

Dorothea Dix: Student, Reformer and Crusader**MEGAN KOKONTIS**

Imagine being a prisoner in the early nineteenth century, forced into a dirty, overcrowded cell that is sweltering in the summer and freezing in the winter. When it rains, the cell floods and there is standing water, surrounded by moldy walls. The cells are poorly, even dangerously, constructed and do not provide the prisoners with proper ventilation. During mealtimes prisoners must stand while they eat and fresh drinking water is a luxury seldom available. Days are idle, prisoners are alone in the in the cell and nights are spent huddled on the floor, as there are never enough beds for all of the inmates. Those who are ill, are sent to the prison hospital, which lacks essential resources and competent doctors. Many prisoners die due to poor or inadequate care. Should a prisoner survive all of this to the end of his sentence, he will be released back into society without any money, nor a decent change of clothes, impelling him to turn back to crime to meet life's basic necessities. This system does not reform its unfortunate victims. Instead, it exposes them to a world of vice without providing them with the resources necessary to become productive, law-abiding citizens.

This was the American prison system that Dorothea Dix encountered when she began her reform work. Dorothea Dix never set out to reform the prison system in the United States; she was on a crusade to improve the conditions of the poor and insane in asylums. As she further investigated these conditions, she discovered that the mentally ill were often housed in prisons, rather than asylums. She was shocked to find that many were confined in “*cages, closets, cellars, stalls, pens! Chained, naked, beaten with rods,*

and lashed into obedience.”¹ She became a student of the two different prison systems then in use in the United States, then a reformer and finally a crusader. Dorothea Dix was personally motivated by her own deeply held religious convictions and after careful study, the Pennsylvania system was the most congruent with her beliefs. However, in order to acquire the support of the state legislators, Dix needed to look beyond her own religious motivations and, in doing so, she appealed to the pocketbooks, the practicality and the philanthropic instincts of the state legislators. Although Dix is traditionally interpreted as a religious reformer, I argue that she was most effective and brought about the most change as a secular reformer.

For this reason, Dorothea Dix does not fit into Robert Azbug’s concept of a religious virtuoso. Azbug argued that religious virtuosos “seemed more tuned to heavenly matters than earthly matters.”² Religious virtuosos strived to bring Heaven and heavenly matters down to earth and infuse religion into everyday matters. Dix was certainly more tuned to earthly matters, specifically the earthly matter of improving the horrendous conditions in the prisons in the United States. While she may have turned to the heavens for personal motivation, her reform work was successful because it appealed to both practical and sympathetic human instincts: Dix showed the legislators it would be impractical and inhumane to *not* reform the American prison system. She was a social reformer who operated in the public sphere. Dix clearly had religious and moral convictions, but her goal was never to convert people, unlike many religious virtuosos. She performed public works that were both secular and humanitarian and operated almost

¹ D. L. Dix, “Memorial. To the Legislature of Massachusetts” (Boston: Munroe and Francis, 1843), reprinted in David L. Lightner, *Asylum, Prison and Poorhouse: The Writings and Reform Work of Dorothea Dix in Illinois* (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 1999), 6.

² Robert H. Azbug, *Cosmos Crumbling: American Reform and the Religious Imagination* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 4.

exclusively in the secular sector. She spoke to state legislators and interviewed prison wardens and convicts. None of this reform work qualifies as religious.

In the introduction to *Asylum, Prison and Poorhouse: The Writings and Reform Work of Dorothea Dix in Illinois*, David Lightner wrote that Dorothea Dix came from humble roots. She was born on April 4, 1802. Her father was a fire-and-brimstone Methodist preacher, but he was also an alcoholic and a religious fanatic.³ Dix went to live with her grandmother in 1815, who was the widow of a wealthy physician. In her new home, she strived to find the security she had longed for as a child and “although she rejected her father’s evangelicalism, she remained devoutly Christian.”⁴ She never lost her faith in God and “felt certain that [He] would provide her, if not with personal happiness, then at least with some means of being useful.”⁵ Before beginning her prison reform work, Dix opened up a school for children and wrote religious and education literature. Her *Conversations on Common Things* was published in 1824 and went through sixty printings.⁶ She developed a close personal friendship with Unitarian minister William Ellery Channing, who was also a social reformer.⁷ In April of 1836 at the age of thirty-four, she suffered a physical and emotional collapse after working herself to exhaustion. She was nursed back to health by the prominent Rathbone family in Liverpool, England. During her time abroad, she became familiar with British reform activities, especially with the “parliamentary investigations of the condition of the insane.”⁸ When she returned in 1841, Dix began to research the conditions of the

