

The challenge of advocacy: The different voices of Helen Keller and Burton Blatt.

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Abstract:

The writer talks about how the voices of Helen Keller and Burton Blatt can challenge educators of mental retardation to hold firm to a belief in the miracle of unconditional and sustained commitments and to a legacy of hopefulness.

Keywords: Helen Keller, Buron Blatt | people with disabilities | civil rights | disability | advocacy

Article:

In his book *Inventing the Feeble Mind*, Trent (1995) described mental retardation as a construction whose changing meaning is shaped both by individuals who initiate and administer policies, programs and practices, and by the social context to which these individuals are responding" (p. 2)

He argued that the meaning of disabilities has sometimes been constructed in the name of science, sometimes in the name of caring for people with disabilities, and sometimes in the name of social or economic necessity. Each of these reasons for describing people with disabilities, however, has also been used for the purpose of controlling these people because they are perceived to be a threat or an inconvenience to society. The construction of the meaning of disability has, from this perspective, been motivated more by a search for control than by a concern for the best interests of people with disabilities.

HELEN KELLER: A MAGNIFICENT EXCEPTION

There have been, of course, exceptions to prevalent social constructions of the meaning of disabilities. These exceptions have most often occurred when an individual with a disability achieved prominence, and visibility, through extraordinary accomplishments. Helen Keller is an outstanding example of a person with severe disabilities but magnificent achievements who was, therefore, able to eclipse the prevailing attitudes about people with those disabilities. Her life and her relationship with her teacher Annie Sullivan are inspiring and worthy of study. In his biography of Helen, Lash (1980) observed that her disabilities may have been necessary vehicles for the achievement of her extraordinary insight and influence. He quoted one of her contemporaries as having speculated on what she might have accomplished if she had not been blind and deaf, and then added that perhaps these were the differences that created her "high intelligence and purity of soul" (p. 766). Helen agreed, saying, "I have made my limitations tools of learning and true joy" (p. 766).

Some years ago I made a discovery while working on a research project in the Manuscript Division of the Library of Congress. I happened upon a reference to letters from and to Helen Keller in the Alexander Graham Bell Collection. As I looked through these papers, I became enthralled with them. Here were letters actually written by Helen, Annie Sullivan, Alexander Graham Bell, and others that presented a unique and important view of Helen, her friendships, and her philosophy.

I soon shared these letters with the wonderful colleague who served as a mentor to so many of my generation, Burton Blatt. Burt read the letters, just as he approached most things, with vigor, insight, and depth of feeling. We discussed his using the letters in a manuscript, and I encouraged him to do so. He subsequently cited some of the letters in an article that was published shortly after his death (Blatt, 1985).

In that article Blatt (1985) quoted extensively from several of the letters. He prefaced these excerpts by explaining that he chose them primarily to draw lessons from these glimpses into the relationship between Helen and Annie Sullivan, her beloved teacher. One quotation that he did not include in his article but that I think portrays the dedication of "Teacher," as Helen always called her, and the epiphany that she created in her student's life was contained in a letter of July 5, 1918. Helen wrote to Alexander Graham Bell describing the moment when she understood that the fingerspelling that she felt in her hand had meaning.

Sometimes I feel that in that supreme moment she
thought me into being.... My fingers still glow with
the feel of the first word that opened its golden heart
to me. How everything seemed to think, to live! Shall
I, in all the years of eternity, forget the torrent of won-

ders that rushed upon me out of the darkness and silence? (Keller, 1918, p. 2)

HELEN KELLER AND THE PARAMETERS OF ADVOCACY

In his article, Blatt (1985) referred to the breadth of Helen Keller's advocacy for the rights of many of the world's most troubled people. She became a political activist and spokesperson for the victims of poverty, economic exploitation, gender bias, and other forms of oppression (Foner, 1967). Burt described Helen's advocacy as follows:

As she strove to free herself from the difficulties which disease created in her, she more and more sought to understand the difficulties which society created for mankind's downtrodden multitudes. (p. 409)

Blatt had a keen sense of history. He understood that the facts and personalities of any historical period are intimately entwined with the social and philosophical context of that period. He also understood that a seemingly clear "good guy--bad guy" dichotomy in the study of any historical topic is likely to be incorrect. He understood that "real" history is fraught with contradictions and disappointments. He knew that this was particularly true of the study of the history of mental retardation (Blatt, 1987).

