

## CHAPTER 14

# What Do We Live For?

One warm summer's evening, an elderly couple sat together outside their home watching the sunset. After a long silence, the man turned to his wife and, looking at the years of experience etched into her kind face, asked: "Is there anything that we have missed in all these years?" Looking at her husband, the old lady's mind was far away, thinking over many memories, both joyous and painful. "Yes," she said, "I wish I had given more of myself for other people." And the two looked ahead of them as they sat in the glowing remnants of the fading sun and pondered the thought.

Probably there is no one who does not think about what will become of him or her in the future. What will become of you in a few years? Maybe you will be studying at the college you are dreaming of now, maybe you will go into business, or perhaps someday you will become a great scholar.

Imagine you have gathered with your classmates to celebrate the 20th anniversary of your graduation. Most of your classmates have families, and you have children of your own. One of your classmates may be a famous scientist, another a doctor or teacher, and still another may be the president of a successful business. What things will have become the most important in your life by that time? What will you long to tell your friends whom you haven't seen for ages? Would you like to tell them about your work, your family, your new car, your trips abroad?

Can you imagine now the 30th anniversary of your graduation? Almost certainly the main topic of discussion (and pride) will be grandchildren.

While we are young, thoughts of our adult life may seem like fantasies. But time will pass, and what seems like the distant future will one day be reality.

What will we bring with us into our mature years? What will we be proud of? What will we regret? Perhaps if we think about it now, in the future we will not have to look back sadly and feel that it is too late to change anything.

Have you ever peered into an old person's face? Have you spoken to any elderly people other than your own grandmother and grandfather? Tomorrow, on your way to school, try to pay attention to these people in old-fashioned clothes hurrying to the shops early in the morning; try to



study their faces. Life may have become so hard for some of them that they think only about how they are going to live the rest of their lives, since their pensions are only enough to buy the simplest food.

There are other people for whom the events of *perestroika* have turned out to be a deep, personal tragedy. They lived all their lives by certain principles and ideals, thinking they were taking part in creating a bright future not only for their country, but also for the whole of humanity. Suddenly, in the last years of their lives, many of the things they had believed in proved to be false. It must be very difficult and painful for them. This disillusionment may be the source of their irritability and discontent, especially concerning young people. It is awful to find oneself in a situation like this. One cannot help but ask oneself: If there was so much falsehood around you, and you took part in it, willingly or not, then what is the meaning of your life?

But you may have come across other old people whose faces, in spite of their age, are full of inner beauty. You cannot trace any anger, irritability or vanity in them. They seem to have reached the declining years of their lives without any resentment from a difficult life, without any regret that life has passed by so quickly and that the only thing left to them is their increasingly helpless and unattractive old age. Despite

hardship, it seems that in the course of the years, some truth about the meaning of life has been revealed to them, which has nothing to do with external success.

Usually at this time of life a person's face becomes wrinkled, the hair begins to grow gray and thin, and the body is no longer beautiful. Power, money, and work — everything is in the past. What is the meaning of such a life? Is the value of life to be found only in recollections? Yet one does not live only in the past. What is the secret of those elderly people who seem to have an inner treasure? Where does their beauty come from? Maybe it is simply due to a more successful life; perhaps they did not experience the sorrow and grief

which have made other people old. Or have they just found a dignified way of overcoming difficulties?

It is worth thinking about old age before it is too late to choose one's own way of life. Then one might be able to grow old without regrets and disappointments, but instead with a feeling of serene wisdom and harmony with oneself and one's surroundings.

Following is a 1993 interview with a Moscow woman who at the time was 96 years old. During World War I she was in her teens. When the Russian Revolution broke out, she was 20. She lived through the Russian Civil War and World War II. Many of her relatives were persecuted or even killed. This seems ancient history to many of us, but this woman, Elena Alexandrovna Strunnikova, is not fiction.

She lives in Moscow on Suvorovski Boulevard, in a big communal flat. Her sight is poor, so she can barely read. It becomes more and more difficult for her to leave home. But her friends are constantly visiting her; some of them are 50 or even 70 years younger than she is. And the only reason why so many people are attracted to her is that she is a person of great inner beauty, wisdom and love. She grew into such a person in spite of the difficulties that she had to overcome throughout her life.

Let us read the life story of this very elderly person. And let's not forget that sometimes, even behind the simplest words, there are years of suffering unimaginable to most of us. What will we be able to share about our own lives when we are 90 years old?



## Elena Alexandrovna Strunnikova

I was born in 1897 in Moscow, in Sheryemetiev Street, not far from where I live now. My father was a doctor, and my mother took care of four children, two boys and two girls. My father was a very kind person and he considered his children to be the best. Mother was also kind, but stricter with us. She wanted to educate us so that we would become honest, kind, and hard-working people.

My sister became a teacher, married a Danish man and moved to Denmark. One of my brothers became a doctor of Western literature. In 1937, he was shot. My second brother also was a doctor of science. His specialty was ancient Roman and Greek literature. He lived a long life, and died at the age of 88.

What about myself? As a young woman, I studied at a private school for girls. When I was in the eleventh grade, the World War began. By that time — when I was 11 — my father had died from tuberculosis. After school I finished nursing courses and began working in hospitals, taking care of those who were injured during the war.

