

Lincoln's Genius Must Be Our Genius

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*"I am not bound to win, but I am bound to be true. I am not bound to succeed,
but I am bound to live up to what light I have."*

—Abraham Lincoln

Meditation

May we come to that quiet place within...
Allowing our breathing to slow...
Our thoughts to slow...
Everything to slow... into this moment...

And from this quiet, this inner calm...
May we find once again alignment
with the principles that guide our lives:

The great principles:
Of honesty
Of fairness
Of kindness
Of compassion.

Reminded once again that *this* is how we would live
Guided by these values, these qualities...

To help heal a broken world
And help one another.

Reading – from “When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloomed” by Walt Whitman

Here is how Walt Whitman's great elegy for the fallen president Lincoln begins – a reminder, if we needed one, of how deeply the loss was felt – of course not just by Whitman but my millions. In some measure, after all, we feel it still:

1
When lilacs last in the door-yard bloom'd,
And the great star early droop'd in the western sky in the night,
I mourn'd... and yet shall mourn with ever-returning spring.

O ever-returning spring! Trinity sure to me you bring;
Lilac blooming perennial, and drooping star in the west,
And thought of him I love.

2

O powerful, western, fallen star!
O shades of night! O moody, tearful night!
O great star disappear'd! O the black murk that hides the star!
O cruel hands that hold me powerless! O helpless soul of me!
O harsh surrounding cloud that will not free my soul!

Reading – from Lincoln's Second Inaugural Address

Fondly do we hope, fervently do we pray, that this mighty scourge of war may speedily pass away. Yet, if God wills that it continue until all the wealth piled by the bondsman's two hundred and fifty years of unrequited toil shall be sunk, and until every drop of blood drawn with the lash shall be paid by another drawn with the sword, as was said three thousand years ago, so still it must be said 'the judgments of the Lord are true and righteous altogether'.

With malice toward none; with charity for all; with firmness in the right, as God gives us to see the right, let us strive on to finish the work we are in; to bind up the nation's wounds; to care for him who shall have borne the battle, and for his widow, and his orphan – to do all which may achieve and cherish a just and lasting peace, among ourselves, and with all nations.

Sermon

In four days we will celebrate the bicentennial of the birth of Abraham Lincoln. And though Lincoln was born 200 years ago in Kentucky, his earliest American ancestor, Samuel Lincoln, was among the first settlers of Hingham and therefore a member of this parish almost 400 years ago.

We are well-connected to our 16th president!

My first impressions of Abraham Lincoln were shaped when I was very young; this was probably true for you too. We had – as perhaps you did too – a picture book children's biography. So I still have in my mind's eye the illustrations from that book: Lincoln reading by candlelight in his family's log cabin; Lincoln splitting rails; Lincoln debating Douglas; Lincoln (now bearded) delivering the Gettysburg Address, Lincoln at Ford's Theater, Lincoln on his death bed.

But there is so much more to Lincoln than these iconic images – images and the myth that goes with them which may leave him appearing as a distant superhuman hero. He was indeed a hero, but he was quite human. And, for me, the more I've come to know the human Lincoln and the complexities of his character, the more I've come to respect him. In fact, even knowing that he likely believed in the inferiority of African Americans, knowing that for most of his life he believed the solution to slavery was to free the slaves (eventually, not necessarily all at once) and ship them to a colony in South American or Africa!, knowing that as much as he hated slavery (and it is clear that he found it an odious and immoral institution) he only decided to sign the Emancipation when it became clear that this could win the war and save the Union... knowing all of this too, I still respect and honor Lincoln.

In this I am in good company. W.E.B. Du Bois, for example (as quoted in the current "Smithsonian Collectors Edition" on Lincoln), the great early 20th century African American scholar and activist, among the founders of the NAACP, wrote that we must take Lincoln off his

pedestal, yes, but not reject him: “The scars and foibles and contradictions of the Great do not diminish but enhance the worth and meaning of their upward struggle.” Du Bois went on, writing of the great figures of the 19th century, affirming that “Lincoln is to me the most human and lovable. And I love him not because he was perfect but because he was not and yet triumphed.”

