

*At an early age, before she learned to speak, Helen Keller lost her sight and hearing. Through an ordeal of training, long hours of work, and unwavering dedication on the part of Mrs. Anna Sullivan Macy, Helen learned to speak, read, and write.*

# The Seeing See Little

*Helen Keller*

Only the deaf appreciate hearing; only the blind realize the manifold blessings that lie in sight. Particularly does this observation apply to those who have lost sight and hearing in adult life. But those who have never suffered impairment of sight or hearing seldom make the fullest use of these blessed faculties. Their eyes and ears take in all sights and sounds hazily, without concentration, and with little appreciation. It is the same old story of not being grateful for what we have until we lose it, of not being conscious of health until we are ill.

I have often thought it would be a blessing if each human being were stricken blind and deaf for a few days at some time during his or her early adult life. Darkness would make people more appreciative of sight; silence would teach them the joys of sound.

Now and then I have tested my seeing friends to discover what they see. Recently I was visited by a very good friend who had just returned from a long walk in the woods, and I asked her what she had observed. "Nothing in particular," she replied. I might have been

incredulous had I not been accustomed to such responses, for long ago I became convinced that the seeing see little.

How was it possible, I asked myself, to walk for an hour through the woods and see nothing worthy of note? I who cannot see, find hundreds of things to interest me through mere touch. I feel the delicate symmetry of a leaf. I pass my hands lovingly about the smooth skin of a silver birch, or the rough, shaggy bark of a pine. In spring I touch the branches of trees hopefully in search of a bud, the first sign of awakening Nature after the winter's sleep. I feel the delightful, velvety texture of a flower, and discover its remarkable convolutions; and something of the miracle of Nature is revealed to me. Occasionally, if I am very fortunate, I place my hand gently on a small tree and feel the happy quiver of a bird in full song. I am delighted to have the cool waters of a brook rush through my open fingers. To me, a lush carpet of pine needles or spongy grass is more welcome than the most luxurious Persian rug. To me, the pageant of seasons is a thrilling and

unending drama, the action of which streams through my fingertips.

At times my heart cries out with longing to see all these things. If I can get so much pleasure from mere touch, how much more beauty must be revealed by sight? Yet those who have eyes apparently see little. The panorama of color and action that fills the world is taken for granted. It is human, perhaps, to appreciate little of that which we have and to long for that which we have not; but it is a great pity that in the world of light, the gift of sight is used only as a mere convenience rather than as a means of adding fullness to life.

If I were the president of a university, I should establish a compulsory course in "How To Use Your Eyes." The professor would try to show the pupils how they could add joy to their lives by really seeing what passes un-

noticed before them. He or she would try to awake their dormant and sluggish faculties.

Perhaps I can best illustrate by imagining what I should most like to see if I were given the use of my eyes, say, for just three days. And while I am imagining, suppose you, too, set your mind to work on the problem of how you would use your own eyes if you had only three more days to see. If, with the oncoming darkness of the third night you knew that the sun would never rise for you again, how would you spend those three precious, intervening days? What would you most want to let your gaze rest upon?

I, naturally, should want most to see the things that have become dear to me through my years of darkness. You, too, would want to let your eyes rest long on the things that have become dear to you, so that you could take the



## B I O G R A P H Y

**Helen Keller** (1880–1968), born in Tuscumbia, Alabama, was happy and normal until an illness left her blind and deaf at age two. By her own account, she lived the next five years like a wild animal. Then her father took her to Dr. Alexander Graham Bell, the inventor of the telephone, who recommended a teacher, Anna Sullivan. Anna communicated with Helen through touch and helped her to master reading and writing in Braille. The play *The Miracle Worker*, by William Gibson, is about Helen's discovery of the gift of language. As a teenager, Helen learned how to use her vocal cords. She attended Radcliffe College, graduating with honors. Dedicated to helping the blind, she raised funds, went on speaking tours, and visited more than twenty-five countries. The books she wrote have been translated into more than fifty languages.

memory of them with you into the night that loomed before you.

If, by some miracle, I were granted three seeing days, to be followed by a relapse into darkness, I should want to see the people whose kindness and gentleness and companionship have made my life worth living. First I should like to gaze long upon the face of my dear teacher, Mrs. Anna Sullivan Macy, who came to me when I was a child and opened the outer world to me. I should want not merely to see the outline of her face, so that I could cherish it in my memory, but to study that face and find in it the living evidence of the sympathetic tenderness and patience with which she accomplished the difficult task of my education. I should like to see in her eyes that strength of character that has enabled her to stand firm in the face of difficulties, and that compassion for all humanity that she has revealed to me so often.

