

FRIENDLY LETTERS¹

On The Correspondence Of Helen Keller, Anne Sullivan, And Alexander Graham Bell

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At The Beginning

At the beginning there was a very severely handicapped infant, deaf and blind. At the end there was a triumphant human being, honored all over the world for her teaching, her character, the hope she gave others. And during her long life, what everyone experiences she experienced--happiness and sadness, fulfillment and disappointment, good days and gloomy ones. Through it all, there were the relationships--with her family, with colleagues worldwide, with those who wrote to her but never saw her, with those who merely saw her but did not know her. But most of all, there was Teacher--Anne Sullivan. And early in Helen Keller's development, there was the influence of Alexander Graham Bell. In this paper, I discuss a bit of their (and related) correspondence. My purpose is to draw lessons from those letters which, for me, represented glimpses of the lives themselves. I'll conclude with brief commentary.

The Lives Together

On November 29, 1888, Captain Keller, Helen's father wrote to Professor Alexander Graham Bell:

Remembering how very kind you were to my little deaf, dumb and blind girl whilst we were in Washington last winter, and how much interest you expressed in her behalf, it affords me great pleasure to report that her progress in learning is phenomenal and the report of it almost staggers one's credulity who has not seen it.

¹I am exceedingly grateful to my colleague, Professor J. David Smith of Lynchburg College, for unearthing these letters at the Library of Congress and encouraging me to use them for this paper.

Mr. Keller goes on to tell Professor Bell that just the previous March he hired Annie Sullivan, "a graduate of the Perkins Institution at Boston, who was educated whilst blind and had her sight restored last year by an operation. In a month their little girl (Helen) learned to spell about four hundred words and in less than three months could write a letter unaided by anyone." He further informs the professor that, "In six weeks she mastered the Braille (French) System which is a cipher for the blind enabling them to read what they have written." Helen also mastered addition as well as multiplication and subtraction, and she's doing nicely in geography. This was an astonishing revelation, hardly believable--but true. The idea that capability is educable may not be proven by a single case, but how else can we satisfactorily explain such unusual progress?

On January 21, 1892 Alexander Graham Bell writes to Miss Anne Sullivan about her method of teaching the child, thanking her for the opportunity to read an account of her pedagogy. He was especially impressed with the fact that Helen was given books printed in raised letters even before she could read them, noting the importance of the pleasure the child derived from passing her fingers over the words and searching for those she knew. He's amazed at Helen's familiarity with idiomatic English, not simply attributing her aptness as a pupil to her wonderful mind--commenting, rather, that the girl was blessed with a superb teacher. After all, the great scientist remarked, "... language comes from without, and not from within." How did Anne Sullivan teach her? If Anne could tell him--and the world--how she did it, society would owe her a great debt of gratitude. And so today, we still ask the same questions: How do children learn that first language, without analogues, without substantial experience? How do the youngest, and the most ordinary children learn subtle idiomatic language? If only great teachers could really tell us "how they did it". They don't (they can't) and so we settle for

what Alexander Graham Bell was willing to settle for--the names of the books Helen was given to read, the order of their presentation to the child, and other information of probable trivialness.

On December 2, 1895, Anne Sullivan writes to Mrs. Alexander Graham Bell, apologizing for the long silences between letters, and also worrying about the mounting expenses for Helen's education:

There has been no improvement in Major Keller's business affairs. He is still unable to pay any of Helen's expenses. The deposit which Mr. Spalding made in one of the Boston banks last year--the interest on which was to pay our school and traveling expenses remains unchanged but no provision has been made for clothing and incidental expenses. Last year when anything was needed I wrote to Mr. Spalding and he sent me the money. But for the present this way out of the difficulty is closed to me. Mr. Spalding has been very dangerously ill since the middle of October and his physicians say it will be a long time -- months before he will be able to attend to his affairs, and in the meantime Helen will need some winter flannels, a dress or two and a warm coat to make her comfortable during the cold weather. And I write to ask if you will kindly send me a small check -- sufficient to supply these necessities -- and thereby relieve my mind of a very great anxiety.

