The Truth About Helen Keller

By Ruth Shagoury

It's time to start telling the truth about Helen Keller. The "Helen Keller story" that is stamped in our collective consciousness freezes her in childhood. We remember her most vividly at age 7 when her teacher, Annie Sullivan, connected her to language through a magical moment at the water pump. We learned little of her life beyond her teen years, except that she worked on behalf of the handicapped.

But there is much more to Helen Keller's history than a brilliant deaf and blind woman who surmounted incredible obstacles. Helen Keller worked throughout her long life to achieve social change; she was an integral part of many important social movements in the 20th century. She was a socialist who believed she was able to overcome many of the difficulties in her life because of her class privilege––a privilege not shared by most of her blind or deaf contemporaries. "I owed my success partly to the advantages of my birth and environment," she said. "I have learned that the power to rise is not within the reach of everyone."

More than an icon of American "can-do," Helen Keller was a tireless advocate of the poor and disenfranchised. Her life story could serve as a fascinating example for children, but most picture books about Helen Keller are woefully silent about her life's work.

Covert Censorship: Promoting the Individual

The world is moved not only by the mighty stories of heroes, but also by the aggregate of the tiny pushes of each honest worker."

—Helen Keller

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Helen Keller was a tireless advocate for workers' rights. This photo from 1919 shows Keller, accompanied by Anne Sullivan Macy, addressing a gathering of striking actors in New York.

In the last decade, there has been a surge in literature for children that depicts people who have worked for social change. On a recent search for nonfiction picture books that tell the stories of those involved in social activism, I found scores of books—beautifully illustrated multicultural texts.

Initially, I was delighted to be able to share these books with kids in my neighborhood and school. But as my collection grew, so did my frustration.

One problem with many of the books is that they stressed the individual, rather than the larger social movements in which the individuals worked. In his critique of popular portrayals of the Rosa Parks story, educator and author Herb Kohl argues convincingly that her role in the Montgomery bus strike is framed again and again as that of a poor, tired seamstress acting out of personal frustration rather than as a community leader in an organized struggle against racism. (See "The Politics of Children's Literature," available at http://www.zinnedproject.org).

Picture books frame the stories of many other key community leaders and social activists in similar ways. Activist and educator Patrick Shannon's careful analysis of the underlying social message of books for young readers highlights this important finding: "Regardless of the genre type, the authors of these books promoted concern for self-development, personal emotions, self-reliance, privacy, and competition rather than concern for social development, service to community, cooperation toward shared goals, community, and mutual prosperity."

I first became interested in the activist work of Helen Keller in the 1990s when I read James Loewen's *Lies My Teacher Told Me: Everything Your American History Textbook Got Wrong.* Loewen concludes that the way that Helen Keller's life story is turned into a "bland maxim" is lying by omission.

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When I turned to the many picture books written about her, I was discouraged to discover that books for young children retain that bland flavor, negating the power of her life work and the lessons people learned from it.

Here is a woman who worked throughout her long life as a radical advocate for the poor, but she is depicted as a kind of saintly role model for people with handicaps.

The Image of Helen Keller in Picture Books

For the purposes of this investigation, I chose six picture books published from 1965 through 1997, which in 2009 are still the most readily available from bookstores and websites. Four of the six covers depict the famous moment at the well where Annie, her teacher, spells "water" into Helen's hand. This clichéd moment is the climax of each book, just as it is in the biographical movies. To most people, Helen remains frozen in time in her childhood.

According to these picture books, she is remembered for two things after she grew up: her "courage" and her "work with the blind and deaf."

Young Helen Keller, Woman of Courage by Anne Benjamin (Troll, 1991) is typical. The first 29 pages bring us to Helen, age 12, who can read and write "and even speak." The last page, page 30, sums up the remaining 66 years of her life:

> *When Helen was 20, she did something that many people thought was impossible. She went to college. Annie went with her to help her study. Helen spent her life helping blind and deaf people. She gave speeches and wrote many books.*
>
> *Helen Keller died on June 1, 1968. But people all over the world still remember her courageous, helpful life.*

But courage to do what? The statements that sum up her "courageous accomplishments" are ambiguous and confusing. "She gave speeches and wrote books." What were they about? What did she do that was so courageous?

None of the children's books I reviewed mentioned that in 1909 Helen Keller became a socialist and a suffragist—movements that framed most of her writing. "I felt the tide of opportunity rising and longed for a voice that would be equal to the urge sweeping me out into the world," she wrote.

Nor do those books tell readers that Helen Keller's publishing options dwindled because she wrote passionately for women's voting rights and against war and corporate domination. In order to promote the social justice she believed in, she decided she would take lessons to improve her speaking voice so that she could publicly speak out against injustice. This was true courage. Even after three years of daily work, her voice was uneven and difficult to control. Though she was embarrassed by her speaking voice and terrified of the crowds, Helen Keller boldly went on the lecture circuit.

