May Keller: The Hero Who Defied All Odds

Aliya J Sultan, University of Richmond

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aliya J sultan

“Old Norse will be the death of me yet. It is the hardest thing I ever tackled and I wouldn’t flunk before 34 men for half America.”
– May Lansfield Keller

May Keller was one of the most determined and headstrong young women of her time. Keller’s drive set her apart from others because she saw every obstacle in her life as an opportunity to demonstrate that women could be just as influential and inspiring as men in the late 1800s. Keller’s passion and courage enabled her to harbor the heroic mindset that anything was possible. Despite gender laws and rampant patriarchy in the 19th century, Keller knew what she wanted to do and how she was going to do it.

Keller is considered one of Richmond’s greatest heroes because she not only demonstrated all the traits of a successful hero; she embodied them and became a legendary reference point for all Richmond educators in the future. Her educational and administrative contributions to Westhampton College at
the University of Richmond established a precedent for all women to obtain a quality education. Her progressive thinking and intelligence allowed her to think “outside the box” of social norms and to stand up for women’s rights and opportunities in the educational system (Becue, 2016).

Keller experienced firsthand what it was like to be the only woman in a large classroom, and she knew the moment she expressed any desire for an education that it would not be easy to combat the prevailing patriarchy. With her firsthand knowledge of discrimination, judgment, and inferiority, she took steps to ensure that no woman would feel inferior or deprived of a good college education and career opportunities. Keller changed the lives of millions just by exercising her own basic right to obtain an education.

In this chapter, I will explore Keller’s heroic traits and examine what factors specifically make her a Richmond hero. I will describe the stages of Keller’s heroic journey and discuss Joseph Campbell’s monomyth, which includes three major events: departure, initiation, and return. From there I will look at how Keller exhibited the great eight heroic traits from Allison and Goethals’ (2011) list of eight qualities that every hero possesses. I will also discuss how Keller’s leadership affected her social identity and why her gender had an influence on her leadership as well. I will also describe the nature of Keller’s heroic transformations. Keller experienced a personal transformation, which ignited her passion and desire to defy all odds, and then later she sparked a societal transformation at Westhampton College and in every woman who received an education from Westhampton.

Finally, I will discuss how Keller contributed to the meaning and purpose of education in Richmond and how she influenced every person she met and with whom she worked. This chapter will discuss why Richmond desperately needed someone like Keller to emerge on the educational scene, and how her heroism arose in a crucial time for every citizen and why that mattered. We’ll also discuss how her reputation and name lives on after her death and how that has affected the community. The chapter concludes with a short summary of how Keller influenced her family, peers, and community, and how her
curiosity and desire to get an education led her to transforming her life and the lives of those around her at Richmond and Westhampton.

keller’s heroic journey

The Familiar World

May Lansfield Keller was born in Baltimore, Maryland, on September 28, 1877. She spent her entire childhood in Baltimore, and when it came time to decide on a college, she enrolled at the Women’s College of Baltimore, now known as Goucher College. She stayed in Baltimore for 21 years and it is very possible that because she remained in her familiar world for so long, she was anxious to explore and get out of her comfort zone after she graduated (Becque, 2016).

Departure

While at the Women’s College of Baltimore, Keller met Dr. Frances Mitchell Froelicher who taught German and Literature and was the second woman to receive a Ph.D. at the University of Zürich. Froelicher played an influential role in Keller wanting to get her Ph.D. at a German university. Although Keller was adamant about getting her Ph.D. in Germany, her father insisted she not leave the country and urged her to enroll in the University of Chicago. She spent two years at Chicago and hated her entire experience there. She noticed how poorly women were treated and the last straw was when a professor asked her why she didn’t quit the program and get married. Keller knew she had to get out of the country if anything was to be done about obtaining her education in a respectable environment. Thus, in 1900 she convinced her father to let her go to Germany (Becque, 2016). She attended the University of Berlin and wrote to her father, “Everyone has been extremely polite notwithstanding everything I have heard to the contrary. It is understood, of course, in Germany – men first!” She also wrote, “I don’t see how anybody in their senses could prefer Chicago after having studied any time in a German University” (Keller, 1975).
Initiation