On December 2, 1895, Helen Keller also writes to, "My Dear Mrs. Bell". She thinks of dear Mr. and Mrs. Bell very often during the months since she last saw them, asking about their trip to France, reporting that she now is studying French--and enjoying it very much. Soon Helen expects to have a French teacher, and then she'll learn to speak as well as to read it. She also studies German, which she finds interesting.

Besides French and German I study Physical Geography, Arithmetic, voice-training and lip-reading; so you see what a busy little girl I am! Sometimes I feel quite overwhelmed when I think what a vast mine of knowledge this world of ours is! It almost seems as if its weight would crush me: but when I remember the great men whose minds have gone down into the dark depths of the mine, and up into the mysterious heights of the heavens, and brought back to us the precious gems of truth which we call science, I begin to think our minds are as vast as the world, and I feel encouraged.

Helen enjoys Physical Geography more than other subjects, but Arithmetic and her have not been good friends. And frankly, she has an aversion for lip-reading

and voice-training. But she is resolved ". . . to conquer them, knowing that a brave heart and patient perseverance will triumph in the end." And then the letter ends with apologies for making the good woman weary of her, noting the oppressively hot weather, and hoping that Mr. Bell is happy at work on his flying-machine. Can this be a letter from a handicapped child (a poor one at that)--one who was feared to be defective as well as blind and deaf? Of course not. As Helen Keller remarked throughout her life, she was not handicapped. And as the world remarked about her life, she was nothing if not brilliant, accomplished, and distinguished.

On September 3, 1896, Helen writes a sad note to Dr. Bell, informing him that her dear father died the previous Saturday at their home in Tuscumbia, Alabama.

My own dear, loving father! Oh, dear friend, how shall I ever bear it! It seems as if a great, dark cloud has fallen upon my life that would always keep out the brightest of everything. How strange it is! I never knew how dearly I loved my father until I realized that I had lost him. I think we do not know the depth of love in our hearts until some dreadful sorrow reveals it to us, and then we realize a little what God's love must be like.

On June 2, 1899, Helen writes to Dr. Bell expressing gratitude and tenderness for a check sent to Teacher and her pupil. She writes about the summer delights ahead, but also about her studies which continue even through what for other children are vacations from schooling. She must study Greek and Latin--Cicero, Homer and Virgil--in order to be prepared for later examinations. Helen knows what one needs to do to be a success at school. And on March 9, 1900, she again writes to Dr. Bell, remarking on her studies--languages, English history and literature, all the courses that other young women are required to take at her preparatory school. She reads Macbeth, and French plays, and writes a paper on "the South African question". And so it goes, remarkably like other letters young women of the time sent to family and friends.

There are many letters from Helen to Dr. Bell, and a few from him to her. On June 2, 1900 she confesses that she thinks she wants to go to Radcliffe, but she

needs a great deal more study before she can take the regular college course. There is a wonderful letter from Bell to a Mrs. Pratt, written on October 13, 1900. Bell is worried that there are people trying to persuade Helen Keller and Anne Sullivan to administer a special school for deaf and blind children. He doesn't like that idea; rather, he wants to see Helen

. . . fighting her way through Radcliffe College in competition with hearing and seeing young ladies, and then startling the world as a great authoress or even poetess. With her gifts of mind and imagination there should be a great future open to her in literature, and I believe that as an authoress, she would not only move the world, but make for herself all the money that might be necessary to keep her in comfort all her life and give her the means to do any good she chose.