³ David L. Lightner, *Asylum, Prison and Poorhouse: The Writings and Reform Work of Dorothea Dix in Illinois* (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 1999), 1.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid., 2.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.

mentally ill in the United States, “most of whom continued to be housed in jails and poorhouses, often under gruesome conditions.”⁹

Dix began her prison reform work by visiting prisons across the country, and two systems emerged as the models of reform. Dix sought a total reform of the system, of both its physical structures, and more importantly, its programs and systems. In order to have a better understanding of the prison systems, Dix traveled throughout the country, visiting prisons, meeting with wardens and evaluating the various systems for their effectiveness. From 1841 to 1843, she visited state prisons, evaluating their respective benefits.¹⁰ Despite her efforts to remain objective, her opinions were always colored by her deeply held religious convictions. Finally, Dix was faced with two somewhat antithetical systems of prison reform to choose from, the Auburn system and the Pennsylvania system. Her eventual preference for the Pennsylvania system reflects the impact of her religious convictions on her point of view. The Auburn system was first implemented in New York at Sing-Sing prison in 1825. In this system the prisoners were kept on a strict schedule. The prisoners were isolated in own cells and slept alone at night, but labored together during the day and ate together at mealtimes. Although, these prisoners “were forbidden to converse with fellow inmates or even exchange glances while on the job, at meals, or in their cells,”¹¹ in practice, however, this was seldom the case. Prisoners often conversed and were subjected to the adverse influences of their fellow inmates. Dix, like many other students of this system, feared that this led to free and open communication among the prisoners: “The prisoners are perfectly familiar with

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ David J. Rothman, *The Discovery of the Asylum* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1971), 82.

each other's history and with many circumstances not occurring in the shop and yards."¹²

Although the guards and wardens may have strictly enforced the rule of silence at some point in time, this system "generally ends in a certain degree of toleration in the use of speech."¹³ This open communication could make prisons a training ground for a future life in crime, she concluded.

The Pennsylvania System, on the other hand, kept each prisoner in solitary confinement for the entirety of his sentence. It was first implemented in Pittsburgh in 1826 and then in Philadelphia in 1829.¹⁴ Each prisoner was to "eat, work, and sleep in individual cells, seeking and talking only with a handful of responsible guards and selected visitors. They were to leave the institution as ignorant of the identity of other convicts as on the day they entered."¹⁵ Despite the differences between the two systems, the purported goal of both systems was to prevent the prisoner from communicating with each other, and to maximize his time for self-reflection, repentance, and eventually self-improvement and moral reformation.

Dix became a proponent of the Pennsylvania system for several reasons. This system offered its convicts the benefits of solitary confinement, individual labor, education and, most importantly, prayer and reflection. Although some people raised significant concerns about the impact of solitary confinement on the mental stability of the inmates and the additional costs of the system, Dix argued its benefits far outweighed any of its costs. She praised the Pennsylvania system through her book, *Remarks on Prison and Prison Discipline in the United States*, published in 1845. One of the

¹² Dorothea Lynde Dix, *Remarks on Prisons and Prison Discipline in the United States* (n.p., 1845; reprint, Montclair, New Jersey: Patterson Smith Publishing Corporation, 1984), 78.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid., 79.

¹⁵ Rothman, *The Discovery of the Asylum*, 82.

