

# “I Tell What I Have Seen”—The Reports of Asylum Reformer Dorothea Dix

Excerpted from Dix, Dorothea, *Memorial to the Legislature of Massachusetts*. Boston: Munroe & Francis, 1843.

## MEMORIAL, TO THE LEGISLATURE OF MASSACHUSETTS.

Gentlemen,

I respectfully ask to present this Memorial, believing that the cause, which . . . sanctions so unusual a movement, presents no equivocal claim to public consideration and sympathy. Surrendering to calm and deep convictions of duty my habitual views of what is womanly and becoming, I proceed briefly to explain what has conducted me before you unsolicited and unsustained, trusting, while I do so, that the memorialist will be speedily forgotten in the memorial.

About two years since leisure afforded opportunity, and duty prompted me to visit several prisons and alms-houses in the vicinity of this metropolis. I found, near Boston, in the Jails and Asylums for the poor, a numerous class brought into unsuitable connexion with criminals and the general mass of Paupers. I refer to Idiots and Insane persons, dwelling in circumstances not only adverse to their own physical and moral improvement, but productive of extreme disadvantages to all other persons brought into association with them. I applied myself diligently to trace the causes of these evils, and sought to supply remedies. As one obstacle was surmounted, fresh difficulties

appeared. Every new investigation has been depth to the conviction that it is only by decided, prompt, and vigorous legislation the evils to which I refer, and which I shall proceed more fully to illustrate, can be remedied. I shall be obliged to speak with great plainness, and to reveal many things revolting to the taste, and from which my woman's nature shrinks with peculiar sensitiveness. But truth is the highest consideration. *I tell what I have seen*—painful and as shocking as the details often are—that from them you may feel more deeply the imperative obligation which lies upon you to prevent the possibility of a repetition or continuance of such outrages upon humanity. 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 idiotic 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. And I cannot

suppose it needful to employ earnest persuasion, or stubborn argument, in order to arrest and fix attention upon a subject, only the more strongly pressing in its claims, because it is revolting and disgusting in its details.

I must confine myself to few examples, but am ready to furnish other and more complete details, if required. If my pictures are displeasing, coarse, and severe, my subjects, it must be recollected, offer no tranquil, refined, or composing features. The condition of human beings, reduced to the extremest states of degradation and misery, cannot be exhibited in softened language, or adorn a polished page.

I proceed, Gentlemen, briefly to call your attention to the present state of Insane Persons confined within this Commonwealth, *in cages, closets, cellars, stalls, pens! Chained, naked, beaten with rods, and lashed into obedience!*

As I state cold, severe *facts*, I feel obliged to refer to persons, and definitely to indicate localities. But it is upon my subject, not upon localities or individuals, I desire to fix attention; and I would speak as kindly as possible of all Wardens, Keepers, and other responsible officers, believing that *most* of these have erred not through hardness of heart and willful cruelty, so much as want of skill and knowledge, and want of consideration. Familiarity

with suffering, it is said, blunts the sensibilities, and where neglect once finds a footing other injuries are multiplied. This is not all, for it may be justly and strongly be added that, from the deficiency of adequate means to meet the wants of these cases, it has been an absolute impossibility to do justice in this matter. Prisons are not constructed in view of being converted into County Hospitals, and Alms-Houses are not founded as receptacles for the Insane. And yet, in the face of justice and common sense, Wardens are by law compelled to receive, and Masters of Alms-House not to refuse, Insane and Idiotic subjects in all stages of mental disease and privation.

It is the Commonwealth, not its integral parts, that is accountable for most of the abuses which have lately, and do still exist. I repeat it, it is defective legislation which perpetuates and multiplies these abuses.

