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Book 4 (Part II)

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Lesson One

TEXT

Three Days to See

by Helen Keller

All of us have read thrilling stories in which the hero had only a limited and specified time to live. Sometimes it was as long as a year, sometimes as short as twenty-four hours. But always we were interested in discovering just how the doomed man chose to spend his last days or his last hours. I speak, of course, of free men who have a choice, not condemned criminals whose sphere of activities is strictly delimited.

Such stories set us thinking, wondering what we should do under similar circumstances. What events, what experiences, what associations should we crowd into those last hours as mortal beings? What happiness should we find in reviewing the past, what regrets?

Sometimes I have thought it would be an excellent rule to live each day as if we should die tomorrow. Such an attitude would emphasize sharply the values of life. We should live each day with a gentleness, a vigor and a keenness of appreciation which are often lost when time stretches before us in the constant panorama of more days and months and years to come. There are those, of course, who would adopt the epicurean motto of "Eat, drink, and be merry," but most people would be chastened by the certainty of impending death.

In stories, the doomed hero is usually saved at the last

minute by some stroke of fortune, but almost always his sense of values is changed. He becomes more appreciative of the meaning of life and its permanent spiritual values. It has often been noted that those who live, or have lived, in the shadow of death bring a mellow sweetness to everything they do.

Most of us, however, take life for granted. We know that one day we must die, but usually we picture that day as far in the future. When we are in buoyant health, death is all but unimaginable. We seldom think of it. The days stretch out in an endless vista. So we go about our petty tasks, hardly aware of our listless attitude toward life.

The same lethargy, I am afraid, characterizes the use of all our faculties and senses. Only the deaf appreciate hearing, only the blind realize the manifold blessings that lie in sight. Particularly does this observation apply to those who have lost sight and hearing in adult life. But those who have never suffered impairment of sight or hearing seldom make the fullest use of these blessed faculties. Their eyes and ears take in all sights and sounds hazily, without concentration, and with little appreciation. It is the same old story of not being grateful for what we have until we lose it, of not being conscious of health until we are ill.

I have often thought it would be a blessing if each human being were stricken blind and deaf for a few days at some time during his early adult life. Darkness would make him more appreciative of sight; silence would teach him the joys of sound.

Now and then I have tested my seeing friends to discover what they see. Recently I was visited by a very good friend who had just returned from a long walk in the woods, and I asked her what she had observed. "Nothing in particular," she replied. I might have been incredulous had I

not been accustomed to such responses, for long ago I became convinced that the seeing see little.

How was it possible, I asked myself, to walk for an hour through the woods and see nothing worthy of note? I who cannot see find hundreds of things to interest me through mere touch. I feel the delicate symmetry of a leaf. I pass my hands lovingly about the smooth skin of a silver birch, or the rough shaggy bark of a pine. In spring I touch the branches of trees hopefully in search of a bud, the first sign of awakening Nature after her winter's sleep. I feel the delightful, velvety texture of a flower, and discover its remarkable convolutions; and something of the miracle of Nature is revealed to me. Occasionally, if I am very fortunate, I place my hand gently on a small tree and feel the happy quiver of a bird in full song. I am delighted to have the cool waters of a brook rush through my open fingers. To me a lush carpet of pine needles or spongy grass is more welcome than the most luxurious Persian rug. To me the pageant of seasons is a thrilling and unending drama, the action of which streams through my fingertips.

At times my heart cries out with longing to see all these things. If I can get so much pleasure from mere touch, how much more beauty must be revealed by sight. Yet, those who have eyes apparently see little. The panorama of color and action which fills the world is taken for granted. It is human, perhaps, to appreciate little that which we have and to long for that which we have not, but it is a great pity that in the world of light the gift of sight is used only as a mere convenience rather than as a means of adding fullness to life.

If I were the president of a university I should establish a compulsory course in "How to Use Your Eyes." The professor would try to show his pupils how they could add joy to their lives by really seeing what passes unnoticed before

them. He would try to awake their dormant and sluggish faculties.

Suppose you set your mind to work on the problem of how you would use your own eyes if you had only three more days to see. If with the oncoming darkness of the third night you knew that the sun would never rise for you again, how would you spend those three precious intervening days? What would you most want to let your gaze rest upon?

I, naturally, should want most to see the things which have become dear to me through my years of darkness. You, too, would want to let your eyes rest long on the things that have become dear to you so that you could take the memory of them with you into the night that loomed before you.

