

# Helen Keller: Rethinking the Problematic Icon

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## **Abstract**

More than thirty years after her death, Helen Keller is still known internationally as the little deaf blind girl, the 'miracle child' who triumphed over adversity. But behind the image, hidden from the public gaze, was a flesh-and-blood woman, writer and radical activist, suffragette and Socialist. She was a woman who lived to old age, yet is fixed in the public imagination as an eternal child.

This paper charts the creation of Keller's popular image and enduring iconic status, analysing their purpose and the implications they hold for us as disabled people. It then examines the truth of her life, revealing how contemporary are the issues which determined it. Finally, it explores the value of retelling her biography and the relevance it holds in the building of disability culture.

## **Biographical details**

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## Helen Keller: Rethinking the Problematic Icon

Helen Keller was like a 'kitchen word'. It was as if she were always in the realm of my consciousness. (Marcous, 1999a)

I have a memory of school assembly, many years ago - the theme: heroes through time. We sat there, cross-legged, 150 children in the big school hall, everyone praying for Helen Keller and all the Helen Kellers of the world, and that we might live our own lives with the same strength and fortitude. Perhaps we watched *The Miracle Worker*, because quarter of a century later there is still a scene from the film etched in my mind: the child Helen with her teacher, high drama by the water pump, that moment when deaf and blind Helen discovers language and a 'miracle' occurs.

I have a memory, too, of an instinctive resistance to what we were being told. Still a non-disabled child, this was a figure outside my experience. Soon to become a disabled child, she was a figure beyond my grasp. Either way, she was set up as something I should strive towards, however unwillingly, but at which I would most certainly fail. As I grew older, for the most part I could dismiss her from my mind. But, when others expected me to be inspired, I would decry her.

And then, in adulthood, I read a book about women anti-militarists (Oldfield, 1989). I learned of Sophie Scholl's resistance work in the Germany of World War II, of the essays of Simone Weil and the awakening of Christa Wolf to the Nazism of her

childhood. And amongst them I found the name of Helen Keller – so different from the Helen Keller of my school days that I took convincing that this was the same person. In place of some pale icon, here she was flesh-and-blood, a writer and radical activist, suffragette and Socialist. All those years before, I had been taught, not of Helen Keller, but of an *image* of Helen Keller. I began to read wider, tracking down her own words, finding out what she was really like, trying to understand this gulf between the fiction and fact of her life.

What I have learned has left me wanting to tell the truth of her life. But I also want to look at the origins and reasons for its fiction. It is not simply the events of her life that have kept me focused, it is that the issues which influenced and determined them are those which still occupy disability activists today. I am intrigued by the connection that her life offers to our past, the lessons that we can learn from looking back and the assurance that, however tentatively, we are making progress.

In this paper I will:

- Describe the creation of her popular and enduring image – her elevation from human being to icon
- Analyse its purpose and the implications it holds for us as disabled people
- Examine the ‘truth’ – and show how contemporary are the issues which shaped her life
- Explore the idea of rethinking icons, bringing their stories into a culture of disability.

## Creating an Image

“Most people know of Helen Keller as a disabled seven year old in the grips of an oblivion of no sight, no sound, rescued by an incredible teacher at a well at the age of seven, brought out of that oblivion through language ...and then it disappears from people’s minds.” (Bergmann, 1999)

Helen Keller was born in 1880 in Tuscumbia, Alabama, the first child of Captain Arthur Keller and his second wife Kate. Theirs was a genteel Southern military family that had been made poor by the civil war of fifteen years before.

At 19 months, after a brief illness, Helen became deaf and blind. The reactions of her family were mixed. The family struggled to communicate with each other and Helen became increasingly “wild and destructive”. Her uncle wanted her shut away in an institution for being “defective and not very pleasant to see” (Keller, 1903). In the late nineteenth century, this was the fate of many disabled children, most of whom subsequently died.

However, her aunt was convinced that “this child has more sense than all the Kellers - if there is any way to reach her mind”. That Helen was already exercising freewill is absent from the popular image, yet she had by now begun to devise her own basic signs, permitting the family rudimentary communication.

