

Abraham Lincoln and the Needs of the Times

Earl Clement Davis

Pittsfield, MA

1906

It seemed to me very much like a tribute of mere words and false to attempt to present to you some suggestions of the greatness and the significance of Lincoln, without correlating the spirit and power of his life with the needs of our own times, and the duty which we owe in forwarding the work to which Lincoln gave his life. We regard him as one of the greatest, if not the very greatest, of the builders of the nation. Yet his work is hardly complete unless we take up the trowel where he laid it down, and continue in the nurture and care for that principle of Democracy, which shall not perish from the Earth forever. With great insight Lowell spoke of him as the "New birth of our new soil, the first American."¹ But our greatest tribute to him, and to the nation which he served, and to the truth and principles upon which that nation is founded is to see to it that future generations shall not be compelled to record that the first American was also the last.

One hundred less three years have passed since the first American was born in the little log cabin of Kentucky frontiersmen. "The wind bloweth where it listeth," but knoweth "not tell whence it cometh, and whither it goeth."² Who can explain the wonderful mystery of life, which is revealed in the story of the life of Abraham Lincoln. Trace it for yourselves as it leads you through the hardship and privations of his boyhood in Indiana. What gave him the impulse to study by the light of a candle or the open fire, searching zealously after truth and wisdom? What power is it in man that enables him to rise upon the very limitations and surroundings, all making them stepping

¹ A line from a poem by James Russell Lowell delivered at Harvard the summer after Lincoln's assassination (1865).

² This is a partial quote from John 3:8 "The wind bloweth where it listeth, and thou hearest the sound thereof, but canst not tell whence it cometh, and whither it goeth: so is every one that is born of the Spirit."

stones to the lofty pinnacle of the greatest man of the greatest nation of the Earth?

What was there in his nature that made him look with horror and righteous indignation upon the system of slavery when for the first time he saw it as he gained his first knowledge of the world in the trip to New Orleans in 1830? What was it that gave him the courage at the age of 22 to announce himself as candidate for the state legislature, and publish the platform upon which he stood? He had no friends of wealth or influence, but little education, and no experience. But here his political career began.

What was the power in him that enabled him [to] feel the pulse of the nation and amid the turmoil, strife and agitations of those bitter years of conflict to read aright the hand writing on the wall? Never once did he flinch. Never once did he waver, even when temporary defeat seemed to belie the very principles upon which he stood.

What power was that in him that enabled him when he came to the White House in 1861 to meet the situation, and perform the work where unto he was called? He had no training as a statesman, and yet he handled with a skill which has never been surpassed the delicate and complicated problems which arose in the affairs at home and in the relations with foreign nations.

What power carried him through all the trials of abuse, criticism and intrigue which he had to face from the day he set his foot upon the capitol steps until the night when he fell a victim to the hand of a man of mistaken judgement? I ask these questions because they are forever coming before when I read the story of his life, and more than that because I feel that upon the answer which we give to these questions rests the solution of the problems before us today.

What kind of a man was he?

He was honest. Not honest because it was the best policy, nor because it was convenient, but because he knew that it was right. We may look with indifference now upon that extreme type of honesty which he exercised. We may think

that he was stretching a point when after a long day's work he feels bound to travel three miles to correct a mistake of six pence made in giving change. It would puzzle many public officials today to feel that when they are called upon to settle accounts, they could go to their trunk, and pull out the exact amount tied up in an old blue stocking, and feel that it had been waiting there for years.

The stain of reproach would be {???) from the legal profession if every lawyer should feel as Lincoln did, and act as Lincoln did, when at one time "he was prosecuting a civil suit, in the course of which evidence was introduced showing that his client was attempting a fraud. Lincoln rose and went to his hotel in deep disgust. The Judge sent for him. He refused to come. 'Tell the judge,' he said 'my hands are dirty. I came over to wash them.'"³ So deep rooted was his sense of honesty so firmly did he believe in the absolute necessity of keeping his hands unsoiled by any act of dishonesty that when he was in the legislature at a critical moment after a long discussion over a bit of jobbery, he was asked his opinion. The whole affair was closed by his reply:

You may burn my body to ashes and scatter them to the winds of heaven; you may drag my soul down to the regions of darkness and despair to be tormented forever; but you will never get me to support a measure which I believe to be wrong, although by do so I may accomplish that which I believe to be right.

