

# Living to learn

---

DH [deccanherald.com/content/444140/living-learn.html](http://deccanherald.com/content/444140/living-learn.html)

November 27, 2014



Shefali Tripathi Mehta, Nov 09, 2014, DHNS:;

- NOV 27 2014, 14:35 IST
- UPDATED: NOV 27 2014, 14:35 IST

Many years ago, I called home to speak with my mother and was told that she had gone for cooking classes.

My mother, the indisputable Master Chef of all our circles, was still learning to make new dishes! That she was in her 70s and had been through a major illness that had left us all deeply anxious for her well-being were relatively trivial matters.

We are conditioned to relate learning with youth; with school and university lessons; with learning skills for a job or hobby. So our learning is more or less ‘accomplished’ by middle age when we’re comfortably ensconced in our jobs and a pattern of living. Those books on history, math, language and science have no place in our lives anymore.

Did you have your 10 almonds today to keep your memory sharp? Or, if you are following the western practice, probably some ginkgo biloba or sage? How about learning a new skill; picking a new hobby; or challenging your limits? That, say experts, are the best ways to grow your mind.

Let us consider this typical scenario — people watching a fire performance. When the audience is invited to try a hand at it, guess who will volunteer? Kids — even unwilling ones will be pushed forward by parents or adults accompanying them. Older people prefer to remain spectators. And this is true in the larger picture of our lives — we gradually take a back seat, slowly stop participating, and become spectators.

Born to learn

“Men are often capable of greater things than they perform. They are sent into the world with bills of credit, and seldom draw to their full extent,” said Horace Walpole.

We came into this world as helpless little creatures who needed to be clothed, fed and soothed. We learned to walk and speak; do math and swim; act in plays and lead teams.

The world was our oyster — we created our lives learning one thing after another. Whatever the circumstances, the learning never stopped one way or the other. As we grew older, instead of questioning stereotypical, repressive norms, we began to question our ability to pick up new skills — I don’t have an aptitude for languages; I have two left feet; I have no head for numbers — we said and stayed put in our comfort zones. What we

denied ourselves were not always things we did not enjoy, often, these were things we would be most happy doing.

Why does a middle-aged immigrant pick up a native language but most of us admit we cannot learn a foreign language? Perhaps we are using age-old beliefs or research that younger people learn more easily as a ruse to not challenge ourselves?

A 50 year old can learn to dance as well as a five year old. Of course, there are savants, precocious kids and geniuses, but did we drop out of class V because there were 10 others doing better at Math or English? Let's consider some examples of people around us, those who we can emulate rather than idolise.

It is true that we will learn things that we are passionate about because memory and learning are closely associated with emotions, which is why permanent learning almost always has an emotional component.

A friend tells of a woman over 30 who started to learn Bharatnatyam dance along with her young daughter. The back story is that she had always wanted to dance and would hide behind doors to watch her sister who was being taught dance as she was the prettier of the two.

This lady was able to fulfil her desire so many years later, even though it demanded more from her with increased responsibilities of home, family and a job.

No absolute truths

Adult learning would be a lot facile if the problem of perception did not weigh it down so much. The good news is that for all the mental roadblocks such as, how will it look to learn new things at 'this' age and what will people think, a recent study shows others think less of us than we imagine them to.

A young boy learning to play basketball is learning to play basketball while an older person learning to play basketball is learning to play it with the added pressure of something akin to 'stage fright' — How am I doing? Am I learning quick enough? What are the others thinking, saying? Confidence is the greatest aid for learning.

Just as parents feel proud watching their kids learn new things, children too experience such pride. Shalini Ramachandran's heart swells with pride and joy when she talks of her mother who overcame her fear of water and learned to swim in her early 50s.

And Saroj Juneja at 55, did the most amazing thing — when the swimming coach refused to teach her saying it was too late, she observed others, asked questions, and learnt it herself! The only people who learn are those that are so desperate to learn that they do it despite conditions being unfavourable.

Recently, I met an amazing foot artist, Sheela from Lucknow. Sheela lost both her hands in a train accident when she was four. She watched other kids draw and write and slowly began to train herself to hold the pencil between her toes.

The brush soon replaced the pencil. Sheela completed schooling, a Bachelor's degree in Fine Arts, and is an artist with the National Lalit Kala Kendra, Lucknow. For a woman from a large family of six siblings and limited means, having a disability as restricting as this, these were not mere roadblocks but mountains that she moved to learn what she was passionate about. How many of us have looked at a painting and sighed, "Wish I could paint too!" And why not? What is our excuse?

Ekalavyas all

Imagine being invisible when attending a class one wants to as an older student. This is the kind of anonymity the Internet offers. Technology has opened up such a wide, new world of learning before us.

It is far easier now to follow our dreams with technology not just making learning accessible, but allowing us to first try our hand at stuff and gain confidence in private.

In high school, a classmate with who I was doing a project asked if Sonia Gandhi was Rajiv Gandhi's sister. She may have never set her sight on the UPSC, but Indira Gandhi was prime minister, and it must be hard to not know.

Every film theatre screened the documentary in which Indira Gandhi was shown telling her grandchildren why the colour of blood is red while the parents — Sonia and Rajiv smiled and looked on.

I was gobsmacked, not by her ignorance, but by her courage to admit it, and finally learn than to never do. Now, of course, the Internet saves everyone's face.

Mable Thomas is an IT professional with a passion for designing clothes. She designed clothes for family and friends working late into the nights, creating designs, learning and experimenting along with her full-time job.