Her family's desire to find a way at least to discipline Helen and control her tantrums led them to Alexander Graham Bell, the great inventor, who was also well known for his work with deaf people. The controversial nature of this work never appears in the fiction of Helen Keller, although it would soon exert a fundamental influence on the course of her life. At their first meeting, Bell suggested they approach Perkins School for the Blind in Boston to find a teacher. It was there that Anne Sullivan, a recent graduate of the school, was recommended for the job.

Annie travelled down to Alabama to work with Helen. She believed intuitively that a child would learn best when the process was enjoyable and, set against the Victorian education system, her teaching was progressive and inspired. She used the deaf blind manual alphabet and spelt words constantly into the palm of Helen's hand. For several months this was a game to Helen, with no inherent meaning, until one day, at the water pump, a single event occurred which would instantly be turned into mythical status:

As the cool stream gushed over one hand she spelled into the other the word *water*, first slowly, then rapidly. I stood still, my whole attention fixed upon the motions of her fingers. Suddenly I felt a misty consciousness as of something forgotten – a thrill of returning thought; and somehow the mystery of language was revealed to me. (Keller, 1903)

This was the 'miracle' that would for ever after define the image of Helen Keller.

“She was transformed from this semi-wild child into this saint-like child, this angel child. She was groomed to play a part.” (Herrmann, 1999)

Once she had discovered language and learning, Helen revelled in it. She was very bright and learned at a phenomenal pace. Annie recorded her learning in detailed letters to Michael Anagnos, the director of Perkins School. At a time when relatively few deaf blind children even survived, the fact that a deaf blind child could be educable was a revelation. Anagnos alerted the press and the story of the ‘miracle child’ was born. Within weeks Helen was world famous.

Throughout her childhood, the desire of the press and public to follow her every move was feverish. Wild stories were spread about her amazing achievements: her ability to identify colours by touch, her fluency in seven languages by the age of ten, her singing and her brilliant piano playing. The language used was extravagant:

“She was a miracle child, she had sprung fully grown from the forehead like Athena, she was brilliant, she was innocent, she was a natural wonder, she was a genius – the word miracle occurs again and again.” (Klages, 1999)

Helen was visited by famous people, written about by the literati and examined by philosophers and scientists (who found, her mind and her senses to be remarkably like those of other people). Her likes, her sayings and her foibles, her kindnesses to others were all catalogued in detail and read voraciously.

Financed by philanthropists, Helen's education continued. Soon she had learned to write using a stylus and, by the age of eleven, to lip read and speak. The image of Helen Keller does not question her means of communication, although many deaf people have done so ever since.

Although at the time of Helen's birth, sign language was well established in the United States, her education coincided with the new oralism movement (Baynton, 1996). This argued that deaf children should be taught to lip read and speak. Helen had met Alexander Graham Bell, who was a leading figure for the oralism campaign, before she had acquired language and at a time when her family was desperate for answers. His advice was trusted and unquestioned.

When Helen was introduced to communication and language through the deaf blind manual alphabet, it was used as a tool by which to 'break through' to her. The intention was never to facilitate her connection with other deaf people. When Bell referred her to Perkins School for the Blind, she was presented with lipreading and speech as the only valid means of communication. The manual alphabet became a secondary communication method, a back up to speech and lipreading, and her segregation from other deaf people was reinforced. Her early schooling set her firmly on the path of oralism so that even when she later attended a school for deaf children, the Wright-Humason School in New York was selected specifically for its innovations in oralism.

From early childhood, Helen knew that she wanted to spend her life working to improve social conditions. To do so, she must be able to communicate effectively. Sign language, a predominantly visual (as opposed to tactile) language, was not readily available to her and the deaf blind manual alphabet ( which entails spelling each word letter-by-letter) made communication very slow. The most effective route that Helen knew for her ideas to reach people was speaking. She “labored night and day” and was delighted in her achievement, but “discouragement and weariness cast me down frequently” (Keller, 1903). Helen could never speak clearly enough to be understood by strangers and, in life-long regret, believed herself to have failed.

At eighteen, she passed her entrance exams to Radcliffe, the leading women’s college of the time. Radcliffe admitted Helen, but grudgingly:

When the word became public there was much talk – ‘Why don’t they say outright that Miss Sullivan is entering Radcliffe instead of Helen Keller a blind, deaf and dumb girl?’ (Lash, 1980)

Very few staff or students made real effort to communicate with her. Books were rarely provided in Braille, classes were laboriously finger-spelled by Annie and Helen spent each night typing up the day’s lectures from memory. Helen was the first deaf blind college student in the United States – and the last for half a century. In the public image, her education was a triumph; in reality she struggled throughout, remembering her college years as times of deep loneliness and exclusion.



