INTRODUCTION TO TEACHING GUIDE FOR "THE MIRACLE WORKER"

Burton Blatt
Dean, School of Education
Syracuse University

Before Annie Sullivan came into her life, Helen Keller was a wild animal. Of course, Helen Keller grew up to become a brilliant and internationally famous person. But before she was brilliant, she was mentally retarded. Precisely, that is the prepotent lesson to be learned from Helen Keller's life and, thus, from "The Miracle Worker." It's the most important lesson that a teacher can learn and, consequently, is the most important lesson that a teacher can teach. Specifically, "The Miracle Worker" illuminates the hypotheses that:

1. People traditionally underestimate their potential for changing or, to use a more common term, their potential for learning.
2. Pessimism concerning the conditions of change become a self-fulfilling prophesy. People do not learn when they become convinced that they cannot or should not.
3. Under proper conditions, it can be demonstrated that capability is a function of practice and training. That we have not been able to accomplish such change in people may be less a defect of that belief than it is of our practices.

The easy lesson to be learned from this story is that Helen Keller wasn't really retarded. It is so easy that we must guard against unwittingly teaching it, because it's wrong. Helen Keller was retarded. Another false lesson that can easily be learned from this story is that most deaf-blind children grow up

to become intelligent, much less brilliant. The belief the teacher must have is not that Helen Keller had to change in order to satisfy Annie Sullivan, but that she didn't have to change in order to justify her right to Annie's best efforts on her behalf. Without this belief in the right of each child to the fullest educational opportunities possible, a teacher may soon be infected with contempt for those pupils who are not good enough or are not quickly enough learning to meet the teacher's requirements for being human. Annie Sullivan probably couldn't have accomplished the "miracle" if she believed Helen Keller had to change. Indeed, had Annie spent her entire life with Helen, and had Helen never made a single response, everything we know about Annie Sullivan suggests that she would not have felt that her life was wasted. Ironically, but how else could it be, we are least likely to produce a "miracle" if we require it.

The above informs society about how we can express concern for the individual and his or her value as a human being irrespective of any talents one may have, irrespective of any limitations one must endure. But the other necessary belief the teacher must hold is that the human being is indeed capable of improvement in virtually every conceivable way. It's the right of every human being to have his or her limitations accepted by family, by teacher, by society. But it's also the right of every human being to have his or her limitations mitigated to the degree society finds possible, and to have his or her strengths exploited in similar fashion. To accomplish the amelioration of deficits and the enhancement of strengths in all children, teachers and other treatment personnel especially must change their conceptions of human potential. And your inspiration for such personal reassessment may well be, "The Miracle Worker."

The lives of Annie Sullivan and Helen Keller demonstrate to us that each person can contribute to the larger society, that as human beings all people are equally valuable, that every person is entitled to developmental opportunities, and that development itself is educable, i.e. incremental.

What kind of a teacher do you want for your own children? What kind of a teacher did you wish for yourself? Annie Sullivan had such boundless faith in the human ethos that she was surely convinced that the work of the teacher is not to judge who can or can't change but rather to fulfill the goal that everyone can change; and it was exactly that belief which gave purpose and courage to that good and faithful teacher. As this story unfolds, ~~you will see~~ that the core of Annie's strength was found in her belief that, before one could truly help another person to learn, the teacher must begin with herself: Before I ask the world to change, I must change. I am the beginning step.

After nearly a century of advances in psychology and pedagogy, we still look to the shining examples of Annie Sullivan and Helen Keller to teach us about the human spirit, about the educability of intelligence, about the work of the teacher. Their lives remind us that the genuine miracle of their association was less in the fact that Annie Sullivan "cured" Helen Keller's incomprehensibility than that, together, they discovered a "cure" for society's most debilitating and unnecessary disease, hopelessness.

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