

A Speech from Bruce K. Nelson, PhD (1915-2017)

May, 1960

Members of F.T.A:

Those of us who read a few days ago of the passing of Polly Thomson, the companion of Helen Keller, had a sense of loss---not because we knew her personally but because of what she and Helen Keller have done for all mankind. And those of us who are teachers or are interested in becoming teachers realize that now has come to an end one of the finest examples of teaching the world has ever known. It started, as you know, not with Polly Thomson but with Anne Mansfield Sullivan --- away back before the turn of the century. Miss Keller, who had lost her sight, and become deaf and dumb when she was nineteen months old, in later years wrote:

“The most important day I remember in all my life is the one on which my teacher, Anne Mansfield Sullivan, came to me. It was the third of March, 1887, three months before I was seven years old. On the afternoon of that eventful day, I stood on the porch, dumb, expectant. I guessed vaguely from my mother’s signs and from the hurrying to and fro in the house that something unusual was about to happen, so I went to the door and waited on the steps. The afternoon sun penetrated the mass of honey-suckle that covered the porch, and fell on my upturned face. My fingers lingered almost unconsciously on the familiar leaves and blossoms which had just come forth to greet the sweet southern spring.

I felt approaching footsteps. (Notice the word felt --- not heard --- felt --- making us realize the full limitation of Miss Keller’s contact with the world.) I stretched out my hand as I supposed to my mother. Someone took it, and I was caught up and held close in the arms of her who had come to reveal all things to me, and more than anything else, to love me.”

The rest is history. All of you know the story. How the next day Miss Sullivan gave Helen a doll and spelled DOLL in her hand --- the incident at the well a few days later when the combination of a cool stream flowing over one hand and the letters W-A-T-E-R spelled out in the other first revealed to her the mystery of language --- the eventful and fruitful life that followed and continues today in Bridgeport, Connecticut. After almost fifty years of helping Helen Keller be less deaf, less dumb, and less blind, Annie Sullivan died in 1936. And until a few days ago Polly Thomson carried on this great example of personal sacrifice and dedication.

As students all of us are Helen Kellers in some degree. Early in our lives we have ears that hear but do not understand, eyes that see but do not differentiate, lips that speak but do not communicate. And we need our own Annie Sullivans to unlock the world of knowledge for us so that we are able to hear and understand the present, so that we may have the vision of the future, and so that we may speak and act meaningfully in a way that others may share our knowledge.

What is the unique quality that the Anne Sullivans of this world have that makes them master teachers? This should be of supreme significance to us who are teachers or are thinking of becoming teachers.

What was it about his teacher Mark Hopkins that made President James Garfield say: "Give me a log hut, with only a simple bench, Mark Hopkins at one end and I on the other, and you may have all the buildings, apparatus, and libraries without him."

Why did people come from the far corners of our country and actually from all over the world to be in the classes of John Dewey, a teacher of teachers? And why do people still discuss today what he said in those classes?

Let's take a look at some of these great teachers. Where did they come from? What were they like? How did they teach? What was their secret?

Annie Sullivan--- did she come from a home of sweetness and light? Not at all. Her's was a poverty-stricken home, her mother, sister, and brother chronically ill, her father a drunkard. She was in the public almshouse---half blind with trachoma---when she was ten---and somehow survived five horrible years there. Hardly the cultured environment for creation of a master teacher. Rebelling against life in the almshouse she won a transfer to the Massachusetts Asylum for the Blind and there several operations and five years later she was graduated as valedictorian of her class at the Perkins Institute.

Miss Keller's analysis of Miss Sullivan's ability was that its first element was love. She had such devotion that she gave all of her energy and life to helping her student. Having poor eyesight herself, she understood and knew well the limitations and problems of her pupil. She recognized the elementary level at which learning would have to begin (with the names of objects)---and this did not disconcert her. She had boundless patience. She knew her subject-matter well. Before accepting as Helen Keller's tutor, she studied in minute detail all that was known at that time about teaching the blind, deaf and dumb---and she was soon blazing new trails in this unexplored area which we now call special education.