In adulthood, the child of purity became the woman of virtue. In her middle years, Helen worked as fundraiser and ambassador with the newly established American Foundation for the Blind (AFB). She still attracted the press who cast her as an international figurehead for blind people. But the public image omits her scepticism about charity and her loathing of asking for money:

“She didn’t like doing it, she felt like she was begging. I think she felt it was a step backwards in the evolution of being a blind person, to find herself there on a stage asking for money, even though she was not asking for money for herself. I think she perceived it as something that was needed and she was willing to do it because she believed in the cause.” (Kleege, 1999)

She conceded to working within the AFB and the system with great reluctance, believing it was the best means for her to be effective. However, the image does not record her growing frustration and increasingly volatile relationship with an organisation which, initially at the vanguard, became increasingly establishment over time.

The biggest omissions, however, from the popular image of Helen Keller concern her political activism and her personal life.

During her college days, Helen was introduced to socialism by the lecturer and journalist John Macy (who later married Annie). She recognised “a struggle which

resembles my own” and rapidly moved from an intellectual commitment into lifelong and revolutionary activism.

The saint was in actuality a spitfire, and her rhetoric was forceful and furious.  
(Fillippeli, 1985)

Helen joined the Socialist Party, subsequently leaving it for the more radical Industrial Workers of the World. Her political involvements were many and varied, carried out with resoluteness. She campaigned for birth control, supported civil rights for black people, defended militant women’s suffrage, campaigned with leading pacifists against the United States’ preparations for war, protested at the deportation of immigrants for their political beliefs, co-founded the American Civil Liberties Union. For Helen, the root of all these campaigns lay in a fundamental drive for justice and social equality and she exhorted others to join the struggle.

Many young women full of devotion and good-will have been engaged in superficial charities. They have tried to feed the hungry without knowing the causes of poverty. They have tried to minister to the sick without understanding the cause of disease. They have tried to raise up fallen sisters without understanding the brutal arm of necessity that struck them down... We attempt social reforms where we need social transformations. We mend small things and leave the great things untouched. (Keller, 1913)

No one has given me a good reason why we should obey unjust laws. But the reason why we should resist them is obvious... The dignity of human nature compels us to resist what we believe to be wrong. (Keller, 1914)

In 1933, her book of political essays was burned by the Nazis. From the 1930s and throughout the tide of anti-Communism into the 1950s, to the great dismay of the American Foundation for the Blind, she was kept under surveillance by the FBI for her far-left politics and support of Communism. She took risks that saw other people jailed or socially dispossessed and, particularly during her early civil rights work, “her politics for anyone else might have gotten her lynched” (Fillippeli, 1999).

Early on, she publicly linked her work on women’s suffrage and anti-poverty with the rights of blind people.

The way to help the blind or any other defective class is to understand, correct, remove the incapacities and inequalities of our entire civilization. (Keller, 1913)

A class of college girls...asked me to initiate them into philanthropic endeavor for the sightless. I told them to study the life that swarms at their very doors... that the best educated human is the one who understands most about the life in which he is placed... They asked me how to help the blind... I gravely recommended that they study Industrial Economics. (Keller, 1913)

To most people, her disability rights work appeared to be in keeping with the saintly public image, so that they were open to her ideas without realising how radical they could be. In Israel, when her hosts showed her with great pride a village for blind people, Helen argued vehemently against segregation and convinced them to break up the village. Long before the social model of disability had a name, she publicised the link between social and economic conditions and impairment, as well as grasping the impact of multiple oppression. Within the American Foundation for the Blind and the legislature, she lobbied continuously to include the particular needs of deaf blind people and of black disabled people.

As part of her bid to bring her political beliefs to a wider audience, Helen (misguidedly) took up an offer from Hollywood in 1920 to star in *Deliverance*, a silent movie of her life. The producer realised early on that the saccharine image alone would not hold audiences. To sell the film, he spiced it up with a lover. For the public image of Helen Keller, this was the sole admission of Helen as sexual, but the concession was only partial. In the film, her love is unrequited and so pure that the idol has fallen for Ulysses, a mythical being like herself.

