

**WE
BEREAVED**

HELEN KELLER

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WE BEREAVED

By
HELEN KELLER



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Suffering and death are the
great teachers of mankind.

PREFACE

I have received many letters from people stricken with grief, and I have always felt poignantly my helplessness before their sorrow. My heart yearns to speak the word that would soothe their anguish, but how futile are words in the ears of those who mourn.

I can only take their hands in mine and pray that the love and sympathy in my heart may overflow into theirs. I too have loved and lost, I too must often fight hard to keep a steadfast faith. When I fail to hear the Divine Voice, grief overwhelms me, my faith wavers, but I must not let it go for without faith there would be no light in all the world.

Faith lifts up shining arms and points to a happier world where our loved ones await us. Faith in immortality broadens the boundaries of our endeavors and makes us feel that we have a part in God's plan of good. It is a staff in our gropings, a benign cup of encouragement.

When all about us is dark we have it in our power to lift on high the torch of faith whose beams shall sustain us until the joy of perfect light dawns upon our mortal day.

HELEN KELLER.

*Forest Hills,
New York.*

WE BEREAVED

We bereaved are not alone. We belong to the largest company in all the world—the company of those who have known suffering. When it seems that our sorrow is too great to be borne, let us think of the great family of the heavy-hearted into which our grief has given us entrance, and, inevitably, we will feel about us their arms, their sympathy, their understanding.



Believe, when you are most unhappy, that there is something for you to do in the world. So long as you can sweeten another's pain, life is not in vain.

What we have once enjoyed we can never lose. A sunset, a mountain bathed in moonlight, the ocean in calm and in storm—we see these, love their beauty, hold the vision to our hearts. All that we love deeply becomes a part of us. Our beloved ones are no more lost to us when they die than if they were still laughing and loving and working and playing at our side. Truly, life is overlord of Death and Love can never lose its own.



Vainly the tortured soul gropes in darkness for a Reason. Bereavement has come; life is lonely and bitter, and almost too terrible to be endured. Abraham Lincoln, when his little son died in his arms, said: “The Almighty has His own purposes.”

“Those who struggle can never learn to float; they must relinquish themselves utterly to the mercy of the water, relax every muscle, be trustful of the element to which they give themselves,” Thus said a teacher of swimming to his pupils. It is so with Eternal Love. In times of trouble if we resist and beat against the waves of misfortune we sink and are swallowed up in darkness unutterable. But if we trust, and if we relinquish our own will, and yield to the Divine will, then we find that we are afloat on a buoyant sea of peace and under us are the everlasting arms.



New sorrows teach new courage. Time makes the bitterest pain to “blossom like Aaron’s rod with flowers.”

It is possible to diminish suffering by resolutely drawing sweetness from the memory of past happiness. Montaigne said: “I have a peculiar method of my own; I pass over my time when it is ill and uneasy, but when it is good I shall not pass it over.” Life would be happier for all of us if we hurried over the ill stretches and lingered long upon the good.



Death comes to those we love, and it seems impossible that, in the face of our dark grief, the sun should shine, birds should sing, men and women should go on laughing and living, and treading all the multitudinous sunny paths of normal life. But, before grief came upon us, we lived and laughed while others sorrowed, and hard as it is to believe, we shall live and laugh again. For that is the way of life.

“Tomorrow!” What possibilities there are in that word. No matter how discouraging today, how gloomy with dark clouds, with terrors and illness and death, there’s always Tomorrow, with its promise of better things. Let us think then of Death as but one more tomorrow, filled with infinite promise and fulfillment.



On these chill autumn days we wander along the highroads and byways, or through the God-painted forests. We return at last, cold and weary, to our own home, and find warmth and comfort before a blazing fire on our own hearth. So in life, we wander until we are cold and weary, and at last find warmth and rest before the peacefully glowing flame of Eternity, for: Death is the hearthstone of Life.

Diogenes tells us that when Zeno was asked what a friend was, he answered: “Another I.” Truly, a friend is another self. When he dies, it seems that we have died as well, but, conversely, the friend who is our “other I” still lives in us, and in living nobly we are continuing his life here.



It is necessary for the endurableness of life that we should believe that the uncertainty, the darkness in which we are struggling, shall one day be illumined by the light of solution; and even now we possess signs and traces of the knowledge which shall come when we see that Light face to face.

