

Dorothea Dix - Nurturing Reformer

Sermon by Rev. Tess Baumberger
Sunday May 10th, 2015

Reading from “Memorial to the Massachusetts Legislature (1843)
by Dorothea Dix

Note - this is the original language of the Memorial and it contains words commonly used then that we would not use today. In using it in worship I substituted the word “mentally ill” for “insane” and “developmentally disabled” for “idiot.”

I come to present the strong claims of suffering humanity. I come to place before the Legislature of Massachusetts the condition of the miserable, the desolate, the outcast. I come as the advocate of helpless, forgotten, insane, and idiotic men and women; of beings sunk to a condition from which the most unconcerned would start with real horror; of beings wretched in our prisons, and more wretched in our almshouses. . . .

I must confine myself to few examples, but am ready to furnish other and more complete details, if required.

Lincoln. A woman in a cage. Medford. One idiotic subject chained, and one in a close stall for seventeen years.

Dedham. The insane disadvantageously placed in the jail. In the almshouse, two females in stalls, situated in the main building; lie in wooden bunks filled with straw; always shut up. One of these subjects is supposed curable. The overseers of the poor have declined giving her a trial at the hospital, as I was informed, on account of expense...

In traversing the State, I have found hundreds of insane persons in every variety of circumstance and condition, many whose situation could not and need not be improved; a less number, but that very large, whose lives are the saddest pictures of human suffering and degradation.

Gentlemen, I commit to you this sacred cause. Your action upon this subject will affect the present and future condition of hundreds and of thousands. In this legislation, as in all things, may you exercise that "wisdom which is the breath of the power of God."

Sermon “Dorothea Dix - Nurturing Reformer”

There is something about hearing stories and telling stories that powerfully connects and inspires us. Stories based on real experiences, stories that highlight the humanity of their subjects AND call on our humanity — those stories can bring about great changes.

Today I would like to weave for you a fabric of stories using threads of different hues and textures. This fabric will feature the life of the amazing Dorothea Dix. Though she never married or had children, Dorothea was a creative, nurturing reformer whose work has aided millions of lives.

From the many-colored cloth of these stories, we can form a garment of mercy today, clothing ourselves in compassion for those in prison, and those among us who suffer from mental illness. In the coat of many colors that is our congregational life, we strive to include people with mental health problems and developmental disabilities. We advocate for those in prison, many of whom face the same challenges today as in Dorothea’s time.

Known as “Dolly” when she was a child, Dorothea Dix was born in 1802 in Campden, Maine (which now has a park named for her). Her father Joseph Dix came from a wealthy Boston family that disowned him because he married a woman they thought was far beneath him.

It seems that Dorothea’s father struggled with alcoholism, was abusive, and had difficulty holding down a job. Dorothea’s mother suffered from poor mental health. Dorothea said she never knew childhood because she had to take care of her two younger brothers, as well as her parents. When she was twelve years old, Dorothea’s grandmother decided that her parents were incapable of taking care of their three children, and so became their guardian.

Dorothea and her upper-crusty grandmother clashed. Mrs. Dix wanted this girl raised in poverty to act like a wealthy girl. She punished Dorothea for

trying to give food and her own new clothes to a beggar at the gate of the Dix mansion. Eventually she shipped Dorothea off to her aunt in Worcester.

Dorothea loved learning and studied anything she could get her hands on. She read from early in life and liked to keep company with learned people. In Worcester Dorothea met a distant cousin, Edward Bangs, who encouraged her to open a school for girls. Girls were not allowed to attend public schools at the time. Dorothea did, and at the age of fifteen began teaching. Her first career was teaching young children, and writing books for parents and children.

Edward fell in love with his cousin and proposed to her. Though Dorothea never married him or any other, she and Edward were engaged for some time. Bangs later became secretary of state here in Massachusetts at the same time that Dorothea's good friend General Levi Lincoln was governor. These two influential men helped Dorothea's later reform efforts.