My own sense of the contradictory nature of the study of history was challenged recently as I was reading a fascinating book entitled *The Black Stork* (Pernick, 1996). The author provided an interesting account of a controversy that began in 1915 and that surrounded the work of a physician who openly practiced euthanasia on "defective" newborns. Dr. Harry Haiselden not only allowed infants with severe disabilities to die, but he administered drugs to speed the death of several of these newborns. He also campaigned for the widespread adoption of these practices and produced and starred in a movie promoting euthanasia, "The Black Stork." The film was based on Haiselden's eugenic arguments and was shown in commercial movie theaters from 1916 through the 1920s.

In reading Pernick's (1996) account of the controversy, I was intrigued by a reference he made to Helen Keller's support of Haiselden's eugenic campaign. When I read her position (Keller, 1915) on the euthanasia of infants with mental retardation, my perception of the contradictory nature of historical realities, and my sense of Helen Keller as a person of her time, was deepened.

In her statement Keller expressed the following opinions:

It is the possibilities of happiness, intelligence and

power that give life its sanctity, and they are absent in the case of a poor, misshapen, paralyzed, unthinking creature.... The toleration of such anomalies tends to lessen the sacredness in which normal life is held.

It seems to me that the simplest, wisest thing to do would be to submit cases like that of the malformed idiot baby to a jury of expert physicians.... A mental defective ... is almost sure to be a potential criminal. The evidence before a jury of physicians considering the case of an idiot would be exact and scientific. Their findings would be free from the prejudice and inaccuracy of untrained observation. They would act only in case of true idiocy, where there could be no hope of mental development. (pp. 173-174)

CONTRADICTIONS AND "GOOD" HISTORY

Considering the history of mental retardation, Blatt (1987) wrote that virtually all histories in our field are dangerously incomplete.... That which is preserved may be less relevant than that which is unknown; and the 'facts,' however pertinent, are to a degree divorced from the social-psychological context of the period.... To understand what actually occurred (and why) requires one to know what the times were like. (p. 17)

Helen Keller's development as an intellectual and as an advocate took place within the context of the scientific/social movement of eugenics. It also occurred within the political/philosophical environment of progressivism. Progressive thought held that most of the

problems of society and those of individuals could and should be reduced to scientific terms, and resolved by scientific means. Helen's trust of a "jury" of physicians is very consistent with the faith in scientific progress that characterized the cultural climate of her formative years as a social activist. Her opinion that "true idiocy" lessens the sanctity of "normal life" reflects the eugenic principles to which she was certainly exposed. These arguments supported euthanasia, sterilization, and institutionalization. They asserted that these and other eugenic measures were in the best interests of both society and the "defective" individual.

Helen's voice of advocacy was bold for its time. It was focused, however, on the potential for social intercourse and productivity in the lives of ignored, misunderstood, and exploited people. In that regard she moved beyond a social context that devalued many people with blindness, deafness, and other physical disabilities, for example, and crusaded for their rights to earn a place in society. She was a courageous advocate for these people and she deserves the admiration embodied in Blatt's (1985) tribute to her:

Seeing with her hands and her soul while others could see only with their eyes, she was led to the idea of a new social order, a world free of worker exploitation, free of preventable disease, free of sexism, free of all forms of human oppression. (p. 409)

BURTON BLATT'S ADVOCACY: THE GOLDEN RULE AND BEYOND

Burt Blatt's advocacy, like that of Helen Keller, was grounded in a commitment to human rights and human dignity. In his voice, however, rights were not couched in the expectation of productivity, and dignity was not contingent on independence. He urged that advocates work for others not as they would have others treat them but as they would treat themselves in the most challenging of circumstances.

Ironically, Burt's voice as an advocate is heard clearly in his description of the relationship between Helen Keller and Annie Sullivan. He believed that before Helen was liberated to become a brilliant and famous person, she was a person with mental retardation. He felt that the fact that she functioned as a person with mental retardation was one of the two most central facets of the "miracle" of her life story. The second central facet of the story, according to Burt, was that Annie's commitment as Helen's Teacher was unconditional. When Sullivan boarded a train in Boston destined for Tuscumbia, Alabama, it was not with the expectation that Helen would become a miracle student and she a miracle worker. In describing Annie's commitment and advocacy, Blatt (1982) said,

Indeed, had Annie spent her entire life with Helen, and

had Helen never made a single intelligible response, everything we know about Annie Sullivan suggests that she would not have felt that her life was wasted. (p. 137)

LEGACIES AND CHALLENGES

Through the memory of Helen Keller and Annie Sullivan, we are challenged to hold firm to a belief in the miracle of commitments that are unconditional and sustained. We are also reminded of the contradictions that characterize history and even the greatest of personalities.

Through Burt Blatt's mentorship we are sustained by a legacy of hopefulness. We are challenged to believe that the conquest of mental retardation is possible.

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