



## Jane Addams (1860-1935): Social worker and Peace Builder

*James D. Allen, St. Louis University, USA*



### **Introduction**

The name Jane Addams is typically associated with the Settlement House Movement. As a founder of Hull House, the first settlement house in the United States, Addams worked tirelessly on behalf of the poor and oppressed. Less widely known is the depth of her concern about peace and her efforts as a peace builder. A more careful review, however, of Addams' words and works reveals her passionate commitment to the abolition of war and the restoration of peace. This biographical sketch highlights the breadth and depth of Addams' work both as an advocate for the poor and as an advocate for peace.

### **Background**

Addams was born into a well-to-do family in Cedarville, Illinois in 1860. Addams' early years were strongly influenced by her father who taught her tolerance, philanthropy, and a strong work ethic. Her father encouraged

Addams to pursue higher education. At his urging, Addams enrolled in Rockford Female Seminary. During her time at Rockford, Addams quickly developed strong leadership traits and excelled academically. Addams expressed a desire to study medicine upon completion of her degree. Neither of Addams' parents supported her desire to pursue a career in medicine, however. In an effort to give her an opportunity to consider other options, Addams' parents decided to take her and some of her friends to Europe for an extended visit.

Shortly after returning from Europe, Addams' father died. Following her father's death, Addams became quite depressed. Although she was in medical school, Addams no longer had the interest in or passion for medicine. This further complicated her depression. Addams' family again suggested that she travel to Europe as a way of dealing with her depression. Addams agreed and along with her classmate, Ellen Starr, traveled to Europe.

During her time abroad, Addams continued to try and discern her future plans. A visit to Toynbee Hall, a settlement house located in the slums of London, profoundly affected Addams. Addams became quite interested in the work of those who were attempting to

address the needs of people living in poverty. It was this experience that laid the foundation for the work she undertook when she returned to the United States. Five years after visiting Toynbee Hall, Addams returned to Europe and visited Spain. During this visit Addams focused on gathering additional information concerning people who were poor and how best to address their needs. This exploration helped Addams to clarify what she wanted to do with her life. Upon returning to the United States, Addams and her friend Ellen Starr began looking for a place to establish a settlement house.

### **Hull House**

Addams and Starr eventually chose the Polk mansion in Chicago as the site for their settlement house. They chose this site because it provided an appropriate atmosphere and was located in a diverse neighborhood. They decided to name the settlement after its builder, Charles Hull.

As noted in its charter, the purpose of Hull House was “to provide a center for a higher civic and social life; to institute and maintain educational and philanthropic enterprises, and to investigate and improve the conditions in the industrial districts of Chicago.” To this end, Hull House offered a broad range of services and programs for the neighborhood residents. Services and programs were developed in response to the emerging needs identified by residents.

A severe economic depression in 1893 heightened Addams’ awareness of the connection between poverty and public policy. Based on her experience with the Hull House clients, Addams recognized the need to direct attention toward policies and laws that were at the root of poverty. Addams quickly became a political activist and tirelessly worked on behalf of the most vulnerable. She lobbied for legislation designed to protect immigrants, women, and children.

As an advocate for laborers, Addams participated in the Haymarket riot which called attention to the horrible working conditions laborers were subjected to. A number of financial supporters of Hull House took exception to Addams’ active involvement in the labor movement and withdrew their support. Addams work on behalf of women was also a source of controversy. As an active member of the National American Women Suffrage Association, Addams led the movement for women’s right to vote. Again, her advocacy for the rights of women made her a target for criticism. Addams’ concern extended to issues of racial equality as well. Addams’ involvement in the formation of the American Civil Liberties Union and the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People led to her being labeled as a “socialist, an anarchist, and a communist.”

Despite the public criticism of her activities, Addams persisted in her efforts to advocate for the poor and marginalized. While others assumed responsibility for the day to day operation of Hull House, Addams continued her public efforts to advocate for needed changes in laws and policies.

### **Peace Building Work**

Addams believed that the essence of peace is the “nurture of human life” (Johnson 1960, p. 254) and that the “abolition of degrading poverty, disease, and ignorance” was at the heart of peace building. Achieving peace required that all men and all nations move in the “direction of compassionate tending to citizens” (Elshtain 2002, p.217). Addams maintained that as men and nations tended to the needs of citizens, the possibility of war became more remote.

