CRITIQUING A UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST HERO:

THE PROBLEMATIC LEGACY OF DOROTHEA DIX

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Unitarian activist Dorothea Dix's social justice work, and particularly her success as a crusader for the mentally ill, is widely remembered for both the fervor with which she approached it and the unparalleled success she achieved. Equally notable to Dix's radically progressive work is how prescient much of it was in terms of where our contemporary concerns as Unitarian Universalists rest, though Dorothea Dix lived and died long before the creation of the seven Unitarian Universalist principles. While these accomplishments undoubtedly deserve recognition, even more intriguingly, there are lessons to be learned from Dix's shortcomings, lessons that are reflective of issues that Unitarian Universalists still struggle with today. In short, Dix's autonomous style of working, reflective of strong individualism, along with a lack of awareness of her own privilege, not only hindered her work, but was potentially a factor in creating the perception of her responsibility for the custodialism that ultimately developed in the hospitals she helped create. In three areas of her life--her early work in education, her legislative work in prison and mental health reform, and her later years, including her work as Superintendant of Army Nurses in the Civil War--while Dix no doubt made great leaps forward, she also made mistakes that gesture toward common critiques of contemporary Unitarian Universalism. Given the enormity of Dix's accomplishments, it almost seems like bad natured quibbling to critique her shortcomings. Yet, who better to learn from than one who was so successful? From her mistakes, contemporary Unitarian Universalists and others concerned with social justice motivated by liberal theology can learn how to more effectively implement social change and perhaps avoid the pitfalls faced by "America's greatest woman."[1]

Before delving into Dix's flaws, it is vital that we first remind ourselves why Dix is such an iconic figure in the Unitarian Universalist movement, as an understanding of the depth of her

[1] Wayne Viney and K. Bartsch, "Dorothea Lynde Dix: Positive or Negative Influence on the Development of Treatment for the Mentally Ill," 74.

faith is key to exploring the importance of her shortcomings. If anyone could represent the quintessential Unitarian, Dorothea Dix is undoubtedly a worthy candidate. Her achievements are common knowledge: creating the first school for poor children, implementing worldwide mental health and prison reform, serving as superintendant of Army nurses, and working for veterans' rights. These accomplishments would be astounding if achieved by anyone at any time, but by a female emerging from a deeply troubled childhood in the nineteenth century, they reach near mythic status. Undergirding all of these successes was an unwavering Unitarian faith, one that motivated and focused Dorothea, and one that she was "powerfully affected by," motivating her to attend "two Sunday sermons at several churches a week."[2] Indeed, as important as theologians, iconoclasts, unconventional thinkers, and trained ministers have been to the Unitarian Universalist movement, its real staying power has been in the countless congregants who have *lived* out their faith in their everyday lives. Dix is a prime example of a lived faith at the top of its form, an illustration of what can be achieved by someone whose faith, work, and motivation come together to effect positive change in the world. After years of searching for a faith that aligned with her values, Dix came upon the religious movement that would be identified with her greatest successes, and she "thoroughly absorbed Unitarian principles and set to work."[3] While never formally trained as a minister, Dix, inspired by her mentor William Ellery Channing, developed a highly effective rhetorical style reminiscent of popular Unitarian ministers,[4] and even went on to school fledgling preachers on cultivating a passionate preaching style.[5] The direct influence of Unitarian ministry could be seen in her early groundbreaking

[2] Margaret Muckenhoupt, *Dorothea Dix: Advocate for Mental Health Care* (New York, NewYork: Oxford, 2003), 16.

[3] Muckenhoupt, *Advocate*, 17.

[4] David Gollaher, *Voice for the Mad--The Life of Dorothea Dix* (New York: The Free Press, 1995), 62-64.

