Lincoln - How Right Makes Might

Presidents' Day Presentation by Brent Winans

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Before Lincoln had received the Republican nomination for President in 1860, he spoke to a crowd of 1,500 at the great hall at Cooper Union in New York City. He championed the central idea of the newly formed Republican Party - that slavery should not be allowed to spread to the territories, which then made up most of the western United States.

He urged his anti-slavery audience to avoid angry denunciations of the South and to yield to Southern demands where they could do so in good conscience. But then he finished with these stirring words that also described how he lived his own life, ***"Let us have faith that right makes might, and in that faith, let us to the end, dare to do our duty as we understand it."***

Through corruption, deceit, greed – we know too well how evil gains power. But how does goodness become strong? How does right make might? In the life of Lincoln we see it created through the fusion of opposites – two characteristics which we rarely see in the same person in extremes – ambition and empathy.

Lincoln was our great storytelling president, and so I would like to share a few stories from his life – stories that illustrate how his extraordinary ambition and exceptional empathy fused to give right might.

First, Lincoln's ambition

What have we known about Abraham Lincoln since we were kids? – "Honest Abe," born in a log cabin, stovepipe hat - all of that. But never do I remember hearing the description, "ambitious." But it was one of his central traits. His law partner, William Herndon, said "His ambition was a little engine that knew no rest." Do you remember the kids' story about the little engine that could? "I think I can. I think I can." Well they could have put a stovepipe hat on that train, because that was Lincoln, always seeking to climb the next mountain.

Picture this, when Lincoln was 23 years old he left home and took a job on a flat bottom boat floating down the river with a shipment to New Orleans. At the end of the return trip he settled in New Salem, Illinois, a town of a couple of dozen families built around a river dam and a grist mill. He worked at the mill and the general store and lived in rented rooms. He was tall, strong and bright, but had a total of a year's formal education, no money and no connections. Yet after being in this backwoods berg for six months, he announced in the local newspaper that he was running for the state legislature. That's ambition. Or as one my old friends would say, "He had more nerve than an abscessed tooth."

His announcement in the paper reveals both the strength and personality of his ambition. In that announcement "To the People of Sangamon County" he declared his candidacy and went on, “Every man is said to have his peculiar ambition. Whether it be true or not, I can say for one that I have no other so great as that of being truly esteemed of my fellow men by rendering myself worthy of their esteem. How far I shall succeed in gratifying this ambition is yet to be developed. I am young and unknown to many of you. I was born and have ever remained in the most humble walks of life. I have no wealthy or popular relations to recommend me. My case is thrown exclusively upon the independent voters of this county, and if elected they will have conferred a favor upon me, for which I shall be unremitting in my labors to compensate. But if the good people in their wisdom shall see fit to keep me in the background, I have been too familiar with disappointment to be very much chagrined. Your friend and fellow-citizen. A. Lincoln, March 9, 1832.”

He lost that election but ran again in two years and won. He kept running, through very many defeats as well as victories, his whole life.

Lincoln’s passion to rise was obvious from an early age. In spite of his lack of formal schooling, the illiteracy of his father and step mother, and the absence of books in his own home, he borrowed and read and re-read and memorized long passages from the Bible, Aesop’s fables, works of Shakespeare and anything else he could obtain. As a young man, he always had a book in his hand and taught himself English grammar, geometry and trigonometry.

After being elected to the Illinois legislature, he decided to become a lawyer. In that day young men were apprenticed to practicing lawyers while learning the law, but Lincoln did not study with anyone. Instead, while he worked to make ends meet, he borrowed law books and read and re-read them until he understood them thoroughly. He later told a student seeking advice, “Always bear in mind that your resolution to succeed is more important than any one thing.”

The early months of 1841 were a very hard time for the naturally melancholic Lincoln, and illustrate how his ambition was central to his very life. He had broken off his engagement with Mary Todd, Joshua Speed, his best friend of seven years, announced that he was moving back to Kentucky to take care of his widowed mother, and his political career suffered a setback when the internal improvement projects he had championed in the Illinois legislature collapsed during an economic recession.

Lincoln became severely depressed. According to Speed, “Lincoln went crazy – (I) had to remove razors from his room – take away all knives and other such dangerous things… it was terrible.” Speed stayed with him and warned him that if that if he did not come to himself, he would die. Lincoln replied that he was more than willing to die, but that he had “done nothing to make any human being remember that he had lived, and … to link his name with something that would redound in the interest of his fellow man was what he desired to live for.”

He did recover and later married the mercurial Mary Todd. Much has been written about her terrible rages and their often unhappy relationship, but one thing that is clear is that in marrying Mary, Lincoln's heart chose someone who believed in his ambitions.

