Name: Date:

**Dorothea Dix’s Plea on Behalf of the Mentally Ill**

*In March, 1841, Dorothea Dix visited a Massachusetts jail where she found mentally ill people being kept in a frigid cell. Appalled by these conditions, Dix investigated asylums, jails, and almshouses throughout the state. In 1843, she submitted a report to the legislature – an excerpt of which is reprinted here.*

I come to present the strong claims of suffering humanity. I come to place before the Legislature of Massachusetts the condition of the miserable, the desolate, the outcast. I come as the advocate of helpless, forgotten, insane, and idiotic men and women; of beings sunk to a condition from which the most unconcerned would start with real horror; of beings wretched in our prisons, and more wretched in our almshouses…

In illustration of my subject, I offer the following extracts from my Note-book and Journal. –

*Springfield*. In the jail, one lunatic woman, furiously mad, a State pauper improperly situated both in regard to the prisoners, the keepers, and herself…

*Lincoln*. A woman in a cage. *Medford*. One idiotic subject chained, and one in a close stall for seventeen years. *Peppermill*. One often doubly chained, hand and foot; another violent; several peaceable now. *Brookfield*. One man caged, comfortable. *Granville*. One often closely confined; now losing use of his limbs from want of exercise. *Charlemot*. One man caged. *Lenox*. Two in the jail, against whose unfit condition there the jailer protests…

*Danvers*. November. Visited the almshouse. A large building, much out of repair. Understand a new one is in contemplation. Here are from fifty-six to sixty inmates, one idiotic, three insane; one of the latter is close confinement at all times.

Long before reaching the house, wild shouts, snatches of rude songs, imprecations and obscene language, fell upon the ear, proceeding from the occupant of a low building, rather remote from the principal building to which my course was directed. Found the mistress, and was conducted to the place which was called “the home” of the forlorn maniac, a young woman, exhibiting a condition of neglect and misery blotting out the faintest idea of comfort, and outraging every sentiment of decency. She had been, I learnt, “a respectable person, industrious, and worthy. Disappointments and trials shook her mind, and finally, laid prostrate reason and self-control. She became a maniac for life. She had been at Worchester Hospital for a considerable time, and had been returned as incurable.” The mistress told me she understood that, “while there, she was comfortable and decent.” Alas, what a change was here exhibited! She had passed from one degree of violence to another, in swift progress. There she stood, clinging to or beating upon the bars of her caged apartment, the contracted size of which afforded space only for increasing, accumulations of filth, a foul spectacle. There she stood with naked arms and disheveled hair, the unwashed frame invested with fragments of unclean garments, the air so extremely offensive, though ventilation was afforded on all sides save one, that it was not possible to remain beyond a few moments without retreating for recovery to the outward air. Irritation of body, produced by utter filth and exposure, incited her to the horrid process of tearing off her skin by inches; her face, neck, and person were thus disfigured to hideousness. She hold up a fragment just rent off. To my exclamation of horror the mistress replied: “Oh, we can’t help it. Half the skin is off sometimes…”

Gentlemen, I commit you to this sacred cause. Your action upon this subject will affect the present and future condition of hundreds and of thousands. In this legislation, as in all thigns, may you exercise that “wisdom which is the breath of the power of God.”

*From* Dorothea Dix, “Memorial to the Legislature of Massachusetts,” *Old South Leaflet*, No. 148 (Boston)