[5] Thomas J. Brown, *Dorothea Dix: New England Reformer* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard, 1998), 84.

petition to improve prison conditions, which was described as "part legislative petition, part Unitarian sermon, part personal justification."[6] Dix's lifelong devotion to acting upon Unitarian principles is evidenced by even her most private diaries where she wrote heartfelt religious poetry reflective of the ideals of her faith.[7] From a contemporary perspective, Dix's work can no doubt be regarded as a form of community ministry, but it is important to remember that Dix likely viewed herself as simply a devout Unitarian living out her principles in her work and daily life. For that reason, and for the advances she made in advocating for what is now known as the Unitarian Universalist first principle, Dix emerges as an historical figure who is in many ways the physical embodiment of Unitarian ideals. She has become an iconic figure, a hero who proves that "one person can change the world,"[8] her legacy an enduring symbol of social compassion.[9]

But as rightly celebrated as Dix is for her tremendous achievements, her work is not immune to criticisms. And those criticisms, while specific to Dix's work, are not unfamiliar to Unitarian Universalists in general today, which is one reason it was necessary to at least summarize how deeply Unitarianism was woven into Dix's approach and work. The main criticisms that emerge regarding Dix's work (and, by association, Unitarian Universalism) are focused in two areas: one, in the style of interaction and communication in which she achieved her good works, and two, in the lasting repercussions of her work, some of which have been perceived as negative. At the heart of these criticisms are concerns around the autonomous,

[6] Brown, *Reformer*, 88.

[7] Gollaher, *Voice*, 50-52.

[8] "Woman Hero: Dorothea Lynde Dix," My Hero, Accessed January 21, 2013, http://www.myhero.com/go/hero.asp?hero=D_Dix_moran_ms_2008.

[9] "Dismantling the Dix Legacy: The End of Compassion," NC Spin, Accessed January 24, 2013, http://www.ncspin.com/2012/10/25/dismantling-the-dix-legacy-the-end-of-compassion/.

individualistic style through which Dix approached her work—a criticism that has certainly been leveled at Unitarian Universalism, even by some of its most influential leaders (as will be explored). Likewise, "Dorothea Dix's life was a tale of arrogance and grief," characterized by actions that often relied on social, cultural, and economic privilege without acknowledging (or likely being aware) of their influence.[10] This too is a common critique of contemporary Unitarian Universalism, thus positioning Dorothea Dix not only as a hero of our movement, but also a cautionary figure from whose mistakes we can find relevance to our struggles today.

The first area where Dix's weaknesses are apparent is in her early work in teaching and school administration. The recipient of a haphazard education (despite a keen mind), Dix took on the unlikely role of teacher and principal in her teen years, making up for her lack of knowledge through harsh discipline.[11] One of her students recalled:

> It was her nature to use the whip, and use it she did. She didn't whip the girls so much; but she devised all sorts of schemes to mortify them. One little miss had to go through the streets in Court Week with a large placard on her back, bearing the words: "A very bad girl indeed."[12]

The portrait of Dix that emerges from the recollections of her students is an unpleasant one of a woman who, despite having the sincere drive to help others, was unable to contain the bitterness she felt about her own familial relationships.[13] Even Dix's supporters, such as George Emerson, were unable to ignore her faults; he summed up her period as an educator by saying, "Miss Dix was a thorough, successful teacher, and had become rich. But she did not succeed in making her

[10] Muckenhoupt, *Advocate*, 8.

[11] Ibid., 13.

[12] Alfred S. Roe, *Dorothea Lynde Dix: A Paper Read Before the Worcester Society of Antiquity, November 20th, 1888* (Worcester, Mass: Private Press of Franklin P. Rice, 1889), 10.

[13] Alice Davis Wood, *Dorothea Dix and Dr. Francis T. Stribling*: *An Intense Friendship, Letters 1849-1874* (United States: Gallileo Gianniny, 2008), 21.

scholars love her."[14] Dix's mixed success as an educator can be traced back to her own words. She wrote, "Let *me* rescue some of America's miserable children from vice and guilt."[15] (The emphasis on "me" is Dix's own.) Right here we can see the roots of the autonomous style for which Dix would become known, a style that would bring both great achievement but also costly failure. For Dix, rescuing others became a personal quest early on as she quickly developed "the fortitude of a martyr."[16] This startling independence, no doubt influenced by the fractured relationship with her family and her social position as a woman, set Dix on the path to a "lonely and wandering life, . . .carrying ever in her heart an unsatisfied yearning after those closer ties which unite human beings."[17] This portrait of the young woman that emerges from those who knew her is a melancholy one, marked by isolation and tense relationships, even while her fierce independence and seemingly unending resourcefulness drew admiration.

