



## Remembering Hull House, Speaking to Jane Addams, and Preserving Empathy

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## **Remembering Hull House, Speaking to Jane Addams, and Preserving Empathy**

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*Chicago's Jane Addams Hull House Association was closed on January 27, 2012. The settlement house, founded in 1889 by Jane Addams and Ellen Gates Starr, long served as a beacon for social justice. The devastating loss of this national treasure is an ominous sign. In this article the authors remember Hull House, consider the implications of its closing, pay tribute to its inspiration Jane Addams and reflect on the importance of preserving empathy in tough economic times.*

*KEYWORDS Hull House, Jane Addams, Ellen Gates Starr, social justice, disenfranchised, empathy, compassion*

### THE DEMISE OF A NATIONAL TREASURE

One of the oldest, largest, and most well-respected community-based human service agencies closed its doors on January 27, 2012. Some 300 employees at Chicago's Jane Addams Hull House Association were handed layoff notices and final paychecks and were notified of the immediate discontinuation of their health care benefits. This is a tragedy and an ominous sign.

Hull House was founded in 1889 by social worker and Nobel Peace Prize winner Jane Addams and her lifetime friend, community-activist Ellen Gates Starr. Hull House began as a home for disenfranchised citizens. The organization's mission was "neighbors helping neighbors." In its early years

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Hull House was organized to help immigrants to learn English and the principles of democratic citizenship, and to improve the lives and working conditions of many of those living on the west side of Chicago. In recent years Hull House's focus was on foster care, child care, domestic violence counseling, and job training.

From its inception Hull House was a beacon for social justice. It was guided by three basic principles: (1) active and side-by-side participation with community residents in addressing local issues; (2) respect for the dignity of all individuals regardless of ethnic background, socioeconomic status, gender, or age; and (3) a belief that poverty and lack of opportunity breed ignorance, crime, and disease that are the result of financial desperation and not due to a flaw in moral character.

It is widely believed that Hull House's demise was the result of its over-reliance on government financing. Margaret Berglund, president of the Child Care Association of Illinois, commented in the *Chicago Tribune* (Ford & Thayer, 2012) that "the government is asking you to do today's work at yesterday's prices."

Some would argue that Hull House had strayed quite far from a key aspect of its original mission: to bring together the privileged and the poor of our society for their mutual benefit. According to Illinois physician Cory Franklin (2012),

Hull House was not simply a charity; it embodied how [Chicago] became a community. When immigrants and the poor were cut off from the rest of society, the settlement house forged what Addams called "the soundest of all social bonds, the companionship of mutual interests." (p. 21)

Is it the intention of government to shrink the system of care? Although it is not their job to keep providers in business, it is their responsibility to ensure ample access and consumer choice and to make sure our most vulnerable citizens get care, regardless of their economic status. I am certain that Jane Addams would have agreed. Following is a posthumous letter that pays tribute to Miss Addams' legacy.

#### A LETTER TO JANE ADDAMS

Catherine P. Papell, a founding editor of this journal, wrote a letter to Jane Addams and read it to a room full of group workers at Hull House during the Association for the Advancement of Social Work with Groups (AASWG) annual symposium in Chicago, Illinois, on June 18, 2009. Here is a selection of Dr. Papell's letter.

Good afternoon Miss Addams,

Here we are. Your group workers – social workers who work with groups. You are our mentor. We have come today to honor you and to remind ourselves what we owe to you, what we have sought with such commitment to keep alive in the profession that you participated in building.

We know that you were not a Licensed Professional Social Worker as most of us are. That was because you lived and worked years before such technical societal matters, 1860–1935. We know too that you identified yourself with the early social settlement movement and, along with Mary Richmond (1861–1921), the charities movement, wherein lay the roots of today's Social Work Profession.

We know too that, before you opened Hull House, you graduated valedictorian from the Seminary that became Rockland College, that despite ill health which thwarted your plans to go to medical school, you traveled in Europe for two years, as was appropriate at that time for a well-educated young woman. We know that you took a second trip to Europe with Ellen G. Starr and visited Toynbee Hall in London that you were searching for a meaningful plan for your life (as many of us have done). We know that you and Miss Starr returned to Chicago and decided to live with the impoverished immigrant community on Halsted and Polk Streets and open a Social Settlement there (September 18, 1889).

We know that, like the social settlement movement, your purpose was to . . . [help] people to survive and enrich their lives, to create community, and to participate in national and international problem solving. . . . We know too that your deep and genuine humanity and love for all people and your extraordinary creativity and the breadth of your personal, intellectual, and spiritual ideology produced a program of world renown. . . .

We know too that your writing and lecturing and your civic and political leadership and activities produced outcomes of national and international benefit, and your advocating against World War I led to your being awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1931.

Let me tell you, Miss Addams, something about us who have come to have tea with you today. May I speak for us . . . We are social workers who have spent the many decades, a century since you were the President (1909) of our first professional organization, The National Conference of Charities and Corrections (NCCC), seeking to capture and

maintain for the growing Social Work Profession, the essence of your work: helping people by helping them to help each other and themselves. We social group workers have been responsible, during the early half of the last century, for the progression of organizations of the group work movement, each of which early on was inspired by your work. We joined in 1955 with all social work organizations to become the National Association of Social Workers (NASW).

