

Dorothea Dix

(adapted from [UUA](#) website)



Dorothea Dix lived in the 1800s. At a time when women had fewer choices than men did, Dorothea made extraordinary choices for herself. She did not grow up a Unitarian, but she chose to become one as an adult. Another choice she made was to work hard on behalf of other people.

Dorothea made one of the most important contributions to our society by helping to create hospitals for people with mental illness. In her time, there were no hospitals for people with mental problems. People who acted strange or could not communicate because they had difficulty thinking and interacting the same way most others did, were kept in prisons. Often they were chained and given very little clothing. So what if it was cold in the prison? Nobody cared whether these people were cold. Most people thought people with mental illness did not get cold or feel pain. In fact, many people thought that those with mental illness were not fully human at all.

What gave Dorothea Dix a different idea about them? Maybe it was some of her own troubles that made her think more compassionately.

Dorothea Lynde Dix was born on April 4, 1802 in the town of Hampden, Maine. She was the oldest of three children born to Joseph Dix and Mary Bigelow Dix. Dorothea's mother was often sick and her father was not very nice to his family. He often hit his wife and children. The family moved a lot, from Maine to Massachusetts and finally Vermont. When she was 12 years old, her grandmother sent for Dorothea and her two younger brothers to come live with her in Boston. Dorothea's grandmother was wealthy and she expected Dorothea to behave in a certain way. Dorothea only wanted to care for her younger brothers. She was not interested in learning to be a "lady" which at that time meant taking lessons in how to behave in society.

It took time for Dorothea to learn and understand how to "behave." But one thing that she did very well, and loved in fact, was to read books and study. It was unusual at the time for a young girl to know how to read and write, but Dorothea's father, a Methodist minister, had taught her. Even though he was difficult as a father, he did teach her something valuable.

As Dorothea grew up, her grandmother was very strict and very concerned about her status in society. When Dorothea became involved in opening a school for poor children, she wanted to use her grandmother's barn as the school. Dorothea was so worried her grandmother would not let her teach the poor, especially in her own barn, that she wrote

her a letter to ask permission. Dorothea's grandmother said yes right away and Dorothea spent years as a teacher.

Dorothea was religious, attending her grandmother's Congregationalist church every Sunday. One day, Dorothea decided to visit the Unitarian church where Dr. William Ellery Channing was speaking. What she heard that day changed her life forever. She heard Dr. Channing preach that God was love and we are all a part of that love and we are called to show that love to others. This was very different from the sermons she heard in her own church. Dorothea became a Unitarian. After she got to know William Channing, he offered her a job helping to care for his children. She lived with the Channing family for six months, traveling with them and tutoring the Channing children.

When Dix was in her forties, she visited a women's prison and saw women in chains with no clothes on. When she asked why, the prison matron told her those people were mentally ill and didn't understand anyway. Dix was appalled. She was so upset, she called her friends in the Massachusetts government to tell them. They told her they would need a written report before they could act. Dix went to every prison in Massachusetts and wrote a detailed report about the conditions for the mentally ill in each one. With her reports, Massachusetts began to open hospitals that treated the mentally ill with respect and gave them good food and warm clothing.

Dix began to travel to other states, investigating conditions in prisons, filing reports, and testifying before state legislatures. Some of the hospitals she started still stand. So does the view of the mentally ill that she put forth: Even when someone's words or behaviors cannot be understood by others, they remain a person deserving of dignity, respect and love.

Dix deeply valued the right to make one's own choices. She trusted her own choices about the right way to live her life. One of her choices was to become a Unitarian. Another was to work to help people with mental illness in ways they were not able to help themselves. She understood they were people whose right to make their own choices had been taken away. She helped everyone understand that people with mental illness are people like us, who deserve dignity and respect.



Clara Barton (adapted from [UUA](#) and [UUDB](#) websites)

Clara Barton was born on Christmas Day, 1821, in Oxford, MA, into a Universalist family.

Her father was prominent in the local Universalist church. She remembered the church as simple, with tall box pews and high narrow seats, where the faith was "hammered out" in "an incongruous winter atmosphere" (meaning not-conforming—congregants were allowed to challenge doctrines and norms).

Clara was taught to read by her sisters at such an early age that she had "no knowledge of ever learning to read." Her brother taught her mathematics and how to ride horses bareback. However, the Barton household was a stressful place for Clara as a timid and sensitive child. Her family teased her for being small and having a lisp. Her mother was often angry and her oldest sister, Dolly, suffered a mental breakdown, which led to Dolly being locked in the attic. Academically advanced and very shy, Clara was sent away to school at age eight, but was unable to stay and soon returned home.

In her late teens, her parents were advised to have Clara become a teacher in order to overcome her shyness. Although the idea terrified her, she took on forty boys and girls at a district school. Surprised when her school won a prize for discipline, she said no discipline had been needed. Many job offers followed, even after she demanded and received the same pay as male teachers. She taught school for ten years.

When the U.S. Civil War started, Barton was living in Washington, D.C. She began nursing wounded soldiers in her sister's home, visiting the army camps, and was soon orchestrating the delivery of supplies from numerous Ladies Aid societies. After a short time, she began working on the front lines, delivering supplies and tending to wounded soldiers. Despite occasional bouts of illness, she continued her efforts, working alongside a host of women volunteers that included Dorothea Dix and Frances Gage. Gage, also a Universalist, became a close friend. When Barton expressed frustration at the barriers women faced in her line of work, Gage introduced Barton to the women's rights movement as well as the abolitionist movement. They often discussed their shared Universalist faith, which they both credited with influencing their work.

Gage suggested that Barton tell her story to the people, and so in November, 1866, after the Civil War ended, she set off on a speaking tour. Her lecture, "Work and Incidents of Army

Life," was warmly received wherever she delivered it for the next two years. Dressed in black silk, her small figure commanded respect, and her musical voice stirred feelings. Her performance on the lecture circuit made her name a household word, and brought her steady income again.

A few years later, Barton was vacationing in Europe when the Franco-Prussian war broke out. Having just heard of the Geneva Convention which established the International Red Cross, she offered her services to the organization. She set up aid centers in several war-torn cities. The Grand Duchess Louise of Baden and other influential leaders welcomed the famous American. She was awarded the Iron Cross and urged to found an American Red Cross.

In 1881, Barton founded the American Red Cross, but the first few years of the organization's existence were difficult. Barton's own health was often compromised by overwork, and although she was a passionate advocate for the agency's relief work, her lack of administrative skills often caused problems. She persevered, however, and served as the President of the Red Cross until 1904, when she retired at the age of 83. She died eight years later in 1912 of pneumonia.

An excerpt of a letter from Barton to her friend Frances Gage, written in 1870, provides a glimpse into her faith and insightful moral conviction:

My Dear Fannie,

I can never see a poor mutilated wreck, blown to pieces with powder and lead without wondering if visions of such an end ever flitted before his mother's mind when she washed and dressed her fair skinned baby. Woman should certainly have some voice in the matter of war, either affirmative or negative, and the fact that she has not yet should not be made the ground on which to deprive her of other privileges. She shan't say there shall be no war — and she shan't take any part in it when there is one, and because she don't take part in war, she must not vote, and because she can't vote, she has no voice in her government, and because she has no voice in her government, she isn't a citizen, and because she isn't a citizen, she has no rights, and because she has no rights, she must submit to wrongs, and because she submits to wrongs, she isn't anybody, and "what does she know about war— " and because she don't know anything about it, she mustn't say or do anything about it."

Clara Barton