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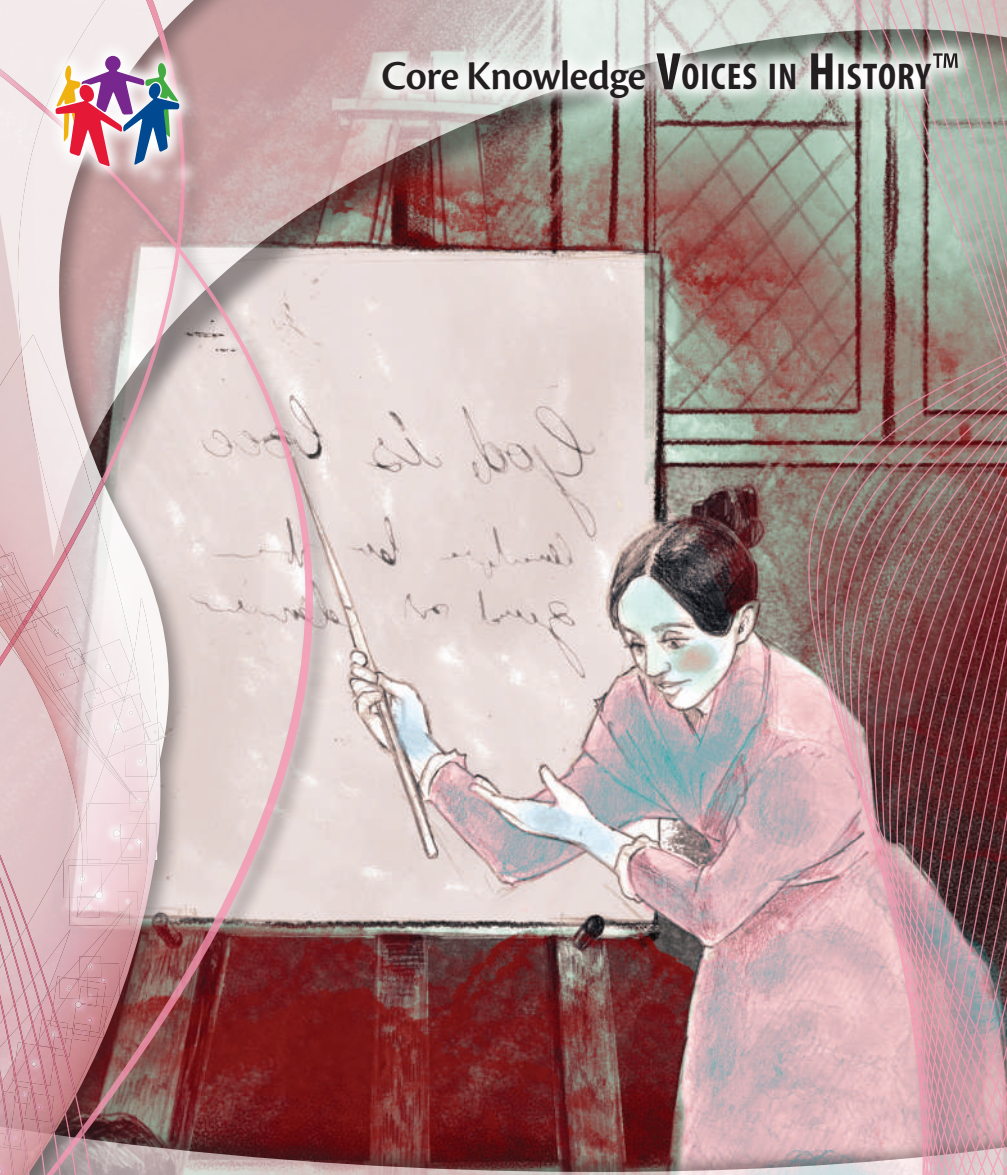

Dorothea Dix

On a Mission

by Anne Marie Pace

illustrated by Natalie Riolfi

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Dorothea Dix

On a Mission

by

Anne Marie Pace

illustrated by *Natalie Riolfi*

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INTRODUCTION

Dorothea Dix was on a mission. You might think that on such a cold New England day, a genteel, educated lady like Dorothea would prefer to be in her sitting room next to a warm fire, having tea with her best friend, Anne. But that wasn't the kind of person Dorothea Dix was. This mission was her life's work.

She knocked sharply at the door. The mistress of the house told Dorothea not to go down into the cellar. It was unpleasant. It was disturbing. Dorothea was a lady, and ladies like Dorothea shouldn't go into this cellar.

But Dorothea insisted. Dorothea was tougher and stronger than she looked.

She strode toward the cellar door and began making her way down the steep, dark staircase.

And there, she saw what she had come to see: a man clothed in dirty rags, sitting in a dirty room with no fresh air and no fire to keep him warm. Why was he in the cellar? Had he done something wrong? Not at all. He was ill—not with a physical ailment, but with a mental illness. In that time and in that place, most people didn't know how to care for people living with a mental illness.

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genteel: elegant and graceful
cellar: basement

Seeing people with mental illness was nothing new to Dorothea. For years, she had been visiting as many jails and hospitals as she could find. She wanted to document the conditions of the places where mentally ill people were housed. She took detailed notes and recorded many heartbreaking situations.

Dorothea leaned down and gently spoke to the man with respect and compassion. She took his hands in hers and rubbed them until they were warm. Dorothea Dix was appalled by the man's situation—and by the situations of so many people like him across New England, and in fact the entire United States. She was *not* going to stand for it!

1

They Called Her Dolly

Dorothea Dix did not like to remember her childhood. She was born on April 4, 1802, on a farm near the village of Hampden, Maine. She was named Dorothy Lynde Dix after her grandmother. Her grandmother was called Dolly, so her family called the new baby Dolly, too.

The Dix home was in such poor condition that Dolly's father had rented a room in a nicer house for her mother to give birth in. But her parents soon took baby Dolly back to the cold pine shack where they made their home. Even that poor home didn't last long. The Dix family moved many, many times throughout Dolly's childhood.

Dolly's father, Joseph, had not grown up in poverty, so it probably came as a surprise to people who knew his family that Joseph and his wife and children were destitute. In fact, Dr. Elijah Dix, Joseph's father, was a successful doctor and apothecary in Worcester, Massachusetts. His wife, Dorothy Lynde, was from a

apothecary: a person who makes medicines

rich and prominent Massachusetts family. With Dr. Dix's money and Madam Dix's social status, the Dix family was prosperous. They even built a mansion in one of the fanciest neighborhoods in the city of Boston.

Their son Joseph Dix was very intelligent, but he was not a hard worker. As a young man, he enrolled in Harvard College, one of the most prestigious colleges in the country. However, he skipped many classes and was often in trouble, so the college asked him to leave. He tried to learn to be an apothecary like his father, but he didn't work hard at that, either. In January 1801, against his parents' wishes, Joseph married Mary Bigelow.

After the wedding, Joseph and Mary moved to Maine, where Joseph earned barely enough money for his family to survive. In Maine, Joseph started to change his religious beliefs. These new ideas inspired him to become a Methodist preacher. He started traveling around New England preaching sermons. This meant that Dolly and her mother were often alone.