May I tell you Miss Addams that early on some of us group workers who were social work educators entered genuinely in the search for a generic, holistic, foundation notion of social work methodology, and discovered the unintended consequences that individual and family work with primarily clinical treatment objectives seemed to be more educationally powerful for Social Work education than group and community approaches. Our organization, the Association for the Advancement of Social Work with Groups (AASWG), organized in 1979, and the journal, *Social Work with Groups*, emerged to restore and strengthen the place of the group and of interactional relationship in the societal purpose of the Social Work Profession.

As professional social workers with individuals, families, groups, and communities, we have sought to recapture the heart of the Settlement movement, enabling people to organize and work together in groups in order to problem-solve and create community. We have continued to believe with you, Jane Addams, that successfully and actively dealing with reality in group life is health and strength producing as well as community enriching. . . .

We would like you to know, Miss Addams, about how we group workers have developed the way of engaging with suffering people that you demonstrated early on in Hull House, in order that it can be taught in education for the Social Work Profession. . . . Throughout the past century and today, through writing and exchanging experiences in leading groups of infinite kinds of human issues, problems, and settings, through drawing on the growing social sciences, sociology, social psychology, psychology, anthropology and, of course, education, there have been beautiful skills and concepts identified, and theories created by our group work colleagues about the professional social work role in helping humans to succeed in their group life. . . .

Those of us gathered here in 2009 and representing our organization (AASWG), would wish for me to tell you, Miss Addams, what we are certain you knew, that the struggle for depth and breadth in our helping profession is never over. It is not difficult to think systemically, holistically about the needs of humankind, but it is difficult indeed to act, to “use the self”, in the social work societal role needed for the complexity of human misery in an oftentimes evil world.

The world is still at war, Jane Addams, and the essential humanity of group and community work is even more desperately needed. You would be greatly saddened and horrified, as we are, by the newfound savagery and the unspeakable human misery war has wrought. . . .

We social workers who meet here today at Hull House are amongst those who have identified themselves within the profession as social workers who believe passionately in offering our helping services through experience in group and community life. We have struggled and are still doing so to keep alive within the profession the ideals and insight and deep humanity that you exemplified in your life and work here more than a hundred years ago.

We thank you, Jane Addams, for inviting us to tea, and for giving us this opportunity, as social workers who work with groups, to be reconnected with our indebtedness to you. - Dr. Catherine P. Papell

### PRESERVING EMPATHY

Journalist Louise W. Knight (2012) asked: “Is the original settlement house method – having every day citizens of one socio-economic class live among those of another – a legacy that we should bring back to life?” Jane Addams’ efforts to bridge the gap between the well-off and the poor necessitated recognizing and confronting the fact that, according to Knight,

materially comfortable people often held dangerous misconceptions about working class people as undisciplined and without ambition and that working people held prejudices of their own about the selfishness and greed of the wealthier classes.

Addams understood that people could not rely exclusively on governmental resources to take care of them and that they had to learn to work together on the realities of their life problems. In community and in groups empathy and compassion could be introduced and strengthened for one another and for their privileged neighbors.

*Empathy* refers to one’s capacity to tune in to and share the feelings of another: to put oneself into another’s shoes, and, in some instances, to compassionately embrace another’s suffering; and to search for resources or to create them. The settlement people, of whom Jane Addams was one and a leader, knew empathy well.

Yet during tough economic times, empathy is the first hostage of survival. In times like those of today, it is especially important for humane, empathic, privileged people to struggle with the heart and legacy of the settlement movement.

In today's world, myriad of human services organizations rely on the compassion and generosity of their volunteers and donors without neighborhood living. For example, at my (Malekoff) agency, a community-based children's mental health center, we have supporters who look into the eyes of their own children, grandchildren, nieces, and nephews and feel a deep connection to all children and the community. During hard economic times it is their capacity to retain their empathy that enables them to carry on in support of the agency's mission to restore and strengthen the emotional well being of children and families and the communities in which they must grow up.

As with Jane Addams over 100 years ago, but without residential "neighborhoodness," it takes empathic compassionate citizens to invest in our mission. Donors today understand what is at stake. They are more than "do-gooders," despite the good that they do. In addition to empathic concerns and generosity they understand in multiple ways the societal importance of what the agency does and their role in it.

In the Hull House community it was the understanding that government bureaucracies that could make help available are by definition dispassionate and without empathy. They have rules and regulations. Today, it is the hope that the policies that guide their rules are undergirded, as was Jane Addams, by values deeply rooted in the felt needs of real people.

It is precisely because we cannot rely exclusively on government to take care of us that we must also rely on one another. If we allow empathy to slip away under cover of economic survival, we will be in trouble. The demise of empathy would be the most perilous consequence of a faltering economy.

In a recent *New York Times* letter one interested contributor (Raines, 2012) commented that "To reduce the widening divide between haves and have-nots, we need to find a new way of building community, and to do that we'll have to accept that idea that a community isn't a community until all its members are included."

Let us take care to preserve the empathic reality that we learn was created in the community of Hull House. Without actual residence in the neighborhood, it is the compassion - the empathetic hearts and acts - that can safeguard the spirit of Jane Addams and Hull House and can sustain and maintain a humane society.

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Catherine P. Papell, Professor Emerita, Adelphi University School of Social Work, Garden City, New York, was a founding editor of *Social Work with Groups*, a journal of community and clinical practice in 1978.

Andrew Malekoff succeeded Papell as editor of *Social Work with Groups* in 1990. This is the first article that Malekoff and Papell co-authored.