

# VITALITY: LEARNING BY LIVING

*One's philosophy is not best expressed in words; it is expressed in the choices one makes. In the long run, we shape our lives and we shape ourselves. The process never ends until we die. And, the choices we make are ultimately our own responsibility.*

*Eleanor Roosevelt*

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## YOU LEARN BY LIVING

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Eleanor Roosevelt's fundamental philosophy of life was that you are the sum result of the choices you make. To be vital, you must take charge of your own life, and accept responsibility for what you are and will become. The choices that you make are as a result of the values you hold. And, you can alter what you value.

The eleven chapters of the book outline the values that Eleanor Roosevelt felt were important to living life fully. They apply now as well as they did thirty years ago when she wrote them. And, they apply as well, with some interpretation in the context of today's environment, to personal and professional vitality.

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## LEARN TO LEARN\*

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"Try to understand the meaning of everything you encounter," she advises. "And, readjust your knowledge to this new knowledge." If you do this, then you can continue to learn and to grow as long as you live. "Life is interesting," she believed, "only as long as it is a process of growth."

The most important ingredients in learning to learn are curiosity, interest, imagination, and a sense, of adventure of life. In the process of learning, what counts is not what you learn, "but the ideas and impressions that are aroused in you." What makes you an interesting, hence, a vital, person is "the ideas stirred in your own mind, the ideas which are a reflection of your own thinking."

"Live every experience to the utmost" is her advice. Quoting a poem, she urges the reader to value highly not only those who have had the courage to face death, but, more importantly, those who have had the courage to "dare not to die."

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## FACE YOUR FEARS

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"You gain strength, courage, and confidence by every experience in which you really stop to look fear in the face." Therefore, to start, face small fears. This will help you face larger ones. And, be patient. Take it "just a step at a time, meeting each thing that comes up, seeing it is not as dreadful as it appeared, discovering we have the strength to stare it down."

Mrs. Roosevelt's strategy for handling fear was to discipline herself to face her fears, realizing that much fear is the result of not knowing.

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### MAKE TIME COUNT

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Eleanor Roosevelt grasped and lived each moment. To let time elapse without a purpose was an abomination to her. "To let them drift through our fingers is a tragic waste. To use them to the hilt, making them count for something, is the beginning of wisdom," she wrote.

But, that doesn't mean that you have to work at tasks every minute of your life. She believed that varied activities were all important. Using time to the hilt meant to her that you knew the purpose of all the moments of your life.

She quoted one of her relatives, Laura Astor Delano, when some young visitors were late for a meeting with her. They apologized, complaining that they didn't have enough time. "You had all the time there was," was Aunt Laura's response.

Mrs. Roosevelt's advice for effective use of time was to:

- Achieve an inner calm so that you can work undisturbed by what goes on around you.
- Concentrate on the thing at hand.
- Arrange a routine pattern for your days which is structured enough so that you get everything done but flexible enough to allow for the unexpected.
- Maintain a general pattern of good health.

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### STRIVE FOR MATURITY

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"A mature person is one who does not think only in absolutes, who is able to be objective even when deeply stirred emotionally."

Maturity is not an end result, but the process by which we live. Her advice for guiding that process is:

- Know yourself.
- Learn to accept that others will be unable to give you everything you want.
- Take constructive criticism and evaluate it.
- Gradually eliminate the faults you see in yourself, but no one else knows exist.
- Realize what you value most.

A few weeks ago, we were watching an old classic, black and white movie about a school teacher who had affected so many people with her life. (We've forgotten the title now, but it reflected the values of the age in which it was made.) Ill now, she reminisces about her life, the story being told in flashbacks. One of the stories was concerned with a young woman, long ago graduated, who came back for advice about a problem.

Crying, she asked what she must do. "Do your duty," was the teacher's terse response.

The late Joseph Campbell wrote and taught extensively about mythology and the importance it has in establishing mankind's values. He was a popular university teacher until his death a few years ago. When asked by his students about what to do with their lives, his response was "Follow your bliss."

What a world of difference there is between the two pieces of advice separated by fifty years, and how reflective of what society valued.

Mrs. Roosevelt felt that it was our purpose in life to discover our values. "Not to arrive at a clear understanding of one's own values is a tragic waste. You have missed the whole point of what life's for." I suspect that she would have opted more for Campbell's advice, for to follow your bliss, you must know what you value.