Pennsylvania system's most significant features was the use of solitary confinement, which would become an important element of her plan for the prisoners' reformation. In this system, she argued, the prisoner was not in total isolation, although he:

is separate . . . from fellow convicts, and shut in from the curious gaze of thoughtless visitors. He is not solitary; for he sees *daily*, three times, the officer who furnishes his meals; he sees the officer who supplies the working materials; teaches him to work and receives the work when done.¹⁶

The prisoner was also permitted to see righteous, pre-approved visitors, such as "the warden, the chaplain, the schoolmaster, and the physician and the apothecary."¹⁷ More importantly, the benefits gained from separation from other prisoners were vital to the prisoners' reform. Historians recognize that:

Social ills were the cause of crime . . . then society should be able to cure criminals by separating them from corrupting influences and by inculcating in them healthy habits. . . . The prisons had failed not because imprisonment was wrong,¹⁸ but because offenders were indiscriminately mixed together.

Dix refuted the objections to the system of solitary confinement potentially leading to insanity by citing Commissioner Crawford, a prison commissioner from England, who unwaveringly declared his support of the Pennsylvania system because "its discipline is a safe and efficacious mode of prison management; and that it has no unfavorable effect upon the mind of health."¹⁹ She also cited the chaplain from Western Penitentiary in Pennsylvania in 1844, who asserted that the Pennsylvania system "has no more tendency

¹⁶ Dix, *Remarks on Prisons and Prison Discipline in the United States*, 73.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Matthew W. Meskell, "An American Revolution: The History of Prisons in the United States from 1777-1877," *Stanford Law Review* 51, no. 4 (April, 1999), 852.

¹⁹ Dix, *Remarks on Prison and Prison Discipline*, 80.

to produce insanity than any other form of imprisonment.”²⁰ She defended against the claims of possible insanity by suggesting that the cases cited were the exceptions and in most cases prisoners benefited from this practice.²¹

Dix believed that labor was an important part of prisoners’ reformation and that it was an essential part of the prison system. Labor improved the prisoners’ self-esteem since “he who works for his maintenance has a higher sense of self-respect, than he who receives his support from others.”²² The Pennsylvania system provided time for prisoners to work as well as time for education and reflection. The prisoner would labor in his own cell and would learn a skill that could lead to future employment, as well as contribute to his own maintenance. In 1831, when Alexis de Tocqueville and Gustave de Beaumont came to the United States to study the American prison system and how it could be applied in France, they confirmed these views on labor. When they questioned the prisoners, each one affirmed the necessity of labor in their daily lives. They asked: “*Ques.* ‘Do you believe you could live here without labour?’ *Ans.* ‘Labour seems to me absolutely necessary for existence; I believe I should die without it.’”²³ Another prisoner asked the same question answered, “*Ans.* ‘It would be impossible to live here without labour. Sunday is a very long day, I assure you . . . Labour is here a pleasure.’”²⁴

Prisoners could perform additional labor; in an effort to earn enough money so that once released they would not be forced to turn back to a life of crime. Prisons established these incentives and “established accounts for each convict who produced

²⁰ Ibid., 43.

²¹ Ibid., 85.

²² Ibid., 12.

²³ Gustave de Beaumont and Alexis de Tocqueville, *On the Penitentiary System in the United States and its Application in France*, Translated by Francis Lieber (New York: Augustus M. Kelley Publishers, 1970), 188.

²⁴ Ibid., 189.

more goods than were necessary to cover his costs. Each prisoner was supposed to receive the money from this account upon release from the institution.”²⁵

Dix also believed that the Pennsylvania system afforded the prisoners more time to devote to education and reformation. They still performed labor, but those tasks “are not burdensome [and] are accomplished at intervals during the day.”²⁶ The prisoner could then choose how to spend the rest of his time. However, the Pennsylvania system also gave each prisoner “the liberty to rest, to read, or write, to listen to the counsels of the chaplain, or the teachings of the schoolmaster, and to cultivate in its season the small plat of ground, which the industrious have much pleasure in keeping in order, and in which an hour daily maybe be spent.”²⁷ Uneducated and illiterate prisoners could become educated. Those prisoners who have never found God or religion in the past had the opportunity for spiritual reflection. The Pennsylvania system gave the prisoners these choices, whereas the Auburn system imposed a single, strict schedule for each prisoner.

