

The Life of Dorothea Dix:

Mother of Mental Health Care, Pioneer of Psychology, and Advocate for Human Rights

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### Abstract

Dorothea Dix was a prominent figure in the field of mental health. In 1841, she visited a Massachusetts jail, where she was outraged at the inhumane treatment of the mentally ill. She decided to dedicate her life to fighting for better treatment of those with mental illness, helping to create over 30 mental hospitals throughout her lifetime. Her sensitivity to the plights of the mentally ill was a result of her loveless childhood, her job as a teacher, and the physical and mental illnesses she battled throughout her life. She was the mother of just and humane mental health care, a pioneer of psychology, and an advocate for human rights. Dix was a strong woman who stood up against the traditional gender roles of her time and took action. She defied countless odds to achieve substantial change and to fight for what she knew was right. Though often forgotten, Dix made a permanent change in the way mental health treatment is viewed.

*Keywords:* mental healthcare, reform, social justice, advocacy

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*“In a world where there is so much to be done, I felt strongly impressed that there must be something for me to do.”*  
– Dorothea Dix, 1844

Dorothea Dix was an early pioneer in the field of mental health. She was an advocate for those with mental illness, a soldier for human rights, and a strong woman that stood out against the backdrop of the traditional 19<sup>th</sup> century society. Dix overcame many struggles in her life and focused her energy on helping others. She helped establish better accommodations for people with mental illnesses. Though the deinstitutionalization movement changed the reforms she had put into play about a century earlier, her actions permanently changed the way we approach the treatment of mental illness. She sparked change in how the country treated the mentally ill. Dix saw injustice in the world and actively worked to correct it.

I was drawn to Dorothea Dix for a few reasons. I was curious to see how Dix impacted psychology and how, if at all, her life shaped her life’s work. As someone who plans to go into psychology, I am grateful to Dix for the advances she made within the field. Dix paved the way for humane and thoughtful treatment of people with mental illness, which I wholeheartedly agree with. Without her, psychological treatment as we know it may not have been the same. I also respect Dix greatly for her accomplishments as a woman. Dix was born in the early 1800s, a time when women were not highly regarded. She defied the odds by speaking up and advocating for what she knew was right, even when women at the time were often silenced. I am inspired by her actions and hope to channel a similar energy and passion for justice in my life and in my work as a psychologist.

Though Dix had a long and prolific life, I plan to focus on three aspects of her life- her childhood, her experience as a student and teacher, and her personal illnesses- in order to frame

and best understand her life's work. There are some aspects of her life that will be excluded for the sake of clarity, but those will be discussed as ideas for further research later in the paper.

### **A Visit to Jail**

*“His prison was from six to eight feet square... excluding both light and fresh air, and entirely without accommodation of any description of warming and ventilation... The only bed was a small sacking stuffed with straw. The bed itself was wet, and the outside covering was completely saturated with the drippings from the walls and stiffly frozen. Thus in utter darkness... has this most dreadfully abused man existed through the past inclement winter.”*

*- Dorothea Dix describing the jail cell of a man with mental illness*

*(Schlaifer & Freeman, 1991)*

In 1841, an overheard conversation on the streets of Boston would alter Dix's life forever. At the time, Dix was a schoolteacher living and working in Massachusetts. One day while walking through the city, she heard two men discussing the conditions of the prisoners in the East Cambridge jail. This piqued Dix's curiosity and she resolved to look into the matter for herself. She was offered an opportunity to teach Sunday school classes for the prisoners and quickly agreed, knowing it was a good excuse for her to get into the prison. She was shocked to witness the poor state of the “insane” prisoners there, who were filthy and clothed in rags, locked in dingy cells, and neglected. Several of the East Cambridge Jail cells that held the insane prisoners did not have heat; when she brought this to the attention of the jail officials, they claimed the insane could not tell the difference anyway. This outraged Dix and this anger sparked her quest to secure better treatment for the mentally insane (Gollaher, 1995; Schlaifer & Freeman, 1991).

She began to visit other prisons in Massachusetts, where she encountered similar mistreatment of the mentally ill. As she traveled, she began to garner support from important male Bostonians, which, especially as a woman seeking respect in a male-dominated society, was a huge victory for her. In 1843, she wrote a passionate appeal to the Massachusetts State Legislature asking for better treatment of the mentally ill. This appeal, entitled *Memorial*, helped

her gain the respect of prominent men including Horace Man and Dr. Luther V. Bell of the McLean Asylum. Due to the overwhelmingly positive response to *Memorial*, a bill was passed that allowed the state hospital in Worcester, MA to accommodate an addition two hundred mentally ill people. This was Dix's first of many legislative victories (Schlaifer & Freeman, 1991; Dix, 1843).

