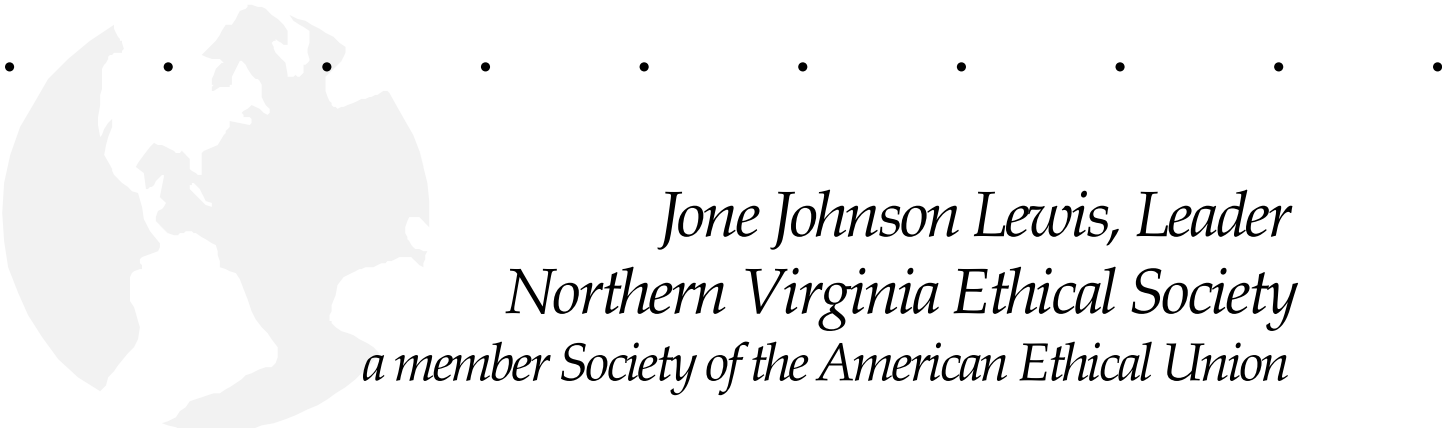




Ethical Heroine

Jane Addams:

Experiment and Social Reform



*Jone Johnson Lewis, Leader
Northern Virginia Ethical Society
a member Society of the American Ethical Union*





Ethical Heroine

Jane Addams: Experiment and Social Reform

Jone Johnson Lewis, Leader

Reading

We slowly learn that life consists of processes as well as results, and that failure may come quite as easily from ignoring the adequacy of one's method as from selfish or ignoble aims. We are thus brought to a conception of Democracy not merely as a sentiment which desires the well-being of all [people], nor yet as a creed which believes in the essential dignity and equality of all [people], but as that which affords a rule for living as well as a test of faith. – *Jane Addams*

Jane Addams and Me

Today is Mother's Day, and for me it's perfect to be talking about Jane Addams, who was perhaps my mother's greatest role model. So before I talk more about Jane Addams' experimental approach to social reform, I want to talk about "Jane Addams and me." I'm not going to talk too much about her biography – you can find one online on my Women's History website [womenshistory.about.com].

But in my teen rebellion, I didn't read Jane Addams' best-known work, "Twenty Years at Hull-House" until I went away to college – at the University of Chicago, an institution with ties to Jane Addams and the settlement house she founded, Hull-House.

My mother was a social worker. Her specialties within that discipline were recreation work and group work. In both of these disciplines, she was inspired by the work of Jane Addams and Hull-House.

Mom worked at a neighborhood center in the middle of a housing project – a project that had been built, long before it was a common practice, not in the inner

city, but at the growing edge of a city. It was only a few blocks from our home. She first volunteered to work at that neighborhood center, then worked part-time, then finally full-time, eventually becoming the program director there her last year that she worked before returning to college to get her degree to get her proper social work credentials.

Unfortunately, my mother died before she could finish that process, and not too long after I'd finally read Jane Addams.

I know that one of the aspects of Jane Addams' approach to social reform that Mom thought was most important was the idea of the "resident" - that social work shouldn't be merely a job where professionals descend on a neighborhood, do their daily tasks without really being involved, and then return to their safe and upscale homes. To Mom, being a good social worker meant sharing the experiences of the people. The major reason she was program director for only a year? As one board member told her, "You listen too much to the people here." Mom thought it was tragic that this was considered a bad thing. Jane Addams certainly would not have.

