

Article

Abraham Lincoln: God’s “Instrument”

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Abstract: This paper examines one example of a spiritual hero, Abraham Lincoln, to reflect on issues about spiritual development, to connect spiritual development to character, and to indicate in what ways moral and religious development define and promote spiritual development. It uses Lincoln to show why spiritual maturity takes so long to develop and to show how spiritual development grows out of, rather than in parallel to, the many developments in our public and private lives. Finally, it shows the significance of being spiritual and why we should support spiritual development.

Keywords: character; virtue; moral development; democracy; slavery; faith

1. Lincoln as A Spiritual Hero

Saying Lincoln is a spiritual hero is no exaggeration or mere inference. It is a fact—not just to a small and homogeneous group of Lincoln disciples but to a large and diverse group with varying knowledge of Lincoln. Leo Tolstoy referred to Lincoln as a “Christ in miniature”. The liberal theologian Reinhold Niebuhr spoke of Lincoln as a near perfect model for what it means to take a religious perspective on moral issues ([1], p. 172). The evangelist Billy Graham and his wife Ruth said Lincoln was one of those rare spiritual giants “... like Moses, Paul, and Luther.” ([2], p. ix).

These are well-known figures in the public eye, non-historians whose high regard for Lincoln might be thought to come from their not knowing much about the details of Lincoln’s life. But Lincoln scholars too have idolized Lincoln and made him into a spiritual hero (cf. [3], [4]). For example, Lord Charnwood, one

of Lincoln's most read biographers, described Lincoln as a man who "... stood alone in the dark... (did) justice... loved mercy ... (and) walked humbly with his God." ([5], p. 316).

While there are words aplenty to prove that Lincoln is a spiritual hero, there are monuments too. The most impressive, of course, is the great "Memorial" in Washington, D.C. that sits at the end of the long, rectangular "reflecting pool"—staring appropriately at the monument to George Washington, Lincoln's boyhood hero, and beyond to the nation's Capitol building. It is here where America's great popular movements gather, where Martin Luther King, Jr. gave his "I have a dream" speech, where protesters everywhere and for every type of cause come to share the liberty of free speech though, regrettably, not always to give to the word *liberty* the meaning that Lincoln gave. Behind the speech-makers and crowds, Lincoln sits watching over all, on his huge, throne-like chair. And behind him, words from his Second Inaugural Address, "With malice toward none; with charity for all...", remind us he is a spiritual hero.

But perhaps the clearest evidence for Lincoln being a spiritual hero emerges from the emotions and private experiences of those who come to know Lincoln. Lincoln stirs emotions as few statesmen anywhere stir emotions. Hans Morganthau put it this way: "Because he was a great man, he can make us aware of our own potential, if not for greatness, at least for growth." ([6], p. 5). The Lincoln scholar Edgar Dewitt Jones gives a more personal account of Lincoln's hold on private emotions:

"Sometimes when the lights are low and I sit musing in my Lincoln Room, where the shelves are filled with books devoted to the life story of our "First American," and from the walls his portraits look down upon me, I dream dreams and see visions. And there are mystic moments when out of the gloaming there seems to emerge a tall, shawl-wrapped figure which fills the room. And I hear, or seem to hear, that gaunt great figure say in measured speech: "This nation, under God, shall have a new birth of freedom; and that government of the PEOPLE, by the PEOPLE, for the PEOPLE, shall not perish from the earth." ([7], p. 166).

No wonder, then, as the historian David Donald once noted, that Americans today feel the need to "Get right with Lincoln". Lincoln is indeed a spiritual hero.

2. Lincoln, Character, and Spiritual Development

When speaking of Lincoln's spiritual development, many focus on his religion. But those who knew Lincoln and many who come to know him now are more apt to focus on his character. Lincoln became a spiritual hero based largely upon the virtues that define his character. As Lord Charnwood put it,

"And this perhaps is the main impression ..., the impression of a man quite unlike the many statesmen whom power and the vexations attendant upon it have in some piteous way spoiled and marred, a man who started by being tough and shrewd and canny and became very strong and very wise, and became, under a tremendous strain, honest, brave, and kind to an almost tremendous degree." ([5], p. 7).

Some of Lincoln's virtues seem always to have been part of Lincoln and are noteworthy only because they endured, even grew, despite the pressures of his presidential years. Honesty, self-discipline, plainness, simplicity and compassion are among these enduring virtues. Other virtues, like diamonds thrust up by subterranean forces, formed, it seemed, under the incredible pressures brought on by the great moral

dilemmas and tragedies during the Civil War. Forbearance, humility, and steadfastness are among these later appearing virtues. Let us begin with a discussion of the enduring virtues, seeing what they looked like and how they contributed to the overall picture of Lincoln as a model of spiritual development and spiritual maturity.

2.1. *The Enduring Virtues*

Of all the several virtues associated with the name of Abraham Lincoln, perhaps the most frequently mentioned is that of honesty. Even as a young man in New Salem, Illinois, Lincoln's honesty became a sort of trademark. His word alone was once good enough to buy him half interest in a store. Later, as a seasoned lawyer, Lincoln counseled young lawyers to quit being lawyers if they could not be honest. And still later, when he perceived the country's dishonest treatment of the Declaration of Independence, he wrote,

“Our progress in degeneracy appears to me pretty rapid. As a nation we began by declaring that ‘all men are created equal.’ We now practically read it, ‘all men are created equal, except negroes.’ When the Know-Nothings (an anti-immigrant political group) get control, it will read, ‘all men are created equal, except negroes and foreigners and Catholics.’ When it comes to this, I shall prefer emigrating to some country where they make no pretense of loving liberty—to Russia, for instance, where despotism can be taken pure, and without the base alloy of hypocrisy.” ([8], p. 335).