I do not know what it is to see into the heart of a friend through that "window of the soul," the eye. I can only "see" through my fingertips the outline of a face. I can detect laughter, sorrow, and many other obvious emotions. I know my friends from the feel of their faces. But I cannot really picture their personalities by touch. I know their personalities, of course, through other means, through the thoughts they express to me, through whatever of their actions are revealed to me. But I am denied that deeper understanding of them that I am sure would come through sight of them, through watching their reactions to various expressed thoughts and circumstances, through noting the immediate and fleeting reactions of their eyes and countenance.

Friends who are near to me I know well, because through the months and years they reveal themselves to me in all their phases; but

of casual friends I have only an incomplete impression, an impression gained from a hand-clasp, from spoken words that I take from their lips with my fingertips, or which they tap into the palm of my hand.

How much easier, how much more satisfying it is for you who can see to grasp quickly the essential qualities of another person by watching the subtleties of expression, the quiver of a muscle, the flutter of a hand. But does it ever occur to you to use your sight to see into the inner nature of a friend or acquaintance? Do not most of you seeing people grasp casually the outward features of a face and let it go at that?

For instance, can you describe accurately the faces of five good friends? Some of you can, but many cannot. As an experiment, I have questioned husbands of long standing about the color of their wives' eyes, and often they express embarrassed confusion and admit that they do not know. And, incidentally, it is a chronic complaint of wives that their husbands do not notice new dresses, new hats, and changes in household arrangements.

The eyes of seeing persons soon become accustomed to the routine of their surroundings, and they actually see only the startling and spectacular. But even in viewing the most spectacular sights, the eyes are lazy. Court records reveal every day how inaccurately "eyewitnesses" see. A given event will be "seen" in several different ways by as many witnesses. Some see more than others, but few see everything that is within the range of their vision.

Oh, the things that I should see if I had the power of sight for just three days!

The first day would be a busy one. I should call to me all my dear friends and look long into their faces, imprinting upon my mind the out-

ward evidence of the beauty that is within them. I should let my eyes rest, too, on the face of a baby, so that I could catch a vision of the eager, innocent beauty that precedes the individual's consciousness of the conflicts that life develops.

And I should like to look into the loyal, trusting eyes of my dogs—the grave, canny little Scottie, Darkie, and the stalwart, understanding Great Dane, Helga, whose warm, tender, and playful friendships are so comforting to me.

On that busy first day I should also view the small, simple things of my home. I want to see the warm colors in the rugs under my feet, the pictures on the walls, the intimate trifles that transform a house into a home. My eyes would rest respectfully on the books in raised type that I have read, but they would be more eagerly interested in the printed books that seeing people can read; for during the long night of my life the books I have read and those that have been read to me have built themselves into a great, shining lighthouse, revealing to me the deepest channels of human life and the human spirit.

In the afternoon of that first seeing day, I should take a long walk in the woods and intoxicate my eyes on the beauties of the world of Nature, trying desperately to absorb in a few hours the vast splendor that is constantly unfolding itself to those who can see. On the

way home from my woodland jaunt, my path would lie near a farm, so that I might see the patient horses plowing in the field (perhaps I should see only a tractor!) and the serene content of people living close to the soil. And I should pray for the glory of a colorful sunset.

When dusk had fallen, I should experience the double delight of being able to see by artificial light, which the human genius has created to extend the power of sight when Nature decrees darkness.

In the night of that first day of sight, I should not be able to sleep, so full would be my mind of the memories of the day.

I who am blind can give one hint to those who see—one admonition to those who would make full use of the gift of sight: Use your eyes as if tomorrow you would be stricken blind. And the same method can be applied to the other senses. Hear the music of voices, the song of a bird, the mighty strains of an orchestra, as if you would be stricken deaf tomorrow. Touch each object you want to touch as if tomorrow your tactile sense would fail. Smell the perfume of flowers, taste with relish each morsel, as if tomorrow you could never smell and taste again. Make the most of every sense; glory in all facets of pleasure and beauty that the world reveals to you through the several means of contact that Nature provides. But of all the senses, I am sure that sight must be the most delightful.