This decision was a revolutionary one, especially given the time period Dix was working and living in. Dix's visit was fifteen years before Sigmund Freud, a man who many consider to be a founding father of psychology, was born and about fifty years before he established his famous theories (Schlaifer & Freeman, 1991). Decades before the study of the mentally ill had begun to blossom into its' infancy, Dix had recognized it as a problem and had sprung into action. This was also a time when women were granted very little power and had no political power. Women did not have the right to vote (this would not be changed until the 19<sup>th</sup> Amendment almost 80 years later), could not work in occupations that were male dominated, and did not hold any positions in state legislatures or Congress. By doing what she knew was right, Dix challenged the popular belief about the mentally ill while also challenging the stances society held on women at the time (Parry, 2006; Schlaifer & Freeman, 1991).

#### **Advocacy Around America**

*"If I inflict pain upon you, and move you to horror, it is to acquaint you with suffering which you have the power to alleviate, and make you hasten to the relief of the victims of legalized barbarity. 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 idiot 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 Alms-Houses."*

*- Dorothea Dix, 1843*

*("Memorial to the Legislature of Massachusetts")*

Dix was not finished. She was proud of her accomplishments in Massachusetts but was not content. She knew what she had witnessed was happening in other states and she decided to

travel through the country to rectify these injustices. She began with the neighboring state of Rhode Island, eventually traveling as far as Kentucky and Tennessee. Dix wanted to do more than just supplementing the pre-existing institutions; she wanted to create new institutions focused on treating both the rich and the poor. Dix believed that, “The rich may partake the benefits such institutions afford: the poor must suffer, agonize, and bear heavily out, by slow-killing tortures, their unblessed life! Are there no pitying hearts, and open hands that can be moved by these miseries?” (Dix, 1848). Dix argued that the mentally ill were humans and deserved to be treated as such; she took this argument with her wherever she traveled. She wrote letters, met with lawmakers and policymakers, and held strong as a lone woman in the face of all-male audiences (Gollaher, 1995; Schlaifer & Freeman, 1991).

Dix challenged the idea that the mentally ill could not be helped and spoke out against the inhumane treatment of the mentally ill, including things like caging and painful physical restraint (Parry, 2006). By the 1880s, there were 75 psychiatric hospitals in the United States, a significant increase from the 4 that were established before Dix started her crusade (Rubinow, 2014). Dix played a key role in the establishment of more than 30 of these (Parry, 2006). A survey done at the time estimated that less than 1% of prisoners had mental illness, a poignant statistic that shows how effective Dix’s advocacy had been (Rubinow, 2014). This system remained in place until the 1950s, when the beginning of the deinstitutionalization movement began.

### **Childhood**

*“I never knew childhood.”*  
- Dorothea Dix (Gollaher, 1995)

Dorothea Lynde Dix was born on April 4<sup>th</sup>, 1802 in Hampden, Maine, the firstborn in her family. When asked about her childhood, Dix avoided the subject; she even burned all of her

letters, diaries, or any other shred of evidence that would expose these years of her life. Dix harbored resentment for her upbringing. Some scholars believe she was neglected and abused by her parents as a child, though this has never been definitively proven. Her father was “emotionally unbalanced” and drank heavily; her mother suffered from acute and incurable headaches and neuroticism (Schlaifer & Freeman, 1991). Dix was raised in a strongly religious family. Her father was a Methodist minister and the family lived a simple life as a result of his vow of poverty. She spent a significant amount of time with her grandparents, especially her grandfather; of all the hospitals she created, the only one she allowed to be associated with her family name was created as a memorial to her grandfather. When Dix was 12, she moved out of her house to live with her grandmother in Boston. Dix had no interest in following the traditionally female route of dressing nicely, learning to walk properly, and seeking a good husband; instead, she was interested in helping the needy as her minister father had been. Her grandmother could not deal with this and sent Dix to stay with her great-aunt when she was 14 (Gollaher, 1995; Parry, 2006; Schlaifer & Freeman, 1991; Browne, 1969).