I should want to see the people whose kindness and gentleness and companionship have made my life worth living. First I should like to gaze long upon the face of my dear teacher, Mrs Anne Sullivan Macy, who came to me when I was a child and opened the outer world to me. I should want not merely to see the outline of her face, so that I could cherish it in my memory, but to study that face and find in it the living evidence of the sympathetic tenderness and patience with which she accomplished the difficult task of my education. I should like to see in her eyes that strength of character which has enabled her to stand firm in the face of difficulties, and that compassion for all humanity which she has revealed to me so often.

I do not know what it is to see into the heart of a friend through the "window of the soul", the eye. I can only "see" through my fingertips the outline of a face. I can detect laughter, sorrow, and many other obvious emotions. I know my friends from the feel of their faces. But I cannot really picture their personalities by touch. I know their personalities, of course, through other means,

through the thoughts they express to me, through whatever of their actions are revealed to me. But I am denied that deeper understanding of them which I am sure would come through sight of them, through watching their reactions to various expressed thoughts and circumstances, through noting the immediate and fleeting reactions of their eyes and countenance.

Friends who are near to me I know well, because through the months and years they reveal themselves to me in all their phases; but of casual friends I have only an incomplete impression, an impression gained from a handclap, from their lips with my finger tips, or which they tap into the palm of my hand.

How much easier, how much more satisfying it is for you who can see to grasp quickly the essential qualities of another person by watching the subtleties of expression, the quiver of a muscle, the flutter of a hand. But does it ever occur to you to use your sight to see into the inner nature of a friend or acquaintance? Do not most of you seeing people grasp casually the outward features of a face and let it go at that?

For instance, can you describe accurately the faces of five good friends? Some of you can, but many cannot. As an experiment, I have questioned husbands of long standing about the color of their wives' eyes, and often they express embarrassed confusion and admit that they do not know. And, incidentally, it is a chronic complaint of wives that their husbands do not notice new dresses, new hats, and changes in household arrangements.

The eyes of seeing persons soon become accustomed to the routine of their surroundings, and they actually see only the startling and spectacular. But even in viewing the most spectacular sights the eyes are lazy. Court records reveal every day how inaccurately "eyewitnesses" see. A given event will

be "seen" in several different ways by as many witnesses. Some see more than others, but few see everything that is within the range of their vision.

Oh, the things that I should see if I had the power of sight for just three days!

Aids to Preview

1. Notes

- 1) Helen Keller (1880 — 1968) was born in Alabama, U. S. A. An illness deprived her of sight and hearing when she was barely two years old. Though blind and deaf she graduated with honors from Radcliffe College, Boston, Massachusetts, in 1904. Her early education was conducted by Mrs Anne Sullivan, who communicated lessons by the manual alphabet i.e. hand alphabet, tapped out on her hand; the same method enabled her to attend lectures at college. She learned to type, was proficient in French and German, and made a special study of philosophy. She lectured all over America and in Europe and Asia, raising funds for the training of the blind. She devoted all her life to international service for the blind, deaf and dumb. Among her works are *The Story of My Life* (1902) and *Teacher* (1956), an account of Anne Sullivan, to whom she owed her education. Many honors came to Helen Keller through the years. In 1959, The Helen Keller World Crusade was begun at the U. N. building in New York City to help blind and deaf children all over the world. On her eightieth birthday, in 1960, the American Foundation for

Overseas Blind announced the Helen Keller International Award, an award for people who give outstanding help to the blind.

- 2) Anne Sullivan Macy (1866 — 1936) was born at Springfield, Massachusetts. Very early in her life, she became almost totally blind. At fourteen, she entered the Perkins Institution, a school for blind children in Boston, and graduated in 1886. When Helen Keller's father applied to the director for a teacher, he recommended her. For almost fifty years Helen Keller and Anne Sullivan Macy were together, playing together, exploring together and educating themselves; pupil and teacher became inseparable.
- 3) Epicurus (341 — 270 B. C.) was a philosopher in ancient Greece. He taught that the highest goal in life was pleasure derived from the practice of virtue (doing good to others) . However, today an epicurean means one who gets great pleasure from high-quality food and drink. But Helen Keller is not correct to call "eat drink and be merry" the epicurean motto. This is the hedonist motto. In full it is "Eat, drink and be merry for tomorrow we die." A hedonist thinks of nothing but pleasure.
- 4) "window of the soul" — a line from William Blake's poem:

The Everlasting Gospel

This life's dim window of the soul
Distorts the heavens from pole to pole
And leads you to believe a lie
When you see with, not thro', the eye.

