

UNMAILED LETTER:  
ON THE EDUCABILITY PARADOX

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Dear Friend,

It was Thanksgiving and there was much to be thankful for. For one thing, our family was together. For another, we are "together" even when we're not sitting around the table rubbing elbows. And in this day and age, some think it's a miracle when people enjoy being together. But that's not the miracle I want to discuss with you.

Our son Steve had been working as an attendant at the state school for the mentally retarded, during a period away from college when he was supposed to get some experiences in the "real world." Steve had invited Edwin, a 32-year-old man who's now a resident of that institution, to our home for Thanksgiving dinner. I don't know anything about Ed, except that he was transferred to the school from a large ugly place near Utica, where, I understand, he had been a patient since he was a small child.

Throughout the day I couldn't help but stare at Ed when I knew he was either looking elsewhere or concentrating on something which made him oblivious to us. It wasn't that I had never seen a mentally retarded person before, but having Ed in my own home at that particular time, with one of my own children doing things right under my nose which made me as proud of him as I could ever be of anyone, started me to think about my work when one isn't supposed to think about work. Later, as we sat around a table laden with more food than was good for our bodies, but is exactly what the soul needs at least once a year, I couldn't help but think about those wild beasts in countless institutions across the world. Those naked and mute, assaulters and assaulted, head bangers and mutilators who inhabit the prisons which are variously called asylums, state schools, or developmental centers. While I surely know it's rude to stare at anyone, much less a guest, my eyes kept focusing on Ed while at the same time my inner eyes and ears dredged up scenes of unremitting horror and degradation, scenes which I knew were being enacted that very moment on that loveliest of all holidays. In the safety and warmth of our own home, I saw a man who looked like the rest of us, whose pants were on straight, whose shoes matched, who was clean and courteous and who was involved with other human beings in those unimportant affairs which only become important in their absence. While I watched Ed in fascination and felt remorse for his wasted years, my mind conjured up where he might have been that evening had he not come to our home. For the thousandth time or more, I remembered that people like Ed are not the wild beasts, but that institutions are wild and ungovernable, and that sometimes those brilliant doctors and politicians who create institutions are wild beasts.

Maybe it was because this man was so much like the rest of us—in spite of the slurred speech and his lack of interest in small talk—or maybe it was because I knew what might have been his life had he been able to remain in a real home. Maybe it was because I knew that it was too late to restore to Ed that which the state had robbed from him. But for whatever reason, my mind wandered back to the turn of the century, to a time when the very wealthy would spare no expense to create a miracle for their handicapped baby. Although miracles hardly ever occur, once upon a time in that era a miracle that should be remembered forever was wrought by Annie Sullivan and Helen Keller. It's been said that works of art don't have extrinsic value like, for instance, a pound of coffee, but miracles of the kind pulled off by Annie Sullivan and Helen Keller have both intrinsic and extrinsic value. They are not only rare, spectacular, inspiring, and invaluable; they are the stuff which makes life worth living and understandable. Thinking about Annie Sullivan and Helen Keller that Thanksgiving Day made me want to tell you as much as I know about that wonderful relationship.

Before Annie Sullivan came into her life, Helen Keller was also a "wild animal." Helen Keller grew up to become a brilliant and internationally famous person, of course. But before she was brilliant, she *was* mentally retarded, and that is a central lesson to be learned from her life. It's a most important lesson that a teacher can learn, and, consequently, is a most important lesson that a teacher can teach. Specifically, Helen Keller's life illuminates the hypotheses that:

1. People traditionally underestimate their potential for changing or, to use a more common term, their potential for learning.
2. Pessimism concerning the conditions of change become a self-fulfilling prophesy. People do not learn when they become convinced that they cannot or should not.
3. Under proper conditions, it can be demonstrated that capability is a function of practice and training. That we have not been able to accomplish such change in people may be less a defect of that belief than it is of our practices.

An easy lesson to be learned from Helen Keller's successes is that she wasn't really retarded. It is so easy that we must carefully guard against teaching it, because it's wrong. Helen Keller *was* retarded. Another false lesson that can easily be learned from her story is that most deaf-blind children grow up to become intelligent—much less brilliant. Quite the opposite, the real lesson that teachers must learn from this story is that Helen Keller did not have to improve in order to justify Annie Sullivan's commitment to her, that she didn't have to change to merit Annie's continued efforts on her behalf. Without such a belief in the right of each child to the fullest educational opportunities possible, a teacher may soon be infected

with contempt for those pupils who are not good enough, or who are not learning quickly enough to meet the teacher's requirements for status as a student. Paradoxically, so it seems, Annie Sullivan couldn't have accomplished the "miracle" if she believed Helen Keller *had* to change. 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. Ironically—but how else could it be—we are at least likely to produce a "miracle" if it is required. Exactly, because it can neither be required nor anticipated, exactly because it is *necessarily* unexpected, was there the need to invent the notion of something we call "miracle."

Annie Sullivan's devotion to Helen Keller instructs society about how we can express concern for the individual and his or her value as a human being, irrespective of any talents one may have, irrespective of any limitations one must endure. But another necessary belief the teacher must hold is that the human being is *indeed* capable of improvement in virtually every conceivable way. It's the right of every human being to have his or her limitations accepted by the family, by teacher, and by society. But it's also the right of every human being to have his or her limitations mitigated to the degree society finds possible, and to have his or her strengths exploited in similar fashion. To accomplish the amelioration of deficits and enhancement of strengths in all children, teachers must change their conceptions of human potential. And one's inspiration for such personal reassessment could well be the miracle wrought by Annie Sullivan and Helen Keller. The lives of those gallant women demonstrate to us that each person can contribute to the larger society, that as human beings all people are equally valuable, that every person is entitled to developmental opportunities, and that development itself is incremental. The idea that people can change but are not required to change to merit attention is what fashions and gives strength to the double-edged sword called educability.

What kind of teacher do you want for your own children? What kind of teacher did you wish for yourself? Annie Sullivan had such boundless faith in the human ethos that she was surely convinced that the work of the teacher is not to judge who can or cannot change, but rather to fulfill the goal that everyone can change. It was exactly that belief which gave purpose and courage to that good and faithful teacher. If you know their story, you will see that the core of Annie's strength was found in her belief that, before one could truly help another person to learn, the teacher must begin with herself. Before I ask the world to change, I must change. I am the beginning step.

After nearly a century of advances in psychology and pedagogy, we still look to the shining examples of Annie Sullivan and Helen Keller to teach us about the human spirit, the educability of intelligence, and the work of the teacher. Their lives remind us that the genuine miracle of their association was less that Annie Sullivan "cured" Helen Keller's incomprehensibility, than that together, they discovered a "cure" for society's most debilitating and unnecessary disease: hopelessness.

Your friend,

Burton Blatt

*This "letter" is part of a book-length manuscript to be titled "Unmailed Letters: On Special Education, Higher Education, and Other Sides of My Education."*