According to psychologists Allison, Goethals, and Kramer (2017), initiation refers to the hero’s encounter with trials and tribulations during the journey. Keller had many obstacles to overcome when she first moved to Germany. One difficulty was the fact that all her lecturers at the University spoke in the German language. Some days, she would listen to German lectures for five hours straining to understand even bits of what the professors were talking about. The tests were difficult and on her first one, she was required to understand the grammars of four languages: Old Norse, Gothic, Anglo-Saxon, and Latin. She wrote, “Old Norse will be the death of me yet. It is the hardest thing I ever tackled and I wouldn’t flunk before 34 men for half America” (Keller, 1975). Keller was determined to succeed; failure was not an option. Keller suffered through many hostile deans and students but never gave up. She joined the Woman’s Club in Berlin called “Verein für studierende Frauen,” which consisted of women interested in making education for women more accessible and respected by the rest of the student body. The group met twice a month on Tuesdays in the beer hall to discuss what actions should be taken to promote women’s rights. The beer hall was seen as deviant because women meeting where liquor was served wasn’t considered “proper.” Keller, however, didn’t care. She took what she could get and made the best out of it (Becue, 2016).

Challenges of Racism and Gender

When Keller enrolled at the University of Heidelberg, the Dean treated her unfairly because of her gender. Keller wrote, “I cannot tell yet what I am going to study as I have to interview every prof., have his permission to attend his lectures, a written permission from the philological faculty and also the dean before I can ever go near the univ. Such red tape!” The dean actively attempted to keep her from enrolling. He kept all her papers and diploma, telling her she would have to wait and do nothing until he was ready to act. He knew classes started the next day so she wouldn’t be able to go to class and would therefore fail. Keller however, was determined and knew that one hostile authority figure wouldn’t stop her, so she went to her classes anyway as if she had permission. Although she was frightened, she didn’t care. She
believed that “they are only German profs, not lords of the realm and I am an American citizen with a passport but no diploma at present.” She also said it was “awfully aggravating and I could kick the old gentleman for being so slow,” (Keller, 1975) but thankfully she never did kick the Dean.

He kept her paperwork for 10 days after classes had started. Meanwhile, she continued to attend classes without the dean knowing and spoke with professors who gave her permission to attend their lectures. She was taking 17 hours of classes that semester, and in her words it was “enough to kill a mule, but never mind, I can stand it.” In 1901, she wrote, “The novelty of being the only woman reciting before a class full of men is somewhat wearing off before the fire of questions which the beloved prof. hurls at my American head” (Keller, 1975). Keller also had many other acceptance difficulties which she didn’t tell her parents about. She eventually told them that to enter one of the professor’s seminars, she had to apply for a thesis on a grammatical subject and complete an oral exam of the professor’s choosing. She was the only woman who applied, and when she received her thesis subject on a language she had never heard before, she “worked like a trooper” and got clearance to attend the seminar. Her willingness to apply for positions that other women wouldn’t dare made her an extraordinary student in the eyes of supportive professors and a courageous peer in the eyes of other students (Becque, 2016).

Challenge of Language Barriers

Keller’s struggles with gender and nationality were compounded by the fact that she was also trying to learn German and better her English. By November of 1901, there were four women studying with her and all of them were having trouble with their minors because they weren’t allowed to minor in German, or German and English, for their Ph.D. Keller felt the whole world was turned against her, but even so she never gave up. Her father advised her on what to do as her minor options were restricted. She ended up majoring in Anglo-Saxon, Middle English, and New English, and minoring in Old Norse, Old French, Middle and New French, and Latin. Her father told her that by majoring and minoring in these subjects, she would eventually study every subset of German and also obtain experience in French and English. When it came time to take her Ph.D. exam, she wrote to her family expressing her distress
about it and how she “should be happier if there wasn’t such thing as a Ph.D. or rather the exam for the Ph.D.” Keller knew that this exam would be the defining factor of her career. It didn’t matter if she aced all her classes; if she received a low score on the exam she wouldn’t be seen as “successful” (Becque, 2016).

Friends and Mentors

Although Keller did not have very many friends due to her intense focus on her studies, she did have many influential mentors. Dr. Frances Mitchell Froelicher and her husband played a great role in helping Keller decide she wanted to go to Germany for her education. Both were professors at the Women’s College of Baltimore and Dr. Frances Froelicher got her Ph.D. at the University of Zürich. Froelicher inspired her and showed her that anything is possible, even going overseas and getting an education. Another mentor she benefited from was the professor who, despite not having her diploma or papers, allowed her to attend his seminars. He taught her that not all professors and authoritative figures were barriers to her getting an education. Keller realized that there were only a select few who were actively trying to decrease the chances for her to get an education, and she knew not to dwell on these people. Keller did not let anyone or anything get in her way of her achieving her goals. No professors and no language barriers would prevent her from earning her Ph.D. She proved to her family, to her professors, and to herself that she was smart enough and good enough to get her Ph.D. from a German university (Becque, 2016).