The public image does not permit her a real personal life. Yet just two years before Hollywood's fiction, she had fallen in love with her secretary Peter Fagan and the two had taken out a marriage licence in secret. The press broke the news and Helen's family whisked her back to Alabama, banishing her lover at gunpoint. Her family could not countenance the reality of Helen's adulthood and nor could the image

incorporate her as sexual: “for anyone as pure as Helen is, she would be so sullied by actual sexuality that it could just never happen” (Finger, 1999).

The public image cannot incorporate a Helen Keller that is human and so the largest part of her life - her greatest accomplishments and her great tragedy – is missing from the public account.

The final event associated with Helen Keller was her funeral, held in 1968. She had left instructions for a simple, intimate funeral, in keeping with her chosen Swedenborgian religion. However, her wishes did not fit the image of Helen Keller and so they were ignored by her family and her trustees at the American Foundation for the Blind. Instead, these keepers of the image conducted a large public service, with full honours and interment at the National Cathedral in Washington DC, so that “even in death, she wasn’t free, her image wasn’t free” (Fillippeli, 1999).

The abiding image of Helen Keller is reinforced in the last major public document of her life. *The Unconquered* is a film biography made in 1953 towards the end of her public life. It recounts the water pump story, the charity work, the great achiever, the icon, and shows scenes of domesticity – flower arranging and washing up. It omits all departures from the image and leaves the audience with a picture of Helen now, a mild, docile old lady who once inspired the world.

But in the popular imagination, it is the childhood image that persists. On the internet, a school project posted recently by an eleven year old charts the events of

Helen Keller's life. A timeline begins with her birth, notes her illness in 1882, tells us "Annie came to teach Helen how to behave". In 1890, she learns to speak, followed by her school days and on to 1900: "Helen's first day at college". A chronological gap gives way to the next event, in 1968: "Helen died".

Helen Keller is 'the little blind girl who overcame adversity to symbolize the triumph of the individual' (Fillippeli, 1999). She was a woman who lived to old age, yet is fixed in the public imagination as an eternal child. Situated alongside *Heidi's* Little Clara and Beth in *Little Women*, she enjoins us to be better than ourselves and rivals the very essence of fiction.

## **Exposing the lie**

The historical record of Helen Keller's life has been censored to fit the image. But throughout her life, too, many of the real events of her life were influenced and even determined by the image.

There were reasons for creating and maintaining such an image: the myth of Helen Keller served many people well during her lifetime – and it continues to do so today. Helen Keller cannot be understood outside the context that created her image.

The earliest promotion of the image came from Michael Anagnos, the director of Perkins School. Helen's association with the school brought fame and boosted

Anagnos' career. For the press, it meant more revenue. When stories were exaggerated neither party seemed concerned: the 'miracle child' was serving their interests well.

Alexander Graham Bell and his Association for the Promotion of Speech capitalised on the image. To Bell, Helen's education had been a brilliantly inspired experiment, making her a useful tool in his promotion of oralism. Papers were written about her instruction and she demonstrated her accomplishments at a conference for educationalists. (Herrmann, 1998)

In adulthood, others continued to benefit from the image of Helen Keller. To the American Foundation for the Blind, Helen represented enormous revenue and crucial support from legislators for the AFB's campaigning work.

Governments and leaders seized on an image of hope and fortitude, especially in times of crisis. Helen visited overseas troops wounded in World War II, was welcomed as a peace ambassador to Japan after the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki and, despite her more controversial activities, was portrayed as the exemplary all-American citizen in a United States feeling the Cold War pressure of Communism.

Helen, too, recognised the power of her image. Conforming to it maximised her access to an inhospitable world and monitoring and censoring her own behaviour was a constant part of her life. As a child, she received attention and praise for

conforming, along with introductions to influential people who provided her financial security and fees for her education. It was essential that she keep people interested in her; the alternative was an end to resources and a return to extreme isolation. Maintaining the image was perhaps a price worth paying.

In adulthood, she knew that the public's adulation of her was as strong as ever.

