

Helen Keller and Anne Sullivan: Twin “Miracle Workers”



*“Sometimes isolation enfolds me like a cold mist.. and silence sits immense upon my soul. Then I try to make the light in others’ eyes my sun, the music in others’ ears my symphony, the smile on others’ lips my happiness.” (p. 94) ... still, **Helen** is the one who smells the rose.*

Born with the proverbial “silver spoon ...”?

Heritage-wise, Helen was a smart little “Swiss miss” whose paternal family had migrated some generations earlier from the German-speaking part of Switzerland around Zurich. They settled first in Maryland, then moved to (very UN-Swiss-like) Alabama where Helen was born on 27 June 1880 into a relatively affluent, formerly slave-holding, Confederate family.

She later wrote that “I came, I saw, I conquered as the first baby in the family always does;” thus, with that proverbial “silver spoon” in her mouth. Besides being blonde, pretty and precocious, there was her own autobiographical self-description as having an “eager, self-asserting disposition”. These were genetic gifts that helped her through the all-but-insurmountable difficulties that beset her from a very early age.

Even before her second birthday, she was struck down with a mysterious fever she later described as “an acute congestion of the stomach and brain” that it seemed she wouldn’t survive. Miraculously, she **did** ... but when the fever fled as suddenly as it had come, it had stolen away both baby Helen’s sight and hearing.

Cruel Fate, Destiny’s Calling ... or Willed Self-Transcendence?

Thought-provoking it is to note how language influences perception ... and *vice versa*. In German, the language that Helen’s family spoke before immigrating to America, there is only one word—“**Schicksal**”—which purports to describe everything inexplicable and seemingly arbitrary that may happen in the course of one’s life. For Helen, this word had a very fateful ring to it. In English, however, this author’s mother tongue, there are two very distinct sides to this existential coin:

- the negative side is the “**cruel fate**” perspective that would see a perfectly healthy Helen suddenly struck down with “brain fever” (probably bacterial meningitis) at only 19 months of age and thus seemingly condemned to living her entire life in a world of dark isolation; perhaps even “put away” because of her frustrated temper tantrums when she couldn’t communicate; whereas

- the positive side is that “**destiny calling**” attitude that would point to Helen’s intact intelligence and ‘expressive driver’ will power and say, “Indeed! Living is a challenge ... but we **can** overcome many of the circumstances that appear to be insurmountable”. In fact, this is a quote of hers:

“The world is full of suffering. It is also full of overcoming it.”

— *Helen Keller*

But “overcoming” suffering, as she put it, would require more than a little help from her family, friends and benefactors. Certainly, family was critical; without it in the face of such obstacles, she would surely have pined away like so many institutionalized, isolated disabled. But family alone was not enough. Two *non*-family members—imperative in her early years—were Alexander Graham Bell and Anne Sullivan, perhaps both part of Helen’s beckoning “destiny”? But first, let’s look at Helen-the-child and what she brought with her in terms of intelligence, drive and will power.

From willfulness ... Strong-willed she was without a doubt, this little blind girl; domineering even, if we believe her own accounts of how she ordered around her little colored playmate, Martha Washington, who was several years older. Gleefully naughty and power-wielding she could be too, for example, when she discovered the function of a key, locking first her mother and later her teacher into different rooms in the house, hiding the key and relishing her prank. But as she later said, she had not yet experienced the power of love and compassion. That came only later. Meanwhile, ...

How did others see her? Here, an outsider’s observation.

“A wild, uncouth little creature” she was. “At family meals, she got up and wandered from plate-to-plate, grabbing handfuls of food.” She also threw frightful tantrums, flailing around with her entire little body, hurling whatever she could lay her hands on. “She also slapped strangers in the face” we are told. Today we’d say an incredibly “spoiled brat” who shook her childish fist in Fate’s face.

Source: <https://www.theattic.space/home-page-blogs/2018/11/29/helen-kellers-moment>):

But her family forgave—even shielded and indulged—her. Perhaps they had a guilty conscience because she had been in their safe keeping when the illness ravaged her. In any case, they stayed staunchly Swiss-like in their allegiance, standing by her in hopes of some solution. They also might have prayed, something a bit like this:

**“The Prayer”. (Excerpt)
(Céline Dion and Andrea Bocelli)**

*I pray you'll be our eyes
And watch us where we go*

*And help us to be wise
In times when we don't know
Let this be our prayer
When we lose our way
Lead us to a place
Guide us with your grace
To a place where we'll be safe*

*I pray we'll find your light
And hold it in our hearts
When stars go out each night*

*Let this be our prayer
When shadows fill our day
Lead us to a place
Guide us with your grace
Give us faith so we'll be safe*

Note: Italian singer Andrea Bocelli was blind from birth.