As a traveling preacher, Joseph earned less than $100 a year, which would be about $2,500 today. It was

prominent: widely known
prosperous: wealthy or successful
prestigious: important and respected
Methodist preacher: a member of the Methodist branch of Protestant Christianity who gives religious speeches
sermons: religious speeches

barely enough money to live on. Joseph also wrote and published religious essays to sell to earn money. Dolly and her mother had to sew and paste the papers into pamphlets. It was hard, unpleasant work.

Worst of all, Joseph was an alcoholic, and Mary was often ill. They had very little energy to love and care for Dolly—or for her two little brothers once they were born. Still, Joseph taught Dolly to read and write, which were skills she would use throughout her life.

Dolly liked going for long walks, probably to get away from home. "I never had a childhood," she would later say. But her experiences as a neglected child, instead of hardening her, made her more compassionate.

2

Miss Dix, Dame School Teacher

When Dolly was twelve years old, her family traveled to Worcester, Massachusetts, to stay with extended family. One day, tired of endlessly stitching and gluing her father's religious pamphlets, Dolly decided to run away. She traveled forty miles on her own, all the way to Boston, to stay with her grandmother, Madam Dix.

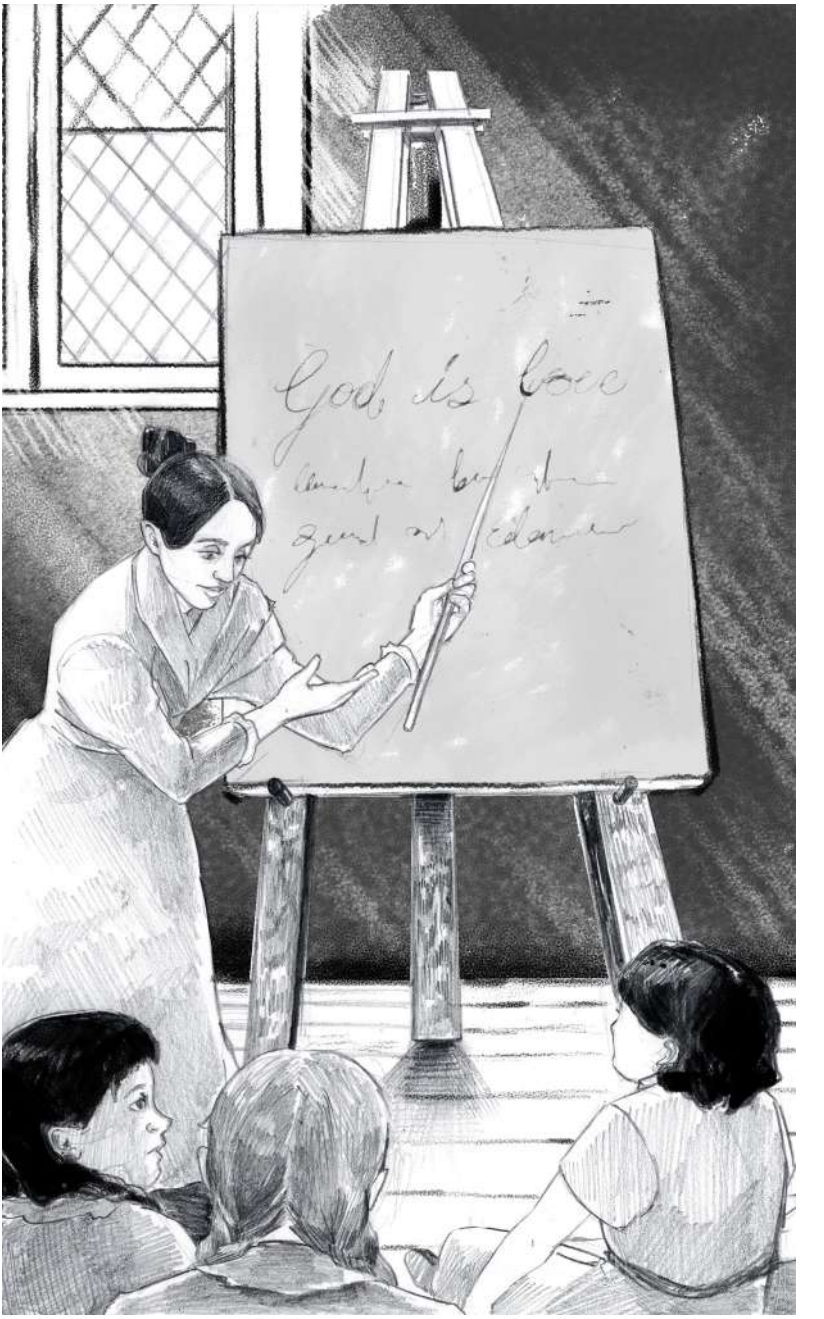
Madam Dix's home was in a prestigious neighborhood in Boston, close to the famous Beacon Hill. The three-story brick mansion had mahogany furniture, fancy rugs, and a cupola on top. The home was organized and spotless—a far cry from the houses Dolly had been brought up in. There was a large, beautiful garden, complete with Dix pear trees, which had been named for the family.

In some ways, the Dix mansion was a big improvement over Dolly's childhood homes. She was warm, she had enough to eat, and she had nice clothes. But Madam Dix was quite strict. She wanted Dolly to be brought up as a genteel young lady. Madam Dix wanted to make sure Dolly didn't make the same mistakes her father had made. She hired a dance master and a seamstress, and she taught Dolly many lessons of etiquette and deportment.

Dolly and her grandmother disagreed often. They both had strong personalities and didn't always get along. So when Dolly was fourteen, Madam Dix sent her to Worcester to live with a relative, Sarah Fiske.

Sarah's home was very different from the Dix mansion. For the first time in her life, Dolly was surrounded by a warm, loving family.

Dolly was anxious to become independent, so she decided to become a teacher and start a dame school. She was only fourteen, so to seem more adult, Dolly pinned up her long hair and lengthened her skirts. She even changed her name to Dorothea! Her students thought her a very strict teacher.


God is love

Dame Schools

In the nineteenth century, there were not many places where a young woman could work, but teaching was considered a very respectable profession. Many young women opened dame schools. Dame schools were places where small children could learn their ABCs and simple mathematics. Most children who attended dame schools were between five and eight years old. For some of these children, the dame school was the only education they would ever receive. Other children learned the basics that would enable them to enter a primary school.

When Dorothea was eighteen, she moved back into the Dix mansion in Boston. Dorothea had grown up a great deal. Her grandmother was pleased with the young woman Dorothea had become.

Dorothea wanted to open a free school for poor children in the barn of the Dix mansion. Her grandmother didn't think it was a good idea, but Dorothea eventually convinced her. Soon, Dorothea also opened a school for paying pupils, which was held in the mansion. This allowed her to have some income.

Dorothea was still a very strict teacher. She taught spelling, reading, writing, arithmetic, geography, history, natural science, and physics. She also emphasized moral and religious development. She was not happy when her students misbehaved and did not learn. But she also had interesting ways of relating to the children.

She encouraged them to write in journals and to write notes to her. She stayed up very late at night in order to answer each child's questions.

When Dorothea was about twenty, she had her portrait painted. She had brown hair, a high forehead, and a prominent nose. For the portrait, she wore curls in her hair and a lace collar over a dark dress, along with several thin necklaces and oval earrings. People thought her quite pretty.