Many noble enterprises begged for Helen's name, for her appearance on the platform... for attendance at fund-gathering teas, for testimonials to character for sons, daughters, inmates, for introductions.. book reviews (something please that can be quoted on the jacket)... endorsements for automobiles, dog food, watches. (Braddy Henney, no date)

Whilst she never understood "why [anyone] should feel that being with her is like attending a religious service" (Braddy Henney, no date), she made use of the power of the image in her work for disability legislation and to put across her political message.

"She was very aware of the power of her celebrity. When she signed a petition, when she attended a meeting, when she wrote editorials or letters to newspapers, she was conscious that the mere fact that her name was attached to something...had an impact. I think she was quite savvy about that." (Kleege, 1999)



The fact that she did not always subscribe or conform to the image is not the point. In the public imagination, she *was* the image and many capitalised on that.

In the creation and maintenance of the image, Helen came under enormous pressure to be better and more constant than her non-disabled contemporaries. As a child, she was expected to write and rewrite letters with her stylus until she achieved perfection. At a time when higher education for any woman was unusual, she gained admission to the leading women's college. She learned to present herself in ways that allowed for constant public scrutiny and comment, so that in film footage she smiles constantly and, in public situations, when asked ignorant and intrusive questions about blindness, she became

“quite expert in simulating interest in absurdities that are told me about blind people. Putting on my Job-like expression, I tell them that blind people are like other people in the dark, that fire burns them and cold chills them, and they like food when they are hungry, and drink when they are thirsty, that some of them like one lump of sugar in their tea, and others more”. (Keller, 1930)

Only an image of ruthless and absolute purity could carry such power and its main beneficiaries were careful to protect it. The American Foundation for the Blind, for example, issued strict instructions to photographers not to publish without first obtaining their approval. In the AFB archive of over 2000 stills relating to Helen Keller, most carry images of a woman who does not 'look' deaf and blind. There is a

single image, of Helen looking strained and tearful, which undermines the icon. On the back is scribbled “Too tense. Just throw away.” (Herrmann, 1998)

Beyond all the local reasons for keeping the image in check – the career promotion and the public relations exercises – and beyond the personal compromises it held for Helen, the meaning and consequence of the image goes much deeper. An image of resilience and courage serves the status quo.

The image was, and still is, used to uphold the myth of personal striving – it is the same message from my childhood: any individual, determined enough, can do anything; if Helen Keller succeeded, and against such odds, then there can be no excuse. In schools, especially in the United States, Helen Keller is still regularly a subject for class work and the message is explicit: “students will forever understand that there is no obstacle so big that it cannot be overcome”.

It’s a set up...any comparison to another person who was idolized is a recipe for failure. It never allowed me to feel that people were looking at *me*. I always thought they were seeing me through ‘rose tinted glasses’... whenever I struggled they would be shocked. (Marcous, 1999a)

Then and now, the myth of personal striving keeps the focus on the individual; they are responsible for their own destiny. It was Helen Keller’s responsibility to squeeze herself into a non-disabled world, just as it is ours. To state it any other way, to expect the non-disabled world to adapt to and include her, is to scrutinise the very

structure of society –to question why it excludes and to demand its change. Creating and maintaining the image of Helen Keller distracts from the bigger picture.

“People want to keep Helen Keller in a place where they can idolise her and it’s like a frozen picture in time, free of any problems, free of any struggles, without oppression, but someone on a pedestal who was amazing, this picture in their minds. That keeps them safe.” (Marcous, 1999b)

The image that constrained Helen Keller constrains us still. It is an image of super-human attainment - a fictional account of a life, with all the complications and compromises tippexed out. In the public image of Helen Keller, when is she ever shown as fallible, inconsistent or complicated? Where is her autonomy? What happened to the radical and rebel? Where is Helen as a woman? And where is she, convincingly, as a disabled person?

Her image reflects back on us; if she cannot be seen as she really was, then nor can we. In the public imagination, Helen Keller is a two-dimensional supercripple, a fiction that requires us all to be something other than ourselves and which allows a non-disabled world to continue unchecked.

To show Helen Keller as real, as human, is to fulfil a different purpose.