A couple of years after my mother died, I was concerned to find a place to raise my then 3-year-old son. I wanted to find a Sunday School for him. I had been raised Unitarian, and was not at that time at all aware of something called an Ethical Society. I made a list of all the Unitarian Universalist congregations in the area. At the first one I tried out, the student minister's sermon that day was on Jane Addams and Social Reform. I never visited any of the other congregations on my list - that the congregation welcomed that topic as a sermon told me enough to know that it would be a good home for myself and my family.

That Sunday also led me back into reading about Jane Addams -- and taking better advantage of the presence in that city of the museum installed in what remained of the institution called Hull-House.

Another connection: my first husband and I owned a small bit of property in southern Wisconsin, which we used to camp on with our kids. To get to that property, our most common driving route was through Cedarburg, Illinois -the birthplace of Jane Addams. Watching for the historical marker commemorating Jane Addams became a ritual on those driving trips, and I'd talk to my kids about Jane Addams and Hull-House and their importance to my mother whom they knew only through my stories.

When I returned to graduate school, to prepare for a ministry career, I encountered Jane Addams again. In a required core course on social ethics, I wrote a paper on the “religion of Jane Addams” -- I wanted to uncover what religious beliefs of Jane Addams had inspired her work at Hull-House. I also co-taught a course on Jane Addams at a local university's labor education program, looking at the underlying principles of her social reform efforts.

Jane Addams and Religion

Jane Addams' father, whom she admired greatly, was a Quaker who attended a Presbyterian church because there was no Quaker meeting in town. When Jane Addams moved to Chicago, she joined a Presbyterian church and remained a member through her lifetime. But she attended services there only sporadically.

For some years, she and her partner, Ellen Gates Starr, the initial two residents, were so busy with programs at Hull-House, even on Sundays, that they often did not attend church. Since Sunday was usually the only day off of work for people - men and women - working in the sweat shops and factories of late 19th century urban America, Sunday was often the only day that activities directed to families could be held.

But eventually, Ellen Gates Starr became more traditionally religious, and Jane Addams less so. Starr moved out and in a different direction in her life. Some have claimed Jane Addams became an agnostic or atheist, but Addams didn't wear either her religion or her lack of it on her sleeve. She talked of the ethical message being the true Christian message. When she was in Chicago, she came to spend most Sundays at one of two religious congregations: One was a Universalist congregation on the south side of Chicago, where members included the industrialist George Pullman and also many who opposed his authoritarian paternalism. That congregation was itself the center of another settlement house in Chicago. The other religious congregation where Jane Addams spent her Sundays was the Ethical Society of Chicago, then meeting in the downtown area of the city.

Jane Addams was a regular speaker at the Ethical Society's platforms. One researcher told me that Addams liked to speak at the Ethical Society because the lively discussions and questions afterwards helped her to refine her essays before they were published.

After a Chicago Ethical Society Leader retired, Jane Addams served as one of several interim leaders until a long-term leader could be selected. Although Jane Addams never actually joined either the Ethical Society or that Universalist

church she attended – she retained nominal membership in that Presbyterian congregation– and she was never formally certified as a leader in the Ethical movement – she can arguably be called the second woman to serve as an Ethical Culture Leader (after Anna Garlin Spencer). And I admit to finding that a matter of some pride as a woman Leader in this movement. I think my mother would have been thrilled.

Felix Adler and many people in the Ethical movement were also connected to and involved in the settlement house movement. Hudson Guild in New York City began as a project of the New York Society. Hudson Guild is still alive and serving New York City’s population, including those the poor and today's immigrants. The Chicago Society sponsored the creation of another Chicago settlement house, Booth House, serving, now, an area dominated by the presence of five major public housing projects.

In 1894, the Ethical Culture movement sponsored an important gathering of Americans involved in the settlement house movement, which was key in the development of ideas in the movement. Jane Addams delivered the two first addresses: one on the objective value of the settlement house, and another on what she called the “subjective necessity” of the settlement house.

Objective and Subjective Values of Social Reform

That idea that there are both objective and subjective values to social reform work is one that also appears constantly in the work of Felix Adler, writing about the nature of the ethical life. Frankly, I don’t know and haven’t been able to figure out how much Jane Addams influenced Felix Adler’s ideas, how much Adler influenced Addams, or whether this concept was so much “in the air” that both picked it up from someone else. My guess is that they influenced each other, though neither says so.

