

Helen Keller, The Radical: A Great Mind and Inspiration for all Humanity

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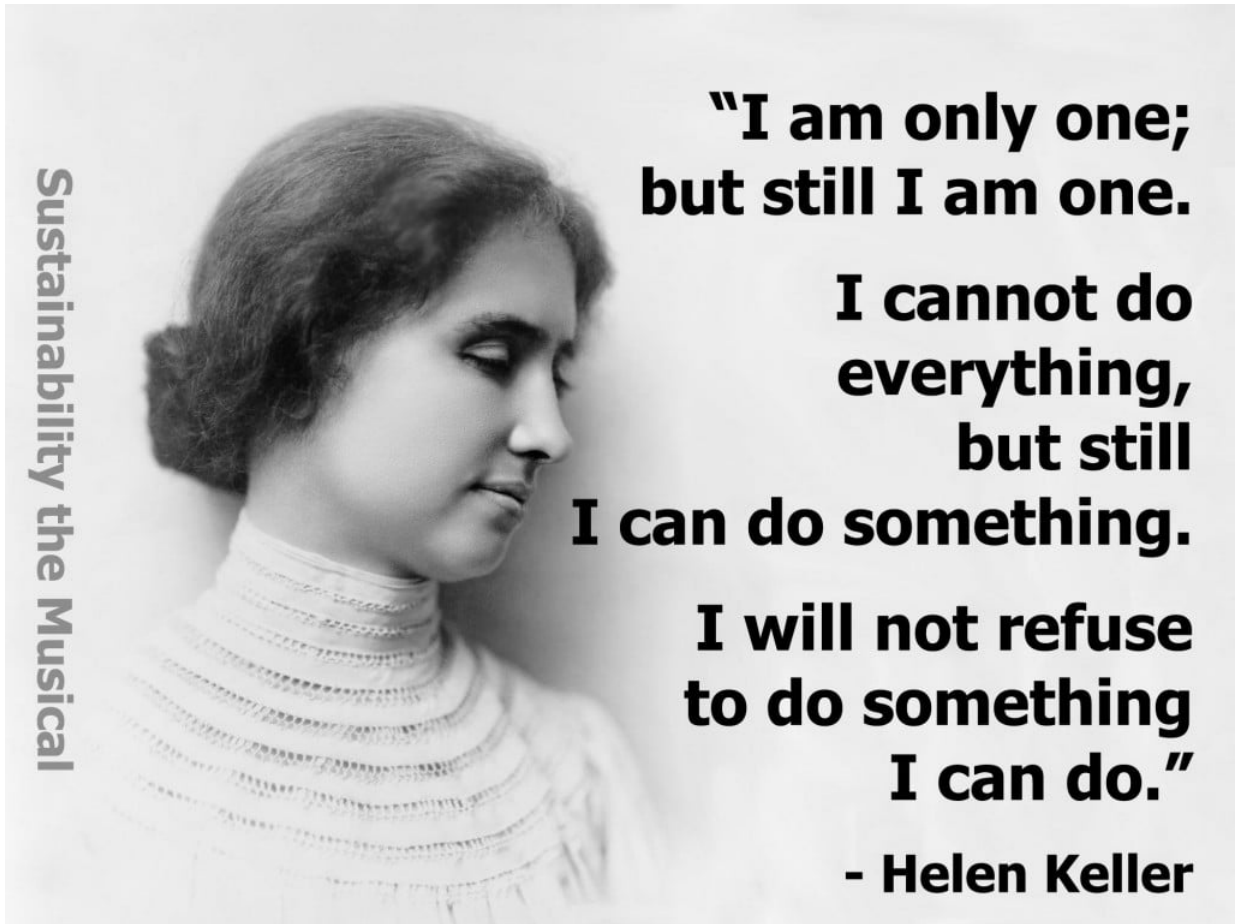
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Helen Adams Keller, born June 27, 1880 in Tuscumbia, Alabama. In 1882, she fell ill and was struck blind, deaf and mute. Beginning in 1887, Keller's teacher, [Anne Sullivan](#), helped her make tremendous progress with her ability to communicate, and Keller went on to college, graduating in 1904. In 1920, Keller helped found the ACLU. During her lifetime, she received many honors in recognition of her accomplishments."

Travel north from Bridgeport through Fairfield to Sport Hill Road in the small, upscale town of Easton, Connecticut and you eventually come to Helen Keller Middle School. Go west a few miles to the other side of Easton and you can see the house where Keller lived from 1939 until her death in 1968. If you don't know the house's location, however, you'll never find it, for there is no stone or plaque marking the spot even though Keller lived there longer than anywhere else.

That there's no marker at the house is a bit surprising, for there was a time when Keller was one of the most famous people in the world, better known even than presidents and kings. Circa 1920, she was perhaps the second most recognizable Westerner on the planet behind only Charlie Chaplin – also a radical who, like Helen, used his brilliance to speak for the unrepresented.



Born in 1880 in Alabama with sight and the ability to hear, Keller lost both senses at 19 months due to disease, most likely scarlet fever or meningitis. Her parents were of some means and she was thus spared institutionalization, the fate that befell thousands of blind and deaf working class children of the time. As a young girl, Keller developed a homemade sign language that she used to communicate with those close to her. Treatment options and educational opportunities were few, however, and her quality of life was minimal. Despite the love of her devoted but heartbroken mother, Kate Adams Keller, Helen lived much like an untamed animal.

