

A Courageous Life: Helen Keller

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I have a distant cousin, Janelle, a bright young woman, and deeply religious. She married a sweet-faced man named Todd. I can remember them dancing at my nephew's wedding, which I performed in 1999, looking fiercely into one another's eyes, clearly thrilled with each other and with life. That summer, Janelle was in a car accident. Her spine was severed, and she lost all feeling and function from her neck down. She was more fortunate than most in her situation. Todd stuck by her, never wavered. Her mother and aunt were registered nurses and gave her expert, personal and loving care. And yet, of course, she struggled to live. It also changed the way we looked at her; we couldn't help it.

When I was preparing for my niece's wedding, six years later, I learned that she'd invited Janelle to read the passage from First Corinthians 13 at her wedding. I'll admit I was taken aback. "Are you sure, Kendra?" I asked. "Do you think she's up to it?" This made my niece - someone with a very sunny personality and a 1000-kilowatt smile - very angry. "Well, she can TALK," she snapped. It was one of those humbling moments when you learn you have prejudices you didn't know about. I sat there, sort of blinking on other end of the phone. "Of course she can," I said.

And she did - with such beauty and tenderness, introducing her piece by reminding us that love was a gift from God, not something you feel, but something you do. Do I need to tell you there was not a dry eye in the house? It took great courage for her to read at that wedding, as it did for her to get up in the morning, every morning, knowing that she was utterly dependent on her care givers, that she would never have a job, never have a child, never have the ordinary life she possessed moments before her accident.

This week, I learned a new word from the Japanese language. It's *gaman*, and it means "to endure the seemingly impossible with patience and dignity". It's remarkable that one word can express all this, but I think it captures the life of a severely disabled person. It captures the incredible courage that life requires.

I also spent this week with what felt like an old friend from my girlhood, Helen Keller. How many of you read Helen Keller's autobiography when you were a child, or a book about her, or her teacher, Annie Sullivan? When I was

growing up, she was one of my heroines, along with Anne Frank – and Laura Ingalls Wilder, Pippi Longstocking and Harriet the Spy. I don't mean to diminish Helen Keller, just to say that as a voracious child reader, I didn't discriminate between fact and fiction. They were brave girls who helped me to learn about bravery. And we need these growing up. So when Rev. Josh and I decided on "courage" as the worship theme for January, Helen Keller came immediately to mind.

The trouble with Helen Keller is that for most of us, she remains a child. We are captivated by that incredible moment when Helen and her new teacher, Annie Sullivan, were out at the water pump, and Annie spelled w-a-t-e-r into Helen's hand. Helen wrote later that the light broke into her soul just then. She learned that "this delicious, cool something flowing over my hand had a name," that everything had a name, that human beings had this astonishing thing called language, and it was hers for the taking. She was seven years old. For most of us, the story ends there – Helen remains a child, and a child's hero.

This week, I spent some time with a terrific and honest book called, *Helen Keller: A Life* by Dorothy Herrmann. I wanted to answer some questions. Who was she as an adult? Why was she so famous? Why are we still telling her story, decades after her death in 1968? And what lessons can we draw from her life?

She was born in Tuscumbia, Alabama, in 1880, the granddaughter of a plantation owner. Her mother, Kate Keller, was descended from the Unitarian minister, Edward Everett Hale, but – don't get excited - the Kellers were not Unitarians. (Helen herself would later become a Swedenborgian, when she was given pamphlets to read as a young woman by her friend, Alexander Graham Bell, who *was* Unitarian. If only he'd given her one of ours!) She had full sight and hearing when she was born, but scarlet fever, which she developed at 19 months, left her both deaf and blind. It broke her parents' hearts, and I'm sure it frightened them, on many levels. They didn't have the heart to discipline her, so she became a wild thing, controlling the family with her temper tantrums. Helen still showed signs of high intelligence. She made up several of her own signs to communicate. But it was only when they sent for a teacher at the Perkins School, Annie Sullivan, that she learned language and could join the rest of the world. After she learned the word "water", she learned 30 other words in two hours.

