

## **Helen Keller: Ardent Receiver of the Teachings given through Swedenborg (Part 2)**

We are continuing the two part story of the late Dr. Helen Keller. If you were able to join us last week you will remember that we got to the point of Anne Sullivan's arrival at the Keller household to be Helen's teacher, and we had begun to touch on Anne's struggles to control and discipline Helen who, blind and deaf, and understandably indulged had become, as in her own words, something of a 'little animal'.

Annie was sure that unless Helen could be taught to respect her and be disciplined by her, she would never succeed. So Annie and Helen moved into a little cottage not far from the house. Helen found that just as she had been shut up for four hours with this unrelenting person she was now with her for twenty four hours a day. The battles were fast and furious, both had iron wills and a strong determination to win. Sometimes Annie thought she would never win.

Every night she was exhausted physically and mentally, she was emotionally drained but still determined. Slowly the fighting grew less and Helen became more amenable and developed better eating manners. Eventually there was a day on which there was not a single fight. During the times of peace Helen would sit while Annie spelled words into her hand. Helen would copy them but have no perception of what they meant. She was soon able to form thirty word shapes.

On April 5th, 1887, a breakthrough occurred. The light dawned. It was a beautiful morning and Helen pulled Annie to go outside into the garden which both of them loved. Helen went first into the cool pump house. She ran inside to the pump. Annie pumped water out and the cold wet stuff splashed into Helen's hand. As Helen held her hand under the water, Annie spelled w.a.t.e.r into it. Helen jerked her hand away and was about to rush on to the next thing when she stopped, a concept was forming, a glimmer was growing, and connection was dawning. Annie saw it happening and quickly spelled water again and again. Helen then spelt it back slowly and her face shone for now she knew everything had a name which she could share with other people. All those shapes she had learned had meanings and she could learn more and more. Annie was excited and hugged Helen but this was no time for hugging; for Helen, there was too much to do. She dragged Annie away to spell everything she could touch. She thumped the ground, wanting its name, then the pump, the door, the trees, the grass, the flowers. Annie was just as excited, and as Helen eagerly wanted more and more names she laughed and cried for joy.

Then another thought stopped Helen and she banged her head. Annie laughed 'Yes, there's a name for you, too', and she spelt H.e.l.e.n. Helen smiled and then patted Annie's arm, and Annie spelled, T.e.a.c.h.e.r into Helen's excited palm.

Sometime later, hand in hand, two intimate companions walked out of the garden to begin their life together. They had shared in the dawning of a human mind.

Helen's parents were overjoyed when they saw their daughter change from a wild animal to a happy and delightful young lady. Over the next few years Helen had the whole world to experience. There were many obstacles but that same determination which proved such a barrier earlier was now a servant to help her overcome her difficulties.

Later she wrote 'The joy of surmounting obstacles which once seemed unremovable and pushing the frontier of accomplishment further.... what joy is there like that?'

All the world became known to her through Teacher's fingers. She read books; watched plays, and attended services of worship through them. Helen was not content with finger speaking; she wanted to do what others did with their lips, mouths and tongues. She wanted to talk! But without hearing or sight, how could she talk? After much thought by all concerned, and at the age of nine, this determined young lady was taken to a speech therapist in Boston and given lessons. She placed her sensitive fingers on her therapist's lips and throat, feeling the shapes and vibrations. Helen spent hours at home copying them trying to perfect her lips and throat. After many weeks of hard work she triumphantly said in an indistinct way, 'I am not dumb now.' We can imagine how overwhelmed her parents were when she greeted them with the words, "Hello, mother; Hello father".

With this same indomitable spirit she continued to meet life. She was greedy for as many new experiences as those who cared for her would allow. She learned to swim, row a boat, ride a tandem, play cards, ride a horse.

When she was thirteen, she visited Washington at the invitation of Alexander Graham Bell, and while there met his friend, and assistant John Hitz. Hitz was a member of the Washington Society of the New Church.

Bell and Hitz became firm friends of Helen's. Hitz especially spent long hours spelling word shapes into her hand. He introduced her to the Writings of Emanuel Swedenborg.

