Living a Fruitful Life

Frank Oppenheimer, Exploratorium
Speech to the Graduating Class of Pagosa Springs High School, 1960

In 1960, Frank delivered a speech to the graduating class of Pagosa Springs High School, a small Colorado school where Frank had been the sole science instructor from 1957 to 1959. Portions of this speech, which dealt with how to live a rich and fruitful life, seem particularly appropriate to this issue of The Exploratorium.

I am grateful for the life I have lived. It has certainly not been as full as the lives of some people, and yet it has probably been richer in experience and in a sense of accomplishment than the lives of many.

I think that part of the sense of having lived a full and a rich life comes from an ability to continually take things seriously, but not too personally. This feeling stems from a willingness - even a determination - to become deeply involved in what you are doing, but not obsessed by it.

I want to put a little more meaning into the phrase "taking things seriously." Perhaps I can best explain what I mean by talking about myself. I would say, for example, that I took my teaching in this school seriously. First of all, I thought it was an important job. I felt that if you learned some science, you would be able to lead better lives. And I felt that by trying to do a good job of teaching, I might have some effect not only on you individually but also on the school and the community. The teaching involved a lot of work and planning and I had to learn new things, not only about the subject matter, such as the names of the various geologic epochs, but also about how to present ideas that I was, at first, not able to get across. I stopped thinking of myself as a rancher or a nuclear physicist and thought of myself primarily as a high school teacher and wanted to be a good teacher. I wanted you to understand the things I enjoyed understanding, such as why a star got hot and stayed hot. I wanted you to get satisfaction from being able to do some of the things I found pleasure in doing, whether blowing glass or solving a problem. I felt an enthusiasm for the whole process of teaching.

Now let me give you another example, in retrospect a quite trivial one. At about the time I graduated from college, I took coffee seriously. I read about coffee and found out where and how it was grown and roasted. I wandered about New York City looking for coffee import houses, bought my own grinder, and learned to...
learned the sick feeling that comes when one fails in helping a heifer to deliver a live calf or sees four or five cows dying on the range from having eaten larkspur.

Before coming here, I was in Minnesota for a couple of years. I remember how exciting it was when, with our high-altitude--balloon experiments, we discovered that not only hydrogen, but the atoms of all the elements were in the cosmic rays coming from outer space.

In thinking about my life, I arrived at some ideas about what was necessary for a fruitful life. First, you become involved in projects that you can put your heart into. They seem important. What happens, the outcome of your efforts, must make a difference to you.

Second, the outcome must have, directly or indirectly, a wanted effect not only on you but on something outside you, on other people or on science or on a ranch or on a business.

Third, your project must involve some effort in doing, and especially in learning and experimenting.

Fourth, you have to really commit yourself by being willing to stand for something and represent the kind of person to yourself and to others that is not inconsistent with what you are involved in. In this sense, taking something seriously often means that one is conscious of acting a role.

Now this subject of acting a role is a tricky one. There are many people who are thoroughly obnoxious or pathetic because they are continually acting the role of someone they would like to resemble but cannot. The standard cartoon about insane people shows them pretending to be Napoleon. I am not going to try to answer the question of when and to what degree role-playing is proper and appropriate. But I know that to get much out of what you are doing, you have to act the part and be consistent with its restraints and customs. But I cannot draw for you the fine line between devotion and obsession or between
sanity and insanity. It seems that one's ability to draw this line in any actual situation is connected with the fact that one can take what one is doing seriously without at the same time taking oneself too seriously.

It is not easy to explain why people take things seriously. If one thinks deeply and objectively about anything, even life itself, it can appear trivial. One can argue that our actions make a negligible difference to a universe that is billions of years old and a billion light years in diameter. But such thinking is somehow irrelevant to the way humans act. I am aware of the immensity of the cosmos and yet I can take things seriously. So can you.

I do not want to imply that I have no sense of values, and that everything is of equal importance to me. Some kinds of pursuits and exploits that I could have at one time put my heart into, now seem unimportant to me, but other, perhaps somewhat more channeled interests, have appeared in their place. I do not know what will capture my devotion in the future, but from past experience I have some confidence that it will be caught.

For you, I hope that there is another domain that will attract you. Throughout one's life, one sees the perpetuation of innumerable injustices in human acts, both at home and abroad. Usually, one feels powerless to do anything about them, but I recommend to you that when an opportunity to intervene for justice arises, either for you alone or in concert with others, you take these opportunities seriously and consider them important.

I have gone a little astray from my main purpose tonight, which was merely to remind you that you have a long life ahead of you and to say that I hope it will he a good one. I have talked about just one small aspect of how you live your life, but I think it is an aspect over which you have some measure of control and also one that you might not have been aware of. I recommend that you be willing to become deeply involved in lots and lots of things and that you let yourself, perhaps even force yourself, to do the things that you think are important and that you can take seriously.

I make this recommendation to you because I believe that if you do, then even in the face of considerable adversity you will feel, as I do now, grateful for having lived.