



Education Department Resource

Women Creating Change: Jane Addams and Urvashi Vaid

A Women's History Month Reading and Discussion Activity

Overview:

Happy Women's History Month! This pair of readings and discussion questions compares the lives of two figures in U.S. history, one contemporary (Urvashi Vaid), and one historical (Jane Addams), and asks students to consider how questions of identity shaped the work of both women. The short biographies are paired to highlight the similarities in the goals of both reformers, the ways in which Jane Addams' work laid a foundation for the work of contemporary women like Urvashi Vaid, and the ways in which race, class, and sexuality influenced the ways in which both women chose to effect change in the United States. This activity could be utilized as brief introduction to broader Women's History Month activities, or extended with supplemental readings and assignments.

Objectives:

- To educate students about the lives and work of Jane Addams and Urvashi Vaid.
- To encourage students to consider the strides made by women in the U.S. since Jane Addams' era by comparing her life to Urvashi Vaid's.
- To engage students in considering the ways in which identity impacts people's work, values, and goals, and how hiding or obscuring the sexual identity of historical figures can leave us with a less-than-complete understanding of their work and motivations.
- To explore the concept that the liberation of one group can lead to the liberation of others.

Level: Grades 7 through 12.

Time: 30 – 50 minutes, depending on available time.

Materials:

Handout 1 – “Jane Addams: A Legacy of Change”

Handout 2 – “Urvashi Vaid: Working Today for a Better Tomorrow”

Subject Areas: Social Studies (U.S. History, U.S. Current Events, Sociology)

Part 1: Pre-discussion (5 minutes)

Before you distribute the reading material, you might want to ask students to consider the following questions:

- How does your identity (race, class, ethnicity, sexuality, religion, etc.) shape what you consider to be important values and causes? Are your future aspirations influenced by your identity?

- The fact that many important historical figures had same-sex relationships is often ignored or obscured in history books. Do you think it's important for you to know if a historical figure was a sexual minority? How would such knowledge impact your understanding of their work and accomplishments?

Part 2: Reading (15 minutes)

Students should first read the biography of Jane Addams, then the piece on Urvashi Vaid. The biographies can be read silently, aloud, or within small groups. In a small class, you might choose to divide the students into two groups, with each group focusing on one biography and reporting back to the class on it.

Part 3: Discussion (10 – 30 minutes)

Use the following questions to explore the lives and work of Jane Addams and Urvashi Vaid.

- What are some similarities between Addams and Vaid? Differences? What personal values and experiences, do you think, made them seek to change society?
- How has U.S. society changed since Jane Addams' time? Did the work of Jane Addams and other women reformers of her generation impact the opportunities available to contemporary activists like Urvashi Vaid? How will Vaid's work impact future generations?
- Do you think the "outsider" status of both women impacted the work they chose to do? How so?
- Urvashi Vaid is quoted as saying, "The movement I work in might be called a gay and lesbian movement, but its mission is the liberation of all people." Do you believe that the liberation of one group can help liberate others? How did Jane Addams' work to help the poor of Chicago also impact the lives of the women who worked at Hull House?
- How has the work of these women impacted your life? (Encourage students to think creatively, even if they haven't directly benefited from the reforms that Addams and Vaid worked for—consider Addams' work in the suffrage movement, women's employment, labor reform, and changing the perception many held of immigrants. Vaid's work has brought LGBT issues to the mainstream media, challenging homophobia.)

Follow-Up Activities

- Ask students to research, compare, and contrast other historical and contemporary figures in Women's History (e.g., Eleanor Roosevelt and Hillary Rodham Clinton, Dorothy Dandridge and Halle Berry, Zora Neale Hurston and Louise Erdrich, Babe Didrikson and Lisa Leslie).
- Have students create "identity collages" using photos, magazine clippings, words, and drawings to capture the many layers of history and experiences that make them who they are and shape their goals for the future.



Jane Addams: A Legacy of Change

Introduction

Social reformer, pacifist, and founder of Hull House, Jane Addams was born in 1860 to a prominent family in Cedarville, Illinois. The women of her generation and class were expected to marry and raise children, but Addams' deep commitment to the values of social justice and hard work, taught to her by her Quaker father, led her to life of service to Chicago's poor. Although it is often minimized or hidden by historians, Addams had at least two important relationships with women, the latter one lasting thirty-four years.