## Revealing the truth

Helen Keller's whole life was defined in relation to a single event: the 'miracle' at the water pump, symbolising her 'triumph' over impairment. Throughout her life, Helen Keller was defined by her impairments; in newspaper reports, regardless of her activities, she was 'deaf and blind Helen Keller'. She was presented as having 'overcome' her impairments, yet her every accomplishment was described in relation to them. The image and the historical record take a simplistic view of her impairments: tragic afflictions to be overcome through personal grit. They do not allow for the complexities of living with impairment, nor do they reflect the ways that disability influenced and determined her life.

In truth, disability (i.e. discrimination) was *the* defining influence. The dilemmas that framed her life and the issues which shaped it are those which face disabled people in general. When Helen Keller is *not* shown as she truly was - as complicated, radical, rebellious, sexual – the primary factor behind this is disability. To begin to understand her life, we must set it in this context.

*Defined by impairment, constrained by disability*

Helen Keller was widely encouraged to write and speak about her experiences of impairment. At twenty, she was asked to write *The Story of My Life*, an autobiography of her early years which she later regretted for having made her struggles appear too easy (Keller, 1930). It seemed that she could never fully satisfy

people's curiosity for details nor could she reassure them entirely that she was content as herself. Where the non-disabled world feted her courage, for Helen her impairments were a natural, largely neutral, condition (Herrmann, 1998).

Where she struggled was to make public and be taken seriously for her opinions on anything other than impairment. She wrote with deep frustration of the responses whenever she ventured to write or speak on politics:

So long as I confine my activities to social service and the blind, they compliment me extravagantly, calling me the 'archpriestess of the sightless', 'wonder woman', and 'modern miracle', but when it comes to a discussion of a burning social or political issue, especially if I happen to be, as I so often am, on the unpopular side, the tone changes completely. (Keller, 1924)

Frequently her impairments were called upon to undermine or discredit her opinions, with the result that almost every article and speech begins with a plea that her words be heeded (Fillippeli, 1985). Her critics maintained that a deaf and blind woman could not possibly know anything of the real world, that her "mistakes spring out of the limitations of her development". Others protested "the pathetic exploitation of poor Helen Keller", claiming that her impairments left her vulnerable to manipulation by the socialists for their own sinister agendas.

Throughout her life, the validity of her academic and political achievements were questioned by many. She never fully escaped suspicion that she was really the

puppet of Annie Sullivan, “speaking and writing lines that are fed to her by Annie’s genius” (Lash, 1980). Deviations from the image, including her political beliefs, were blamed on Annie, even though Helen’s commitment to socialism preceded and exceeded Annie’s. It was partly in answer to these accusations that Helen worked for years to improve the clarity of her speech: if she could speak directly to her critics, instead of through Annie, her only interpreter, then perhaps they would be convinced that her words were her own.

Even those who supported her opinions or encouraged her autonomy seemed incapable of moving beyond her impairments. To them, her activities were “almost as much of a miracle as any of the wonderful physical achievements which are recorded of her”.

### *The created image*

Helen Keller was known for her difference and for her supposed triumph over it. She remained different enough for interest, but similar enough that she caused no great discomfort to those who met her.

In childhood, to the middle classes of Boston, she was a pet project. Although middle class herself, her impairments relegated her to the margins. The Boston elite sponsored her education and living costs and they managed her access to the wider world. Helen offered them philanthropic opportunity without the need to question their values too deeply. (Klages, 1989)

Much of her education was aimed at making her into a hearing seeing person, in appearance at least (Klages, 1989). She communicated as nearly as possible on hearing people's terms, using language which drew on all the senses. Great pains were taken to educate her out of mannerisms that might associate her with blind people. Until early adulthood, she was photographed only in right profile, to conceal her left eye which looked blind. When this was replaced with an artificial eye (for medical as well as cosmetic reasons), that particular censorship ceased.

In her life as well as in the image, Helen Keller was encouraged to be predominantly cerebral and spiritual. Indeed, much of the purpose of the image is to exhort other people to spiritual improvement. Her image does not convey her as physical. As in life, she is restrained and constrained, her gestures are neat, but not expressive. For a woman who operated so extensively through touch, there is no sense of her as sensual, much less sexual. Her physicality is transferred to the people around her, Annie Sullivan and others through whom she is seen accessing the world.

Helen and Annie were together for fifty years, from Helen's childhood until Annie's death. In the image, they are portrayed as inseparable; in the words of Mark Twain "It took the pair of you to make a complete and perfect whole". Within that 'whole', they appear as two sides of a coin: Helen dependent on Annie the liberator, sacrificing her life for the good of her pupil.