This idea is basic, I believe, to what was special about Addams’ work at Hull-House, and to our Ethical movement’s commitment to making the world more humane. It’s the idea that by eliciting the best in another, we elicit the best in ourselves.

The objective is the social reform that makes it possible for the other to be more of their best self. The subjective is that the changer is also changed – the most effective social reform also makes the reformer a better person, through their active engagement with the process and people.

Thus, the skepticism which Jane Addams had – and my mother shared – of the reformer or service provider who simply does the work without making real connections with the people involved.

As I've studied and read Jane Addams and her work, I am struck by this: Jane Addams' model of social reform – one which influenced and was influenced by Felix Adler's evolving model, as well – was one of both participation and experimentation. I think it's even more clear in Jane Addams' work and writing than in Adler's, and understanding Addams makes some of Adler's ideas more clear, as well.

Jane Addams' model was, first, participatory. Henry Thoreau writes in "Walden" that he had to go to the woods to truly experience life. Jane Addams might have written that she had to go to live on Halsted Street in Chicago to truly experience life.

Listen to what Addams says about the neighborhood of Hull-House – this is from her talk to the 1894 conference organized by Adler and the New York Society. I find it both objective, and also clearly the words of someone who's lived there:

Jane Addams on Hull-House

Hull House is an ample old residence, well built and somewhat ornately decorated after the manner of its time, 1856. It has been used for many purposes, and although battered by its vicissitudes, is essentially sound and has responded kindly to repairs and careful furnishing. Its wide hall and open fires always insure it a gracious aspect. It once stood in the suburbs, but the city has steadily grown up around it and its site now has corners on three or four more or less distinct foreign colonies. Between Halsted Street and the river live about ten thousand Italians: Neapolitans, Sicilians, and Calabrians, with an occasional Lombard or Venetian. To the south on Twelfth Street are many Germans, and side streets are given over almost entirely to Polish and Russian Jews. Still farther south, these Jewish colonies merge into a huge Bohemian colony, so vast that Chicago ranks as the third Bohemian city in the world. To the northwest are many Canadian-French, clannish in spite of their long residence in America, and to the north are many Irish and first-generation Americans. On the streets directly west and farther north are well-to-do English-speaking families, many of whom own their houses and have lived in the neighborhood for years. I know one man who is still living in his old farm-house....

.... The streets are inexpressibly dirty, the number of schools inadequate, factory legislation unenforced, the street-lighting bad, the paving miserable and altogether lacking in the alleys and smaller streets, and the stables defy all laws of sanitation. Hundreds of houses are unconnected with the street sewer. The older and richer inhabitants seem anxious to move away as rapidly as they can afford it. They make room for newly arrived immigrants

The site for a Settlement was selected in the first instance because of its diversity and the variety of activity for which it presented an opportunity. It has been the aim of the residents to respond to all sides of the neighborhood life: not to the poor people alone, nor to the well-to-do, nor to the young in contradistinction to the old, but to the neighborhood as a whole....

Jane Addams' Model of Social Reform

So how did Jane Addams go about reform? The simple way to put it is this: she, and her mostly-female co-workers, became "residents." They lived there. They experienced the smells and sights and sounds of the neighborhood. They invited their neighbors into their home, Hull-House. They were part of the neighborhood and the neighbors were part of Hull-House. They experimented until they found ways that made life better for everyone there.

Most of the residents were women; they had been raised to believe that a "woman's place is in the home" yet were also more educated than women of the past had been and thus had something to offer to the larger society. Some have called what they did "public housekeeping" - instead of confining themselves to the home and one family, they took responsibility for caring for the whole neighborhood and all its people.

The Hull-House residents learned quickly that ethnic diversity of a city neighborhood could not be ignored. One program didn't work for all groups. Getting people from the groups to relate to each other was a slow process, and required among other things learning a common language, English, in which Hull-House provided many classes.

One example of a Hull-House project: the residents observed that in America, the Greeks were often considered by their neighbors to be not just ignorant but incapable of learning. And the residents observed the Greek immigrants adopting this as their own self-image, so much did they encounter it in their interactions in America. And so, Hull-House began evening classes for the Greek immigrant men - in Greek philosophy. Why? To help the men recover a sense

of pride in their heritage – that it was their own ancestors who brought “light” to the world.

