Inspirational Quotes from Associate Justice of the Supreme Court of the United States, Sonia Sotomayor


1. **Homework:** It was Junior and I every night, doing homework and not much else. 46
2. **Reading and the Parkchester Library:** My solace and only distraction that summer was reading. I discovered the pleasure of chapter books and devoured a big stack of them. The Parkchester Library was my haven. To thumb through the card catalog was to touch an infinite bounty, more books than I could ever possibly exhaust. 48
3. **Princeton and the Firestone Library:** Whenever I felt out of place or homesick, I took refuge at Firestone Library. Books had seen me through an earlier time of trouble, and their presence all around me was both a comfort and an answer to the question of why I had come here. 128
4. **Yale Law School:** I read the cases scrupulously and would never have dreamed of walking into class unprepared. 171
5. **Encyclopedia Britannica:** When the two big boxes labeled Encyclopedia Britannica arrived, it was Christmas come early...The world branched out before me in a thousand new directions, pretty much as the salesman had promised, and when it became overwhelming, all I had to do was close the book. It would wait for me to return. 71
6. **Study skills:** After the first As began appearing on my report card, I made a solemn vow that from then on, every report card would have at least one more A than the last one. 71 A vow on its own wasn’t enough; I had to figure out how to make it happen. Study skills were not something that our teachers at Blessed Sacrament had ever addressed explicitly. Obviously, some kids were smarter than others; some kids worked harder than others. But I also noticed, a handful of kids, the same ones every time, routinely got the top marks. That was the camp I wanted to join. But how did they do it? 72
   - I decided to approach one of the smartest girls in the class and ask her how to study. Donna Ranella looked surprised, maybe even flattered. In any case, she generously divulged her technique: how, while she was reading, she underlined important facts and took notes to condense information into smaller bits that were easier to remember; how, the night before a test, she would reread the relevant chapter. 72
7. **Competitive spirit:** Mrs. Reilly, our fifth-grade teacher, unleashed my competitive spirit. She would put a gold star up on the blackboard each time a student did something really well, and was I a sucker for those gold stars! I was determined to collect as many as I could. After the first As began appearing on my report card, I made a solemn vow that from then on, every report card would have at least one more A than the last one. 71
8. **Speaking confidently:** It occurred to me that if I was going to be a lawyer—or, who knows, a judge—I had to learn to speak persuasively and confidently in front of an audience. I couldn’t be a quivering mess of nerves. So when they asked volunteers to do the Bible reading in church on Sunday, I spied an opportunity to test myself. 86
   - Wobbly at first, my voice soon steadied, and so did my knees. The words started to flow. I knew it was important to look up at the end of each sentence, but I didn’t dare...Fortunately, after the next verse or two came inspiration: to avoid the trap of their eyes, I would focus on their foreheads...
   Before I knew it, I made it down the stairs and back to my seat. I had done it, and I knew I could do it again. 87
9. **An honest look at her writing skills:** In my next few papers I would start doing in prose what I learned how to do in spoken words. But before I could do that really well, I’d have to face up to another obstacle: the general deficiency of my written English. 135
   - Professor Weiss had minced none of her own informing me that my English was weak: my sentences were often fragments; my tenses erratic; and my grammar often just not grammatical. If I could have seen it myself, I would have fixed it, but what was wrong sounded right to me. 134
   - It wasn’t until the following year, when I took Peter Winn’s course in contemporary Latin American history, that the roots of my problem were uncovered my English was riddled with Spanish constructions and usage. 134
But my English wouldn’t be as easy to fix as the lack of an argument in my essays. I bought some grammar handbooks and, as part of the same effort, a stack of vocabulary booklets. Over summer vacations spent working at Prospect Hospital, or later at the Department of Consumer Affairs in Spanish Harlem, I’d devote each day’s lunch hour to grammar exercises and to learning ten new words, which I would later test out on Junior, trying to make them my own.135

10. **Effort trumps everything**: Seeing my mother get back to her studies was all the proof I needed that a chain of emotion can persuade when one forged of logic won’t hold. But more important was her example that a surplus of effort could overcome a deficit of confidence. It was something I would remember often in years ahead, whenever faced with fears that I wasn’t smart enough to succeed. 115