Addams' mother died when she was only two years old, and Addams herself was plagued by health problems for most of her life. Addams attended college at the Rockford Female Seminary, and graduated in 1880. She went on to pursue her dream of becoming a doctor at the Philadelphia Women's College, but left because of her poor health, and possibly because of the strongly voiced disapproval of her father, who worried she would become overly educated and never marry. After undergoing surgery, Addams was confined to bed for nearly a year. Upon her recovery, she traveled to Europe with Ellen Gates Starr, a former classmate from the Rockford seminary, and her companion for many years to come.

Hull House

In England, Addams made a fortuitous visit to Toynbee Hall, a settlement house in the slums of London dedicated to tackling the problems of the poor. Deeply moved, Addams returned to the U.S. with hopes of helping the poor in her country. In 1889, Jane Addams and Ellen Gates Starr opened the doors of Hull House in the middle of a Chicago slum occupied by various immigrant communities. Within four years, Hull House was serving over two thousand people a week, providing hot lunches, daycare, and after-school programs for children, and literacy, arts, and music classes for adults, and grew to include an art gallery, gymnasium, and labor museum. Hull House operated on the premise that community members knew best how to solve their problems; the ideas of the local residents shaped the various programs and services at Hull House. In addition, Hull House became the center of a vibrant political community, from which Addams and neighborhood residents organized to lobby for labor law, child labor, and factory reform in Chicago.

The local push to improve social conditions spread across the country as settlement houses sprang up in urban centers, hoping to imitate the success of Hull House. In addition to providing much-needed services to poor communities, these settlement houses also provided the middle-class women who worked there with stimulating careers and economic independence, which was rare at the time. Hull House in particular became a center of intellectual discourse for young women, drawing the likes of physician Alice Hamilton, and acting as a hub of the suffrage movement. Addams wrote and lectured extensively about life at Hull House, and the book she published in 1910, *Twenty Years at Hull House*, did much to educate the public about the famed settlement. In 1911 the National Federation of Settlements and Neighborhood Centers was established with Addams serving as its first president.

The Peace Movement

By the early 1900's, Jane Addams was well established as a beloved reformer and heroic figure in the American consciousness. All that changed in the wake of the First World War. Addams, an avowed pacifist, opposed American intervention in the war, and helped lead the formation of the Women's Peace Party, which sought a peaceful end to the war and worked to establish a permanent international peacekeeping organization. From 1919 until 1929, she served as president of the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom. Her popularity in the U.S. took a nosedive with the publication of her book, *Peace and Bread in a Time of War*, and Addams faced accusations of being a communist and a "silly old maid." Nevertheless, Addams held true to her beliefs, and led efforts to provide civilian victims of war with food, clothing, and health care. Although her work as a pacifist was derided during World War I, it eventually was recognized as an important contribution. Addams (with fellow activist Nicholas Murray Butler) was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1931 in recognition of her dedication to peace.

Relationships

Although it is seldom discussed in biographies, which usually present Addams as a woman who gave up all thoughts of romance and marriage in order to better serve America's poor, there is much evidence that Addams did indeed have passionate, long-term relationships with women. Ellen Gates Starr was Addams first long-term companion and lifelong friend, but more documentation exists of her relationship later with Mary Rozet Smith, the daughter of a wealthy paper manufacturer who worked at Hull House. Although Addams destroyed much of her correspondence with Smith before her death, many of the surviving letters and poems they wrote to each other demonstrate the depth of their relationship. "I miss you dreadfully and am yours 'til death," Addams wrote to Smith. Smith responded, "You can never know what it is to me to have had you and to have you...I feel quite a rush of emotion when I think of you."

Jane Addams' relationship with Mary Rozet Smith lasted more than 40 years until Mary's death from pneumonia. At the time of Mary's death she wrote: "I suppose I could have willed my heart to stop beating, but the thought of what she had been to me for so long kept me from being cowardly." Addams died only a year later, at the age of 74. Her memory lives on in the profession of social work, which she helped establish, and which provides services to millions in a plethora of organizations today.

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"Biographical Sketch of Jane Addams." Jane Addams Hull House Museum. University of Illinois Chicago. 1997. GLSEN, New York, NY. 15 March 2005. <http://www.uic.edu/jaddams/hull/hull_house.html>.