In our excess of grief and bitterness, we feel that the hand of God is against us. We look round the happy circle of our friends and it seems to us that we are the only ones bereaved; the only ones to whom has come this terrible emptiness, this dark void of loneliness. When this thought overwhelms us, it is well to remember that we are not alone in our sorrow, that

“There is no flock, however watched and tended,
But one dead lamb is there.
There is no fireside, howsoe’r defended,
But has one vacant chair.”



In the Valley of the Shadow God’s Love still lights the way. Though my eyes be blind with tears, I clasp God’s guiding Hand, knowing that He is Lord of the night as of the day.

In the first dark hours of our grief there is no comfort in all the world for us. The anxious efforts of our friends to console us seem an intrusion. “Leave us alone,” we cry in our hearts; “leave us alone with our sorrow. That is the only precious thing left to us.” But when our friends depart how quickly we change, how we creep to the side of some trusted loved one and reach out wistful hands for affection and understanding. Life is like that. Bereaved though we are, we are not ghosts, but living, breathing human beings, vibrant and eager for contact with our kind. And that is as it should be. God has taken away the beloved and left us here for some purpose. There is work to be done and people to be loved and helped. No normal human being can live with shadows.



It is necessary to pass through deep waters to reach the Shore of Fulfillment.

“Our friend and we were invited abroad on a party of pleasure, which is to last forever. His chair was ready first, and he has gone before us. We

could not all conveniently start together; and why should you and I be grieved at this, since we are soon to follow, and know where to find him.” Benjamin Franklin wrote these words concerning death, and they seem to me very beautiful.



We invite needless suffering when we entertain an exaggerated idea of our own suffering. Why should we be spared the chastening rod which all mortals pass under? Instead of comparing our lot with that of those who are more fortunate than we are, we should compare it with the lot of the great majority of our fellowmen. It then appears that we are among the privileged.

A little boat with sails like snowy wings sailed out of the harbor. The sea was gray and menacing, the sky was darkened by threatening clouds. “It will be an evil day,” said those who beheld the little ship and its going. “See how dark it is!” But the little ship sailed on, and there, in the open sea, suddenly it passed the region of storm, and the sun beamed brightly upon its sails, turning them to silver. And all about the little ship flowed waters that were blue and gold, with dancing lights. So the little spirit which departs in darkness amid sighs and tears and regrettings, finds, despite all the terrors of those who stay behind, its haven of sunshine and joy.



It is not so wretched to suffer loss as not to be capable of enduring it.

Our beloved ones have not “gone to a far country,” it is only the veil of sense that separates them from us, and even that veil grows thin when our thoughts reach out to them.



“There’s so little I can say.” This is often said in apology by friends. If they but knew that any words—the most beautiful—are an intrusion at such a time, and that the truest sympathy comes with the warm close handclasp.



He who travels the hazardous road of misfortune courageously, leaves it strewn with sweet flowers of consolation for others.

When I was a young girl at college I wrote my creed thus: "I believe in God, I believe in Man, I believe in the power of the spirit. I believe it is a sacred duty to encourage ourselves and others; to hold the tongue from any unhappy word against God's world, because no man has any right to complain of a universe which God made good, and which thousands of men have striven to keep good." It is many years since I wrote these words, and I have suffered many a bereavement and many a sorrow, but I see no reason to change my creed. Any human being who believes in God, in Man, and in the spirit is fundamentally, I think, an optimist. No matter what pain comes to him, he knows that good is the dominant power of the universe and feels himself surrounded by it and by God's love.

"What shall I do with all the hours and days that must be lived ere I see thy face again?" So we mourn in our hearts as the empty hours, days, and years stretch before us darkly. But in the very nature of things life is not desolate. We must eat and sleep and find for ourselves a living. Surely and inevitably life makes its demands upon us. No man is left alone with his grief for long. Gradually the little joys come creeping in, and though the lost dear one is not forgotten, the days and years until he is once more found are never empty, but vital and full of endeavor.



Is there not comfort for us in the thought that our departed dear ones have entered a broader field of usefulness than was possible for them here on earth?

Life without faith is uneasy, timorous, and wholly spent in running away from misfortunes which are in the nature of things inescapable.



My friend has long since gone into the Light; but his presence, loved and familiar, walks noiseless by my side, his guiding hand in mine.



There is a Christmas story of a bereaved mother whose tears fell so long, they dimmed the candle of joy her little one held in his hand. Let us resolve that our grief shall not cast a shadow upon the happiness of our loved ones.

