

Jane Addams: Reclaiming her Legacy- A Call to Social Workers.

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As social workers, we credit Jane Addams as our foremother. But, as is frequently the case with someone who becomes an icon, the depth of her work is diluted into a few sentences. And as is also often true, the more radical, political aspects of her work take a back seat to her 'charitable work'. We repeatedly hear: 'Jane Addams founded Hull House'. We less often hear how she joined with workers to lobby the state of Illinois to change laws, to champion legislation that would both empower and protect people, and how she worked actively to wage peace.

In the last few years, as I have watched the slow erosion of many social programs, and many hard won rights, I have been thinking that we are now living in a time when it is urgent for social workers to go back to our beginnings. These beginnings were founded on a clear understanding that it was important to work with individual people in order to alleviate their suffering. And at least as important, it was imperative to work for social reform and to impact the root causes of people's suffering.

So yes, Jane Addams founded Hull House. In that capacity, she started a settlement house which offered medical care, child care, legal aid, classes for immigrants to learn English, vocational skills, music, art and drama. But when a severe depression swept the country in 1893, Jane Addams understood that it was not good enough to serve over two thousand people a week. She understood the importance of challenging those laws and systems, which kept people, oppressed.

Using her experiences at Hull House, Jane Addams, the Hull House residents and their supporters launched a highly effective reform movement. They lobbied the State of Illinois to examine the laws governing child labor, the factory inspection system, and the juvenile justice system. They launched the Immigrants Protective League, the Juvenile Protective Association and the first juvenile court in the country. They worked for legislation to limit the working hours of women, mandate schooling for children, recognize labor unions, and provide for industrial safety. When a Federal Children's Bureau was created in 1912, and a federal child labor law was passed in 1916, the Hull House group saw their efforts bear fruit on a national level.

And Jane Addams did not stop there. When the Haymarket riot erupted because of oppressive working conditions, Jane Addams supported the workers even though it cost her a significant loss of donor support. To make up for the loss, she generated revenue for Hull House by lecturing and writing.

In 1915, she organized the Woman's Peace party and the International Congress of Women in an effort to avert World War I. When the US ultimately joined the war, Jane was expelled from the Daughters of the American Revolution and became the target of much criticism. But she kept on. She was elected the first president of the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom, helped found the American Civil Liberties Union and the NAACP. This increased the criticism that people directed at her. She was accused of being a communist, a socialist and an anarchist. But she kept on. In 1931, she won the Nobel Peace Prize. (The preceding material was based on information contained in The Lincoln Library of Essential Information, Frontier Press Co. (1924) as reported at www.lkwdpl.org/wihohio/adda-jan.htm and also the Hull House Museum's website at <http://wall.aa.uic.edu:62730/artifact/HullHouse.asp>).

Today social work has evolved into a profession that Jane Addams might not recognize. We have academic credentials, with a strong body of writing and research upon which to rest our work. We have professional licenses in many states. Many of us have specialized in clinical practise, performing necessary and valuable services to individuals who suffer from a wide range of symptoms and stressors. We work in private offices, agencies, hospitals, nursing homes, schools, aids clinics, substance abuse programs, and much, much more.

But how many of us are working for social change, and to eradicate some of those societal ills which contribute so mightily to our clients suffering? After all, social work was predicated on a deep understanding that our environment can oppress us in ways that make it hard for us to function and to achieve our full potential. Our beginnings are radical and controversial. But I think that the constant struggle to get funding, to comply with governmental requests, to write grants, to maintain our 501(c)3 status, to conduct a private practise under the watchful eyes of managed care companies have diverted some of our energies away from the mission to accomplish real social change.

Yet there is an absolutely urgent need for us to reclaim our roots. There is a steady and unrelenting erosion of support for social programs and for people in the US today. In many areas where we thought we had made gains, we are going backwards and losing ground. Instead of a War on Poverty we seem to have a war on poor people. Katrina brought this into our living rooms. Fifty years after Brown vs. Board of Education, many of our school districts are absolutely segregated. (See *The Shame of the Nation: The Restoration of Apartheid Schooling in America* by Jonathan Kozol, 2005). Instead of drug treatment, we have laws like the Rockefeller Drug Laws in NY State, which have destroyed lives and whole families.

Poverty rates increase. The numbers of hungry children in our country rise. Many people have no health care. Affordable housing is an elusive dream. (Those of us who work with poor people know how deeply these oppressions

impact our client's mental health.) And years after Dr. Martin Luther King, years after Selma, years after Montgomery, racism continues to exact a devastating price across the county.

In fact, some of us have come to believe that racism is the single most critical barrier to building effective coalitions for social change in our country. (for this analysis, I am wholly indebted to the People's Institute for Survival and Beyond*).

In the United States of American, racism is the virus in the computer that infects every single program. We can only have successful movements in the country to work against poverty, war, injustice and violence, if we confront racism and work against it at every level.

With this in mind, some social workers in the New York Area have formed the Anti-Racist Alliance (“The AntiRacist Alliance is an organizing collective of human service practitioners and educators whose vision is to bring a clear and deliberate anti-racist structural power analysis to social service education and practice. We work for racial justice from a common understanding of racism as presented by the Peoples Institute for Survival and Beyond”. see www.antiracistalliance.com)

The goal of the Anti-Racist Alliance is to infuse social work education and practise with an understanding of structural racism and principles of effective anti-racist organizing. We believe that effective anti-racist organizing will give us the tools we need to challenge poverty, militarism, substandard education, the criminal justice system, unemployment, violence against women and the myriad of other ills that affect our country today. We think that Jane Addams would be part of our collective.

This is a call to the Social Work Profession to reclaim our roots. Many of us do wonderful and important work. But social work is about social change. How much are we changing and impacting the systems which are making us and our clients sick. If we look around, the obvious answer is 'not enough'. We need to remember how to change systems and institutions. We need to reteach and relearn effective organizing. Like Jane Addams, we need to see clients as potential allies in building a movement and we need to keep our focus on racism, because if we do not, we will fail in our efforts to come together.

Many social movements are co-opted by institutions which want to maintain the status quo. I think that whole areas of the social work profession have been co-opted in this way. But we have never been about preserving the status quo. We are strongly rooted in movements for change. Hull House proved not to be an end in itself, although it was an incredible model which helped thousands of people. Rather, Hull House served as a springboard and an inspiration to spur a movement for social reform, and to make important, systemic changes. In 2006, is time to go backward to go forward.

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*The People's Institute for Survival and Beyond is a national collective of experienced organizers and educators dedicated to building an effective movement for social change, and consider racism the primary barrier. Their highly acclaimed 'Undoing Racism' workshop has been given nationally and internationally for more than 25 years. (www.thepeoplesinstitute.org)