

Eleanor Roosevelt

First lady, writer (1884-1962)

Few people have undergone such dramatic personal alterations as Eleanor Roosevelt. From the strict confines of Victorian femininity, Eleanor surged forward to the center stage of 20th century political activism.

Born in 1884 to a society belle, Anna Hall, and the charming and affluent Elliott Roosevelt, Eleanor's plain looks and graceless manner were a disappointment to her mother, though her father never found any fault with her looks. When her mother died in 1892, Eleanor looked forward to returning to her father's home and his kindness, but his subsequent death two years later left Eleanor with a permanent longing for affection. It was only after her grandmother sent her to boarding school in 1899 that Eleanor began to develop any assertiveness.

Upon her return to New York in 1902, Eleanor had her debut as a society woman, though she became

“deeply ashamed” of her lack of suitors. However, three years later she married her fifth cousin Franklin Delano Roosevelt. At this point in her life Eleanor knew virtually nothing of politics, but she considered it her social duty to participate in the women's organizations active during the Progressive era.

When her husband, a rising political figure who ultimately became President, was paralyzed by a polio attack in 1921, her political education increased exponentially. Roosevelt taught her to observe and investigate the social conditions present during her trips throughout the country so that they could discuss them upon her return. She became her husband's “legs.”

As First Lady, Eleanor held press conferences especially for female reporters and worked to further women's issues within the Democratic Party. Social justice issues such as anti-lynching campaigns, the labor movement, and fair

housing for minorities were of supreme importance to her.

Throughout her life, Eleanor depended on her close partnership and friendship with Roosevelt. After his death in 1945, she entered a brief period of seclusion before resuming her busy schedule. It was during this period of activity that Eleanor Roosevelt fully evolved into a stateswoman, being chosen by President Harry Truman to head the UN Human Rights Commission and to be an instrumental figure in drafting the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

By the time of her death from tuberculosis in 1962 Eleanor Roosevelt had metamorphosed into one of the most important, vibrant, and compassionate political figures of the 20th century.

Some thoughts from Eleanor Roosevelt:

“Long ago, there was a noble word, liberal, which derives from the word free. Now a strange thing happened to that word. A man named Hitler made it a term of abuse, a matter of suspicion, because those who were not with him were against him, and liberals had no use for Hitler. And then another named McCarthy cast the same opprobrium on the word...We must cherish and honor the word free or it will cease to apply to us.”

Eleanor Roosevelt, *Tomorrow is Now* (1963) “You must do the thing you think you cannot do.”

- Eleanor Roosevelt, *You Learn by Living* (1960)

“Life was meant to be lived and curiosity must be kept alive. One must never, for whatever reason, turn one’s back on life.”

- Eleanor Roosevelt, *The Autobiography of Eleanor Roosevelt* (1961)

“So much attention is paid to the aggressive sins, such as violence and cruelty and greed with all their tragic effects, that too little attention is paid to the passive sins, such as apathy and laziness, which in the long run can have a more devastating and destructive effect upon society than the others.”

- Eleanor Roosevelt, *You Learn by Living* (1960)

“Nearly all great civilizations that perished did so because they had crystallized, because they were incapable of adapting themselves to new conditions, new methods, new points of view. It is as though people would literally rather die than change.”

- Eleanor Roosevelt, *Tomorrow is Now* (1963)

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“No one can make you feel inferior without your consent.”