From a contemporary standpoint, Unitarian Universalists still struggle with individualism's place in our faith movement and social justice work. Recently, Unitarian Universalist Association President Peter Morales said, "Individualism is the spiritual disease of our time."[18] Echoes of this concern ripple throughout the Unitarian Universalist community, a community whose recent history has been marked by strong humanistic individualism. Reverend Lynn Thomas Strauss says that the greatest danger to Unitarian Universalism is the tendency to

[14] Wood, *Friendship*, 18.

[15] Muckenhoupt, *Advocate*, 17.

[16] Francis Tiffany, *Life of Dorothea Lynde Dix* (Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1891), Accessed November 4, 2012, http://books.google.com/books?id=b0oXAAAAYAAJ&printsec=frontcover&dq=dorothea+dix&hl=en&sa=X&ei=bzWlUMG4A8bligKZ4ICwDQ&ved=0CEUQ6AEwBw#v=onepage&q=dorothea%20dix&f=false, iv

[17] Tiffany, *Life*, viii.

[18] "The Growth of Totalitarian Unitarian Universalism," Irregular Times, Accessed December 20, 2012, http://irregulartimes.com/index.php/archives/2011/06/27/the-growth-of-totalitarian-unitarian-universalism/.

idolize the individual;[19] Reverend Tony Lorenzen says that, "It's not about you, it's about the community;"[20] and Matt Dance, another Unitarian Universalist, offers the promise that "the key to human happiness is to acknowledge that the world is not about you."[21] But how does Dix, who undoubtedly accomplished so much to help so many people, who undoubtedly was aware of the interconnection of all living creatures (certainly human creatures, anyway) long before our seventh principle was articulated, fit into this contemporary concern? Is she not a Unitarian Universalist hero because of the work she did for society at large? The argument should certainly be made that she is, but it can also be suggested that her status as hero is related to her mystique as an individual fighting for injustice, alone and with little support. As quoted before, she is the personification of the idea that "one person can change the world."[22] As admiring as we are of Dix's achievements, she also has staying power in our cultural imagination because she fits a romantic notion of the rugged individual. We like the image of this young teenage woman having the audacity to start her very own school without the input of anyone else; better yet, we picture her dressed in taffeta sweeping up the stone steps of a bleak prison, ready to lambast a drably suited, wide-eyed, unsuspecting warden. But, in light of the warnings of Peter Morales and other ministerial leadership, we should likely hold alongside Dix's hero status a touch of cool skepticism, as churlish as that may seem in light of her accomplishments. Her early days as an educator serve as a prime example for us that—despite her motivation to help others—there was an individualistic approach to her work that potentially crushed the spirits of those she sought to aid. Here was a person who made up for her own deficiencies by emphasizing

[19] Lynn Thomas Strauss, "Evil," Accessed January 22, 2013, http://www.uucr.org/sermons/evil.html.

[20] Tony Lorenzen, "Abandoned Places of Empire Movers," Accessed January 26, 2013, http://sunflowerchalice.com/2011/05/14/abandoned-places-of-empire-movers/.

[21] Matt Dance,"Stoic Reflections on Suffering and Happiness, Accessed January 28, 2013, http://uufortwayne.org/sermons/10-03-14.pdf.

[22] "Woman Hero: Dorothea Lynde Dix."

discipline over discourse, a person who set out to save children on her own without appealing to others to create an educational community that could have strengthened her weaknesses, and a person who developed something of a martyr complex early on in her career. Dix, without knowing it, was setting in place a pattern in these early days, a pattern of autonomy that would, just as her successes multiplied, ultimately result in larger and larger mistakes.