Villains and Setbacks

As we previously discussed, the Dean of the University of Heidelberg was one of the “villains” in Keller’s career. From hiding her diploma to trying to make her fail her classes, he was indeed an obstructionist character in her life. However, there was another man by the name of Hoops, who made the rule that in order for new members (which happened to be only women) to join his seminar, they had to write a thesis and present it to him perfectly. Keller was the only woman to apply and passed with flying colors. He told her that her understanding of the subject was superb and that all the other students would
have to pass another exam at the end of the semester. However, throughout
the semester, whenever he gave assignments, Keller would bring them to him
and he would “tear it all to pieces, find mistakes, and make me do it all over
again” (Becque, 2016).

A setback in her life involved the completion of her dissertation, which she
had spent three months working on for five to seven hours every day. She
had to copy 500 to 600 pages of manuscript and then find someone to type
all the work she had done. Midway through copying her work, the blood
vessel in her left eye burst, but she wrote to her family that she “kept up
with work” and the vessel eventually healed. She wrote that if her disserta-
tion were accepted, she would give absolutely no credit to her head professor
because he “didn’t give me one bit of advice, and doesn’t know one word that
is in it. That is German – he is too busy to bother with his students; if they
have brains to work out something on their own – good! If not they must
simply go under” (Keller, 1975). She didn’t let anyone stand in her way and
defied the system at times even if it meant her enrollment was on the line.
She demonstrated her independence and strength, which paid off because her
dissertation was accepted without a single correction. She was worried about
failing her exam but wrote to her father, “you will hear whether the profs.
have flunked me, in which case I shall go to Italy, and try it again in July.”
Keller was the most determined woman and although she was frightened of
the prospect of failure, she was prepared to go to a different country and try
all over again. One just knew that she was going to get the title of “Doctor” if
it was the last thing she did (Becque, 2016).

The Return to the Familiar World

After graduating Magna Cum Laude, the Women’s College of Baltimore offered
Keller a job as an English professor, which she accepted. After eight years in
Maryland, she was offered the position of Dean of Westhampton College at
the University of Richmond. “She was determined that Westhampton should
be a liberal arts college in the true sense of the word. Its entrance require-
ments, its curriculum, and its standards must be of the highest. It must com-
pare with the great women’s colleges of the East” (Becque, 2016). She used her
expertise and knowledge about gender discrimination in education and was
determined that Westhampton should offer a fair and dependable education for women in the United States.

The Gift to the World

Keller’s gift to society was passing along her passion and respect for education to her fellow administrators, to her faculty, and to Westhampton students. She devoted her time and life to making Westhampton the greatest women’s college that it could be. Her experiences overseas in Germany only solidified her beliefs that women should be treated equally in the classroom and everywhere else for that matter. She wanted the best for her students and knew that if she gave them a viable way to get a good education, more women would become influential citizens of a more enlightened society. Keller’s qualities and characteristics were contagious. Whenever she was happy, everyone around her would instantly become happy as well. She was a light that came to Richmond and shined for everyone to see. She made people believe that what women wanted was valid and that their opinions were just as valued as those of any man.

Keller knew she was destined for greatness and her father knew it, too. He saw that twinkle in her eyes and he knew that she was going to do great things. She transformed Westhampton and Richmond with her progressive ideas and actions, and she gave her women students the quality education in American that she was never able to obtain. Keller fought for her education every step of the way and never gave up for an instant, but she knew that some women were not able to follow her same path. She therefore provided a system of education at Westhampton, and now almost 100 years later, women are able to get an exemplary education at Richmond thanks to the pioneering contributions of May Keller (Becque, 2016).

The Great Eight

According to Allison and Goethals’ (2011) theory of leadership, there are eight qualities that characterize heroism, and these traits are called the great eight traits of heroes. May Keller exhibited all eight of these qualities to near perfection. To say that Keller was smart was an understatement. She craved
learning, and her wisdom and intelligence were clearly reflected in her dissertations and in her professional contributions at Westampton College. Keller was selfless as well, always thinking of others and giving up personal achievement celebrations to make sure that others didn’t feel unaccomplished. Her strength was not physical, as she had a slight build and a 4’10” frame. But her personality was dynamic and powerful. Her conviction and strength sustained her when everyone seemed to be against her.