Somewhere in that big {???) {???) man there lurked a power which we need today more than we need education, more than we need reform. That power is plain, hard, clear-cut honesty which will suffer any defeat rather than a victory bought by a stain of dishonesty. Chas. E. Hughes, whose fame as the insurance investigator has made a public {???) gives us this very point saying "What we need is a revival of the sense of honor. We want to hear less of the man who

³ Davis is quoting Frederick Trevor Hill. *Lincoln, the Lawyer*. New York: The Century Co. 1906, pp 498-9.

began poor and amassed riches, and more about the man who lived unsullied, though he dies poor."⁴

To the problems of his life Lincoln carried a moral code based upon absolute and uncompromising honesty, the integrity of his own life, and the integrity of the life of others.

Are we facing life with the same honesty?

When he made his Gettysburg speech in 1863, amid the most impressive surroundings and in the most trying times of his life, he gave expression to the greatest thoughts that have ever been uttered in the history of the world. They were the thoughts of Democracy.

We forget with what toil and sacrifice and loss of life the seeds of democracy were saved from the wreck of the old world, planted and nurtured in this country, but he did not forget, because the ideas of Democracy were vital to him. He believed in them, and he lived them not alone in the little frontier town of New Salem, but when he became the head of the nation. When opening the great address with these words, "Fourscore and seven years ago our fathers brought forth on this continent a new nation, conceived in liberty, and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal." He was not giving expression to a mere intellectual speculation, but was speaking a truth which found its incarnation in his own life. He regarded himself as a man and he regarded others as men, meeting them as man-to-man, not holding himself above the town drunkard whom he could pick up in the street, and carry to the inn for treatment like the good Samaritan of old, or regarding

⁴ Charles E. Hughes, at the time this sermon was written in 1906, had just completed an investigation of the insurance industry revealing significant corruption. He went on to serve as the Governor of New York (1906-1910), Associate Justice of the Supreme Court (1910-1912) and was the unsuccessful Republican nominee for President, when Woodrow Wilson was elected in 1912. He served as Warren G. Harding's Secretary of State (1920-1925). He rejoined the Supreme Court as Chief Justice in 1930 until he retired in 1941.

himself beneath the most prominent man whom he met in his life.

Most of us betray the smallness of our natures by holding ourselves above those who are less fortunate than ourselves, and whining and {??} like a {??}{??} when we come into the presence of those who happen to be more fortunate. It takes a man to believe in and to live the ideas of Democracy. Any whimpering, squibbing cad can stand upon the shoulders of some less fortunate being below him, and grasp frantically after the coattails someone above. So [for] Lincoln the proposition that all men are created equal was a practical vital principle of his life, and according to that principle he lived. It was because of his implicit faith in the soundness and integrity of the plain people that gave him such confidence in public opinion and enabled him to lead the nation through those dark years. His power and his strength as a leader rested in this that he was subservient to no one, but was the servant of all, in a government of the people, by the people and for the people.

His confidence in human nature, and his recognition of man as a man, was not the trusting credulousness of ignorance, but the direct fruit of knowledge. He knew human nature. He understood all the windings, in and out, of the human mind, and could meet a man of any trade or calling and in a very short time discover the inner workings of the person. This keen and sympathetic response to other minds resulted in two very marked characteristics of Lincoln.

The first was his keen sense of humor a trait which belonged to and developed with his democracy. It rested upon his appreciation of human nature, and from all the strange people that he had met he had gleaned a great store of anecdotes and tales illustrative of the idiosyncrasies of human nature. When he was president he used to seek relaxation in telling these stories to the ready listeners who clustered about him. It is said that at one time when he was attending court that the judge on the bench had to interrupt a group over in the corner to whom Lincoln was telling stories. Then he called one of the men to the bench immediately and said, "What was that story Lincoln was telling?"

He was a habitual reader of humorous literature and in the long sleepless nights of the dark days of the war he used to while away the hours by reading {???}, Bill Nye and others.