Source: YouTube h Prayer https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qt_OkgSOrkU

Faith without follow-through won't manifest. Helen's mother Kate was her steadfast champion, but her father was also a man of action and consequence. Together they were determined to do everything they could to restore the promise of their daughter's life. And they *did*. And it *worked*. A series of auspicious “synchronicities” made it possible.

Granted, educating a child that could neither see nor hear was new territory, but her father was determined to pull out all the stops: first traveling with her to Baltimore to see a reputed oculist (alas, to no avail); then immediately onwards to Washington, D.C. to consult Dr. Alexander Graham Bell (inventor of the telephone and someone who worked with the deaf). Helen and the kindly Dr. Bell understood each other instantly, but as she later wrote, “*I did not dream that that interview would be the door through which I should pass from darkness into light, from isolation to friendship, companionship, knowledge, love.*” Still, she needed a one-on-one teacher; that was Anne.

Enter “Miss Spitfire,” the “Miracle Worker”



Anne Sullivan’s name will be forever linked to Helen Keller’s because she was the empathetic kindred soul and teacher who brought light into this six-year-old’s dark world. And yet ...

Anne’s own world had been even far darker. “An impoverished Dickensian nightmare,” with no trace of any ‘silver spoon’; beaten and neglected as a child; her own vision impaired through disease, she learned to deal with this herself. But not before she had to witness her father’s abandonment and the death of her dear brother, then her mother. “*Quo vadis, Anne?*”

Sent to Boston’s Perkins School for the Blind, Anne was nothing if not both defiant ... and brilliant. “**Miss Spitfire**” was her nickname. So, when Mr. Keller sought out Alexander Graham Bell and he, in turn, approached the Perkins

School in search of a teacher for Helen, who was recommended to him but Anne. It took some time, but she arrived in Alabama on 3 March 1887, just three months before Helen’s seventh birthday, never dreaming how this move would also enrich her own life, even make her famous!

“Tough Love” Teacher. Having worked with her own visual disabilities and learned Braille and hand-sign language at Boston’s Perkins School for the Blind, Anne was well-prepared to teach someone eager to learn. But, at first, Helen was anything **but!**

“The spirit of resistance was strong within me,” Helen later wrote. *Understatement!* In the intervening five years since her illness, Helen had become notorious for her outbursts of passion when she couldn’t make herself understood; for throwing such daily, even hourly, temper tantrums that there was talk of putting her away in an institution.

Still, an enormous amount of patience and perseverance would be required, and Anne had what it took. The first hurdle was making the mental connection between the thought, the word and the concrete reality. The story of this breakthrough is legendary!

Spoiled brat vs. Miss Spitfire! Still, Anne’s first two weeks with Helen was described as “a war of wills”. Blind spoiled brat vs. Miss Spitfire! Tears and tantrums, broken dishes and on-edge nerves. But Miss Spitfire (20) won the day against a railing, flailing Helen (6). Anne prevailed through her patience and perseverance, spelling out words into Helen’s hand whether she wanted it or not ... until, *finally*, Helen began to get interested in the finger-play and realized she could do more than just be a wild rebel.

“My Soul’s Birthday”. Helen’s spiritual pivot—at age seven!

Here’s Helen’s first-person description 13 years later when she penned her “life’s story”—although it was but the beginning of a very long and miraculously *engaged* life on multiple fronts! The prelude was the latest tantrum when Helen smashed the doll that Anne had given her. So Anne took her by the arm and literally dragged her outside; more space there for the duel of their two strong wills.

Helen did adore Nature! Especially the smells. Those, she could take in directly. In her autobiography, she repeatedly praises the primroses in her garden, the honeysuckle, even the pungent smell of the earth after a rain. So, Nature provided the perfect setting for her ‘enlightenment’! And she did a ‘spiritual pivot’ virtually on the waterspout spot!

While being dragged through the flower-filled garden, they came upon a waterspout. Anne put Helen’s hand in the stream of water, then repeatedly spelled out the word ‘water’ in her hand. At first bewilderment; but then—Aha! The child connected the dots...and changed in that moment the rest of her life!