Eventually Dorothea's love for learning and for being around smart people led her to meet the Unitarian minister William Ellery Channing. Now Dorothea's father had been a fire-and-brimstone Methodist, while her grandmother attended a Congregational Church. Dorothea did not find spiritual satisfaction in either. In is biography of her on the online dictionary of UU biography <http://uudb.org/articles/dorotheadix.html> Wayne Viney says Dorothea felt a kinship with Unitarianism's, "emphasis on the goodness of God, purity of heart, openness to new knowledge, and responsibility for the good of all society." She did not like stiff beliefs, and felt nearest to the Divine when doing specific things that had measurable good effects. Justice work was a spiritual practice for her.

In 1836 Dorothea's teaching career ended with a severe bout of tuberculosis. According to some sources, she suffered a complete physical and emotional collapse at that point. She had to shut down the two schools she had started at Dix Mansion in Boston (her grandmother apparently came to admire Dorothea's pluck). One of these schools was for privileged girls – that kept

grandma happy – and the other was a free school for poor children – which kept Dorothea happy.

After her health collapsed in 1836, forcing her to shut both schools, her friend William Ellery Channing helped arrange a trip to England for her, where she stayed with the Unitarian William Rathbone, a man who gave generously to many causes. Rathbone and his wife very kindly nursed Dorothea back to health, and introduced her to many prominent people, including Dr. Samuel Tuke. Dr. Tuke was the son of the man who had established a progressive institution for the mentally ill called York Retreat.

One source explains, “The Tukes believed that mental illness could be alleviated, even cured, by treating the insane with kindness and respect. York Retreat’s philosophy and values formed the basis of Dix’s subsequent crusade for the rights of the mentally ill.” That crusade began in 1841. She had returned to the Boston area by that point and started teaching a Sunday School class for women in an East Cambridge prison.

Dorothea was shocked by the conditions she encountered there. She found mentally ill women and children with severe developmental disabilities in the same cells as hardened criminals. Though it was March, the jail was not heated because people believed if you were mentally ill, you could not feel heat or cold. Dorothea quickly got a court order to heat the place and improve things, and set about learning all she could about mental illness.

Soon she knew as much about mental disorders as some experts in that field. She discovered that while people with money could provide care for mentally ill family members in some way, poor people with mental illness often ended up in jails, prisons, poorhouses, and workhouses.

As she studied, a plan took shape in her mind. It became one of the very first social research projects. First she visited as many prisons, jails, and poorhouses in Massachusetts as she could, listening to stories and taking lots of notes. Then she wrote a lengthy report called a “memorial.” Finally, she used her

contacts (including her former fiancé) to present it to the state legislature. Her goal was to establish hospitals for the care of poor people who were mentally ill.

You heard parts of that memorial , and so know that she presented mentally ill people as human beings worthy of respect and kindness. She told their stories, capturing their humanity and also calling on the humanity of those who had power to change things. It worked. The legislature voted funds to expand the state hospital in Worcester.

Even before this first success, Dorothea was visiting mentally ill patients in other states. She followed the same pattern – doing her research, writing memorials full of personal stories, and having influential friends present them. She had to get male friends to do this because women could not vote at the time.

By the way, it was very unusual for women at the time to travel alone, let alone try to influence Congress, but that did not stop Dorothea Lynde Dix. In the seven years between 1841 and 1848, some estimate that she traveled 60,000 miles and visited over 9,000 incarcerated people in every state east of the Mississippi River. She saw ground break on dozens of new and expanded facilities for mentally ill people.

After all this success, in 1848 she wrote a memorial presented to the U.S. Senate. For the next several years she advocated for a bill that would set aside 12.5 million acres to support a fund for the care of indigent blind, deaf, mute, and mentally ill individuals. What a bold woman! She exchanged lots of letters with President Millard Fillmore (also a Unitarian) during this time. If the bill that eventually passed by both houses had crossed his desk, he probably would have signed it. He was no longer in office, however, and Franklin Pierce vetoed the measure.

After the national bill failed Dorothea returned to Europe to rest, but soon took up her cause again as she heard stories about the huge differences between private institutions for mentally ill people from wealthy families and public

institutions for poor mentally ill people. She began to visit mentally ill people in fourteen countries across Europe, listening to their stories.

