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If we took away all of the world’s reflective surfaces, how would we see ourselves? Through our many tools of self-expression: visual images, music, dance, drama, and, of course, language. In this section, we want you to explore how language can be a reflection of that which might otherwise be invisible—namely, the thoughts in your head and the emotions in your heart. Language doesn’t reflect in the ways a mirror does, however. Indeed, what makes writing so challenging is that the writer has to do the work of converting those inner thoughts and feelings into words and sentences that are understandable to others.

What distinguishes humans from all other living creatures is this ability to use language to share our self-reflections. Nowhere is this clearer than in *The Miracle Worker*, which dramatizes Helen Keller’s acquisition of language, despite her being deaf, mute, and blind. Can anyone, including Keller herself, represent in language life before language? What is gained by using language to reflect on questions too big to be answered? What is lost by only using language to express what can be proven? When you reflect on what you’ve written, can you see your work reflect back to you a trace of your mind reflecting on itself?

On the Miracle of Language

What are words for?

We could begin by saying that words are a way to focus the mind, that words make meaning and reflection possible.

But we could also say that words stand in the way of insight; the ceaseless chattering of the inner voice, forever generating judgments and drawing conclusions, must be silenced for new understandings to emerge.

Or we could say that words allow us to formulate ideas and, with these ideas in mind, to make contact with the world and with each other. To this way of thinking, words, organized by syntax, are the component pieces of an essentially human technology, one that enables us to escape the tyranny of the present that rules all other members of the animal kingdom.

Examples abound of the sacred significance we attribute to the acquisition of language. We'll start with two of the most familiar.

Parents eagerly await the moment when their toddler moves from making burbling proto-words to clearly saying what can be counted as the child's first word. The desire to record this moment—to be present when the child points to the night sky and says “moon,” or to the snow and says “milk,” or to the mother and says “mama”—is the desire to be present at the everyday miracle of language acquisition.

In Genesis, once God has created the heavens and the earth, God places Adam in the garden of Eden and then, to provide Adam with companions, forms “every beast of the field and every bird of the heavens” and brings them “to the man to see what he would call them” (Genesis 2:19). In this account, the first act of the first human is the act of naming.

But when Adam is done naming all the animals that have passed before him, he is still alone, so God fashions another living creature out of Adam's rib to serve as Adam's helper. Once again, Adam's first act upon encountering this new creature is to provide a name for her. And of course, shortly thereafter, Adam and Eve are introduced to

language's additional powers to persuade and deceive when the serpent entices Eve to disobey God's command. In the Judeo-Christian tradition, all of human history appears to unfold as a direct result of the first conversation recorded in the Bible.

Our purpose in calling these two very different examples to mind may seem quixotic, but here it is: for the moment, we'd like you to suspend the idea that language is an everyday miracle or a sacred gift. We also want you to pry language loose from the clutches of communication, where it figures as a hammer that gets the job done, and of rhetoric, where it acts as a silver tongue that artfully persuades. Against these visions of language's function, we would like instead to highlight the creative, generative, exploratory powers with which language endows us all.

In *The Miracle Worker*, surely the best-known depiction of language acquisition of the twentieth century, the playwright William Gibson dramatizes the utterly improbable story of how Helen Keller—deaf, blind, and unable to speak—escapes a life of complete social isolation. At the play's opening, Keller's parents have hired the young, inexperienced, formerly blind, and fiercely determined Annie Sullivan to help care for and control their daughter, whose violent behavior has made her all but unmanageable. One of Helen's most distressing habits occurs at mealtimes: refusing to use tableware—or unable to understand how to use it—Helen grabs whatever food is in reach with her bare hands, stuffs what she can in her face, and then casts about for her next handful. And when her frustration at not finding her next mouthful mounts to the boiling point, Helen throws whatever she can get her hands on—tableware, plates, her shoes—until food is once again placed in front of her.

Sullivan decides that the only way to make progress with Helen is to start over and treat her like a very large two-year-old—that is, as a child who is on the developmental threshold of acquiring language. Sullivan signs into Helen's palm all day long, spelling out the words of objects they encounter, repeating them over and over, just as one would do verbally in teaching a toddler to speak. Sullivan also sets about training Helen in appropriate behavior, while struggling to convince Keller's parents that their daughter needs to be punished when she behaves improperly. In the play's climactic scene, Helen, who has learned how to use tableware, regresses and throws a tantrum during the midday

meal. In her thrashing about, she spills a pitcher of water, and Sullivan drags her, kicking and writhing, from the room and out to the water pump in the yard. Placing the pitcher in one of Helen's hands, Sullivan begins furiously pumping water into the pitcher, while signing the word *water* one letter at a time, over and over, into Helen's other hand.