“The Miracle Worker”:

Television, Broadway Stage and Film Blockbuster (1959 – 1964)

This initial version, created and produced by William Gibson and starring actresses Anne Bancroft and Patty Duke, received rave reviews! It brings to life the spellbinding story of the triumph by a blind-deaf girl and the stubbornly persevering teacher who brought her out of her sensory imprisonment and onto life’s bright-lit stage.

Major themes: the vital importance of *language* to human communication and the need for everyone in the *family*, not just the teacher, to get fully involved. Blind-deaf children *can* be taught! About language and meaning, about rebellion and devotion, about change and transformation. The basic integrity and touching emotional honesty of the “The Miracle Worker” moves every viewer.

It is worth watching the “new” (2000) version of this film where 1880s Alabama’s Deep South is depicted in all its horse-and-carriage, plantations-and-Southern drawl splendor. Also, with strong doses of white-supremacy prejudice. Anne Sullivan comes across vividly strong, seeing Helen not as a child “ripe for the asylum” but as one who is smart but spoiled—and angry but indulged! Her best lines? “Pity is a waste of energy. Feeling sorry for ourselves, even worse... rather than spoil such children, we have to teach them to do things for themselves ... and learn kindness.”

Helen’s Spiritual Pivot. We are told, “Now she stood, one hand plunged in the water’s flow, the other in Sullivan’s as she spelled. Words fail to capture what happened next, though ‘miracle’ comes to mind.”

Then, as Helen herself related years later in her autobiography, “I stood still, my whole attention fixed upon the motion of her fingers. Suddenly, I felt a misty consciousness as of something forgotten—a thrill of returning thought; and somehow the mystery of language was revealed to me. I knew then that w-a-t-e-r meant the wonderful cool something that was flowing over my hand.

A soul’s sudden awakening!

Water!! “That living word awakened my soul, gave it light, hope, joy, set it free! Now as we walked back to the house, every object I touched seemed to quiver with light.”
- Helen Keller, age seven

Such an incredibly rare experience, especially for a child of seven! A psychologist might describe this feat as climbing from that sensory-deprived cellar of the blind-deaf child up through the physical and into the almost purely mental realm. As of this point, Helen’s communication with the world around her became more predominantly ‘intellectual’ in that it worked through her brain, as prompted by her fingertips, sense of smell, etc. But that’s not all perhaps ...

Satori! A Japanese Zen Buddhist might well point to this equally rare experience: a sudden inner, intuitive “illumination”, the lifting of a veil of darkness; “unexplainable, indescribable, and unintelligible by reason and logic”, a complete re-ordering of the individual in relation to her world, indeed the universe. American blues singer, Aretha Franklin, put it more poetically, calling it “a spark of brilliance, a touch of meaning” ... that provided a beckoning path for Helen to follow.

So it was that—in that “Aha!” moment—although Anne provided the “dots” in the heavens of Helen’s mind, it was the child who worked her own miracles by connecting them!

Symbiosis

As Helen herself was first to say, “the deaf and blind find it very difficult to acquire the amenities of conversation.” Pronunciation and intonation posed a major obstacle while wrapping her mind around abstract thoughts represented an enormous achievement. But she was bright and knowledge-hungry.

Then Helen learned to read! And yet another world was opened to her. She devoured books! At the same time, Anne provided inspiration through her wonderful descriptive gifts. The two of them were growing seamlessly together: symbiosis or a true “meeting of the minds”.

Helen—the ‘caged bird’ now freed because her teacher had opened that cage door and she had had the courage to fly out into a far larger world—also revealed the like-spirited quality of their relationship even in her childhood years, saying that “my teacher is so near to me that I scarcely think of myself as apart from her ... her being is inseparable

from my own ... the footsteps of my life are in hers.” Was this co-dependency or simply overwhelming gratitude?

In her autobiography, written when she was only 22 while at Radcliffe, so actually more like an interim memoir, Helen credited her teacher’s “genius ...her quick sympathy, her loving tact”. Still, the book itself she dedicated to Alexander Graham Bell “who has taught the deaf to speak and enabled the listening ear to hear speech from the Atlantic to the Rockies, I dedicate this story of my life.”

Breaking through, bit-by-bit, day-by-day.

Granted that frustrated tantrums and naughty pranks were the first hints of Helen’s own brand of “defiance of the human spirit”, Viktor Frankl himself might have traced her gradual emergence from darkness as “a powerful example of how determination, hard work and imagination can allow an individual to triumph over adversity”.

Nor did it happen instantly. Not by *far*. First, like the desert fox in Saint-Exupéry’s “The Little Prince” (see Chapter 5), Helen had to be “tamed”. For this, it truly took a miracle worker! That was Anne.