This was just the beginning of her education, and of her relationship with Annie Sullivan, which lasted 50 years. Helen called her "Teacher" in her writings, never Annie, or Miss Sullivan. "Teacher" was a term that conveyed more than what most of us mean by the word – there was honor and reverence, but also

affection and intimacy – more like Mother or Father. Annie Sullivan saw intelligence in her, even at her most savage, and always pushed her to go further and further. By the age of 8, Helen was learning (through Annie’s finger-spelling) Shakespeare and Homer. She understood it, and she memorized it. Annie wrote to Michael Anagnos, the director of the Perkins School, about her student’s progress. Anagnos was so impressed that when he wrote his annual report for Perkins, he featured her. These reports were picked up by the newspapers, and soon there were offers for Helen and Annie she agreed to make public appearances. Helen “recited” Shakespeare, through spelling it into her teacher’s hand. These appearances drew hundreds of people, and brought Helen a celebrity that lasted her whole life. It was tempting to exploit. Vaudeville companies offered her the princely sum of \$500 a week to appear, and her father would have gladly put her on the stage, but her mother intervened.

As Helen grew up, she went to Perkins School along with Annie. She was the only deaf-blind student there, but it was still helpful to her to be with other blind children. When she came of age to attend college, she started to prepare rigorously to attend Radcliffe. Radcliffe eventually admitted her, but not until after trying to talk her out of going, telling her that she was so special, she shouldn’t just do what ordinary girls were doing. (Going to college was not ordinary for most young women in the early 1900s.) Helen’s letters show remarkable patience with Radcliffe – for a response that now sounds patronizing, not to mention an obvious attempt to avoid taking on a student with what we would call “special needs”. But eventually she was admitted, and graduated - cum laude. Some thought Annie Sullivan ought to have also received a degree, since she had to read every single word and spell it to Helen, and she helped her write every one of her essays. Annie was always an exacting, demanding teacher, and made Helen redo and redo her writing until it was flawless.

Helen Keller wrote *The Story of My Life* in 1904, as she was graduating from Radcliffe. I must say that in re-reading it as an adult, I felt some disappointment. While she shows a great intellect and facility for language, it’s still written in a kind of florid, early-20th-century lady writer’s style. Annie and later, Annie’s husband the literary critic, John Macy, would serve as Helen’s editors and helped her tone this down. Helen Keller wrote a number of books, covering a range of subjects, some autobiographical, some political, some about social conditions. All show a great mind and a passion for the suffering of the world. None, I am sad to say, would probably be remembered if they were written by someone else. It’s *her* we loved - her courage, her kindness, her conviction. The cover of *The Story of My Life* shows an image of Helen that was carefully cultivated. This is Helen Keller as the public saw her – a cheerful, virginal young maiden, seated with a

large Braille book and gracefully sniffing a rose. She is photographed from her “good side”, which does not show her disfigured left eye. Remember this image. You will have to unlearn it.

From an early age, Helen wanted to do good in the world. When she was 10, a policeman shot and killed her dog, and when the public heard about this, letters with cash came pouring in to replace the dog, or just to express their care and concern. Helen immediately decided that she would collect the money for a boy who could not afford to go to the Perkins School. She not only accepted the money, but wrote letters to the newspapers soliciting more. As someone who suffered personally from limitations greater than most people have to endure, she was extremely sensitive to learning about the sufferings of others.

But she didn't do the genteel charity-work a good Southern woman would have been encouraged to do. She was a radical. She told the New York Times: “I am a militant socialist and suffragette.” She marched in suffrage parades. She lectured, she wrote to the newspapers constantly. Through Annie Sullivan, she followed textile strikes of the teens - she actually joined the Wobblies and declared herself a socialist. This was bad enough, but when America was about to enter World War I, she was an outspoken pacifist, saying that war exploited the working class. She was friends with Emma Goldman and John Reed. Instead of daintily sniffing a rose, we should picture her carrying a large, red flag.

