

## Helen Keller, a Precursor in the Field of Education of Differently Enabled

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### Abstract

Helen Keller was really an embodiment of valour, courage and determination who worked hard to change the scenario for special children. In spite of having manifold handicaps since her early childhood, she rose to be a well acclaimed critic and litterateur and social worker par excellence. With her eternal spirit she fought the tribulations and uncertainties with brave heart and showed to the world that handicap is only in mind. In fact she surpassed so called normal people in her sensitivity, discernment and large –heartedness as well as in firm determination. Her undying spirit, her indomitable will to not to succumb before the difficulties of life and ultimately come out triumphant to prove that a person with unbeatable spirit can never be conquered. Her autobiography *The Story of My Life* by Helen Keller is a classic chronicle of a woman's aspirations. Through her firm determination and constant efforts she crossed the boundaries posed by her handicaps. She proved to the world that for a resolute person impossible world is found only in dictionaries. She proved her supremacy over her age group people through her in-born wisdom, perseverance, single minded determination. She repeatedly showed that mental resolution and soul's inherent goodness makes this world a heaven for a specially enabled person like her. God does justice with specially enabled persons by opening new vistas and horizons for those not having their outer senses intact. Their intuition comes to help them to win over the weakness caused by non functioning of their senses. Milton and Surdas are superb examples for that. Keller's superb victory over her disability has inspired crores and crores of people and her story is now made ever-lasting by the movie "The Miracle Worker" and "Black". Due to sudden illness, an active, lively, vivacious and strong-willed child became engulfed in total darkness and excruciating silence. Instead of mourning her fate, Keller daringly took the decision to face the world with full resolve to not to let her sufferings dictate her spirit. With extreme confidence, she conquered over her frustration and anguish of being confined to the seclusion of the world, not having means to bond with the outer world and society. With the support and help of her empathetic and concerned teacher Anne Sullivan she learnt basics of knowledge and also joined the world of people having normal sight to pass her college exam. Later she becomes a critic par excellence and also a successful writer. Her life history gives insights into her journey of progress to triumph over obstacles due to physical handicaps. Her life story marvellously records how she made all the obstacles as stepping stones of success.

**Early Life:** Born as an average hale and hearty child Helen Keller didn't have these physical problems since birth. She was an energetic and spirited child as well as a fast learner. She writes, "The beginning of my life was simple and much like every other little life." Further she adds, "I showed many signs of an eager self-assertion." Due to her illness she was deprived of those highly needed and invaluable gifts of sight and listening.

"Then in the month of February, came the illness which closed my eyes and ears and plunged me into the unconsciousness of a newborn baby".

She intuitively felt the vacuum and felt perturbed and miserable for the same. She has written in her life story, "Sometimes I stood between two persons who were conversing and touched their lips. I could not understand and was vexed. I moved my lips and gesticulated frantically without result. This made me so angry at times that I kicked and screamed until I was exhausted."

Despite her physical disability, she had a strong bond with one girl Martha and used to all sort of mischievous things. She used to hunt bird nests as a time pass. She also got her hair cut by Martha and one day she would have almost burnt herself as she threw her dress in the fireplace to dry. Her father was sensitive enough about her problems and made rigorous efforts to find the solution of her problems. He met Dr. Bell, inventor of phones so that he can help in finding out the ways to educate her. She describes father was most loving and kind. She writes "Dr. Bell advised my father to write to Mr. Anagnos, director of the Perkins Institution in Boston, the scene of Dr. Howe's great labours for the blind, and ask him if he had a teacher competent to begin my education." Her mother also had adorable kindness. She never hesitated to take extra pains to help her special child. "Indeed I owe to her loving wisdom all that was bright and good in my long night."

**Miss Sullivan's Contribution to her learning:** Miss Sullivan was an ideal teacher who introduced innovative and ingenious teaching methods. She used real, natural settings, actual objects and real life situations to make the teaching learning process interactive, participatory and interesting. She assisted Keller to make her life well-planned and well-regulated. She brought light in the absolute darkness faced by Keller. She totally transformed Keller's life. Keller quotes:

"The most important day, I remember in all my life is the one on which my teacher, Anne Sullivan came to me. I was like that ship before my education began, only that I was without compass or sounding line-----."

"Light ! give me light !" was the wordless cry of my soul, and the light of love shone on me in that very hour.

**Early Learning:** As Keller was both blind and deaf, Mrs Sullivan educated her with great patience, determination, understanding and perseverance. To educate her Mrs Sullivan spelt into her hand. "Mrs Sullivan slowly spelled into my hand the word d-o-l-l."

