

Semioethics and Interfaith Action: Jane Addams and “The Fellowship of the Deed”

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Abstract: Jane Addams (1860–1935) brought ethics and interfaith action to life in her commitment to service within her communities. This presentation explores her passions for a life of service through her personal vision of service and several stories of her encounters with others through the early years of her work at Hull House. Committed to pragmatism and embodying a meaningful existence through a life of service to others, Addams focused on the best way to make a difference in the world, bringing ethics into action and expanding how we think about interfaith service.

Keywords: Hull House; interfaith service; social ethics; semioethics; reflective encounter; fellowship of the deed

Thank you for such a nice welcome to the 5th Biennial Philosophy of Communication Conference: Pragmatism. Today, I will be discussing the pragmatism of Jane Addams (1860–1935), and, I confess, I have not studied Addams in any depth until now, though I am exploring her from a philosophy of communication perspective. While I knew a little about Jane Addams, I really had little understanding of her interfaith and interhuman philosophy and action. So, when I was asked to speak on Addams, I was excited to have an opportunity to delve into her life, her work, and her philosophy. I started with reading her biography by Louise Knight, who, by the way, is a great storyteller. Then I read her books *Twenty Years at Hull House* (1911) and *Democracy and Social Ethics* (1902), both of which gave me insight into her pragmatic thinking and doing. What I hope to do here today is to expand her story as we think about her social, moral, and very pragmatic engagement in the world, exemplifying her interfaith and interhuman commitments. I want to do this by telling stories about her life, stories that she shares in her writings, stories that helped her come to meaning in a world of suffering and challenges.

I am going to start with acknowledging one commonality between Jane Addams and the conclusion drawn by Vincent Colapietro about Peirce in his keynote yesterday: Jane Addams also affirmed the “primacy of practice” throughout her work. While Addams was well educated and lived a life informed

by her education, she engaged reflectively but did not stop there. She allowed herself to be fully present in her work with others, and she allowed her understandings and perspectives to be informed by others. She, too, celebrated plurality. For Addams, it was plurality that was central to her work, and it was the plurality of differences that always guided her decisions and the meaning that she gained through her experiences. To begin this presentation, I want to start with a few stories that will help to set the framework for understanding Addams's life and work.

Louise W. Knight (2010) begins her biography of Jane Addams with a story of Jane's early years. She recounts that as a two-and-a-half-year-old little girl, Jane experienced her first death when her mother died after an accident. Jane's mother, Sarah, was seven months pregnant when she slipped and fell on an icy hill on her way to assist someone else who was in labor and giving birth. After her fall, a little while later, Sarah went herself into premature labor and delivered a stillborn daughter. Afterward, she slipped into unconsciousness. At the time, Jane's father was away at the Illinois state capital serving as a state senator, and he was called back home to be by his wife's bedside. Initially, the family tried to keep Jane out of the room, but in one of her mother's more lucid moments in between bouts of unconsciousness, she heard Jane pounding on the door and she called out to let Jane in to come to her side. Five days after her fall, Sarah was dead.

This devastated Jane. There were other deaths to come in her immediate family, too. When Jane was six years old, her sister Martha died from typhoid fever, and again her family shielded Jane from Martha's death by not letting her attend Martha's funeral. Jane had been left behind at the house, and she describes herself sitting in a vigil state on the steps staring into a wall, which made her feel left out and simultaneously protected from death. Later, when Jane was sixteen years old, Polly, a family servant who helped to raise Jane after the death of her mother, fell ill, and this time, Jane was present, along with Polly, when she died. Addams ([1911] 2022) indicated that these early death-related experiences in her life left her feeling unsheltered as she faced nature's elemental forces in what to her seemed to be a relentless fashion. When Jane was twenty, she also witnessed the death of her father. So, her first twenty years of life were rife with death experiences.

This is a lot for a child to bear, but it was not an uncommon experience back then. What is so telling about these early years of Jane's life is the pounding on the door calling for her mother, the persistence of holding a vigil at a wall blocking her from entering the space of death for her sister—she persisted in breaking her way into being a witness of, for, and to death. Her persistence would come to represent her commitment to witness with and to others in spaces of suffering and to work hard to reduce, disrupt, and eliminate whatever suffering of others she could. This is the narrative ground from which Jane Addams led her life: always to, for, and about the other. Jane Addams had a keen sense of response-ability, or being able to respond, for the other, to care for the other, especially during suffering.