Dix also argued that the Pennsylvania system was cost effective, because “the superior benefits more than compensate for the difference in the cost.”²⁸ Although the Pennsylvania system was reported in 1844 to cost “1.16 pounds per annum for each prisoner more than the social system,”²⁹ it had a higher success rate. Auburn required expensive buildings as well, but did not promise the same results. In fact, Dix argued that it “does not produce a real reformation.”³⁰ The benefits of the Pennsylvania system were well documented. Widespread knowledge of its strict rules would “tend to diminish

²⁵ Elaine Jackson-Retondo, “Manufacturing Moral Reform: Images and Realities of a Nineteenth-Century American Prison,” *Perspectives in Vernacular Architecture* 8 (2000), 126.

²⁶ Dix, *Remarks on Prison and Prison Discipline*, 71.

²⁷ Beaumont and de Tocqueville, *On the Penitentiary System in the United States and its Application in France*, 189.

²⁸ Dix, *Remarks on Prison and Prison Discipline*, 81.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Ibid., 83.

the number of crimes, and consequently that of criminals; and . . . also . . . the length of punishment.”³¹ It was widely speculated that the Pennsylvania system acted as a deterrent against future crime. This would lead to fewer criminals in the prison, which would tend to balance out the additional costs required to implement this system.

These fiscal concerns aside, Dix found the moral advantages of the Pennsylvania system more compelling. This system allowed a prisoner to manage his own time and was significantly better for the development of his intellect and his spirituality. Dix argued that this system allowed each prisoner to develop a routine and “after a short time, a new habit of using the mind is acquired.”³² Prisoners were removed from the temptation of consorting with other prisoners and “at the period of release, go forth really strengthened to resist the allurements and temptations, which have already proved so fatal to their reputation and their peace.”³³ The prisoners’ interactions with righteous individuals prevented total isolation and the prisoners’ “moral faculties are not inactive; and I think, so far as I have observed, that they are decidedly strengthened.”³⁴ This system allowed the inmates to learn to be useful and productive members of society, reducing their need to engage in criminal activity in order to survive. The system used equity and justice in administering punishment and according to Dix, provided the best opportunity a prisoner had of attaining reformation.

Dorothea Dix’s choice of the Pennsylvania system was very much influenced by her deeply held belief that human beings are fundamentally good. However heinous the crime a prisoner committed, Dix believed he or she could be reformed. This idea,

³¹ Ibid., 84.

³² Ibid., 73.

³³ Ibid., 74.

³⁴ Ibid.

founded in her Unitarian beliefs, contrasted with the earliest Calvinist views, “that people are born sinners and cannot fundamentally change.”³⁵ Dix was clearly influenced by the Second Great Awakening, which had a more positive view of humans and human nature and saw God as a merciful being. Instead of the traditional Calvinist attitude, the Second Great Awakening taught that individuals had a “direct responsibility for securing his or her own salvation.”³⁶ She called her reform movement a “sacred cause,”³⁷ and her belief in the goodness of humanity could be seen through her views on learning and education. She believed that moral differences among individuals arose from their “early condition.”³⁸

This was a commonly held belief at the time. Beaumont and de Tocqueville affirmed these beliefs, and asserted similar views on the origin of immorality and the beginnings of criminal behavior. Beaumont and de Tocqueville interviewed many prisoners between 1831 and 1833 and each prisoner was asked about his family and early childhood. Often, the loss of a parent or growing up without a family was cited, as though it would explain his actions later in life.³⁹ They focused their investigations on “questions on the criminals’ childhood, recording what they wanted legislators and philanthropists to learn. No matter at what age the deviant committed an offence, the cause would be traced back to his childhood.”⁴⁰ Dix also espoused this belief a decade

³⁵ Meskell, “An American Revolution: The History of Prisons in the United States from 1777-1877,” 852.