This pleased her and she started leaning the words fast. She mentions in her story, “I was at once interested in this finger play and tried to imitate it.” She further said, “When I finally succeeded in making the letters correctly I was flushed with childish pleasure and pride.” This made her aware of the intricacies of language. “--- and somehow the mystery of language was revealed to me. “I knew then that w-a-t-e-r meant that wonderful cool something that was flowing over my hand.” Following the psychological principle of from easy to difficult, Anne Sullivan made her to identify words. “As soon as I could spell a few words my teacher gave me slips of cardboard on which were printed letters in raised letters.” “I quickly learned that each printed word stood for an object, an act or a quality.”

**Her Learning Process:** *Talking with fingers:* Her first communication with the world started when her teacher wrote the spelling of water on her arm. She learnt to spell the words by first experiencing their concrete form. Very subtly, Keller’s teacher made her learn the intangible words like love. “I do not feel each letter any more than you see each letter separately when you read. Constant practice makes the fingers very flexible----.”

**Learning Language:** Miss Sullivan followed the psychological principles of learning and taught her innovatively through participatory activities. Games were used to teach language. She mentions in her story, “Miss Sullivan and I kept up a game of guessing which taught me more about the use of language than any set lessons could have done.” Further she adds ---the bits of knowledge one gathers undergo a similar change and become pearls of thought.

**Learning Geography:** *Miss Sullivan’s innovative and creative method to teach different subjects helped her learn quickly.* “Catering to her special needs, Miss Sullivan taught even Geography through play-way method. It was not theoretical knowledge but actually doing the things practically. She mentions, “*It was learning through actual participation in activities. It was fun in learning which made learning easy and filled it with pleasure.*” She further adds, “There we spent many happy hours and played at learning Geography. I built dams of pebbles, made islands and lakes and dug river beds, all for fun, and never dreamed that I was learning a lesson.”

*Miss Sullivan* actually made Keller learn through Dewey’s principle of learning by doing. Keller mentions how she taught her Geography. “She made raised maps in clay, so that I could feel the mountain ridges and valleys, and follow with my fingers the devious course of rivers.”

**Learning Science:** *Miss Sullivan* taught Science also through real life examples. Keller mentions, “She introduced dry technicalities of science little by little, making every subject so real that I could not help remembering what she taught.”

**Education amidst Nature:** Keller’s education was not in four walls of rooms but amidst nature. She writes, “We read and studied out of doors, preferring the sunlit woods to the house.”

The natural surroundings around her, added to her delight and enjoyment. She quotes, “All my early lessons have in them the breath of the woods- the fine resinous odour of pine needles, blended with the perfume of wild grapes.”

According to her, “The loveliness of things taught me all their use.” Actually through nature, she learnt secrets of nature. She writes, “Again, it was the growth of a plant that furnished the text for a lesson.”

**Human Anatomy :** Real life like examples were used to teach her human anatomy. She mentions, “My teacher read me ‘The Chambered Nautilus ‘ and showed me that the shell building process of the molluscs is symbolical of the development of mind.”

**Learning Arithmetic:** *Miss Sullivan* taught her Mathematics by using concrete objects. She ponders over ,“Mrs. Sullivan tried to teach me to count by stringing beads in groups, and by arranging kindergarten straws.” She introduced dry technicalities of science little by little, making every subject so real that I could not help remembering what she taught..” Due to her fantastic influence, Keller began to find a learning purpose everywhere,”I learned to think that everything has a lesson and a suggestion.” According to her, “The loveliness of thing taught me all their use.”

**Learning through Play-way Method:** Her wonderful teacher playfully used play way method to teach Keller. Keller writes,”For a long time I had no regular lessons. Even when I studied most earnestly it seemed more like play than work.” According to her, “She linked my earliest thoughts with nature, and made me feel that birds and flowers and I were happy peers.”

**Dissatisfaction at not being able to speak:** Full of diverse thoughts about different aspects of life, she felt quite disappointed and frustrated at not being able to articulate her feelings. “I was conscious of dissatisfaction with the means of communication I already possessed. One who is entirely dependent upon the manual alphabet has always a sense of restraint, of narrowness.”

**Talking with lips: Learning to Speak:** As Keller was unable to speak correct meaningful sentences, she felt frustrated at not being able to communicate. She rightly mentions, “One who is entirely dependent upon the manual alphabet has always a sense of restraint, of narrowness.” She further writes,” My thoughts would often beat like birds against the wind and I persisted in using my lips and voice.”