Throughout her adult life, Jane Addams built a life of servitude, cultivating an interfaith community through her words and deeds. Addams had what she

described as a “curious sense of responsibility” (2017, 8), referring to a repetitive dream that she recalled from her earliest years: Night after night she dreamt everyone in the world was dead except herself, and she recognized that responsibility rested solely upon her, only her, to rebuild the wagon wheel. The wagon wheel was the metaphor she used for the world because it represented movement, action, and doing. In her dreams, she remembered she was standing in her empty, deserted village realizing that she did not know what to do nor how to move forward with rebuilding. She kept thinking that what she had to do was just to start—start something, start somewhere, start building. In her dream, that was to build one wagon wheel. From there, she thought the world would begin anew. So, she began her life with this immense sense of duty, obligation, and responsibility for the human community to exist and to flourish.

This immense sense of responsibility for the other and for community is not the only intuitive passion she felt. She also felt an interfaith fortitude that was enculturated within her from her father’s evangelical impulses. Her father, John Huy Addams, who died when Jane was twenty years old, is described as refusing to join any one particular faith community because he could not accept the complete teaching of any one singular religious perspective. The family did attend a local Presbyterian church, but John Addams also shared many Quaker affinities. He was an influential Bible school teacher; thus, he contributed to the religious development of his community, and he also held strong evangelical beliefs. Being raised in this kind of ecumenical environment provided the ground of interfaith sentiment in Jane from the beginning of her developing years.

This presentation offers a very brief biography of Jane Addams in case one is not familiar with her life work, which has left an imprint on many people and communities around the country and around the world. Then, using one aspect of semioethics—the “reflective encounter” discussed by Ronald C. Arnett—as a frame, I explore two features of her work. The first is the notion of “fellowship of the deed” and its connection to interfaith commitment. The second is her commitment to interhuman engagement. It should be noted that I chose the “reflective encounter” because of its pragmatic necessity. According to Arnett (2017), semioethics in action involves a “reflective encounter” that provides a way to eliminate assumptions we take for granted about communicative behavior. The reflective encounter invites divergent voices into a dialogic space regardless of differences. Arnett (2017) affirms this perspective, suggesting that the significance of this reflective encounter provides an opening for a “critical response to the ongoing expansion of global communication production processes” (80). The more voices, the better. The reflective encounter allows one to check and remove the assumptions we make, implicit or explicit, as we engage in ever-changing local and global landscapes. Additionally, as I consider Addams’s philosophy of service, two questions emerge that motivate her persistence toward serving her communities: how do we serve the other as we would want to be served, and how do we break down the walls between people of differences? These two questions undergirded everything that meant anything to her.

Who Was Jane Addams?

Laura Jane Addams, who used the name Jane, was born in Cedarville, Illinois, on September 6, 1860, and lived until May 21, 1935. She was the eighth child in a family of nine children. As a young child, Jane suffered with a spinal defect, which was corrected by surgery later in life. She accomplished a lot in her life, most notably winning the Nobel Peace Prize in 1931 for her effort in working to revive and rekindle the spirit of peace in her nation. She was also recognized as a pioneering social worker in America, an active suffragist, and an internationalist. All of humanity was her concern.

Addams's father was a successful businessman and politician serving for sixteen years as an Illinois state senator. John Huy fought in the Civil War and was a friend and colleague of Abraham Lincoln. Jane attended higher levels of education; she graduated from the Rockford Female Seminary and was awarded a bachelor's degree after the school was accredited as Rockford College for Women. Addams also attended medical school but had to leave due to her own poor health.

When Jane was twenty-seven years old, traveling with a friend and partner, Ellen Starr, she visited a settlement house in London. This visit led to Addams pursuing her dreams of service to her community. When they returned, they rented a house in Chicago and designed the initial Hull House (named for the builder of the house), which would serve the underprivileged in providing a higher civic and social life and maintaining educational and philanthropic work to improve living conditions and human experiences for all others. Addams did this initially with her own money.

Addams and Starr worked together in serving the needs of the underprivileged in Chicago. In doing so, more and more civic responsibility was drawing her into more and more civic environments. As her reputation expanded, she earned an honorary degree from Yale University and gave a series of lectures at the University of Wisconsin, which led to a publication one of her books, *Newer Ideals of Peace*. One of the goals in her life was to eliminate the need for war and to provide relief and education to the poor. Her lifetime of commitment to serving those less privileged was started with her own money, and eventually she was able to receive funding from others the more successful she became. She passed away after having several heart attacks and ovarian cancer in 1935.

Using her first book about her work, *Twenty Years at Hull House* (2022), first published in 1911, we can explore her commitment to and embodiment of interfaith engagement. Her commitment to action is explicitly represented in her mantra "the fellowship of the deed" (Addams 2017, 43).

