

Education in the US - One Learner at a Time

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A poem that resonates of Eleanor Roosevelt's life:

To Be of Use

By Marge Piercy

The people I love the best
jump into work head first
without dallying in the shallows
and swim off with sure strokes almost out of sight.
They seem to become natives of that element,
the black sleek heads of seals
bouncing like half-submerged balls.

I love people who harness themselves, an ox to a heavy cart,
who pull like water buffalo, with massive patience,
who strain in the mud and the muck to move things forward,
who do what has to be done, again and again.

I want to be with people who submerge
in the task, who go into the fields to harvest
and work in a row and pass the bags along,
who are not parlor generals and field deserters
but move in a common rhythm
when the food must come in or the fire be put out.

The work of the world is common as mud.
Botched, it smears the hands, crumbles to dust.
But the thing worth doing well done
has a shape that satisfies, clean and evident.
Greek amphoras for wine or oil,
Hopi vases that held corn, are put in museums
but you know they were made to be used.
The pitcher cries for water to carry
and a person for work that is real.

Eleanor Roosevelt is a woman I have always admired and held a great deal of respect towards. Her fortitude in difficult situations, her clarity of voice, and her willingness to get her hands dirty in order to get a job done have been traits that I have always admired. A favorite poem of mine, "To Be of Use" by Marge Piercy is a poem that speaks of the people she loves best - the people best who are willing to get into the line and pass the bags along, those who see a need and work to fulfill it. Eleanor Roosevelt was a woman who embodied that. Additionally, if Roosevelt saw a need that she didn't know how to fill, she learned what she needed to so that she could solve the problem at hand.

One of the pillars of education that Philip Cusick says education depends on is autodidacticism. Autodidacticism is the process or practice of learning a subject without a teacher or formal education; self-education. While Roosevelt did certainly receive formal education, she was not a person who stopped her learning there. Like most of the educations described in *A Passion for Learning*, Roosevelt's formal education was just a small piece of her educational puzzle. As Cusick said, "When [Roosevelt] needed to learn something, [she] went and learned it" (4). She lived a life that embodied autodidacticism.

The resource that proved most beneficial to learning about Roosevelt's autodidactic nature was The Eleanor Roosevelt's Papers Project. In that resource, I could read firsthand what she was thinking and those thoughts demonstrated her commitment to lifelong learning - often an education that required Roosevelt to go and find, firsthand, the information she sought.

Cusick referenced a specific period in time during which Roosevelt's autodidacticism was quite prominent - her time as wife of FDR during his presidency. He referenced a 1968 writing, where Roosevelt was reflecting on her life. She said, "Somebody had asked me to 'come and let us show you what is happening here' and being interested I went... And each thing I saw proved so fascinating I found myself going more and more, farther and farther" (Hareven 1968, p. 42)" (109). That was Roosevelt's lifestyle and a practice that she used throughout her life - she spent her life wanting to know things, and she went straight to the sources to learn about them.

Since Roosevelt was so pursuant of knowledge, and that was perhaps an unusual thing for a woman to be, she faced criticism, yet she didn't let it stop her pursuit. In an article Roosevelt wrote for *The Saturday Evening Post* in 1933 entitled, "In Defense of Curiosity", Roosevelt began the article with a reference to a political cartoon poking fun at her curiosity and willingness to go to great lengths to learn from people. In response to the cartoon, she wrote, "[The cartoon implied] there was something the matter with a woman who wanted to see so much and know so much" but she pointed out, "In its simplest form, curiosity will help you to an all-around education." Roosevelt saw curiosity, and fulfilling one's curiosity with seeking answers, as a way of life. This was evident through her countless trips to speak with American citizens and citizens of the world. She was continually out among people trying to learn from them.

In another resource at the Eleanor Roosevelt Papers Project, one of Roosevelt's diary entries from 1942 demonstrates again her commitment to learning and the fact that she was self-pursuant of this knowledge. In it, she was describing a tour of England of which she was a part. She described, "We were taken first to the room to see the charts and general system of operations for sending pilots to pick up a plane at a factory to fly it to its destination" and then continued to list the numerous tours and engagements she had throughout the day. Each one was a unique experience and was something that she used in order to better understand the world around her. The entire trip to England was filled with meetings, tours, and

gatherings in which she tried to fill her days with learning. This was typical of Roosevelt - learning from the time she awoke until the time she went to bed at night. She concluded that day's entry with saying "No evening have we been to bed before one and nearly always later but we have had breakfast at 8:30 every morning." Through this entry, we can see that she filled her days with learning that had an impact on her and in turn, helped shape our country's involvement in the war. Again, this resource demonstrated Roosevelt's autodidactic nature - a desire and willingness to educate herself about the things for which she needed knowledge.

Continuing with study of Roosevelt through her own words at Eleanor Roosevelt Papers Project, the article "What I Hope to Leave Behind," Roosevelt's belief in bettering oneself through self-education can be seen yet again. In the article, she wrote, "Of course, we may not be able to make all our dreams come true, but it is an astonishing thing how often, in the words of Peter Ibbetson, we can 'dream true.'"

She said, "Unconsciously our characters shape themselves to meet the requirements which our dreams put upon our life. A great doctor dreamed in his youth that he would save people, that he would help a suffering humanity. He completed his long training; he steeled himself to see suffering in order that he might alleviate it. Instead of sliding out from under responsibility, he accepted it because he knew that he had to develop all those qualities of mind and heart if he were going to be a great doctor or a great surgeon." This example that Roosevelt uses demonstrates her belief in autodidacticism. Roosevelt's belief that if a person wants something in his life, whatever that something is, it is not unattainable. It *is* attainable if a person is willing to learn and put in the work towards getting it. She expressed this sentiment of autodidacticism again and again throughout her articles.

In conclusion, Eleanor Roosevelt was a woman who embodied lifelong learning. She was a woman who stayed curious her whole life and strove to better the world through her pursuit of equality, excellence, and ed.