³⁶ Daniel Feller, *The Jacksonian Promise: American 1815-1840* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995), 98.

³⁷ Dorothea Dix “Memorial on the Condition of the Insane in Massachusetts, 1843.” In *The Era of Reform: 1830-1860*, ed. Henry Steele Commager. Princeton, N.J., 1960. Reprint. (Malabar, Florida: Robert E. Krieger Publishing Company, 1982) 170.

³⁸ Dix, *Remarks on Prison and Prison Discipline*, 6.

³⁹ Beaumont and Tocqueville, *On The Penitentiary System In the United States and its Application in France*, 188.

⁴⁰ Rothman, *The Discovery of the Asylum*, 65.

later. The fact that many of the convicts were “destitute of early moral culture,”⁴¹ was significant, but she felt that their total lack of “religious instruction” was of greater significance.⁴² She asserted in her article “The Strong Claims of Suffering Humanity” in 1843 that the prisoners’ choices were explained “not through crime, but misfortune.”⁴³ Dix believed that despite differences in environment and exposure to religion, people could be educated and reformed. She emphasized that “all men may be taught, who are not deficient in mental capacity, -- that is, who are not idiots, or furiously mad, -- the observance of those laws and rules which give moral vigor and safety to society.”⁴⁴ While in prison, the inmates could be educated both intellectually and morally. She strongly believed that education was key in reducing crime in society. It could act as a great equalizer and eventually, “the humble, the lowly, *the weak*, of whom there are so many, and who are so sorely tried and tempted, will have powerful aid in maintaining their virtue, and in resisting vice, and in forbearing crime.”⁴⁵

Dix favored a system of moderate and just punishment, which also reflected her belief in the goodness of man. She conceded that physical punishment was necessary, at first, to instill a sense of fear of retribution for deviant behavior and establish respect for the rules in the prisoners. She agreed that a new prisoner “can . . . no more, *at first*, be influenced to observe rules and general order by mild influence and words, than the tiger or hyena can be brought to tameness by an expressive word or gentle regard.”⁴⁶ And she was realistic enough to understand, in certain extreme examples, that “sometimes

⁴¹ Dix, *Remarks on Prison and Prison Discipline*, 50.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Dorothea L. Dix, “The Strong Claims of Suffering Humanity,” In *The Reform Impulse: 1825-1850*, ed. Walter Hugins.(New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1972), 71.

⁴⁴ Dix, *Remarks on Prisons and Prison Discipline*, 6.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 13.

[physical punishment was] *the only* mode . . . by which an insurrectionary spirit can be conquered.”⁴⁷ However, in a vast majority of cases, she believed that “[physical punishment] should not be inflicted till reasonable and mild measures have been persevered in, and proved to be unavailing; it should, in the strictest, most literal sense, be the *dernier resort*.”⁴⁸ She contended that the guards should “maintain order through the mildest possible influences,”⁴⁹ and that “violence and severity do but exasperate”⁵⁰ their conditions and “the only availing influence is kindness and firmness.”⁵¹ She believed that prisoners should be dealt with justly and fairly, because men were fundamentally good. Using the lash, “the gag,” “the shower” or any of the other cruel forms of punishment were not the way to bring the prisoners back to God and religion, the eventual goal of reform.

The positive influences provided to prisoners by the Pennsylvania system would do much to reform their characters. Dix believed that “in order to do good, a man must be good; and he will not be good except he have instruction by counsel and by example.”⁵² The guards and officials in the prison were subject to the same rigid restrictions as the prisoners themselves.⁵³ Therefore, the prisoners were provided with legitimate role models. Along with solitary confinement, labor and the virtuous example set by the prison staff, Dix promoted both the study of the Bible and self-reflection to complete her plan for moral reformation. She favored the law at Thomaston Prison in Maine, which required a chaplain to attend to the needs of the prisoners. He had several

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 14.

⁵⁰ Dix, “The Strong Claims of Suffering Humanity,” 71.

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Dix, *Remarks on Prison and Prison Discipline*, 9.