He gave Helen a braille copy of one of Swedenborg's books. It was called "Heaven and Hell". In it Swedenborg describes what he learned of heaven and hell. The Lord permitted him to see into them so that men might know that there is life after death and that by their life on earth choose whether they will want to go to heaven or hell when they die.

After reading "Heaven and Hell" Helen asked for more of Swedenborg's writings, so every morning before breakfast Hitz would spend one hour translating a page or two into braille. Unfortunately Teacher could not accept these new teachings and it was always a barrier between her and Helen.

For Helen, however, these new truths were eyes for her soul and through them she discovered the meaning of Divine Love and Divine Wisdom. She wrote in her book "*My Religion*": "The truths have been to my faculties what light and colour and music are to the eye and ear. They have given me a vivid consciousness of the complete being within me. One thing I know, that where as I was blind, now I see".

If you ask what she saw; she saw the realities of life after death; the purpose of life in this world. She saw how love was the key to human existence and happiness. She wrote "Love makes us free and I can bear witness to its power of lifting us out of the isolation to which we seem condemned. When the idea of an active, all controlling love lays hold of us, we become masters, creators of good, helpers of our kind.... In love we find our release from the evils of mental and physical blindness.... Swedenborg shows us that love teaches us the highest of all arts.... the art of loving". The rest of her life became a witness to that faith. She gained a degree at Radcliffe College. Having attained academic honours. She now turned to see how she could serve her fellow men and women. She travelled world wide with Teacher, lecturing and meeting people. She inspired those who were handicapped and shamed those who weren't and grumbled.

We have concentrated on Helen but we need to remember that without her inseparable companion, Annie Sullivan, very little could have been achieved. Annie made her life. She sacrificed so much that we, in our life take for granted. Such companionship cannot always continue, and Annie died in 1936 after sharing Helen's life for fifty years. We can only feel humbled in the face of such devotion. 'Greater love has no man than this, that he lay down his life for his friends'.

We can only imagine a little of the loss that Helen must have experienced. But after much mourning, she accepted a new companion, Polly Thomson.

Almost immediately after this new relationship began, World War II started. Helen and Polly were called to help the wounded, especially the deaf and blind. She gave herself to these people, inspiring them with the belief that they could find a useful and happy life on the other side of their disability.

She said, "Sick or well, blind or seeing, bound or free, we are here for a purpose. We please God better with useful deeds than with many prayers and pious resignation."

So this gracious woman continued after the war to inspire and encourage others. As she grew older, her activities decreased. She stopped travelling and began to become even more dependent on others. Until at the age of eighty eight, on June 1st, 1968, she slipped quietly into the spiritual world where 'every sense is alive and acute'. We can imagine her joy at seeing the beauty of heaven and the faces of her parents, and of Annie and hearing their voices, saying 'Helen'.

To finish off here is a portion of what Helen wrote in her appreciation of the teachings given through Swedenborg.

"There is among us a distressing indifference to all things of faith, and an impatience at any effort to explain the laws of life in spiritual terms. The only really blind are those who will not see the truth, those who shut their eyes to the spiritual vision. For them alone darkness is irrevocable. Those who explore the dark, with love as a torch and trust as a guide, find it good. Blind people who have eyes know that they live in a spiritual world inconceivably more wonderful than the material world that is veiled from them. The landscapes they behold never fade. The flowers they look upon are the immortal flowers which grow in God's garden. Swedenborg's message is like the rock smitten by Moses, yielding sweet streams of healing water, even an abundance of truths for those who hunger and thirst in their pilgrimage through an age of materialism and selfishness.

The doctrines set forth by Swedenborg bring men by a wondrous way to God's city of light. I have walked through its sunlit ways of truth, I have drunk of its sweet waters of knowledge, and the eyes of my spirit have been opened, so that I know the joy of vision which conquers darkness and circles Heaven. Of one thing I am sure, any effort is worth while that brings comfort to limited, struggling human beings in a dark, self centred age; and Swedenborg's message has meant so much to me! It has given colour and reality and unity to my thought of the life to come; it has exalted my ideas of love, truth, and usefulness; it has been my strongest incitement to overcome limitations."

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