It seems, then, that with regard to honesty, Lincoln was always “Honest Abe.”

If “Honest Abe” is the first epithet used for describing Lincoln, “self-made man” follows close behind. Lincoln was indeed a self-made man. Through self-discipline, Lincoln rose from poverty, illiteracy and obscurity to assume the highest political office in the land. As a young man in New Salem and Springfield, Illinois, Lincoln read vociferously and taught himself to become a good surveyor, an excellent lawyer, and a masterful speech maker. And during his presidential years, when his generals proved incompetent, he taught himself enough about military science to become a good strategist. As Lord Charnwood put it, Lincoln did not, like most of us, arrest his growth.

This virtue of self-discipline for the purpose of teaching oneself might not be considered part of Lincoln's spiritual development except for the fact that he used what he taught himself for moral and spiritual ends. His legal mind became a formidable force against slavery, as best evidenced in his debates with Stephen Douglas. His refutations against arguments for slavery are legend, such as: “But, slavery (say some) is good for some people!!! As a good thing, slavery is strikingly peculiar, in this, that it is the only good thing which no man ever seeks to the good of, for himself.” ([8], p. 478) and “Whenever I hear anyone arguing for slavery, I feel a strong impulse to see it tried on him personally.” ([9], p. 175).

In his teaching himself to write, Lincoln's self-discipline led to his becoming an inspiring speech-maker who used political speeches to guide a nation to becoming more spiritual. His speeches are at once logical arguments and poems. They contain some of the most remarkable and inspiring lines in the English language—lines such as, “The mystic chords of memory, stretching from every battle-field, and patriot grave, to every living heart and hearth-stone, all over this broad land, will yet swell the chorus of

the Union, when again touched, as surely they will be, by the better angels of our nature.” and “The fiery trial through which we pass, will light us down, in honor or dishonor, to the latest generation.” and “We shall nobly save, or meanly lose, the last best hope of earth.”

And finally with respect to self-discipline, Lincoln taught himself military science—to the point where he was a better strategist than many of his military commanders. Lincoln’s considerable military sense may be seen in the many telegraph messages he sent to his generals. And as usual, the sense he made often infused logical argument with metaphor, as when he telegraphed General Hooker, “If the head of Lee’s army is at Martinsburg and the tail of it on the Plank road between Fredericksburg and Chancellorsville, the animal must be very slim somewhere. Could you not break him?” ([10], p. 101).

Mentioning Lincoln’s knowledge of military strategy may seem out of place in a discussion of spiritual development—especially when being peace-loving rather than being war-like is generally taken to be essential to “being spiritual”. But Lincoln’s military knowledge and use of that knowledge showed not a love of war but rather dedication to preserving the Union while saving as many lives as possible by bringing about a quick end to the war. Lincoln was a pacifist by nature, someone who hated war and bloodshed—as he himself confessed to a congressman from Indiana, “Doesn’t it seem strange to you that I should be here (as president)? Doesn’t it strike you as queer that I, who couldn’t cut the head off of a chicken, and who was sick at the sight of blood, should be cast into the middle of a great war, with blood flowing all about me?” ([11], p. 414).

Simplicity and plainness, too, were part of the Lincoln character from very early on—not simplicity and plainness in the sense of lacking complexity and subtlety but in the same spiritual sense that certain religious groups such as the Quakers and Amish are simple and plain. Lincoln was simple and plain in dress, manner, and often in speech. During the 1860 presidential race, after Lincoln’s Cooper Union address in New York, one man wrote, “He appeared in every sense of the word like one of the plain people among whom he loved to be counted.” and “His style of speech and manner of delivery were severely simple.... It was marvelous to see how this untutored man ... had outgrown all meretricious arts, and found his way to the grandeur and strength of absolute simplicity.” ([5], p. 116). Contrary to this writer’s remarks, these virtues of simplicity and plainness did not develop later on; the fact that they endured rather than developed is what makes Lincoln remarkable. Amidst his anything but simple and plain presidential surroundings, Lincoln managed to remain his own simple, plain, unpretentious self—wandering through the White House in stocking feet, rough-housing on the floor with his sons, and once greeting a tall, grave senator from Pennsylvania with the surprising suggestion, “Let’s see if you are as tall as I am. We’ll measure.” ([5], p. 172).

From childhood, Lincoln was also remarkable for his compassion. As a boy and then as an adolescent, Lincoln showed a kindness to both man and beast not common in his wilderness community. Charnwood writes,

“Tales survive of his kindness to helpless men and animals. it marks the real hardness of his surroundings, and their hardening effect on many, that his exertions in saving a drunken man from death in the snow are related with apparent surprise. Some tales of his helping a pig stuck in a bog or a dog on an ice flow and the like seem to indicate a curious and lasting trait.” ([5], p. 14).

As a young adult, much to the annoyance of his sober and perhaps self-righteous audience, he asked the Springfield Temperance Society to show compassion for, not condemnation of, alcoholics and reformed alcoholics by joining their support groups:

“‘But’, say some, ‘we are no drunkards; and we shall not acknowledge ourselves such by joining a reformed drunkards’ society, whatever our influence might be.’ Surely no Christian will adhere to this objection. If they believe, as they profess, that Omnipotence condescended to take on himself the form of sinful man, and as such, to die an ignominious death for their sakes, surely they will not refuse submission to the infinitely lesser condescension, for the temporal, and perhaps eternal salvation, of a large, erring, and unfortunate class of their own fellow creatures.” ([8], p. 139).

