

Why Jane Addams' moral compass is needed today

By Rutherford H. Platt

Hampshire Gazette, Tuesday, September 06, 2016

On July 9, 1915, before a packed Carnegie Hall, Jane Addams committed a sacrilege.

At 55, Addams was world-renowned as the co-founder of Chicago's Hull House, matriarch of the American settlement house movement and humanitarian extraordinaire – “one of the greatest public citizens of the twentieth century,” according to the late Jean Bethke Elshtain.

But two sentences she uttered at Carnegie Hall would transform her public persona from “Saint Jane” to “complacent and self-satisfied woman” and worse. Even Theodore Roosevelt, whose Progressive Party presidential nomination she seconded to huge acclaim in 1912, now dismissed her as a “Bull Mouse.”

Like the Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr. who famously denounced the Vietnam War at Riverside Church on April 4, 1967, Addams committed the heresy of using her great moral authority to condemn warfare itself. (King's speech was promptly deplored in dozens of newspapers including the New York Times and the Washington Post.)

In 1915, the United States was still neutral but war fever was rising after a German submarine sank the Lusitania on May 7. Against that background, Addams at Carnegie Hall summarized the recent International Women's Congress at the Hague, where nearly 1,200 delegates developed a mediation plan to end the slaughter.

Addams, as chair of the Congress, personally conveyed the mediation plan to the leaders of nine combatant and neutral powers including President Woodrow Wilson and the Pope. She was joined by a few distinguished colleagues, including Wellesley College economist Emily Greene Balch (a Nobel Laureate in 1946) and Dr. Alice Hamilton (who became the first woman faculty member at Harvard Medical School in 1919).

They were politely received (after all, they were women) but the mediation plan went nowhere, although Wilson later incorporated some of its principles into his “Fourteen Points.”

In her speech, Addams declared that: 1) Wars are started by old men and waged by the young; 2) War feeds on itself – the horrors of combat provide the rationale for continuing to fight; and 3) “Militarist forces” inevitably dominate “civil forces” during wartime, making it harder for the latter to “resuscitate” after a conflict.

Then followed the fateful two sentences: “We heard in all countries similar statements [from wounded soldiers] in regard to the necessity for the use of stimulants before men would engage in certain bayonet charges ... They all have to give them the ‘dope’ before the bayonet charge is possible.”

The outrage began with a letter from war correspondent Richard Harding Davis to the New York Times (July 13, 1915) titled: “An Insult to War: Miss Addams would strip the dead of honor and courage.” Davis ranted: “If we are to believe her, the Canadians at Ypres, the Australians in the Dardanelles, the English and the French on the Aisne made no supreme sacrifice, but were killed in a drunken brawl. ...

But against this insult, flung by a complacent and self-satisfied woman at men who gave their lives for men, I protest.”

The Davis protest went viral. As recalled by Addams in her 1930 memoir, “The journalistic attack continued for week after week in every sort of newspaper throughout the country. ... It also brought me an enormous number of letters, most of them abusive.”

The scorn outlasted the war. The New York Times (Nov. 30, 1918) ridiculed Addams as chair of another women’s Congress to be held in Zurich to coincide with the official Paris Peace Conference in 1919. (The Women’s International League of Peace and Freedom established at the Zurich Congress with Addams as its first president continues its peace mission today.)

During the reactionary 1920s, pacifists and feminists like Addams were demonized as “the most dangerous women in America” by “anti-Reds” like Attorney General A. Mitchell Palmer and his deputy, J. Edgar Hoover.

Despite age and poor health, Addams’s reputation recovered in the late 1920s. Her personal influence was augmented by a generation of social activists associated with Hull House like Ellen Gates Starr, Florence Kelley, Julia Lathrop, Alice Hamilton, Edith and Grace Abbott, Ida B. Wells, Graham Taylor, Frances Perkins and Lillian Wald.

In 1931, Addams was the first American woman to be awarded the Nobel Peace Prize (shared with Nicholas Murray Butler). Hull House was well represented in the New Deal by such Addams disciples as Frances Perkins, Harold Ickes, and Rex Tugwell. Eleanor Roosevelt, a former settlement house worker and friend of Addams, assumed her leadership on civil rights and international peace.

Shortly before she died on May 21, 1935, President Franklin D. Roosevelt said that Addams “understands more about the real people of the United States than anybody else does.” Walter Lippmann in his eulogy recalled her “blend of sympathy with distinction, of common humanity with a noble style [representing] the mystic promise of the American democracy. It is the quality which reached its highest expression in Lincoln.”

Today, Jane Addams is no longer a household name, except for motorists stuck on the Addams Tollway in Illinois. She was not listed among the 15 women finalists nominated to replace Andrew Jackson on the \$20 bill. No PBS documentary has yet explored her life and legacies.

She would certainly not want to be remembered as “Saint Jane” – she has her Nobel and her tollway. What she would expect is for the story of Hull House and its heritage to inspire a new generation of Janes to join her (and her counterparts today like Frances Crowe of Northampton) to join the ongoing fight for social and economic justice and a more peaceful world.

The Addams moral compass is desperately needed in this age of Trumpism.

But there are hopeful echoes of her unflagging faith in democracy and human goodness. How she would have beamed with approval at President Obama’s soaring eulogy on June 26, 2015, for the Rev. Clementa Pinckney and eight others slain at the Mother Emanuel A.M.E. Church in Charleston.

In lauding Rev. Pinckney, Obama could have been describing Addams herself: “His calls for greater equity were too often unheeded, the votes he cast were sometimes lonely. But he never gave up. He stayed true to his convictions. He would not grow discouraged.”

Rutherford H. Platt, a University of Massachusetts Amherst professor emeritus of geography, lives in Northampton. He is the author of “Reclaiming American Cities: The Struggle for People, Place, and Nature Since 1900” (UMass Press, 2014).