In illustration of my subject, I offer the following extracts from my Note-Book and Journal:—

*Springfield.* In the jail, one lunatic woman, furiously mad, a state pauper, improperly situated, both in regard to the prisoners, the keepers, and herself. It is a case of extreme self-forgetfulness and oblivion to all the decencies of life; to describe which, would be to repeat only the grossest scenes. She is much

worse since leaving Worcester. In the almshouse of the same town is a woman apparently only needing judicious care, and some well-chosen employment, to make it unnecessary to confine her in solitude, in a dreary unfurnished room. Her appeals for employment and companionship are most touching, but the mistress replied, 'she had no time to attend to her.'

*Northampton.* In the jail, quite lately, was a young man violently mad, who had not, as I was informed at the prison, come under medical care, and not been returned from any hospital. In the almshouse, the cases of insanity are now unmarked by abuse, and afford evidence of judicious care by the keepers.

*Williamsburg.* The almshouse has several insane, not under suitable treatment. No apparent intentional abuse.

*Rutland.* Appearance and report of the insane in the almshouse not satisfactory.

*Sterling.* A terrible case; manageable in a hospital; at present as well controlled perhaps as circumstances in a case so extreme allow. An almshouse, but wholly wrong in relation to the poor crazy woman, to the paupers generally, and to her keepers.

*Burlington.* A woman, declared to be very insane; decent room and bed; but not allowed to rise oftener, the mistress said, 'than

every other day: it is too much trouble.'

*Concord.* A woman from the hospital in a cage in the almshouse. In the jail several, decently cared for in general, but not properly placed in a 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 17 years.

*Pepperell.* One often doubly chained, hand and foot; another violent; several peaceable now.

*Brookfield.* One man caged, comfortable.

*Granville.* One often closely confined; now losing the use of his limbs from want of exercise. . . .

I may here remark that severe measures, in enforcing rule, have in many places been openly revealed. I have not seen chastisement administered by stripes, and in but few instances have I seen the rods and whips, but I have seen blows inflicted, both passionately and repeatedly.

I have been asked if I have investigated the causes of insanity? I have not; but I have been told that this most calamitous overthrow of reason, often is the result of a life of sin; it is sometimes, but rarely, added, they must take the consequences; they deserve no better care! . . .

Could we in fancy place ourselves in the situation of some of



Dorothea Lynde Dix (courtesy of the National Library of Medicine)

these poor wretches, bereft of reason, deserted of friends, hopeless; troubles without, and more dreary troubles within, overwhelming the wreck of the mind as 'a wide breaking in of the waters,'—how should we, as the terrible illusion was cast off, not only offer the thank-offering of prayer, that so mighty a destruction had not overwhelmed our mental nature, but as an offering more acceptable devote ourselves to alleviate that state from which we are so mercifully spared. . . .

Men of Massachusetts, I beg, I implore, I demand, pity and protection, for these of my suffering, outraged sex!—Fathers, Husbands, Brothers, I would supplicate you for this boon—but what do I say? I dishonor you, divest you at once of Christianity and humanity—does this appeal imply distrust. If it comes burthened with a doubt of your righteousness in this Legislation, then blot it out; while I declare confidence in your honor, not less than your humanity. Here you will put away the cold, calculating spirit of selfishness and self-seeking; lay off the armor of local strife and political opposition; here and now, for once, forgetful of the earthly and perishable, come up to these halls and consecrate them with one heart and one mind to works of righteousness and just guardians of the solemn rights you hold in trust. Raise up the fallen; succor the desolate; restore the outcast; defend the helpless; and for your eternal and great reward, receive the benediction . . . “Well done, good and faithful servants, become rulers over many things!” ■

## Dorothea Dix (1802–1887)

Dorothea Dix played an instrumental role in the founding or expansion of more than 30 hospitals for the treatment of the mentally ill. She was a leading figure in those national and international movements that challenged the idea that people with mental disturbances could not be cured or helped. She also was a staunch critic of cruel and neglectful practices toward the mentally ill, such as caging, incarceration without clothing, and painful physical restraint. Dix may have had personal experience of mental instability that drove her to focus on the issue of asylum reform, and certainly her singular focus on the issue led to some important victories.