The Fellowship of the Deed

The word "fellowship" has several meanings that have emerged over time and across disciplines. Fellowship can mean having a friendly association, and this friendliness can be enhanced if it is shaped around common interests. In certain

disciplines or industries, it can also mean an award of a certain amount of funding designed to either acknowledge a good idea or to support or subsidize the cost of something, like an educational degree or professional development. In most academic settings, a fellowship refers to some kind of monetary gift or award, which can be merit-based but not always. While the word “fellow” colloquially refers to a companion of some kind, in its etymology it comes from the word “consociate,” referring to one who is united with another as a comrade or companion (Simpson 1959). “Fellow” also aligns itself with the Greek word *koinonia*, which refers to commonality or having something in common with an other in the sense of being “in communion with” (Jones 1977). This reflects a sense of friendliness, a partnership, or some kind of sharing of something—money, an idea, or an experience. The Greek notion of fellowship often refers to a friend, one who is in the company of another, a member in a class or a profession, or a member of a pair of something. “Fellow” plus “ship” refers to the state of being together, companionship, partnership, being in communion with one another or others (Jones 1977). Fellowship also has a religious connotation, such as participating in a religious community or partaking in a meal together (Daniels 2017).

Fellowship also has a spiritual connotation: being in spiritual communion with a divine being. In the New Testament, 2 Corinthians 13:14 states, “The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit, be with you all” (NASB). As a verb, fellowship is an action, meaning to admit to fellowship or to enter into fellowship with or to make one feel welcome by showing friendship or building a cordial relationship. In the context of Jane Addams’s exemplification, the word “fellowship” stands for the sentiment of care that she had for the other, and the word “deed” stands for her emphasis on doing and action. It is not good enough to just think or reflect; that reflection, which is necessary, must be tied to action.

Thinking about “fellowship” resonates with some understandings of welcoming the other. In Jacques Derrida’s essay *A Word of Welcome* (1999), he states that welcome insinuates or points to the following:

1. Saying “welcome” insinuates that one is at home here;
 2. This means that one knows what it means to be at home;
 3. At home, one receives, invites, or offers hospitality,
 4. Appropriates for oneself a place to welcome the Other,
 5. Or one welcomes the other so that one appropriates a place for oneself;
 6. When one welcomes the other, one speaks the language of hospitality.
- (15–16)

Fellowship opens to a welcoming, which then opens to hospitality—being hospitable to the other. François Cooren (2018) identifies the metaphor of hospitality as the key feature of Derrida’s ethics of communication. Cooren (2018) suggests that Derrida’s principle of hospitality is an unconditional welcoming of

the Other, as Addams did. Jane Addams led with interfaith and interhuman sentiment, which also exemplifies that which Thich Nhat Hanh (2020) referred to as interbeing (leading to his model of Engaged Buddhism, which shares similar qualities with Addams's work). Fellowship, welcoming, and being hospitable defines who we are and what we should do as human beings: we are all interbeing (Hanh 2020). When we welcome the other in fellowship, we are hospitable, and as the host of this hospitality, we become hostage, in action, we host the Other. Jane Addams's life was devoted to this commitment.

The "fellowship of the deed" reflects an emphasis on action that demonstrates an interfaith commitment to serving others in society, regardless of socioeconomic status, religion, race, or other divisive constructs. It reflects our responsibility toward the other through service, deed, and meeting others where they are in any given moment. This sentiment was the foundation and fabric of the first settlement house imagined and built by Addams.

Addams referred to the settlement house as "an experimental effort to aid in the solution of the social and industrial problems which are engendered by modern conditions of life in a great city" (Addams 2022, 64). Addams (2022) wrote that people must be content to live quietly and in harmony, side-by-side, with others. She envisioned that by living with others of difference, people can grow together, have respect and relational experiences with others, and build their connections around mutual interests. Addams penned this construct to symbolize how through words, language, and actions, she built her life serving an interfaith, interwoven community, which demonstrated or modeled to others how to live a life enriched by otherness.

Fellowship was an important word to Addams as it represented her sentiment of care for others grounded in pragmatic doing and serving others. She stated that without fellowship, "we may never know how great the divergence between ourselves and others" really is and what it means to the integrity of our relations. She stated that without fellowship, we actually experience loneliness (Addams 2017, 118), and this can become so significant that it leaves absolutely no room for gratitude in our hearts. Fellowship, especially while sharing food and drink, provides a "common meeting ground" for people situated within differences (Addams 2017, 243).

The notion of the fellowship of the deed is the key to understanding Addams's interfaith vision and actions. In her book *The Twenty Years at Hull House*, Addams (2017) stated her "early hopes for the Settlement that it should unite in the fellowship of the deed those of widely differing religious beliefs" (43). This, uniting those separated by religious and other differences, is the true consequence of service toward and for others.