Teaching was the most important task of Dorothea's life. But her religious faith was also very important to her, and she attended church regularly. She attended Hollis Street Church, a Unitarian congregation. There, in 1823, she met Anne Heath. Anne quickly became Dorothea's best friend.

Anne was from a family that was even wealthier and more important than Dorothea's grandmother. The Heath house was full of people—brothers, sisters, cousins, other relatives—and the family was popular and fun to be around. Dorothea had never experienced a home like this. Anne and Dorothea opened up to each other and became confidants. They had long conversations and wrote each other hundreds of long letters.

In one of Dorothea's letters to Anne, she wrote, "I have little taste for . . . cards [and] dancing; the theatre

Unitarian: relating to Unitarianism, a form of Christianity

and tea parties are my aversion." Anne, like many people, enjoyed socializing and cultural pastimes, but she admired Dorothea's search for meaning elsewhere. Dorothea sought a life's mission. Throughout their friendship, Anne supported Dorothea's goals to become a better person.

Dorothea's search for her life's meaning was in part born of her religious upbringing. From a young age, she had been encouraged to determine God's will for her and then act on that will. Sometimes, when she felt fearful or angry, she worried that she wouldn't be able to accomplish her goals. But eventually, a sense of bravery and calm would always take over, and she would get back to work.

Dorothea the Author

Not only did Dorothea teach children, but she also wrote many books for them. One of her best-known books was called Conversations on Common Things. *It was published in 1824. The book was written as an extended conversation between a mother and daughter. The daughter asks the mother questions about science, mathematics, history, and philosophy, and the mother answers them. The book stresses the importance of knowledge and the value of hard work and purpose. While that sounds very different from most children's books today, it sold many, many copies and was reprinted again and again over the next several decades.*

aversion: something that is disliked

3

Miss Dix, Self-Taught Naturalist

Dorothea always worked very hard as a teacher. She worked long hours, staying up past midnight to prepare lesson plans, grade papers, and write little notes to her students. Still, her best friend, Anne, insisted that Dorothea make some time for fun.

Boston had many parties and events that young people liked, and Anne ensured that Dorothea was invited to them. Dorothea went, even though she thought that the parties were extravagant, with too much fancy food. She preferred books to parties, so her favorite place in Boston was the private library of the Boston Athenaeum, where her Uncle Harris had gotten her a library card.

Further filling the hours of her days were her own studies. Because young women, with very few exceptions, did not go to university at the time, Dorothea continued to teach herself through reading. She read books by important authors like Homer, Virgil, Dante Alighieri, Miguel de Cervantes, and William Wordsworth. She loved science, and she read many books about the stars, rocks and minerals, plants, and insects. She believed that

extravagant: elaborate or excessive

her studies would also help her figure out what God wanted her to do with her life.

Dorothea enjoyed visiting different churches and hearing different preachers' sermons and lectures. She particularly liked going to Unitarian churches. One minister who inspired Dorothea was named Joseph Tuckerman. He had great compassion for the poor. He encouraged people, including Dorothea, to collect clothes, shoes, and books for poor children.

In 1823, Dorothea first heard Dr. William Ellery Channing preach. He was also a Unitarian. His messages made sense to her. Dorothea wrote to Anne that she had found "a church of [her] own."

As they got to know each other, Dr. Channing and his wife asked Dorothea to help at their house with their children. She even went on vacation with them to visit a seaside mansion in Newport, Rhode Island. In the mornings, she read to the Channing children and took them on walks near the beach; in the afternoons, when she had free time, she held a religion class for men and boys.

By 1830, Dorothea was practically part of the Channing family. Dr. and Mrs. Channing took her with them on a trip to St. Croix, a beautiful tropical island in the Caribbean. At first, she did not feel well. New England and St. Croix have very different climates, and Dorothea

lectures: educational speeches

was not used to the hot Caribbean weather. But by February 1831, she had started to feel much better.

Dorothea had long been a collector of objects from nature, finding samples of plants like algae as well as rocks and insects. She looked carefully at her samples and wrote descriptions of them. She even compared her samples to the ones at the Boston Athenaeum. The chance to study nature in the Caribbean was extremely exciting to her. She observed and recorded plants, including banana, mango, and orange trees, cocoa palms, and many others. She didn't believe her study of nature was her life's work or God's will, but it prepared her very well for what was to come.

algae: plants or plantlike life-forms that live in water

4

Miss Dix, World Traveler

When Dorothea returned to Boston in 1831, her health had greatly improved. Soon she once again opened a school, which she named the Hope.

Just as she had done before, she worked many hours into the night. Her friends warned that she was working too hard and not taking good enough care of herself. She knew that the school was probably too much work for her, but she would not take a break. By 1835, she was again exhausted.

In the late winter of 1836, Dorothea was too unwell—both mentally and physically—to continue teaching. She had no choice but to close her school.

Some of Dorothea's friends arranged for her to take a trip to Europe to rest and recover. They thought that the change of scenery would help her feel better. Dorothea was deeply sad and didn't believe the trip would help. But her friends insisted, so on April 22, 1836, she boarded a ship called *The Virginian* to cross the Atlantic Ocean.

At first, the sea voyage made her feel better. She made friends with other passengers, who invited her to come along with them on their own trips around Europe. When she arrived in England, she rented rooms near Liverpool.

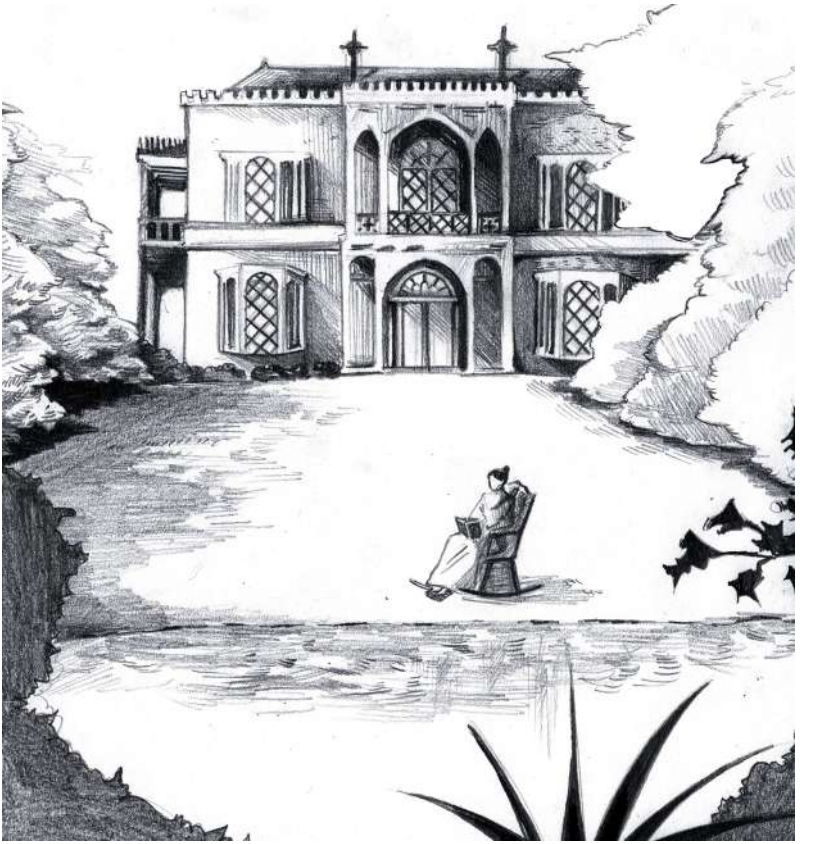
However, the weather in England was cold and rainy, and Dorothea quickly grew ill again. She was sick and alone, and she didn't know what to do. Then one day, she remembered that her friend Dr. Channing had written her a letter of introduction.