The second area of note in Dix's work is that which she did toward mental health and prison reform. Specifically of interest in light of this critical examination is the bill proposed by Dix to Congress, a bill Dix was incredibly passionate about as it would have utilized federal land grants to provide care for the mentally ill in perpetuity.[23] This would ultimately be the biggest disappointment in Dix's career, a disappointment that would stem in no small part from her signature autonomous working style. "Believing now that God had chosen her as his instrument to help those who could not help themselves," Dix set out on a lone crusade, drafting this bill and attempting to sway the powers that be into supporting it.[24] Having not learned from an earlier political misstep in New York where she made a mental health reform proposal public before sharing it with the doctors it would affect, Dix pushed her bill forward with unrelenting force, missing the political nuances and opportunities for collaboration that availed themselves along the way.[25] Likewise, she did not see that the involvement of federal land grants had highly complex political implications in a country simmering on the brink of civil war.[26] When the bill was finally passed by both houses of Congress in 1854, Dix misinterpreted the reaction of the

[23] Gollaher, *Voice*, 217-234.
[24]Wood, *Friendship*, 20.
[25]Wood, *Friendship*, 18.
[26]Thomas J. Brown, *Dorothea Dix: New England Reformer* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard, 1998), 212.

bill's opponents, saying, "I think in my heart the very opponents are glad."[27] She was indeed correct, but she was oblivious to where that gladness was coming from, unable to see that these opponents were happily anticipating the bill being vetoed by President Pierce, which it promptly was. Dix was devastated, having completely misread her standing in Washington, believing that her ambitious and "assiduous cultivation" of a relationship with the president would assure that her bill succeeded, and unaware of the multiple toes she had stepped on in the process.[28] During her campaign, one politician, chaffing at Dix's political single-mindedness, told her to remember the people she was trying to help. Dix retorted, "Remember *my bill*!"[29] This lack of political savvy and willingness to collaborate paved the way for the bill's ultimate failure, a failure that perhaps could have been avoided had more people been allowed a voice in its creation. Instead,

> Dix's greatest humanitarian effort had shattered in a heartbreaking failure. . . Despite her contempt for partisanship, her bill had become a vehicle for mobilizing Democratic loyalty behind the effort to repeal the ban on slavery in the public domain. . . She had come to Washington ready to use the political system selectively and transcend it, to sanctify the nation with benevolence; instead, her reform crusade had been manipulated by party strategists and had unwittingly contributed to the framing of the crisis that would bring the country to civil war.[30]

Before we assume that Dix was simply socially inept (as some articles have labeled her), it is important to recognize that she was "politically astute enough not to associate with controversial causes, remaining focused on her own work. Her image could be severely damaged if she alienated the very legislators whose help she later would need."[31] In light of this, it seems clear that Dix chose her autonomous path, again most likely as a result of multiple factors, particularly her troubled early years and her social status as a woman.

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[27]Brown, *Reformer*, 207.

[28]Ibid., 207.

[29]Ibid., 186.

[30]Ibid., 214.

[31]Wood, *Friendship*, 23.

More than individualism marked the flaws in Dix's work at this point, however. There was also a level of privilege that Dix seemed wholly unaware of, privilege that Unitarian Universalism still grapples with today. Certainly, despite Dix's difficult childhood, she had advantages available to very few, most notably benefitting from the wealthy grandparent who had allowed Dix to use a portion of the family mansion to open her first school. The success of the school insured Dix's own economic independence. She traveled in rarefied circles, even within her faith community for "most Unitarians were comfortable citizens who could afford pew rent." Similarly, Harriet Beecher Stowe famously said, "All the elite of wealth and fashion crowded Unitarian churches." [32] Dix had become one of those elite, a fiercely independent member of the upper class, cultivating relationships with presidents, traveling globally, and forging alone ahead on crusades on her own volition. Often, she was startlingly successful with this tactic. Yet, the failure of the land bill and Dix's obliviousness to those around her offering direction suggests that this very independence smacked of a certain kind of socio-economic privilege that "kept her from listening to valuable advice."[33] Modern Unitarian Universalists have been grappling with this notion of privilege for decades now, and certainly the UUA has for many years insisted on examining privilege in its multiple training programs.[34] As a denomination, Unitarian Universalism has primarily consisted of people of privilege, whether it be educational, racial, or economic. Moreover, Unitarian Universalist scholars acknowledge that racism and classism are woven into the very fabric of the modern era.[35] Much work is currently being done to bring a broader spectrum of people into our congregations and do more effective

[32]Muckenhoupt, *Advocate*, 16.

