

LETTERS FROM GRANDPA
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Dearest Grandchild,

Today's letter will deal with Anne Sullivan. Perhaps you remember that she obtained a measure of fame for her success in teaching Helen Keller. Helen, as you know, had a triple handicap of being blind, deaf, and dumb since she the age of 19 months.

Anne had handicaps of her own to overcome. She was born April 14, 1866. At the age of 5 she contracted a bacterial eye disease known as *trachoma* which made her nearly blind. Her mother died when she was 8 and two years later her father abandoned her and her siblings. They wound up in an overcrowded almshouse where her younger brother James died three weeks later. Anne stayed there for another four years but developed no skills in reading or writing.

On Oct. 7, 1880 Anne enrolled in the Perkins School for the Blind in Boston. Her rough manners and lack of education were humiliating. Yet she overcame these obstacles and graduated the valedictorian of her class in June 1886.

The following summer Anne went to Tuscumbia, Alabama to tutor seven year old Helen Keller. Her struggles in teaching Helen are revealed in this letter to Sophia Hopkins on March 11, 1887. *"Since I wrote to you, Helen and I have gone to live all by ourselves in a little garden-house about a quarter of a mile from her home . . . I very soon made up my mind that I could do nothing with Helen in the midst of her family . . . she tyrannized over everybody, her mother, her father, the servants . . . nobody ever seriously disputed her will . . . As I began to teach her she wouldn't yield a point without contesting it to the bitter end . . . to get her to do the simplest thing, such as combing her hair . . . it was necessary to use force."* Anne then described a two hour struggle before Helen was finally forced to go to bed. The next day Helen expressed her seething rage by throwing her favorite doll ruthlessly on the floor. Anne saw clearly that it would be impossible to teach Helen language, or anything else, until she learned to obey. Because Anne could see, and was bigger and stronger than her seven year old student, obedience was rigorously enforced.

In a following letter (April 5, 1887), Anne had some good news. Helen had learned that everything had a name, and that the manual alphabet was the key to everything she wanted to know. The major break through came, as you probably know, came when Anne pumped water on Helen's hand and spelled "w-a-t-e-r". A new light came to Helen's face. She dropped to the ground and asked for it's name. Then the trellis. Then she wanted to know Anne's name. Anne spelled out "t-e-a-c-h-e-r". All the way back to the house Helen was so excited that she wanted to know the name of everything she touched.

That letter was concluded with this: *"P.S. - I didn't finish my letter in time to get it posted last night; so I shall add a line. Helen got up this morning like a radiant fairy. She has flitting from object to object, asking the name of everything and kissing me for very gladness. Last night when I got in bed, she stole into my arms of her own accord and kissed me for the first time, and I thought my heart would burst, it was so full of joy"*.

First Helen learned the manual alphabet, next she learned to read and write sentences. Next she learned braille and ultimately could read five languages (English, French, German, Greek, and Latin). Then she learned to lip read, type, and finger spell. Slowly she learned to speak audibly which has been hailed as one of the greatest educational achievements of all time. Then she wrote two books, and was in a movie. In her life time she raised two million dollars for the American Foundation for the Blind. She was the first deaf and dumb person to receive a college degree and ultimately published 14 books. She personally met every U.S. President from Calvin Coolidge to J. F. Kennedy. She wrote and received personal letters from eight U. S. Presidents.

All of this was possible because Helen learned obedience. “Discipline” is the very root of “discipleship”. When Queen Victoria pinned England’s highest award on her she was asked: “How do you explain the fact that though you were blind and deaf you were able to accomplish so much?” Without hesitation Helen replied that without Anne Sullivan she would have remained unknown!

There are many lessons we can learn from Anne Sullivan and one of them involves living for someone else. John the Baptist was the greatest person ever born of a woman (Matt. 11:11), yet he never worked a miracle (Jn. 10:41). The total purpose of John’s life was to help and exalt Jesus (Jn. 3:27 - 30). We can achieve greatness in the same way!

I love you,

Grandpa Boyce