

Helen Keller: Ardent Receiver of the Teachings given through Swedenborg (Part 1).

The next two programmes are about the late Dr. Helen Keller, one of the most widely known and widely admired and respected women of our age.

Whilst she is remembered for her inspiring triumph over awesome physical handicaps and revered for a life lived in service to others, Helen Keller was a deeply read and ardent receiver of the teachings given to the world in the theological writings of Emanuel Swedenborg.

Helen Keller, A New-Church Woman.

On June 27th, 1880 a little girl was born in Alabama, U.S.A. Her name was Helen Keller. Her parents were thrilled with their first child. She soon learned to crawl, then walk and eventually to talk. By the time she was nineteen months old she had become a normal, lively, laughing child. But one day with all the suddenness of a summer storm coming out of the blue sky, Helen became feverish and eventually delirious. Her mother could not ease her pain. She tossed and turned on her bed, she moaned and whimpered but even the doctors could do nothing. Both they and her parents had to stand by and watch her become slowly weaker. They felt helpless to prevent the inevitable death.

Under providence this was not to be, for one day just as quickly as the fever had come, so it left her. We can imagine her parents joy, knowing that she would live and everything would be normal again.

Helen slept for a long time but when her mother went to pick her up she lay motionless in her cot. When she went to draw the curtains Mrs. Keller noticed that Helen did not follow her with her eyes. At first she thought nothing of it but on looking closely as she picked her up she saw that Helen's eyes were just staring straight ahead and she never blinked. Even when a hand was waved in front of her face they did not move. Afraid to believe or accept what she feared, she took Helen to the window and placed her face directly in the sunlight but even this made no difference to Helen's sightless gaze. She clutched Helen to her and sobbed 'She's blind, my daughter's blind'.

This was not all, for a few days later when Helen was playing with her toys her mother called her for lunch. 'Helen'... but, she did not respond; 'Helen'.... still nothing. Hardly daring to believe the thought entering her mind, she grabbed a rattle and shook it fiercely behind Helen, then to the right, and then to the left; she whispered close to her, she shouted, but Helen remained unmoved. Mrs. Keller crumpled, and wrapping her arms around Helen, she whispered, 'She's deaf, deaf, deaf, my child is blind and deaf'.

In this tragic way the life of one of the most remarkable women of the twentieth century began. Her parents tried all the local doctors and city specialists to see if she could have any sight or hearing, but everyone shook their heads in sadness. Out of the five physical senses Helen was deprived of two. They are the two which, after the sense of touch, are the main channels for the growth of the mind. If one is closed the mind can still feed through the other, but if both are closed the mind is in total darkness.

Helen was reborn into this dark and frightening world and was to remain in it for six years. She forgot how to talk, she cried for no apparent reason, she screamed and kicked in frustration and anger. Slowly she learned to communicate by nodding her head; by pushing and pulling and by making shapes with her hands. Later, when she wrote of this period of her life she said 'For six years I had no concept whatever of nature, or mind, or death or God. I literally thought with my body.... I was like an unconscious clod of earth'. Her distraught parents were equally bewildered because they did not know how to teach her or what to expect of her. Consequently Helen only had to scream and she would get her own way. The whole house came to live under the threat of one of Helen's explosions.

At the age of five, a baby sister arrived and Helen became even more frustrated for now she no longer had the entire attention of her parents, and her mother's arms were often filled with the baby. In fact she became so angry and jealous that she tipped her sister out of the cradle. Another time she nearly set the house on fire when she tried to dry her own clothes.

Both parents came to realise that Helen must be controlled in some way to prevent her doing harm to herself or others. It seemed that the only way was to admit her to a mental asylum. However, they kept delaying this step hoping for a miracle.

The miracle began with an article in a newspaper about a school for the blind which had once taught a little girl to talk who was blind and deaf. With this glimmer of hope they wrote away to the Perkins Institute in Boston. After a lengthy correspondence, it was arranged for a teacher to come and try to see if Helen would respond. The teacher chosen was Miss Anne Sullivan.

On the day Annie Sullivan arrived, Helen knew something special was to happen. There was more bustle than usual and the guest room had been prepared. Her mother and father had got ready to go out and had refused to take her. She felt the vibrations of the carriage as it drove down the drive. Not long afterwards she jumped up and ran to the front door as she felt it return. Then a stranger came and hugged her but Helen pushed her away. Soon curiosity got the better of her and she explored the stranger's clothes, face and even her case and then all the things inside it. One of the things her searching fingers found was a doll and she guessed it was for her. She clutched it to her. The stranger started doing funny things with her hand. Helen was interested and quickly copied these movements which unknown to her spelled 'd.o.l.l.'

Helen's mother was thrilled, but Annie quickly pointed out that Helen did not really comprehend what the movements meant. Annie was pleased at the way in which Helen had quickly picked up the movements and, wanting to press home the lesson, she tried to take the doll from Helen and return it while making the shapes d.o.l.l. in Helen's hand, Helen was too quick and hit out at Annie, catching her face. Annie caught her and stopped the wild attack. Helen relaxed and so did Annie, which gave Helen her chance to shake off the hands and rush into the garden.

So the battle lines had been drawn up from the first moment they met. Annie realised that she had not just come to teach a deaf and dumb child to talk, but also to teach Helen self control and this before anything else. She had to be loving, but very firm. They were to have many a fight, with Annie standing firm and not relenting. Very often she would feel utterly exhausted and cry when she reached her room. Helen could not see or hear the anguish, pain or tears she caused.

The worst fight of all began one morning at breakfast. All the family were having sausages but Helen lingered over her porridge and began fingering everyone else's plate. She sniffed her way round the table and realised that the only sausage left was on Annie's plate. It smelled so good.

Her hand shot out but even quicker Annie's hand had gripped Helen's. Helen tried again, and this time managed to get hold of the sausage. Annie caught her hand and gradually prised the fingers off one by one while Helen fought and screamed. Helen's father tried to persuade Annie to let her have it rather than upset her. Annie was determined that Helen should be taught to respect someone for the first time in her life.

Helen screamed and stamped, she lashed out as she rolled on the floor, she threw chairs all over the room. Her parents could not bear it, and Helen's little sister, Mildred, was in tears so they left the room. Annie locked the door after them and put the key in her pocket. Helen raged on while Annie watched. Suddenly Helen went quiet and made her way to the table. Her hand shot out again and Annie pushed it away. Again and again she tried for the sausage but again and again she was pushed away. Mad with rage Helen pinched Annie hard. Annie slapped her; Helen pinched, Annie slapped; pinch - slap - pinch - slap, until realising that she could never win, Helen ran for the door to escape from this humiliation. When she found it locked, she rattled it, shook it, and kicked it. When it failed to yield, she realised that she was locked in the room with this fierce, hard person!

After some time her hunger got the better of her pride and she made her way to the table. She sat in her place and began to feed porridge into her mouth with her hands. Annie took her spoon and placed it in Helen's hand, but it was thrown across the room. Annie dragged the screaming child across the room to pick it up. She dragged her back again and got Helen to eat some of her porridge with the spoon. The moment she relaxed, Helen sensing it, immediately sent the spoon flying again. Annie gathering her strength again, dragged Helen to where the spoon lay and back to the chair where Helen ate her porridge between her great sobs. When they finally left that room, it was lunch time and both of them were exhausted, but an important victory had been won.

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