The fox speaking to “The Little Prince”

*“If you tame me, you and I, we will have
created a relationship,
And so we will need one another.
You will be unique in the world for me...
If you were to tame me,
my whole life would be so much more fun.”
- Antoine de Saint Exupéry*

An aside: In the original French of “The Little Prince”, there would be two words for the English one, “to tame”. The first is to domesticate (i.e. make subservient); the second—and the one that Saint Exupéry used—is “apprivoiser”, which involves a more reciprocal, even *loving* connection.

Part 2: Making Life Meaningful, Transcending Self

On a personal Note:

On my fridge a magnet from my New York years
stubbornly sticks. It says:
“Life isn’t about finding yourself.
It’s about **creating** yourself.”
(right down to the final wire—every *second* counts)
--Author unknown

One thing seems sure: the fact that Helen could slowly but surely communicate helped persuade her that her own life might have some overarching **meaning**, both for herself and later for others. Frankl would have added that “not *because* and not *against*, but ***in spite of her suffering***,” Helen would emerge “spiritually intact” and able to define her greater role in the world.

Being valued and appreciated: an unlikely role for Mark Twain

Out of the ashes of her disabilities, Helen ascended like the proverbial phoenix, thanks to her incandescent mind, even becoming something of an instant celebrity! Let’s just take the case of American writer and humorist, Mark Twain. We are told that a “most unlikely friendship” developed from the outset between Mark and Helen, which began in 1895, when Keller was only 14 while he was 40 years her senior (<https://www.biography.com/authors-writers/helen-keller-mark-twain-friendship>).

Already famous as the father of American literature, Twain was quick to put the teenage girl at ease. “He was peculiarly tender and lovely with her—even for Mr. Clemens.” This young girl’s innocence deeply moved the cynical and sophisticated Twain. “When I first met Helen, she was fourteen... and up to that time all ...unpleasant things had been carefully kept from her.” The word *death* was not in her vocabulary, nor the word *grave*. She was indeed “the whitest soul on earth.”

For Keller, Twain became both a mentor and a friend. “*Mark Twain has his own way of thinking, saying and doing everything*,” she later wrote. “*I can feel the twinkle of his eye in his handshake. Even while he utters his cynical wisdom in an indescribably droll voice, he makes you feel that his heart is a tender Iliad of human sympathy.*” Plus, his easy, carefree attitude toward her was a breath of fresh air. “*He treated me not as a freak but as a handicapped woman seeking a way to circumvent extraordinary difficulties.*”

Pushing the “educational envelope”: Pioneering achievements

An uphill battle it was, but Helen was undaunted, being drawn forward by her own innate curiosity, her achievement-oriented character and her emerging talent as a writer. For starters, her family had already financed the best education money could buy for that time, starting with the pre-eminent Perkins Institute for the Blind in Boston, plus multiple other schools for the deaf and blind and including two finishing schools before she dared to apply to Harvard—Radcliffe was the women’s faculty—and succeeded in 1900 at age 20.

It is worth noting here that it was Mark Twain (see above), who—amazed by her precocious intelligence---arranged the financing for her four Harvard years. And she, in fact, outdid herself, graduating Phi Beta Kappa, having become in the process the first deafblind person in the United States to earn a Bachelor of Arts degree. That was just the beginning.

She had already launched herself into writing and subsequently developed into a prolific author, “writing 14 books and hundreds of speeches and essays on topics ranging from animals to Mahatma Gandhi.”

Switching Roles: Becoming *herself* the Advocate

Since Helen Keller had suffered the fate of a societal outcast directly ... she had developed the weapons to deal with this. She sensed when the time was ripe to switch from taker to giver, from learner to teacher. Henceforth, **she** would lead the way. And she did ... for the rest of her very long life.

In a nutshell, we are told that “Keller campaigned for those with disabilities, for women's suffrage, labor rights, and world peace. In 1909, she joined the Socialist Party of America (SPA). And ... she was a founding member of the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU).” Just one example that has had long-term benefits: largely because of the advocacy of Helen Keller, Braille has been established as the single writing system in the United States for people who are blind.

Determined to communicate with others as conventionally as possible, Keller learned to speak and spent much of her life giving speeches and lectures on aspects of her life. But there was one right that was denied, even to her.

Squelching Helen's Right to Marry: Disability-based Discrimination

So lucky to have stumbled upon this 2021 PBS-related article! Here the born-blind writer and poet Kathi Wolfe wrote that “it was “her doomed love life that really made me identify” with otherwise too-good-to-be-true Helen Keller.