Tales of sacrifice have strong appeal and over the years so many who talked with Helen emphasized it that it became an agony to her... [but] if anyone was sacrificed, and I am not certain anyone was, it was Helen herself. (Braddy Henney, no date)

Even in Helen's adult years, when Annie's role had long evolved into one of friend, interpreter and assistant, she was addressed as Teacher, thereby reinforcing an image of dependent and liberator. Beyond the image, it was Annie who depended far more on Helen, both financially and emotionally. A brutal, workhouse childhood meant Annie's prospects had been bleak. Her work and her friendship with Helen offered a life that could scarcely have been conceived of for someone with her background. In truth, their relationship was *interdependent*.

But there is another layer to the relationship. Excised from the image, is the fact that Annie Sullivan too was a disabled woman.

"It's ironic, isn't it, that Annie Sullivan was a person with a disability herself, but is never really remembered that way and when her disability is noted, it's minimised. It's reduced to insignificance, she has a little eye trouble, she wears kind of designer sun glasses in *The Miracle Worker*. But we don't think of this as in fact two disabled people mutually supporting one another, we think of it as dependent and professional." (Longmore, 1999)



When the child Annie was admitted to the workhouse, it was *because of* discrimination: relatives had rejected her, along with her disabled brother, in favour of their non-disabled sibling. Later, Annie helped to avert a similar fate for Helen. The similarities were almost certainly an additional bond. Yet the image does not show Annie as disabled or acknowledge their relationship as two-way. Doing so would question the assumed tragedy of impairment and the presumed dependency of disabled people. To maintain the fiction of Helen Keller, we must also buy in to a false image of Annie Sullivan.

### *Illusions of independence*

Annie was the key figure in Helen's life. A mix of timing, youth, personality and common experience, along with a mutual desire to leave their pasts behind them, meant the relationship opened to Helen opportunities beyond all expectations. It gave her an autonomy that few could have imagined for a child with her impairments and, for its time, it was a highly progressive arrangement. Yet it was not the only possible solution and it made Helen far more dependent than was necessary.

In childhood, Helen dreaded separation from Annie and, in adulthood, she dreaded Annie's death - not simply because of the loss of her greatest friend, but because of the practical impact it would have on her life. It was assumed that Helen's independence was inextricably bound up with Annie's presence. Only after Annie's death was it proved that, with varying degrees of skill and compromise, other people could take on her role. Whilst Annie's friendship was irreplaceable, her *function* was

not. Keeping Annie as virtually her sole source of assistance kept Helen's security, autonomy and social contact very fragile.

At a time when what little provision that existed for disabled children and adults was charity-based, Helen relied on the goodwill and practical contributions of others. She had several long-term philanthropists and supporters - including Anagnos, Bell, the industrialist Andrew Carnegie, Polly Thompson (who became Helen's assistant during Annie's later years and after her death) and the American Foundation for the Blind – each a vital contributor to her life, but each with their own demands.

These men are accustomed to obedience and any whiff of insubordination is a cold wind against their benevolence. Helen had for them the value of a rare work of art and like the donors off side in a Renaissance altar piece they wanted to be in the picture. They did love Helen, but they did become exasperated when they found that they could not manage her. (Braddy Henney, no date)

Such arrangements left her very vulnerable: if her access solutions were controlled by others, then so was her ability to make choices about her life. What would have been the costs of rejecting oralism, of expressing rage or frustration, of disclosing controversial beliefs, of refusing to do what others required of her? Hers was a life of constant bargaining and compromise.

In particular, she trod a fine line between her reliance on largely right-wing philanthropists or employers at the American Foundation for the Blind and her pursuit

of left-wing politics. Each time she went public in her political activities or declined to conform to the image that others had created, she knew that she was risking her reputation, her livelihood and her access to other people's goodwill and assistance.

With hindsight, although no one could have been certain of this at the time, it is clear that Helen was exempt from the worst of the sanctions imposed on others for their political beliefs (social dispossession, jailing, tarring and feathering or lynching). She faced different penalties, but the risks were real – her *self* and her existence were on the line.

