

Speech by Helen Keller, undated

(Helen Keller) Ladies and Gentlemen:

It is a great pleasure to me to speak in New York about the blind. For New York is great because of the open hand with which it responds to the needs of the weak and the poor. The men and women for whom I speak are poor and weak in that they lack one of the chief weapons with which the human being fights his battle. But they must not on that account be sent to the rear. Much less must they be pensioned like disabled soldiers. They must be kept in the fight for their own sake, and for the sake of the strong. It is a blessing to the strong to give help to the weak. Otherwise there would be no excuse for having the poor always with us.

The help we give the unfortunate must be intelligent. Charity may flow freely and yet fail to touch the deserts of human life. Disorganized charity is creditable to the heart, but not to the mind. Pity and tears make poetry; but they do not raise model tenement-houses or keep children out of factories or save the manhood of blind men. The heaviest burden on the blind is not blindness, but idleness, and they can be relieved of this greater burden.

Our work for the blind is practical. The Massachusetts Commission, your association and the New York Commission are placing it on a sincere basis.

The first task is to make a careful census of the blind, to find out how many there are, how old they are, what are their circumstances, when they lost their sight, and from what cause.

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Without such a census there can be no order in our work. In Massachusetts this task is nearly completed.

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The next step is to awaken each town and city to a sense of its duty to the blind. For it is the community where the blind man lives that ultimately determines his success or his failure. The State can teach him to work, supply him with raw materials and capital to start his business. But this fellow-citizens must furnish the market for his products and give him the encouragement without which no blind man can make headway. They must do more than this, they must meet him with a sympathy that conforms to the dignity of his manhood and his capacity for service. Indeed the community should regard it as a disgrace for the blind to beg on the street corner or receive unearned pensions. ¶ It is not helpful, in the long run it is harmful, to buy worthless articles of the blind. For many years kind-hearted people have bought futile and childish things because the blind made them. Quantities of beadwork that can appeal to no eye, save the eye of pity, have passed as specimens of the work of the blind. If beadwork had been studied in the schools for the blind and supervised by competent seeing persons, it could have been made a profitable industry for the sightless. I have examined beautiful beadwork in the shops, purses, bags, belts, lamp-shades and dress-trimmings, some of it very expensive, imported from France and Germany. Under proper supervision this beadwork could be made by the blind. This is only one example of the sort of manufacture that the blind may profitably engage in.

One of the principal objects of the movement which we ask you to help is to promote good workmanship among the sightless. In Boston, in a fashionable shopping district, the Massachusetts Commission has opened a salesroom where the best handicraft of all the sightless in the state may be exhibited and sold. There are handwoven curtains, table-covers, bedspreads, sofa-pillows, linen suits, rugs; and the articles are of good design and workmanship. People buy them not out of pity for the maker, but out of admiration for the thing. Orders have already come from Minnesota, from England, from Egypt. So the blind of the New World have sent light into Egyptian darkness!

This shop is under the same roof with the salesroom of the Perkins Institution for the blind. The old school and the new commission are working side by side. I desire to see similar

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co-operation between the New York Institution for the Blind and the New York Association. The true value of a school for the sightless is not merely to enlighten intellectual darkness, but to lend a hand to every movement in the interests of the blind. It is not enough that our blind children receive a common school education. They should do something well enough to become wage-earners. When they are properly educated, they desire to work more than they desire ease or entertainment. If some of the blind are ambitionless and lazy, the fault lies partly with those who have directed their education, 4 partly with out indolent progenitors in the garden of Eden. All over the land the blind are stretching forth eager hands to the new tasks which shall soon be within their reach. They embrace labor gladly because they know it is strength.

One of our critics has suggested that we who call the blind forth to toil are as one who should overload a disabled horse and compel him to earn his oats. In the little village where I live, there was a lady so mistakenly kind to a pet horse that she never broke him to harness, and fed him twelve quarts of oats a day. The horse had to be shot. I am not afraid that we shall kill our blind with kindness. I am still less afraid that we shall break their backs.

Nay, I can tell you of blind men who of their own accord enter the sharp competition of business and put their hands zealously to the tools of trade. It is our part to train them in business, to teach them to use their tools skilfully. Before this Association was thought of, blind men had given examples of energy and industry, and with such examples shining in the dark other blind men will not be content to be numbered among those who will not, or cannot carry burden on shoulder or tool in hand, those who know not the honor of hard-won independence.

The New movement for the blind rests on a foundation of commonsense. It is not the baseless fabric of a sentimentalist's dream. We do not believe that the blind should be segregated from the seeing, gathered together in a sort of 5 Zion City, as has been done in Ro u mania and attempted in Iowa. We have no queen to preside over such a city.

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America is a democracy, a multimonarchy, and the city of the blind is everywhere. Each community should take care of its own blind, provide employment for them, and enable them to work side by side with the seeing. We do not expect to find among the blind a disproportionate number of geniuses. Education does not develop in them remarkable talent. Like the seeing man the blind man may be a philosopher, a mathematician, a linguist, a seer, a poet, a prophet. But believe me, if the light of genius burns within him, it will burn despite his infirmity, and not because of it. The lack of one sense — or two — never helped a human being. We should be glad of the sixth or the sixteenth sense with which our friends and the newspaper reporters, more generous than nature, are wont to endow us. To paraphrase Mr. Kipling, we are not heroes, and we are not cowards too. We are ordinary folk limited by an extraordinary incapacity. If we do not always succeed in our undertakings, even with assistance from friends, we console ourselves with the thought that in the vast company of the world's failures is many a sound pair of eyes!

I appeal to you, given the blind man the assistance that shall secure for him complete or partial independence. He is blind, and falters. Therefore go a little more than half-way to meet him. Remember, however brave and self-reliant he is, he will always need a guiding hand in his.