#### **Influence on her Work**

*“Uniform firmness and kindness towards the patient are of absolute obligation. The most exact observance of truth should be preserved in all intercourse with the insane.”*

*- Dorothea Dix, 1848*

*(“Memorial Soliciting a State Hospital for the Protection and Cure of the Insane”)*

Dorothea Dix did not have a stable upbringing. As a child, her family moved often due to their extreme poverty and her father’s ministry. She ran away to her grandmother’s to escape these conditions, but she was not greeted with warmth when she arrived; rather, Dix described it as a “grim and loveless home” (Schlaifer & Freeman, 1991). Her grandmother, who had experienced a variety of personal traumas including the murder of her husband and the death of four of her six children, set out to ensure Dorothea did not repeat the mistakes of her father.

Madame Dix was aloof, reserved, and scornful; Dorothea soon realized that, "... in moving she had not escaped her sorrows but simply exchanged one form of unhappiness for another" (Gollaher, 1995). Even though she moved, Dorothea was never fully away from her childhood home. She felt she needed to continue looking after her family from afar, especially her younger siblings, who she had grown up tending to as a result of her neglectful parents (Browne, 1969).

All of her life, Dix longed for a stable family life and a consistent source of support, which she never received. She was hyperaware of the possibility of abandonment, which seems to have contributed to her sensitivity for the abandonment of the mentally ill in prisons; "Her empathy for the lunatic sprang from the deeper theme of abandonment, isolation, and broken family ties to which she had always been so exquisitely sensitive" (Gollaher, 1995). Her maternal instinct, which had helped her care for her family, carried over into her work. Dix seemed to draw on her own personal experience and worries when advocating for the most vulnerable in society.

#### **Student and Teacher**

*"I would employ it [my elegance] in explaining all the motives, and dwelling on all the good, good to the poor, the miserable, the idle, and the ignorant, which would follow your giving me permission to use the barn chamber for a school-room... Why not, when it can be done without exposure or expense, let me rescue some of America's miserable children, from vice and guilt?"*  
- A letter from Dorothea Dix to her grandmother  
(Schlaifer & Freeman, 1991)

Dix was not educated in a classroom; education at the time was for men. She was self-taught, reading everything she came across and engaging in discussions with her more educated male friends. She decided to take up work as a teacher, one of the few jobs available to women, and a job that aligned with her natural nurturing spirit. In 1821, Dorothea Dix opened a charity school for local students in her grandmother's house. A few years later, she opened a second school for students who could afford to pay, reasoning that all children deserved to learn



regardless of their economic background. She also sought to educate both girls and boys equally. She is described as having “no patience for the argument, advanced by some of her contemporaries, that nature had not equipped the ‘weaker sex’ [women] for rigorous intellectual pursuits” (Gollaher, 1995). Shortly after opening her school, she authored a novel called *Conversations on Common Things; or, Guide to Knowledge: With Questions*. The book was a small book of facts and was written in the style of a conversation between a mother and daughter. The book was directed at an audience of female teachers and reflected Dix’s belief that women should be educated as well as men. By the time of the Civil War, her book had been reprinted 60 times (Parry, 2006; Gollaher, 1995; Schlaifer & Freeman, 1991).

#### **Influence on her Work**

*“God has placed us here to serve himself in serving his children of earth  
- Dorothea Dix  
(Gollaher, 1995)*

Dix defied gender norms as she fought to pursue an education. She knew that all people deserved to be treated equally, including women (and later on, including the mentally ill). She wanted to make sure the poor and rich were able to get the same resources, an argument she used later when advocating for the creation of new mental institutions; prior to this, mental health care in institutions was only for the rich, while the poor were either tended to at home or ended up in jail (Dix, 1848). She was undeterred from following her dreams, even when she was encouraged by relatives to settle down and try to find a husband instead (Gollaher, 1995). This persistence remained throughout the course of her life and seems to be one of the reasons why she was so successful in achieving social change.

#### **Patient**

*“Your infirm health seems to dim your prospects of usefulness. But I believe your constitution will yet be built up, if you give it a fair chance...”  
- A letter from Dr. Channing to Dix  
(Schlaifer & Freeman, 1991)*

Dix battled illnesses for most of her life. During her twenties, when she was both a self-taught student and a teacher at the school she created, Dix began to struggle with her health. The stress of this constant work put strain on her body and she soon ended up in the hospital with rheumatism of the lungs. These lung problems would resurface throughout her life, eventually causing her to lose functioning in one of her lungs. As a result of her lung problems, she was often tired, worn out from her wavering health as well as her constant dedication to her work. Dix's illnesses were cyclical. She would get extremely sick and then would spend time in a more pleasant climate with friends (visiting both St. Croix in the Caribbean and England in hopes of reviving her health). She would return to the United States restored to full health, only to get engrossed again up in her work and bringing about another round of sickness (Schlaifer & Freeman, 1991).

