

Podcast #76: Lessons on happiness from Helen Keller

I'm still working on a podcast about Lincoln, but I am in the middle of treasure hunting for additional books for the new website and I found a rare jewel I just have to share with you. It's an article from an old 1930 Better Homes and Gardens magazine contributed by Hazel Gertrude Kinscella following an interview with Helen Keller. I'll get to the article in a minute, but the ads on the pages were also interesting— For example: “If good taste says “white or light-tinted walls and woodwork’ And more and more greasy dust sifts indoors from increasing traffic and high-priced domestic help balks at endless scrubbing of walls and woodwork which you haven't time to do yourself, how can you have lasting cleanliness and beauty? Thousands have found the answer in Barreled Sunlight, the paint enamel whose flawless surface can't hold dirt embedded!

Or to the wives of desk-bound men...Sanitarium records show an amazing number of people who live sedentary lives suffer from faulty elimination. It causes most human ills. Ridding the body of waste must be done regularly and thoroughly, else poisons are formed that tend to get into the blood stream. These poisons prematurely age and cause many serious diseases. From Battle Creek comes a new drugless way to regular habits . . .

Some things never change!

Which leads me back to the article. The principles of tending to the heart are universal and true. There is a part of us that cannot be expressed and cannot be seen. But it is very real. There are so many faculties within us that can add to our joy and happiness, but they lie dormant because they are unused. Helen was blind and deaf, yet she could see flowers and hear music which gave her abundant joy. She said, “Flowers have personalities, too, and Music is more than sound.” We who have sight and hearing often see and hear very little.

Let me share parts of this beautiful article with you.

“My most startling lesson in seeing and hearing, in learning of the unseen personality of flowers and of the enchanting inner beauties of the world of sound, came to me today as I visited for an hour with Helen Keller, who can neither see nor hear, and yet finds joy in a flower garden and in the music of the spheres. I asked her how she was able to enjoy these things.

“In replying to your question,” Miss Keller said to me, during the course of our conversation, “my ways of seeing and hearing the outer world are difficult to analyze. Indeed, I am almost convinced that my impressions cannot be expressed except in mystical symbolism. When I try to tell people my idea of natural phenomena beyond the reach of my hands, I am profoundly troubled by the remoteness of my inner life, and yet the intensity of it is as fresh and throbbing as a physical reality. Things perceived by the spirit are imperfectly articulate. Only the greatest poets can put into words shades of soul experience.’

“I put my hand on the violin or the sensitive diaphragm of the radio, and my body is flooded with rhythmical vibrations. My mind transmutes the silvery nerve thrills into bird songs and wind songs, the tripping of tiny streams, the chattering of moth and bee, the tremulous whispering of leaves. Thus my conception of music is built up of association and analogy.

“I am extremely sensitive, not only to musical vibrations, but also to the exhalation of flowers. Beside their delicate texture and fragrance, I feel a soul in them. By this I mean the personalities of flowers. Subtly they suggest human attributes. Some flowers are friendly, adapting themselves to our moods. The sense lends itself to all our human experiences, like a versatile companion. Some flowers have shy spirits that seem embarrassed when I touch them. The mimosa actually shrinks from the human hand. Other flowers caress my palm with tenderest speech of curling petal and nestling leaf. Everyone feels the modesty of the violet and the thought that looks out of the upturned face of the pansy. Who does not welcome the hearty laugh of the peony, the childlike gaiety of daffodils, the mystical quality of lilacs, the pungent good sense of chrysanthemums and marigolds? Anyone can see that geraniums are cheerful, good-natured, workaday friends of man, and that the sunflower is an optimist, keeping its face ever towards the sun...”

Unexpected is Miss Keller’s constant use of the words “see” and “hear,” in view of her personal handicap. “Miss Keller will see you at 1 o’clock ‘Saturday afternoon’ had come the telegram signed by Polly Thomson, Miss Keller’s loyal friend and secretary for many years.

When I arrived at the Forest Hills Station a little after 3, my first impression was that of a Tudor village, the ivy-covered red brick building, the great tower, and the big speaking clock, all reminding a visitor of an old English scene.

My first impression of [Miss Keller’s] house, standing behind the iron fence and rather high-clipped hedge, was of a three-story pink brick and stone dwelling, partly overhung with glistening ivy, the windows to the south being all shielded with striped awnings...

No portrait can, or does, do justice to the great personal beauty of Miss Keller. I thought instantly, as with high-held head, and erect, high-spirited person, she came towards me across the hall and the parlor to greet me graciously and hospitably.