Addams' understanding of peace was deeply rooted in her sense of optimism about human beings. Addams believed "human beings are more similar than they are different and what unites is stronger than what divides" (Elshtain 2002, p. 219). Given this view, Addams maintained that "war is not a natural activity for mankind" and that it was abnormal for men to fight against each other. In Addams' view, the more natural tendency is for "men to come together into friendly relationships...and to live constantly a more extended life" (Johnson 1960, p. 246). This process of coming together into friendly relationships is at the heart of peace building

Addams' optimism about relationships among people was fed by her experience working with the immigrant population in the settlements. Observing immigrants from diverse backgrounds working together to address common needs affirmed Addams' belief that friendly and cooperative relationships among people were possible and that the experience of working together inevitably increased mutual understanding and a sense of fellowship. As people came together and worked on issues such as health and sanitation in their neighborhood, they realized they shared a common concern and that it was possible to work together to address this concern. The experience of working in these friendly and cooperative relationships paved the way for a "new internationalism" (Elshtain 2002, p. 218). Ultimately, Addams believed that this new form of internationalism would lead to "a moment when virile good-will will be substituted for the spirit of warfare" (Elshtain 2002, p. 218).

Addams was adamant in her belief that war destroys democracy wherever it thrives. In Addams' view, war "reverses the process of cooperating good will" (Johnson 1960, p.259). Inevitably war "arouses the more primitive antagonisms" (Johnson, 1960, p.4) and in so doing undermines mutual understanding and fellowship. Addams further observed that, once started, the "temper necessary for continuing war is worked up and fed largely by the things which have occurred in the war itself" (Elshtain 2002, p.337). Rather than contributing to the solution of international problems, war tended to "obscure and confuse those faculties which might otherwise find a solution" (Elshtain 2002, p. 353).

Addams labeled the notion that militarism "can be crushed by countermilitarism "...one of the greatest illusions which can possibly seize the human mind" (Elshtain 2002, p. 339). In Addams' view, killing a man was much easier than "bringing him forward in the paths of civilization" (Johnson 1960, p. 253). Fighting a war was easier than working to find peaceful solutions based on shared values and beliefs.

Addams was painfully aware of both the immediate and long-term consequences of war. War inevitably involved a "reversion to primitive methods of determining relations between man and man and nation and nation" (Elshtain 2002, p. 346). In so doing, war totally prevented mutual understanding and undermined the possibility of social progress. Efforts at developing alternative approaches to conflict ceased.

The onset of war and the accompanying spirit of nationalism provided justification for actions designed to limit the rights of targeted groups. Addams noted that "radical assaults on basic civil liberties; abuse of immigrants; and legally sanctioned vigilantism against any and all who were not 100-percent American" (Elshtain 2002, pp. 203-204) became routine as the fervor for war increased. Pacifists were quickly added to the list of agitators and actions were taken to silence them. By their very nature such actions increased a sense of animosity and served to undermine efforts designed to foster social cooperation.

For Addams, war was an “intimately social and domestic affair” (Elshtain 2002, p. 358). Addams was convinced that what happened on far removed battlefields affected families everywhere. The “increasing dearth of food” (Johnson 1960, p. 24), directly related to the war effort, was one example of the larger immediate and profound impact of war. The diversion of millions of men and women to support the war effort and the destruction of food distribution networks created a humanitarian crisis. This crisis for Addams was a call to act in such a way as to relieve the human devastation caused by war.

Addams had very clear beliefs about women and their roles and contributions in time of war. As a “social feminist,” Addams believed that women brought an important perspective to “social life and social problems” (Elshtain 2002, p. 249). Nurturing of vulnerable human life was a particularly important contribution of women. This impulse of women to nurture and sustain life made war repugnant and led them to search for alternative ways to address conflict. Given this impulse, Addams hoped “to see women of civilization rebel against the senseless wholesale sacrifice of warfare” (Johnson 2002, p. 234).

Addams believed in “social amelioration” as a way to pursue needed change both at the national and international level. The process of “social amelioration” involved bringing together diverse groups to identify shared concerns and to work jointly toward finding appropriate ways to cooperatively address these concerns. Women’s experience in their own household, particularly as bread givers, prepared them well to engage in this process. Expanding the understanding of “household” to transcend international borders and highlighting the interdependence of all people led women to a more global concern for peace and well being.

