Dorothea Dix
A Voice for the Mad

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Childhood

- Born April 4, 1802 in Hampden, Maine
- Parents Joseph and Mary Dix
- Father was a Methodist minister
- Income of less than $80 a year
- Moved three to four times a year
- Brutal discipline
- God meant for children to be seen and not heard
- Experienced a good deal of physical and emotional mistreatment
- In 1815 her mother became physically unable to care for her children
Childhood

- Snuck away from home to live with her widowed grandmother
- Discipline, restraint and self-control
- Had scorn for laziness and self-pity
- Dorothea realized that in moving she had not escaped her sorrows but simply exchanged one form of unhappiness for another
- Grandmother sent her back home to take care of her younger brothers
Childhood

- Resulted in Dorothea possessing intense anger
- Wiped her parents out of her past
- Described herself as an orphan

“I am a being almost alone in this wide world, How mercifully God has given me dear friends but not kindred!”
Childhood

- Lost the capacity for intimacy
- Pervasive melancholy and anxiety
- Developed a striking capacity for dissociation
- Mistrustful of others
Teen Years

- Started a school in a building one of her uncles owned
- School became the center of her life
- She set the tone of utmost somberness and strictness
- At age 16, having taken responsibility for both of her brothers, she replaced her parents at the head of the household
- Closed the school in 1820 and moved to Boston
Teen Years

- Described as 5'8
- An intense person whose sense of humor, if she had one, was well concealed
- Wore her brown hair in wispy curls
- Watery blue eyes and olive skin
- Very stern decided expression
- “Handsome”
- Did not enjoy playing cards, dancing, tea-parties, or the theater
Father died in April 1821
She attributed his death to his alcohol indulgence
She had an unquenchable thirst for spiritual insight
Believed her life’s purpose revolved around discovering and carrying out the will of God
Too bright and too angry for her own good
Grew obsessed with her shortcomings
Believed she had to get a grip on her temper
In her early 20s she developed a lifetime pattern of illness in which physical symptoms cropped up during times of stress.

She believed her illnesses were a spiritual test or a deserved punishment.

Blamed her weak structure on her parents.

She believed the only way for someone to not be “pulled under” was to live a life “virtuously sacrificed for the benefit of others.”

1821 started a charity school for poor children in the barn behind her grandmother’s mansion.

Opened a second school within her grandmother’s mansion a few years later.

Obsessed with an urge to re-create herself – to become more virtuous, more admirable, and more influential than she was.

Many her meditations and prayers were pleas for strength to contain the anger that seethed inside her.
Loved books

Collector of facts

After three years of studying and teaching she crystallized her learning into a book

At age 22 she wrote a Children’s Encyclopedia called *Conversations on Common Things; or, Guide to Knowledge: With Questions*

Unexpected financial success

60 editions before the Civil War
Books

- Second book about the wonders of the invisible world: *Hymns for Children, Selected and Altered*
- She published it anonymously
- Her book as well received and her confidence soared
- Believed she was destined to become a writer
- *Evening Hours* (1825)
- *Meditations for Private hours* (1828)
- *Selected Hymns for the Use of Children Families, or Sunday Schools* (1833)
The Hope

- Could see no alternative to teaching
- Opened her school “The Hope”
- Strict and inflexible
- Arithmetic, natural science, geography, reading, writing, and grammar
Breakdown

- 1832 her best friend's mother died
- While trying to console her friend, her own depression came out
- At age 30 she was sinking into the early stages of breakdown
- Spreading fatigue
- Confined herself to her room, unwilling to engage in social life
- Punished herself for her inactivity
- Stopped writing books and saw no one
- Continued to cling to The Hope even though she was convinced that the stress of teaching was largely responsible for her illnesses
In March 1836, convinced her life was a miserable failure, she collapsed. Fatigue, congestion in her lungs, and severely depressed. Death obsessed her. Believed her breakdown was deserved. Friends formed a plan to get her out of Boston. Believed her only chance to recover was a restorative sea voyage and tour of Europe. Boarded *The Virginian* on April 22, 1863. First leg of the journey as somewhat therapeutic.
1836