Much later, as president, Lincoln showed compassion when carrying out the terrible responsibility of deciding whether or not to pardon soldiers condemned to die for deserting. Many times, Lincoln’s pardoning angered the military, but as was his style, Lincoln softened the effect with humor, saying, “...it would frighten the poor devils too terribly, to shoot them.” and, “I don’t see how shooting the man would do him any good.” ([5], p. 301). But, always, beneath the wit and sarcasm, Lincoln felt deep compassion for the soldier, deserter or no deserter, such that he loathed to add to his suffering and harm. In the case of one soldier whose appeal for clemency lacked the usual supporting documents from influential friends, Lincoln exclaimed, “What? Has this man no friends?” When told the man had none, Lincoln responded, “Then I will be his friend.” ([9], p. 141).

Lincoln’s compassion was not limited to those on the union side. He showed equal compassion for Confederate soldiers and the common people of the South who he thought of as victims of Southern demagogues. He wept at the side of wounded Confederate prisoners of war, and in his Second Inaugural Address, he reminded the nation that the business at hand was to “...bind up the nation’s wounds, to care for him who shall have borne the battle, and for his widow, and his orphan....”.

2.2. *The Presidential Virtues*

During his presidential years, but not before, Lincoln showed incredible forbearance in the face of unjust treatment and ridicule. William Seward, Lincoln’s Secretary of State, began his term by carrying on secret negotiations with secessionists—behind Lincoln’s back. Seward thought himself to be vastly superior to Lincoln and a kind of prime minister with Lincoln as figurehead. Edwin Stanton, Lincoln’s Secretary of War, once insulted Lincoln—calling him a “giraffe” and later a “baboon”. Both Seward and Stanton eventually developed a deep respect and affection for Lincoln. But perhaps the best known example of Lincoln’s forbearance was his patient treatment of General McClellan, head of the Army of the Potomac early on in the war. McClellan often insulted the President and ignored his suggestions. When others became furious with McClellan’s impudence, Lincoln replied, “I would hold General McClellan’s stirrup for him if he will only bring us victories.” ([5], p. 210). Lincoln showed his forbearance with his wife as well—especially on the several occasions when she embarrassed him with her angry outbursts and maniacal displays of jealousy. After one such occasion, an observer wrote, “I never suffered greater humiliation and pain ...than when I saw the Head of State, the man who carried all

the cares of the nation at such a crisis—subjected to this inexpressible public mortification.” and Lincoln “bore it as Christ might have done; with an expression of pain and sadness that cut one to the heart, but with supreme calmness and dignity.” ([12], p. 289). As a final example of Lincoln’s forbearance, toward the end of the war, in response to one man’s apology for having caused others to unfairly ridicule Lincoln, Lincoln replied, “I have endured a great deal of ridicule without much malice; and have received a great deal of kindness, not quite free of ridicule. I am used to it.” ([11], p.569).

Lincoln’s forbearance in the face of unjust treatment and ridicule is close in nature to another of his presidential virtues, namely, the virtue of humility. Lincoln’s humility showed in his continually reminding himself and others to “Judge not.” It showed in his pointing out that good men disagree. It showed most of all in his humble acknowledgement that neither he nor others could fully fathom and control events. In the Second Inaugural Address, he reminds his audience that,

“Neither party expected for the war the magnitude or the duration which it has already attained. Neither expected that the cause of the conflict might cease with, or even before, the conflict itself should cease. Each looked for an easier triumph, and a result less fundamental and astounding. Both read the same Bible, and pray to the same God; and each involves His aid against the other. It may seem strange that any men should dare to ask a just God’s assistance in wringing their bread from the sweat of other men’s faces; but let us judge not that we be not judged.”

For Lincoln, then, our individual and collective shortcomings should be enough to keep us all feeling humble.

But perhaps the single most important virtue or quality of Lincoln’s character that made him into a spiritual hero was his strength to remain steadfast in the midst of tremendous opposition and adversity. Any reader of the Lincoln life story cannot help but be impressed by the fact that Lincoln often stood alone—not, of course, in the physical sense, but in the sense that he often had little support in the quest to save the Union. He stood alone when his generals caused a string of military disasters, when his own cabinet members worked against him, when so-called northern “Copperheads” clamored for an end to the war. He stood alone when making the many tough and unpopular decisions he needed to make to stay the course and reach the conflicting goals of union and liberty. And he stood alone and steadfast through a series of personal tragedies, through the losses of friends such as Ellsworth and Baker, killed at the beginning the war, and the loss of his favorite son Willie, who died from drinking polluted White house water. Through all the criticism and opposition, through all the public and private adversity, through all the times of standing alone, Lincoln remained steadfast and stayed the course so well that it is not too much to say that without Lincoln the South would most likely have won the war.

2.3. Lincoln’s Character Flaws and Failings

If heroes are worthy, their influence should be worthy. But that is not always the case—because we often distort heroes, make them into something they are not. We often sift out the mundane struggles, contradictions, and imperfections in heroes—the stuff that keeps them human—leaving our heroes as figures more appropriately found in the play of preschoolers than in the reflections of responsible adults. In fashioning heroes into super-heroes, we render them useless as guides, or worse; we make them belittle

our own humanity. The task, then, is to understand heroes as human, as more like us than different, while still taking them as guides.

Lest we turn Lincoln into a super-hero, we need to remind ourselves of the flaws and failings that marked his character early on. More important, we need to do so to better understand his spiritual development. Before his presidential years, Lincoln was an honest, self-disciplined, unpretentious man with exceptional talent, but he was not exceptionally spiritual. In fact, a careful look at Lincoln's character before he became president might leave one with the opposite impression of a man quite flawed.

