

Helen Keller Matters

by

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Both of my mother's parents were deaf. I grew up adjacent to the deaf community and knew, quite well, many of my grandmother's friends. My grandfather had worked for Endicott Johnson Shoe Co. for many years and even had a patent for improving the connection between the horse and wagon. Unfortunately, he died rather young (my mother was 13) so I did not know him. My grandmother lived with us for several years and her friends would sometimes gather in our home. She always carried a little notepad and pencil in order to communicate with those in the hearing world. Before she died at around 80, she had lost her sight. Therefore, I have some personal understanding of the humanity and strength of communities, which are considered by others to not be "normal," including incarcerated men and women.

Many may know the story The Miracle Worker, from film or the stage, about how Annie Sullivan taught Helen, who was deaf and blind, to communicate. Sullivan was her mentor and a lifetime companion. Later, Helen became an author, lecturer, and activist. Her *struggle was painful and deep*, but she found ways to overcome her handicaps and reach her full potential.

Critics delight to tell us what we cannot do. They assume that blindness and deafness sever us completely from the things which the seeing and the hearing enjoy, and hence they assert we have no moral right to talk about beauty, the skies, mountains, the song birds, and color...Some brave doubters have gone so far even as to deny my existence. In order, therefore, that I may know that I exist, I resort to Descartes's method: "I think, therefore I am."...

is it not amazing that any one should presume to define what one can know or cannot know? I admit that there are innumerable marvels in the visible universe unguessed by me. Likewise, O confident critic, there are myriad sensations perceived by me of which you do not dream.<sup>1</sup>

Can you see the parallels? The incarcerated begin a journey that develops from drastic mistakes, unfortunate circumstances, or intentional disgrace. The outside world cannot understand the singular and powerful journey the incarcerated undertake, making each uniquely human. Nevertheless, society wants to deny their very existence, lock them away never to be heard from again. In spite of this ignorance, the True Self lives within, capable of great creativity and humanity.

It is a common notion that when one sense is taken away that the others become stronger. Helen does affirm this. She not only used her sense of touch as a way to identify objects and to communicate by finger spelling into the palm of another's hand, but she enjoyed the unique odors of plants, flowers, foods, and even people which informed her of her world. She could not hear, but she enjoyed musical vibrations. She could sense the opening of a door or the recognizable foot falls of a friend who had entered a room. She did not feel deprived. She did rely on the assistance of others, of course, but her life was her own.

Within confinement, however it is defined, are opportunities to learn something new, become what we can become, and expand awareness,. We must or they win and we are forgotten.

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<sup>1</sup> - from "The Power of Touch" contained in The World I Live In by Helen Keller published 1908

I who am blind can give one hint to those who see — one admonition to those who would make full use of the gift of sight: Use your eyes as if tomorrow you would be stricken blind. And the same method can be applied to the other senses. Hear the music of voices, the song of a bird, the mighty strains of an orchestra, as if you would be stricken deaf to-morrow. Touch each object you want to touch as if to-morrow your tactile sense would fail. Smell the perfume of flowers, taste with relish each morsel, as if to-morrow you could never smell and taste again. Make the most of every sense; glory in all the facets of pleasure and beauty which the world reveals to you through the several means of contact which Nature provides. But of all the senses, I am sure that sight must be the most delightful.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> from “Three Days to See” an essay by Helen Keller published in Atlantic Magazine, 1933 — full essay available on this website-see Suggested Books, Publications, and Media/Essays by Others