“I am glad to meet you,” she said quietly but distinctly, as she took my hand...

The impression of Miss Keller’s great charm deepened, as sitting there so quietly in her modish gray dress—her only decoration a string of pearls—she asked and answered questions as naturally as any hostess might.

That my questions and conversation were conveyed to her hand by Miss Thomson seemed, after the first instant, not at all an unusual way to converse. Miss Keller’s diction and her command of the English language are such as to call for comment in this day of careless speech.

“You wish to know what home and garden mean to me,” she said, at once. “My garden is my greatest joy. I feel that I am in the seventh heaven when among my plants. I feel the little heads pop up to look at me—my poppies, pansies, and pinks. We had a fine time in our garden last night with the hose. We have just set out a little Siberian elm tree, and not knowing that it was going to rain in the night, we watered it well. It took two of us to drag the hose around, and I got so dirty. You should have seen me then!”

“There in my garden I have my ‘green circle’ where I walk for at least an hour every day or evening. It is very narrow, but it reaches to the stars! On one side of this narrow walk is a privet hedge; on the other, small evergreen trees to guide me in my walk.’

“We have as many things as we can. Our clematis is just planted. It is always a miracle to see young trees grow. I take unusual joy in the dogwood and the wisteria, of which there has been a profusion. And here is syringa earlier than usual,” she concluded, indicating with her right hand an exquisite cluster of syringa and white peonies which stood in a quaint blue bow on a low table in the hallway.

“Are all these flowers from your garden?” I asked, for the room was fragrant with the odor of the blossoms which were everywhere so tastefully arranged.

“Yes, indeed,” was the reply, “but you must not think we have a big garden because we seem to have so many flowers. We shall show you what we have before you go. At best, it is not much,” she concluded modestly.

“Miss Kinscella is looking at our flowers,” Miss Thomson told Miss Keller and as I looked at each of the lovely bouquets, the two hostesses united in telling me of their history.

At one end of the divan upon which we sat was a low table and on this was another bowl full of white peonies.”

“I adore the peonies,” said Miss Keller. “Since my childhood I have adored them and have been glad each spring when the miracle of their bloom has been wrought again.”

Beside me, at the other end of the divan was a higher table, and on it was a tall bouquet of violet and cream iris. On the library table near the fireplace was another bouquet, this one of fragrant red roses and white peonies. I mentioned their fragrance.

“I really like no flowers without fragrance, as fragrance is their soul, to me,” said Miss Keller. “As color is to the eye, so is fragrance to me my way of recognizing them. Also I feel them—their form, shape, stem, even their pistils. Such a joke was played on me,” she added with a characteristic little gesture. “What I took, one day, for a petunia, bless you, was a tobaccoflower. So I had to ‘look’ very closely again to see whether the stem was round, or square—Yes, I like those red roses. We have some nice red buds on another bush out by the front walk, a bush we thought dead from insects. The bugs like my flowers, too!”

There was still another wonderful spray of flowers in the room—a gorgeous spray of salmon-colored gladiolus which set at the opposite end of the fireplace under a life-size oil portrait of Miss Keller at the age of 14.

Hans—the beautiful big Dane was sent Miss Keller just a year ago by her German publisher—was meanwhile interestedly watching every movement in the room, and when his mistress rose and started to take me thru the house before going out into the garden, he rose and followed closely behind her.

We went thru the dining-room. Cheery sunshine flooded it, streaming across the blue rug and onto the table. Here Miss Keller must stop to “see” with her fingers a dainty centerpiece of old-fashioned flowers. There on to the “radio” room, so called because in it is installed the device which is one of Miss Keller’s greatest pleasures.

“Here is my radio. It enables me to feel the beautiful music every night. I like the Goldman band concerts, the quaint old melodies some entertainers sing, comic opera, Gilbert and Sullivan, and Wagner. It is so tantalizing when one feels the announcer’s voice. I can distinguish the various instruments, the human voices, and the applause. This age of invention is so astonishing! What is my favorite music? One of my favorites is the Wagner “Fire Music.” Then one time Heifetz, the famous violinist, played for me especially, while we both chanced to be in Denver. I like best of all that he played the ‘Hunting Song,’ but—I could feel the song of the deer at its end.”

With a skillful twist of the hand, Miss Keller turned the radio going, touched it lightly, adjusted it again, then with one hand barely touching the frame, and head slightly tipped, she “listened,” while instantly her free hand indicated the rhythmic pulsations she was feeling.