How does someone unable to perceive the world through sight or sound grasp the idea of language? As the play tells the story, it occurs in an instant, when Helen, feeling the water from the pump splash on her one hand and the repetition of the same pattern of pressure, traced over and over by Sullivan, in her other palm, connects these two experiences. In the screenplay for the 1962 movie version of his original teleplay, Gibson provides the following instructions to the director and the camera crew for capturing this moment:

And now the miracle happens. We have moved around close to Helen's face, and we see it change, startled, some light coming into it we have never seen there, some struggle in the depths behind it; and her lips tremble, trying to remember something the muscles around them once knew, till at last it finds its way out, painfully, a baby sound buried under the debris of years of dumbness.

Ecstatic at her sudden understanding of the word *water*, Helen signs the word in her own palm, then in Sullivan's, and then falls to the ground, slapping it with one hand and holding her other hand out for instruction. One word leads to another and then another, the irreversible course set in motion. The miracle worker, it turns out, is language itself.

Words make thought possible; they enable us to see things we've never seen and to hear things we've never heard; they even make it possible for us to travel back and forth in time. They give us the power to create and then to ponder abstractions and arguments; they give us the means to discover new ways of understanding the natural world and ourselves. But words don't do any of these things without us. The miracle of our being able to make ourselves known to each other becomes possible only with practice—practice stringing words together into sentences, questions, and paragraphs; practice accommodating the constraints of syntax and convention; practice speaking and writing ourselves into being.

Practice Session

Reflecting

The Miracle Worker dramatizes the power that language has for Helen Keller. While it is tempting to universalize Keller's experience, we think it a better idea to reflect on your own experiences of trying to make your innermost thoughts known to others. What medium do you feel is best for expressing your thoughts? Words? Color? Sound? Touch? Food? Movement?

Our list of possible answers may surprise you, but we want you to reflect on the full range of your expressive experience. When was the moment that you *felt* most fully that you were expressing exactly what you wanted to express in the way you wanted to express it? Write for at least 60 minutes about that moment, doing your best to render the truest representation of your experience at the time.

Reflecting

The power of the water pump scene in *The Miracle Worker* derives in part from all the frustration, rage, and anger that precedes it: the endless hours of instruction that seem to have no payoff; the screaming; the thrown food. Without the miracle at the pump, Helen Keller might have spent the rest of her life unable to communicate her thoughts to others except through physical behavior, in particular gestures of frustration and protest.

When you reflect back on your own experience, when was the moment that you felt most fully *incapable* of making yourself understood? What prevented others from understanding you? What did you do following this experience? Was there a way, at some subsequent moment, to bring about mutual understanding, or are there some experiences that simply cannot be expressed? Write for at least 60 minutes about that moment, doing your best to render the truest representation of your experience at the time.

Writing

When you look at what you wrote in Session One about the moment in which you felt most fully that you were expressing yourself and in Session Two about the moment in which you felt most incapable of expressing yourself, what do you see? What precisely does putting these two examples next to each other reveal to you about how language works? About the nature of communication? About learning and inner experience? Write an essay that speculates

about why some efforts to share an understanding succeed and why others fail. Your goal here is neither to argue nor to prove a point—that's not the best use of the evidence of your own experience. Your goal is to use your experience to think in new ways about language, communication, learning, and expression.

EXPLORE

While we may never be able to say, definitively, where language came from, we can ask: What happens to language after it appears? Jared Diamond looks at how spoken language and the written language that represents speech evolve at different rates. Shirley Brice Heath considers the difference between the language practices of children who were read bedtime stories and those who weren't. And historian and essayist Tony Judt, reflecting on a neurological disorder that is slowly robbing him of the ability to make the words in his mind audible to others, considers what happens to the self when language begins to disappear.

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On Making Thought Visible



Helen Keller (Patty Duke) at the pump, with Anne Sullivan (Anne Bancroft). Still from the 1962 film version of The Miracle Worker.

In “On the Miracle of Language,” we considered the most famous teaching scene of the twentieth century: Helen Keller at the pump, Anne Sullivan furiously signing the word *water* in Helen’s palm, and Helen’s breakthrough of connecting the experience of water pouring over one palm to the signing Sullivan is doing in her other palm.

Our discussion focused on the representation of this moment in William Gibson’s *The Miracle Worker*. For the purposes of Gibson’s teleplay, Helen’s miraculous connection occurs in an instant; it’s dramatic, powerful, and visually compelling. Gibson needed to make the workings of Keller’s mind visible to his television audience. But as we’ve continued to think about this play and its influence on how people the world over imagine Helen Keller, we’ve found ourselves led to another question: Is Gibson’s version of this event, composed in the late 1950s, what

actually happened at the water pump on that fateful day in 1887? The most well-known representation of learning has got us wondering about the relationship between words and ideas and about whether words or images can ever provide unmediated access to what is going on in another person's mind.