Mark Hopkins was an entirely different sort. Members of his family were leaders in the early American churches and, during his boyhood, his home life reflected the best of the culture of that day. After being graduated from Williams College he completed a medical education before deciding that his main interest in life was in being a teacher--- and so he went back to his own college and there taught philosophy for over fifty years. Physically, Mark Hopkins was a large-framed man. A former pupil describes him as a person “with a well-poised head of strikingly intellectual mold. Benignant and winsome in countenance, seasoning his words with a gracious voice, he commanded respect, conciliated affection, kindled enthusiasm by his presence”.

As Annie Sullivan did, so did Mark Hopkins know where to begin – with the simple things that all students could understand. He, also, gave much attention to the individual student. He said “It is far easier to generalize a class and give it a lesson to get by rote and hear it said and let it pass, than it is to watch the progress of the individual mind and awaken interest and answer objections and explore tendencies.” Dr. Hopkins recognized the worth of the individual personality. He was a great one to have his class engage in mental gymnastics, he asked a lot of questions---but never just to confound his students so that he could enjoy their confusion---he had too much respect for them to do that. At the same time he had a thorough knowledge of many fields of learning---and was seldom stumped when a student asked a question. Still another quality which he had was that of hopefulness in the future. “He taught us, said one of his pupils, “to shun the pitfalls of pessimism.”

Quite in contrast to Mark Hopkins was John Dewey – undoubtedly America’s greatest educational philosopher. He was physically a smaller man than Hopkins. In appearance he looked like a New England farmer – weather beaten and unpretentious. His necktie was usually askew. He spoke slowly with a Vermont drawl. He had been born in 1859 on a Vermont farm, had graduated from high school and was able to attend the University of Vermont because it was close to home, the tuition was low and he had assistance in the form of a scholarship.

It is said that in later years as a professor at Columbia University he would come into class, turn his chair sideways, sit down and look out the window---and then he would begin to talk. His voice was soft. There were times that those in the back row couldn’t hear what he was saying. The soft voice and the relaxed atmosphere of the classroom provided a perfect environment for sleep---and some students did---but those who stayed awake and took notes, and examined them afterwards found as did one of his students, Irving Edman, who has written:

“It was then a remarkable discovery on looking over my notes to find that what seemed so casual, so rambling, so unexciting, was of extraordinary coherence, texture, and brilliance. I had been listening not to a semi-theatrical repetition of a discourse many times made---a fairly accurate description of many academic lectures---I had been

listening to a man actually thinking in the presence of a class.” John Dewey believed in learning by doing, and since thinking is so much a part of learning he taught his students quietly and undramatically how to think.

John Dewey believed in learning by doing, and since thinking is so much a part of learning he taught his students quietly and undramatically how to think.

Now we’ve had a look at three great teachers---it’s perhaps too brief a look and maybe even too small a number to draw any valid conclusions about teaching and what qualities make a good teacher. But suppose you now to add to these three those teachers you have personally had who have had a profound effect upon you---have perhaps even helped you decide that teaching is the field in which you would like to work. If each of us thinks of two teachers, we have now expanded the three examples to fifteen or sixteen hundred---certainly a most adequate number upon which to make judgment.

With these good teachers in mind let’s observe a few things about them:

First, success in teaching does not depend upon the circumstances into which the person is born. We have seen that a potentially great teacher may be born in a poverty stricken city home, on a farm, or in home of wealth and culture. It would not be correct to say that these circumstances do not make a difference. They certainly affect the individual’s entire personality. But the extent to which the person tries to understand his environment, the extent to which he lives actively and participates fully in what is happening in that environment, the extent to which he finds real meaning there---a meaning that he can later draw upon in working with others---these things rather than the circumstances themselves seem to determine the nature and size of contribution the person can make as a teacher. We can all take heart then that to each of us is given the opportunity of becoming a great teacher---no matter what our original station in life.