Before he became president, Lincoln could be both insensitive and cruel. His cruel, anonymous (and perhaps, therefore, cowardly) newspaper attacks on one political opponent, James Shields, almost resulted in a duel. And after trying to end an engagement to Mary Owens by persuading her to do the tough emotional work of ending it herself, Lincoln made fun of her in a letter to another female friend—calling Mary Owens “.. a fair match for Falstaff,” and going on to say that, “... nothing could have commenced at the size of infancy, and reached her present bulk in less than thirty-five or forty years...” ([8], p. 86).

As a young man, rather than being humble, Lincoln was prone to fits of sophomoric self-confidence as he expounded on the virtues and powers of reasoning. In his 1838 address to Springfield's “Young Men's Lyceum,” Lincoln ended by saying, “Reason, cold, calculating, unimpassioned reason, must furnish all the materials for our future support and defense...” ([8], p. 84), and four years later, in his address to Springfield's Temperance Society, he said, “Happy day, when, all appetites controlled, all passions subdued, all matters subjected, mind, all conquering mind, shall live and move the monarch of the world. Glorious consummation! Hail, fall of Fury! Reign of Reason, all hail!” ([8], p. 140).

Early on, Lincoln was hardly a picture of strength and steadfastness amidst adversity. In his twenties and thirties, Lincoln's moods alternated between exuberant self-confidence and deep depression. After breaking off his first engagement to Mary Todd, Lincoln became so depressed his friends had to watch him out of fear he would kill himself. By his own admission, he could not maintain a steady course. After backing away from his engagement, he told his friend, Speed, “My own ability to keep my resolves when they are made,” was once a source of pride and “the only, or at least the chief, gem of my character.” ([8], p. 147). But that was lost. Later, in a letter to another friend, he wrote, “I have, within the last few days, been making the most discreditable exhibition of myself in the way of hypochondriasm.” ([11], p. 88). Even after he matured into a formidable lawyer with a distinguished political career, Lincoln sometimes went to his office, pulled down his shades, and sat for hours immobilized by depression.

Furthermore, before he became president and under the pressures of politicking, Lincoln sometimes pandered to his racist audiences, as he did during one debate with Stephen Douglas, saying, “I am not nor ever have been in favor of making voters or jurors of negroes, nor of qualifying them to hold office, nor of intermarry with white people.” ([11], p. 221). Unfortunately, for some, this statement and others like it have become the total picture of Lincoln. After he became president and especially after blacks fought for the Union, Lincoln never pandered.

What, then, does this discussion of the virtues and flaws of Lincoln's character mean? For one thing, it means that character development is central to spiritual development. Without a description and evaluation of character development, any talk of spiritual development is about abstractions only and not

about the full, concrete experience of spiritual development. For another, it means that not all virtues appear at the same time. Some appear early in an individual's development and become part of that person's spiritual development to the extent that they endure. Others appear later in response to complex moral challenges and adversity. And finally, it means that the character of even those we take to be heroes is apt to be flawed.

3. Lincoln, Moral Judgment, and Spiritual Development

Lawrence Kohlberg, the most famous of researchers on moral development, pictures moral development as a matter of reasoning such that the long process that ends with moral decisions being rooted in universal principles of justice need not have any religious or spiritual meaning ([13], 1982). But Kohlberg's picture leaves out the experience of those who find spiritual meaning in moral principles. Lincoln provides an example.

Lincoln came to view as sacred the American Declaration of Independence's moral principle that all have equal rights to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. He took this principle to be the cornerstone of American democracy and a spiritual guide for the nation's future. He wrote,

“They (the founding Fathers who issued the Declaration) meant to set up a standard maxim for free society, which could be familiar to all, and revered by all; constantly looked to, constantly labored for, and even though never perfectly attained, constantly approximated, and thereby constantly spreading and deepening its influence, and augmenting the happiness and value of life to all people of all colors everywhere.” ([8], p. 360).

This was Lincoln's message in his moral battles against slavery and this too was his message at Gettysburg.

At Gettysburg, Lincoln redefined the Union's war aims. No longer was the war to be fought to preserve a nation divided by slavery. From Gettysburg on, it was to be a war for a “new birth of freedom” and for a nation rededicated “to the proposition that all men are created equal.” That proposition was, for Lincoln, something quite spiritual.

3.1. *The Structure of Lincoln's Moral Thinking*

In 1860, while on his way to Washington for his first inaugural, Lincoln recalled to the New Jersey senate that as a boy while reading Parson Weem's *Life of George Washington*, he was moved by the heroic struggles that occurred at Trenton. He said, “I recollect thinking then, boy even though I was, that there must have been something more than common that those men struggled for.” ([14], p. 85). Lincoln's boyish intuitions developed gradually into his deep reverence for the principle of equality.

As the Swiss developmental psychologist Piaget pointed out, transforming intuitions into explicit ideas takes a very long time and “making things explicit leads to the construction of a structure which is partially new, even though contained virtually in those structures which preceded it.” ([15], p. x). To understand Lincoln's moral development and how that development relates to his spiritual development, we need to understand the structure of Lincoln's moral thinking and how, over a very long time, that structure became explicit. We have already defined and discussed one component of the structure of

Lincoln's moral thinking, namely, his devotion to moral principles, particularly to the Declaration of Independence's principle of equality. But there are other components as well.

Throughout his adult life, Lincoln was a moderate politically, a man who rejected abolitionist idealism for a more conservative reliance on the Constitution and laws. In 1838, to Springfield's "Young Men's Lyceum," he said,

"Let reverence for the laws, be breathed by every American mother, to the lisping babe, that prattles on her lap—let it be taught in schools, in seminaries, and in colleges; let it be written in Primers, spelling books, and in Almanacs;—let it be preached from the pulpit, proclaimed in legislative halls, and enforced in courts of justice. And, in short, let it become the political religion of the nation." ([8], p. 80).

