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The Jane Addams Model

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These days everything puts me in mind of Jane Addams. Many of the social problems we face today — the fraying social fabric, widening inequality, anxieties over immigration, concentrated poverty, the return of cartoonish hyper-masculinity — are the same problems she faced 130 years ago. And in many ways her responses were more sophisticated than ours.

Addams was born to an affluent family in Cedarville, Ill., in 1860. She was a morally ambitious young woman who dreamed of some epic life of service without much idea about how it might come about. In her teenage years, she earnestly set to reading — “Pilgrim’s Progress,” Plutarch’s “Lives,” “The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire” — but in her twenties she was one of those young people who don’t get to themselves quickly. They spend years in study and in acquiring degrees with a vague sense they are preparing for something, without actually leaping into what it is they might want to do.

Addams took a Grand Tour of Europe and found herself in a vegetable market as the leftovers were being tossed to a crowd of paupers, who stood with their grasping hands upraised. The image had a powerful effect on her. Forever after, the sight of hands raised up, even in dance and calisthenics, caused her to feel the pain of poverty and want.

In London, she visited a place called Toynbee Hall, a settlement house where rich university men organized social gatherings with the poor in the same way they would organize them with one another. Addams returned to Chicago and set up Hull House, an American version of the settlement idea.

As today, it was a time when the social fabric was being torn by technological change. Addams moved her family possessions, including the paintings, books and heirloom silver, into a large mansion in a blighted district. The idea was to give the dispossessed the same sort of refined and cultivated home environment that she had known, and thus create a network of family and neighborly bonds. Before long, 2,000 a day were streaming through the place, taking and teaching courses, offering and receiving day care, doing the housekeeping, conducting sociological research.

This was not rich serving the poor (Addams hated paternalism). It was rich and poor, immigrant and old stock, living and working in reciprocity, and as a byproduct bridging social chasms and coming to understand one another. For example, Addams thought it was especially important to put immigrant adults into the role of teachers, because it affords “a pleasant change from the tutelage in which all Americans, including their own children, are so apt to hold them.”

There were classes in acting, weaving, carpentry, but especially in art history, philosophy, and music. Addams was convinced that everyone longs for beauty and knowledge. Everyone longs to serve some high ideal. She believed in character before intellect, that spiritual support is as important as material support. And yet “the soul of man in the commercial and industrial struggle is under siege.”

High culture was her way to elevate the desires and tastes of all who passed through. Residents were surrounded with copies of Rembrandts and presented with Greek tragedies and classical concerts. One new immigrant walked in and Addams handed him an Atlantic Monthly and recommended an essay he could barely understand. But it was a sign of respect and equality, and access to a different world. Even poor kids, she believed, should “share in the common inheritance of life’s best goods.”

Our antipoverty efforts tend to be systematized and bureaucratized, but Hull House was intensely personalistic. She sought to change the world by planting herself deeply in a particular neighborhood. She treated each person as a unique soul.

Addams had amazing capacity to work from the specific case to the general philosophy, and had the ability to apply an overall strategy to the particular incident. There are many philanthropists and caregivers today who dislike theory and just want to get practical. It is this sort of doer’s arrogance and intellectual laziness that explains why so many charities do no good or do positive harm. Addams, by contrast, was both theorist and practitioner.

In her day, like our own, public life was dominated by manly men who saw politics as a competition between warriors and who sought change through partisan chest thumping and impersonal legislative action.

Addams was certainly political, but she defended the primacy of the “woman’s” sphere. People are really shaped by dense intimate connections. People thrive in “familied contexts.” As Jean Bethke Elshtain wrote in her biography, “The world of women was, for her, a dense concoction of imperatives, yearnings, reflections,

actions, joys, tragedies, laughter, tears — a complex way of knowing and being in the world."

Tough, Addams believed that we only make our way in the world through discipline and self-control. Tender, she created an institution that was a lived-out version of humanist philosophy. In today's terms, she was a moral and religious traditionalist and an economic leftist, and an incredible role model for our time.

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