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The Woman Behind the New Deal
by Kirstin Downey

Frances Perkins was a woman born long before a time when it was assumed women could and should be educated; long before educational, business, and governmental glass ceilings were shattered. Frances lived her life in a way that we would not find unusual. Her ideas, which are the basics of contemporary life, Social Security, unemployment insurance, the minimum wage, and child labor guidelines, were considered radical, undo-able notions at the time. It was she who helped define the New Deal and so much of FDR's twelve years in office. Frances would be at home in 2011, but in 1880 when she was born, expectations for women were very well defined in terms of home, hearth, and child rearing. Frances was the proverbial square peg and she lived her life according to her own creed and conscience, in spite of the fact that society at the time did not encourage this.

The book, *The Woman Behind the New Deal*, written by Kirstin Downey and published in 2009, required great amounts of time both "archaeological and historical" Downey says. Downey's recalls hearing Frances's name time and again, when she moved to Washington D.C. in 1988, as a young staff reporter for the *Washington Post*, writing about business and economics. Her development of the book began in earnest, when she was writing a column called On the Job, which allowed workers to ask important workplace questions. As Downey referenced these answers about workplace injuries and the rights of employees to be compensated for their loss of health, the legacy of Frances Perkins was a story needing to be told. Information written by and about Frances was scattered from Washington to the northeast; disorganized and uncategorized. Many personal documents and letters had been destroyed as Downey began her research in earnest. She was on leave from her job as she combed scattered archives, letters, and personal papers/pages, at the Columbia University Oral History Research office, Cornell University, the Library of Congress, and Labor Department files. Several of Frances's family and friends did provide access to their private collections of letters, but Downey says it took ten years of detective work to bring the book to publishable life.

I found *The Woman Behind the New Deal*, to be engaging and informative. I knew little about Frances Perkins before I read the book, other than the fact that she was the only woman in FDR's cabinet; the only woman in any cabinet for decades. There was much to admire about Perkins and Downey made it easy to do so. She illuminated the life and times of a woman whose name is hardly commonplace, yet Downey's appreciation for Frances and who she was clearly defines and makes this book one not to be overlooked.

Frances Perkins was born on Beacon Hill, on April 10, 1880 to Frederick Perkins and Susan Bean Perkins. She was christened Fannie Coralie Perkins, but would later legally take the name of Frances at the age of 25 . Downey calls Frances's birth in Boston "a technicality", because it was Newcastle, Maine on the Damariscotta River, where her grandmother lived and she spent happy childhood summers, that Frances considered home. Fannie grew up in Worcester where her father had a stationery and office supply store with a partner. She adored her grandmother Cynthia Otis who lived to be 101 and instilled in young Fannie a sense of Yankee values, among them, "self-reliance, democratic beliefs, tenacity, physical endurance, contempt for complainers, and a tendency to be closed mouthed". Her parents considered their ancestry to be "storied and heroic". Among her ancestors were Revolutionary War patriot, James Otis, and General Oliver Otis Howard, the founder of Howard University in Washington and chief of the Freedmen's Bureau.

Downey says that Frances's mother "didn't grasp what a remarkable child she had in Fannie" and that Fannie's affection for her was "dutiful rather than heartfelt". Fannie's father on the other hand, focused his attention on her, teaching her to read Greek at age 8 and preparing her for college, at a time when only 3 percent of women went on to higher education. Ideas about women being given a "broader social role" were seeping into the public consciousness and Fannie's father was "converted" to the idea of women's suffrage. Downey says, that "[T]hey were proud of her intelligence but ambivalent about what the future might hold for an educated woman". Early on it seems, that Frances showed qualities that would hold her in good stead in Washington; learning to speak out and take charge when necessary. Through her mother's church work tending to the needs of the poor and the "plight of hungry children", Frances developed a great sense of compassion. Downey says that Fannie's parents, who were financially comfortable, tended to blame poverty on drunkenness, while Frances began to question why it is that some people are poor. While a teenager, she read *How the Other Half Lives*, by Jacob Riis, a police reporter for the *New York Tribune* and the Associated Press, which detailed life on New York's Lower East Side inhabited by one hundred thousand people living "in homes not fit for human habitation" and where thousands of children were abandoned and forced to live on scraps and "by street theft". Frances observed the air of resentment which had begun with the large influx of immigrants starting in the year of her birth as well as the shift in America from an agricultural to industrial society as she grew into young adulthood. She began to develop an "acute sense of social justice", towards immigrants "in the same way she had noticed the travails of the poor".