Another example: the residents, in their being present with Italian immigrant mothers of infants, discovered that these mothers fed their children with bread dipped in tea. The residents, who knew that there were better foods for infants, didn’t lecture them ... the Italian families were invited to a Sunday morning tea at Hull-House, where the residents served oatmeal for the infants and children. Thus, the residents were able to provide a different option that then the Italian families could freely choose, now that they were aware of that option. And they preserved their dignity, and the children’s health improved.

Another: When Addams observed that the children of immigrant families were adopting a disdain for their grandmothers and mothers “primitive” sewing and needlework, in contrast to “American” factory-made clothes, Addams opened a textile museum honoring hand-work as art. The primary audience for the museum: neighborhood residents.

But Hull-House residents didn’t sit down in a program planning session and schedule out these ideas, or take them from some book. They experimented. Sometimes the experiment worked, more often it didn’t. How did the residents know whether they worked or not? They were part of the community, so they asked and listened, they observed carefully, and they didn’t assume that they knew better than the people they were living among. They drew on the diversity of the neighborhood as a strength, and realized that they – the residents of Hull-House – would never have as good answers by themselves as they would have if they listened to and truly involved the people of the neighborhood.

Participation of both reformers and those with the “objective needs” are essential to effective social reform. The attitude that all programs are experiments is also essential -- otherwise, well-intentioned reformers are so invested in their projects that they either give up or keep trying to force the program anyway.

At Hull-House, when an experiment worked well, some residents worked on making it permanent, sometimes through founding a private organization, and sometimes through getting government involved. Thus, when a small playlot near Hull House proved successful in providing a constructive place for children to play and families to gather, became a city-wide, city-funded program of playlots every few blocks throughout Chicago – a program that remains to this day.

The basic model of social reform, as practiced by Jane Addams and the residents of Hull-House, is thus the opposite of what we see today in the government's approach to social programs.

The theory of social reform and government in our day seems to have evolved largely into this: let government fund experiments, and then private funding should take over if the experiment works. One result of this, is that of course many government programs will fail – they're experiments. Thus, government programs are easily targeted as failures, and privately-funded programs look more successful – and the pressure is on to cut government programs because they have such a bad track record.

The current administration's fondness for faith-based programming is one answer to this dilemma. In one sense, this is sort of the Jane Addams model. President Bush is right that many of those programs work better than government programs do – but he doesn't understand why. The faith-based programs that do work are the result, usually, of the kind of bottom-up experimental, participatory model.

But in implementing faith-based programming, this attitude isn't necessarily carried through fully. There's unfortunately in practice a presumption that if the program is based on Christian faith, it must work – the money in this program is going to Christian-based programs, not Jewish or Buddhist or Muslim programs.

In other government actions, effective programs are sacrificed to religious pressures – the global gag rule, preventing family planning organizations from even speaking of abortion as a fallback method of family planning, is a good example.

The Jane Addams model, really implemented, would be, I think, a better way to get to effective use of government money for social reform. Let private charities, including religions, fund *experiments*. Once an experiment is proved to be useful, and does not violate individual rights nor extend beyond the social reform itself (such as to recruiting for a particular religious faith or political party), then let the government take it over “for the common welfare.”

Jane Addams model of social reform is simple and, I believe, effective. Not all attempts at reform will work – an attitude of experimentation will keep reformers from becoming more fixed on forcing solutions to work than on fixing solutions so they work. Reform only works if it truly involves the people the reform is meant to serve. And we need to take some risks, support and be part of

projects that may not work. If there are fewer experiments and failures, there will be fewer successes, too.

I agree with Jane Addams – and my mother – that making the world better is an essential part of our lives. We don't have to make social reform the only and central activity of our lives – even Addams believed that the residents of Hull-House needed their own time and space and recreation to remain effective. But there is a value to us, and not only to the world, of being involved. And being involved is not just about what we think, but what we do.

Reading – from Jane Addams

By our daily experience we have discovered that we cannot mechanically hold up a moral standard, then jump at it in rare moments of exhilaration, when we have the strength for it, but ... the strength must be secured from interest in life itself. We slowly learn that life consists of processes as well as results, and that failure may come quite as easily from ignoring the adequacy of one's method as from selfish or ignoble aims. We are thus brought to a conception of Democracy not merely as a sentiment which desires the well-being of all [people], nor yet as a creed which believes in the essential dignity and equality of all [people], but as that which affords a rule of living as well as a test of faith.