Years later, in 1855, it looked like Lincoln would finally achieve his goal of high political office by being elected to the U.S. Senate, but unexpected turns of fate led instead to his defeat. In her book, *Team of Rivals – The Political Genius of Abraham Lincoln*, Doris Kearns Goodwin writes, "At this juncture, some have suggested, Lincoln was sustained by his wife's unflagging belief that a glorious destiny awaited him. 'She had the fire, will and ambition' his law partner John Stuart observed. When Mary was young and still being courted by many beaux, she had told a friend who had taken an old, wealthy husband, 'I would rather marry a good man – a man of mind – with a hope and bright prospects ahead for position – fame and power than to marry all the houses – gold and bones in the world.' Quite simply, in Mary's mind, her husband had 'no equal in the United States.'" And, fortunately, she proved to be right.

<u>But in contract to his ambition, there is his empathy.</u>

It is nothing unusual to see an ambitious politician. But part of what made Lincoln extraordinary was that his ambition was joined to another quality, his exceptional empathy.

What is empathy? The ability to mutually experience the emotions and thoughts of others - to see and feel the world as they do. Even as a child, Kearns Goodwin wrote, he was uncommonly tenderhearted. He once stopped and tracked back half a mile to rescue a pig caught in a mire - not because he loved the pig, recollected a friend, "just to take a pain out of his own mind."

But his empathy was unusual because he not only felt as others felt, but was able to think as they thought. It is obvious from his words and results that he was able to put himself inside the hearts and heads of others to an uncommon degree. And that ability, when combined with his ambition, was a large factor in building his power for good. How, this morning I will talk about just two ways. It gave him the ability to overlook the insults of strong people and enlist them in his team, and it gave him exquisite political insight and timing.

<u>First, his empathy was shown in magnanimity.</u>

Magnanimity, isn't that a fun word? Of course it means the ability to rise above personal insults and injuries. Fun to say – hard to do.

Lincoln's relationship with Stanton is a colorful example of this. Edwin Stanton was one of the age's brilliant, hard driving and decidedly non-empathetic attorneys. In the summer of 1855, six months after Lincoln had lost his first bid for the Senate, their paths crossed in a most unpleasant way.

Cyrus McCormick, the original inventor of the mechanical reaping machine, had sued the John Manny Company of Rockford, Illinois for patent infringement in what became known as the Reaper Trial. Manny hired a famous patent attorney from Philadelphia, George Harding, to defend it in the suit. Harding wanted to engage the renowned Stanton from Ohio to be his co-counsel, but since the case was being tried in Illinois, he decided he should try to find an attorney who knew the judge and had his confidence. But he confided that he doubted that anyone from the frontier state of Illinois would be of any real assistance.

Lincoln had been recommended, and Manning sent a young associate to interview him. But when Lincoln appeared in the doorway of his modest house "with neither coat or vest," the young man was not impressed. However, once he talked with Lincoln, he decided that Lincoln might be "rather effective." He paid Lincoln a retainer and arranged for a substantial fee once the trial was concluded. Lincoln was thrilled both by the fee and the opportunity to participate in such a case, and he began preparing at once.

However, shortly after that visit, the venue for the trial was moved from Chicago to Cincinnati, so Harding's reason for engaging Lincoln was eliminated, and he was able to partner with his original choice, Edwin Stanton. Unfortunately, nobody bothered to tell Lincoln. He continued to prepare for the trial and arrived in Cincinnati. Kearns Goodwin writes this account of what happened when Lincoln arrived at the Burnet House where all of the lawyers were staying. "…he encountered Harding and Stanton as they left for the court. Years later, Harding could still recall the shock of his first sight of the 'tall, rawly boned, ungainly back- woodsman, with coarse, ill-fitting clothing, his trousers hardly reaching his ankles…' Lincoln introduced himself and proposed, 'Let's go up in a gang.' At this point, Stanton drew Harding aside and whispered, 'Why did you bring that damned long armed ape here…he does not know anything and can do you no good.' With that, Stanton and Harding turned from Lincoln and continued to court on their own."

During the days that followed, Stanton made clear to Lincoln that he was expected to withdraw himself from the case, which Lincoln did, but he stayed in Cincinnati to hear the arguments. While Harding later sent Lincoln a check, Harding was so sure that Lincoln's work would be worthless that he never opened his manuscript. They ate at the same hotel, but Harding and Stanton never invited him to join them for a meal or accompany them to court. When the judge hosted a dinner for the lawyers on both sides, Lincoln was not invited.

But Lincoln was thoroughly impressed with Stanton's ability as a lawyer, and when Stanton spoke, one attorney noted that Lincoln stood in "rap attention…drinking in his words." Yes, Lincoln was stung. As he prepared to leave, he went to say goodbye to a couple who had been kind to him during his visit. They urged him to come again, but Lincoln replied, "…I never expect to be in Cincinnati again. I have nothing against the city, but things have so happened here as to make it undesirable for me ever to return here."

As unimaginable as it may seem, at their next meeting six years later, Lincoln would ask Stanton to become Secretary of War. Stanton's bearish behavior continued to offend many, but his extraordinary administrative and intellectual abilities played a large role in the North's victory, and Lincoln was willing to endure his weaknesses in order to harness his strengths. Stanton, for his part, came to respect and love Lincoln as he did no one outside of his own family, though he never stopped being Stanton.

