

WRITING SPOTLIGHT

- PROMOTE LANGUAGE ARTS SKILLS •
- RAISE DISABILITY AWARENESS •
- STIMULATE DIALOGUE •

Dreaming of Heaven

by Kathi Wolfe

Introduction

Helen Keller, who lived from 1880 to 1968, became blind and deaf at age 18 months. Keller said that, before she learned what words meant, she lived like a wild animal. She did not know what to call the people in her family or the names of things, from her dolls to her dog. When she was seven years old, Anne Sullivan Macy taught her the meaning of language. Because Keller could not see or hear, people sometimes believed that she could not know as much as people without disabilities. Even today, some people are surprised to learn that Keller engaged frequently in conversation and wrote many books and letters. She was able to surmount the barriers posed by her limitations by finding alternative ways of communicating.

Sometimes poets imagine what it would be like to be someone famous. After doing some research and using their imagination, they write a poem in that person's "voice." In "Dreaming of Heaven" the poet, Kathi Wolfe, imagines what Helen Keller was thinking and chooses to make Keller the speaker of the poem. Keep this in mind as you answer the questions below.

Discussion Questions

1. What do you know about Helen Keller? Why is it important to learn about her? In October 2009, a statue of Keller was unveiled in the Rotunda of the United States Capitol. Why do you think a statue was created in her honor?
2. What do you think it would be like if you did not know the meaning of words or how to name things?
3. How did Helen Keller communicate with people? What did she use to make language accessible to her? Why was this so important to her? Have you ever used Braille or another alternative format to communicate?

4. In the poem, Helen Keller is speaking to “you” (for example in lines 16–18, “No more right/than you/to tell of Paris,”). Who is the “you” that she addresses? Do you feel as if Keller is speaking to you?
5. In the poem, Keller says “You say/I can’t speak/of sound/or write of light./Moonbeams/symphonies/are off-limits to me” (lines 1–7). Why do you think some people felt that Keller’s disabilities limited her ability to understand the world? Has anyone ever told you that you could not speak about or understand something? How did you feel about this?
6. Helen Keller lived at a time before people used “people-first” language. Do you know what “people-first” language is? In this poem, the word “defectives” (line 8) is used to refer to people with disabilities. Why wouldn’t we call someone with a disability a “defective” today?
7. List some things that you understood through personal experience. Then list some things you learned about through books, TV, the internet, movies or from talking with other people. What do you think Helen Keller, as the speaker in this poem, is saying?

Writing Activities

- Imagine what it would be like to be Helen Keller. Write a story or poem in her “voice.”
- It is fun to think about what it would be like if we could meet a celebrity or historical figure. Imagine that you have the chance to meet Helen Keller. Write a story or poem telling how you met and what you said to her.

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