In *Democracy and Social Ethics*, Addams stated that "a standard of social ethics is not attained by travelling a sequestered byway, but by mixing on the thronged and common road where all must turn out for one another, and at least see the size of one another's burdens. . . . [This] implies that [it is] diversified human experience and resultant sympathy which are the foundation and guarantee of democracy" (Addams 2014, 3). Addams advocated for this kind of a social and interfaith ethic as a universal condition of existence.

Addams (2017) stated that “if we grow contemptuous of our fellows, and consciously limit our intercourse to certain kinds of people whom we have previously decided to respect, we not only tremendously circumscribe our range of life, but limit the scope of our ethics” (4). In this way, we close down dialogic spaces and our capacity, or possibility, to achieve dialogue and other interconnections with others.

I want to share two more stories from Jane Addams’s life that demonstrate her pragmatic philosophy, which embodies the commitment of her actions. The first one involves meeting Leo Tolstoy (1828–1910). The second story involves a little boy named Goosie and how his life and death remained in Addams’s inner reflections throughout her entire life. This story exemplifies interhuman action.

Semioethics and Meeting the Other: An Interfaith Perspective

Jane Addams was very educated and well read. She was familiar with Tolstoy’s writings and shared a story about a time when she met him during her travels to Europe. Addams described Tolstoy as being dressed in his “peasant garb,” and he was looking at her judgmentally (Addams 2017, 127). He stated to her, while pulling or tugging on the sleeve of her dress, that “there was enough stuff on one arm to make a frock for a little girl.” He then asked her if she found that “such a dress” was a “barrier to the people” (Addams 2017, 127–28). Addams stated that she was a little taken aback by his judgment of her, and she replied to him that “monstrous as my sleeves were they did not compare in size with those of the working girls in Chicago and that nothing would more effectively separate me from the people than a cotton blouse following simple lines of the human form” (127). Addams continued, “even if I had wished to imitate him [Tolstoy] and ‘dress as a peasant’ it would have been hard to choose which peasant among the thirty-six nationalities we had recently counted in our ward” to dress as (127). This sentiment points to Addams’s awareness of diversity in peasantry.

This story illustrates Addams’s commitment to live among those she served and demonstrates that she did not pretend she was something that she was not. Tolstoy was judging her on her appearance and thought she could better serve the poor by dressing as he had imagined poor people would dress. Addams responded by indicating that it is more important to know others by living with them within their daily existence than to guess something about them. Then you will know how to dress to become a part of their life and experiences—building trust, which you need if you want to make a difference in their lives. Tolstoy would not have made such a quick judgment about her sleeves if he was aware of the multiplicities within the peasant population. He would have known this had he lived fully present among the poor and recognized that understanding the poor is not a singular understanding; there are diverse ways to communicate, dress, and live with them. Addams reflected on this and realized Tolstoy was pretending: he remained outside and above the people to whom he wrote.

Additionally, this story points to diversity of perspectives since Addams referred to the thirty-six nationalities of people living in her ward, as well as the

expansive range of religious differences, all of whom she knew intimately and served regularly. She was an integral part of Hull House. She also knew enough that they were all different from each other, in their dress, in what they ate, in the norms of how they acted, and in their religious and worship practices. She accepted and celebrated all of their differences, especially the contours of religious practices. Having various religious perspectives in conversation with each other and living among this rich diversity laid the backdrop for her interfaith commitment. This story involving Tolstoy reveals the extent of Addams's interfaith commitment to the people she served. She also allowed the experience to enable a deeply reflective orientation for her, and she never forgot the exchange.

Interfaith work can be represented several ways. According to Brad Fulton and Richard L. Wood (2013), interfaith work may come in the form of grassroots collaboration on social projects, locally sponsored interfaith dialogues, or collaborations sponsored by nondenominational shared work on faith-based initiatives (17). Addams engaged in interfaith work through her grassroots collaborations that led to building, running, and maintaining Hull House. It was the interfaith structures at Hull House that embodied her interfaith commitments; all faiths were welcomed and deemed equal in their work. The more perspectives, the more successful Hull House would become, and the more people it would help.

Semioethics and Interhuman Action

Addams made her case for a life lived in ethics and interfaith action, thus representing a model of care through her fellowship sentiment. Her interfaith commitment underscores her social ethic, which is about "recognizing that democracy is a 'rule of living' which requires individuals to cultivate a sense of shared responsibility for social processes" (Hanagan 2013, 370). Addams's social ethic lays the responsibility for reforming social processes in the hands of the people—it is not any top-down solution. This is something that all people have the responsibility for; the locus of control is, or should be, in the hands of everyone.