Maria Mitchell, America's first woman astronomer, wrote in her diary on December 26, 1854: "We know a few things which were once hidden, and being known they seem easy, but there are the flashing of the Northern Lights; there are the startling comets whose use is all unknown; there are the bright and flickering variable stars, and the meteoric showers—for all of these the reasons are as clear as for the succession of day and night; they lie just beyond the daily mist of our minds, but our eyes have not yet pierced through it." So I think it is with pain and separation. The reasons for them are as clear as the reasons for the succession of day and night, but our spiritual eyes have not yet pierced the mist which is upon us.



The more we dwell on the happy state of our dear departed ones, the closer we shall be to them.

Sometimes it is well not to think. The mind mills over and over again its eternal problems of Why and When and Where. "Why" am I made thus to suffer? "When" shall I see my dear one again? "Where" is he, now that he is lost to me? It is well to remember at such a time with Cardinal Newman: "It is thy very energy of thought which keeps thee from thy God." Cease thinking, questioning, wondering; relax on the bosom of faith, and faith will not betray you.



It is because our loved ones are in the Sun, and we in the shadow, that we do not see each other.

If your faith burns strong and bright, others will light their candle at it.



All the aeons and aeons of time before we were born, before the spirit awoke to its present consciousness—where were we then? All the aeons and aeons of time after we are dead, after the spirit has sunk again to sleep from its present consciousness, where then shall we be? Vain questions; vain wondering. But if the spirit is eternal, we have no more reason to dread the future of the spirit than to shudder at its past. Rather, it is better to consider this, our life, merely as "a gleam of time between two Eternities," and to

believe that most of the truth, most of the beauty, most of the real splendor and fulfillment lies rather in those eternities than in the here-and-now.

There is beauty in Benjamin Franklin's self-written epitaph. Here it is:

“The body of Benjamin Franklin, Printer, (like the cover of an old book, its contents torn out and stripped of its lettering and gilding) lies here, food for worms. Yet the work itself shall not be lost, for it will (as he believes) appear once more in a new and more beautiful Edition, corrected and amended by the Author.”



They tell me that a flash of lightning reveals everything within the range of vision clearly for an instant. Death is the penetrating flash that illumines the spirit-world which material existence veils from us in our happier hours.

“God is, and all is well.” If only we could—and would—remember this in time of sorrow and bereavement, we would find the peace that passeth understanding.



Surely we would not weep if some beloved friend had the good fortune to move from a humble and uncomfortable house to a mansion into which the sunlight streamed, and whose grounds are a never-ending maze of beauty and wonder and delight. We would say that that was a fortunate friend, and, a bit wistfully, we would look forward to the time when we too might leave the burden of our daily tasks and join him in his house of beauty and light.

I am blind and have never seen a rainbow, but I have been told of its beauty. I know that its beauty is always broken and incomplete. Never does it stretch across the heavens in full perfection. So it is with all things as we know them here below. Life itself is as imperfect and broken for everyone of us as the span of a rainbow. Not until we have taken the step from life into Eternity, shall we understand the meaning of Browning's words: “On the earth, the broken arc; in heaven, a perfect round.”



Remember that in the Country where your loved ones have gone, the things that were impossible here become glorious realities.

Back in the seventeenth century, Thomas Fuller wrote: “He was one of lean body and visage, as if his eager soul, biting for anger at the clog of his body, desired to fret a passage through it.” And so it is with us. We mourn, when they are gone, for that lost “clog of a body” as though that were the great, the vital, the beautiful thing, forgetting that the eager soul liberated now, has come into its own as gloriously as a man long shackled in a prison cell, when once again he walks free in God’s glorious sunshine.



As the fruit is the essence of the tree, so sympathy is the essence distilled from pain.

In the presence of suffering and death we cry in the bitterness of our hearts, “Why cannot we cast it out?” Listen, ye that mourn, and ye shall hear the wonderful answer from Matthew 17:20: “Because of your unbelief: for verily I say unto you, if ye have faith as a grain of mustard seed, ye shall say unto this mountain, Remove hence to yonder place; and it shall remove; and nothing shall be impossible unto you.”



Sorrow is like the quieting caress of the dark. It veils the too glaring light of material day, and lets our minds behold the spiritual stars the sun hid from us.

When one door of happiness closes, another opens; but often we look so long at the closed door that we do not see the one which has been opened for us.