Using the letter of introduction, Dorothea reached out to one of Dr. Channing's friends, a local politician named William Rathbone V. Mr. Rathbone was a very wealthy citizen of Liverpool who donated a lot of money and time to charity. He and his wife, Elizabeth, immediately brought Dorothea to their home so that she could recuperate from her illness. The Rathbones were known for their hospitality. They hosted company for dinner almost every evening. Not only was it easy for them to include Dorothea in their life, but they also often had other visitors whose company Dorothea could enjoy.

The Rathbone estate, called Greenbank, was grand and beautiful. It had lovely gardens, a lake with a boat,

letter of introduction: a letter someone writes to introduce one friend to another

and a large porch called a veranda to sit on. Dorothea ended up living with the Rathbones for about fifteen months. She spent plenty of time resting, writing poetry, and reading extensively. Even the Rathbones' teenage son welcomed her, often bringing her some fruit from the garden. She wrote that she felt "folded as infant dear in parent-arms"—something she surely had never felt from her own parents, her grandmother, or even Sarah. Dorothea later called this time "the jubilee of [her] life."



Like Dorothea, the Rathbones were Unitarian. Mr. Rathbone had long believed he should use some of his family's wealth to provide for the poor and needy. At their home, their many visitors often included people who agreed with the Rathbones and with Dorothea that it was the responsibility of Christians and of the government to help less fortunate people, which included the poor and the mentally ill.

Dorothea was transfixed by the discussions. Mr. Rathbone and his fellow politicians wanted to create a system that would help the truly needy but not discourage people from working if they were able to work. In order to figure out who needed the most help, they encouraged scientific research into what poverty was—where poor people lived, what their housing was like, how they spent their days. These observations helped them make their plans.

Dorothea also met people who wanted to help the mentally ill. She was particularly interested in a place called York Retreat, a hospital for mentally ill people. The philosophy of York Retreat involved bringing the mentally ill to a beautiful, peaceful place where they would be treated with respect and dignity. This made a lot of sense to Dorothea, who had been treated with gentle care by the Rathbone family.

transfixed: held still by intense interest

Dorothea didn't realize it yet, but the time she spent at Greenbank with the Rathbone family had taught her things that would eventually help her change not only her own life but the lives of many others.

The Words We Choose

In Dorothea Dix's time, people, including doctors and caregivers, used words like lunatic *or* insane *to refer to people who suffered from mental illnesses. We no longer use these words today.*

Because Dorothea lived a long time ago, she used those words in her writings and letters. But some people started using those words to make fun of people, and compassionate people decided not to use them anymore. We know from her writing that Dorothea was very compassionate, so if she lived today, she would almost certainly use today's kinder words. These days, we say mental illness, *or we use the specific name of an illness or syndrome instead of lumping lots of illnesses together.*

Mental Illnesses Through History

For thousands of years, people didn't understand mental illness. Of course, there must have been some people who treated their mentally ill family members and neighbors kindly and respectfully. But this wasn't common. Many people thought that a mentally ill person was being punished by God. Others thought mentally ill people were possessed by evil spirits. Mentally ill people were cast out of their homes, kept imprisoned, or even killed as witches!

Society's attitudes toward people with mental illness gradually began to change. Doctors wanted to help the mentally ill so that they could live happy, satisfied lives. In the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, a philosophy of kindness took hold. It was called "moral treatment." People who supported this philosophy believed that if mentally ill people could live in calm, beautiful, peaceful surroundings with plenty of food and warmth, as well as activities and hobbies, their health would improve. But the old ways were entrenched, and the new ways were expensive enough that only wealthy people could afford this kind of treatment. It would take a lot of hard work to change the system. Dorothea was determined to do that hard work.

entrenched: solidly established

5

Dorothea L. Dix, on a Mission

In the spring of 1837, while Dorothea was in England, she experienced a double loss. Her mother died, and soon after, her grandmother died. Neither woman had been particularly loving to Dorothea, and she wrote that she was "not deeply sad." But when she returned to Boston, she found that she no longer had a home. Her grandmother's house had been sold to her uncle.

Dorothea had saved money from her teaching and writing, and her grandmother left her a good inheritance. She was not wealthy, but she had enough money to live on for the rest of her life if she spent wisely, and even enough to give some to charity, which was very important to her.

Even though Dorothea did not have to work, she wanted to do something meaningful. Over the next couple of years, she moved often. She lived for a time in Washington, D.C., and she traveled to Pennsylvania, Virginia, New York, and Maryland, sometimes staying with friends. During this time, she continued to think about how she could help those in need. Finally, in 1839, she decided to return to Boston, even though she didn't have a home of her own there.

inheritance: money or property received from someone who has died

For a while, Dorothea lived in a boardinghouse. Then she became reacquainted with the Channing family, for whom she had once been a governess. Dr. Channing's sister-in-law Sarah Gibbs asked Dorothea to live with the family in their mansion on Beacon Hill, the most exclusive neighborhood in Boston. Dorothea enjoyed reading aloud to Dr. Channing in the evenings. Sometimes they discussed their mutual friends from England.

Dorothea also enjoyed teaching Sunday school. She accepted a position teaching a class of female inmates at the East Cambridge House of Correction.

On Sunday, March 28, 1841, Dorothea taught her class for an hour, then walked across the yard and asked the jailer if she could visit one of the smaller buildings. There, she found a group of inmates who were very cold. It was early spring, which in Massachusetts was still extremely chilly. The inmates didn't have warm clothing, and they didn't have a fire to sit by. Dorothea was disgusted by the dirty, cold room. She complained to the jailer, who told her (using language we would find rude today) that "lunatics don't feel the cold."