Devotion to laws and legal processes, then, formed a second component of Lincoln's moral thinking.

For most of Lincoln's political career, laws and legal processes held an equal and at times superior position to that of principles. But events preceding the American Civil War, particularly the national movement to have popular majority in the Western Territories decide whether territories would allow ownership of slaves, changed the balance considerably.

Lincoln recognized that this national movement pitted popular majority against the Declaration of Independence's principle of equality. The two could not both claim to define the core of the American system. Popular majority is neutral with respect to moral issues such as slavery. The principle of equality is anything but neutral. For Lincoln, to abandon the second for the first meant extracting the nation's moral backbone. From the early 1850's until his death, Lincoln fought to preserve that moral backbone.

The war, too, lessened Lincoln's reliance on laws and legal processes for reaching moral decisions. When the war came, Lincoln responded to a number of emergencies by suspending normal legal processes. Early on, he appropriated funds and recruited soldiers without Congress' prior approval—both illegal. But even more controversial, at times he supported the jailing of dissenters who made speeches against the war. The most celebrated example was that of the Ohio politician, Clement Vallandigham who was jailed, then deported. In response to a national outcry, Lincoln replied, "Must I shoot a simple-minded soldier boy who deserts, while I must not touch a hair of a wily agitator who induces him to desert?" ([5], p. 276). As this reply might indicate, though he occasionally bent or ignored the law, Lincoln was no tyrant or fanatic.

Lincoln's moral thinking was also pragmatic—as the previous examples attest. As a moral pragmatist, Lincoln attended always to the special circumstances and necessities of the moment. In Lincoln's own words, "I claim not to have controlled events, but confess plainly that events have controlled me." ([11], p. 15). He likened himself to a riverboat captain whose focus is on getting past one sand bar before refocusing on another. Attention to the specifics in circumstances, then, formed a third component of Lincoln's moral thinking.

Taken together, Lincoln's consideration for sacred moral principles, for laws and legal processes, and for special circumstances define the structure of his moral thinking. Only after a long time did that structure become explicit and conscious. And only then was Lincoln able to take on the extraordinary moral dilemmas presented to him as president.

3.2. Lincoln and Moral Dilemmas

Moral development, at least from adolescence on, should be about developing capacity to manage moral dilemmas. As children and often as adolescents, we see moral issues in terms of “right” vs. “wrong” or “good” vs. “evil”. But as adults, we see a good many moral issues in terms of dilemmas brought about by competing principles, laws, and extenuating circumstances. In fact, one of the greatest challenges for adults is to tolerate the tensions brought on by moral dilemmas and to think critically about moral dilemmas. Furthermore, one of the defining characteristics of spiritual development and spiritual maturity is having ability to manage moral dilemmas responsibly. Once again, Lincoln serves as an example.

In the years leading up to his presidency and especially during his presidency, Lincoln faced two great moral dilemmas that threatened to tear the country apart. The first was the dilemma between preserving the union and eliminating slavery. These two were in conflict since southerners made preserving slavery a condition for union. Abolitionists cared only about eliminating slavery. Lincoln cared about both. The second great moral dilemma was that between prosecuting a war and preventing the bloodshed and tragic losses that come with war.

The slavery-union dilemma is particularly instructive with respect to spiritual development. Slavery is such an obvious evil that it may be difficult to think of opposing slavery as a matter of managing a dilemma. For us, as for the abolitionists of Lincoln’s day, opposing slavery seems to call not for the calculation and patience needed to manage a dilemma, but for strong words and actions to eliminate the evil immediately. However, Lincoln proves that even with so clear an evil as slavery, the challenge may indeed be to calculate, be patient, and manage dilemmas. Lincoln had to keep the slave-holding border states in the Union if there was to be any hope for victory. He is reported to have said that though he hoped to have God on his side, he must have Kentucky ([16], p. 284).

Furthermore, the way he managed the union-slavery dilemma provides important insights into his strong, spiritual character. Lord Charnwood captures those insights best in describing Lincoln as:

“A patient being, who, long ago in his youth, had boiled with anger against slavery, but whose whole soul now expressed itself in a policy of deadly moderation towards it... In almost every department of policy we shall see him watching and waiting while blood flows, suspending judgment, temporizing, making trial of this expedient and of that, adopting in the end, quite unthanked, the measure of which most men will say, when it succeeds, ‘That is what we always said should be done.’ Above all, ... we shall witness the long postponement of the blow that killed negro slavery, the steady subordination of this particular issue to what will not at once appeal to us as a larger and a higher issue. All this provoked at the time in many excellent and clever men dissatisfaction and deep suspicion; they longed for a leader whose heart visibly glowed with a sacred passion; they attributed his patience, the one quality of greatness which after a while everybody might have discerned in him, not to a self-mastery which almost passed belief, but to a tepid disposition and a mediocre if not a low level of desire... (but) perhaps the sense will grow upon us that this balanced and calculating person, with his finger on the pulse of the electorate as he cracked his uncensored jests with all comers, did of set purpose drink and refill and drink again as full and fiery a cup of sacrifice as ever was pressed to the lips of hero or of saint.” ([5], p. 115).

The other great moral dilemma faced by Lincoln was that between making war and making peace. Lincoln did not start the war; the South started the war when it fired on Ft. Sumter. But more than any other, Lincoln continued the war—until the combined Union and Confederate casualties almost match the casualties of all other American wars combined. Furthermore, at each step of the way, Lincoln urged his generals to not just fight, but to destroy. Some of his war metaphors are chilling. To Grant's explanation that coordinated attacks by the North's separate armies would contribute to victory even if one or two armies did not win battles, Lincoln replied, "Oh yes! I see....if a man can't skin he must hold a leg while somebody else does." ([11], p. 499). And when Grant began the siege of Petersburg, Lincoln telegraphed, "Hold on with a bull-dog grip, and chew and choke, as much as possible." ([10], p. 101). All this talk of skinning, chewing, and choking hardly sounds like the talk of a spiritual man.