The defining influence in Helen Keller's life was disability. Defined by impairment, expected to conform to an impossible image and allowed a most precarious illusion of independence, the issues which influenced and directed Helen Keller are the same issues that face disabled people today.

## **Rethinking icons**

We have an image of Helen Keller that pretends it is the truth. Instead, it presents an icon: a representation of the real person, a symbol, an idol, an object of devotion.

The icon is built on socially valued behaviours or status, the signs of 'success': career attainment, financial or material wealth, ideals of beauty, and so on. In its making, one or more of these factors is perceived as present to an exceptional

degree. The icon becomes a symbol of perfection and, by definition, excludes the majority.

As disabled people, we resent such images of 'perfection' because of the expectations they place upon us. We find ourselves repeatedly presented with the icon as an enforced role model, an end to strive towards. Yet if iconic status excludes the majority, then most people must surely fail. It is at this point that the icon becomes problematic. It propagates a role model that most of us cannot live up to and few would wish to: to be perfect is to be not fully human.

It helps other people be more comfortable, but it's unfair to me, or to Helen.  
(Marcous, 1999b)

The iconic status imposed on Helen Keller was perhaps the greatest assault of many, the most fundamental way in which society disabled her. To expect her to live up to such an ideal was always unreasonable; to remember her this way seems a disservice.

In truth, when the real lives of icons are examined, they too fall short of the image. When the icon of Helen Keller is dismantled and the woman emerges, so do her flaws, and often we feel she has let us down because her flaws reflect on us.

Yet it is partly her flaws which entice me, because they reveal her as complex, imperfect, struggling and, above all, *real*. It is her flaws which, so often, were her

means of survival. My wish to know more about Helen Keller is not because she 'triumphed' according to some imposed measure, but because she resisted. I never imagined I would some day choose to identify with Helen Keller but, made real and human, I find she has become one of our own.

At times, I don't know whether her history should dishearten or empower.

Sometimes I wonder just what progress we have made over all these years, when so much of what she was expected to conform to seems unchanged. But there are also departures from the conditions she faced that show me we have moved forward.

Today, she might have more autonomy, more control over her personal assistance and access resources. She might be less isolated from other disabled and deaf blind people. Perhaps she would be making choices about the way she communicated.

And maybe today she would not have to try so hard. For Helen Keller, the outcomes of some of the issues in her life might today have been very different precisely *because we have made progress.*

Tackling the Helen Keller story is a part of my activism. Where once we rejected Helen Keller, to me it no longer seems an option. Now we can counter the *image* of Helen Keller with the three-dimensional *life*. We can take Helen Keller, and other enforced icons, and make them our own. We can delve into the *truth* of their lives and include the complexities. By taking an old 'heart-warming story', we can invite people in and, by a twist in the telling, confront them with real events and the issues which emerge. If the audience is appalled by what was done in the past, then we can reveal how little has changed, how much remains to be done.

In learning about Helen Keller, time and again, I have been asked the ‘what if’ question: what if Helen Keller had not been disabled? The implied addition: how much more could she then have achieved?

It is a question that misses the point. That Helen Keller *was* disabled is integral to the life she led and the person it shaped. It was impairment and disability that impelled her out of the conventional world she had been born into. Her sex and family circumstances destined her for a circumscribed life as a traditional Southern belle. Even if she had somehow gained an education and been exposed to the ideas of socialism, she would have not been the Helen Keller that a coming together of circumstances made her. Exceptionally resilient, intelligent and inquiring and with the advantages brought by her class, it was those factors *in combination* with impairment and disability that made her what she was and brought her public notice. As a disabled woman she was *different* – she could not fit the life she was born to and, like so many others, was impelled to invent another.

Understanding the issues that influenced Helen Keller’s life holds a purpose for us as disabled people today. I revel in being amongst other disabled people, in the here and now, witnessing and building on the similarities and differences in our lives, discovering connections which exist over distance and culture. As I begin to recast Helen Keller from a disability perspective, my connection with disabled people extends back over time. I sense a continuity of resistance and survival and my own life and activism are set in context.

So much of resistance over generations has been built on the passing on of history, the building of a culture - telling stories of what has passed for the sake of what will come to pass. In a community that can be so disparate, making connections carries an urgency and the telling of our own stories becomes vital. And in so many ways, Helen Keller's story is ours.

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