After attending Worcester Classical High School with other affluent children most of whom were boys, Frances attended Mount Holyoke College near her home in Worcester. It's original mission set out by its founder, Mary Lyon was to prepare girls as missionaries and teachers. Frances majored in chemistry and physics, because a chemistry teacher encouraged her to take more rigorous subjects, but she was "most impressed by her American economic history course, in which students visited factories and other workplaces". She "learned that losing a hand at work meant losing your livelihood", and that factory work "paid so little and so irregularly that it left families with no savings for future periods of unemployment". She did not distinguish herself as a student academically, but more with her ability to lead, to think independently, and "to

raise questions about society and its workings". Frances graduated in 1902, reluctant to return home as was the custom for women of the time. Against her parents wishes, she traveled to New York City imbued with a strong sense of wanting to help the poor. Once she arrived, she went to the offices of the Charity Organization Society, (later the United Way), demanding to meet with the group's director. Social work was in its infancy, and due to her lack of experience, Frances was sent home. She took several teaching jobs in the course of two years, moving west to Chicago to teach science at Ferry Hall, a woman's college in the hopes of escaping Worcester, her family, and their complacent expectations. Downey says, that Frances reinvented herself in Chicago, changing "her name, her faith, and her political persuasion". It's unclear why she changed her name; to escape the ridicule associated with Fannie and a woman's posterior, or to give her some advantages found with a gender-neutral name.

Through a friendship with a young woman teacher whose aunt was on the board of directors at Hull House, Frances got involved with social work projects there on weekends and during vacations. Frances was finding her professional niche and was developing associations with many who would come to influence life in many ways. Among those was Upton Sinclair, both a friend and admirer. During her time in Chicago, Frances first heard activists speak of trade unions as organizations that would benefit the working poor. The divide between Frances and her family grew. In 1907, Frances moved to Philadelphia to work as general secretary of a new group called the Philadelphia Research and Protective Association founded by a Hull House alumna. This group combatted the forced prostitution of young European immigrants and black women from the rural south. She was expected to raise funds to pay her salary and research costs. Among the many practical things Frances learned while working here, was that "women were almost always paid less than men, given less desirable jobs, and were barred by their gender from union participation". Frances decided she needed further education in "order to debate these economic and labor issues more effectively". She attended the Wharton School of Finance and Commerce at the University of Pennsylvania in Philadelphia, studying among other newly accepted women. A professor at the school who was impressed with her aptitude, helped arrange a fellowship for her at Columbia University. During her time in Philadelphia, she became a member of the Socialist Party. She concealed this information years later, insisting that she had been apolitical at the time. In New York City, Frances moved into a settlement house affiliated with Hull House located in Greenwich Village; considered to be a "center of intellectual ferment". Her career plans were still unfocused. She thought about becoming an actress or a writer. She heard political radicals like Jack Reed and met a young Robert Moses, an investigator at the Bureau of Municipal Research, who shared his vision for remaking New York City with Frances. It would be three decades before this happened. She helped edit manuscripts for Sinclair Lewis, who yelled a marriage proposal to Frances one night. Frances did not reciprocate his feelings and carefully deflected them by pretending he was joking. In addition to the Progressive Movement, Frances devoted her energy to the suffrage movement, actively marching and speaking out on street corners. As her graduate studies neared completion, Frances was approached by the National Consumers League to head their offices in the city. Frances had met its executive secretary, Florence Kelley, while still a student at Mount Holyoke. This was a group dedicated to abolishing child labor and eliminating tenement

sweatshops and work, relying on “consumer education to help promote better working conditions for workers”.