But in the case of Lincoln, it was the talk of a spiritual man. No one, and especially not Lincoln, thought the war would go on for very long. But early on, Lincoln realized that the only way it would end quickly with the Union succeeding was to destroy Confederate armies. And he was right. He was right when he said McClellan should attack, full force, the confederate army at Manassas rather than maneuver south of Richmond. He was right when he said McClellan should pursue and destroy Lee's army following Antietam. And, most definitely, he was right when he said Meade should do the same following Gettysburg. Unfortunately, McClellan, Meade, and other generals were slow to fight and more inclined to hold off rather than destroy Confederate armies. As a result, the war went on years longer than it needed to go on and thousands of lives were lost because generals were not, like Lincoln, willing to skin, chew, and choke. When Meade let Lee get away, Lincoln wrote, "Our army held the war in the hollow of their hand and they would not close it." ([11], p. 446). That was mid-summer, 1863. As Lincoln feared, the greatest number of casualties were yet to come. But with casualties so great and with northerners clamoring for peace, Lincoln could have negotiated with the Confederates to bring about a speedy end to the war. To most, that was the moral thing to do. But was it?

After his proclamation emancipating slaves in the deep south and after his approving the recruiting of blacks to fight for the Union, Lincoln insisted on an unconditional surrender by the South. He refused to negotiate a surrender—fearing that doing so would undermine Union soldiers' morale and lead possibly to an independent Confederate nation. He understood the sacredness of the promise made to those freed slaves and black soldiers that they would never again be slaves. To betray "those who had come bodily over from the rebel side to ours", such a betrayal could not "escape the curses of Heaven, or of any good man." ([11], p. 527). So Lincoln's aggressive leadership in making war came, somewhat paradoxically, from his strong abhorrence of war and from his deep moral convictions about freedom and slavery.

4. Lincoln, Religion, and Spiritual Development

Like so much about Lincoln, there are a good many controversies concerning Lincoln's religion. One controversy has to do with whether Lincoln was a Christian. Some say he was a Christian in every sense. Others say he was a Christian, though not in a ritualistic sense. Still others say he was a Christian but did not know it. And some say he was a skeptic first and then a Christian—although few agree about when he

converted. A good many say Lincoln was not a Christian, but rather a skeptic or fatalist, or deist. Lincoln would be much amused.

Another controversy has to do with whether Lincoln was a prophet. Some say he was a prophet in the sense that he spoke for God, calling the nation's people to give up their errant ways. Others say he was a prophet in the sense that he led his people out of the wilderness of slavery and into a promised land. Still others say he was no prophet, just a leader and religious man.

These controversies over Lincoln's religion are interesting but, for our purposes, beside the point. For our purposes, the point is to define Lincoln's religious beliefs and the nature of his faith, showing how they, in turn, defined and influenced his spiritual development.

4.1. Lincoln's Religious Beliefs and Faith During the Civil War

Lincoln never joined a church though he attended church services and thought the presence of so many different denominations to be a good thing, "They are all getting somebody in that the others could not." he said ([17], p. 109). He never joined because he disliked long, complicated creeds. Toward the end of the war, he said,

"When any church will inscribe over its altar as its sole qualification for membership the Savior's condensed statement of the substance of both the law and Gospel, 'Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind, and thy neighbor as thyself, that Church will I join with all my heart and soul.'" ([17], p. 75).

Lincoln's religious beliefs, then, are not defined by religious affiliations and creeds. Rather, as in so many other areas of Lincoln's life, they are defined by a simple, subtle, and powerful idea. That idea is expressed in the Second Inaugural Address where he says,

"Fondly do we hope—ferverently 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 bond-man'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 with 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.'"

As David Hein has pointed out ([18], p. 114), when Lincoln referred to the possibility of God continuing the war as a just punishment for the sin of slavery, he was not saying that this is what God would do. Nor was he saying that the American Civil War was God's punishment—as many readers of Lincoln think he was saying. Rather, Lincoln was saying that God is almighty, just, and mysterious. We poor mortals can never fathom God's intentions. We can only place our hopes in God, trusting that He will bring good even out of tragedy.

For Lincoln, this idea of an almighty, just, and mysterious God was there from the beginning to the end of the war. Early on, he wrote in a note to himself intended as a private meditation on the meaning of the war,

“In the present civil war it is quite possible that God’s purpose is something different from the purpose of either party; and yet the human instrumentalities, working just as they do, are of the best adaptation to effect His purpose. I am almost ready to say that this is probably true; that God wills this contest, and wills that it shall not end yet.” ([8], p. 655).

And a year and a half after the meditation, in a letter to his Quaker friend, Eliza Gurney, he wrote,

“The purposes of the Almighty are perfect, and must prevail, though we erring mortals may fail to accurately perceive them in advance... We shall yet acknowledge His wisdom and our own error therein. Meanwhile we must work earnestly in the best light He gives us, trusting that so working still conduces to the great ends He ordains. Surely He intends some great good to follow this mighty convulsion, which no mortal could make, and no mortal could stay.” ([8], p. 757).

What Lincoln was saying, then, is this: We humans are not in charge, God is in charge—though we must act as His instruments. Furthermore, says Lincoln, our hope lies not in our own wisdom and power but in God’s. This was Lincoln’s central, religious idea. But in the context of his other, political and moral ideas, one might ask, “How important was it?” The historian James McPherson provides a clue for answering this question.