[33]Ibid., 8.

[34]Tom Stites, "Antiracism Primer," Accessed December 12, 2012, http://www.uuworld.org/2000/0300primer.html.

[35] Rosemary Bray McNatt, "Do UUs Have Theological Common Ground?" Accessed January 30, 2013, http://www.uuworld.org/ideas/articles/2281.shtml.

social justice work in marginalized groups; awareness of privilege is key to this work. Only by having this keen awareness can other voices be truly heard, which is vital if collaboration with others is to be achieved. As UU World contributor Mary Pipher said, "A strong community will include people of different ages, ethnic backgrounds, socioeconomic status, and interests."[36] Dix was attempting to serve a diverse community, but she herself was entrenched in an elite, homogenized one. Her actions suggest she was unaware of the ramifications of the privilege she had, and certainly, as a woman in a very repressive time, she had much oppression herself to overcome. Yet, her wealth, prestige, and influential friendships opened doors for her that were accessible to few other people, much less women. Perhaps in her well intentioned fervor to effect positive change, Dix simply overlooked the possibilities for collaboration and communication that were potentially available along the way. Elizabeth Peabody wrote of Dix: "It is amazing that Miss Dix has any success. Dix's righteous ideals have consumed her personality. I particularly detest such a character as Miss Dix. I don't detest Miss Dix herself; however, I think she is rather better than her character. "[37] Peabody's assessment of Dorothea Dix is harsh, and perhaps unfair in light of how difficult it must have been for Dix to operate effectively in a patriarchal society, but it does speak to a perception of her that likely affected her work and participated in the failure of the bill she was so understandably passionate about.

The final area that emerges for exploration of Dix's very human shortcomings is the later period of her life, including her time during the Civil War as the Superintendent of Army Nurses and her remaining years beyond. The prestigious appointment to Nurse Superintendent found Dix in a similarly privileged position to the one she had occupied amongst the Washington elite.

[36] Mary Pipher, "In Praise of Hometowns: Staying Home in the Global Village," Accessed January 15, 2013, http://www.uuworld.org/2003/02/feature3.html.

[37] Muckenhoupt, *Advocate*, 18.

As one person recalled of Dix's years in service, "I have yet to find the first man who has any personal recollection of her in connection with his army life. She was a power behind the throne. That she was authoritative, peremptory, and dictatorial goes without saying."[38] Indeed, her years as superintendent are marked by this pronounced distance from the very people she was attempting to help. There are anecdotes of her storming into hospitals without introducing herself, and then demanding alterations to the wards to meet her specifications—still without anyone knowing who she was.[39] Amusingly, when she met resistance from the chief surgeon at one hospital, she went directly to the department commander to discover who outranked who; when she was told she outranked the surgeon, she returned to see that her orders were immediately implemented.[40] She was described as having been of "good principles and great business capacity, but overbearing and dictatorial toward all;" also, "her shortcomings were neglect of maintaining her records, and a habit of drawing conclusions without duly weighing the circumstances."[41] Again, Dix's autonomous style and disconnection from the average person positioned her in a place of power with which she was often able to do good, but also caused friction. Her history of individualism left her ill prepared to deal with the military bureaucracy, and her unacknowledged privilege resulted in nurses thinking her "rigid and imperious."[42]

These later years serve as a cautionary tale for Unitarian Universalists. Dix was so set in her autonomous ways, so entrenched in her unexamined privilege, that the good that she most assuredly would liked to have achieved in her position was hampered by barriers and obstacles.

[38]Roe, *Paper*, 13.

[39]Ibid., 16.

[40]Ibid., 15.

[41]Roe, *Paper,* 11-16.

[42] "Dorothea Dix," Unitarian Universalist Association, Accessed December 5, 2012. http://www25.uua.org/uuhs/duub/articles/dorotheadix.html.