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Can we know what actually happened at that pump?

At first, how to answer this question seems obvious: just find out what Helen Keller herself had to say about this transformative moment, and then we'll be done with it. This may seem like a reasonable approach if words make our thoughts visible by simply reporting what we think, in the moment or after the fact. This is what we thought before we began to explore the many different accounts that Keller and her teacher provided of the miracle of Keller's language acquisition. It turns out that there isn't a "true" version of what happened at the pump; rather, there are multiple versions that were put forth at different times to serve different ends.

VERSION ONE: HELEN KELLER'S *THE STORY OF MY LIFE* (1903)

The initial public version of the pump story appears in Keller's first autobiography, *The Story of My Life*, which was published in 1903, when Keller was twenty-three and had just graduated from Radcliffe College. Keller begins her description of the moment thus: Sullivan had taken her outside for a walk, which made Keller "hop and skip with pleasure." They passed someone pumping water; Sullivan placed one of Keller's hands under the water and began signing "w-a-t-e-r" into Keller's other hand, while the unnamed third person continued to pump. Already, the differences between Keller's first-person account and the account in Gibson's teleplay announce themselves: instead of being dragged to the pump in a violent tug of war, Keller is happily walking with her teacher; instead of two people at the pump, there are three.

Here is Keller's description of what happened next:

I stood still, my whole attention fixed upon the motions of her [Sullivan's] fingers. Suddenly I felt a misty consciousness

as of something forgotten—a thrill of returning thought; and somehow the mystery of language was revealed to me. I knew then that “w-a-t-e-r” meant the wonderful cool something that was flowing over my hand. That living word awakened my soul, gave it light, hope, joy, set it free!

Notice the words and phrases that populate this description: *misty consciousness; mystery; revealed; living word; awakened; soul; light, hope, joy; set it free*. A version of the born-again Christian narrative, “I once was lost, but now am found,” can be heard in Keller’s first description of how she came to language. But Keller’s version curiously makes no overt reference to Christ as the source of the “living word” that has awakened her soul; to some readers, it may well seem that Keller is describing a religious conversion without the religion.

Keller continues to draw on the vocabulary of revelation in her description of what happened immediately after her momentous discovery:

As we returned to the house every object which I touched seemed to quiver with life. That was because I saw everything with the strange, new sight that had come to me. On entering the door I remembered the doll I had broken. I felt my way to the hearth and picked up the pieces. I tried vainly to put them together. Then my eyes filled with tears; for I realized what I had done, and for the first time I felt repentance and sorrow.

In this version, the miracle worker is language itself; language has made it possible for blind Helen Keller to “see” and, quickly thereafter, has led her to feel the need to repent for her earlier actions.

We would argue that, at the age of twenty-three, Keller clearly connected her experience of coming to language with what she subsequently learned about the experience of Christian conversion. And if one were to delve deeper into Keller’s memoir, one would learn that Keller was exposed to the work of the eighteenth-century Christian theologian Emanuel Swedenborg when she was fourteen and that she, like William Blake, William Butler Yeats, and Ralph Waldo Emerson before her, was

drawn to Swedenborg's descriptions of a Christian spirituality that transcended the church-based versions of the religion. So Keller's readers aren't getting a description of what actually happened when she was six; they are getting Keller's rethinking of that experience based on her subsequent experiences learning how to describe a profound change in worldview in a way that is both compelling and recognizable.

That Keller's original version has been shaped to meet her audience's expectations is clear not only in retrospect; it was openly acknowledged at the time by John Macy, who helped Keller write *The Story of My Life*. In an appendix to the volume, Macy offers this observation about the status of the stories that populate Keller's autobiography: to his mind, Keller has not provided "a scientifically accurate record of her life, nor even of the important events. She cannot know in detail how she was taught, and her memory of her childhood is in some cases an idealized memory of what she has learned later from her teacher and others." There is, we would note, nothing exceptional about this: What do you remember about your life at six? How much of your memory of that time is shaped by the stories your parents or siblings tell about you? How much is shaped by photographs and family videos, which are themselves a type of idealized memory?

Perhaps we'll have more luck if we turn to the memories of those who were adults at the time. Anne Sullivan could, in fact, have a truer version of what happened at the pump than Keller does.