Then I entered Moscow University and studied there for several years at the philological faculty — studying Russian literature. Unfortunately, I couldn't finish the course because I got sick; the doctors found the beginning of tuberculosis. Also I needed to earn money.

At the beginning of the revolution I was very enthusiastic. It seemed to me that we were creating a new world. I was so young and naive! But soon, when the first arrests began, I understood what was really going on.

When I was 25, I met a young man whom I married. We loved each other deeply. I was very happy with my husband. But during World War II he died from dystrophy. It was very difficult. He was suffering terribly before his death. I was with him till the last moment.

Within two years I met another man whom I had known during my youth. By then he had already spent eight years in one of Stalin's prisons, and was now exiled to the North. I sold all I had, left everything behind, and followed him. He became my second husband. By that time his health was already declining. We lived together in a small village in the North for five years, and then he also died. I found myself absolutely alone, in the middle of nowhere. But even there I met wonderful people who really helped me.

At that time an old friend of mine — N.V. Polenova, daughter of the famous Russian artist V.P. Polenov — invited me to come to Polenovo to work in the museum as a guide. I had known this family from the age of 7. We were distant relatives and very good friends. I remember how we often spent time together with the Polenov and Mamontov families when we visited Abramtsevo. What a wonderful, high-spirited atmosphere we had in those times together! So, I moved to Polenovo and worked there for another 30 years.

Now I am 96. All my close friends and relatives have already died. I am the only one still alive, and I worry about the lives of those I see around me. My heart is aching. Some people say that it's time to stop worrying, it's not healthy at my age. But I think that as long as I am concerned about others, I am still alive. When I came to work in Polenovo, my private life was over. My heart and my body began to age. But this container, my body, is still so strong — the spirit cannot jump out of it. All day I am sitting and thinking. Thinking, remembering, and thinking again. These are the best words from the Gospels, my mom used to repeat to me — "Don't judge, and you won't face judgment."





## Interview Questions:

### ***What has been most important to you in your life?***

Love for people, friendship, human relationships. From my childhood I had many friends, with very different views of life. It's very important. I didn't have that many prejudices against people.

### ***What personal quality has helped you the most through difficulties in your life?***

I had a calm outlook on life. I have always tried to see the good side in everything. I've always had a strong faith in people. Even when I met a stranger, I always believed in that person. That's what I did earlier, that's what I try to practice now. I want to find something good in everyone.

### ***What are the qualities you have most admired and respected in people?***

There is a French proverb: "Death, it's not for long, but stupidity is forever." I've always respected and admired a strong mind and a kind soul. What does it mean — kind soul? It's a big heart. I cannot say, I cannot express this in words. Most of all, I appreciate a big heart.



### ***What made your personal relationships closer?***

I've always tried not to judge people, and help them in whatever way I could. My first husband was not an atheist, he was simply indifferent to the questions of faith, whereas I have always been a believer. He used to tell me: "Be kind to people, help them. This will be your faith."

### ***What is your biggest accomplishment, what was most valuable for you?***

I was very happy in my private life. My first husband and I — we really loved each other. After we got married, we never parted. And during the war, he died in my arms.

### ***What was your biggest difficulty in life?***

That I know for sure. Mathematics.

### ***What do you regret?***

I regret that I often hurt my mother, even though I really adored her. Often I didn't tell her the truth. I brought many heavy moments into her life.

And now I regret that I outlived all of my relatives and old friends. Earlier, I could interest other people, and now — what can I give? Only the warmth of my heart, some warmth through relationship. I love people. And I would like to give them my warmth as long as I can.

*Life is simple. What we give out, we get back.*

## For Your Journal



In your journal write down all the things you *could have done* but have not. After you have written the first list, make a second list opposite the first that explains why.

Write a letter to someone with whom you have a disagreement, or someone with whom you have not talked for a long time. Tell that person what you really think about your relationship, and the good things you see in that person. You may want to begin by making a list of the good qualities of that person. Remember, even the most difficult people have at least one good quality.

## A Hero of Our Time

by Mikhail Lermontov

*Pechorin, before the duel with Grushnitsky:*

I recollect all my past and ask myself: Why did I live? What was I born for? There must have been a purpose, and a high one. For I feel in my soul unlimited power. ... But I did not guess this purpose, I was carried away by temptations of empty and ungrateful passions; after that I became as hard as nails, but lost forever the fire of noble desires, the best bloom of life. Since then how often have I played the part of an ax in fate's hands! As an execution tool, I fell upon the heads of the doomed victims, often without malice, always without regret. ... My love brought happiness to nobody, because I never sacrificed for those I loved; I loved for myself, for my own pleasure; I only satisfied a strange need of the heart, devouring greedily their feelings, their tenderness, their joys and sufferings, always insatiable. Likewise a hungry one falls asleep exhausted, and dreams of fine dishes and sparkling wines; he devours in delight the ephemeral gifts of imagination and seems to be relieved; but as soon as he wakes up, the dream vanishes and the hunger and frustration are doubled!

And maybe I'll die tomorrow!  
There won't be a single being left who has understood me perfectly. Some think me better than I am, others worse. ... Some will say: he was a good man; others: he was a scoundrel. Both won't be true. After this, is it worthwhile living? But you are living all the same — out of curiosity; waiting and waiting for something new. ... What a ridiculous nuisance!