But the same insight into human nature enabled him to see the pathos of life, and no man in public life has shown more tenderness and forgiveness than Abraham Lincoln. All the stories told of his pardons, and his deeds of fine kindness pay a tribute to a side in his nature which is often lacking in great men. It made no difference who came to him, whether it was the poor woman or the man of influence, he was forever granting pardons, so that the generals had to request him not to, because it interfered with the discipline of the army. In spite of this he still continued to pardon, and he once said, "If I have one great sin, it is the inability to say no." Because it contains so much of that deep appreciation of human nature upon which his whole life rested, and out of which it evolved, because it shows so much of his tendencies and sympathy, and above all his spirit of forgiveness, I must repeat the closing paragraph of his 2nd inaugural.

With malice towards 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.

To our civic and social life do we today bring this deep-rooted vital Democracy resting upon faith in Human Nature?

I have spoken of his faith in his own integrity, and how that expressed itself in his honesty, his unwillingness to soil himself in what was wrong and dishonest. I have spoken of his faith in the integrity of human nature, and the vital Democracy which rested upon that faith. I come now to speak of his deep religious nature, his faith in God, upon which both his honesty and his Democracy rested.

I am well aware of the fact that he has not always been regarded as a religious man, that he was even spoken of as

an Atheist, and infidel, but the {???) of judgement have not always been just.

Let us approach this by the way of deed. One cannot read the well-known story of how he found the town drunkard lying in the street one night, and carried him on his back to the inn, and cared for him as he would for a brother, without thinking of the beautiful parable of the good Samaritan which Jesus tells.

But such things are not always regarded as evidences of Religious life, and in as much as he had read from Paine's *Age of Reason*, did not believe that all of the Bible was inspired, and did not believe in the miracles, he has been spoken of as an Atheist. So I wish to speak of one or two things in which is revealed a deep religious nature. He once said,

Whenever any church will inscribe over its alters as a qualification for membership the Savior's condensed statement for the substance of both law and gospel, 'Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and will all thy mind, and thy neighbor as thyself,' that church will I join will all my heart and soul.

In the dark days when the outlook for the Union was black, he used to go alone with God and give himself up to prayer. "I have been driven many times to my knees," he once remarked, "by the overwhelming conviction that I had nowhere else to go. My own wisdom, and that of all about me seemed insufficient for that day." That must have been a wonderful sight to see that great God fearing man alone, at night, when all the city was sleeping, pouring out the hopes and doubts and fears of his soul to God in prayer.

One thing more as to his religious life and the direct bearing it had upon the way in which Lincoln served his country. The Diary of Secretary Chase contains the following entry for the day the Proclamation of Emancipation was issued. He quotes the President saying these words,

When the Rebel army was at Fredericksburg, I determined as soon as it should be driven out of

Maryland to issue a proclamation of emancipation such as I thought was likely to be useful. I said nothing to anyone, but made the promise to myself and to my Maker. The Rebel army is now driven out, and I am going to fulfill that promise.

This deep religious life of Lincoln was the foundation of all his great work, and who shall not say that in this rests that great power and genius which enabled him to do the work that he did. To the problems of his day he carried a deep religious faith resting upon the experience of his own soul. Are we giving to our times a service resting upon a covenant of service with God?

You may think it strange that I have said nothing about Lincoln's education which he secured for himself, and the value which education, and such things may bring to the problems of our own day. But education, skill, executive ability, and training are not the qualities of which we are in need. We are still working out the problems of a "nation conceived in liberty, and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal." Many of the problems press for solution. Political corruption, industrial uncertainty, false ideals of life, unsound {??}, the care of newcomers, and the training of them into citizens, are the problems which we must face. To these problems we must bring that same absolute honesty, that same vital Democracy, that same faith in God, and his truth, that the great Lincoln showed when he faced the problem of slavery, a broken Union and a divided North, else the men who have died for freedom must have died in vain. That we may complete the work which they devoted themselves to, we must dedicate ourselves to the unfinished work which those who fought in the Civil War have so nobly advanced. It is for us to dedicate ourselves to the great task remaining before us, that from their honored dead we take increased devotion to that cause for which they gave the last full measure of devotion, that we here highly resolve that those dead shall not have died in vain, that this nation, under God, shall have a new birth of freedom, and that the Government of the people, by the people, and for the people shall not perish from the Earth.