One of my favorite Lincoln stories illustrates the point. Once a group of men from the Midwest came to Lincoln to discuss a plan for the war. Lincoln approved of the plan, and then sent them on to Stanton to have it implemented. When they presented the plan to Stanton, he said, "Did Lincoln give you that order." "Yes," they replied. Stanton said, "Well then he's a damn fool." Aghast, the men said, "Did you say that the President is a damn fool?" Stanton replied, "If he gave you that order he is." They went back to Lincoln in disbelief and related what had happened. "So Stanton called me a damn fool," Lincoln said. "Yes sir, and repeated it." Lincoln thought for a moment and then said, "Well, Secretary Stanton is a very intelligent man and is usually right. I guess I had better go talk to him."

Because of his empathy, Lincoln saw the world through the eyes of others. We usually judge others by their actions but ourselves by our intentions. Since he viewed others through their own eyes, he was able to overlook their slights. And because of that, he was able to enlist the most capable people to help save the union even if they had personally offended him, and that is one way his right built might.

Please forgive me for this, but:
Abe was known for his hat like a chim-i-ney
And also his great magnanimity.
"Though a capable dude
Is insulting and rude,
I'll make him my friend not my enemy."

<u>Another way that Lincoln's empathy helped right make might was by giving him extraordinary political insight and timing.</u>

As I have already said, many people have the ability to feel as others feel, but Lincoln's empathy went beyond that to being able to think as they thought.

In his time as in ours, fervent people and their politicians often vilified their opponents. Lincoln was always passionate about the evils of slavery. Early on he declared, "If slavery is not wrong, then nothing is wrong." But he was unusual in that he did not castigate slave owners as corrupt and un-Christian. He saw the world from their point of view and urged his anti-slavery audiences not to be self-righteous. "They are just what we would be in their situation," he said. "If slavery did not now exist amongst them, they would not introduce it. If it did now exist amongst us, we should not instantly give it up." It was useless, he explained in another address, to employ "thundering tones of anathema and denunciation," for denunciation would be met by denunciation, "anathema with anathema."

His empathy gave him great political savvy and an acute sense of political timing. Nowhere is this more evident than in the timing of the Emancipation Proclamation. From our vantage point, we might wonder why, when the South rebelled, Lincoln did not immediately proclaim all of the slaves free. But it was not nearly that simply. Many in the North were not fighting to end slavery, they were fighting to save the Union, and were not willing to shed blood for blacks. That is just the way it was. If Lincoln would have moved too quickly to free the slaves, the border states would have joined the South, many of his commanders and soldiers would have laid down their arms, and the effort to save the Union would have collapsed.

Relatively early in the war, Lincoln appointed General John C. Fremont to command the troops in Missouri. But shortly after receiving his command, the anti-slavery Fremont issued a bold proclamation without consulting Lincoln, declaring martial law in the state and giving his troops the power to seize and free all slaves belonging to those in active rebellion. Though he hated slavery, Lincoln knew the consequences of this ill-timed move would be disastrous, and he rescinded it.

It was only much later, when the war had drug on for years longer than anyone had anticipated, anti-slavery sentiments had grown and the North had been sickened by the loss of hundreds of thousands of its own, that Lincoln was able to justify the Emancipation Proclamation as military necessity. His opponents condemned the proclamation and warned that it would destroy the unity of the North, but Lincoln's empathy had allowed him to correctly judge the mood of the people, and instead the Emancipation Proclamation re-energized the war effort.

So recapping, on the one hand, we see Lincoln's burning ambition and we know that ambition usually blinds - "blind ambition" as the saying goes. But on the other we see his empathy and the extraordinary vision it gave him, and with that vision the magnanimity to enlist the best people in his administration in spite of their personal slights and to lead the nation with exquisitely sensitive political timing.

<u>What lessons can we take away from Lincoln's example?</u>

One of the advantages of telling stories is that people draw their own lessons, and I hope you will draw yours, but here are three that have come home to me.

- First – I should not fret too much about my ambition, but I should temper it with empathy. If we are going to be good for something then we need energy, and the desire to be somebody and do something worthwhile often fuels our drive. And perhaps it will be my own pain that gives me energy, just as it was probably the deprivation of Lincoln's childhood that gave him his. And yes, I may not be perfectly balanced, but things that are balanced usually don't go anywhere.

- Second – I should follow Lincoln's example and spend time consciously imagining what it would be like to be in the shoes of others. In my experiments with this, I have found that it is emotionally difficult. My spirit rebels. After all, those people are wrong. Why would I want to see things as they see them? Lincoln shows me why.

- And lastly – I can have hope. Right can make might - might to save a nation, might to free the slaves and might to leave a legacy for generations to come.

"Let us have faith that right makes might, and in that faith, let us to the end dare to do our duty as we understand it."

Major texts on which I relied in the preparation of this manuscript were *Team of Rivals, the Political Genius of Abraham Lincoln* by Doris Kearns Goodwin (2005), and *Lincoln, an Illustrated Biography* by Kunhardt, Kunhardt and Kunhardt (1992).

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