Drawing an analogy from one of Aesop’s fables, McPherson characterized Lincoln as a “hedgehog” with one big idea—and those surrounding him, such as Seward and Chase, as “foxes” with lots of little ideas ([10], p. 114). McPherson argued that the big idea expressed at Gettysburg, of a “nation, conceived in Liberty, and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal...” kept Lincoln and the Union on course, whereas, the little ideas of others would have led to the North’s foundering.

The idea expressed at Gettysburg was indeed a big idea, and certainly it sustained Lincoln, kept him on course. But this other, religious idea was equally big and equally important for sustaining and guiding. Throughout the war, we hear Lincoln expressing his anxieties about the future and his despair about the recent past. And often, his expressions of anxiety and despair are followed by his one, big, religious idea—which seemed to mollify his anxiety and despair. Because he believed God was in charge, Lincoln could manage his anxieties and doubts, enough to leave him free to find reasonable ways to act.

But managing anxiety, despair, and doubts was not the only function that makes Lincoln’s big religious idea so central and important. Its other function was to help Lincoln act independently while remaining thoughtful and responsible, especially in the face of opposition by those with religious motives. Early on in the war, to representatives from a mass meeting of Chicago Christians demanding the immediate emancipation of slaves, Lincoln said,

“I am approached with the most opposite opinions and advice, and that by religious men, who are equally certain that they represent the divine will... I hope it will not be irreverent for me to say that if it is probable that God would reveal his will to others, on a point so connected with my duty, it might be supposed he would reveal it directly to me; for, unless I am more deceived in myself than I often am, it is my earnest desire to know the will of Providence in this matter. And if I can learn what it is, I will do it! These are not, however, the days of miracles, and I suppose it will be granted that I am not to expect a direct revelation. I must study the plain,

physical facts of the case, ascertain what is possible, and learn what appears to be wise and right. The subject is difficult, and good men do not agree.” ([17], p. 22).

Lincoln’s independence in the face of religiously motivated opposition shows also in the following incident. After he had pardoned a rebel prisoner of war whose wife had pleaded with him on the grounds that her husband was a religious man, Lincoln said to the wife,

“You say your husband is a religious man; tell him when you meet him, that I say I am not much of a judge of religion, but that, in my opinion, the religion that sets men to rebel and fight against their government, because, as they think, that government does not sufficiently help some men to eat their bread in the sweat of other men’s faces, is not the sort of religion upon which people can get to heaven.” ([8], p. 772).

As a third example of how Lincoln’s own religious faith supported his independent thinking, there is the time when a delegation of clergymen objected to his nominating a particular minister for the position of army hospital chaplain. Lincoln asked, “On what grounds do you wish the nomination withdrawn?” The delegation said the minister nominated was “not sound in his theological opinions.” “On what question is the gentleman unsound?” asked Lincoln. “He does not believe in endless punishment.” said one delegate, continuing, “Not only, sir, but he believes that even the rebels themselves will be finally saved.” “Is that so?” inquired the President—to which the other delegates said, “yes, yes.” “Well gentlemen, if that be so, and there is any way under Heaven whereby the rebels can be saved, then, for God’s sake and their sakes, let the man be appointed.” ([7], p. 149).

During the Civil War, then, Lincoln’s religious beliefs and faith sustained him in his trials, kept him steadfast and able to make the many hard political and military decisions he had to make. But even more important, throughout the war, Lincoln’s religious faith in a mysterious yet just and caring God kept him morally responsible, compassionate and humble, that is, kept him from becoming a fanatic. The enormity of this achievement is perhaps best captured by Reinhold Niebuhr when he said:

“This combination of moral resoluteness about the immediate issues with a religious awareness of another dimension of meaning and judgment must be regarded as almost a perfect model of the difficult but not impossible task of remaining loyal and responsible toward the moral treasures of a free civilization on the one hand while yet having some religious vantage point over the struggle. Surely it was this double attitude which made the spirit of Lincoln’s, “with malice toward none; with charity for all” possible. There can be no other basis of true charity; for charity cannot be induced by lessons from copybook texts. It can proceed only from a “broken spirit and a contrite heart....

Abraham Lincoln is not only a statesman who saved the nation in the hour of its peril; he was also that rare and unique human being who could be responsible in executing historic tasks without equating his interpretation of the task with the divine wisdom.” ([1], p. 87).

4.2. *The Development of Lincoln’s Religious Faith*

Hein claims that the religious faith expressed in the Second Inaugural was there, in Lincoln, from very early on. He says,

“The central elements of Lincoln’s mature religious faith were already present in that of the youthful Lincoln. In 1842 he wrote a letter to his closest friend, Joshua F. Speed, in which he discussed Speed’s engagement to be married and stated his belief that ‘God made me one of the instruments of bringing your Fanny and you together, which union, I have no doubt He had fore-ordained.’ Here we have clearly expressed a strong belief in God’s overruling providence and a conviction that Abraham Lincoln might be employed by God as an ‘instrument’ to bring about the specific good of reconciliation. Both of these would be among the wartime themes of Lincoln’s faith.” ([18], p. 113).

But does the religious faith expressed in this letter truly have the same central elements as Lincoln’s faith later on? I don’t think so.

The faith expressed in the letter to Speed has all the characteristics of what Lincoln referred to as “the doctrine of necessity” whereby “the human mind is impelled to action, or held in rest by some power, over which the mind itself has not control.” ([11], p. 15). This faith has none of the personal feeling for God, none of the trust and devotion to a just and caring God that so characterized Lincoln’s faith later on.