2. Proper names:

Helen Keller

Anne Sullivan Macy

Epicurus

3. Explain

- 1) ... in which the hero had only a limited and *specified time* to live.
- 2) I speak, of course, of free men who have a choice, not *condemned criminals* whose sphere of activities is strictly delimited.
- 3) What events, what experiences, *what associations* should we *crowd into* those last hours as *mortal beings*?
- 4) We should live each day with a *gentleness*, a *vigor*, and a *keenness of appreciation* which are often lost when time stretches before us in the *constant panorama* of more days and months and years to come.
- 5) ... but most people would be *chastened by the certainty of impending death*.
- 6) When we are in buoyant health, death is *all but unimaginable*.
- 7) So we *go about* our *petty tasks*, hardly aware of our listless attitude toward life.
- 8) ..., only the blind realize the manifold blessings that *lie in sight*.
- 9) It is *the same old story* of not being grateful for what we have until we lose it, ...
- 10) *Now and then* I have tested my *seeing friends* to discover what they see.
- 11) ... and see nothing *worthy of note*?
- 12) ... but it is a great pity that... the gift of sight is used only as a *mere convenience* rather than as a

means of *adding fullness to life*.

- 13) He should try to awake their *dormant and sluggish faculties*.
- 14) ... how would you spend those three precious *intervening days*?
- 15) What would you most want to *let your gaze rest upon*?
- 16) but I am *denied* that deeper understanding of them which I am sure would come ... through noting the *immediate and fleeting reactions of their eyes and countenance*.
- 17) Do not most of you seeing people grasp casually the outward features of a face and *let it go at that*?
- 18) I have questioned *husbands of long standing* about the color of their wives' eyes, ...
- 19) ... *incidentally*, it is a *chronic complaint* of wives that
- 20) The eyes of seeing persons soon become accustomed to the *routine of their surroundings*, ...
- 21) *Court records* reveal every day how inaccurately "eyewitnesses" see.
- 22) A *given event* will be "seen" in several different ways by *as many witnesses*.

4. List all the useful phrases, collocations and idioms in the text.

5. Note how these words are formed:

- 1) Epicurus — the epicurean motto;
Confucius — Confucian ideas;
Newton — Newtonian discoveries;
Darwin — Darwinian principles;
Malthus — Malthusian theory of population;

Victoria — Victorian Age;
Elizabeth — Elizabethan times;
Hercules — Herculean efforts;
Jefferson — Jeffersonian era;
Jackson — Jacksonian democracy

- 2) (from the Latin *scribere*, to write)
describe, inscribe, subscribe, transcribe,
prescribe, conscribe; description, inscription,
subscription, transcription, prescription,
conscription; script, scripture, scribble.

6. Note how these words and expressions are used:

1) *to appreciate*

- a) to value; to be grateful for:

I appreciate your kindness.

We appreciate the friendship between our two peoples.

Thank you for spending so much time with us.

We appreciate it very much.

I'd appreciate it if you could deliver this letter for me.

- b) to understand, estimate the quality, value or significance of:

Not many young people nowadays appreciate Beijing opera.

In our culture, there has been a tendency to appreciate mature wisdom rather than youthful energy.

appreciation n

Professor Wang is going to give a lecture on the appreciation of modern Western literature.

We would like to give you a small gift by way of appreciation.

appreciative of (warning: This expression is pedantic.)

Some young people are not appreciative of their privileged position as college students.

People with a peasant mentality cannot be expected to be appreciative of the important role of education.

2) *to stretch vt, vi*

a) *to lengthen or widen:*

The only drawback of this material is that you can't stretch it like rubber.

The shoes may feel tight at the toes right now. But they will stretch after a few days.

They all stretched their necks to see what was happening.

b) *to extend from one place to another or across a given space or time*

The desert stretches for nearly a hundred miles.

This railway will stretch over three provinces.

The story stretched over three generations.

c) *to reach (out)*

The beggars all stretched out their hands, but he had no more to give.

Take a rest. Go out and stretch yourself a bit.

stretch n

a) *an unbroken length, area or expanse:*

a stretch of road (water, open country, etc.)

This is a dangerous stretch of the river.

b) *a continuous period of time:*

He was so tired that he slept for twelve hours at a stretch.

He loves to hear his own voice. Often he talks for hours at a stretch.