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Urvashi Vaid: Working Today for a Better Tomorrow

Introduction

Urvashi Vaid is a community organizer and grass-roots activist who has been involved in the gay/lesbian and feminist movements since the early 1980s. Vaid has not limited her community service to gay/lesbian rights, however. She described what she sees as the nature of her work for *Vanity Fair*, explaining, "The movement I work in might be called a gay and lesbian movement, but its mission is the liberation of all people. To me, my mission is about ending sexism, about ending racism, and about ending homophobia."

A very young activist

Vaid was born in India in 1958, but when she was eight her family moved to the United States. Vaid was an intellectually curious child and at a very young age became involved in the antiwar movement then sweeping through America's campuses in protest of U.S. involvement in the war in Vietnam. At the age of 11 she participated in an antiwar March, and at 12 she gave a speech praising George McGovern, the 1972 Democratic nominee for president who was beaten by Richard M. Nixon in a now-infamous landslide.

In general, though, Vaid was an outsider as a child. She told *Vanity Fair*, "I was a very awkward young girl. I spoke with an Indian accent. I had these very thick glasses. I had long hair, very thick, straight hair, Indian hair, down to my waist. I was such an intellectual. I read voraciously, and by the time I was 12 I was going through my parents' library.... I lived a lot in my head." Vaid graduated from high school in only three years and attended upstate New York's Vassar College on an academic scholarship.

The climate at Vassar at this time was politically charged, as was Vaid herself, and she was heavily influenced by it. She was especially attracted to the feminist movement, though she was concerned about oppression in all its forms. "I've gotten criticized throughout my political life for having a multi-issue agenda," she told the *Boston Phoenix*. "All I can say is that that agenda derives from the oppression I experience. As a woman who is a lesbian, who's out [open about her sexual orientation], and who's a woman of color — it's not possible for me to divorce the prejudice I experience one from the other."

Political organizing

Vaid began political organizing in college, working to form a variety of groups to address the discrimination she felt. In 1979 she graduated with a bachelor's degree in English and political science, and went on to work for a variety of organizations that promoted social change. She graduated from law school in 1983 and went to work as a staff attorney with the ACLU's National Prisons Project in Washington, D.C. In this position Vaid conducted class action civil rights lawsuits to improve conditions in the nation's prison system. In 1984 she initiated the National Prisons Project's work with prisoners who had contracted the HIV virus, which is generally believed to cause AIDS.

National Gay and Lesbian Task Force

Vaid became involved with the NGLTF in 1985 when she served on its board of directors. In 1986 she became the group's director of public information and brought with her a degree of

professionalism and media savvy it had not known before. In doing so, she increased coverage of NGLTF's activities and agenda and established the organization as a principal source of information on issues concerning gay and lesbian rights. She told the *Boston Phoenix*, "We concentrated on making sure that gay issues were going to be really, really in the media's face, and hatched a lot of plots to do that."

In 1989 Vaid became executive director of NGLTF's Policy Institute in Washington, D.C. As always, Vaid was working to increase visibility, believing that the more gays and lesbians are seen by the media as ordinary citizens participating in society just like anyone else, the fewer barriers there will be to acceptance. She also co-founded the NGLTF's Creating Change conference, which remains the only national gay and lesbian political conference, making news during the 1988 and 1992 presidential campaigns.

After NGLTF

Vaid is acknowledged to have had a major impact on NGLTF's efforts to increase the visibility and viability of gays and lesbians on the national scene. She is seen in the gay community as a fiery orator, someone who strongly supports the kind of direct action politics advocated by groups like ACT-UP and Queer Nation, who use public confrontations and symbolic acts of civil disobedience to draw media attention to their cause. In 1990, for instance, she disrupted President Bush's first policy speech on AIDS by holding up a sign that read, "Talk Is Cheap, AIDS Funding Is Not" and was removed from the audience by police. This is just one example of the hundreds of local and national protests she has organized over the years.

The Closet

Like nearly all lesbians and gays, Vaid has felt the terror of coming out of the closet (admitting her sexuality to her family, friends, and society at large). The closeting of homosexuals by social mores is something Vaid sees as having a crippling affect on political organizing. "Why is it so hard for us to build?," she asked in *Vanity Fair*. "Because of the closet. Because so many of our people are hidden from us. Many women leaders still feel the need to be closeted to protect their access or their status. They feel if they come out of the closet as lesbians in the women's movement they will somehow lose their leadership." It is a dilemma Vaid has been fighting for nearly two decades.