Knight (2010) describes Addams as an activist. If Hull House was going to be successful, Addams would have to get a little political, something that she often resisted but eventually got drawn into. Lobbying was something Addams hated doing, yet she knew it was necessary for social change. Her interhuman perspective and engagement would eventually help to shape a more positive view of lobbying. Before having to lobby, she thought that lobbying was about pushing one main agenda at all costs. Later, she came to see lobbying as cross-class political campaigning in that people from all different political voices would come together to advocate for social and political changes, and these changes would be felt in the lives of the people she worked with and served.

Hull House came to signify roots, connection, and belonging in the community. This second story centers around an experience that Addams shared about a boy named Goosie, which reflects a sense of what it means to have an interhuman perspective and experience. There were many reasons for the need of

a social space such as the settlement house, and living there led to many epiphanies for Addams. She knew Goosie's mother because he attended the childcare center at Hull House every day while his mother worked hard outside of the home. When Goosie was five years old, he was helping his mother on the roof of a shed building, where she was hanging laundry before going to the factory for the day. Unfortunately, that morning was very windy. In the blink of an eye, when Goosie was reaching up to hand his mother a clothespin, a strong wind lifted him up and threw him off the roof. His mother kept calling for him to come back up to the roof, but she was not aware that his neck was broken. Goosie was dead.

This had a profound impact on Jane. On the day of the funeral, Jane asked Goosie's mother what she could do for her. His mother simply asked if she could still have her wages for the next day if she stayed home. She wanted to hold Goosie, her dead child, all day because Goosie would ask her every day to stay home so they could spend time together just to play or be held. Then, Goosie's mother admitted she never had the time, or made the time, to give this time to Goosie before. For Addams, this sentiment reflected the absurd reality that the mother, living in poverty, had to work for a living and that in doing so, the work left no time "for the tender care and caressing" of children (Addams 2017, 86). Addams recognized this was a problem for all poor people and that no matter how progressive a society became, there would still be poor people who were enslaved by their poverty, and there would always be someone who could not provide the tender care that their child needed. This demonstrated for Jane the need for a firm social ethic around the interhuman action of care. Addams wondered: How can society provide the opportunity or the environment for cultivating and supporting this interhuman desire? From then on, Addams's perspective of the poor expanded even more, and she wanted to continue to make a difference in individual people's lives, especially for working mothers. Addams did not have children of her own, but everyone she served, no matter the age, was like her own child to her.

Conclusion

Interfaith and interhuman qualities are descriptors that exemplify how Jane Addams moved through the world. Addams's life, exemplified through engagement in her work at the Hull House, provided her with opportunities for reflective encounters that allowed her to question the "taken-for-granted assumptions about communicative behavior" (Arnett 2017, 80). Reading *Twenty Years at Hull House*, one finds a rich repository of stories shared by Addams that exemplifies an interfaith mindset and an interhuman spirit, which allowed her to weave together a tapestry of pragmatic engagement for the public good. Addams's life of deeds orchestrated divergent voices, perspectives, worldviews, and faiths into a dialogic space that respected and honored others while embracing the differences between people. Addams brought people together around ideas and differences, modeling for them how to honor, respect, and serve the other.

The work Jane Addams did was a critical response to the growth of the city as well as growth around the world. She would engage in a “reflective encounter” that ultimately opened opportunities to connect and reflect with others around assumptions and processes that we all take for granted (Arnett 2017, 80). Addams did not remain in a reflective mode; rather, she moved from the reflective into a very pragmatic space of action while recognizing that people not only come together around ideas but also around action—in the doing together.

Addams modeled an ethic of care through her stewardship of the poor and the fellowship she shared with them. Let me end with one last story, returning to the wall. By the end of her life, Addams had knocked down the walls that stood between her and the deaths in her family, as well as the walls between her and others in her communities. Being able to witness, to be in fellowship, with those who die, or to be with them at death, allowed for a radical civility (Danisch and Keith 2020) to develop and guide the work—the pragmatic action of her life. She united others through an interhuman sentiment, through interfaith dialogue, and through commitment to pragmatic action. These three elements that underscore Addams’s contributions to society enabled her to make sense of the world for herself and to help others to make their own sense of being in the world, no matter where they were in their human journey. Her life represented resistance to the status quo that represented other kinds of walls in the social fabric of human existence. Jane Addams worked toward breaking barriers and eliminating walls between people, recognizing that it is the differences we share that can lead us to find common ground, to create a respectful community, and to contribute to a flourishing life devoted to serving others, all others.

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