- Feeling the need to rest, she rented a room in a small shingled inn to plan her next stage of her trip
- Felt herself losing ground
- When she tried to read she was defeated by fatigue
- When she tried to sleep she was kept awake by fits of fever and violent coughing
- She was alone in a foreign country at a loss for whom to call
- Bedridden, without the least strength to help herself, she was overcome by the feeling of having at last sunk to the bottom
- Wrote a note to William Rathbone
- Rathbone and his wife drove at once to her inn and removed her to their estate in Greenbank
- For almost two years she stayed with them until she was healthy enough to go back to America
In America recovery was slow
Suffered bouts of depression
No mental energy
Bedridden
“This is the 9\textsuperscript{th} week that I have had no day sat up three hours at a time, and have frequently not risen at all for days in succession”
Felt ashamed for abandoning her school
In early spring of 1837 her grandmother died of influenza
Dorothea’s reaction was subdued and coldly ambivalent
Had not been able to trust her grandmother to love her
Her grandmother represented the harshest side of Dorothea’s conscience
Dorothea was relieved by her passing
Two months later her mother died
Could not avoid remorse for abandoning her grandmother and her mother
She believed she was a victim of damaged hereditary
Melancholy

- Moved to England
- Feared she was helplessly slipping into madness
- Thought of her problem not so much as moral insanity, but as the more familiar affliction, melancholy
- General term used to describe a host of depressive disorders
- Was thought to be a source of sympathy and power
- Dorothea frantically tried to get a grip on herself, searching for a way to free herself from the bonds of melancholy
- First exposure to the revolution concerning madness
Madness Movement

- Originated in late-eighteenth century England and France
- New interpretations of insanity that transformed its whole conception and social meaning
- Inspired by revolutionary treatments
- Wanted to create a new kind of institution for the insane
- Trying to grasp what was happening to her, Dorothea searched the prevailing theories of disease
- Disturbed by the great emphasis medical writers placed on hereditary
How her Mission Launched

- Several different stories on how her great mission launched
- James T.G. Nichols
- Dorothea visited the East Cambridge House of Corrections on March 28, 1841
- Noticed several cells holding insane prisoners without heat
- Was told that fire would not a hazard because lunatics could not tell the difference between hot and cold
- She knew better but could not convince the jail’s officials to change their policy, so she prepared a petition to the East Middlesex court, where it was granted at once
- “Thus her great work commenced” – James Nichols
Dorothea’s Great Mission

- Fought against the inhumanity of throwing lunatics in jails with criminals
- Saw the mentally disordered patients on a regular basis while teaching at East Cambridge House of Corrections
- Concerned about the uproar they caused in the jail
- Well aware that better arrangements could be made for their care, she pondered what she could do
- Began to devote increasing amounts of energy to the problem of the insane poor
- Began to travel to jails, almshouses, and asylums throughout the country
- Documented what she saw inside of a notebook
Incarceration

- Most public institutions of incarceration – jails, almshouses, asylums – welcomed visitors
- Advertised themselves as visitor attractions
- Charged admission to gape at the criminal, poor, and mad
- Dorothea had no trouble getting inside
Dorothea’s Great Mission

- Wrote letters to jailers, physicians, and local officials asking how they provided for their criminals, paupers, and lunatics
- Through her documentation she began writing memorials
- Her first was of Massachusetts which launched her intended career as a social reformer and political advocate
Dorothea’s Memorials

- On-the-spot style
- Notes were sketchy and fragmented until she rearranged her material into a narrative
- Passionate appeals to conscience and human feeling
- Addressed the gentlemen of the legislature in first person
- Told legislature she was coming forward “to present the strong claims of suffering humanity”
Dorothea’s Memorials