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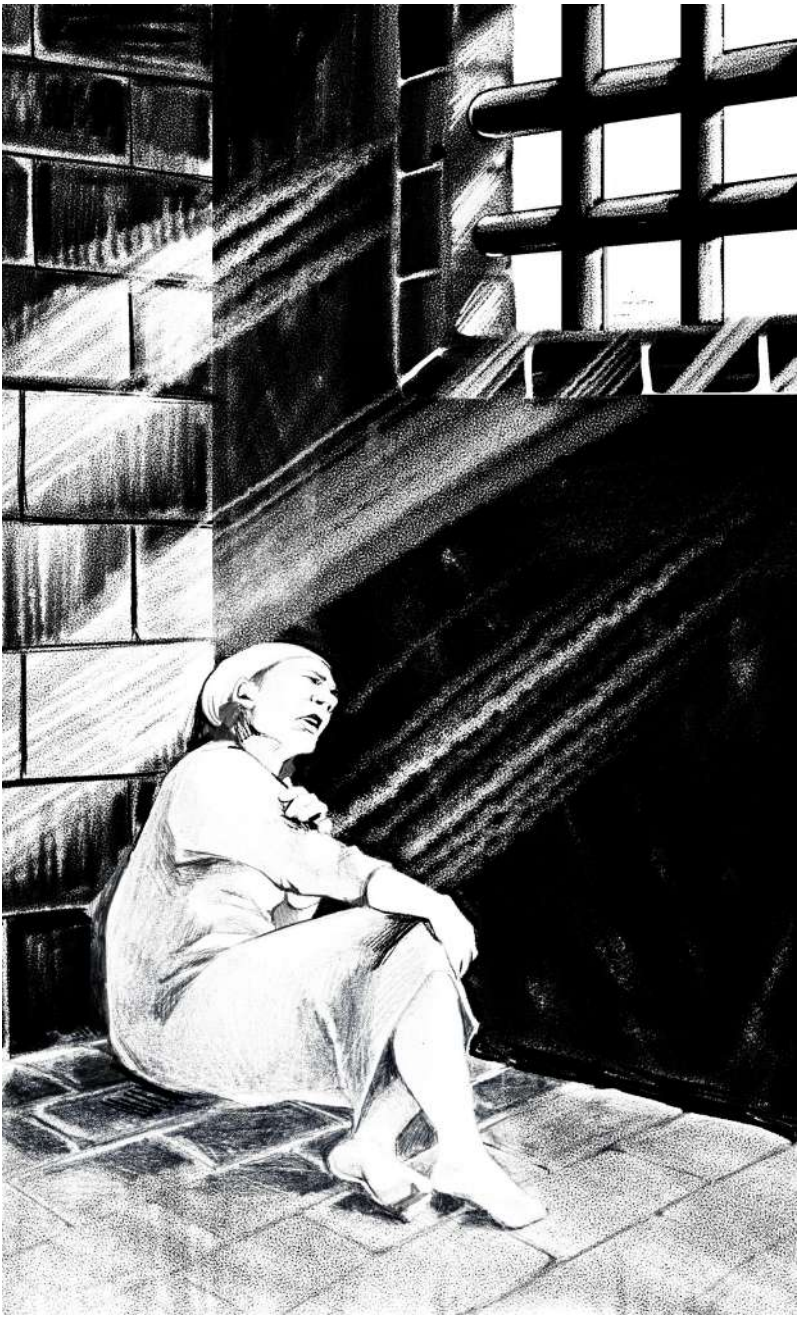
boardinghouse: a house where people live and receive meals in exchange for money

governess: a woman who cares for and teaches a child in the child's home



The inmates in this part of the prison were mentally ill people whose needs were being disregarded by the prison. Dorothea decided to do something. She asked the local court to provide better conditions for the inmates, and the court agreed with her that the jail needed to provide a wood stove for heat. This success felt like a real accomplishment to Dorothea.

Caring for People with Mental Illness

Dorothea's interest in helping women prisoners grew into an interest in helping people with mental illness. At the time, many people did not know how to care for mentally ill people. Unwell people from wealthy families could be cared for at home by a private caregiver, but unwell people from poorer families often had nowhere to go, so they were put in prisons, even though they had not committed a crime. This made Dorothea furious!

But she wasn't finished yet! While she was a teacher and when she was in St. Croix, Dorothea had observed and catalogued many varieties of plants, animals, and minerals. Now she would use her skills of observation and recording to help people.

For months, with the encouragement of the reformer Horace Mann and his friend Samuel Gridley Howe, Dorothea traveled across the state of Massachusetts visiting jails, prisons, cellars, almshouses, and anywhere

catalogued: listed and described in an organized way
almshouses: privately funded housing for people in need

mentally ill people were housed. Sometimes they were hungry or thirsty. Sometimes they wore rags for clothing. What she saw shocked her beyond belief!

After Dorothea had observed and catalogued all that she had witnessed, she had to figure out a way to use that information to bring about change. Samuel Gridley Howe asked her to write a lengthy report, called a memorial, to submit to the Massachusetts legislature.

Dorothea's writing style was dramatic and serious. She described exactly what she had seen without flinching. The legislature needed to know the facts. And the fact was that in almost every town in Massachusetts, mentally ill people were being mistreated. Dorothea wrote, "I proceed, Gentlemen, briefly to call your attention to the *present* state of Insane Persons confined within this Commonwealth." A typical entry in the memorial went like this:

> *Burlington*. A woman, declared to be very insane; decent room and bed; but not allowed to rise oftener, the mistress said, "than every other day: it is too much trouble."

Dorothea told horrible stories of people with little clothing or fire for warmth, who were ill but received no

legislature: a group of people who make laws

medical attention. But she also told of caregivers who wanted to take good care of their patients but did not have enough resources or money to do so. She wrote of the situations in Burlington and Northampton, in Springfield and Concord, and in dozens of other towns.

Dorothea encouraged the legislature to fix this situation primarily because it was the right thing to do. But she also made practical arguments in case legislators were not emotionally swayed. She argued that legally, putting mentally ill people into jails violated the U.S. Constitution. They had committed no crimes, so putting them in jail was false imprisonment.

Dorothea finished writing her memorial in January 1843. It was time for Samuel Gridley Howe to present it to the legislature.

Not everyone appreciated Dorothea's words. Some people felt that she was exaggerating. Some of the doctors and jailers felt disrespected even though they were trying their best. But by the end of the spring legislative session, the legislature had agreed to budget some money to build an addition to the Worcester hospital for the mentally ill. It wouldn't solve the problem, but it was a good start.

swayed: convinced
violated: disobeyed or broke a rule or law

People to Know

Samuel Gridley Howe *(1801–76) was a Massachusetts doctor and abolitionist. He is probably best known as the doctor who started the Perkins School for the Blind. He taught Laura Bridgman, one of the first deaf and blind children to be successfully educated with language. He was married to Julia Ward Howe, who wrote "Battle Hymn of the Republic."*

Horace Mann *(1796–1859) was an abolitionist and politician best known for his work to transform American education. He believed that having public schools for all children was important not just for individual children but for the country itself. He and Dorothea had a falling-out, but his support of her work with the mentally ill meant a lot to her and encouraged her to work even harder.*

abolitionist: someone who wanted to outlaw slavery

6

Miss Dix Goes Nationwide

The addition of between 150 and 200 beds to the Worcester hospital meant that some patients could be moved from the worst situations in jails or private homes into the hospital. It was a great success, but Dorothea was just getting started.

Her achievement in Massachusetts inspired Dorothea to expand her work. Even before the legislature approved the change to the hospital, Dorothea was starting to look at how mentally ill people were treated in the nearby state of New York.

Over the next eighteen years, Dorothea visited many different states and parts of Canada in her quest to improve the lives of mentally ill people. She wrote many memorials for different state legislatures, trying to get them to spend money to help the mentally ill as Massachusetts had done. She traveled thousands of miles by buggy, wagon, steamboat, stagecoach, and railroad.

One of her notable successes was convincing the state of New Jersey to build its very first mental hospital. She called that hospital her "first-born child." Another

hospital was built in North Carolina. At first, the North Carolina legislature was hesitant to spend the money. But Dorothea happened to be staying in the same hotel as a very ill woman named Louisa Dobbins, whose husband was a politician. Dorothea visited Mrs. Dobbins and read the Bible to her, offering her much-needed comfort. Mrs. Dobbins was dying, and as her final wish, she asked her husband to work hard to build the mental hospital. After her death, the hospital was built. The people of North Carolina wanted to name it after Dorothea, but Dorothea was humble and said no.