This from Plutarch: “Diogenes, the cynic, when, a little before death, he fell into a slumber, and his physician rousing him out of it asking whether anything ailed him, answered: ‘Nothing, sir; only one brother anticipates another: Sleep before Death.’” It is well to look upon Death in this friendly, everyday way. Sleep we welcome every night, knowing from experience that there is nothing to fear. Then why should we fear the coming of our other Brother—Death?

A father, who had lost a beloved child, could not hear the companionship of his fellowmen, and turned to wood and field for solace accompanied only by his dog. His friends attempted to dissuade him from this course, but they were wrong. Gradually healing came to his spirit, breathed to him in silent understanding of trees, of grass, of sky, of his faithful canine friend. Thus we are taught that each of us who are in pain and sorrow must seek consolation after his own manner, and seeking, shall find it.



Death cannot separate those who truly love. Each lives in the other's mind and speech.

“It lies around us like a cloud,
A world we do not see;
Yet the sweet closing of an eye,
May bring us there to be.”

Harriet Beecher Stowe, author of “Uncle Tom’s Cabin,” had a beautiful faith in the after-life. She wrote the above lines and believed them. A sweet sincerity, a child-like belief, rings in every word.



Earth-life cannot appease the soul's hunger. It is Death that flings wide the portals of eternal life. Released by death, the soul sheds its drab covering to don the radiant robe of immortality.

Never should the evening of life, any more than the evening of a single day, be thought of with fear. For evening is a time for home-coming, and of peace. We should say, as Tagore said: “The evening sky to me is like a window, and a lighted lamp, and a waiting behind it.” “A lighted lamp and a waiting behind it”—there is a comforting, a beautiful certainty and serenity in those words.



There are moments when the veil between us and the spiritual world lifts, and we behold our Heavenly home in sudden light. The open door, the smiling faces of our dear ones, birds twittering in the trees, the sweet keen

smell of grass and flowers, the sound of happy voices—all yield their delight once more.

“Bon voyage,” call those who stay behind, to their friends who are departing for foreign lands. Cheerfully they face the separation as the water widens between them and those they love. Why can it not be just so when those whom we love have gone upon that last long voyage of death? The answer will be: “Because this is a parting for all eternity. There is no returning from the country to which these lost dear ones have turned their faces.” Only those who have faith know the truth: “for those who live with God there is no last meeting.”



I believe in the goodness of life, in the recreative power of the spirit, in the ennobling possibilities of suffering.

It is an encouraging thought that however difficult life may be, we are not living it alone, that above and beneath and around us are the resources of the Eternal Spirit.



“Drawing near her death, she sent most pious thoughts as harbingers to heaven; and her soul saw a glimpse of happiness through the chinks of her sickness-broken body.” So said Thomas Fuller in his “Life of Monica.” Is it not selfish and cruel to want to keep with us those who suffer? For, after all, their worn bodies are but as prison cells, through which they see wistfully and longingly, as did Monica, “a glimpse of happiness.”

It is a day bright with sunshine. Then, from somewhere, unexpected, comes a veil of mist and then another, until the face of the sun is hid from us, and all is dark before our eyes. Yet we never doubt for a moment the sun is still there. Some poet has said that Life itself is “A wisp of fog between us and the sun.” I think that is true; I think that we—that the spirit-part of us—is eternal, that the Sun of true love and happiness is eternal, and that life, with its hurry, its bustle, its materialism, comes between us and the Sun, like a wisp of fog, a veiling cloud.



Death is not the end. “In our embers is something that doth live that nature yet remembers.”

Experiencing a great sorrow is like entering a cave. We are overwhelmed by the darkness, the loneliness, the homesickness. Sad thoughts, like bats, flutter about us in the gloom. We feel that there is no escape from the prison-house of pain. But God in His Loving-kindness has set on the invisible wall the Lamp of Faith—whose beams shall guide us back to the sunlit world where work and friends and service await us.



“From the voiceless lips of the unreplying dead there comes no word, but in the night of Death, Hope sees a star and listening love can hear the rustling of a wing.” Thus spoke Robert G. Ingersoll, the agnostic, at his brother’s grave.

A brave faith is the only bridge over which the feet of our loved ones may cross to us.