In addition to her failing physical health, Dix struggled with her mental health. Her constant momentum of work led her to a nervous breakdown; her friend described her as having "exhausted nerves" which could no longer bear the stress (Schlaifer & Freeman, 1991). She also dealt with severe depression, falling into a several year depression before she began her advocacy work. Some theorize that this depression sprang from the immense guilt she felt from her religious upbringing. Dix converted to Unitarianism after one particular depressive episode, rejecting the harsh Methodist traditions she was raised in (Browne, 1969). Dix fell into depression again after encountering setbacks in her work. In addition to these depressions, Dix seems to have experienced hypomanic phases; her close friend said that Dix's "suffering was succeeded by high spiritual exaltation and that any vision of sublimity and beauty would lift her above bodily suffering into a state of transport and adoration" (Browne, 1969).

### **Influence on her Work**

*“Women in chains Dorothea? You saw them?”*

*“I most certainly did.”*

*“Then do something about them.”*

*“But my doctor told me I might only have a year to live.”*

*“Make that year do, Dorothea. Remember, everyone needs care and compassion, even the criminals and the insane.”*

*- A conversation between Dorothea Dix and her close friend Dr. Channing  
(Gollaher, 1995)*

In her younger adulthood, Dix lost function in one of her lungs and was told that she would not live more than a year. She consulted about this with her friend, Dr. Channing (see section’s opening quote), who encouraged her to make the most of the time she had. Dix fought for her beliefs adamantly, as if she were running out of time. Her shaky health may have been one of the impetuses for her to work so hard and so ardently. In addition to her physical health, Dix was no stranger to mental illness. Her father was an alcoholic and though her mother dealt with somatic illness, it is theorized she also had her own psychological struggles (Gollager, 1995). Dix herself dealt with bouts of severe depression. Her previous exposure to these illnesses may have made her more sensitive to the struggles of the mentally ill she saw in the East Cambridge Jail. At times, the illnesses held her back from her work; but with occasional periods of rest and a dedication unshaken by sickness, she persisted. Even with her faulty health, Dix lived until she was 85 years old, another testament to her resiliency and dedication.

### **Further Research**

*“I have learned to live each day as it comes, and not to borrow trouble by dreading tomorrow. It is the dark menace of the future that makes cowards of us.”*

*- Dorothea Dix*

*(Lombardo, 2014)*

In order to keep this paper focused, I chose three major events in Dix’s life to expand on. She was a prolific woman who lived a long life and there are things I overlooked in the writing of this. Dix worked as a nurse during the Civil War, even though she never had medical

experience; further research could be done to see if this had any effect on her mental health advocacy work. She also faced a crushing defeat towards the end of her career, which could be enlightening to look further into. Dix never married or had children; it would be interesting to explore if she redirected her natural maternal instinct into her work in the hospitals. After Dix's death, the state of asylums began to decline, becoming worse and worse until the deinstitutionalization movement that began in the mid-1950s. Further research could be done into mapping the creation of Dix's hospitals and the evolution of these institutions in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. It would also be interesting to look at the current state of mental healthcare in comparison to the state of mental healthcare during Dix's time. Dix began her work because of an experience she had with the mentally ill in a prison; in 44 of the 50 states today, prisons hold more people with serious mental illness than psychiatric hospitals do (Swanson, 2015). It could be interesting to trace the patterns that led us to where we are today, over a century removed from Dix.

### **Conclusion**

*"The tapestry of history has no point at which you can cut it and leave the design intelligible."*

*- Dorothea Dix*

*(Lombardo, 2014)*

Dorothea Dix was an important figure in the history of mental health. She was a visionary, her ideas and her actions decades ahead of her contemporaries. Dix paved the way for the idea of humane and just treatment of people with mental illness. As a future psychologist, I am grateful to Dix for the contributions she has made to the field. She is often forgotten and overlooked, as many women from her time were, but I hope to carry her spirit, her ideas, and her passion for justice forward with me into my future work.

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