

Helen Keller, The Story of My Life; With Her Letters (1887-1901)

From “Chapter II”

I cannot recall what happened during the first months after my illness. I only know that I sat in my mother's lap or clung to her dress as she went about her household duties. My hands felt every object and observed every motion, and in this way I learned to know many things. Soon I felt the need of some communication with others and began to make crude signs. A shake of the head meant "No" and a nod, "Yes," a pull meant "Come" and a push, "Go." Was it bread that I wanted? Then I would imitate the acts of cutting the slices and buttering them. If I wanted my mother to make ice-cream for dinner I made the sign for working the freezer and shivered, indicating cold. My mother, moreover, succeeded in making me understand a good deal. I always knew when she wished me to bring her something, and I would run upstairs or anywhere else she indicated. Indeed, I owe to her loving wisdom all that was bright and good in my long night.

I understood a good deal of what was going on about me. At five I learned to fold and put away the clean clothes when they were brought in from the laundry, and I distinguished my own from the rest. I knew by the way my mother and aunt dressed when they were going out, and I invariably begged to go with them. I was always sent for when there was company, and when the guests took their leave, I waved my hand to them, I think with a vague remembrance of the meaning of the gesture. One day some gentlemen called on my mother, and I felt the shutting of the front door and other sounds that indicated their arrival. On a sudden thought I ran upstairs before any one could stop me, to put on my idea of a company dress. Standing before the mirror, as I had seen others do, I anointed mine head with oil and covered my face thickly with powder. Then I pinned a veil over my head so that it covered my face and fell in folds down to my shoulders, and tied an enormous bustle round my small waist, so that it dangled behind, almost meeting the hem of my skirt. Thus attired I went down to help entertain the company.

I do not remember when I first realized that I was different from other people; but I knew it before my teacher came to me. I had noticed that my mother and my friends did not use signs as I did when they wanted anything done, but talked with their mouths. Sometimes I stood between two persons who were conversing and touched their lips. I could not understand, and was vexed. I moved my lips and gesticulated frantically without result. This made me so angry at times that I kicked and screamed until I was exhausted.

I think I knew when I was naughty, for I knew that it hurt Ella, my nurse, to kick her, and when my fit of temper was over I had a feeling akin to regret. But I cannot remember any instance in which this feeling prevented me from repeating the naughtiness when I failed to get what I wanted.

In those days a little coloured girl, Martha Washington, the child of our cook, and Belle, an old setter, and a great hunter in her day, were my constant companions. Martha Washington understood my signs, and I seldom had any difficulty in making her do just as I wished. It pleased me to domineer over her, and she generally submitted to my tyranny rather than risk a hand-to-hand encounter. I was strong, active, indifferent to consequences. I knew my own mind well enough and always had my own way, even if I had to fight tooth and nail for it. We spent a great deal of time in the kitchen, kneading dough balls, helping make ice-cream, grinding coffee, quarreling over the cake-bowl, and feeding the hens and turkeys that swarmed about the kitchen steps. Many of them were so tame that they would eat from my hand and let me feel them. One big gobbler snatched a tomato from me one day and ran away with it. Inspired, perhaps, by Master Gobbler's success, we carried off to the woodpile a cake which the cook had just frosted, and ate every bit of it. I was quite ill afterward, and I wonder if retribution also overtook the turkey.

Vocabulary

Define each word below, as Keller uses it in her writing. If you cannot determine the meaning, look up the word.

- recall
- cling (clung)
- crude
- shiver (shivered)
- distinguish (distinguished)
- invariably
- gesture
- anoint (anointed)
- bustle (noun)
- dangle (dangled)
- hem
- attire (attired)
- vex (vexed)
- gesticulate (gesticulated)
- akin
- domineer
- knead (kneading)
- gobbler
- retribution

Thinking Critically

Answer each question completely, using well-formed sentences. Although there is no "correct" answer, please support your answer with evidence from the text.

1. Keller writes that she owes “to her [mother’s] loving wisdom all that was bright and good in [her] long night.” What does Keller mean by “long night”? How is this expression an example of figurative language?
2. What evidence do we have that Keller was once able to see and hear? How does that recollection help Keller to navigate life in the state she describes in this excerpt?
3. How would you describe Keller’s personality, her nature? What examples and textual evidence does she present to support your description?
4. In the last paragraph, Keller calls a turkey that snatched a tomato from her “Master Gobbler.” Why might Keller have used such formal language in writing about a turkey? What effect does the last anecdote, about the turkey and the cake, have on you?

Writing Assignment

Recall a time in your life when you were incapacitated in some way. Did the experience make you feel more empathy (empathize – to identification with and understand someone else’s situation, feelings, and motives) for others than you did before? In a 500-word personal essay, relate the adaptations that you made to your daily routine, along with your perspective on others’ conditions.