



Disability: Leadership, Resistance and Culture

DISABLED LEADERS

“Every great dream begins with a dreamer. Always remember, you have within you the strength, the patience, and the passion to reach for the stars to change the world”.

Harriet Tubman was an American Abolitionist and political activist. Born into slavery (c.1820), she was once hit on the head by an overseer. For the rest of her life she was affected by symptoms of brain injury, suffering from epileptic seizures and narcolepsy. Tubman escaped and made some 13 missions to rescue approximately 70 enslaved people, using the network of anti-slavery activists and safe houses known as the Underground Railroad. She also aided the cause of liberty by becoming a spy for the Union during the Civil War.

On June 2 1863, Tubman (under the command of Union Colonel James Montgomery) became the first woman to lead a major military operation in the United States when she and 150 African American Union soldiers rescued more than 700 slaves in the Combahee Ferry Raid during the Civil War.

After abolition she went on to fight for women’s suffrage and human rights. In 1903 she donated land to her church to open a home for poor African Americans.

Harriet Tubman died in 1913 and was buried with full military honours.



Harriet Tubman



Helen Keller

“The public must learn that the blind man is neither genius nor freak nor an idiot. He has a mind that can be educated, a hand which can be trained, ambitions which it is right for him to strive to realise, and it is the duty of the public to help him make the best of himself so that he can win light through work.”

Helen Keller (1880 – 1968) was an American author and educator. Born in Alabama, she was left deaf and blind following a serious illness in infancy. At age 6, she was introduced to Anne Sullivan – a remarkable young almost deaf teacher. Helen very quickly learned to feel objects and associate them with words spelled out by finger signals on her palm. She learnt to read sentences by feeling raised words on cardboard, and to make her own sentences by arranging words in a frame. Eventually she could understand what other people said by feeling their lips and throat with her fingers, as well as using Braille.

Helen rejected her portrayal as triumphing over tragedy. Instead, as a committed socialist, she came to realise much blindness and human misery was preventable and caused by an uncaring capitalist system. She was a life-long campaigner for equality and human rights.

Helen became the first deafblind person to graduate with a Bachelor of Arts degree, in 1904. She went on to write magazine articles about blindness and then several books of her life - *The Story of My Life* (1903), *Optimism* (1903), *The World I Live In* (1908), *My Religion* (1927), *Helen Keller’s Journal* (1938), and *The Open Door* (1957). She was an active fundraiser for both the American Foundation for the Blind and for American Foundation for the Overseas Blind, and after 1921 she devoted most of her efforts to this. Her efforts to improve treatment of the deaf and the blind were influential in removing disabled people from asylums.

She was an advocate of workers’ rights, women’s suffrage, peace, birth control and other radical causes. In 1912, she joined the Industrial Workers of the World (The Wobblies). In 1920, she helped found the American Civil Liberties Union.

In 1964, Helen Keller was awarded the Presidential Medal of Freedom.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XdTUSignq7Y>