VERSION TWO: ANNE SULLIVAN'S CORRESPONDENCE (1887)

The Story of My Life also has in its supplementary materials Anne Sullivan's account of how Keller came to learn how to communicate. In her correspondence with her teachers at the Perkins Institution for the Blind, Sullivan begins her account of the events of March 20, 1887, with this excited declaration: "A miracle has happened! The light of understanding has shone upon my little pupil's mind, and behold, all things are changed!" The miracle that Sullivan goes on to describe, though, is not the miracle of Keller's language acquisition: it is that "the little savage has learned her first lesson in obedience, and finds the yoke easy." Keller has learned to sit still, to be calm. She can make the signs

to spell out words, but she confuses *mug* and *milk*, which shows that she “has no idea yet that everything has a name.”

Two weeks later, on April 5, Sullivan reports that “something very important has happened. Helen has taken the second great step in her education. She has learned that everything has a name, and that the manual alphabet is the key to everything she wants to know.” Sullivan mentions that Keller continued to have problems distinguishing *mug* and *milk*. Sullivan then describes what led her to take Keller outside to the water pump: while washing up in the morning, Keller “wanted to know the name for ‘water.’ When she wants to know the name of anything, she points to it and pats my hand.” Sullivan signs the word, thinking nothing of it at the time, but then later decides to take Keller out to the pump-house, on the hunch that Keller’s learning the sign for *water* might help straighten out “the ‘mug-milk’ difficulty.”

Note how Sullivan’s correspondence stretches out the sequence of events, placing Keller’s acts of learning and discovery in the stream of time. Note, too, that in Sullivan’s account, Keller’s immersion in the world of signing, which involves weeks of confusion and incomprehension, nevertheless leads to the generation of a question—a question asked before Keller even knows what a question is. The experience of water on the hand. The patting of the palm. In Sullivan’s account, Keller is already five weeks into an immersive instructional experience when Sullivan leads her to the pump:

The word coming so close upon the sensation of cold water rushing over her hand seemed to startle her. She dropped the mug and stood as one transfixed. A new light came into her face. She spelled “water” several times. Then she dropped on the ground and asked for its name and pointed to the pump and the trellis, and suddenly turning round she asked for my name.

For Sullivan, the story at the pump isn’t about an instant in time or a revelatory moment of conversion; it’s about Sullivan’s commitment to weeks of dragging Keller, kicking and screaming, to the threshold of language. Thus, Sullivan’s version of the story

culminates not in Keller's newly discovered desire to repent but in Keller's desire to learn the name of the person who brought her out of the darkness—her teacher. In the version told by Sullivan, she is the miracle worker.

Given these two versions of the scene at the pump, one might reasonably conclude that we are always the heroes of our own stories: for Keller, the scene at the pump is about her spiritual encounter with an elevated state of consciousness; for Sullivan, it is affirmation of her powers as a teacher. But this conclusion is too simplistic. If we drill down further, we find that not only did Keller's thinking about that scene at the pump continue to change over the course of her lifetime, but Keller came to feel trapped by the power of the story itself because it turned out to be the only story about her that others wanted to hear.

VERSION THREE: HELEN KELLER'S *THE WORLD I LIVE IN* (1908)

Keller first gives voice to this frustration in her second autobiography, *The World I Live In*, which was published just five years after *The Story of My Life*.

Every book is in a sense autobiographical. But while other self-recording creatures are permitted at least to seem to change the subject, apparently nobody cares what I think of the tariff, the conservation of our natural resources, or the conflicts which revolve about the name of Dreyfus. If I offer to reform the education system of the world, my editorial friends say, "That is interesting. But will you please tell us what idea you had of goodness and beauty when you were six years old?"

In effect, this one story from Keller's childhood was already on its way to being the only story from her life that there was a market for, despite the fact that Keller was the first deaf-blind American to earn a college degree and, was eager to share her thoughts about the virtues of socialism and other matters of global import.

Keenly aware of this conflict between her audience's expectations and her own desires, in *The World I Live In* Keller settles for weaving

her thoughts about larger world affairs into the story of her life. This is evident even in the way she retells the story of the pump in her new volume:

Before my teacher came to me, I did not know that I am. I lived in a world that was a no-world. I cannot hope to describe adequately that unconscious, yet conscious time of nothingness. I did not know that I knew aught, or that I lived or acted or desired. I had neither will nor intellect.

Notice that in this revised account, Keller grants Sullivan a central role in her transformation, but she uses language that foregrounds the transformation as one of the mind, rather than one of the soul or the spirit. Her teacher, represented here iconically rather than by name, gave Keller access to consciousness, to desire, to will, and to the intellect. Keller is still a “self-recording creature,” but the self she represents herself as recording has changed; before language, she was incapable of voicing the statement that Descartes asserted is the very foundation of our being: “I think, therefore I am.” She was, by her own estimation, not human.