The newspapers published her letters, but criticized her at the same time. One newspaper began its editorial with this sentence: “It would be difficult to imagine anything more pathetic than the present exploitation of poor Helen Keller by the Socialists.” Keller replied in a speech that, “I do not like the hypocritical sympathy of such a paper. . . but I am glad if it knows what the word ‘exploitation’ means.” (from Bruce Cleary's sermon, “Helen Keller's Religion”)

Helen Keller using sarcasm – you've got to love it. She supported Margaret Sanger and her birth control clinics. She championed the rights of African Americans – she felt a strong sense of shame over her Southern heritage which included lynching, slavery and segregation, and was an early supporter of the controversial NAACP. She helped found the ACLU in 1920. Wherever she went, she drew attention, and she knew it. In this way, she was not unlike socially conscious celebrities today. The late Princess Diana once wrote about her campaign against land mines. She said, “Wherever I go, there will be cameras. I may as well put it to good use.”

Dorothy Herrmann, her biographer, wrote that it was also a way for her to express the hurt and rage about her own disabilities that she did not allow herself in

public. This is the most interesting thing about Helen Keller to me – that she became the symbol of the model disabled person. In the teens, the actress Georgette LeBlanc once wrote of her, “She is the example necessary to our day, the glorification of effort, intelligence and strength...Be happy, Helen, and be free, for you have proved that there is no real prison save in mediocrity, that the darkness which has no ending is the darkness of the mind...” Can’t you hear the early 20th century philosophers here? Progress! No limitations! Onward and upward forever.

Helen Keller was beautiful and intelligent, cheerful and courageous. (More than one blind person has expressed mixed feelings about this relentless good attitude. It’s inspiring, and it’s hard to live up to, 24/7. Helen couldn’t possibly have done it.) But she helped allay our fears. We love Helen Keller. And we keep her and other disabled people at an arm’s length, because it’s terrifying to think that we could be so vulnerable. That we could be a happily married young woman and a car accident can make us a quadriplegic. That we could have a bright, healthy one-year-old, and six months later, she could be deaf and blind. That we *will* age and lose abilities we take for granted: to see, to hear, to walk easily, to drive a car.

She helped us with our discomfort, but at a great price. We forget the hours and hours it took her to do any normal thing, and the tremendous help she needed to function. Helen had an unusual number of friends for someone with her limitations at that time. Many blind people and deaf people are isolated and lonely – doubly so, if you are both. We need our heroes and heroines – we need to see people with disabilities making contributions to the world and living full lives. But we also need to understand that they cannot do this by themselves. Disabled people, like everyone else, need cooperation and respect – and opportunity to be fully themselves. Independence is the prize. Helen Keller once said, “My whole desire has been to have my own door key, and go and come like people who can see.”

People who are disabled are much closer to having this kind of door key. We’ve come a long way, thanks to Helen Keller, in recognizing the rights of the disabled. Probably her greatest, most lasting contribution was in founding organizations that supported and educated the blind. We have enacted legislation like the Americans with Disabilities Act, and there are whole communities of blind and deaf people that advocate for themselves. But we’re a long way from full opportunity and equality. Disabled people are still required to have “gaman”, a patient and dignified endurance of the seemingly impossible.

Of the 9.7 million blind people in the U.S., for example, only 26% of those between ages 21 and 65 have jobs. People with disabilities – especially women - still have a much harder time attracting a mate. Funding for children with learning disabilities in schools is still fought by administrations, and school psychologists are discouraged from diagnosing such needs. Like all work for inclusion, it requires effort; it costs money. Until everyone sees people with disabilities as being like themselves, as not being separate from themselves, we will not pony up.

And in our own church – we still do not have a building that accommodates a wheelchair. To go from the sanctuary to the chapel requires a person to go out and all the way around the building to the Sunday School parking lot. Three little steps are all it takes to make passage completely impossible. The request that breaks my heart every time is from someone who cannot walk who wants a regular ride to church. We simply aren't equipped. We did have a small – and I mean small – victory this fall, in placing the 2 half-pews in the back rows to allow people in wheelchairs and their families to sit together, and not apart from the rest of the congregation. But we have much farther to go.

While I applaud the air conditioning (THANK ya, Lord!) and the spruced-up bathrooms we are planning, and the efforts to make our building “green”, I would love to see us look at making ourselves fully accessible.

“Courage is as contagious as fear,” Eleanor Roosevelt once said. May we not just admire people like Helen Keller, but allow their courage to be contagious, to face our own fears and limitations, and do what we need to do to make a fair and just world, for everyone. Amen.