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Eight Lessons Millennial Women Can Learn from Elizabeth Taylor

by Lauren Stiller Rikleen | ForbesWoman | March 28, 2011

As Millennial women learned of Elizabeth Taylor's death, they likely knew very little about her, except the famous name. By the time the first of them were toddlers, Elizabeth Taylor was in her late 40's and an international star. She'd made movies with the most important studio of its day: Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer and had been married seven times. She had four children, was a grandmother, and was fighting an addiction to alcohol and painkillers.

Despite, or because, of her own suffering, Taylor was also a philanthropist. Following the death of her friend and fellow Hollywood icon Rock Hudson, she became an activist on behalf of AIDS research. That was long before AIDS became a cause that mainstream actors embraced. Her own Elizabeth Taylor AIDS Foundation has given millions of dollars to programs around the world in the fight against that dreadful disease.

So what can this extraordinary life teach young women poised to begin their careers in fashion with Ralph Lauren, in the law at Skadden, Irell or Quinn, in journalism with the New York Times, in health care at Pfizer, or, like Taylor, in film.

Elizabeth Taylor's own words provide a guidepost for those entering the tumultuous stage that begins when we choose our occupation. Her quick wit showed a sharp eye for irony, and her intelligence helped her capitalize on the opportunities that came her way. In her own words, she offers great advice to young women everywhere.

1. "It's not the having, it's the getting."



Elizabeth Taylor understood that success is not measured by the achievement of a milestone. One's efforts do not stop after winning the Oscar, closing the deal, winning the lawsuit or any of the other markers of professional success. It is all about the journey.

2. "Big girls need big diamonds."

Not everyone can carry flamboyance the way Elizabeth Taylor did, and most cannot afford her diamond collection. But every woman has her own personal style. We hate admitting it, but how we dress in the workplace matters. The diamonds are simply a metaphor for finding the look that brings your best self forward. Elizabeth Taylor made her expensive look accessible through her line of costume jewelry sold by Avon – further reinforcing that an image can be achieved at any price point.

3. "I adore wearing gems, but not because they are mine. You can't possess radiance, you can only admire it."

This is the corollary principle to the statement that "Big Girls Need Big Diamonds." Elizabeth Taylor understood that her exquisite jewelry was, in essence, a beautiful fashion accessory. It did not define her. The diamonds were not responsible for the luminescence of her personality. Without them, she would still be Elizabeth Taylor.

4. "It's all about hope, kindness and a connection with one another."

Working women today are under enormous pressures. They are scrutinized for any signs of diminished commitment. They receive mixed messages from men and women alike as to how or whether to speak openly about their need to address life outside the workplace. Many young women worry about the family events they miss and the friends they don't see. But even one of the world's most successful working mothers had the wisdom to understand that, without life's connections with one another and the opportunities to give and receive kindness, little else matters.

5. "Success is a great deodorant. It takes away all your past smells."

Perhaps not her most artful statement, but Taylor certainly makes her point. We don't need research to show us just how hard on ourselves we can be, but research there is. It's difficult for us to acknowledge our own success and we are too quick to diminish our accomplishments. Elizabeth Taylor understood that failures quickly dissipate in the face of success, and that success builds upon itself. Her failures were alarmingly public. Yet they never stopped her from pursuing that next big success.

6. "If it is not to make the world better, what is money for?"

Elizabeth Taylor knew that success is meaningless without a legacy of giving back. She donated to many causes, but her work – indeed, her crusade – to fund AIDS research was a combination of passion and bravery. She used her prominence and wealth to

bring attention to AIDS at a time when its stigma kept most others far away from the topic. She made a difference and inspired others to make a difference as well. “Give,” she said. “Remember to always give. This is the thing that will make you grow.”

7. “There’s still so much more to do. I can’t sit back and be complacent, and none of us should be.”

Elizabeth Taylor spoke these words from the wheelchair to which she was confined. Just as her failures never stopped her, neither did her illness. Even as we find success in the workplace, we remain frustrated by what we cannot yet achieve. Women frequently express resigned acceptance about work environments that demand 24/7 loyalty and compensation gaps that reveal an inexplicable gender divide. But complacency leaves only the status quo behind – not much of a legacy for future generations in the workplace. Complacency is the enemy of change. It is vanquished with a strong will and a growing network of supporters – just as Elizabeth Taylor learned in her own efforts to make each moment count.

8. “A belly laugh increases the ability of your immune system to fight infections.”

Elizabeth Taylor’s impish sense of humor was ever-present no matter what her circumstances. She understood that life is too hard to be taken too seriously. She laughed at herself and at life’s many ironies. She even left us with a humorous flourish, requesting that she be fifteen minutes late for her own funeral at the Forest Lawn Cemetery.

Elizabeth Taylor was a thoroughly modern woman in every decade she inhabited and illuminated. The glamour of her life was matched by its challenges, all of which she met directly. Commenting on our shared mortality she observed: “When people say, ‘She’s got everything’, I’ve got one answer – I haven’t had tomorrow.”

As young women juggle the many demands of career and family, they would be well advised to follow in Taylor’s footsteps –giggle a bit, lighten the load, find success, and make a difference even when the difference you make is unpopular.

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