On a Saturday in late March, 1911, Frances and some friends were having tea in the apartment of a wealthy friend that overlooked Washington Square Park, when they heard fire whistles and shouting. The ten-story building that housed the Triangle Shirtwaist company, was on fire, killing 146 mostly young Jewish and Italian women. Two years prior to the fire, workers there had been on strike, pleading for better working conditions. That event galvanized Frances and “started her on her career”, a journalist friend said. At the time, Frances’s naivete was being morphed into more pragmatic, realistic views of change, causing her to think about cultivating alliances with Tammany Hall, a political machine that used favors to win popular support.

Frances’s job with the National Consumers League took her to Albany at least once a week. At the time, new Tammany Hall leadership was being installed in New York City with Charles Murphy, who chose two young men to represent him in Albany, Robert F. Wagner and Al Smith. Known as the “Tammany Twins”, Frances made it her mission to get to know them. The book discusses at length the process of how Frances was able to affect change within the political machine, as she strengthened her ties to people who could make change happen, while establishing a reputation as someone with a strong moral core. “She found that making deals with imperfect people and focusing on their strengths provided a pathway to actually achieving social change.” In the wake of the Triangle Shirtwaist fire, Frances found herself appointed by Teddy Roosevelt as executive director to the Factory Investigating Commission in New York. The former president had more than likely heard about Frances from Jane Addams, a longtime Republican, whose father was a friend of Lincoln’s and from Florence Kelley, whose father had been a Republican congressman from Pennsylvania. Things like fire drills, banning smoking in factories, the instillation of automatic sprinklers for buildings taller than seven stories, and registration of factories for building inspection became law by 1915, when the zeal for reformism began to wane. Frances was instrumental in getting this legislation passed. To facilitate the passage of these reforms as well as others she hoped someday would come into being, Frances changed her look. She began wearing somber, black matronly dresses, carefully constructing an image of someone serious about what she is doing.

Sometime around 1910, Frances met Paul Caldwell Wilson. In later years, she said she couldn’t recall how they’d met. The author suggests that perhaps she didn’t want to. He came from a well to do Chicago family and was involved in the Reform movement. They had mutual friends and seemed to have similar philosophies and outlooks on life. At the time they married in 1913, Paul was working with a mayoral candidate who was elected soon after their nuptials. Frances debated on continuing her career or staying home with the family they planned on raising. Paul was an assistant to Mayor John Purroy Mitchel. Mitchel seemed to be a rising Democratic star, until he made some major political blunders, one of which angered women suffragists, and another which distanced President Wilson, resulting in the loss of party backing.

At some point, the marriage began to sour, and Frances planned on leaving Paul, until she found out she was pregnant. Unfortunately, that pregnancy ended in miscarriage and a subsequent one, in a stillbirth. And while she may have had misgivings about the marriage, Downey says, she was committed to motherhood.

Frances became pregnant a third time, giving birth to her daughter, Susanna in December, 1916. In spite of her feminist leanings, Frances planned to leave the work force and be a full-time mother, becoming involved instead with charity work. However, Frances, grew restless. She began working with the Maternity Center Association, whose goal was to improve gynecological and obstetrical care, especially for poor women.

As Mayor Mitchel's political life began to unravel, Paul became dispirited. Mitchel joined the military, and in early 1918, died under mysterious circumstances in training. Paul couldn't seem to find work, increasing his despondency and his emotional and financial dependency on Frances. They had to leave their comfortable surroundings as finances dwindled. In the fall of that same year, Frances helped Al Smith get elected to the governorship of New York. In repayment, he appointed her to the Industrial Commission. Despite opposition to her appointment because she was a woman, and because she would be paid \$8000 a year, Frances was confirmed by more than half of the New York state senate. Frances instituted reforms such as, rotating factory inspectors and workmen's compensation. It was during this time that Frances developed a close relationship with Smith and his wife. Although Smith was not re-elected in 1920, he subsequently became governor again in 1922, 1924, and in 1926, with Frances named to the state agency. When Smith sought the presidency in 1928, he tapped FDR to succeed him and to continue the work he'd begun.