She later wrote that it felt as if she were going to her own hanging: "Terror invaded my flesh, my mind froze, my heart stopped beating. I kept repeating, 'What shall I do? What shall I do to calm this tumult within me?'"

The picture books omit the courage that took Helen Keller farther away from her home to visit poverty-stricken neighborhoods in New York City, where she learned firsthand about the horror of the crowded, unhealthy living conditions in tenement buildings. Outraged over the child labor practices she encountered, she educated herself about union organizing and the violence that organizers and strikers faced. She wrote angry articles about the Ludlow Massacre where, in an attempt to break a miners' strike, the Colorado National Guard shot 13 people and burned alive 11 children and two women.

The Ludlow Mine belonged to the powerful millionaire John D. Rockefeller, who paid the wages of the National Guard. When newspapers hesitated to publish her articles, Helen Keller spoke out publicly against Rockefeller: "I have followed, step by step, the developments in Colorado, where women and children have been ruthlessly slaughtered. Mr. Rockefeller is a monster of capitalism," she declared. "He gives charity in the same breath he permits the helpless workmen, their wives, and children to be shot down."

Helen Keller was not afraid to ask tough, "impolite" questions: "Why in this land of great wealth is there great poverty?" she wrote in 1912. "Why [do] children toil in the mills while thousands of men cannot get work, why [do] women who do nothing have thousands of dollars a year to spend?"

This courage to speak out for what she believed in is also ignored in the picture book *Helen Keller: Courage in the Dark* by Johanna Hurwith (Random House, 1997). Here, her achievements are summed up on the final page:

> *Helen's story has been retold over and over. She has been the subject of books, plays, films, and television programs. The United States Postal Service has dedicated a stamp to her. And an organization with her name works to help blind people.*
>
> *Helen Keller's life was filled with silence and darkness. But she had the courage and determination to light her days.*

This is courage at its blandest—and most passive. Notice that Helen herself is simply an icon—a "subject" of the media, the name behind an organization, and of course, best of all, an image on a stamp!

What a contrast to Helen Keller's own commitment to an active, productive life. When she wrote her autobiography in 1929, Keller declared: "I resolved that whatever role I did play in life, it would not be a passive one."

Children don't learn that Helen Keller not only supported organizations to support blind people, she supported radical unions like the Industrial Workers of the World, becoming a "Wobbly" herself. Nor do they learn of her support for civil rights organizations like the National Association for the Advancement of

Colored People. W. E. B. DuBois printed news of her financial donations and the text of her letter of support in the organization's publication: "Ashamed in my very soul, I behold in my beloved south-land the tears of those oppressed, those who must bring up their sons and daughters in bondage to be servants, because others have their fields and vineyards, and on the side of the oppressor is power," she wrote.

During a recent search, the two bestselling picture books on Helen Keller were *A Picture Book of Helen Keller* by David Adler (Scott Foresman, 1992) and *A Girl Named Helen Keller* by Margo Lundell (Cartwheel, 1995). The theme of passive courage is at the center of both these books as well.

At least in Lundell's book, Helen is credited with some action. After focusing on her childhood for 42 of the book's 44 pages, the author sums up Helen Keller's life with the following list:

- In her life, Helen wrote 5 books.
- She traveled many places.
- She met kings and presidents.
- She spoke to groups of people around the world.
- Most of the work she did was to help people who were blind or deaf.
- She was a warm and caring person.
- People loved her in return.
- The life of Helen Keller brought hope to many.

Helen Keller herself would probably be horrified by this vague and misleading representation of her life's work. She spoke to groups of people around the world, yes, but Lundell doesn't hint that she said things like: "The future of America rests on the leaders of 80 million working men and women and their children. To end the war and capitalism, all you need to do is straighten up and fold your arms." Lundell is equally vague about the content of her books, neglecting to mention essays such as "How I Became a Socialist" or books she wrote such as *Out of the Dark: Essays, Letters, and Addresses on Physical and Social Vision.*

Lundell's synopsis of Keller's accomplishments focuses on the famous people—"kings and presidents"—whom she met in her life. But at the core of her commitment was her work for political change with blue-collar workers, child laborers, and the oppressed, taking part in rallies and marches, and meeting with friends to talk politics and to strategize. "I have never felt separated from my fellow men by the silent dark," she wrote. "Any sense of isolation is impossible since the doors of my heart were thrown open and the world came in." She showed that connection to her fellow workers in her actions again and again.

One fascinating example occurred in 1919, when Keller starred in *Deliverance*, a silent movie about her life. Helen supported the Actors Equity Union's strike by refusing to cross the picket line to attend the opening—and by joining a protest march with the striking actors.