⁵³ Ibid., 21.

duties, “in addition to his services on the Sabbath, [he] made daily visits to the prison for the purpose of conversing with the convicts.”⁵⁴ Although private consultation with a chaplain was not required, chapel attendance was. Also, according to the president of the board of directors in the Maryland State Penitentiary, “all who can read and desire books are provided with Bibles, Testaments, and moral and religious tracts.”⁵⁵ The idea was to inundate the prisoners with moral influences, whether it be virtuous role models, religious officials or moral literature, in the hopes of “winning their hearts and minds.” Dix also believed self-reflection played a role in the moral reformation of the prisoners. While alone in his cell, “the convict begins to reason and to reflect. The perceptive faculties are quickened; the reflective powers are called into action; the moral nature is awakened.”⁵⁶ Given time to consider his mistakes and transgressions, he would see the error of his ways. Once shown how one ought to behave and given the appropriate moral tools through the other aspects implemented in the prison to guide their moral improvement, a prisoner could finally achieve reformation. Dix turned to past prisoners who had been converted for testimony, asking them to affirm the changes they had experienced. She called “those converted to unite, with rectitude of conduct the social and civil relations, a devout and religious spirit, nourished by Christian truth. The evidence of such a reformation of character and life, can be obtained by years of knowledge and observation of the convicts.”⁵⁷

Once her research was complete, she set about to lobby the state legislatures for support to implement these reforms and to improve the facilities themselves. Dix

⁵⁴ Ibid., 49.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 58.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 72.

⁵⁷ Ibid., 66.

developed a three-part plea to enlist the support of the state legislators; appealing to their pocketbooks, their practicality and their philanthropic instincts. Dix understood prison reform would never succeed without the support of the state legislatures, but that the state legislators would be reluctant to take on the economic burden of prison reform and to address the issue of inadequate, unhealthy and crumbling prison facilities. Dix was asked to speak to state legislatures in many states, including Illinois, Indiana, Tennessee, New Jersey, New York and Pennsylvania.⁵⁸ As a woman, being asked to speak to such prestigious institutions on such an important topic speaks volumes about what an influential reformer Dix was. “In all, she was directly responsible for the founding or enlarging of thirty-two institutions here and abroad.”⁵⁹

Dix intended to prove to the assemblies that it would actually be more cost-effective to construct a brand-new prison, rather than to continue to repair the crumbling structures that were currently serving as the state prison buildings. She addressed the Massachusetts legislature first in 1843.⁶⁰ After modest success there, she moved on to New Jersey in 1845 and Illinois in 1846. Before each legislature, she itemized each of the specific expenses that would be necessary to repair the existing structures. For example, in a Report to the Illinois Legislature, from expenses dating back to 1842-1843, she detailed the necessary expenses to improve the walls of a prison. She wrote:

The report . . . shows a charge to the State for building an abutment to *support the wall*, \$19.50; also for rebuilding a large breach in the wall, viz: 274 perch, \$445.25; also \$430.67, for replacing cooper shops, crushed by the falling wall.[!] A bill for extra guards, employed while repairs were carried on, follows the above, of \$1,860.00.⁶¹

⁵⁸ Albert Deutsch, “Dorothea Lynde Dix: Apostle of the Insane,” *The American Journal of Nursing* 36, no. 10 (Oct, 1936), p. 997.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ Lightner, *Asylum, Prison and Poorhouse*, 2.

⁶¹ Ibid., 44.