11. **Aim high**: “Try for the Ivy League.” Ken was the first student we knew from Spellman ever to have crossed into that world, and it wasn’t a term that had ever come up in conversation. He explained that this was the finest college education available and that it would open every door, which sounded oddly like a more knowing version of Mami’s claim for higher education generally. I jotted down the names of the colleges as he rattled them off, tossing in Stanford for good measure. 117

- I didn’t begin to understand the power of those Ivy names Kenny had first disclosed to me until I saw the reactions of people when they learned that I was heading to Princeton. 124

12. **How to overcome a big problem**: In both kinds of remedial efforts, I would do what I’d always done: break the challenge down into smaller challenges, which I could get on with in my methodical fashion. 183

13. **Challenges are good**: At Yale, the DA’s Office, Pavia & Harcourt—wherever I’ve gone, I’ve honestly never felt fully prepared at the outset. Yet each time I’ve survived, I’ve learned, and I’ve thrived. I’m not intimidated by challenges. My whole life has been one. I look forward to engaging the work and learning how to do it well. 288

14. **Sonia’s mother, Celina, learned English**: Not coincidently, by the time fifth grade started, school had become for the first time something to look forward to…Now suddenly lessons seemed easier. It certainly didn’t hurt that I spent the entire summer vacation with my nose in a book, hiding from my mother’s gloom, but there was another reason too. It was around that time that my mother made an effort to speak some English at home. 69

- It sounded odd when my mother first started speaking English at home, addressing Junior and me as if she were talking to a doctor at the hospital. But as soon as she found the words to scold us, it began to seem natural enough…Still, as easily as Junior and I shifted gears into English with the flexibility of youth, at the age of thirty-sis my mother could not have steered that change without a mighty effort. Only her devotion to our education could have supplied such a force of will. “You’ve got to get your education! It’s the only way to get ahead in the world.” That was her constant refrain, and I could no more get it out of my head that a commercial I’d heard a thousand times. 70

  - **Grateful for school**: (Celina, mother) At least they sent her to school. She was grateful for that, and in her warm remembrances of school I sent the stirrings of her passion for education. 53
  
  - **Grateful for the library**: (Celina, mother) The best part of school was the library and carrying home a book. She loved to read, hoarded magazines and pamphlets, any scrap of writing she could find. When the sewing was finished, she read stories into the evening, by the light of the quinque with the moths dancing around the kerosene flame. 54
  
  - **Grateful for the library**: (Celina, mother) In school Celina was lonely all the time and so quiet that practically no one knew she was there. She lived in the library and often read so long that there was no time left to study. Her grades suffered, but she knew a wealth of words from those precious books, words that nobody would ever guess she knew. 55
15. **Junior's (brother) path to med school:** Junior stumbled into a program that put minority kids on a fast track to medical school, essentially free of cost. He wasn’t inspired by childhood dreams of becoming a doctor; he had never considered the possibility. But once he started, he found that he loved what he was doing, loved the process of learning itself, and had excellent study habits compared with most kids in the program, 45% of whom would drop out. Affirmative action may have gotten him into medical school, but it was his own self-discipline, intelligence, and hard work that saw him through, where others like him had failed.

16. **Sonia’s father encouraged her mother to become a nurse:** Despite having lost his own chance for an education, my father never resented my mother’s ambitions. On the contrary, he encouraged her. She managed to finish high school, do a secretarial course, and study to qualify as a practical nurse in the first years of their marriage.

17. **Sonia’s cousin, Nelson, talks about Sonia’s determination:** “You really don’t understand, do you? I’ve always been in awe of you. There was nothing you couldn’t learn if you set your mind to it. You would just study until you figured it out. I can’t do that; I never could. That’s why I couldn’t finish college, why I couldn’t stick with a job. I didn’t have the will. That determination that you have is special. It’s a different kind of intelligence.”

- Nelson had mentioned it that day at the hospital: the one thing I had that he lacked. **Call it what you like: discipline, determination, perseverance, the force of will. Even apart from his saying so, I knew that it had made all the difference in my life.**