Wolfe relates that, at age 36, Keller fell in love with journalist and fellow socialist, Peter Fagan, who had briefly served as her secretary when Anne Sullivan (who was 50 at the time) had become ill. They even made clandestine plans to elope! Reading this, I immediately went in search of more information and images on the internet ...but found not a single one of the couple; only a really crude YouTube cartoon for a piece called “Ridiculous Romances” (which I will refrain from immortalizing here!). At least the caption offers that, *“her abelist family didn't seem to think one of the most accomplished women in the world could handle marriage!”*

We are further told that both Anne Sullivan and *“Keller's extended family vigorously squashed the relationship with forced midnight train trips out of town, an angry and gun-waving brother, and drama worthy of a bad novel,”* historian Kim E. Nielsen writes in “Helen Keller: Selected Writings.”

Never mind that she was meanwhile world-renowned, had written books and given lectures across the country, still Sullivan and Keller's relatives *“felt adamantly that marriage and childbearing were not options for a deaf-blind woman,”* Nielsen writes. Dutiful Swiss daughter that she was, Helen succumbed to this ignorant discrimination and severed the relationship.

Blazing Trails

Although in America she became virtually a household name as an author, political activist and advocate for the rights of disabled people, still there are a few facts worth knowing about this high-profile woman. The Perkins School for the Blind, which was founded in 1829 in Boston and where she studied, compiled an inspiring list—part of which is found below—for us to ponder:

1. **She was a pioneer, the first deafblind person to earn a college degree.** From Radcliffe, Harvard's sister university no less, in the days when education was still gender-segregated and disabilities a taboo door-closer.
2. **She was outgoing, interacting with America's rich and famous,** from politicians to literary celebrities, becoming for example close friends with Mark Twain who delighted in her sharp intelligence and quick wit. In fact, it was Twain who first dubbed Anne Sullivan a “miracle worker” for bringing Keller out of her darkness and into the light of learning and communication.
3. **She was even nominated for a Nobel Peace Prize in 1953** advocating for disabled's rights in Egypt and the Middle East. Her legacy still lives on at the Hellen Keller School in Jerusalem, Israel.



4. **She was a “political animal” through-and-through.** Besides being a card-carrying Socialist, Keller was also a founding member of the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU). An outspoken advocate for women’s rights and a strong supporter of birth control, she was politically way ahead of her time. And lest it be forgotten, she personally met with no less than twelve American presidents! (See below.)

5. **She showed herself not even averse to vaudeville!** In 1920, Keller (40) and Sullivan (53) began a five-year stint in vaudeville to supplement their dwindling finances. Touted as

the “Eighth Wonder of the World,” Keller performed a 20-minute show, where she told her life story in her own words (translated by Sullivan). Q&A sessions with the audience allowed Keller to demonstrate her witty intelligence. For example, during the American Prohibition, when asked by an audience member, “What do you think is the most important question before the country today?” her response was: “How to get a drink.” No doubt she could be wickedly outrageous!

6. **She remains influential and respected even after her death.** Although she died in 1968, “in 1999 her name still appeared on Time magazine’s list of the 100 most important figures of the 20th century... That’s an impressive accomplishment for anyone”, all the more so for a woman who could neither see nor hear.

Travels, Twelve Presidents, *Two* Female Icons!

In her later years, she traveled widely—to 39 different countries all told—to raise awareness around the issue of physical disability and to try to persuade foreign governments to establish schools for people who were blind and deaf. In 1938 Helen also had the opportunity to meet another woman who would make waves.

First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt would later become inextricably linked with the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Building up to that was the necessity to SEE human rights as an innate privilege for all, the world over. Early on, Helen saw this and wrote on February 19, 1933: *“Dear Mrs. Roosevelt, We have met only twice for a moment, but I have been drawn to you by your earnest, constructive efforts on behalf of the unprivileged (sic), and since Election Day I have felt the bond of*

sympathy grow stronger and stronger between us. I cannot tell you with what pride and satisfaction I have followed your courageous activities. Your talks over the radio have in them the ring of conscience and vision."

Keller, the "President Whisperer". No slouch in terms of public exposure, between 1888 and 1964 Helen was introduced to no less than twelve American presidents— Grover Cleveland, William McKinley, Theodore Roosevelt, William Taft, Woodrow Wilson, Warren G. Harding, Calvin Coolidge, Herbert Hoover, Franklin Delano Roosevelt, Harry Truman, Dwight D. Eisenhower, John F. Kennedy and Lyndon B. Johnson. She did more than just **meet** them — she used her platform to **enlist** them in the fight for equal rights for people with disabilities.