Nor secondly does success in teaching depend on personal appearance---being short or tall, slim or stout, young or old, of strong voice or soft spoken, nearsighted, far sighted, or partially-sighted or any other physical characteristic---but it does depend on being thoroughly and unequivocally one’s self. There was no affectation in John Dewey. He was a modest man. People had to accept him as he was. Mark Hopkins was equally honest and sincere. There was no pretense in the character of Annie Sullivan. (Some say that to be a successful teacher you have to be somewhat of a ham actor. I don’t subscribe to that point of view. Once the mask is off---and its bound to come off in the intimate relationship of pupil and teacher---disillusion predominates).

Third, success in teaching is related to the ability to establish good relationships with other people as individuals. Helen Keller, you recall, said: “And I was caught up in the arms of her who had come to reveal all things to me---and more than anything else, to love me.”

Mark Hopkins refused to generalize his classes and enthusiastically accepted the challenge of the much harder task of helping students as individuals develop their minds. John Dewey's relationship to his pupils was much more subtle---from my description you might say non-existent. But this was not so---in his quiet, humble way he generated a feeling of mutual identification of problems and of having the teacher and pupil think together about them. And if you think of your own favorite teacher you will certainly agree that he knows how students learn, he recognizes their individual differences, and he provides a climate of mutual understanding and respect in which learning can take place.

Lastly, the successful teacher knows his subject well---not just for the purpose of earning a living, or for transferring knowledge to others---but rather because of an intense personal interest and involvement in it. Anne Sullivan learned all there was to be learned about teaching the blind. Pupils of Mark Hopkins reported an inability to "stump him". John Dewey published 38 books and more than 820 articles---a stack twelve feet six inches high. It is safe to say he knew his field. Yet these teachers did not ostentatiously display their knowledge. In many, many instances they worked with their students as learners together. They continued to be learners as well as teachers throughout their lives.

Now I have said only a fraction of what ought to be said to young people who are seriously thinking of preparing for teaching. But I hope that you have been encouraged this morning. That you are aware of the opportunities for you in teaching no matter what your background is or what has happened to you up to this time. You are individuals. You are each different from those sitting next to you. And there is a place for each of you in teaching. It will take some doing. You will have to work hard to become proficient in some special subject---and also learn much about many other subjects---and you will have to study about how people learn and you'll have to know how to get along with people and inspire them.

Is it worth the effort? Let me tell you of a personal experience. Twenty-three years ago I had a fourth grade science class in the Upper Peninsula, a little girl, who for the first time in a school situation was having the wonderful world of science come alive for her. She was as intrigued, as enthusiastic about science as children of that age can be. Six years later she was one of my better students in a high school biology class. Eight weeks ago this coming Sunday a seven year old boy – tobogganing on Ann Arbor Golf Course – was struck by another toboggan. A blood vessel between the skull and the brain ruptured. As the clot inside the skull grew, terrific pressure was exerted on the brain. He was rushed to the hospital. At the emergency door was a waiting stretcher cart. The elevator was being held and in it was the neuro-surgeon, who immediately began a quick examination. In the operating room, the boy's head was quickly shaved, a section of his skull was opened, and within eighteen minutes from the time he had arrived at the emergency door, the clot was extruded and the artery repaired. It was not a

moment too soon. Ten minutes more, the surgeon said, and his respiration would have stopped and he would not have lived. By a strange and yet wonderful twist of fate the chief nurse in the neuro-surgery operating room was the girl who had been in my fourth grade science class---and the boy whose life was saved was my son. Certainly no one can promise that the rewards of teaching will be as direct as personal and as dramatic as was true in this instance, and yet there is no doubt that experiences of this sort with different individuals involved occur again and again. You are to be congratulated on your choice of profession. You will not be disappointed.

Bruce K. Nelson, PhD (1915-2017)