

READING**“CRUEL AND UNUSUAL PUNISHMENT”:
DOROTHEA DIX AND REFORMS FOR THE
MENTALLY ILL**

CHAPTER 10

A bitter east wind swept Boston on March 28, 1841 when a new Sunday school teacher, tidy Dorothea Dix, arrived at East Cambridge Jail. Stench from the surrounding swamp mingled with the heavy smell of unwashed inmates. A class of 20 women—thieves, prostitutes, alcoholics, outcasts—had been assembled. The Bible lesson on Mary Magdalene met stony resistance. Miss Dix, though, had learned to relish small successes and a few prisoners did join in the hymn.

Unwed and almost 40, Dorothea Lynde Dix, by the standards of her day, was finished. In her early teens, she had run away from difficult parents and begun a brilliant teaching career. She founded two popular schools, experimented with teaching the poor and wrote six books—one a best-seller. Then, in 1836, her world came crashing down. Overwork brought on a nervous breakdown. Worse, she began to cough blood, a sure sign of tuberculosis, a fatal lung disease. Miss Dix had been resting ever since. She was not expected to live much longer.

When Dix volunteered to teach at the jail, her friends said the inmates would appall her. They did, but so did the jail itself. Before leaving that Sunday, Dix took a look around. Trailed by a nervous jailer, she examined cells and talked with prisoners. Suddenly, an eerie wail echoed down the halls.

Who was screaming? And why? Just a mad one, said the jailer. Miss Dix wondered why a lunatic would be in jail. Surely the insane went to asylums. Oh, no, the jailer told her, most went to jail. He had several at the moment. Miss Dix wanted to see them. He couldn't possibly show her: they were too disgusting. She insisted.

The jailer led her to a barred door and gingerly opened it, just a crack. Out rushed a foul odor. Peering in, Dix saw a small stone room, bare but for a few piles of rotting straw and a half dozen huddled bodies, shivering in thin rags. She pushed at the door, but the jailer barred her way. Those people were mad, he warned. Those people were freezing, said Dix. They needed heat and clothing and probably food. The jailer just stared. The insane couldn't feel heat or cold. Everybody knew that.

Just then, the scream sounded again. It wasn't coming from the mad room. With great reluctance, the jailer opened an adjoining cell. Even smaller than the first, this stone room had been divided with rough boards into two pens. In one, the wild-eyed screamer, an almost naked woman, raved and raged. In the other, a normal-looking young woman, with a hint of vagueness about her eyes, cowered. Each time the one howled, the other whimpered in fear.

Dix demanded to know how long these two women had been locked up together. For months, replied the jailer. But they weren't really together. Those boards kept them apart. Otherwise the wild one would have ripped the other to shreds long ago.

Something snapped in Dorothea Dix on that first day at East Cambridge Jail. She moved quickly to help the inmates she'd seen. She took them food and blankets and coaxed two male reformers into confirming her findings and forcing authorities to heat the cells. But what of those she had not seen? How, in this modern day, in enlightened Boston, could public officials treat anyone so cruelly? Why were insane people jailed at all?

Dix began to investigate. She visited hospitals and asylums. She questioned doctors and experts on the poor. She found out that private asylums had abandoned the “lock them in the closet” approach to the insane. Experiments with humane care and various therapies had improved cure rates. Educated people no longer thought that the mad and mentally retarded were possessed by devils, morally impure or unable to feel pain. Unfortunately, most of those who ran almshouses, poorhouses and jails were not educated and still believed these myths.

Dix also found out why insane, simple-minded and even physically impaired people were sent to jail. Under Massachusetts law, people judged unfit to stand trial had to be locked up until they proved able to handle themselves or until someone took responsibility for them. Further, each county had to support its own pauper insane. Where else could counties imprison their charges but at the local jailhouse or poorhouse?

A recent law, passed at the urging of educator

Horace Mann, required that the insane be kept separate from convicts, if possible in asylums. But few counties had public asylums and care in private hospitals cost too much. By the time the state built a public asylum, it was already far too small. Some counties moved their lunatics to separate cells, even unused closets, at the jail. Others paid private citizens a small fee to keep prisoners in attics, cellars, or outbuildings.

Dix consulted Mann. In his view, the government would not pay for adequate care unless the current wretched conditions were brought to light. Someone must visit each jail, almshouse, asylum and prison in the state and carefully, accurately describe how inmates lived. The reporter would need to be persuasive for, without official backing, jailers might refuse to cooperate. He would need to pay his own expenses; no one would fund such a study. He would need to be smart and honest, or no one would believe his findings. Alas, Mann lamented, who capable of such a project would be willing to undertake it?

Dorothea Dix was willing and able. In the early summer of 1841, over the protests of friends and the threats of relatives, she began an 18-month tour of Massachusetts. She jostled through smoke and cinders along the state's few railways, creaked by stagecoach down the highways, spent nights in tavern corners or, bolt upright, on station benches. She always emerged clean and prim enough to awe the most suspicious jailer. She visited every institution in the state, some more than once, and took careful notes.

Shelburne. November. Reached a house of most respectable appearance. . . . [In the yard] was a small building of rough boards imperfectly joined. This shanty, or shell, enclosing a cage, might have been eight or ten feet square. A narrow passage within allowed [one] to pass in front of the cage. Very cold, air within burdened with most noisome vapors. All still save now and then a low groan. At last I saw a human being, partially extended, cast upon his back amidst a mass of filth. . . . "Can he not have some clean, dry place and a fire?" "As for clean, it will do no good," [the keeper replied]. "He's cleaned out now and then, but what's the use for such a creature? If he had a fire, he'd only pull off his clothes."