Robbed of joy, of courage, of the very desire to live, the newly-bereaved frequently avoids companionship, feeling himself so limp with misery and so empty of vitality that he is ill suited for human contacts. And yet no one is so bereaved, so miserable, that he cannot find someone else to succor, someone who needs friendship, understanding, and courage more than he. The unselfish effort to bring cheer to others will be the beginning of a happier life for ourselves.

“Fear,” it has been said, “can only be cured by vision.” Especially is this true of the fear of death. We fear death for ourselves and for those who are dear to us. Could we but trust to that Inner Vision which is of the spirit, we would know that there is nothing to fear—that Eternal goodness and love enfolds us in Death as in Life.



We think too much of the darkness of night and too little of the stars that shine in it. So with Death; we think too much of its blackness, and too little of the bright star of Immortality which robs it of its terrors.

Often the thoughts of great men run parallel. Robert Louis Stevenson says: "To believe in immortality is one thing, but it is first needful to believe in life." And Henry Van Dyke says: "There is only one way to get ready for immortality, and that is to love this life, and live it as bravely and faithfully and cheerfully as we can." We should not mourn for those who have lived nobly, but should look upon their having thus lived as the most splendid and beautiful Preparation for the Life into which they have now entered.



Often the death of a beloved friend educates us. The only way to match our strength with Death is to believe that life is eternal.

"Everybody's lonesome." That was the title of a story once read to me. How true it is! Everyone, no matter how surrounded by friends and loved ones, has periods of loneliness; loneliness for he knows not what. We, the living, should not think of the dead as lonely because if they could speak to us, they would say: "Do not weep for me, Earth was not my true country, I was an alien there; I am now at home where everyone comes in his turn."



Life is everlasting, and the living spirit moves always upward toward the road to perfection. Life on earth is only one phase of the universal life. Then why are we terrified by Death which is only a milepost on the journey toward perfect and eternal life?

"And God shall wipe away all tears from their eyes; and there shall be no more death, neither sorrow, nor crying, neither shall there be any more pain, for the former things are passed away." In Revelation 21:4 come these words, and to the lonely and bereft they are as cool rain falling on parched flowers.



They are wise who perceive that Spirit is stronger than Material force—thought rules the world. Confronted by the seeming fact of material death we can learn to see that the surviving spirit is stronger than the force that has taken from us the body of our loved one. As long as our dear one lives in our thought he is not dead.

Rebellion, anguish, doubt; the unceasing questioning as to why this sorrow had to come, and what the future holds of reunion and joy and love! If only we would remember that “whatsoever there is to know, that shall we know some day,” how soothed and happy we should be. Those who have gone before already know and are waiting behind the veil of Eternity, to whisper to us, when we join them, the beautiful secret of Life and Death.



The spiritual world enfolds in its ample bosom all the visible world. Our earth-home is merely a perceptible point. Here we play with shadows; there we live the reality.

Hourly, daily, we rebel against pain. It seems that we, the bereaved, are the most deeply afflicted of all God’s children. We wonder why this anguish has come to us, and unceasingly we weep. But if we only have the strength to bear our sorrow, we will find in the end that by it we are spiritually ennobled; that “pain is no evil unless it conquers us.”



Often when the heart is torn with sorrow, spiritually we wander like a traveler lost in a deep wood. We grow frightened, lose all sense of direction, batter ourselves against trees and rocks in our attempt to find a path. All the while there is a path—the path of Faith—that leads straight out of the dense tangle of our difficulties into the open road we are seeking.

Let us not weep for those who have gone away when their lives were at full bloom and beauty. Who are we that we should mourn them and wish them back? Life at its every stage is good, but who shall say whether those who die in the splendor of their prime are not fortunate to have known no abatement, no dulling of the flame by ash, no slow fading of life’s perfect flower.



Doubt not that thy dear one lives immortally in Paradise, with bright angels for companions and high tasks for accomplishment.

Spring and autumn; seedtime and harvest; rain and sun; winter’s cold and summer’s heat—everything changes. Observing the transience of all

things, why should we dwell on the ultimateness of death? Why should we not face life and death alike, unafraid?



For three things I thank God every day of my life—that he has vouchsafed me knowledge of His Works, deep thanks that He has set in my darkness the lamp of faith, deep, deepest thanks that I have another life to look forward to—a life joyous with light and flowers and heavenly song.

THE END

TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Misspelled words and printer errors have been corrected. Where multiple spellings occur, majority use has been employed.

Punctuation has been maintained except where obvious printer errors occur.

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[The end of *We Bereaved* by Helen Keller]