

JANE AND GENDER: In her own words, she was an utter failure. Albeit she thrived in college as class president, student magazine editor, and excelled academically, as an 1881 college graduate of high intelligence with a strong inner drive to do meaningful work, she was stifled.

Jane Addams was of the first generation of college-educated women to graduate into a patriarchal world in which no positions awaited them. They were considered a malady. College educated men, graduates from Harvard founded in 1636 and all other "men only" universities were, and long had been, the norm. College admissions first opened to women in 1833 at Oberlin College. By 1867, only twenty-two had followed suit. These new educated women with aspirations other than marriage were abusively labeled as selfish, abusively treated vindictively, and abusively shunned for their aptitudes. They were told not only that they couldn't, but that they shouldn't. Harvard physician Edward Clark warned that intellectual activity, particularly that of higher education, would have a detrimental effect on women's health and well being.

Mysterious mental and physical distress became pandemic in young educated women. Symptoms could not be traced anatomically.* They were labeled neurasthenia by neurologist George Beard, who cited one of the causes to be an increase in mental activity among women. In response to such unfounded gender toxins, seventeen college-educated women defied convention and formed the American Association of University Women to advance higher education for women and girls. (1881)**

In this climate of ubiquitous female gender defame, Addams, herself, suffered severe physical illness and mental depression. She was confined to a clinic for six weeks of treatment under the care of the leading expert on neurasthenia, doctor Silas Weir Mitchell. His cure was total seclusion that eliminated all use of body and brain, confined bed rest with no reading or writing. Post treatment, Mitchell prescribed no more than two hours of intellectual stimulation per day and cautioned never to use pen, brush, or pencil.***

For eight years of Addams' young adult life, this ambitious, intelligent woman (as many women of the era) questioned her sanity, her passion to perform, and the restrictive realities of Victorian female submissiveness to Victorian males and mores. Her post college years were painfully wiled away, her intellectual abilities in check.

On one of her travels abroad, she visited Toynbee Hall in London, a settlement house run by educated young men aiding the poor in an interactive manner that appeared to benefit the educated young men even more than it benefited the poor. She saw in Toynbee a vision for her future. She would reconstruct this model in Chicago with one difference. Her settlement would provide outreach opportunities for college women.

In her own words, she opened Hull-House in 1889 to save herself as much as to save the poor. In so doing, she also saved the mental health of the educated women who found meaningful work with other like-minded women at Hull-House, and exponentially she saved the mental health of a wealth of women on into the 21st century who walk through doors she opened, to now crash through ceilings that still confine because of gender. By the turn of the century, Addams was an AAUW- Chicago member.

Venerated for Hull-House, Nobel-Prized for Peace, Addams has never been recognized for the gender steps she took and the gender paths she paved. That is about to

change thanks to five students and one teacher in rural America who discovered that no commemorative day in the entire United States honors a woman and then worked with a local AAUW member to institute such a day. Thereby, December 10 in Illinois has been decreed by legislation to honor Jane Addams, a woman, who was an utter success.

*Similar to symptoms identified in housewives as the “problem that has no name,” by Betty Friedan in her 1963 book, the *Feminine Mystique*.

**AAUW now a national association with a membership over 100,000.

***Charlotte Perkins Gilman, “The Yellow Wallpaper,” captures the horror of this cure.

Sources: *A Useful Woman: The Early Life of Jane Addams*, Gioia Diliberto; *Women Building Chicago 1790-1990*, Eds: Rima Lunin Schultz & Adele Hast; *Degrees of Equality*, Susan Levine.

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NOTE: Illinois will honor Jane Addams with an annual commemorative day, thanks to five junior high students in downstate Dongola, Illinois, one teacher, and two years of dedicated work on a school project to make a difference. Their efforts, aided by AAUW-Carbondale, led Governor Rod Blagojevich to sign HB 5243 designating December 10, 2007 and hence forth to be Jane Addams Day in Illinois. They planned to lobby for an additional school day to accommodate a national holiday that will close schools, banks, and government offices to honor Jane Addams, a native Illinoisan, who founded Hull-House at the turn of the century and initiated social reform methods that formulated how America and the world conduct social work today, who was the first American woman to receive the Nobel Peace Prize on December 10, 1931 for her decades of peace activism, and who surmounted (previously) insurmountable confines placed on her because she was a woman.

press releases, etc. at: www.aauw-il.org/jane.html