In England she asked for Queen Victoria's support in her crusade. In Italy she met with Pope Pius IX, telling him stories about the terrible conditions there. He found out that what she said was true, and started changing things for the better. A pope later compared Unitarian Dorothea Dix with Saint Theresa.

After the Civil War (when she served as Director of Army Nurses while in her 60s), Dorothea returned to her cause. Waves of new immigrants swelled the ranks of poor and mentally ill people. Since money was tight for the states after the Civil War, many of the institutions she helped found before the war were over-crowded, lacked sufficient staff, and needed repairs.

Some people later blamed Dorothea Dix for the "custodialism" of those facilities - meaning they just took care of basic needs like shelter and food, but did nothing really to help people. Viney writes, "In fact she hated custodialism and had argued strongly that the mentally ill should be provided therapy, books, music, recreation, and above all, meaningful work." Dorothea's views of the treatment of mentally ill people were radical. At a time when most believed that mental illness was incurable, she believed that through kind, respectful humane treatment, many mentally ill people could be cured or at least bettered.

The girl that had tried to give her own clothes to a beggar outside her grandmother's house grew into a woman who stood up for poor people with mental illness, who mostly ended up in prisons or poor houses. The girl who clashed with her wealthy grandmother grew into a woman who spoke truth to wealthy people who had the power to change things. This woman who had not had much of a childhood and who was not all that healthy herself worked tirelessly her whole life to establish hospitals for people with mental illness, not only in our country but also overseas. She was an amazing woman and a force of nature. And much of her work she did by listening to and by telling stories. Stories can be powerful things.

Now as I have been telling her story, some of you may have been finding connections to your own stories, weaving fibers into this cloth. The silence of this weaving is partly because we may be afraid to share our stories of mental illness. Unfortunately, many people have a lot of shame about it still. Shame is a terrible thing - it keeps people stuck and afraid - jailed, in a sense. We can only free ourselves by beginning to talk about these things, sharing our own stories.

My father's father was an alcoholic who I believe was self-medicating for an undiagnosed mental illness. Most likely it was bipolar disorder because both of my father's sisters had that illness. My grandfather was not treated partly because of shame about mental illness and addiction. Shame can be deadly. My grandfather (who I never knew) and two of his brothers ended their own lives.

Others in my family have been more fortunate - they have found kind and effective treatment in mental health institutions like those founded by Dorothea Lynde Dix. For others who are even more lucky, good therapy and medication have been enough. I am one of those lucky ones. I have been blessed with wonderful therapists who have helped me heal and find my strength.

No doubt others here among us have similar threads running through the cloth of their family and personal lives. These twine in silent stillness under the surface until we lift them up, and allow their unique hues and textures to enrich the fabric of our diversity. I know that some of you have had the courage to do this already. That's wonderful. Let's keep that going. If you or someone close to you has had a mental illness, I invite you, if you're comfortable, to raise your hands. Look around. There's really nothing to be ashamed about. This is so common. It's part of being human. Thank you.

In the coat of many colors that is our Unitarian Universalist religious life, we include people with mental health problems and developmental disabilities. Not only that, many UUs have done work to reform today's prisons, which still include a large number of poor people with mental illness. Because prisons do not offer effective treatment for mental illness we need to continue the work

Dorothea began. I believe Dorothea Dix would be proud of us. She believed, as we do, that everyone deserves to be treated with respect and kindness.

There is something about hearing stories and telling stories that powerfully connects and inspires us. Specifically, hearing stories based on real experiences, stories that make clear the humanity of their subjects and also call upon our own, can inspire us to create change. They can inspire legislators, presidents, queens and popes as well as more common people like us.

The story of the life of Dorothea Lynde Dix shows not only that she knew how to tell such stories, but that her story might be like our own personal stories. We too may have had live touched by mental illness. We too may have been inspired by their stories to help and advocate for them.

The story of the life of Dorothea Lynde Dix shows not only that she knew how to tell stories of our common humanity, her story is also our own. It is part of the cloth of many colors that is our proud tradition. From the threads of her story and our stories we can weave a fabric of welcome kindly and care for those among us who suffer from mental illness. We can stand up for those confined to prison cell. And when we step back to observe the beauty of this cloth, oh, how can we keep from singing?