

Editorial: Into the Light

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My seven-year-old daughter had to do an oral poster presentation on a famous American. She chose Helen Keller, a choice guided in large part by me, always anxious to counter the social perspectives of disability as weakness and everyday things as miraculous already bombarding impressionable young minds in the first grade.

There is a girl with a disability I will call "Mary" in my daughter's class. Well, Mary is sort of in Susanna's class, which is to say Mary sometimes appears for lunchtime and special activities such as birthdays or field trips. When Mary does come to the classroom, she sits passively at her almost-always-empty desk with "Mary" printed at the top in large letters. Her name proclaims the truth of what is not apparent - that Mary is indeed a member of Room One. Mary is always accompanied by, or rather tethered to, a classroom aide. The aide's sole purpose seems to be to keep Mary from participating.

Case in point. I brought my hearing dog into the classroom to give my annual talk about "working dogs help people with disabilities and by the way people with disabilities are just like you." As expected, Mary was there, and as expected, she was sitting in the back of the room where she was least likely to cause a disturbance, or rather most likely to cause a disturbance because she couldn't hear what I was saying or see the pictures in the brightly illustrated children's book I was reading about "My Buddy the Service Dog."

After the story and a handful of eager questions from my audience such as, "What happens when Buddy has to go to the bathroom?" I sat with my dog while the children came up one by one to pet him. At last it was Mary's turn, and the aide manhandled her to the front of the room while Mary, not surprisingly given that her hand was being given as an offering to a large furry animal with sharp white teeth, was resisting. "No, no," wailed Mary, pulling away as the aide stood behind her, blocking her exit and shoving her towards me. "Hey," I said, "Let her go. She doesn't have to pet the dog. Step away aide! Mary can come on her own if she wants to."

The aide was in such shock she actually did what I said. She stepped back, ready to pounce on Mary if necessary, but releasing her arm from the death grip.

Mary got the most wonderful expression on her face. She stood there, surrounded by empty space, free, for a split second, to decide. And of course, as I had expected, she decided to come forward. She reached out her arm and she patted Presto, and then she gave me a great big smile, full of light, full of understanding. And then she was sucked back into the grip of the person meant to enable her.

But I was talking of Helen Keller, and my daughter's poster presentation. The assignment was to paste photos of the famous person on a large sheet of paper, along with captions describing why they were important. We had prepared for this assignment by reading from a biography of Helen and, since the biography was a little dry for a seven-year-old,

watching a DVD of "The Miracle Worker."

"What did you learn about Helen from watching the movie?" I prompted.

"She was deaf-blind."

"Okay, that's right, and what else?"

"She slapped people."

"What?"

"She slapped people. She knocked her teacher's tooth out. It was so funny!"

My first reaction was, "You can't put that in your report, that she slapped people! Surely there is something nicer than that you can say about Helen Keller!" So we wrote that Helen traveled a lot, and she was friends with Alexander Graham Bell, and she met Presidents, and she showed the world that deaf-blind people can do anything. I was incensed that Helen was always portrayed as a Savage who was rescued from darkness by the Savior, Annie Sullivan. Isn't that just the way of society, I fumed, idolizing someone because they became normal against the odds?

And that made me rethink my reaction to, "Helen Keller slapped people." What was slapping people but exerting her own sense of self, her right to want a doll, and to want it *now*. She was expressing her resistance against doing what she was told, doing what she did not understand. If Helen slapped Annie, it was because she was self-determined, because she had a sense of her own person as distinct from others and of herself as exerting control over her world. In bringing Helen "into the light" the essence of that self-determination was lost, at the expense of being able to express herself in a way that was acceptable to others.

One of the great conversations, if you will, about Helen Keller was her relationship with Annie. Because Helen relied on Annie for just about everything, the question arose of "who was Helen and who was Annie?" What of what Helen said was from Helen, and what was from Annie? My personal opinion is "what does it matter?" Together, they were two remarkable women. Apart from each other they were remarkable too. That was Helen the author, socialist, traveler, actor, dancer, speaker, thinker. But was she self-determined? Did she ever slap someone after she figured out that "water" was the stuff coming out of the well in the backyard? Not likely, because the mission of Annie, of Helen's parents, of the Perkins School for the Blind, of society, and of Helen herself, was for Helen to behave as if she were normal. That behavior involved giving herself over to the unseen hand of decorum. What part did "no" play in that equation?

Later that night, after my daughter was asleep, I took out the poster and wrote, "Helen slapped people," in small print, perhaps where the teacher would not see it, at the bottom of the page.