Dorothea Lynde Dix was born in Hampden, Maine, in 1802. Evidence suggests she may have been neglected by her parents, and she appears to have been unhappy at home. She moved to Boston in 1814 to live with her wealthy grandmother. Dix had only attended school sporadically while living with her parents, but in early adulthood, with limited options for women in the professions, Dix became a schoolteacher. She established an elementary school in her grandmother's home in 1821, and 3 years later, published a small book of facts for schoolteachers that

proved extremely popular. By the time of the Civil War, *Conversations on Common Things; or, Guide to Knowledge: With Questions* had been reprinted 60 times. Written in the style of a conversation between a mother and a daughter, and directed at the young women who dominated the teaching profession, the book reflected Dix's belief that women should be educated to the same level as men.

She went on to publish several other works, including books of religious poetry and fictional texts featuring moral lessons. Dix's record of publications and the social circles accessible to her through her grandmother's significant wealth allowed her to mix with some of the brightest and most influential thinkers of her time. She associated with Ralph Waldo Emerson and worked as a governess for William Ellery Channing, the so-called “Father of Unitarianism.”<sup>1</sup>

In 1831, Dix opened a secondary school in her own home. She frequently suffered from bouts of illness, especially during the winter, developing a cough and general fatigue. By 1836, her intense commitment to teaching and demanding workload seemed to have taken its toll. She began to dwell on the idea of death, and felt overwhelmed by her physical illnesses. Biographer David Gollaher, the first scholar to

have access to all of her papers, has suggested that she suffered from depression at several times during her life, and that she experienced a type of mental breakdown during this period.<sup>2</sup>

Perhaps her own struggles helped make her a more compassionate advocate for people who had been diagnosed as mentally unstable or insane. Certainly her ill health ended her teaching career and brought her into a new circle of contacts. Emerson, Channing, and Dix's physician encouraged her to take a restorative trip to Europe, and made the necessary introductions on her behalf. She convalesced in England for more than a year at the home of politician and reformer William Rathbone. During her stay, she met prison reformer Elizabeth Fry, and Samuel Tuke, founder of the York Retreat for the mentally ill. She returned to Boston in 1837, just after the death of her grandmother. The inheritance she received enabled her to support herself fully and devote her time to reform and charitable work.

In 1841, Dix volunteered to teach Sunday school classes to female convicts in East Cambridge Jail. During her visits she saw people with mental illnesses who had been treated inhumanely and neglectfully, and she became determined to improve conditions. She began to investigate the treatment of the

mentally ill in Massachusetts, and in 1843 submitted her first “memorial” to the state legislature, an excerpt of which is re-published here. These pamphlets were the only means by which a woman could participate in political life in America. Women were barred from voting, could not hold office, and did not present such testimonials themselves before the legislature—a male representative had to read the text aloud. Although she had significant political influence and promoted the education of women, Dix never joined the wider feminist movement or lent her public support to their cause. She has also been criticized for her views on slavery and her resistance to abolitionism.

This memorial reveals how Dix worked within the conventions of her time to carve a role for herself in public life and draw attention to the horrendous treatment of the mentally ill in prisons, almshouses for the poor, and asylums. Ideals of femininity characterized women as having a special responsibility to the most vulnerable members of society, and a moral authority superior to men’s. At the same time, women were supposed to be protected from images and experiences of suffering and degradation. Dix was able to use her vivid and upsetting descriptions to powerful effect, damning the existence of these abuses and shaming politi-

cal leaders into taking action on her behalf, and on behalf of the “inmates” of these institutions.<sup>3</sup>

The model of care that Dix supported, “moral treatment,” was developed from the work of French psychiatrist Philippe Pinel and from new practices used at hospitals such as England’s York Retreat. Her tireless work and dramatic testimonials highlighted the appalling conditions in existing institutions and promoted the inherent value of compassionate care. ■

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