Frances and FDR had first met in New York City 1910 at a tea dance held at the home of an influential banker. They met again when he was a state senator and later in 1920 when he was the vice presidential running mate of James Cox. He was energetic and enthusiastic. In 1924, after his bout with polio, he was determined to re-enter politics. FDR made Frances the chairperson of the state industrial commission. She remained in that post for four years, developing a relationship with Roosevelt's mother, and with Eleanor, although Frances "conducted her life behind a veil". She and Roosevelt learned to figure each other out and achieve political goals as a result of their communication.

The day after FDR was elected to the presidency in 1932, he asked Frances to be his Secretary of Labor. She was reluctant to go to Washington, fearing that she wouldn't fit in. Her daughter was a difficult teenager then and her husband a patient in a sanitarium. However, it seemed that she had prepared for this position all her life; she had changed her name, her appearance, and in recent years, her birth year, to appear younger. Telling FDR she would take the job only if he backed her and only if he agreed to help realize the goals that she had written on a piece of paper: the forty hour work week, a minimum wage, worker's compensation, unemployment compensation, a federal law banning child labor, Social Security, and national health insurance, Frances accepted his request, even though congressional scrutiny lay ahead. Knowing that her life would change forever, she committed to this groundbreaking position as she thought about her grandmother's advice, "whenever a door opened to you, you had no choice but to walk through it".

Frances spent the next twelve years working for and with the Roosevelt administration. The first two terms focused on the Great Depression and easing the economic severity of life for Americans, as well as creating safety nets to avoid this type of financial catastrophe again. Her life was scrutinized, she was hounded by the press,

and subjected to impeachment proceedings, all while gender bias was the accepted norm. She stepped down from her cabinet post in July, 1945, on her own terms. Soon afterward, she was encouraged to write a book about her years with Roosevelt. *The Roosevelt I Knew*, was published in November, 1946 and is considered to be the first definitive biography of the president filled with accurate observations and anecdotes. Truman appointed Frances to the Civil Service Commission some months later.

1952 found Frances's life changing again. Paul had died and the Democrats were leaving Washington after 20 years. She was invited to teach a course on U.S. History and the New Deal legacy at Cornell University as a visiting lecturer. It was rare at that time for women to be hired as university professors, and Frances was sympathetic to the plight of professor's wives, who she took under her wing. People found her interesting, her "idiosyncrasies endearing", and her lectures "eyeopening".

Frances continued to work well into her eighties, always with her hat on, despite failing health. Her "lifetime earnings as a public servant had gone mostly to support her husband and daughter". At this point, she and Susanna were estranged and neither knew much about the other's later life. Although Frances was deeply religious, she could not accept the fact that she did not create Susanna's difficulties. Susanna, as Paul before her, suffered from bi-polar disorder. When Frances died in May, 1965, her daughter neither mourned nor shared the news with her son and step children, but the community at Cornell did so and remembered Frances.

Downey says it is ironic that so few know the name of the woman who insured factory and office occupancy codes, as well as fire escapes, Social Security, a guaranteed minimum wage, workman's comp., or the eight hour day.

Downey is a fan of Frances Perkins, as she has painted a picture of a curious, intellectually outstanding, tireless woman, who had not only compassion but the drive to change and make life better for so many who lived in her lifetime; one whose influence has touched generations yet to come. Perkins overcame adversity and difficulty from the first, within a family whose expectations she chose to forgo, and then living bravely in a man's world, and setting workplace and achievement standards for women and men who might not know her name today. The book is long, filled with names and places that are not readily recognizable, but it is the story of a woman worthy of admiration and praise.

While fifth grade curriculum does not delve too deeply into the Great Depression, we do spend time talking about women who have carved a place for themselves in history. Frances Perkins is one I will add to this list. I did some searching and came upon a website for the Frances Perkins Center.

Created in honor and in memory of Frances Perkins, with the help of her grandson, it is located in Coastal Maine, a place for "students, scholars, and policy makers to research and write about subjects related to and inspired by Perkins's dedication to improving the lives of working men and women." The interactive website along with excerpts from the book can be adapted and used to illuminate the life of a woman, ahead of her time, a champion of working people everywhere.