In a plea for normalization (the specific word not then known to him but deeply understood), Alexander Graham Bell wants Helen to live among hearing and seeing people, where she belongs. She should associate with the best minds of the world--on equal terms. As for Miss Sullivan, that's different. She should be the person placed in a position to train teachers, expand her influence as a great and creative teacher. He then writes eloquently about all disabled, but deaf-blind children especially, needing a normal environment. In his view, a special school would not benefit them but, rather, would hurt them:

It should be recognized as a fundamental thing, that the collection of defective children exclusively together, is a thing to be avoided as much as possible. Exclusive association with one another only aggravates and intensifies the peculiarities that differentiate them from other people, whereas, it is our object, by instruction, to do away with these differences, to the greatest possible extent. I should think it would almost make a sane man mad to be shut up exclusively with the insane, and it certainly would be much better for the insane if they could be surrounded by healthy minds. It is simply a question of practicability, expense, etc. The blind become blinder by exclusive association with one another, and the deaf and dumb are made into a class apart by themselves. I could write a great deal upon this subject, but this is neither the time nor the place. My heart is deeply moved in the matter because I feel that a gigantic blunder is about to be made and I am away and cannot prevent it. Let me, however, say a few words as to what I think should be done, rather than what should not be done.

Believing, as I do, in the policy of decentralization, in dealing with the defective children--the policy of separating them from one another as much as practicable during the process of education--and keeping them in constant personal contact with their friends and relatives and ordinary normal people,--I would say that it would be better to send the teachers to these children, rather than send the children to the teachers. It would be better to associate together the people who wish to benefit these children, than to bring the children themselves together. I would like to see the ideas of Mrs. Chamberlain take the form of an organized association to promote the education of deaf-blind children. I would have this association provide funds that would enable Miss Sullivan to qualify others to become teachers of the deaf-blind and then send these teachers to the deaf-blind children in their own homes and among their own people, as Miss Sullivan herself was sent to Helen. It should be the duty of these teachers to instruct--not simply the deaf-blind children themselves--but their parents and relatives and friends. They should teach the people at home, so that through their agency, the children would have in effect many teachers in their own homes.

I can't go on elaborating thus in the dining room of a trans-atlantic steamer, but I cannot allow your letter to pass unanswered, lest you should think that I approve of a plan that seems to me to be a great mistake.

Just one point in conclusion. So much individual instruction and care is required that the instruction of a deaf-blind child will necessarily be expensive. Each child will necessarily require a teacher to himself. Now, looked at simply from the point of view of expense. Suppose we have a special school. We must provide the buildings and grounds; we must board the pupils and teachers. The money necessary for these things is over and above what is necessary for the education of the children. If we send the teachers to the children, we have only to provide the teachers, salaries of the instructors, for the parents would provide board and lodging for the teacher and pupil, and the expense of school buildings would be saved.

From the point of economy, as well as efficiency, I would say that the money provided should be expended as much as possible, in the salaries of teachers, (exclusive of board) and as little as possible upon board and lodging and buildings.

Send the teachers to the children, not the children to the teachers.

I quote extensively from this letter--written on the Irish Sea, with neither library nor a "movement" behind him. But, truthfully, has either Wolf Wolfensberger, the Council for Exceptional Children, or the architects of Public Law--94--142 ever articulated a more cogent and clear philosophy (and justification) of mainstreaming and normalization?

And then there are letters written through the years--about kindnesses from one friend to the other, about vacations and studies, about all of the good and memorable experiences people enjoy writing about to their dear ones. And all through those years, there was the teacher, the pupil, and the great scientist who befriended a family whose grief was unimaginable and whose problems appeared to be without solution. Notwithstanding, solutions were found. The child grew up. The teacher married. The old scientist passed away. New companions came, new problems were confronted. Everything changed in the world and for the people. What remained were the lasting friendships formed around a studious and beautiful child who grew to brilliant and graceful womanhood.

