

Educating Helen Keller

What *The Miracle Worker* tells us about the art of teaching.

By Thomas S. Hibbs

“**T**he world isn’t an easy place for anyone. I don’t want her just to obey, but to let her have her way in everything is a lie, to *her*,” says Anne Sullivan about her pupil, Helen Keller, in William Gibson’s famous play *The Miracle Worker*. The riveting play, made into an excellent film starring Oscar winners Anne Bancroft (Sullivan) and Patty Duke (Keller), is one of the greatest American statements on the nature of education, the craft of teaching, and the many obstacles to its implementation. The story of Sullivan and Keller remains a devastating critique of the self-esteem movement and an affirmation of the proper role of obedience and repetition in the life of the student. Most dramatically — and most surprisingly — it insists that the true teacher cannot simply be an instrument of the wishes of the student’s family.

Left blind, deaf, and mute from an undiagnosed illness as an infant, Helen is the issue of a wealthy and influential Alabama family. Having tried a variety of means of curing and educating their child, the Kellers eventually arrange for a tutor, Anne Sullivan — the “half-blind Yankee schoolgirl” — to be sent from the Perkins Institute in Massachusetts. Upon her arrival, Sullivan finds a young girl who is undisciplined, defiant, and increasingly violent in her relations with others. To fulfill her task, Anne must overcome numerous obstacles: Helen’s disabilities, the bad habits that have festered in her soul, and especially the disordered affection of Helen’s family.

Tension between the family and the new teacher builds throughout the play. A Southern family proud of its heritage and blood connection to General Robert E. Lee, the Kellers encourage proper respect for the hierarchy of authority in the family. During one of many arguments between Sullivan and the Kellers over how Helen should be treated, Mr. Keller reminds Anne that she is there as a “paid teacher.” Keller treats teaching like other services rendered for a fee — but teaching is not exactly that kind of craft. Like a medical doctor, a teacher who frustrates the student’s progress in learning — by commission or omission — violates the calling of the profession. It was, after all, a sign of Socrates’ independent commitment to the truth that he, unlike the Sophists, refused to take a fee for his instruction. Anne’s unwillingness to reduce teaching to a paid service is a refusal to treat the student and her parents as mere consumers — a common enough problem in today’s universities.

Seeing that Helen is not improving, the Kellers finally grant Anne’s request to have Helen and her isolated from the family. Only then does Anne succeed in introducing order into Helen’s daily activities. The girl becomes more disciplined at the dinner table, less inclined to make a mess of herself and her environment. Frustrated that Helen is not making progress in understanding language, Anne reluctantly returns with her charge to the Keller home, where the family is delighted at Helen’s transformation. Her father observes that she “behaves like — even looks like — a human child, so manageable, contented.” When her father genially states, “cleanliness is next to Godliness,” Anne quips, “Cleanliness is next to nothing.”

The gap between teacher and parents remains one of expectations. “She’ll live up to just what

you demand of her, and no more.” The Kellers’ pampering of Helen has insured that she has had to learn very little. Anne bluntly tells the parents at one point, “her worst handicap is your love. And *pity*” — a term that shows up frequently in the play. Anne is repeatedly scolded for not having pity on Helen. Her terse response is: “Pity? this tyrant?” Of course, the parents have no pity for Helen’s tyrannical impulses, but their pity fosters those impulses. Pity arises from the perception of suffering. But whose suffering? Anne hints that, beyond the suffering of the one incapacitated, the deeper suffering is our own. Pity is a way of quelling or avoiding our own pain, the pain of watching a very difficult educational process, the outcome of which is uncertain. Anne concedes that teaching her, watching her, is painful. In this context, pity is a cover for cowardice and the lack of imagination, and a tacit acceptance of pedagogical defeat.

Setting low expectations — by both parents and teachers — is the great enemy of learning in our time. Often enough, it arises from a contemporary form of false love or pity — a concern that we not disturb the fragile self-esteem of youth. True enough, merely being tough, demanding obedience, and requiring rote repetition are not sufficient for effective pedagogy. But each is indispensable to that end. The delicate task, as Anne puts it with respect to Helen, is to “discipline her heart without breaking her spirit.” Where discipline does exist in our schools, it is too often an instrument, not of educating young adults, but of creating “manageable, contented children.” Obedience, Anne says, “is the gateway through which knowledge enters the mind of a child,” but “obedience without understanding” is “blindness.”

Helen’s spirit, manifest in her rebellious streak, is a sign of her desperate longing to understand. Asked how she will compel Helen to learn, Anne states that she is not “counting on force” but “on her.” She explains, “That little imp is dying to know . . . any and every crumb of God’s creation. I’ll have to use that appetite.” Anne here makes the Platonic point that education is not so much a matter of putting things into the soul but of arousing the desire to know and of turning the soul toward what is knowable.

Early in the play, the Kellers ask Anne what she will teach Helen first. She responds, “first, last, and in between, language.” Language, she argues, is to the “mind more than light to eyes.” The only way for the light to reach her mind is for her to make the connection between words and what they signify. Unable to move Helen directly to understanding, Anne’s principle is: “Imitate now, understand later.” Anne conjoins Helen’s experience with the activity of spelling out in her hand the letters of the words signifying the experience. Helen quickly becomes a gifted mimic, able to spell back into Anne’s hands whatever words she has just learned. The rote memorization of letters is not knowledge, however: “She knows how to spell but she doesn’t know that she knows.”

Simple repetitious tasks (solving problems and memorizing dates, places, vocabulary, and grammatical forms) are indispensable elements in any education. Contemporary educators’ aversion to these tasks, born not so much out of pity as out of banal progressive notions of creative freedom, results in high-school graduates who can barely read and who are ignorant of history, foreign languages, and basic math and science.

To educate is indeed to liberate or make free, as the phrase “liberal education” indicates. Of course, freedom is precisely what the Keller family gives Helen. But Annie makes clear that the

sort of freedom she has been allowed in fact serves only to enslave her further, to keep her trapped in an isolated world. The word education comes from a Latin term, *educare*, which means “to lead forth.”

Certain conceptions of education — liberal and conservative — fail to lead students forth, but keep them trapped where they are. In liberal academic circles, skepticism and relativism suppose that there is nothing to be known. Academics sometimes contend that fostering skepticism is in fact liberating; it frees students from erroneous views. Having been disabused of overconfidence, students are deprived of the possibility of making any further progress in inquiry. There is no pursuit of truth, only endless, comparative analyses of various opinions and of various rival — but equal, always equal — cultures. Indeed, since most of our students now imbibe some form of despairing skepticism from the popular culture and bring it with them to college, academic relativism leaves students where they began. But contemporary liberalism is not the only source of the frustration of students’ natural desire to know. In conservative circles, the process of leading forth can be undercut by peremptory appeals to authority — sometimes religious, sometimes political — that would seek to foreclose legitimate discussion and debate.

Individual teachers and schools can avoid these common misconceptions of education and still fail at the craft of teaching, fail in the art of disciplining and drawing out the soul so that it opens in wonder to the wider world. The magical results of that art are nowhere more dramatically on display than in the scene toward the end of *The Miracle Worker*, when Helen finally puts together the feel of flowing water with the letters and, in rapturous joy, proceeds to spell the words for dozens of objects in her midst. Having decried the Kellers’ love as a “handicap,” Anne now cradles in her arms an affectionate and grateful Helen and says, “I love Helen.” The teacher’s love — which cannot be induced by money, and for which the only recompense is gratitude — is simultaneously a love of the truth and a love for the student. This sort of love makes true learning possible.

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[Published at *National Review Online* (NRO)]