At the later stage ,Keller also learned to speak with lips by copying the lip movements of others. Miss Fuller assisted her to copy her by making her feel the position of her tongue and lips. Keller writes in her story, “Miss Fuller’s method was this: she passed my hand lightly over her face, and let me feel the position of her tongue and lips when she made a sound.” By copying these movements, she learnt to speak. “I shall never forget the surprise and delight I felt when I uttered my first connected sentence.” Keller adds,“ It was in the spring of 1890 that I learned to speak. The impulse to utter audible sounds had always been strong within me.”

It was just like a marvel for her. “It astonished me to find how much easier it is to talk than to spell with fingers.”

But copying and imitating the sound was not easy for her. She writes, “In such cases I was forced to repeat the words or sentences, sometimes for hours, until I felt the proper ring in my own voice. My work was practice, practice, practice.” But indomitable desire to communicate with friends and dear ones without any barrier was very powerful. She writes. “My little sister will understand me now” was a thought stronger than all obstacles.”

The power to communicate with lips had a liberating effect on her. She writes, “----to come out from the prison of silence-----.” The speech had an elevating effect on her. According to her, “My soul, conscious of new strength, came out of bondage, and was reaching through those broken symbols of speech to all knowledge and all faith.”

**Sixth Sense:** *Keller’s instinct was also much developed even in the absence of her two crucial sense organs. This helped Keller to acquire education . She writes:* “It seems that benevolent nature provides some other attributes to those who lost their abilities due to Heavenly Justice.” She feels that she has this intuition about beauty of the earth and its myriad colours due to strong and everlasting impressions of past births. According to her, “Each individual has a subconscious memory of the green earth and murmuring waters, and blindness and deafness cannot rob him of this gift from past generations. This inherited capacity is a sort of sixth sense-a soul sense which sees, hears, feels, all in one.”

**Her Love for Reading :** *Despite having major handicaps in reading because of her not being able to see and listen, Helen Keller had an wonderful, incredible yearning to read and swallow the stories and other fiction work. She writes:*

I read my first connected story in May 1887, **when I** was seven years old, and from that day to this I have devoured everything in the shape of a printed page that has come within the reach of my hungry finger tips. Her learning of words started with writing on her hand. Later she learnt to read the sentences also. This further led her to read the books. She writes, “From the printed slip it was but a step to the printed book.”

In spite of her limitations of not being able to see the world with her eyes, she was a voracious and passionate reader who read thousands of books, appreciated and critically evaluated them. Her immense pleasure in reading can put an eyed person to shame.

“I have since read Shakespeare’s plays many times and know parts of them by heart----.”

She declares. “Next to poetry I love history.” She passionately mentions her love for studies. According to her, “The school is very pleasant and bless you! It is quite fashionable--- I study Arithmetic, English Literature and United States History as I did last winter.” She studied not only English literature but also French and German literature. She liked the writers and the stories written by them. In my college reading I have become familiar with French and German literature.” She adds “Of all the French writers that I have read, I like Moliere and Racine best.” She further comments, “I cannot understand why the stories of the Greeks should have been so fascinating ---.” She also loved the greatest playwright and

painter of universal diverse characters Shakespeare:“I do not remember a time since I have been capable of loving books that I have not loved Shakespeare.”

Thus the autobiography by Miss Helen Keller is an incredible story of the bravery and firm determination of a girl whose unbeatable will and incredible endeavours made her life fabulous and thrilling for even sighted people. She was an absolutely normal child before the handicap happened. A bubbly, cheerful and lively child lost her sight and speech in illness. Having a versatile personality, her talents were versatile. She didn't let her problems defeat her spirits which remained unbroken and exultant throughout her life. She found fun and enjoyment in sports, singing and reading. Her triumph was the result of the unbelievable support received from her adorable, virtuous mother and strong-minded and caring father. Further her magnificent success was the result of the dutiful, sympathetic, empathetic, loving and cordial teacher Miss Anne Sullivan who immensely supported Miss Keller to fathom her talents and abilities and to articulate them to the fullest extent. Her story of life is a motivation and inspiration for millions of special as well as normal persons. She will be always a guiding star for the disheartened, depressed, frustrated and miserable people who are unable to find their goal in life. She showed to the world that handicaps can never check the path of brave and courageous people only they need an empathetic approach and support.

#### References

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