A Perspective

Stricken by disease as an infant, Helen Keller became one of the world's great public figures--an inspiring advocate for humane treatment of the handicapped and others in need (Keller, 1903). But before she became that world leader, she was severely mentally defective. Before she met Anne Sullivan, she was a child shut off from stimuli and even hope. Until the age of seven, Helen Keller was a half-wild "animal," untutored, unsocialized, unable to perform the simplest tasks expected of children. At the age of nineteen months, disease had left her without sight or hearing and, according to the best advice available, without any prospect for a normal life. She was thought to be a hopeless idiot.

Today, many people know the story of the miracle wrought by Helen Keller and Anne Sullivan. We know that the teacher and pupil developed a system for communicating, first by connecting objects with letters through spelling the object by manual alphabet in the child's hand, and next by connecting the word and the object with function or concept. To be sure, Helen Keller was a bright child to progress so quickly from "idiocy" to Radcliffe College student. But we must remember that,

before Radcliffe and before Anne Sullivan, there was only the "idiot." Decades later, students continued to be thrilled and inspired by the life of Helen Keller. But what is often missed is that she and her teacher(s) had lives beyond their concerns for each other and their common victory over the cruel accident of Helen's infirmity. Through much of their life together, it wasn't Miss Anne Sullivan, but Mrs. Ann Sullivan Macy, wife of a distinguished literary critic. To be sure, Helen lived with the Macys and the couple devoted themselves to her, but Helen Keller wasn't the whole of Anne Sullivan's life. And Anne Sullivan wasn't the whole of Helen Keller's life. From 1914 until she died in 1960, Miss Polly Thompson lived and worked with Helen Keller. And there were other family, and other colleagues who encouraged this remarkable woman.

Furthermore, to think of Helen Keller as only an advocate for the blind and deaf, is as if to think only of Franklin Delano Roosevelt as an advocate for the victims of polio, or to think only of Jimmy Carter as an advocate for energy conservation or peanuts; or Ronald Reagan merely as an actor. As true as those designations may be, they conceal as much or more than they reveal about the individuals concerned. Not to know that may be to miss what the lives of historical figures might have truly taught us about our own lives--had we been willing to explore beyond the obvious.

For a time, Helen Keller was an important figure in the American Socialist Movement, advocating for the working class in its struggles against capitalist exploitation, militarism, and sexism (Foner, Ed., 1967). Certainly influenced by her own disabilities and the blocks in overcoming them, Helen Keller's examination of industrial greed, slum life and child labor led her to escape preoccupation with her special sightless and soundless existence. As she strove to free herself from the difficulties which disease created in her, she more and more sought to understand the difficulties which society created for mankind's downtrodden multitudes.

Seeing with her hands and her soul while others could see only with their eyes, she was led to the idea of a new social order, a world free of worker exploitation, free of preventable disease, free of sexism, free of all forms of human oppression. No doubt, her newspaper and magazine articles offended strong elements, probably the strongest and most established elements in our society. She sent checks to striking workers at Little Falls, New York; she befriended striking miners; she demanded the enfranchisement of women. She wrote and wrote--and worked and worked. And thus she accomplished.

Helen Keller raged against the stupidity of buying guns to deface the work of God, when those same hands which make the guns could create marvelously clean cities, could bind wounds rather than inflict them, could feed people rather than starve them. Her eloquent pen reminded us again and again of the women and children who were ground down by their toil and our greed, who were being destroyed while a selfish society thought more of itself than its brothers. She wrote letters to the editors, letters to dignitaries, letters to the masses--exhorting everyone to bring peace to the earth, to us, and to our children and our children's children. And while she spoke about her deafness and blindness, it was more to remind us that we seem to want to remember that fact, that she remembers her infirmity because we insist that it is important. She, who saw nothing but everything, had to contend with a society who claimed to see everything, yet sometimes seemed to see nothing.

A deaf-blind woman brought the sound and vision of a better life to the masses. First she was helpless. Then she had great teachers and advocates. There are children today hoping for such good fortune. There are even miracles waiting to be wrought.

References

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