Who then was Lincoln? What was his unique genius?

Well, recently I’ve been reading Doris Kearns’s Goodwin’s biography of Lincoln, *Team of Rivals*, and I’ve returned to some of my other Lincoln books, including William Miller’s *Lincoln’s Virtues*. And as I’ve reflected on Lincoln I’ve come to see his genius as rooted in two aspects of his character in particular. First, his sensitivity to the feelings and needs and sufferings of others – his compassion and kindness. And second, his unswerving moral compass and vision – his purpose and principle.

And all of this leavened by a sense of humor and humility – which together soften an impression we may have of rigorous rectitude and serious solemnity.

Compassion and kindness; purpose and principle – leavened by humor and humility

All of which – not incidentally, we can and must strive to emulate, and emulate in ways that are of benefit to others in our time as Lincoln was of inestimable benefit to others in his time.

Let me begin with just a word about the leavening quality of humor.

Lincoln grew up listening to his father tell stories and tall tales to the travelers who passed through their lives. Even as a boy, Abe would stand on a log rehearsing and memorizing the stories he had heard. Later he would tell them to a rapt circle of friends.

This became a lifelong habit – whether entertaining fellow lawyers riding the Illinois circuit or lightening shared burdens during a cabinet meeting.

Lincoln used his stories, tales, and jokes (some I can tell from the pulpit, some not...) sometimes to defuse tension, other times to make a point in a gentle yet clear way, and other times just for fun and entertainment. In all of this, it is easy to imagine how Lincoln’s sense of humor helped him and those around him through trials and times we can barely begin to imagine.

An example: He told the following tale to illustrate his thinking behind decisions he had made regarding a sensitive incident early in the Civil War that some had feared could have led England to favor the confederacy. Lincoln recounted the tale of a dying man who invited to his bedside a man named Brown from the neighboring village with whom he had had a long feud – in fact, he hated the fellow. Well, when Brown came into the sick man’s room, the sick man said that “he wanted to die at peace with all his fellow creatures” so he hoped that they could “shake hands and bury all their enmity.” This they did, with tears all around. But then as Brown was leaving the room, the sick man lifted his head and called out: “But see here, Brown; if I should happen to get well, mind, that old grudge stands.”

On another occasion, when counseled that a certain military action would not bring about a fierce reaction, Lincoln said he was reminded of the story of the bulldog in the neighbor’s yard. I know he won’t bite, Lincoln said. You know he won’t bite. But does the bulldog know he won’t bite?

Now, on to compassion and kindness.

Lincoln’s sensitivity to the needs and feelings and suffering of others is legendary... but probably not exaggerated. So many stories could be told – from his saving those two baby birds, as I described it to the children earlier, to his many visits to the troops in the field and his letters to grieving widows, mothers, and even children.

When with the troops, he would speak personally with as many soldiers as he could – and many would tell of how warmly he greeted them. He would see the carnage on the battlefields, he saw the dead, visited the wounded. He knew the suffering the war was causing, and felt it to the marrow.

His letters to grieving family members remain models of precisely how sympathy ought to be extended. Last week I quoted one of those letters, a letter to a child whose father had fallen in battle, which began, “It is with deep grief that I learn of the death of your kind and brave Father; and, especially, that it is affecting your young heart beyond what is common...” The letter continued with utmost and transparent compassion and kindness.

Lincoln’s sensitivity to the feelings of others was also revealed in the way that over and over again he would make a point of apologizing to someone he felt he may have hurt with a word too quick or terse. Many, including former political opponents, came to confess undying loyalty to Lincoln, in good measure due to such humble and genuine reaching out for forgiveness or offering of forgiveness. One example:

During a time of rest and retreat away from the White House an army colonel came to see Lincoln asking his help in recovering the remains of his wife, who had died in a steamboat accident. Lincoln peremptorily dismissed the colonel, exasperated that even in country retreat he could find no peace or respite from his toils.