One Unitarian Universalist minister talks about liberal religion as "a hammer," a tool that can be used to achieve good work in the world.[43] Dix swung that hammer freely, it is true, but how much harder that hammer could have hit if others had been allowed a grip on the handle! The last few years of her life suggest that her independence became too much, even for her, as Dix retreated into silence and ill health while criticism began to surface over her work in the field of mental health. Some felt that Dix had exaggerated the possibilities for curing the mentally ill, which then resulted in overcrowded facilities and paved the way for institutional custodialism as opposed to places of healing.[44] Rather than refute critics, Dix remained silent. When asked to comment on her life's work, Dix refused, stating that, "giving unnecessary publicity to women while they yet live, and to their works, seems to be singularly at variance with the delicacy and modesty which are the most attractive ornaments of their sex."[45] Surely Dix meant this disingenuously, for was this not the woman who was described as having "ambition. . .only equaled by her will--by which she accomplishes everything."[46] Perhaps her silence during these later years was also founded in her wish to deny the character traits that had made many of her successes possible: the toughness, persistence, and determination which would likely be perceived as unfeminine were they brought to light publicly.[47] Whatever her reasons for not answering her critics, Dix, autonomous in her work to the end, allowed her silence to pave the way for a lingering perception that the custodialism that began to characterize the centralized mental institutions she had helped found was her fault, either from poor planning or lack of

[43]Roger Bertschausen, "A Critique of Unitarian Universalism (or The Hammer of Liberal Religion," Accessed January 20, 2013, http://www.fvuuf.org/index2.php?option=com_docman&task=doc_view&gid=76&Itemid=127.

[44] Gollaher, *Voice*, 434-435.

[45] Tiffany, *Life*, v.

[46]Brown, *Reformer*, 192.

[47] Gollaher, *Voice*, 444.

understanding of the complexities of mental disorders.[48] Careful contemporary analysis has shown that this is not the case, and perhaps had Dix been more willing to engage in dialogue regarding her work, this perception might never have arisen and tarnished her reputation.

In the end, then, is Dorothea Dix a Unitarian Universalist hero? The answer is a resounding yes. For all her flaws—and this treatise has been brutally harsh in attempting to bring them to light—during her lifetime, Dorothea Dix improved the quality of life for an enormous amount of people. In fact, it is because her achievements are so extraordinary that it is vital to examine where her missteps were for it is rare that one person is able to achieve so much. If, in doing social justice work, we could but harness all that Dix did right and, at the same time, correct her flaws, we could potentially achieve more than thought possible. Like any other human being, Dix was flawed, but it is fascinating how her flaws fit so neatly into the struggles of contemporary Unitarian Universalism, struggles we have no doubt inherited from our historical past. Dix was a Unitarian through and through, exemplified by her devotion to the faith, the early form of community ministry she intuitively helped create, and her remarkable tangible achievements born out of Unitarian principles. It is no wonder then that this quintessential Unitarian—the living embodiment of Unitarian principles then and now--would also bear the flaws of Unitarianism's legacy: dogmatic individualism and unexamined privilege. To bring these flaws to light is not to suggest that Dorothea Dix should have (or even could have, given her context and circumstances) approached her work in a way that would have insured greater success; after all, her shortcomings are inextricably linked with the era she lived in. As a woman of the nineteenth century, for her to achieve what she did, it is no surprise that she chose

[48] Viney and Bartsch, "Positive or Negative," 71-75.

to adopt a ruggedly individualistic approach to her life and work. Moreover, to expect Dorothea Dix of the nineteenth century to have any comprehensive awareness of the sphere of privilege that she operated from is wishful thinking. But, while these criticisms are not meant as an attack upon Dix herself, they can be useful in illuminating the way forward for Unitarian Universalists today. We can continue to regard Dorothea Dix as an unqualified hero and at the same time hold the knowledge that there were areas of her work where improvements could be made. We can acknowledge that we Unitarian Universalists have historically held individualism in high esteem, but now, through careful examination of the biographical narratives of people like Dorothea Dix, we see how individualism must be balanced with collaboration. We can recognize the amount of privilege that has been housed within our denomination, embodied in patron saints like Dorothea Dix, and also work to see facets of that privilege in their lives that they simply would not have been equipped to see. In so doing, we can see our own still often unexamined privilege reflected back at us in our contemporary lives. Thus, Dorothea Dix most certainly remains a hero: a complicated, complex one with a gloriously problematic legacy from whose achievements and very human flaws we can find both inspiration and edification.

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