Is this version of what happened at the pump more accurate than either of the previous two versions? Is it possible to remember what life before language was like? Or are the results of any such efforts the product not of memory but of the imagination?

**VERSION FOUR: HELEN KELLER'S TEACHER: ANNE SULLIVAN MACY:
A TRIBUTE BY THE FOSTER-CHILD OF HER MIND (1955)**

More than forty years after the publication of *The World I Live In*, Keller revisited the scene at the pump and revised her telling of the story one final time. Looking back on the version she recorded in *The Story of My Life*, Keller now sees her earliest autobiographical work as having been produced “with the carelessness of a happy, positive young girl,” and she regrets that she “failed to stress sufficiently the obstacles and hardships which confronted Teacher” (now capitalized). And so it is with the explicit project of celebrating Anne Sullivan, whom Keller identifies

as the foster mother of her mind, that Keller offers her third version of the events at the pump:

Suddenly Phantom understood the meaning of the word, and her mind began to flutter tiny wings of flame. Caught up in the first joy she had felt since her illness, she reached out eagerly to Annie's ever-ready hand, begging for new words to identify whatever objects she touched. Spark after spark of meaning flew through her mind until her heart was warmed and affection was born. From the well-house there walked two enraptured beings calling each other "Helen" and "Teacher." Surely such moments of delight contain a fuller life than an eternity of darkness.

In this retelling, Phantom, a shadow being without thought, language, or feeling, is transformed into Helen by being given access to the link between words and meaning, after which "her heart was warmed and affection was born." So in this final version of Keller's, a story that once had strong religious overtones gets recast in terms that evoke the pleasures of romance and culminates in the creation of "two enraptured beings" who were joined to one another forever thereafter. But not really forever, since Sullivan had been dead for nearly two decades when Keller published her tribute. Does that fact make this account more true or less so than the previous ones? Are words written in grief or words that seek to repair a past injury more or less likely to express accurately what actually happened?

VERSIONS FIVE AND SIX: WILLIAM GIBSON'S *THE MIRACLE WORKER* (1957) AND *MONDAY AFTER THE MIRACLE* (1982)

As it happens, William Gibson's relationship to the story at the pump also changed over time. As a result of the wild success of *The Miracle Worker*, Gibson's version of Keller's childhood experience has reached a much wider audience than any of the versions Keller herself composed. This is so, we would argue, because of the primacy of the image over the word. To get to Keller's versions or to Sullivan's version, one

must commit to the act of reading. To get to Gibson's version, one need only take a seat in the theater or sit before a screen that's broadcasting either the original teleplay, which first appeared on television in 1957 as an episode of the anthology series *Playhouse 90*, or the movie version, which premiered in 1962 and starred Anne Bancroft and Patty Duke in the roles of Sullivan and Keller, respectively, portrayals for which both actors won an Academy Award. The critical and popular success of the film helped to make *The Miracle Worker* a staple of the high school stage, where it has been regularly performed for the past sixty years, cementing in the public consciousness Gibson's version of the moment when Keller acquired language, with a violent struggle leading Keller and Sullivan to the pump, followed by Keller returning to her family for a joyous embrace. This version is highly melodramatic; it's not a record of what actually happened and not a reliable source for understanding how Keller began to make her thoughts visible and thus knowable to others.

As we've alluded to above, Keller struggled throughout her adult life to find an audience for the thoughts and ideas that her miraculous triumph over adversity made possible—thoughts about women's suffrage, pacifism, religion, and world government. Ironically, Gibson himself came to feel trapped by the success of *The Miracle Worker* and by its simplified tale of how the life of a girl with multiple disabilities was transformed by the miracle of language. In 1982, twenty-five years after the original broadcast of his teleplay, Gibson published the play *Monday after the Miracle*, which picks up Keller's story at the time she is attending Radcliffe College and is in the process of writing *The Story of My Life* with the help of Anne Sullivan and John Macy, an English instructor. In the second act, Sullivan, her own eyesight failing, has married Macy, but their relationship is complicated by the fact that Keller, Sullivan's constant companion, is no longer the small, vulnerable child at the pump but is now a grown woman in her mid-twenties.