Adler's *A Picture Book of Helen Keller* is the bestselling illustrated biography of Helen Keller for young readers. Like the other books I reviewed, this one focuses almost solely on her life before graduating from Radcliffe.

The two important adult episodes Adler includes are her visits to blind soldiers during World War II and her work for the American Foundation for the Blind. The book ignores her phenomenal and productive life work as a writer and social activist. On the last page of the book, Adler sums up her work:

> *Helen Keller couldn't see or hear, but for more than 80 years, she had always been busy. She read and wrote books. She learned how to swim and even how to ride a bicycle. She did many things well. But most of all, Helen Keller brought hope and love to millions of handicapped people.*

Adler has space to note that Helen Keller learned to swim and ride a bicycle, but not to state that she helped found the American Civil Liberties Union or take on the medical establishment to improve health care for infants. The inadequacy of the information in these books for children is staggering. Her life of

hard work is reduced to the phrase "she had always been busy."

Children could also learn from Helen Keller's compassion and recommitment to pacifism after her visit to Hiroshima and Nagasaki in 1948. Deeply moved by the people she met and what they described to her, she wrote that the experience "scorched a deep scar" in her soul and that she was more than ever determined to fight against "the demons of atomic warfare … and for peace."

What's Wrong with This Story?

"So long as I confine my activities to social service and the blind, they compliment me extravagantly, calling me 'archpriestess of the sightless,' 'wonder woman,' and 'a modern miracle,'" Helen wrote to her friend Robert LaFollette, an early pacifist who ran for president as a third-party Progressive candidate in 1924. "But when it comes to a discussion of poverty, and I maintain that it is the result of wrong economics—that the industrial system under which we live is at the root of much of the physical deafness and blindness in the world—that is a different matter!"

While she was alive, Helen Keller fought against the media's tendency to put her on a pedestal as a "model" sweet, good-natured, handicapped person who overcame adversity. The American Foundation for the Blind depended on her as spokesperson, but some of its leaders were horrified by her activism. As Robert Irwin, the executive director of the foundation, wrote to one of the trustees: "Helen Keller's habit of playing around with Communists and near-Communists has long been a source of embarrassment to her conservative friends. Please advise!"

In the years since her death, her lifelong work as a social justice activist has continued to be swept under the rug. As her biographer Dorothy Herrmann concludes:

> *Missing from her curriculum vitae are her militant socialism and the fact that she once had to be protected by six policemen from an admiring crowd of 2,000 people in New York after delivering a fiery speech protesting America's entry into World War I. The war, she told her audience, to thunderous applause, was a capitalist ploy to further enslave the workers. As in her lifetime, Helen Keller's public image remains one of an angelic, sexless, deaf-blind woman who is smelling a rose as she holds a Braille book open on her lap.*

But why is her activism so consistently left out of the picture book versions of her life stories? Perhaps because the mythical Helen Keller creates a politically conservative moral lesson that stresses the ability of the individual to overcome personal adversity in a fair world: "Society is fine the way it is. Look at Helen Keller! Even though she was deaf and blind, she worked hard—with a smile on her face—and overcame her disabilities. She even met kings, queens, and presidents, and is remembered for helping other handicapped people. So what do you have to complain about in this great nation of ours?"

The mythical Helen Keller creates a politically conservative moral lesson that stresses the ability of the individual to overcome personal adversity in a fair world.

This demeaning view of Helen Keller keeps her in her place. She never gets to be an adult; rather she is framed as a grown-up child who overcame her handicap. Like other people with disabilities, Helen Keller must not be defined by her blindness or her deafness. She saw herself as a free and self-reliant person—as she wrote, "a human being with a mind of my own."

It's time to move beyond the distorted and dangerous Helen Keller myth, repeated in picture book after picture book. It's time to stop

lying to children and to go beyond Keller's childhood drama and share the remarkable story of her adult life and work. What finer lesson could children learn than the rewards of the kind of engaged life that Helen Keller lived as she worked with others toward a vision of a more just world? . ■

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For Further Reading

Herrman, Dorothy. *Helen Keller: A Life.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989. A fine biography that covers her adult life as well as her famous childhood.

Keller, Helen. *Out of the Dark: Essays, Letters, and Addresses on Physical and Social Vision*. Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1913.

Keller, Helen. *Midstream: My Later Life.* Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1929. Helen Keller's fascinating autobiography gives readers a taste of her writing voice, her passionate beliefs, and her social convictions.

Lawlor, Laurie. *Helen Keller: Rebellious Spirit.* New York: Holiday House, 2001. A biography for adolescents with excellent photographs to document Keller's life.

Loewen, James. *Lies My Teacher Told Me: Everything Your American History Textbook Got Wrong (revised ed.).* Carmichael, CA: Touchstone, 2007.

Shannon, Patrick. *Becoming Political.* Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 1998.

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