Caption. *"John F. Kennedy came of age in a world already changed by Keller. This wasn't lost on him. In 1963, while wishing her a happy 83rd birthday, Kennedy wrote that Keller was one of very few "men and women whose achievements have become legendary in their own time," adding she had earned "a permanent place in the history of human progress."* (Source: Perkins Institute for the Blind)

The Twilight Years

Although she did manage to meet with President John F. Kennedy in 1963 shortly before his assassination, Keller stopped her public appearances in 1961 after suffering a series of strokes. She was unable to attend the ceremony when President Lyndon Johnson awarded her with the Presidential Medal of Freedom. Still, she lived on until her passing on the first of June 1968 at the age of eighty-eight. She is buried together with her "teacher", Anne Sullivan Macy and Polly Thomson, Keller's companion later in life after Anne's death in 1936.

Keller's 1968 funeral was held at the National Cathedral, and more than 1,200 people were in attendance. Alabama Senator Lister Hill gave the eulogy. He said, "She will live

on, one of the few, the immortal names not born to die. Her spirit will endure as long as man can read and stories can be told of the woman who showed the world **there are no boundaries to courage and faith.**"

"Ich bin blind, aber ich sehe; ich bin taub, aber ich höre."

- Helen Keller (shortly before her 1968 passing)

Helen Keller. Readers' Interactive Workbook

Whatever your age or current stage of life, interacting with these historic or contemporary characters can inspire your own life, calling up comparisons with the figures featured here. Take a vivid “walk down Memory Lane” and recall challenges that you faced—whether you overcame them or just barely survived with bruisingly useful “lessons learned”. This can help you rev up your right-now resilience. *Dare to explore beyond Helen Keller’s “spiritual pivot” at age seven to her emergence onto the world stage as advocate for the disabled.*

- 1. The five senses ... and beyond? We are told that humans have only five, in order of priority: “Sight comes first, because the eye is such a specialized organ. Then come hearing, touch, smell and taste, progressively less specialized senses.”** But aren't there, in fact, more? And, also, perhaps expanded parameters of the ones we take for granted. For example, what about proprioception? Musical acuity? Or Instinct/intuition? What's your take?
- 2. Sensory deprivation and compensation.** Do you know anyone who is totally blind from birth? Totally deaf from birth? Both together? If **so**, describe in some detail how they deal with these disabilities and if they have help in doing so. If **not**, take a full 15 minutes out of the fullness of your busy life to create—or try to deeply imagine—such a double sensory deprivation. How do you **feel** in this state of isolation? **Furthermore, how might one who loses such senses compensate?** For example, scientific studies show that blindness is usually compensated through an enhanced sense of smell, taste and touch. Try reading Braille with your fingertips. How long might it take to become ‘fluent’ in feeling the letters? The words? In imagining abstract ideas like the “universe” or, indeed, close emotions like “friendship”?
- 3. The message beneath Helen’s sense of bravado.** *“Onto the black stage she steps. You believe you hear her cane tap tapping, then stop. Papers rustle. Suddenly you are blinded by a brilliant light. The light, emanating from a lamp on her head like that of a miner, creates dark smudges of her facial features. Under the brilliant light and shadow face, you see what appears to be an oversized pamphlet. Its pages glow eerily with the angel-sleeves of her pale robe or jacket. At first you see the pages blank, then you recognize them as **braille-dappled**. Then Helen begins reading: **“I was not born blind. I was not born deaf... No. I was born in 1880 in Tuscumbia Alabama on a postbellum plantation called Ivy Green, the fair first daughter of a southern belle and a confederate soldier. I was not born a joke.”** Ouch! How does this make you feel, especially if you ever made Helen Keller jokes?*

4. **Beyond mere “coping”.** Once she mastered reading, Helen Keller became herself a prolific writer and public speaker. An icon even in 20th century America, meeting personally with no less than twelve U.S. presidents! How might this social visibility have helped the plight of other sensory-deprived, disabled persons? Can you cite three specifics?

5. **Mark Twain on Helen Keller.** “I need not go into any particulars about Helen Keller. She is fellow to Caesar, Alexander, Napoleon, Homer, Shakespeare and the rest of the immortals. She will be as famous a thousand years from now as she is to-day.” What do *you* say to that?