- She asked nothing for herself.
- She was an “advocate for the helpless, forgotten insane and idiotic men and women; of beings, sunk to a condition from which the most unconcerned would stare with real horror.”
- The rationale for her memorials was to argue that law should be changed to prohibit holding madmen and madwomen in prisons.
Dorothea’s Memorials

- Her first Massachusetts memorial disregarded chronological sequence, offering instead raw images:
  - Concord: A woman from the Worchester hospital in a cage in the almshouse. In the jail several, decently cared for in general but not properly placed in prison. Violent, noisy, unmanageable most of the time
  - Lincoln: A woman in a cage
  - Medford: One idiotic subject chained, and one in a close stall for years…
  - Granville: One often closely confined; now losing the use of his limbs from want of exercise
Dorothea’s Memorials

- Often described herself as stunned into silence and gasping for words
- Asked readers to sympathize with the insane and to acknowledge their dignity
- “I do not know how it is argued, that mad persons and idiots may be dealt with as if no spark of recollection ever light up the mind”
Dorothea’s Memorials

- Believed the only practical and humane solution is to remove lunatics from community control and place them in therapeutic environments
- Believed the state should be guilty of violating the federal constitution
- Canvased government officials and wrote to superintendents of institutions
- Became more self-assured and more balanced with a firmer grasp of legal distinctions and legislative issues
- Curative treatment dependent on institutions devoted to the care and cure of the insane
“At that time the internal surface of the walls was covered with a thick frost, adhering to the stone in some places to the thickness of half an inch, as ascertained by actual measurement… Thus, in utter darkness, encased on every side by walls of frost, his garments constantly more or less wet, with only wet straw to lie upon, and a sheet of ice for his covering, has this most dreadfully abused man existed through the past inclement winter… His teeth must have been worn out by constant and violent chattering for such a length of time, night and day, “Poor Tom’s a-cold!”
Lunacy Reform

- The name Dorothea Dix was rapidly becoming synonymous with lunacy reform
- Met face-to-face with representatives to persuade them to rewrite the law
- Personal confrontation was her most powerful weapon against denial
- Tried to frighten the legislature by showing them that they and their families were just as vulnerable to the threat of mental disease as immigrants and the lower orders
- Believed in the case of insanity, hospital treatment was the best medicine
- Families were inadequate to meet the needs of the insane
Lunacy Reform

- Jails were built to detain criminals, bad persons, who willingly and willfully transgress the civil and social laws. Lunatics, in contract, were innocents, guilty of nothing but laboring under disease. Madness was not a crime
Lunacy Reform

- Believed the underlying condition in mental disorders was a biological malfunction of the brain
- Throwing a person who had a lesion of the brain in with common criminals made about as much sense as imprisoning people for contracting tuberculosis, or for that matter, catching a cold
- Found the unexpected growth of her reputation immensely satisfying
- Boasted about being universally recognized and welcomed
- Believed building a state asylum would prove economical as well as humane
- Inspected local institutions, wrote petitions to grand juries, and published exposes in the papers
Lunacy Reform

- Measured the dimensions of buildings, rooms, cells, and the thickness of walls
- Made inventory of the furniture in cells
- Noted what kind of clothing prisoners wore and its condition
- Researched prison diet
- Often recommended improvements in water systems, ventilation, and organization
- Suggested a policy to limit visitors
- Encouraged religious instruction
Lunacy Reform

- Stressed the importance of early institutionalization to cure insanity in young people
- Emphasized the importance of rendering the incurable at least comfortable
- Though she built homes for the mad, she continued to think of herself as homeless
- Never had her own home
- On the road she often slept on floors or costs
- Became the Western world’s leading authority on mental institutions
Slavery

- Traveled often through the South, yet turned her back on the prejudice, hate, and violence of the slave system
- No description of slavery in her private papers or published writings
- For her, the black slaves seem barely to have existed
- Emancipating “these creatures,” she feared, would flood society with beings with no internal discipline and no self-management
- Believed blacks were the inferior race
- Could not see them as fully human
- “These beings, I repeat cannot be Christians, they cannot act as moral beings...”
- Considered the emancipation of three million slaves a disaster in the making
Civil War