In the third act, Sullivan and Macy's marriage is in the final stage of collapse, owing to Macy's alcoholism, Sullivan's inability to conceive, their money troubles, and Macy's newfound attraction to Keller. To address the household's financial problems, Sullivan and Keller first go on the lecture circuit and then, in the play's penultimate scene,

announce to Macy that they are preparing to join the vaudeville circuit, because there's much more money to be made by performing for audiences that expect to be entertained than by giving lectures to the small groups of educated people interested in Keller's ideas. (Gibson alters the actual timeline of events to create this fictional conflict: Macy and Sullivan split up years before Sullivan and Keller took their show on the road.) When Keller recites her lines from the planned vaudeville act for Macy to critique, he is driven into a rage by her announcing, "My teacher has told you how a word from her hand touched the darkness of my mind. Through love, I found my soul and God and happiness." Macy responds derisively, describing Keller as Sullivan's "trained seal, mouthing platitudes. Found God and happiness, for Christ sake."

Macy then pleads with Keller to leave Sullivan and come to Italy with him: "you can do better—better than the hag-ridden life *you'll* have with her, turning into a tin showpiece. Leave her!" In the darker, more oppressive, and lonelier world Keller and Sullivan inhabit as adults, the miracle of Keller's childhood is now openly mocked, with Macy smashing a bottle of liquor on his typewriter while repeating Keller's lines: "Through love I found my soul and God and happiness." And then, just before he storms out of their lives for good, Macy says to Keller, "you've sucked us empty, angel, you've gutted [Sullivan's] life and mine, and I swear if I could—wipe out the day you were born—"

One could argue that Gibson stages this scene to free both Keller and himself from being frozen in time at the moment Keller learned her first word. If this was Gibson's goal, however, he clearly failed: the critical reception of *Monday after the Miracle* was so negative when it premiered on Broadway in 1982 that the play closed after just one week. Remade into a schlocky "love triangle" TV movie in 1998, *Monday after the Miracle* has essentially been consigned to the dustbin of history.

Is Gibson's second version of Keller's "awakening" more true than his first version? Less true? Completely untrue? What are we to make of the fact that audiences embrace the version of Keller's life that culminates at the water pump and reject the versions of her life that follow her into adulthood?

VERSION SEVEN: ANNE SULLIVAN MACY AND HELEN KELLER ON THE
VAUDEVILLE CIRCUIT (1920-1924)

B.F. Keith's

CHESTNUT BELOW TWELFTH STREET

A BILL OF EXTRAORDINARY FEATURES!

THE MOST REMARKABLE WOMAN IN THE WORLD!

STAR
OF
HAPPINESS

HELENKELLER

IN
PERSON

BLIND—DEAF—AND FORMERLY MUTE

In the Sweetest Story Ever Told. Assisted by ANNE SULLIVAN MACY,
Her Life-Long and Devoted Teacher.

The Granger Collection, New York

Evening Public Ledger, June 5, 1920.

From our historical vantage point, the vision of Anne Sullivan and Helen Keller performing on the vaudeville stage alongside jugglers, acrobats, magicians, and the physically disabled is likely to seem something Gibson invented for dramatic effect. But, as we drill down further, we discover that Sullivan and Keller did indeed perform on the vaudeville stage from 1920 to 1924, and that each performance began with Sullivan first appearing on stage alone to tell the story of the pump. Then Keller would join her and, to the audience's astonishment, would actually speak the following words (demonstrating that she had learned both sign language *and* how to speak aloud):

What I have to say is very simple. My teacher has told you how a word from her hand touched the darkness of my mind and I awoke to the gladness of life. I was dumb; now I speak. I owe this to the hands and hearts of others. Through their love I found my soul and God and happiness. Don't you see what it means? We live by each other and for each other. Alone we can do so little. Together we can do so much. Only

love can break down the walls that stand between us and our happiness. . . . I lift up my voice and thank the Lord for love and joy and the promise of life to come.

In her article “‘Play[ing] her part correctly’: Helen Keller as Vaudevillian Freak,” Susan Crutchfield argues that Keller’s success on the stage was predicated on her performing the story her audience desired. Instead of explicitly stating her support for socialism, Keller recited a script that masked her politics behind a call for people to work together. In reviewing the contemporary newspaper reports on these performances, Crutchfield concludes that, “Again and again for Keller’s vaudeville audience, it is her voice, her physical demonstration of her *ability* to speak rather than what she says, that generates their sense of awe.”

Is Keller’s vaudeville speech the truest version of the pump story, since it allows her to share a version of her thoughts about what is required to create a better world?

MAKING THOUGHT VISIBLE: A PARADOX

After considering all these versions of Keller at the pump, you’re probably tempted to say that there’s no way of ever knowing what happened on that fateful day when the water and the word met on Keller’s palm for the first time. While that’s certainly true, we’re interested in the question that is raised by our journey through these many different ways of describing this pivotal moment in Keller’s life: Is it ever possible to communicate to another your own experience of thinking?