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### EXPLORE LIFE

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Every age is an undiscovered country. "We are constantly advancing, like explorers, into the unknown, which makes life an adventure all the way," she -wrote.

As we grow older, it is important to realize that each age has its own rewards. They are different in kind, but they are not necessarily different in benefit or satisfaction.

"Whatever period of life we are in is good only to the extent that we make use of it, that we live it to the hilt, that we continue to develop and understand what it has to offer us and we have to offer it," she believed. Remember that last phrase, "what we have to offer it." What gives life its zest is our ability to give back to life.

As we age, we experience a change in us. But, as Mrs. Roosevelt reminds us, "nothing ever happens to us except what happens in our own mind." In other words, it is not what happens to us in life, but how we think about what happens to us, and what actions we take -- our actions, of course, determined by our values.

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### BE USEFUL

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"What keeps our interest in life and makes us look forward to tomorrow is giving pleasure to other people," she advises. "Happiness is not a goal, it is a byproduct." She warns that the pursuit of happiness will result in unhappiness. She felt that self-interest results in a loss of interest in other people. This leads to a loss of ties to life which gives rise to a loss of interest in the world and in life itself. Self-interest, then, is the beginning of death.

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### BECOME YOURSELF

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"Remember always that you have not only the right to be an individual, you have an obligation to be one. You cannot make any useful contribution in life unless you do this," she writes.

Success in life is the constant striving to become yourself. It must include the development of yourself to utmost potential and a contribution of some kind to one's world.

In order to become yourself, you must have knowledge on issues important to your life. "You must have convictions on basic questions," she advises. These convictions come from a thorough knowledge of the issues. If not, she warns, "If you don't make up your mind, someone else will."

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### WORK WITH AND THROUGH OTHERS

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"Nobody really does anything alone," she believed. All major accomplishments were done through groups of people. To be a leader of people, she advises:

- Network with a wide variety of people. "If you approach each new person you meet in a spirit of adventure, you will find you become increasingly interested in them and endlessly fascinated by the new channels of thought and experience and personality that you encounter."
- Be a good listener.
- Have an imaginative ability to put yourself in the other person's place.
- Be able to estimate the extent to which you succeed in communicating.
- State complicated questions in a clear and simple way.
- Seek willing, uncoerced cooperation.
- Keep in mind that you are dealing with a variety of human individuals.
- Appeal to them for help.
- Keep focus on main goal, not personal goal.

Remember that you are working with people not ideas. "You are dealing with people through whom ideas must filter."

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### ACCEPT RESPONSIBILITY FOR WHO YOU ARE

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"We all create the person we become by our choices as we go through life. In a very real sense, by the time we are an adult, we are the sum total of the choices we have made."

Our choices are a compromise between reality and our dream of perfection. "We try to bring the reality as close to that dream of perfection as we can," comments Mrs. Roosevelt.

Our life should be dedicated to acceptance of who we have become. As in most things in life, we cannot become fully accepting of responsibility. But, the more we try, the more we grow. If you keep your dream of perfection and strive toward it, you will come closer to achieving the dream than if you reject the reality because it was not perfection.

"Surely in the light of history," she writes, "it is more intelligent to hope rather than to fear, to try rather than

not to try. For one thing we know beyond all doubt: Nothing has ever been achieved by the person who says, 'It can't be done!'"

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### UNDERSTAND THE BIG PICTURE

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To understand the larger context, Mrs. Roosevelt urges her readers to:

- Get the facts
- Talk and listen to others
- Pay attention to local situation
- Study human nature
- See what you look at and understand what you see

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### BE A LEADER

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Her advice to those who wish to lead is pragmatic, for it requires risk and high level of effort:

- Be secure (financially and emotionally)
- Be sure family supports you
- Love people
- Have a deep desire to achieve something
- Have a global concept
- Be a statesman
- Have a sense of timing. "A leader must not get too far ahead," she warns, "or he will outdistance his followers; but he must be at least a step ahead. He must take people with him."

We believe that these eleven principles are as valuable now as they were forty-two years ago when she wrote them. And, I believe that they are a good set of principles upon which to build a vital life.

As a guide for your life, Eleanor Roosevelt asked us to remember the words written by Cervantes for Don Quixote: "Until death, it is all life!"

Reference: Eleanor Roosevelt, *You Learn by Living* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1960).

\*These titles are our interpretation of the important message in each chapter.

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