

Poem #10

“A Psalm of Life” by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow

WHAT THE HEART OF THE YOUNG
MAN
SAID TO THE PSALMIST

TELL me not, in mournful numbers,
Life is but an empty dream! —
For the soul is dead that slumbers,
And things are not what they seem.

Life is real! Life is earnest!
And the grave is not its goal;
Dust thou art, to dust returnest,
Was not spoken of the soul.

Not enjoyment, and not sorrow,
Is our destined end or way;
But to act, that each to-morrow
Find us farther than to-day.

Art is long, and Time is fleeting,
And our hearts, though stout and brave,
Still, like muffled drums, are beating
Funeral marches to the grave.

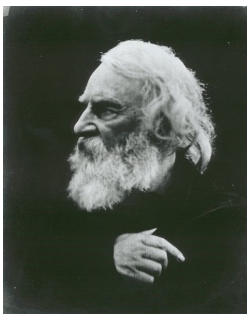
In the world's broad field of battle,
In the bivouac of Life,
Be not like dumb, driven cattle!
Be a hero in the strife!

Trust no Future, howe'er pleasant!
Let the dead Past bury its dead!
Act,— act in the living Present!
Heart within, and God o'erhead!

Lives of great men all remind us
We can make our lives sublime,
And, departing, leave behind us
Footprints on the sands of time;

Footprints, that perhaps another,
Sailing o'er life's solemn main,
A forlorn and shipwrecked brother,
Seeing, shall take heart again.

Let us, then, be up and doing,
With a heart for any fate;
Still achieving, still pursuing,
Learn to labor and to wait.



Longfellow was one of five poets called the “Fireside Poets” because their poetry was read by the firesides of American homes.

He was the most popular poet of his day, and this poem is one of several, including “Paul Revere’s Ride,” that remain well-known today, over a hundred years after his death. This poem’s advises the reader that one should make the best of things and face life bravely.

Taking it apart

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TELL me not, in mournful numbers,
Life is but an empty dream! —
For the soul is dead that slumbers,
And things are not what they seem.

A sleeping soul is like being dead, so to be truly alive, a person needs to believe that he/she can achieve his/her dreams.

Life is real! Life is earnest!
And the grave is not its goal;
Dust thou art, to dust returnest,
Was not spoken of the soul.

This is from a line in the Bible that talks about one's body being created from dust and returning to dust after it dies. Longfellow says that this is only the body – the soul lives on.

Not enjoyment, and not sorrow,
Is our destined end or way;
But to act, that each to-morrow
Find us farther than to-day.

Life isn't just for pleasure (or pain), but is to **do** something – to make progress.

Art is long, and Time is fleeting,
And our hearts, though stout and brave,
Still, like muffled drums, are beating
Funeral marches to the grave.

Even if you are brave, the truth is that everyone is getting closer and closer to death. Time is flying by.

In the world's broad field of battle,
In the bivouac of Life,
Be not like dumb, driven cattle!
Be a hero in the strife!

“Bivouac” is a camp. This term is often used in the military. This stanza uses a military metaphor to explain that we are here temporarily like an army set up in tents preparing for battle. We should be brave, not just try to blend in with the crowd.

Trust no Future, howe'er pleasant!
Let the dead Past bury its dead!
Act,— act in the living Present!
Heart within, and God o'erhead!

The moment right now is the most important moment. You can't change the past, and you can't trust the future. All you can do is seize this moment, trust your heart, and trust God.

Lives of great men all remind us
We can make our lives sublime,
And, departing, leave behind us
Footprints on the sands of time;

This stanza contains the poem's most famous phrase: footprints on the sands of time. “Sublime” means heavenly. So, Longfellow says that we can leave a mark on the world if we make the most of our lives.

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Footprints, that perhaps another,
Sailing o'er life's solemn main,
A forlorn and shipwrecked brother,
Seeing, shall take heart again.

Using a different metaphor this time – of life as a ship – Longfellow says that we may leave a path that someone else can follow in a time of trouble.

Let us, then, be up and doing,
With a heart for any fate;
Still achieving, still pursuing,
Learn to labor and to wait.

This last stanza is a rousing quatrain that inspires the reader to work and never stop, prepared to face anything that comes along.

Memorizing it

This poem, containing nine quatrains, is the longest of the poems included. Although it has thirty-six lines, it has a strong rhyme scheme and meter that make it fairly easy to memorize in spite of its length. Memorize one stanza at a time by couplet (two lines).

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Memory Tip: Try to create hand or body motions for each stanza. For example, you can count on one hand for “numbers,” and you can lay your head on your hands for “slumbers.” Try it for the other stanzas.

Memory Tip: Use a highlighter to mark the word in each couplet that you think is the key word of the couplet.

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Memory Tip: Memorize in groups of three stanzas. After you have a group of three stanzas memorized, move to the next group. Have someone quiz you by prompting you with the first words of the lines.