The resulting structure, repaired in a haphazard and piecemeal way, would not only be more costly than it would have been to tear down and replace, but it would continue to be inadequate and unsafe, requiring future expenditures. She continued in this report to the state legislators, that “should you appropriate the rents for the ensuing six years to repairs and additions, and be assured of a discreet application of the same, you would not, and could not, at the end of that time, have an institution in good condition.”⁶² Simply repairing the building defects would also fail to address the growing problem of inadequate space. There were not enough cells in the existing prisons to accommodate the growing number of criminals. Simply adding more cells onto the existing prisons would be inefficient and costly. Building entirely new prisons would be more cost effective, she argued, and this way, “there will be no occasion to sink funds in building and rebuilding, year following year.”⁶³

Dix also appealed to the state legislators’ sense of practicality. Education was an important part of her proposed reforms, and she stressed the need to improve prison libraries and the overall education of prisoners. She found the current libraries inadequate in most prisons, except for those in Pennsylvania. There, in 1844, she observed the prisoners as diligent pupils; claiming to never have seen “a better ordered school, or a more studious class of pupils. No person, not informed, could have imagined these to be state convicts.”⁶⁴ Education, she argued, would serve the prisoners once they were released, greatly improving their condition and quality of life and making them useful and productive members of society. She argued before the Illinois legislature in

⁶² Ibid., 45.

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ Dix, *Prison and Prison Discipline*, 54.

1846 that books were “important aids, when suitably chosen, in awakening the higher faculties, and kindling desires for that which is wiser and better in life than has heretofore been attained and practiced.”⁶⁵ She cited other state legislatures, such as New York and Rhode Island, who made significant monetary contributions to the prison libraries.⁶⁶ Dix sought to place the responsibility for the development and education of prisoners squarely in the lap of the legislators, hoping to enlist their support in her crusade. Dix believed this was essential because without education or useful skills, the prisoners would return to a life of crime once they were released, increasing recidivism.

Lastly, Dix appealed to the philanthropic instincts of the state legislators. She described the dangerous and deplorable conditions in the prisons, hoping to inspire sympathy in the legislators so that they would appropriate the necessary funds. First, the prisoners suffered from the physical condition of the buildings and the prison cells. Dix described the current cells to the Illinois legislature in 1846 as suffering “from want of ventilation, *are extremely uncomfortable and unhealthy*;-- in summer the water trickles down the sides of them (from defects in the inclosing roofs and walls,) and in winter they are coated with ice!”⁶⁷ It was also reported in 1844 that the kitchens and eating houses were also “originally built in the most temporary manner, and also had become entirely too small for the accommodation of the convicts; they were also built of the most combustible materials, and placed within a few feet of the main buildings; thus constantly endangering the existence of the whole.”⁶⁸ The faulty buildings posed a serious threat to the entire prison community and therefore, leaving the buildings intact would be

⁶⁵ Lighter, *Asylum, Prison and Poorhouse*, 61.

⁶⁶ Dix, *Prison and Prison Discipline*, 53.

⁶⁷ Lightner, *Asylum, Prison and Poorhouse: The Writings and Reform Work of Dorothea Dix in Illinois*, 47.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 52.

unreasonably dangerous for both the prisoners and society at large. Not only were the buildings inadequate and dangerous, but they were not outfitted with the furnishing necessary to do their jobs. Some of the eating houses were not even furnished with enough tables for the prisoners to sit down during their meals and they were forced to stand to eat.⁶⁹ She was appalled by the prison hospitals and felt compelled to alert the state legislatures to these conditions. She described them as “wretched den[s], uncles, unventilated, [and] utterly comfortless.”⁷⁰ Dix reported in 1844 that sometimes “*lives are . . . lost that might have been saved, if they had been provided with the ordinary comforts that humanity calls for.*”⁷¹

However, her most strenuous contention was that the prisons made no effort towards moral reform. Dix believed that “the objects of the Penitentiary are understood to be two-fold; the *reform* of the offender and the *safety* of society, but under such a state of things as exists in our Penitentiary, neither can be reasonably be expected.”⁷² Her crusade with the state legislatures was designed to accomplish this two-part goal. Dix’s appeals to the philanthropic instincts of the state legislators were designed to inspire their sympathies for the plight of the prisoners. She commanded the Massachusetts legislature in 1843 to:

Become the benefactors of [their race], the just guardians of the solemn rights [they] hold in trust. Raise up the fallen, succor the desolate, restore the outcast, defend the helpless, and for [their] eternal and great reward receive the benedictions, ‘Well done, good and faithful servants, become rulers over many things!’⁷³

⁶⁹ Ibid., 53.