Keller’s caring nature was ever-present throughout her life. She cared for her family, for the women with whom she studied in Germany, for the students at Westampton, and for her friends and colleagues. She was loving and compassionate, and these warm qualities shone through her work and her beliefs. Keller’s charisma was derived from her enthusiasm and contagious passion for learning and for teaching. She was adored by her peers and professors, and she wasn’t afraid to say what was on her mind (Keller, 1975). Keller was reliable to everyone who knew her. The students of Westampton relied on her to be a great Dean, and Keller measured up to be just what they hoped for and more. Keller’s resilience was legendary, as evident in her educational experiences in Chicago and in Germany. She bounced back from every near disaster she encountered, and she despite living in a strongly patriarchal society she accomplished more than most of her male contemporaries. Keller inspired many women to obtain an education, to follow their dreams, and to pursue whatever they were passionate about. She dedicated her life to the promise that women should be able to get a good education and that their education should be easily accessible and equal to that offered to men.

The presence of these great eight traits in May Lansfield Keller proved that she not only had heroic traits, but more importantly they demonstrate that she was a hero. Keller used her great eight traits her entire life to give women options when it came to receiving an education. She used her strength, resilience, and inspiration to guide and transform the lives of young women in profound ways. She knew that if more women were educated, the chances of women being treated as equal to men in American society would increase.
Heroes Functions Framework

According to Kinsella, Ritchie, and Igou (2017), heroes serve three main functions: enhancing, moral modeling, and protecting. May Keller’s heroism clearly served these functions with distinction. First, Keller enhanced the lives of others by showing women that they could receive an education and, if they wished, obtain a Ph.D. despite of anyone or anything standing in their way. She boosted the confidence of many young women and improved the quality of life for many more. Her positivity was contagious, demonstrating to everyone that her hard work and years of focus paid off and that she was proud of what she had accomplished.

Second, Keller was a moral model because she exuded the traits of a moral and humble person to friends and colleagues around her. Her decisions were well thought out and she never hurt anyone in the process of becoming successful. While some feel the need to put others down to lift themselves up, this was definitely not the case for Keller. She wanted her peers to succeed just as much as she wanted herself to succeed. She was deeply saddened when she heard that of the eight women who submitted dissertations, only two were accepted and only she had passed (Becque, 2016). She witnessed the difficulty firsthand of what it was like to be treated unfairly, and she realized that she just happened to be one of the lucky women who succeeded despite all the many gender barriers in place.

Third, Keller protected the Richmond community of women from the hardships she had to go through. She saw how difficult it was for women to express their own independent opinions and so she became the Dean of Westhampton to ensure that no woman would have to endure the same disadvantages. She acted as a mother when she was dean and treated every student like her own child. She protected them as if they were all her own. It is thus clear that May Keller served all three main functions of heroism: enhancing, moral modeling, and protecting (Kinsella et al., 2017).
Gender and Leadership

Not many people knew of Keller until she returned to the United States with her Ph.D. and became the Dean of Westhampton. According to Hoyt (2014), “Women are more likely than men to engage in transformational leadership behaviors and these behaviors are associated with contemporary notions of effective leadership.” Hoyt’s review of the link between gender and leadership revealed that “women are more likely than men to endorse social values that promote the welfare of others.” These observations illustrate why May Keller made such a great leader. Keller was selfless and only wanted the best for her students. She demonstrated initiative while she was in Germany and made it the Women’s club’s priority to ensure that women had equal say in the classroom (Becque, 2016). While at Richmond, Keller was “intent on hiring faculty who would demand much from the students ‘because there was so much doubt about the efficacy of even sending girls to college’” (Kapsidelis, 2014). Keller said, “If women are not taken seriously as scholars, then we’re lost.” Keller held extremely high standards for herself and for all her Westhampton students, which in turn paid off when Westhampton acquired the reputation for rigor and academic excellence.

Personal Transformation

May Keller was not one to shy away from a challenge. Unlike many heroes, Keller’s heroic transformation occurred in pieces over time. From a young age, she was interested in education and learning. After graduating college, she decided to pursue graduate work at the University of Heidelberg in Germany. Allison and Setterberg (2016) proposed that suffering is the basis for personal transformation, and May Keller became living proof of this idea. Residing in a patriarchal world where women were second class citizens at best, Keller was constantly being tested and challenged. The Dean at Heidelberg was “hostile” and uncooperative and made it very difficult for Keller to attend classes and work. As mentioned before, he wouldn’t give her the proper documents for her to enroll, and made it so that she had endure many unnecessary procedures to attend class. Keller was determined to go to the University and therefore put up with all the “red tape” she had to, in order to attend and receive the education she desired.
This was Keller’s point of self-transformation. She realized that it was not going to be easy for a woman to get the respect and the education she deserved, and this recognition motivated Keller to change the way the system worked. She was inspired by all the trials and tribulations to transform education so that a proper and high quality college experience would be readily available to all women in America and overseas. Her frustration with the system and for men who disrespected women’s desires to get an education drove her to be the “only woman visible in a perfect swarm of students” (Keller, 1975).