Through these years, Dorothea helped convince people to build thirty-two mental hospitals, fifteen schools for intellectually disabled people, a school for the blind, and many training schools for nurses.

The Famous Miss Dix

Dorothea became very famous for her work. According to one story, one time when she was traveling in Texas, a robber held up her stagecoach at gunpoint. When the robber realized that she was the famous Dorothea Dix, he decided not to rob the passengers after all!

In 1848, Dorothea expanded her vision from working with individual states to working with the federal government. The government owned a lot of land across the country, and Dorothea thought a good use for the land

federal government: a national governing body, above the state or other regional level

would be for her hospitals. She moved to Washington, D.C., and lobbied Congress for six years. She wrote a memorial, just as she had for the states. She even had an office in the Library of Congress. Eventually, both the Senate and the House of Representatives passed a bill. Unfortunately, President Franklin Pierce vetoed the bill. He believed that the responsibility for taking care of the mentally ill belonged to the states, not the federal government.

Dorothea was very disappointed. She decided to return to Europe for a trip. Over the next two years, she spoke with many people in Britain, trying to convince them that mentally ill people should be cared for by doctors and other medical professionals, not untrained staff. She visited many countries in Europe that she hadn't visited on her last trip. In Rome, she was given an audience with Pope Pius IX. She had seen that the asylum in Rome was in horrible condition. She told him it was "a scandal and a disgrace." After the pope visited the asylum, he too was appalled and immediately ordered that a new, clean, healthy hospital be built.

In 1856, Dorothea returned to the United States. She continued her work, traveling all over the country. In some places where she had been successful years earlier,

vetoed: refused to approve

standards for mental health care had dropped, and she wanted to encourage those states once again to do better. The hospitals she had helped earlier in her career needed continuing support. She also asked people to donate books, toys, and clothing to the hospitals. No act of charity was too small.

But a hard chapter was ahead of Dorothea—for her and for the United States.

The American Civil War

Between 1861 and 1865, the United States was involved in a terrible civil war. The term civil war *means a war in which groups of people from the same country fight one another.*

The causes of the American Civil War were complex, but slavery was a major cause. Slavery had been abolished in the Northern states around the time of the Revolutionary War, but in the South, it was not only legal but also widespread. Debates over slavery caused a lot of tension in the government and in the country as a whole.

Before the war itself began, Southern states, starting with South Carolina in December 1860, began to secede from the Union. This means that they said they were no longer part of the United States. These states wanted to form a new country called the Confederate States of America.

The Northern states, led by President Abraham Lincoln, wanted the Southern states to remain part of the United States. The North was willing to fight to keep the South in the Union. And the South was willing to fight to leave.

Miss Dix and Miss Nightingale

For a number of years, like many people on both sides of the Atlantic, Dorothea had been a great admirer of Florence Nightingale, a British woman who was a reformer like Dorothea. In 1855, Florence Nightingale had gone to a city in the Ottoman Empire called Scutari, located near Constantinople. (These were the names in the nineteenth century. Today, the Ottoman Empire is called Turkey, and Constantinople is called Istanbul.) Nearby, the British and their allies were fighting Russia in the Crimean War, and sick and injured soldiers were being sent to a hospital in Scutari for treatment. The hospital was a converted army barracks. It was filthy, with rats and other vermin everywhere.

Miss Nightingale organized a complete overhaul of the building, making it clean and safe, with good drinking water and fresh air for the patients. Dorothea admired what Miss Nightingale had done and saw similarities between their missions. In fact, when Dorothea traveled in Europe, she went to Scutari to visit Miss Nightingale's hospital, but she was unable to meet Miss Nightingale in person.

overhaul: a major redesign or repair

Florence Nightingale

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Dorothea L. Dix, Superintendent of Nurses

In the years leading up to the American Civil War, Dorothea traveled extensively through the United States, including the dissatisfied Southern states that would soon secede from the Union and form the Confederate States of America. Dorothea tried not to take sides between the Northern and Southern states because she feared that if she did, people would stop listening to her, and she would not be able to achieve her goals of helping the mentally ill. She was working to establish good care for the mentally ill all over the nation, just as she always had.

After the election of Abraham Lincoln in the fall of 1860, tension in the country rapidly grew. War was coming quickly. And just a few weeks after his March inauguration, on April 15, 1861, President Abraham Lincoln called for seventy-five thousand volunteers to fight in the war. On April 19, a mob broke out in chaos in

secede: withdraw from an organization
inauguration: a ceremony to introduce a new officeholder

Baltimore when an army regiment arrived. Dorothea saw this news as a sign. Even though she was almost sixty years old, Dorothea did not hesitate. She left Massachusetts and headed straight for Washington, D.C., to offer her services. Dorothea was accustomed to traveling, but this trip, traveling through Baltimore, was more difficult than usual. She wrote to Anne Heath, "It was not easy getting across the city—but I did not choose to turn back."

An Imperfect Hero

In the nineteenth century and well into the twentieth, many people considered Dorothea to be one of the greatest American women. People greatly admired her tireless devotion to her work to encourage public support for the mentally ill. And yet Dorothea, like many historical figures, had beliefs that people find fault with today. In particular, she, like many people of her time, did not believe that Black people should have equal rights with white people. She did work for the Union Army and supported President Lincoln, but in spite of her popularity and reputation, she made no effort to fight slavery, even though several of her friends were abolitionists. Dorothea believed that improving treatment of the mentally ill was more important than any other issue.

When the American Civil War began, there were thirty surgeons, eighty-six assistant surgeons, and a surgeon general in the Union Army's Medical Bureau, but no nurses.

surgeons: doctors who perform operations

Dorothea arrived in Washington, D.C. Her work with the federal government earlier in her career had given her lots of contacts. She immediately went to the White House to volunteer her services. However, she had to wait two days before she could meet with Secretary of War Simon Cameron. Secretary Cameron agreed to Dorothea's offer to organize a nursing corps. Even though Dorothea had no nursing experience outside of caring for family and friends, he appointed her as superintendent of women nurses. Her job was to recruit and hire nurses, assign them to hospitals, and make sure they had what they needed to nurse injured soldiers. Because of her work with the mentally ill, Dorothea was used to asking people for charitable donations, and she promised to do the same for medical needs. Some of the first items she provided were hospital gowns (which she paid for herself) and coffeepots (which were donated).

Nursing

At the time of the Civil War, nursing was not considered a profession the way it is today, and certainly not something for women to do. Teaching was the primary profession for women. Nursing was something women did for sick people in their own families, not strangers. There were no nursing schools. Sometimes women who had been convicted of crimes were asked to nurse in hospitals as part of their sentence. Women like Florence Nightingale and others wanted to change this. They saw nursing as necessary and respectable.

superintendent: a person in charge of a place or group
charitable donations: money given to support good causes

Dorothea began working to find nurses to staff the hospitals. Her ideas about what made a good nurse came from her experiences working with the mentally ill. She had very strict standards. She wanted each nurse to provide two letters of recommendation. In addition, the nurses were required to be at least in their thirties and no older than fifty. And Dorothea wanted them to dress plainly, in clothing that would not interfere with their work.

letters of recommendation: letters that explain why somebody would be good at a job

Most doctors in the Medical Bureau didn't like having women nurses. They didn't think ladies should be around rough soldiers. One surgeon, Dr. Summers of Mansion House Hospital, didn't want any Dix nurses. He was determined to keep them out—and Dorothea was equally determined not to let him. When one of Dorothea's nurses came to Dr. Summers's hospital, he refused to give her a place to sleep. Dorothea told the nurse, "My child . . . you will stay where I have placed you." But unlike the doctors, the secretary of war definitely approved of Dorothea's efforts, and he gave her even more authority.