In 1887, an extraordinary young woman named Anne Sullivan traveled to the Keller home to be her teacher. Severely visually impaired, Sullivan's early life was something out of Dickens or Engels. Orphaned at a young age, she had lived for many years in a Massachusetts institution alongside mentally ill adults who often preyed on the children in their midst. Staff were abusive and apathetic and the facility was little more than a holding cell which few left alive. Sullivan later recalled that fewer than a fifth of the children there lived to adulthood. Among the other horrors, she watched in agony as her younger brother slowly died of neglect despite her best efforts to protect him. Thereafter, she burned with a determination to ensure that other children would not share his fate.

Just twenty years old when she arrived in Alabama, Sullivan began a remarkable relationship with Keller that lasted five decades. In a few months of incredibly intense work, Sullivan drew on teaching techniques she had barely just learned and helped Helen find herself. And the self she helped Helen find contained one of the greatest hearts and minds of that or any time.

Shocked members of the scientific and teaching communities studied Keller and Sullivan's innovative techniques. Medical experts were put in the awkward position of having to explain why so many of the great minds of the time had been so thoroughly upstaged by an undereducated woman driven primarily by a will of iron.

Some sought to portray Keller's situation as an unfortunate but ultimately holy burden delivered from on high. Philanthropists pressed in looking to turn her story into a drawing room freak show. Had she acquiesced and remained polite, virginal and respectable, Keller could have become part of the high society scene. But Helen was having none of that. Although she did for much of her life live, in part, off the largesse of several capitalists, she refused to allow herself to be run up anyone's flagpole to wave as a testament to the good intentions of the well-to-do. Instead, she spent the rest of her long life standing up for the trod upon.



Helen Keller and Ann Sullivan

Sullivan and her lover John Macy were both radicals and Keller learned a great deal from them. It was mostly through her own experience, however, that she came to understand that health problems such as hers were often socio-economic in nature. She indicted industrialism and capitalism as the main causes of disease, blindness and deafness included. While advocating for better treatment, Keller insisted that the greatest emphasis be placed on poverty and unsafe working and living conditions as the root of illness.

In her twenties, Keller joined the Socialist Party and campaigned for Eugene Debs. She soon flew past the Socialists' conservative electoralism, however, and joined the Industrial Workers of the World, then in its heyday and sinking deep roots among the working class. The IWW "points out that the trade unions as presently organized are an obstacle to unity among the masses, and that this lack of solidarity plays into the hands of their economic masters," Keller wrote after becoming a member. "They insist that there can be no peace until the workers organize as a class, take possession of the resources of the earth and the

machinery of production and distribution and abolish the wage system.”

As a Wobbly, Keller walked picket lines, organized support for strikes and, after learning to speak, addressed rallies and forums around the country about the need for a revolutionary transformation of society. On one occasion, she insisted on marching with the unemployed in Sacramento despite threats of state violence. “They have endured countless wrongs and injuries until they are driven to rebellion,” she said, rebuking the IWW’s critics. “They know that the laws are for the strong, that they protect the class that owns everything. They know that in a contest with the workers, employers do not respect the laws, but quite shamelessly break them.”

The well-heeled who had flocked to her side to bask in the radiance of her fame were positively scandalized, but Keller was just getting warmed up. When she joined the vibrant women’s movement of the 1910’s that shook the country to its core, Keller allied herself with the radical wing of the movement. She became an impassioned advocate of, among many other causes, easily accessible birth control. Echoing not the Suffragettes so much as Emma Goldman, she dared to suggest there might be more to female sexuality than reproduction. We can imagine some of her benefactors getting into the wind as a result (the men anyway) and more leaving her side when she came out against World War 1 and in support of the Russian Revolution.

Along with millions around the world, Keller recoiled in horror at the butchery of the Great Imperialist War. She was appalled that working class boys and primarily female non-combatants died by the millions so a select few who already had too much could accumulate still more. She lectured tirelessly against the carnage and, when dissent became virtually illegal after the US entered the war, she stood strong and true behind the thousands who were locked up for demanding peace.

In later years, according to historian and Keller biographer Kim Nielsen, she thought J. Edgar Hoover a close acquaintance even as the FBI was ruining the lives of many of her friends and associates. Unbeknownst to her, Hoover had also for decades amassed a thick dossier on activities of hers that he considered subversive. Although it would’ve surprised no one had Keller been called before a Congressional committee or two, Hoover apparently thought better of subjecting an internationally acclaimed seventy-year old woman who could neither see nor hear to a grilling about her political activities.

Whatever Keller’s overly trusting nature or occasional naivete, they are trivial points compared to her accomplishments. She wrote extensively and traveled the world in solidarity with the oppressed. Her books were translated into many languages and she championed the rights of the deaf and blind into her eighties. She lived to see the elimination of many of the dangerous conditions she worked against as well as the implementation of important teaching techniques that she advocated.

Although less engaged in her later life, Keller never wavered in her commitment to radicalism. Forty-three years after her death, Keller’s story still inspires. She saw things that many sighted people miss, heard things that many who can hear don’t. To say that hers was a life well-lived would be a huge understatement. We get a sense of the fire that burned within both she and Sullivan in *The Miracle Worker*, which beautifully depicts the beginning of their relationship. Both the play and the 1962 film adaptation unflinchingly present the many obstacles both faced, including the period of Sullivan’s institutionalization. All these years later, the climactic scene at the water pump when Keller’s life changed forever

remains incredibly powerful.

But those who relegate Keller to perpetual childhood do her legacy and themselves an injustice, for the day Anne Sullivan reached through the darkness was the turning point of Keller's life, not its end. The young girl bursting with life is inseparable from the adult who stood arm in arm with the immigrant women who led the great Bread and Roses Strike. Although she lived in relative comfort, Keller refused to turn away from the ugliness of class society, choosing instead to do what she could to eradicate it. Amidst the darkness and ugliness that surround us, perhaps the best lesson to draw from her life is that we continue to collectively attempt to do likewise.

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