Everyone who learns how to use language experiences the miracle Keller experienced. But Keller is nearly alone in having been able to credibly claim to remember the miraculous moment when the world of experience shifted from incoherent chaos to a world of nameable objects and actions. We stipulate that this moment is both miraculous and fascinating, but we are nevertheless much more interested in the moments that follow this initial, inexplicable moment of contact—the moments that occur after the mind has matured and there are more words and experiences work with. This is the question that we’ve written ourselves to as a result of meditating on the many different ways of seeing the story of Helen at the pump: Is it ever possible to describe a new thought

coming into being, or must one compose versions of the emergence of new thought that are prepackaged to meet audience expectations? Is the writing one does about one's own thinking always a fiction? Is this so even in academic essays, where one strives to show one's mind at work on a problem?

Practice Session One

Writing

We'd like you to take up the questions with which we've ended our deliberations by considering your own experiences of thinking thoughts that are new to you. While at first blush it may seem that all such experiences are inevitably personal, we encourage you to consider experiences through which you came to think differently about an issue or a topic or a debate and not just those experiences that made you think differently about yourself or others. We want you to choose an example that is important to you, one without which you feel your life would be diminished. Can you make it clear how you came to think this new thought?

The preceding essay gives you a couple of examples of how to go about this task: you can provide a vivid narrative or set of narratives about the experience (as Keller does); or you can provide an evidence-driven account that proceeds via juxtaposition (as we have done). The challenge we invite you to take on is to show, to the best of your ability, not only what the new thought is, but also your own experience of that thought coming into being in your mind.

Practice Session Two

Researching

In the vaudeville performance put on by Keller and Sullivan, Keller would say aloud to the awestruck audience, "I am not dumb now." A century ago, it was common to refer to those who were mute as "dumb," the word then meaning both "incapable of speech" and "unintelligent." But as the example of Keller amply shows, the double meaning of this word reinforced a prejudice against those who, for whatever reason, could not speak. Nearly a century has passed since Keller was performing on the vaudeville circuit, and the language used

today to describe any kind of human difference, be it one of ability or sexuality or race, is now much more carefully scrutinized.

Oddly, this concern for the language we use to describe those who differ from ourselves has been dubbed “political correctness.” We’d like you to do research into the original use of this term and then explore how this term is used in a contemporary example of your own choosing. (We don’t need to provide you with examples because they proliferate in the news media.) When you’ve collected the information about the term’s original meaning and your contemporary example, we’d like you to write an essay about the relationship between thought and language. Is the struggle over language necessarily a struggle over thought?

Practice Session Three

Writing

The most common dodge we come across as writing teachers takes the form of a writer who, after considering a range of conflicting explanations for a given event, concludes that “everyone has a right to his or her own opinion.” Translated, we read this statement as meaning, “I don’t have a stake in this.” We can imagine a reader who considers the seven different versions of the pump scene we’ve provided above and concludes that everyone has a right to interpret Keller’s moment of language acquisition as he or she pleases. We don’t think that this is a question of rights, though: by virtue of being language-using creatures, we are all hardwired to interpret. The question is not whether we have a right to interpret as we please, but whether any one interpretation is better than another. If you were writing an essay that explored the relationship between language and thought, which account of Keller’s experience would you use, and why? Now write that essay, and see where your writing leads your thinking.

EXPLORE

Tim Bascom’s essay, with its explicit focus on how to draw pictures of the thought process, is the perfect companion piece to our own. Clifford Geertz offers one of the best examples we’ve found of what it means to look at an

object from multiple perspectives. Emily Raboteau puzzles over the holiday tradition in Amsterdam of wearing blackface. And Peter Stark finds a way to represent the thoughts of those who are in the process of freezing to death.

Bascom, Tim. "Picturing the Personal Essay: A Visual Guide." *Creative Nonfiction* 49 (Summer 2013). Web.

Geertz, Clifford. "Deep Play: Notes on the Balinese Cockfight." *Daedalus* 101.1 (Winter 1972). 1–37. Print.

Raboteau, Emily. "Who Is Zwarte Piet?" *VQR* 90.1 (Winter 2014). Web.

Stark, Peter. "As Freezing Persons Recollect the Snow—First Chill—Then Stupor—Then the Letting Go: The Cold Hard Facts of Freezing to Death." *Outside Magazine*. Jan. 1997. Web.

On Thinking Unthinkable Thoughts

“To infinity and beyond!”

If you give Buzz Lightyear’s familiar rallying cry a moment’s thought, you can see that what he’s calling for is impossible. It’s one of many jokes embedded in the *Toy Story* movies that is meant to entertain the adults in the audience: only a toy superhero would think that there is some point beyond infinity to which one could go.