A thrill went thru me as I recognized the music which the radio pianist was playing, for the coincidence was so startling! In a moment Miss Keller turned her face slightly toward me. “It is the Moonlight Sonata, which Beethoven, the deaf pianist, played for the blind girl.”

Then we went upstairs. On the third floor are Miss Keller’s bedroom, personal library—all four walls full of books—and her sleeping porch and study. Here was another light and airy spot, all windows. An easy daybed stood near the window at one end of the room. On her table were typewriter and books...

“What are your favorite books?” I asked.

““They are many,” was the answer. “Just now I have been reading ‘Out of the East,’ by Lafeadio Hearn; a book of Conrad’s; Hudson’s Green Mansions’; The River and here is a book given me by a friend in Philadelphia not long ago—put into Braille for me. It is Abraham Lincoln and the Hooker Letter. Louis Kolb, who gave it to me, has several Lincoln keepsakes, among them a pen with which the great president signed many momentous documents. When they put that pen into my hand I couldn’t help kissing it!” and she suggested the act with a simple gesture.

The Bible lay on a table near the bed. “My Bible is always within reach of my hand. It is my ever-increasing fountain of sun and courage. I read it so much.”

It has been commented upon that Miss Keller has possibly acquired much of her lovely command of the English language thru reading the Bible. When this was mentioned, she assented. “It is more than possible. If we read the Bible we get all the English we need—a combination of simplicity and greatness. We may well read it for style as well as for our heavenly inspiration.”

Then we went downstairs to go out into the garden, Miss Keller leading the way down the stair ahead of us as quickly and lightly as a little child at night.

“You will be surprised what a tiny thing our garden really is,” she warned me, as we stepped outside. “Most people expect an extensive garden or a banked-up one. It is just a pile of sun, songs, blossoms, and butterflies, for what else matters? One lady wrote me in a letter, ‘You must have a gorgeous estate.’ I answered her, ‘We have just a wee bird’s nest!’”

Here she stopped, felt for a moment, then located her rose geranium plants and broke off some leaves, of which she smelled the spicy odor, then handed them to me.

Next to the house was a spot where the tulips and daffodils had just finished their blooming. Now the later flowers were coming into blossom, and all along the house, inside the front hedge and along the wall hedge at the side of the lawn, were representatives of almost every lovely flower that grows. Here were Canterbury-bells, high delphinium, rosy columbine, multi-colored phlox, modest violas, daylilies, spotless fragrant Madonna Lilies; and for the fall, chrysanthemum, dahlia, and late gladiolus plants. Near the fence was a showy bunch of gaudily colored oriental poppies. When Miss Keller slipped her fingers under the cup of one of those flowers to show it to me, the petals, already full-blown, fell off into her hand.

“A pool of crimson beauty in my hand,” she said, then tossed the petals aside.

“My impressions of color are emotional, symbolical. I am interested in the theory that there is a correspondence between all the colors in the visible world and the soul within.”

“Here is my bird-bath—I really do have a garden full of songs!”

Right before the bird-bath, near which Miss Keller often sits, is a long cement seat, and not far away is the real heart of the garden—an exquisite marble statue of ‘Rebecca at the Well,’ a gift to Miss Keller from her teacher, Miss Mary.

“We thought it so appropriate a gift,” said Miss Thomson, “as ‘water’ was the first word that Helen learned and realized as the name of something.”

At the foot of the statue is another bird bath, and green ivy covers the ground. Next to it, reached thru a trellis, is Miss Keller’s green circle, a narrow gravel path lined by her evergreens—‘to guide me’.

“They are my favorite trees,” said my hostess. “They are, to me, all that is lovely and unfading in our natures. They symbolize words that breathe and speak after life is done, and that go on thru the air sweetening and ennobling it.”

And as I said good-by and took my departure—after being given a fragrant little rose by Miss Keller to complete my bouquet—I carried with me a mental picture which will not fade, of a homemaking heart, of a joyous and valiant traveler on the Path of Happiness.”

I'll leave you to savor her words and her beautifully well-educated heart. There are many layers of truth here. Her garden reminds me of what I read in Corrie Ten Boom's *The Hiding Place*: People can learn to love from flowers.

So I'll close with a poem by Maurice Thompson.

In the oldest wood I know a brooklet,
That bubbles over stones and roots,
And ripples out of hollow places,
Like music out of flutes.

There creeps the pungent breath of cedars,
Rich coolness wraps the air about
While through clear pools electric flashes
Betray the watchful trout.

I know where wild things lurk and linger
In groves as gray and grand as time;
I know where God has written poems
Too strong for words or rhyme.

Bye bye