Dorothea was really not qualified to run the nursing corps, but she did her best, working long hours as she always did. In August 1861, she became sick, but she still worked from her bed. She said, "I think even lying on my bed I can still do something."

Dorothea cared deeply about her nurses and did not want to give up on them. She wanted them to have enough food, proper equipment and supplies, and anything else they needed to do their jobs. She wanted the doctors to respect them. She helped the nurses with paperwork for their travel expenses. When some nurses needed a break, she allowed them to come to her home on Fifteenth Street in Washington to recuperate. "This dreadful civil war has as a huge wild beast consumed my whole of life," she wrote.

However, in spite of her best efforts, Dorothea struggled to organize such a large project. Sadly, there were people who did not like her. Some called her Dragon Dix. Others called her General Dix, though not to her face. Sometimes Dorothea had arguments with the surgeons about her nurses. One surgeon said, "Madam, who are you to dictate to me?" She replied, "I am Dorothea L. Dix, superintendent of nurses, in the employ of the United States government."

In 1863, about halfway through the war, President Lincoln asked Secretary Cameron, who had supported Dorothea's work, to resign. The new secretary of war, Edwin Stanton, chose a new surgeon general. The new surgeon general, Joseph Barnes, wanted to choose his own nurses. This undermined Dorothea's authority. Still, she persevered. She kept working as best she could throughout the rest of the war.

By the end of the Civil War, Dorothea had provided about three thousand nurses to the Union Army. Other people also provided nurses, especially Dr. Elizabeth Blackwell, the first woman to earn a medical degree in the United States, and Clara Barton, who would later founded the American Red Cross. Sometimes, women would follow their soldier husbands from battle to battle, nursing as needed, even if they weren't official nurses.

American Red Cross: a nonprofit group that helps sick or injured people during disasters and emergencies

There were also civilian agencies that helped find nurses, like the United States Sanitary Commission. But Dorothea had hired about 15 percent of all the nurses—more than any other person or agency.

Before the war, Dorothea had been famous for her work to help the mentally ill. But her experiences during the war damaged her reputation. She was in over her head, and even though she worked hard, she could not overcome her lack of nursing knowledge and organizational skill. By the end of the war, she was weak and sick. Still, she didn't give up.

The Civil War officially ended on April 9, 1865, when Confederate general Robert E. Lee surrendered at Appomattox Court House, Virginia, to Union general Ulysses S. Grant. But nurses were still needed because soldiers were still injured. The nursing corps was not officially disbanded until September 1866. During this time, Dorothea kept working. Over the years, she had amassed a huge number of contacts, or people she could call on for help. She worked to get disabled soldiers and nurses home again. She made sure they received their back pay. She tried to find homes for orphans and find soldiers who were missing in action. This was the kind of work Dorothea was good at.

orphans: children whose parents have died

Everything Dorothea did during the Civil War, she did as a volunteer. Unlike her nurses, who were paid forty cents a day, Dorothea was not paid for her work. Secretary Stanton asked her what he could give her to thank her for her service. She wanted only an American flag.

Dorothea's last project during this time was a granite war memorial at Hampton National Cemetery in Hampton, Virginia. Two Union Army chaplains had the idea for the monument but were unable to raise enough money. Then Dorothea stepped in. She pledged some of her own money and soon secured enough funds from other donors to have it built. Originally, she planned for it to be thirty feet tall. But in summer 1866, Quartermaster General Montgomery C. Meigs agreed that the army would pay some of the money. That enabled Dorothea to more than double the monument's size, to sixty-five feet—as tall as ten very tall people standing on each other's shoulders. Dorothea was proud to have built a memorial to the thousands of Union soldiers buried at the cemetery.

"Thank Heaven the War is over. I would that its memories also could pass away," Dorothea wrote. She had done her best as superintendent of nurses, but she knew it hadn't been good enough. She said, "This was not the work I would have my life judged by." She was ready to close this chapter of her life.

chaplains: religious leaders assigned to a special group, such as the military
pledged: promised to donate

Famous Nurses of the Nineteenth Century

Florence Nightingale *(1820–1910) was a British woman who is considered to be the founder of modern nursing. Even as a child, she took care of sick and injured animals, and as an adult, she went to work as a nurse despite the opposition of her family. She started a nursing school and wrote books about nursing. She influenced American nurses like Clara Barton.*

Clara Barton *(1821–1912) was a self-taught American nurse who founded the American Red Cross. She nursed soldiers during the Civil War. She was known as the "Angel of the Battlefield" and "Florence Nightingale of America." Like Dorothea, she recruited nurses to serve wounded soldiers, but Clara was not an official representative of the government like Dorothea was.*

Louisa May Alcott *(1832–88) was a woman from Massachusetts. When the Civil War broke out, she wanted to fight in the army, but that wasn't allowed, so she decided to become a nurse. As soon as she could, she applied to work with Dorothea Dix's nurses and was accepted. She worked for six weeks in a hospital in Washington, D.C., until she caught typhoid pneumonia and was sent home. She wrote a book about her nursing experience called* Hospital Sketches. *Her most famous book is* Little Women.

typhoid pneumonia: a disease caused by bacteria that leads to fever, headache, and diarrhea

Saving Abraham Lincoln

Because people she worked with in the South trusted Dorothea, they talked honestly in front of her. She overheard some conversations in which she learned that some Southerners were planning to assassinate President Lincoln when he traveled on the railroad to Washington, D.C., for his inauguration. At first Dorothea didn't know who to tell. She finally set an appointment with Samuel M. Felton, the president of the Philadelphia, Wilmington, and Baltimore Railroad. He listened to her for more than an hour, and then he contacted the detectives whom he had hired to keep his railroad safe. As a result of Dorothea's revelation, Lincoln was able to change his schedule and take a different train.

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Dorothea L. Dix

After the war, Dorothea wanted to resume her work on behalf of the mentally ill. But she soon discovered that many of the existing hospitals were overwhelmed. "It would seem that all my work is to be done over," she wrote to a friend.

Several things had changed after the war. There were more and more people in need of care, and there were not enough hospitals to serve them all. The hospitals Dorothea had helped build before the war were no longer big enough. And there were new ideas about caring for the mentally ill. Some doctors were making distinctions between mentally ill people who could be cured and those who could not be cured; they wanted to treat the two groups differently. And there was never enough money. State budgets had been overwhelmed by the cost of the war. Building new hospitals and fixing old ones were not priorities for many people.

Dorothea had some successes. In 1866, she successfully encouraged the legislature of Connecticut to

making distinctions: recognizing differences

create the Connecticut Hospital for the Insane. But the disagreements between doctors made her work difficult. She was in her sixties, she was often ill, and she was tired.

One bright spot in Dorothea's postwar years occurred in 1869. She left her home and her work to travel through the West Coast with some friends. They visited California, Oregon, and Washington Territory. As she had done in St. Croix so many years ago, Dorothea observed and catalogued all sorts of wildlife, from insects to birds to fish and mammals, as well as plant life.

