

It is tempting to describe Jane Addams as the iconic liberal progressive for having founded Hull House in Chicago - the first American settlement house . However, Louise K Knight's , *Spirit in Action*, the most recent biography of Addams does not paint a portrait of an iconoclast. The story Knight tells is about an independent and complicated reformer. She was an ethicist, a sociologist, a politician and gifted orator. She was an influential stateswoman in a period when women were not empowered; yet she embraced and lived according to some conservative principles. She was a pragmatist who held "the conviction that even the most bitter disputes could be resolved if people would only listen to each other". (83). Addams was controversial and fiercely independent.

Educated in a female academy, she dreamt of continuing her higher education at Smith College and of studying medicine. She was confident in her intelligence and abilities. Her conception of female greatness was so vast that she embraced the notion that God was female. (28) Yet, despite her confidence she kept her desires for greatness and independence subordinate to her father's demand that she conduct herself according to the social norms of the late 19th century. (32) The sublimation of her desires, combined with the grief of her father and brother's untimely deaths, sent her reeling into a depression that she treated as so many woman of privilege would have- with a trip to Europe. It was on that trip that Addams' higher consciousness would rise above the proper sphere that had been mandated by her class and her father. After a visit to the impoverished East End of London where she toured Toynbee Hall, the model for the settlement house movement, Addams knew that her calling was what she had been drawn to her whole life - to serve the poor. According to Knight that trip was the first truly

independent act of Addams' life. Still she remained conflicted. She struggled with the notion of whether or not an educated woman like herself "should properly concern herself with the poor or societal problems at all". (53) John Stewart Mill provided inspiration and clarity at that difficult time in Addams life. Upon reading Mill's *The Subjection of Women* her crisis of conscience was resolved. He wrote of the how futile the life of prosperous woman could be

"There is nothing, after disease, indigence, and guilt, so fatal to the pleasurable enjoyment of life as the want of a proper outlet for active faculties". That kind of clarity propelled her forward to pursue what she was being called to do.

Having resolved her crisis of conscience Addams was free to pursue her dream.

Unlike the English model Hull House was not a mission. Jane Addams "hated proselytizing." (71) Her status as an activist and gifted orator evolved and fame amongst the progressive circles would spread.

Leo Tolstoy was another significant influence in Addams' life. Knight describes not only the influences but also how Addams disagreed with some of his most important works. Unlike most reformers there was no singleness of purpose for Jane Addams. Hers was a very open mind. Addams was always a seeker, interested in religion from a young age she found a "brand" that suited her best in Tolstoy's *On Religion*. (52). She credits him for showing her how to live according to a set of Christian principles that matched her passion for wanting to serve the poor. Relieved of the burden of "a doctrine that focused on human sinfulness and redemption" she set out to "emulate Tolstoy's example" including his willingness to turn his back on the materialistic privileges of his class. (54). Furthermore, she would be forever indebted to Tolstoy for teaching her about nonresistance.

She would become an important member and leader of all of the important social reforms of the progressive era. Although resistant, initially, she ultimately became an important figure in the woman's rights movement. She was a leader in the campaign to end child labor and a co-founder of both the NAACP and the ACLU. Having served as an advisor for every president from McKinley to Roosevelt she achieved a level of respect amongst reformers, journalists, all brands of politicians and the American public.(110) Her universal appeal, however, diminished upon taking a public position against WWI – a cause for which she would become as passionate for as serving the poor and it would become her equally important (if lesser known) legacy. Despite the controversy, she founded the Woman's League for International Peace and Freedom – the world's oldest woman's international peace organization that is still headquartered in Geneva and still works for peace and freedom.

John Dewey was a good friend and colleague. As a philosophy professor at the University of Chicago he was a frequent visitor to Hull House. (94) Though often credited with being the greatest philosophical influence in her life Addams found herself often disagreeing with him. Still his description of her, upon her death to explain the simplicity of her appeal – “she was the most human person I know:”

As the poor are getting poorer and the middle class is disappearing America needs a hero like Jane Addams. Some heroes are born with the integrity that propels them to right action. Others emerge from the adrenaline of a crisis. If we ask our students to read more biography we will get more heroes. There are endless parallels between America today and America during the Progressive era. I would like to see my students inspired by this woman of privilege who committed

her life to improving the plight of the poor, child labor, feminism, black civil rights and world peace. As a nation divided we continue to struggle with the proper role for educators in teaching character education. The solution is really so simple. Have students read more biography. I am currently in the earliest stages of shaping a proposal for a senior elective that will focus on the importance of media literacy for studying history. The course will include elements of history, cultural anthropology, philosophy and ethics. Character education is insidious. You cannot lecture someone into being a better person or assign him or her the role of hero. But you can expose them to the inspiration of those persons who changed history in a big way, but with small egos and only good intention. When assigning a biography I will ask students to identify how the subject was the impetus for change. But more importantly I will ask them to describe, in detail, how the subject overcame the obstacles in their way. To personalize the assignment I will ask students to identify characteristics in the subject that they can relate to. To demonstrate the value of this exercise I will ask students to also examine the influences in the subject's life. In the case of Addams those would include Tolstoy, Mill and Dewey. Those influences could become the subjects of additional research. A profile of Addams' courageous life provides so much inspiration and hope for our tumultuous times. Her pragmatism should serve as an example that the solutions to our social problems will materialize only when we become willing to set politics aside.

A REVIEW
Of
LOUISE W. KNIGHT'S
SPIRIT IN ACTION:
JANE ADDAMS

Submitted by: Susan Healy
September 14, 2011

WORK CITED

Knight, Louise W. *Spirit in Action: Jane Addams*. W.W. Norton & Co. Inc.
New York, 2010.