We may chuckle at Buzz Lightyear’s mistake, but do we really understand infinity much better than he does? If you stop and think seriously about what *infinity* means, you’ll find yourself thinking that fully comprehending this concept is, by definition, impossible. And yet, while imagining the infinite may be impossible, striving to think this impossible thought has long preoccupied humankind.

The Greek philosopher Zeno used the concept of the infinite to formulate his paradox about the impossibility of movement. In order to get from point A to point B, he reasoned, you must first move half the distance. Call that halfway point C. But to move from point A to point C, you must first move half *that* distance. Call that halfway point D. And so on. Because any distance can be cut in half, the process of dividing never comes to an end—it is, by definition, infinite. If you try to think Zeno’s paradox about infinite divisibility to its logical conclusion—that there are an infinite number of steps before one reaches a final destination—you will find yourself driven to conclude that motion of any kind is impossible. And yet we move.

The medieval theologian Saint Anselm defined God as “that than which a greater cannot be conceived.” To have a thought equal to the divine being is thus, strictly speaking, impossible, because by definition Saint Anselm’s God exceeds any conceivable thought. In this formulation, reasoning inevitably leads to an encounter with reason’s limit and then to the point beyond that limit, which Anselm calls faith.

Carl Sagan, astronomer and popularizer of science, spent much of his life trying to promote a fuller understanding of the dimensions of the cosmos. This effort, too, can be understood as an attempt to articulate a vision of the infinite: “We have examined the universe in space

and seen that we live on a mote of dust circling a humdrum star in the remotest corner of an obscure galaxy. And if we are a speck in the immensity of space, we also occupy an instant in the expanse of ages.”

As these examples are meant to show, to say that thinking the infinite is impossible is not to say that it is not worth attempting. Indeed, we would say that striving to think the infinite is an essential part of the mental training for adulthood. We believe this for many reasons, but the most important one is this: the only way to know the true limits of your thinking is to travel to the edge of your own understanding and peer into the unknown.

Where is that limit?

How will you know when you get there?

Practice Session One

Reflecting

Spend at least 30 minutes in a quiet place thinking about infinity. Just close your eyes and think. If your thoughts stray, pull them back. Set a timer so you don't interrupt your thoughts to check the time.

When the buzzer rings, write an account of your experience. What, specifically, did you do in your mind to think the infinite? Did you have moments of success, or was your experience an uninterrupted series of failed attempts? How did you feel over the 30 minutes?

Writing

What other thoughts seem unthinkable to you? We've focused on the infinitely big, but what about the infinitely small? What about time? The age of the earth? The smallest fraction of a second? Are the challenges involved with thinking the dimensions of infinity—as an extension of time or space—the same as those that arise when you try to think about infinity in relation to realms of human experience? That is, can you think infinite love? Infinite forgiveness? Infinite patience? Infinite violence? Infinite cruelty?

Write an account of what you learned from this second run at infinity. If you can't think the thought, is the experience of trying a second time qualitatively different from your initial experience? What happens in your mind as you are doing this kind of thinking? What are the consequences of having tried?

Practice Session Two

Researching

We have a former student who interviewed for a job at a major dot-com years ago. He walked in with his résumé and his transcripts documenting his superlative performance as an English major. When he took a seat, the interviewers asked him, “How many golf balls can fit in this room?” Then he was asked to say how many airplanes were in the air at that moment. And finally, he was asked to say how much concrete had been used in constructing the US interstate highway system.

Crazy questions, right? The point of the interview, though, was not to test the candidate’s ability to recall information learned in the past; the point was to see how the candidate could think about how to solve problems involving large numbers and several variables.

How would you answer a question of this kind? You’re not in an interview situation; you have access to the Internet. Choose one of the questions and describe how you would go about formulating an answer.

EXPLORE

We offer you additional examples of writers contending with the unthinkable. Naomi Alderman writes about science’s search for the Higgs Boson particle—a subatomic particle with physical properties that stretch beyond the reach of the human imagination. Wendell Berry asks his readers to imagine the devastating consequences of an economy based on the assumption of limitless growth. Joan Didion meditates on life after the death of her spouse and the experience of a grief without end. Roxane Gay explores the possibility of being privileged and marginalized at the same time. And Naomi Klein covers the worst industrial accident in US history and considers the significance of our inability to contend with the natural disasters we ourselves have caused.

Alderman, Naomi. “The Goddamn Particle.” *Granta*. 12 July 2012. Web.

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Didion, Joan. “After Life.” *New York Times*. 25 Sept. 2005. Web.

Gay, Roxane. “Peculiar Benefits.” *The Rumpus*. 16 May 2012. Web.

Klein, Naomi. “Gulf Oil Spill: A Hole in the World.” *Guardian*. 18 June 2010. Web.