

“Something There Is That Doesn’t Love a Wall”
Hilltop Neighborhood House
Valparaiso, IN
January-April 2000

Introduction

This four-part conversation among trustees and key staff of Hilltop Neighborhood House in Valparaiso, Indiana, served as a first step in the organization’s strategic planning effort. Work began with a daylong retreat, followed by three monthly meetings. At each session, participants shared a meal and discussed selected readings in relation to the history and goals of the organization. Discussion focused on the aspirations of Hilltop’s founders, the purposes and publics of the organization, expectations of those served, and prospects for “doing good better.” To aid in their discussion of these issues, participants read Jane Addams on the history of Hull-House and the Pullman Strike, Robert Frost on neighborly practices, Susan Wisely on American traditions of philanthropy, and several short stories on the challenges of serving and giving. Other conversation prompts included a timeline showing the history of Hilltop, a dinner performance of Act 1, scene I in Shakespeare’s “King Lear”, and a chart inviting participants to summarize their learnings as they move forward into strategic planning.

Readings and Guiding Questions

Session I: *Why Are We Here?* [day retreat]

Readings

- Robert Frost, “Mending Wall”
- Jane Addams, Twenty Years At Hull House: Foreword by Henry Steele Commager, (New York: Signet Classic, 1961), (pp. ix-xxii); Chapter 1, “Earliest Impressions” (pp. 1-14); Chapter 5, “First Days at Hull House” (pp. 58-73); Chapter 7, “Some Early Undertakings at Hull House” (pp. 86-102); Chapter 8, “Problems of Poverty” (pp. 103-117).

Guiding Questions

- What in her early life shaped Addams as a social visionary and civic leader? Can you identify key people or events in your own life that led you (however indirectly) to your current work with Hilltop?
- Why did Addams locate Hull-House where she did? Why is Hilltop Neighborhood House located where it is? Why is Hilltop called a House and not something else (e.g., a center)?

- In this chapter, Addams talks about the conflict between compassion and management. Has this conflict been part of your experience at HNH? How about the problem of so-called ‘tainted money’?
- How are the problems of poverty that Addams describes like/different from the problems we confront today? How do we know what kinds of help people really need?

Session II: *Whom Do We Serve, and for What Purpose?*

Readings and Guiding Questions

- Susan Wisely, “The Pursuit of a Virtuous People,” *Advancing Philanthropy* (Winter 1997-1998).

Drawing on the history of her own organization, the Lilly Endowment, Wisely identifies three traditions of American philanthropy and ponders the emergence of a fourth. Does Hilltop participate in any of these traditions, in your view?

- Henri Barbusse, “The Eleventh,” from *We Others: Stories of Fate, Love and Pity* (New York: Dutton & Co., 1918).

This short story by French poet and writer Barbusse invites reflection on whom we serve—and whom we do not serve. Is there an “eleventh” at the Hilltop door?

Session III: *What Do We Expect of Those We Serve?*

Readings and Guiding Questions

- Jane Addams, “A Modern Lear.” from *The Social Thought of Jane Addams*, edited by Christopher Lasch, (Indianapolis: The Bobbs-Merrill Company, Inc., 1965).

In this essay (written in 1895 but withheld from publication for twenty years due to its inflammatory nature), Addams discusses the Pullman Strike of 1894 as a story of foiled expectations, much like Shakespeare’s “King Lear.” Railroad tycoon George Pullman had given his workers a remarkable gift: the flowers-and-fountains town of Pullman, Illinois. But what did he expect in return? And what happened when his expectations were not met?

Session IV: *How Can We Do Good Better?*

Readings and Guiding Questions

- Edward M. Holmes, “Town Office.” from *A Part of the Main, Short stories of the Maine coast*, (University of Maine at Orono, Maine: Maine Studies no. 95, 1973).

Set in a small town in Maine, “Town Office” describes one of the town’s traditions of doing good. What happens when one man tries to improve on that tradition?

Facilitators

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