

HELEN KELLER: HUMAN RIGHTS ACTIVIST

In 1964, President Lyndon Johnson awarded Helen Keller the Presidential Medal of Freedom, the nation's highest civilian honor. The award is given for "meritorious contribution to the security or national interest of the United States, world peace, cultural or other significant public or private endeavor."

Exactly what was her contribution?

It's not that she learned about language at the family's well with the help of her teacher. It's not even that she proved people who were disabled could have rich, full lives – though she did do that. She was an international symbol of hope and courage, but that's not all she was.

"Blindness with a big B," she wrote in 1946, "has never interested me. What I say of the blind applies equally to all hindered groups, the deaf, the impoverished, the mentally disturbed, and my desire is to help them regain their human rights."

As a young person, she was shocked to discover the world outside her own circle of family and friends was not a particularly nice place. There was widespread poverty and ignorance. People died from diseases that could be prevented. Countries went to war for reasons she couldn't comprehend. Children were sent to work in factories. Women had few rights of their own, not even the right to vote.

Like many young people, she wanted to fix things. But what could she do? She took her talents as a writer and a clear thinker, and she wrote countless essays, letters, speeches, and books. She wrote about political issues, about the foolishness of war, and the need for peace. She wrote about the unfair treatment of people who were blind or deaf, people who were poor or unemployed, or people of different races.

She also called on her famous friends to make changes. She met with leaders all over the world, using her celebrity to help others. As a representative for the American Foundation for the Blind for many years, her words changed lives.

“I do not like this world as it is,” she wrote, “I am trying to make it a little more as I would like to have it.”

Because of Helen Keller, and people like her, the world has become a better place. Here in America, we no longer send children off to work in factories. There are laws against discrimination and laws supporting the rights of people who are deaf, blind, or handicapped mentally or physically.

But there is still a long way to go.

That’s why she should be celebrated and honored, and why her words should be read and understood by each new generation.

About this lesson

The three readings in this lesson were written by Helen Keller at different times in her life, one as a child, one as a young woman, and one as an older woman. Each reveals her skills as a writer and her commitment to human rights. Click on the name of the reading to get started.

1. Letters from Helen
2. The Hand of Man
3. A letter to Nazi Youth