

A Look Back at Eleanor Roosevelt: The Greatest Truths are Ageless

by Kathleen Krebs



Eleanor Roosevelt described her early life as “a series of losses”; both parents and a younger brother died before she turned eleven. For years, she had agonizing fears from being dropped at age three into her father's arms in a descending lifeboat when the ship she and her parents were on was evacuated after a fog-shrouded collision with another vessel.

Her mother considered her an ugly, clumsy “Granny” who could not possibly conform to her own classic standards of beauty. The years after her parents' deaths were spent with a severe, humorless grandmother and a collection of loving but flawed aunts and uncles, with little opportunity for developing the close friendships of adolescence that cushion harsh personal blows, and mitigate dysfunctional family life.

Three years of nontraditional private education at the Allenswood School in England gave her the first glimmer of new and more exciting possibilities for women, twenty years before women began to vote in the U.S. and when females were still firmly bound by the conventional expectations of making a debut, finding a suitable mate and having children. Her beloved headmistress helped her gain confidence in her own judgment and tastes for the first time in her life, yet her grandmother forced her to come home a year before graduation to make her formal debut in New York society. This event meant little to Eleanor and placed her in a social setting of balls and parties which valued gossipy small talk, rather than the grand ideas and provocative give-and-take that had challenged her in her years at school.

Her marriage to Franklin Delano Roosevelt in 1905 produced six children by 1916, five of which survived. Her life was full, but lived mostly in deference to her mother-in-law's tastes and with a husband who was busy with his own priorities. It was Franklin's affair with her part-time social secretary that provided the catalyst that caused this insecure, passive wife and mother to find her voice, and in so doing, herself. Long before her husband was elected Governor of New York State, she had become a keen writer, broadcaster, leader of the NYS Democratic Party's Women's Division, head of the National Democratic Party's Women's Division, enthusiastic social justice advocate and one of the most prominent Democratic women in the state and country. In the process, she threw off her early fears, became a tireless organizer and campaigner, overturning the views of all who thought her weak and unassertive. Eleanor built a political alliance that pursued a broad

range of social justice causes such as unionism, public housing, medical care, education, women's equality, civil rights and equal employment for all who wanted and needed to work. One wonders if she was referring to the early sorrows of her life when she later remarked, “You gain strength, courage, and confidence by every experience in which you really stop to look fear in the face. You are able to say to yourself, ‘I lived through this horror. I can take the next thing that comes along.’” In facing her early sorrows, she developed a resilience that carried her through many personal and political storms and into a wholly new public persona.

Her years as first lady reveal her as a colossus of energy who could run the most indefatigable reporter and political associate into the ground. She tackled every conceivable progressive cause, and relentlessly lobbied everyone who could advance those issues.

Eleanor had her political defeats. An anti-lynching bill she begged her husband to support never passed the Senate because he would not buck Southern Democrats, allies he needed in other causes. Her fights to raze urban slums and build public housing for blacks as well as whites made her name anathema in the South. She was “uppity” and could be a pitiless “nag” to her overworked husband; she had an “in-basket” placed next to his bed so he could review nightly her most pressing issues. People loved her or hated her but they could never ignore her. Her daily columns appeared in hundreds of newspapers from 1936 to 1962 and she wrote, broadcast and gave countless lectures. It was a headline when she actually spent a night at the White House! Nothing diverted her from her goals and no criticism, no matter how vitriolic, ever fazed her; she commented, “I have spent many years of my life in opposition and I rather like the role.”

Following FDR's death in April 1945, Eleanor, always crediting her success to him rather than her own Herculean efforts, remarked, “The story is over.” Nothing was further from the truth. Asked by President Truman to join the original American delegation to the U.N., it was through her superhuman patience and determination that the organization adopted the United Nations Declaration of Human Rights on December 10, 1948, a document that remains today the blueprint for human rights throughout the world. She was one of the first to tour the death camps in Europe after the war, she noted the level of stark human need around the world, and supported the founding of the State of Israel, visiting there more than once. At home she never stopped working for minority rights. After Eisenhower's election caused her to leave the U.N. mission, Eleanor joined the American Association for the United Nations and tirelessly served social justice causes without number.

As the “conscience of the Democratic Party” and perhaps even the “conscience of the nation”, she pointedly reminded her party and the American people of the need for equal rights for all citizens. These pronouncements were acts of personal courage performed without a second thought, even in the face of an overt \$25,000 KKK bounty on her head, near-constant vilification in the right-wing press and a voluminous FBI file dating from her budding activism in the 1920s. Eleanor's moral influence was such that only John F. Kennedy's private pledge of increased support for civil rights would induce her to support his presidential candidacy in 1960. To the end of her life she saw the fight for economic and political equality for

all people as the paramount task of Americans and those of good will throughout the world. As she put it, “One's philosophy is not best expressed in words; it is expressed in the choices one makes...and the choices we make are ultimately our responsibility...” “What is to give light must endure the burning.”

This “ugly Granny”, child of tragedy and crushing emotional need grew up to be not only America's First Lady, but also First Lady of the World. Those who knew her personally and who know her through reading and hearing her words, know her to exemplify both beauty and truth in ways multiple and profound. If you are a union member, she helped you attain that privilege. If you attended an integrated school, she pushed to make that possible. If you are a woman working outside your home, her support of Depression Era training and employment programs for women may have given your mother or grandmother a boost from which you now benefit. If you are Native American, her voice was raised to support your land and culture. If you are a veteran of WW II, she may have visited your hospital bed in the South Pacific; once home, she may have personally contacted your family to let them know you were alive and recovering. If you are a descendant of that veteran, you know she fervently supported our military in confronting Hitler, though she was a lifelong pacifist. If you were a young woman with drive and ambition, you may have attended an Eleanor Roosevelt leadership institute at her Val-Kill home, and gone on to be a leader in any field you chose.

If you are an African American, appreciate the shining example she set the day she put her chair in the aisle between the black and white sections at a conference in Birmingham, Alabama; she had sat in the black section and had been told she couldn't. Rather than give in to prejudice, Eleanor placed herself in the middle as a symbolic bridge between the races. We can all thrill at envisioning the majestic Marian Anderson singing “My Country, 'Tis of Thee” in front of the Lincoln Memorial in 1939 after having been denied use of Constitution Hall by the D.A.R. She later sang at Constitution Hall for an *integrated* audience; Eleanor had resigned from the D.A.R. over the incident. Her example uplifted the debate.

At a time when it is easy to be cynical over the state of our democracy and the pygmies passing themselves off as national leaders, I find comfort and inspiration in recalling the titanic figure of Eleanor Roosevelt. Her life was an arduous journey of successive challenges, many self-imposed: challenges to her energy, her will, her time, her health, her self-esteem, her relationships with the key people in her private world and her vision for the kind of country she felt we must become in order to model justice, compassion, equity and dignity for others who did not have our resources and opportunities.

Eleanor's face is transcendently beautiful; filled with honor, honesty and love. Her life was one of unsparing truth; she excluded no one, including herself, from its demands. In her words, “Remember always, that you not only have the right to be an individual, you have an *obligation* to be one.”

We can take heart in the magnificent vision that Eleanor left us, and I encourage all who might be seeking a heroine to look no further than this extraordinary American.