The next morning, repentant, Lincoln traveled back to Washington, and appeared at the hotel door of this colonel, declaring “I was a brute last night,” and offered whatever help he could. (*Team of Rivals*, by Doris Kearns Goodwin, p. 512)

Yes, Lincoln’s compassion and kindness, his sensitivity to others, was manifest day after day during the most trying of times. He *knew* what 2,000 dead or 20,000 dead meant to those dead soldiers, to their grieving families. He *knew* as well as a white man could know, that a slave hurts as much when lashed as a free white man would. He *knew* that one ought not humiliate an enemy, whether a political foe or the rebel confederacy.

But Lincoln’s soft and feeling heart was linked to an iron will guided by principle and purpose – a moral compass guided him, a moral vision drew him forward, the second dimension of his character in which, it seems to me, much of his genius was rooted. Lincoln would dig until he came to the nub of a moral dilemma posed by almost any challenge or problem, whether personal or political, diplomatic or military.

This means that Lincoln’s political maneuverings (and he was a masterful politician) were typically not about gaining power for the sake of power or position for the sake of position, but were always in the service of a higher goal – the union or the ending of slavery – or more generally, in his words: “the right as God gives us to see the right”

Lincoln *was* supremely ambitious. But less for himself and his personal elevation, and more for the sake of a *moral vision* as best he could see that vision, for the sake of his desire to make the world better for his having lived in the world.

Was his vision of freedom and equality and democracy limited and imperfect? Of course it was, limited by the times in which he lived, limited by his white skin and the privileges granted by that white skin. Yet was his vision broader than most? Yes. And rooted as well in a clear-eyed sense not only of what was *ideal*, but of what was *possible* to achieve with principle and purpose.

We heard earlier the conclusion of Lincoln’s Second Inaugural Address. Nowhere is Lincoln’s compassion and kindness more clearly linked to unwavering purpose and principle. Hear these few lines again with this in mind:

With malice toward none; with charity for all; with firmness in the right, as God gives us to see the right, let us strive on to finish the work we are in; to bind up the nation's wounds; to care for him who shall have borne the battle, and for his widow, and his orphan – to do all which may achieve and cherish a just and lasting peace, among ourselves, and with all nations.

Lincoln best qualities are represented in these words. The compassionate (and also politically practical) Lincoln did not want to punish the south; there had been enough, more than enough suffering. Instead, he wanted to “bind up the nation’s wounds.” Yet not just to end the immediate suffering, but also because he believed that in the union of the states did our democratic experiment have the best chance of success, the experiment he had defined earlier, in the Gettysburg Address as dedicated to the proposition – the moral principle – that “all men are created equal.”

For it is one thing, and a fine thing, to desire to assuage suffering as we see it right in front of us. Yet quite another, and finer still, to desire to create through moral principle and iron-willed purpose the conditions that might reduce suffering for time to come, and that might bring peace, not only to one nation but to all nations.

So – compassion and kindness linked to purpose and principle... leavened with humor and humility.

Indeed, Lincoln was by no means a perfect man. But he was surely one of the finest political figures our democratic experiment has yet produced.

And we must not shrink from emulating him, thinking the model too lofty. Instead we must learn from him, learn in our own lives that we might soften harsh times and tension with gentle humor, that we might feel compassion for the suffering of others and respond to that suffering with gentle and kind words and deeds, and that we too might be guided by fine and high principle and purpose, a moral vision of how we ought to be with one other, person to person, in our communities and nation, in the world.

For today the vision must be yet more expansive; and were Lincoln alive one must believe that he would see this more clearly than most. Today our country is the world. Today our fate as Americans is bound with the fate of all the world’s people, of the planet itself.

And we must, in the spirit of Lincoln, learn to behave more often as though we knew all of this to our very bones.

I was in Washington this week. I visited the Lincoln Memorial once again. As you know, within the brooding gaze of Lincoln are monuments to wars fought since the Civil War, more lives lost, more suffering felt and inflicted.

Yet... also echoing from the Memorial outward across the National Mall and across the nation, around the world... are the words of another emancipator, articulating dreams we all share, yes dreams fulfilled only in part, yet dreams – visions – we must carry forward with our own kind yet principled hearts and minds.

So... inspired by Lincoln’s genius, let us embrace our genius as we “strive on to finish the work we are in.”

So may it be.