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Unit 4

Jane Addams, as described in Philip Cusick’s *A Passion for Learning*, was a force to be reckoned with. What struck me most about Addams was that she, although having a wealthy upbringing laid upon a base of traditional education, gained most of her knowledge through experience and immersion.

Accordingly, the pillar I find to be most suiting for Addams is articulated in the following quote: “Even free, universal, comprehensive, and filled with requirements, electives, events, and activities, [schools] offer only part of an education; and their diplomas and degrees offer only a bureaucratic illusion of completeness” (Cusick, 2005, p.163). This excerpt suggests that “completeness” of education through the attendance of school is only an illusion. Further, it suggests that experience outside of school lends itself to a true wealth of knowledge. Jane Addams proved this countless times in her life’s work—her lack of school-resulted “completeness” compounded her decision to get away from the settled housewives of her hometown and go out to explore the world, eventually bringing her to Chicago with a college friend named Ellen Starr. Addams’ lack of completeness compelled her to seek more ways, and more meaningful ways, to improve countless lives in the Chicago community. In a way, Addams was endowed with humanitarian wanderlust.

A poem entitled “remains. Jane Addams town“ articulates the importance of experiential knowledge in Addams’ life, and the resulting impact she had on so many. This poem, written by 2007-2008 Hull-House Resident Poet Kevin Coval, is featured on the Jane Addams Hull-House Museum website, under the category “Hull-House History on Call.” An excerpt from this poignant poem is as follows:

Jane Addams’s birth right wrote her among the wealthy.   
her and Ellen Gates Starr and Florence Kelly and a bunch   
of their homegirls; white women who flipped, deemed crazy   
and prescribed bed rest, who moved into each other, out  
side of marriage and single family homes, who questioned the nature   
of domesticity. the home maker is maker of culture   
and the culture is broad like the people are broad   
shouldered, hulling hours in jobs that should be valued like the jobs of bosses   
and the fate of bosses and the people are the same cuz we live   
in the same house, where we hull and haul our bodies into public space   
where all bodies should be clothed and fed and coddled and caressed freely   
by the hands of doctors and cooks, lovers and communists, american these hands,   
immigrant and chained, dirty and clean finger nailed, raw and stubborn, the   
home and public space blurred, or extended like the good and goods a citizen should be offered.

In this excerpt, Coval capitalizes on aspects of Addams’ privileged upbringing, and juxtaposes it with her disdain for the settled life that so many women in her hometown deemed fulfilling. Following that, Coval spins phrases about the community that Hull-House provided for: those who are worked hard and join together in moments of safety within the walls Addams and Starr provided. Although this poem does not explicitly state that Jane Addams learned how to provide for these people “on the job,” so to speak, it does play up the experiential nature of Addam’s influential humanitarian leadership. The line that states she (and her “homegirls”) “questioned the nature of domesticity” is one that speaks to this, in a way—it is suggesting that the status quo was not enough for Addams, that knowledge needed to be sought elsewhere before reaching “completeness.”

In the web resource entitled “Urban Experience in Chicago: Hull-House and its Neighborhoods,” there is a wonderful selection of images documenting the Hull-House. One gallery in particular links nicely with Cusick’s pillar of experiential knowledge—“Creating and Appreciating the Visual Arts at Hull-House.” One photo in the gallery states that Jane Addams wrote, “The attempt of Hull-House to make the aesthetic and artistic a vital influence in the lives of its neighbors, and a matter of permanent interest of them, inevitably took the form of a many-sided experiment.” *A many-sided experiment*. This explanation of the Hull-House’s approach to visual art aligns with the overarching idea of learning best through experience, and in this case, experimentation. If it were not a many-sided experiment, would any knowledge be gained? Jane Addams, through this quotation, immortalizes a cornerstone to her legacy—creating a vital influence through a many-sided experiment.