Most initial learning happened on the Internet — YouTube tutorials, sewing blogs and online communities. It gave her enough confidence to quit her job; complete a professional course in designing clothes and start her own label. Alka Shingwekar who loves learning new things also considers the Internet her guru.

An MBBS and MBA degree did not stop her from exploring other diverse interests. She taught herself several programming languages, website design, photoshop, sewing, painting, piano, woodwork and gardening. She loves the freedom and instant help Internet forums provide.

Thousands of people around the world are using online tutorials to learn things they always wanted to. If you are not willing to learn, no one can help you; if you are determined to learn, no one can stop you, goes a popular saying.

Learning is growing

Life is about continuous learning, growing, evolving and embracing change — in short, continually trying to get our sea legs at new things. Our mental horizons are forever expanding with knowledge of new cultures and cuisines through travel, TV or reading; we are picking up life skills everyday — riding a Metro, using a smart phone; we are learning to manage relationships — resolving conflicts, understanding other perspectives; and we are each constantly evolving as the person we are — emotionally, spiritually or intellectually.

“In times of change, learners inherit the earth, while the learned find themselves beautifully equipped to deal with a world that no longer exists” (Eric Hoffer).

This is particularly true for professionals. Continuous learning is crucial in this fast-changing world for people to not become professionally obsolete. Teachers must learn to use technology; human resource personnel must keep up with the latest policies such as the evolving definitions of sexual harassment; writers should learn the politically-correct terminology to use, for example, to refer to people with disabilities.

The edge learning provides is phenomenal. It is people who do not stop learning and acquiring new skills that keep growing and excelling. Besides staying current and relevant, the challenges new learning provides keeps learners motivated and committed to their chosen careers.

Psychologist Abraham Maslow, who gave us the hierarchy of human needs, stated that human motivation is based on people seeking fulfilment and change through personal growth.

Concepts like mentoring and reverse mentoring are finding increased relevance at workplaces. With increased specialisation and opportunities to learn, there are also more options to repurpose learning. Many people, unhappy in their chosen careers, who know that their calling is elsewhere, have chosen to learn late and switch careers.

Invest in life

We all plan for retirement and old age — health, medical, life insurance; investments to get us dividends; house, vehicle and security in many ways. How about investing in life?

When we have all the many comforts that we worked for all life, what will we do with life itself? Have we equipped ourselves with some skills that will keep us contentedly, gainfully occupied?

Nima Srinivasan, a brand consultant and market researcher, decided mid-career to learn to be a trainer — a learning that was rewarding for the insight she gained into human values, behaviours and fears, as also that would sustain her income after the conventional retirement age.

Vivek Banerjee, Project Head with a gaming company, tries to learn one new skill each year, something that is entirely removed from his job role but augments his personality and world view. From calligraphy to book critiques and cooking, he embraces the learning of as diverse subjects as he can.

At 51, when Varsha Prakash realised that she was perhaps finding it harder to retain information, she plunged headlong into learning new things. The physical and mental discipline that helped her train for long-distance running at 40, had equipped her well. She started to sing after overcoming the initial flop sweat, and is now buoyant about learning roller-blading, swimming and horse riding.

Seniors are constantly proving stereotypes wrong. Bangaloreans are familiar with Pizza Haven run by two amazing septuagenarians — Padma Sreenivasan and Jayalaxmi Srinivasan.

When they started it as a small tuck shop in 2003, the two women admit that they did not know how to make pizzas, but they knew that youngsters loved it. Pizza Haven became a hit with youngsters and grew to enable the dynamic duo realise their dream of building an old-age home.

Henry Ford said, “Anyone who stops learning is old, whether at 20 or 80. Anyone who keeps learning stays young.” Doesn’t retirement from job and responsibilities seem like the perfect time to learn all that one wanted to — teaching, reading, writing, volunteering, sport, cooking, art, music?

Finding a purpose by volunteering, contributing one’s skills, experience or knowledge and giving back to society can be fulfilling. It creates positive stress in life. That it keeps the mind alert is the bonus.

Those elders who embrace change and move with the times live happier and healthier. According to cognitive psychologist Scott Barry Kaufman, learning a new skill helps ward off dementia by strengthening the connections between parts of our brain. While brain games improve a limited aspect of short-term memory, Kaufman says, challenging activities strengthen entire networks in the brain.

Increasingly, just as the older generation is picking up new challenges of a changing world, like technology-aided communication — learning to use computers and smartphones, younger people are also being drawn to traditional forms of arts, crafts, cooking, medicine and learning.

In a quiet, aesthetic corner of Bangalore, at an art ‘ashram’ called Bimba, Deepika Dorai is keeping the family-inherited art of Rasalok — miniature, still theatre performance — alive. Sweta Sinha is a software engineer whose love for maths drew her to Vedic maths.

She learnt it from books and the Internet. The learning of this system of mental calculations which is simpler, easier and devoid of mistakes was so fulfilling that she

decided to repurpose her talent for maths from writing software to teaching Vedic maths to kids.

Learning sustains and fills us with new life energy. What holds us back from exploring and learning new things, things that we wanted to do all life as other things took precedence, is mainly the fear of standing out; the anxiety of not being good enough which appear to us camouflaged in excuses of not having enough time or the aptitude.

It is then that we need to consider what we stand to lose — in trying and in giving up. Favourable conditions seldom present themselves. There is never a more opportune time than now.

So, go register for that theatre workshop or Zumba class; join a volunteering group or learn to write RTIs; get online to learn sketching or a new language. John Greenleaf Whittier's words create perspective, "Of all sad words of tongue or pen, the saddest are these, 'It might have been'."