Newburyport almshouse. Eighty inmates, seven insane, one idiotic. . . . I desired to see [one subject]; much reluctance was shown. She was "dangerous to be approached," said the Master of the House, "had lately attacked his wife," and was "often naked". . . . A door to a closet beneath the

staircase was opened, revealing in the imperfect light a female apparently wasted to a skeleton, partially wrapped in blankets, face furrowed by suffering. In that contracted space, unlighted, unventilated, she poured forth the wailings of despair. "Why am I consigned to hell?"

Newton almshouse, a cold morning in October. I ascended the stairs in the woodshed, and passing through a small room, stood at the entrance of the one occupied. With what? The furniture was a wooden box or bunk containing straw, and something I was told was a man. Protruding from the foot of the box was—it could not be feet! Yet from these stumps were swinging chains, fastened to the side of the building. The master told me his history. The old man had been crazy above twenty years. As until recently the town owned no farm for the poor, he had annually been put up at auction. A few winters since, being kept in an outhouse, the people "did not reckon how cold it was," and so his feet froze. "Are the chains necessary now?" I asked. "He cannot run away." "No, but he might crawl forth and in his frenzy do some damage."

The vast majority of the insane people Dorothea Dix found in jail were locked up because no one knew what else to do with them. They were treated cruelly, not as punishment, but out of ignorance. Still, Dix found many jailers and citizens who believed insanity was caused by sin, as were poverty and other misfortunes. In this view, lunatics and paupers did deserve punishment.

In January, 1843, Dix submitted a report to the legislature. She asked for money to enlarge the state's only asylum. This report has been called the nation's first piece of social research. At the time, it was also called a pack of lies. Jailers, officials and citizens took the report as a personal insult and tried to prove abuses didn't exist in their towns. The press claimed Miss Dix suffered from an overactive imagination: perhaps half her stories had some truth to them. In spite of the attacks, state lawmakers endorsed the Dix report and approved money for adding 200 rooms to the state asylum. By the Rhode Island clergymen had invited Dix to examine conditions in their jails.

Behind Bars

In the 1840s, treatment of the insane was Dorothea Dix's prime concern, indeed her obsession. But touring state after state, at first on her own initiative, then by invitation, she came to know more about jails and prisons than anyone

else in the country.

In colonial America, locking people up was not the preferred way of punishing them. It was thought more effective, and was less expensive, to inflict immediate physical pain. Towns had jail cells to hold suspects, but soon after conviction, the criminal was whipped, branded, ducked in water, mutilated, set in the stocks or hanged.

By Dix's day, only one state—Delaware—still clung to this system. The state had no prison: convicts went straight to the stocks, the whipping post or the gallows. Delaware claimed it had less crime than its neighbors and that second convictions were rare. But, as Dix pointed out in one report, statistics suggested that Delaware's native criminals hadn't reformed. They'd moved to Pennsylvania.

Pennsylvania had special prisons. Fifty years before, the Society of Friends (or Quakers), whose religious views opposed violence, had introduced the notion of isolating criminals instead of whipping them. Stuck alone behind thick walls for long periods of time, the prisoner could think about his or her misdeeds and become penitent. Hence, the term penitentiary.

In 1843, a convict wrote Dix about life in a Pennsylvania prison.

"I have been confined in prison nearly two years. My sentence is for ten years, for coining Spanish quarter dollars. . . . At the time I came, I was sick and debilitated, but my health has improved. I have not once been out of my cell. It is well warmed and ventilated. . . . Solitude has necessarily led me to reflection. . . [and] convinced me that I have been a drunkard for the 25 years previous to my coming here. . . . My labor is making heddles for the weavers. It is not so laborious but that I have time for study. Besides the Holy Scriptures and Book of Common Prayer, which I

resort to morning and evening daily, I have several works on moral and scientific subjects. . . . I feel satisfied that the solitary system is best adapted to . . . effect a cure of that moral disease called crime."

Because prisoners never left them, cells in the Pennsylvania or "solitary" system were fairly large. Such prisons could hold fewer prisoners. The resulting expense made some officials wary. Others pointed out that, though convicts in solitary cells earned money at weaving, shoemaking and other crafts, they could be used more profitably as industrial labor. Still others said permanent solitude was cruel torture.

As a result, the "work" or "silent" system emerged at a prison in Auburn, New York. Though locked in their cells for 14 or 16 hours a day, inmates were released to eat in common rooms and work at prison industries. However, to keep them focused on their crimes, they could never speak. (Sing Sing ran on this plan.)

Dix found fault with the Auburn system. First, prisoners who worked all day had little time for the study and reflection they needed to change their ways. Second, denied speech, convicts soon learned to communicate with coughs, sneezes and signs. In an 1844 survey, almost 30 percent of Sing Sing's prisoners blamed evil company for their crimes. Letting them mingle with other criminals was senseless. Finally, group discipline could not be maintained without resorting to physical abuse.

Supporters of both systems fought to prove their plan superior. Each side publicized incidents of cruelty and neglect from the other's prisons. Some states adopted a mix: many New England prisoners ate in their tiny cells, but worked elsewhere. By the 1840s, the Auburn system was winning. It still influences prison design today.