⁷⁰ Ibid., 55.

⁷¹ Ibid., 56.

⁷² Ibid., 48.

⁷³ Dix, “Memorial on the Condition of the Insane of Massachusetts, 1843,” 170.

Her impassioned words display a religious motivation, but her genuine fervor was effective in enlisting the economic support of the state legislators. She appealed to their sense of humanity to improve the unreasonable conditions. She posed arguments of fiscal responsibility and practicality to construct new prisons with the goals of moral reform and generating a more productive citizenry. Although her efforts to enlist the support of the state legislatures were primarily focused on improving the safety of the prisons, her passion was for the moral reformation of the prisoners.

Dorothea Dix was a part of the sweeping reform spirit of the nineteenth century. All of these reformers, like Sarah and Angelina Grimke and Robert Owen, held fast to the millennial expectations, the widespread belief at the time that society could be perfected. These millennial expectations were borne out of the spirit of the Second Great Awakening, just as Dix's optimistic views about human nature and human perfectibility were. Dix's overtly optimistic views on prison reform were always imbued with the best intentions, despite the fact that her reforms were the likely causes of insanity of many of the inmates. Although she cited many credible sources to the contrary, the repercussions of solitary confinement for many of the convicts were severe. Dix had good reason to believe otherwise, however. When de Tocqueville and Beaumont wrote their study of the American prison system, they seemed to affirm her beliefs. The prisoners they spoke with were a part of the Pennsylvania system and none of them seemed to be suffering unreasonable consequences. It was not until much later that "psychological studies . . . purported to demonstrate conclusively the negative mental effects of the system"⁷⁴ were released.

⁷⁴ Meskell, "An American Revolution: The History of Prisons in the United States from 1777-1877," 855.

Despite her miscalculations, Dorothea Dix was a compassionate reformer ahead of her time in many ways. Her specific plan for prison reform may have been a failure, but Dix was certainly not a failure herself. She saw human beings as capable of reform, as opposed to the traditional Calvinists who saw humans as fundamentally flawed, with only a select few chosen for comfort in this life and salvation afterwards. Her reform plan focused on solitary confinement to prevent the spread of further vice; labor to give the prisoners a useful skill; and self-reflection and study of the Bible to help the prisoners see the error of their ways and understand that a life of crime and vice could be avoided for a more satisfying life of virtue.

Dix's desire to make moral reformation as much a part of her prison reform movement as prison safety was also revolutionary. Moral reformation had never previously been considered a part of the prisoners' rights, but Dix made it as much a part of the movement as their basic safety and security. To this day, "a constitutional right to rehabilitation remains unrecognized by the United States federal courts, . . . [but] a number of European nations include rehabilitation as a constitutional mandate."⁷⁵ Although this tradition can be traced back to elements in the Magna Carta, the impact of de Tocqueville and Beaumont's studies of the American prison system on the French prison system, which was heavily influenced by the work of Dorothea Dix, cannot be dismissed. Also, "customary international law establishes a duty of rehabilitation as expressed, for example, in the 1955 United Nations Minimum Rules for the Treatment of Prisoners and the American Convention of Human Rights."⁷⁶ The Eighth Amendment of the United States Constitution prohibits cruel and unusual punishment, and although

⁷⁵ Edgardo Rotman, "Do Criminals Have a Constitutional Right to Rehabilitation," *The Journal of Criminal Law and Criminology* (1973-) 77, no. 4 (Winter 1986), 1023.

⁷⁶ Ibid.

rehabilitation is not a duty explicitly owed to prisoners, its absence is often the first step towards proving the existence of cruel conditions.⁷⁷ Dix understood more than a century ago, that “to avoid the harmful effects of incarceration on the mental and social health of the inmate, some positive action towards rehabilitation is essential.”⁷⁸ Some remnants of this belief still survive in today’s prison system. This is the legacy that Dorothea Dix left behind.

⁷⁷ Ibid., 1042.

⁷⁸ Ibid., 1029.