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Life Lessons from Eleanor Roosevelt

According to the Franklin & Eleanor Roosevelt Institute's website, Eleanor wrote the following in her autobiography: "I had long since become aware of my overall objective in life.... I wanted, with all my heart, a peaceful world.... It is to these ends that I have, in the main, devoted the past years." We see in this brief quote the "larger ideals and private ambitions" of Eleanor Roosevelt, and as Philip Cusick suggested in *A Passion for Learning*, each subject's need to find "work that would satisfy larger ideals and private ambitions," which stemmed from their want "to create better selves and a better world," represents one of the "pillars upon which the subjects established their education." What better way to make use of all her "serious reading" and reflecting than to begin working to turn her "serious ideas" into "serious accomplishments." Her "serious accomplishments" appear to be the highlight of the web resources in 5.12. The timelines from four different sites provide a fascinating overview of just how much Eleanor Roosevelt involved herself in. And she is an excellent example of how much an individual's education is deepened when *what* one knows becomes a driving force to *how* one brings about change. In the midst of her everyday work is where she learned the most about politics and the need to become a strong advocate of human rights, and it was this "unstructured learning" that appears to have had the most impact on her life.

Beginning as early as 1903, according to the timelines, Eleanor involved herself in various organizations, committees and volunteer positions—teaching immigrants dance, inspecting working conditions in the garment industry, visiting and helping WWI veterans in the hospital, and working as a translator. The quantity of these involvements increased significantly throughout her life. More doors to more committees, including roles in leadership, began to open as she became experienced and respected for her ideas and work. She begins in the 1920's to exert a different level of confidence by holding chair positions and by beginning her journey as a public speaker and writer. She is a model for E.D. Hirsch's ideals that "knowledge is power," and the more she expands her knowledge base, the more she becomes a powerful, influential woman. The timelines and biographies begin at this stage of her life to describe her actions using dominant verbs such as leads, organizes, chairs, heads, coordinates, and establishes. The work that Eleanor involved herself in took on a new dimension of seriousness for her to invoke change in her world, opening doors of opportunity for her that only these forms of leadership positions would produce. Later, the timelines show that the verbs describing her work changed once again beginning in the 1940's signifying a more direct, personal approach to the issues which she was so passionate about: urges, defends, pressures, lobbies, serves, challenges, intervenes, supports, assists, and many more. These new verbs, which described her work until her death in 1962, indicate her leadership, her desire, her strength, and her heart, not to mention her growth in understanding the issues of her time and what it took to "create . . . a better world."

In a brief biography on the PBS site we see that "for the labor movement, she investigated working conditions and supported the right to organize. These issues and others provided the content for her *My Day* columns, which she wrote daily from 1936 to 1962." The

My Day Columns available on the website were a tremendous indication that her daily work served to deepen and expand her education. She addressed such topics as “Prohibition”, the attack on Pearl Harbor, the “H Bomb”; issues of which she obviously made herself aware and desired to make others aware. She also wrote about race and women’s issues, both of which she remained passionate about throughout her life. With the help of these columns, the reader can see her thoughts and struggles with issues she faced daily. The reader can also get an idea of the range of topics she poured herself into on a daily basis. But more importantly, the readers of her time period were prompted to evaluate their own thoughts and if Eleanor succeeded, they were motivated to enter the cause to promote change.

Finally, one of the most moving examples in the web resources was of her active role in the lives of WWI servicemen as represented through the interactive map of her travels in the South Pacific and to Guadalcanal on the PBS site. Eleanor said of this journey, “The Pacific trip left a mark from which I will never be free.” The fullness of what she learned during these travels, and many others, can only be left to the imagination, but it is obvious that what she saw effected how she lived. Maybe this is why she lived so selflessly; she saw a need in others that was greater than her own. We can only hope that our work will bring about such great learning as Eleanor’s did.

Date: 11/3/2008 10:16:50 PM
From: Steven Weiland
To: Simpson, Tammi Dawn
Subject: RE: 5.14 Unit 5 Writing Assignment

GRADE: 4.00

This is just a terrific paper! It was very good to see you open with such an apt quotation from ER found at one of the websites. That tells me that you took in the assignment perfectly, or the connections to be made between text and digital resources in the matter of Philip Cusick’s “pillars.” And combining the timeliness from the sites is a very smart way to probe their uses in an integrative fashion. It turns out, I know you will agree, that the timeline is one of those things that can work very well indeed in a digital interactive format. But it is what you do with the timelines that is so impressive. Thus, you read them for evidence that truly extends what Cusick says about ER. And the reading is precise and revealing. Watching the interpretive diction closely gives us another way to see what Cusick found in other ways. In your account we get an astonishingly active ER—even more so than in the portrait in “A Passion for Learning.” And what you propose takes us to other pillars as well. But there are more good things to come when you go from the timelines to the “daily work” that made ER such an influential figure. By doing so you deepen the idea of how biography can work as a form of inquiry. So, in addition to the broad narrative of a life and learning we also need to slow things down and get as close as possible to the particulars of experience. You are probing the nature of biographical and

historical inquiry even while you consider the educational example of ER. That's very impressive. Just as is your steady attention to the matter of "larger ideals and private ambitions." The "My Day" columns are, as you say, very good evidence for how ER did this. I was also pleased to see you respond so personally at the end to one more feature from the Web resources. In effect, that demonstrates the durability of ER's story—a point that is also important to Cusick. Very fine work. It is just the kind of thing I've been hoping for from this kind of assignment. But, sad to say, despite all the talk about how keen people are to use the Web I don't see that much evidence for it (and the intellectual curiosity it should reflect) in the papers on "A Passion for Learning." Yours though, is an example of what hypermedia learning (including fine writing) is all about.