Keller as an Underdog

According to Vandello et al. (2017), underdogs are defined as “disadvantaged parties facing advantaged opponents and who are unlikely to succeed.” This underdog scenario describes Keller’s life because her gender, mixed with ambition, caused clashes with the men in power. Vandello et al. (2017) also argued that “high status individuals and groups are seen as more competent, influential, and worthy than low status individuals and groups.” Keller rose to the occasion when after being denied an education; she fought her way through the corrupt system to become a “high status individual” who eventually influenced thousands of women at Westhampton College. Despite the odds being against Keller, her resilience and strength allowed her to prevail. Vandello et al. (2017) have claimed that underdogs are likeable because people can identify with them on several levels. Women identified with Keller because she was a woman who proved that barriers set in place by a patriarchal society can be overcome. Education enthusiasts identified with Keller because she was so passionate about women getting an education and earning it rightfully. Keller indeed conquered all obstacles in her way.

Societal Transformation

At her funeral, a eulogy speaker made the following observation about Keller’s heroism: “Dean Keller never lost sight of the needs of her student body and her faculty. The students knew of her singleness of purpose. They were conscious of her outstanding character – integrity! …Dean Keller was Westhampton” (Kapsidelis, 2014). Keller transformed Westhampton College and the University of Richmond as well. Her ability to transform her larger
world is consistent with the culmination of the hero’s journey as described by Joseph Campbell (1949). Her transformative effect on society is also consistent with Allison and Goethals’ (2017) analysis of the classic hero’s arc of transformation from self-metamorphosis to societal metamorphosis.

Keller inspired the students of Westhampton College by making sure that each and every student understood that her education was valued and necessary for her to be taken seriously in a male-dominated world. Keller’s “energetic leadership and that of a few other women educators... was instrumental in raising the standards and classifying all southern colleges” (Kapsidelis, 2014). Keller was dedicated to being the best advisor she could possibly be, and her confidence and warm heart inspired others to follow in her footsteps. She was seen as a leader by many people and as a hero to even more. She was courageous and selfless, she was devoted and loyal, and she had the kind of personality that engendered agreement and attracted followers. This was the basis of her charisma. Keller was feisty in her younger years and wasn’t afraid to challenge anyone’s ideas.

While Keller was getting her doctoral degree in Germany, she was seen as a classic underdog figure because she was the only female in a school full of privileged males. However, she managed to focus on her studies and graduate at the top of her class. In addition to being a high achiever in the classroom, she was also very well liked socially and was a well-rounded person. She was also the first chapter president of Pi Beta Phi and attended every annual national convention to demonstrate her pride and dedication.

She also had an impact on the community through her civic engagement. She adopted two dogs and said “God’s creatures should live two by two, otherwise loneliness would result” (Becque, 2016). She had a love for all animals, and everyone who met her walked away with the same sense of love for all things. She led with passion and courage and after hearing her speak, one also left feeling more passionate and courageous about one’s own abilities, potential, and future endeavors.
Meaning and Purpose

Keller’s purpose, based on her letters to her father, was to establish a stable system for women to receive a quality education. She wanted everyone to have the same opportunities and chances to succeed that she had, and her way of accomplishing this objective was to become the best possible Dean of Westhampton College. Aspiring to be as involved as possible in campus life, she attended many student events and even played the role of Juliet in one of the Shakespeare festivals on campus. She also made appearances in many students’ scrapbooks because of how involved she was in their lives. In addition to being a Dean, she also taught English, which helped her get acquainted with even more students. Even after Keller retired, people say they saw her walking her dogs around campus and giving advice to anyone she ran into on her walks (White, 2014).

Conclusion

In conclusion, May Keller attained the status of a hero by becoming the first academic Dean in the state of Virginia and by subsequently influencing the lives of thousands of students in positive and enduring ways. Moreover, her influence extended well beyond that of the academic community that she led. Keller influenced her family by keeping them updated on her worldwide university adventures and by inspiring them through her impressive achievements. She influenced her peers by cheering them on and making sure they knew that anything was possible. And she influenced the community by always being a friendly face anyone from whom anyone could receive support and encouragement. Keller transformed the lives of countless students and colleagues, making sure that everyone knew how important and vital they were in the community. She had a passion for Westhampton College and for her students, a passion that no one else could quite match. Her motherly role as a mentor in the community and in Westhampton made her unique and made the university a home away from home for many students. Without her heroic influence, Westhampton College and the University of Richmond would not have evolved into the outstanding centers of education for women that they are today.
references


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