After this diverting trip, Dorothea returned to her work, but again she found it difficult and frustrating. By 1870, she had contracted malaria, a type of very bad fever spread by mosquito bites. She was ill for several months.

In the coming years, Dorothea continued to work, but she gradually slowed down. She continued to travel to visit friends and family, and she wrote many, many letters, both personal and professional. In 1875, she was gratified to learn that a Japanese man, Mori Arinori, admired her work and had begun building hospitals for mentally ill people in Japan.

Because Dorothea was so well-known, some people wanted her to write her autobiography. She thought about it, but she didn't want to write it. She was very humble and didn't want to call attention to herself.

To her, the work was what mattered, not the person who did the work. She did not like to be interviewed or talk about herself. She preferred to be private.

By 1881, Dorothea was too elderly to work. In October of that year, she traveled to Trenton, New Jersey, to visit the hospital she had helped found so many years before, the one she called her "first-born child." During her visit, she felt feverish and had a pain in her lung. The former superintendent of the hospital arranged for her to have a small apartment to live in, and she spent the rest of her life there.

Over time, Dorothea lost her sight and her hearing. She had a full-time nurse to care for her. They didn't get along very well, and sometimes she felt very alone. People came to visit her from all over the country, and while she would talk with them for an hour or so, she didn't always want visitors. She spent much of her time reading poetry until her eyesight failed.

Finally, on July 18, 1887, at the age of eighty-five, Dorothea died. Her body was brought by train back to Boston and was buried in Mount Auburn Cemetery in nearby Cambridge. The coffin and the funeral were simple and humble, much like Dorothea herself. Her simple headstone read only "Dorothea L. Dix." Later, Dr. Charles Nichols wrote that Dorothea was "the

most useful and distinguished woman America has yet produced." Back in 1812, little Dolly Dix surely could not have imagined the life she was destined to lead!

Since her death, Dorothea has been honored in many interesting ways. During World War II, a U.S. Navy ship was named the USS *Dorothea L. Dix*. In 1979, she was chosen for the National Women's Hall of Fame. In 1983, the United States Postal Service commemorated her with a postage stamp. There have been several hospitals and clinics named for her, including, posthumously, the one in North Carolina that she was originally too humble to have named after her. And perhaps most interesting of all, in 1994, a crater on Venus was named Dix to honor her!

Today, Dorothea Dix is not remembered as well as other people of her time, like Abraham Lincoln or Florence Nightingale. But that doesn't mean her life's work wasn't incredibly important. In the twenty-first century, almost 150 years after Dorothea's death, there are still problems that need to be solved in the way mentally ill people are diagnosed and treated. The issues are complicated, and just like in Dorothea's time, there never seems to be enough money to do all that needs to be done. But Dorothea never wavered in her compassion or in her

posthumously: after the person's death
crater: a pit in the ground caused by the impact of an object
diagnosed: recognized as having a disease or condition

belief that mentally ill people deserve the same kindness and respect as a physically ill person. We can learn a great lesson from her perseverance and her empathy.

AFTERWORD:
Understanding the Misunderstood

Dorothea Dix worked through much of her life to help people with mental health and developmental challenges. What these people had in common was that their families and doctors did not always know how to help them. Before the nineteenth century, people with such difficulties were locked away in hospitals or even jails.

Some of the people Dorothea helped had a mental illness. That means they had a health condition where their thoughts, actions, and behaviors sometimes made it hard for them to live with their families, to work, or to feel good about themselves and their lives.

Sometimes, the people she helped needed extra support in living and learning. It might have been hard for them to learn to read and write or to do common household tasks.

Sometimes, the people she helped had ways of thinking that were considered different or unusual. Their thoughts and behaviors made other people uncomfortable.

Today, we know much more about how to help people

whose brains work differently. For one thing, some of the people who were considered ill in Dorothea's time wouldn't be considered ill at all today. For another, some people can be helped with therapy or medications. Some people who struggle to learn or to live independently can receive special classes at school and extra support in their jobs. And people who think differently might need support navigating the world, but most people understand that thinking in a different way from other people shouldn't automatically be seen as negative.

In the past, mental illness, intellectual disabilities, and neurodivergence carried a stigma, which means that most people viewed them very negatively. In the twenty-first century, many people are working to reduce that stigma. It's pretty safe to assume that Dorothea would be very pleased!

therapy: treatment for mental health issues that involves talking about and working through problems

neurodivergence: a condition that affects how a person's brain processes information

Discussion Questions

1. Think about Dorothea's childhood experiences in Maine with her parents and then in Massachusetts with other relatives. How were those situations different from each other?
2. If your family decided to move to a new home in a new state, what would be the hardest part? What would be the most exciting part?
3. What did Dorothea experience or learn during her childhood that helped her when she became an adult?
4. As a young woman, Dorothea was passionate about recording her observations of nature. What do you feel passionate about learning and observing?
5. What personal qualities do you think Dorothea's friends admired about her?
6. Dorothea worked very hard during the Civil War, but in the end, she wanted to put that chapter of her life behind her. Why did Dorothea feel that way?
7. Dorothea chose not to write her own memoir or autobiography. What are the differences between writing one's own life story and having someone else write about it?

8. Imagine if Dorothea Dix lived today. How would her life be different? Would it be easier or harder to stand up for her beliefs?
9. If you could ask Dorothea Dix one question, what would it be?

Meet the Author

Anne Marie Pace has loved to read and write since she was old enough to turn the pages of a book and hold a pencil. The first story she remembers writing was about a child who was sledding on a winter day and couldn't get his sled to slow down. He caused all sorts of trouble, including sledding right through his mom's kitchen! Anne Marie also loved writing stories about families with ten or twelve children. She loved her only sister, but she thought it would be fun to live in a house with lots going on.

Anne Marie has lived in Virginia all her life. She studied English and history in college and then learned to be a teacher in graduate school. She was a teacher before she was a professional writer, and now she loves to help other writers improve their stories. She also loves visiting schools to share her books.

Anne Marie has written lots of picture books and has published eleven of them, including *Groundhug Day*, *Busy-Eyed Day*, *Sunny's Tow Truck Saves the Day!*, *Mouse Calls*, and the four books of the *Vampirina Ballerina* series. She loves to bake cookies and cakes for her four children and her husband. (Her two dogs and three cats do not get any cake.)

Meet the Illustrator

Natalie Riolfi is an Argentinian-American artist, born and raised in Miami, Florida. Brought up by Argentinian parents in Miami constantly exposed her to colorful art and music and an eccentric community. She enrolled in Design and Architecture Senior High, where she focused on industrial design. While practicing a very academic genre of illustration, she also fell into portraiture through traditional painting and drawing. After some time, her focus shifted toward creating comics and illustrations. Shortly after graduating high school, Natalie moved to New York City and received

a BFA in Cartooning from the School of Visual Arts. At SVA, she solidified an interest and practice in book arts and book design. Her current stories focus on cultural identity and culture shock, inspired by the change experienced when she moved from Miami to New York City. She explores the conflict between confidence and insecurity of representing her experience growing up in a Latin household, in a Latin city. She aims to reconcile the cultural and generational gap between herself, her family, and the people around her.

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