- 59 years old
- Went to Washington because rumors spread that the capital was going to be attacked
- Believed her duty was at the military hospitals
- Aided in organizing military hospitals
- Selected and assigned women nurses to military hospitals
- Nurses could not be employed until Dorothea gave her approval
- Worked without pay
- Earned the title she wanted: Superintendent of Women Nurses
Civil War

- Organized a female nursing corps
- Pulled together teams of women volunteers under her command
- “No young ladies should be sent at all but women who can afford to give their services and time and meet part of their expenses or the whole, who will associate themselves by twos to be ready for duty at any hour of day or night – those who are sober, earnest, self-sacrificing and exercise entire self-control”
- “All nurses are required to be plain looking women. Their dresses must be brown or black, with no bows, no curls, no jewelry, and no hoop-skirts.”
- Used her money to rent a large town house to be used as a clearing station for nurse recruits
- Trusted no one and delegated almost nothing
Civil War

- Required any woman who presented herself for nursing service to provide certificates from two physicians and testimonials from two clergymen.
- On a salary of 40 cents per day, her nurses were to “be in their own rooms at taps, or nine o’clock unless obliged to be with the sick; must not go to any place of amusement in the evening; must not walk out with any patient or officer in their own room except on business.”
- Prejudice against Catholic nurses.
- Surgeons did not treat women nurses well.
- Earned a reputation of taking direction from no one.
- Sometimes used her official rank and title to humiliate doctors who challenged her.
- Thought of herself as superior to the ordinary army surgeons, who she regarded as barely competent hacks.
Civil War

- Many nurses mocked her behind her back
- Was essentially fired from her position
- Worked among the hospitals until the end of the war
- Little hope for lunacy reform after the war
- After the war helped lost and wounded soldiers and nurses find their way home
- At 64 had no intention of slowing down
- Usually took of 10 years when mentioning her age
- Became a one-woman relief agency
Post Civil War

- Helped soldiers collect back pay from the arm
- Distributed food and clothing to poor veterans and their families
- Did her best to find homes for the war’s orphans
- By 1866 raised $8,000 to build a 45 feet high column for the 6,000 American soldiers who laid down their lives for the Constitution
- Meant to memorialize self-sacrifice
- The war had taken a heavy toll on her
- People described her as being a walking textbook of symptoms
- Alarmingly thin and fatigued
Post Civil War

- Donated a lot of her money to various people and causes
- Paid for a water fountain for animals in downtown Boston
The Last Years

- In the last quarter of the century Dix’s asylums had become badly tarnished
- Popular fiction represented them as hell-holes and the doctors who ran them as medical villains
- In her 70s she developed arthritis and she no longer traveled
- Stopped writing memorials
- Wanted to write a memoir of her life to set the record straight
- In 1878 after her brother and best friend Ann Heath died she drafted her will
Her Will

- The value of her estate was to be invested for training and education of American youth
- $500 to the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals to build another fountain
- $100 to the African church in Washington
- $100 to the Old Women’s Colored Home in Boston
- $100 to several nurses who served under her
- Left nothing to the institutions she had created
- Her asylums had changed so much that she could no longer identify with their purposes
 Died on July 17, 1887 at age 85
 Body was placed in a plain casket, as by her instructions
 She specified nothing more elaborate than a granite headstone simply bearing her name to mark her grave
Today

- The institutions that she built are still standing
- The asylum movement never received enough funding or intelligent management
- Today nearly $\frac{1}{3}$rd of all jails regularly hold people with serious mental disorders on trivial charges or no charges at all
- 85% of jails report confining people who are mentally ill
- The Los Angeles County jail has become the nation’s largest mental institution
Discussion Questions

- Today what is the solution to remove the mentally ill from jails and prisons?
- Should Dorothea have done something different to prevent this outcome?
- Did Dorothea’s childhood benefit or hinder her success as an adult?
References