In Addams’ view “feminism and militarism are counterposed as two stark opposites” (Elshtain 2002, p. 237). Militarism advocated the use of physical force as the basis for government and found its expression in the “crudest forms of violence.” The use of force and violence was incompatible with the goal of achieving peace. By its very nature, militarism, heightened animosity and undermined efforts to work cooperatively. By contrast, Addams maintained that feminists must highlight the absurdity of the militaristic approach and advocate for the use of creative strategies that brought people together and fostered cooperative efforts to achieve peace. Given the obvious differences in these approaches, Addams insisted a fundamental choice existed. Resolution of differences could be achieved either through the use of force and violence or through cooperative peaceful efforts. For Addams the choice was obvious, women should commit themselves to avoiding war by finding peaceful solutions.

The inevitable failure of war and its consequences created a new opportunity for women to demonstrate their contribution to international affairs. According to Addams, women should “try to prevent the worst damage from being done—to feed the hungry, to bind up the wounded, to heal broken bodies and spirits insofar as one can” (Elshtain 2002, p. 249).

Addams’ convictions about peace and the peace building process were reflected not only in her words but her actions. Although the outbreak of World War I appeared to mark the beginning of Addams’ public commitment to the peace movement, she had begun earlier to articulate her position concerning peace and peace building. Addams used her 1899 essay, “Democracy and Militarism,” to openly denounce the role of the United States government in the Spanish-American War. A series of lectures at the Chautauga Institute in 1904 provided another opportunity for Addams to advance her view of peace.

With the world moving toward war in 1915, Addams became involved in the Women's Peace Party and was elected national chairman. As the Peace Party's representative, Addams attended the International Congress of Women at the Hague and was selected to serve as head of the commission to find an end to the war. At the same time, in a series of three books Addams outlined her thoughts concerning peace and peace building. In "Newer Ideal of Peace," published in 1909, Addams argued for the need of basic social reform and discussed what she believed was necessary for international peace and understanding. Addams' second book, "Women at the Hague" (1915), detailed the work of the 1915 International Congress of Women and its efforts to advocate for peace. Addams recounts her experiences during and after World War I in her third book, "Peace and Bread in Time of War" (1922). Taken together, these three books expose the destructive impact of war on human relationships and the intimate connection between peace and meeting the basic physical and emotional needs of all humans.

When peace making efforts failed and war came, Addams vehemently protested. She openly criticized the failure of national leaders to find peaceful solutions to the problems being fought over and became a strong advocate for conscientious objectors. As a result of her passionate opposition to the war, President Theodore Roosevelt labeled Addams "the most dangerous woman in America." This label did not curtail Addams' activities. Before the armistice ending World War I was signed, Addams organized efforts to provide food and relief to those affected by the war. When the war ended, Addams was instrumental in arranging a second meeting of the International Woman's Conference. In recognition of her efforts as a peace builder, Addams was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1931. Addams is the only social worker to receive this award.

Shortly before her death, Addams spoke at a banquet of the Women's International League. On that occasion Addams reflected on her twenty years of peace making efforts. While acknowledging the progress achieved during that time, Addams insisted that there was still much more to be done. In particular, she highlighted the importance of continuing to educate the public about the futility of war. The only way to bring an end to killing in war was to bring people to the realization that killing was not justified. In so doing, the folly of a war psychology might be demonstrated and the door opened to new creative possibilities for resolving conflict and achieving peace.

### **Addams' Legacy**

Addams died unexpectedly of cancer in 1935 but her words and works continue to inform contemporary social work practice. A passionate commitment to the pursuit of justice marked all of Addams' work. Addams clearly understood the relationship between fundamental causes and the conditions in which people lived and worked tirelessly to address those causes. Rather than passively observing and commenting on the need for social change, Addams actively engaged in the change process.

Like Addams, contemporary social workers must expose and challenge oppressive and unjust systems. Doing so requires that social workers actively engage in public discourse as a means of raising consciousness. At the same time, social workers must focus on engaging those who are oppressed and treated unjustly in the process of advocating for themselves. Using their professional skills, social workers must provide leadership in organizing coalitions that can develop, present, and advocate for needed changes. In so doing, social workers can continue the tradition of Jane Addams as an advocate for peace and justice.

## References

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### Author's Address:

Ass Prof James D. Allen, Jr., Ph.D.

St. Louis University

School of Social Work

3550 Lindell Blvd.

St. Louis, MO 63103

USA

Tel: ++1 314 977 2750

Email: [allenj3@slu.edu](mailto:allenj3@slu.edu)

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