Perhaps even more important, the doctrine of necessity has humans acting as God’s puppets, their autonomy minimized, at least during critical moments. In contrast, Lincoln’s faith later on always emphasized both God’s omnipotence and humans’ autonomy. These are not the days of miracles, Lincoln reminded others; they are the days for struggling to interpret cold, hard, facts.

The doctrine of necessity, in deemphasizing the role for human autonomous decision-making, may also explain the younger Lincoln’s sometimes placing too much confidence in his powers to reason (e.g., “Hail, fall of Fury! Reign of Reason...”). As Oser, Gmunder and Reich have argued, adolescents and young adults often have a difficult time feeling both autonomous and connected in their relationship with God—for their connecting to God means, to them losing their autonomy, and their autonomy means they are on their own ([19,20]). Lincoln’s failure to coordinate the autonomy-connection polarity in his relationship to God may well have contributed to his occasionally becoming depressed over his not being able to control his life through reasoning. In contrast, the religious faith of the mature Lincoln effected a coordination or balance such that Lincoln could be secure in his autonomous decision-making not so much because he had faith in his powers to reason as because he had faith that his limitations would be compensated for by God’s omnipotence.

The younger Lincoln’s religious faith also lacked the visions of justice and caring that characterized the faith of the presidential Lincoln. In the 1850’s, the possibility that slavery would spread throughout the country roused Lincoln to make explicit his previously intuitive grasp that the Declaration of Independence’s principle of equality was the defining principle of American democracy. In having to make explicit his beliefs concerning the nation’s moral mission, Lincoln also had to make explicit his mature faith in a just and caring God. This was never more evident than in his reaction to the news that most of Springfield’s clergy and prominent church members were going to vote against him in the 1860 presidential election. To this news, Lincoln became deeply sad and replied:

“I am not a Christian. God knows I would be one; but I have carefully read the Bible ...These men well know that I am for freedom in the territories, freedom everywhere, as free as the Constitution and the laws will permit,

and that my opponents are for slavery. They know this, and yet with this book (the Bible) in their hands, in the light of which human bondage cannot live a moment, they are going to vote against me. I do not understand it at all. I know there is a God, and that He hates injustice and slavery. I see the storm coming and I know that His hand is in it. If He has a place and work for me, and I think He has, I believe I am ready. I am nothing, but truth is everything. I know I am right because I know that liberty is right, for Christ teaches it, and Christ is God. I have told them that a house divided against itself cannot stand, and Christ and Reason say the same, and they will find it so.” ([21], p. 43).

In this statement and many that followed, we see Lincoln connecting religion to the vision of a just and caring community of humankind, a vision outlined in both the American Declaration of Independence and in the Bible. In this connecting, Lincoln begins his tenure as a spiritual president working tirelessly to do what he can to make that vision reality.

The sequence in Lincoln’s religious development was, then, as follows: As a young man, Lincoln acquired a good deal of religious knowledge, largely through his reading the Bible, but also through participating in the religious conversations common in Protestant America during the first half of the 19th century. That knowledge spawned a faith in an impersonal, all-powerful God but not a strong faith in the sense of its being a continuous presence that effected Lincoln’s daily discourse and actions. During the 1850’s, when the issue of slavery brought out Lincoln’s passionate faith in the principle of equality, Lincoln began to make explicit the link between his religious faith and his moral vision for the country. That transition ended with Lincoln’s being elected president and with the realization that the weight of two issues, union and liberty, rested most heavily on his shoulders. Then, Lincoln’s mature religious faith in a just and caring God and his identity as someone constantly striving to be an instrument of God’s will even as God’s will remains forever veiled—is evident in his farewell address to his friends in Springfield. Just before he took office, in his farewell speech at Springfield, he said,

“I now leave, not knowing when or whether ever I may return, with a task before me greater than that which rested upon Washington. Without the assistance of that Divine Being who ever attended him, I cannot succeed. With that assistance, I cannot fail. Trusting in Him who can go with me, and remain with you, and be everywhere for good, let us confidently hope that all will yet be well. To His care commending you, as I hope in your prayers you will commend me, I bid you an affectionate farewell.” ([8], p. 568).

The mature faith that emerged with Lincoln’s becoming president fits James Fowler’s description of “universalizing faith”. In doing so, we get some indication of just why Lincoln so often stood alone and just why he later on became a martyr. Fowler writes:

“Persons best described at Stage 6 (the stage of universalizing faith) typically exhibit qualities that shake our usual criteria of normalcy. Their heedlessness to self-preservation and the vividness of their taste and feel for transcendent moral and religious actuality give their actions and words an extraordinary and often unpredictable quality. In their devotion to universalizing compassion they may offend our parochial perceptions of justice. In their penetration through the obsession with survival, security, and significance they threaten our measured standards of righteousness and goodness and prudence. Their enlarged visions of universal community disclose

the partialness of our tribes and pseudo-species. And their leadership initiatives...constitute affronts to our usual notions of relevance. It is little wonder that persons best described by Stage 6 so frequently become martyrs for the visions they incarnate.” ([22], p. 200).

5. Concluding Remarks: Lessons from Lincoln

This essay has presented a composite picture of Lincoln’s spirituality and its development. As mentioned, Lincoln’s spirituality is defined by the virtues that made up his extraordinary character. We look up to certain individuals such as Lincoln as “being spiritual” not so much because of their moral judgment and religious faith as because of their character, which we experience as rich in virtues that each and everyone of us can or should aspire to make our own.

Also as mentioned, Lincoln’s spirituality is defined by the way he made the Declaration of Independence’s principle of equality not just a moral principle but a spiritual principle as well, a sacred truth revealing something essential about us humans, and a standard by which to guide, measure, and judge the way we gather ourselves in to communities. Kohlberg’s theory captures something of Lincoln’s moral thinking but not the sacredness Lincoln attributed to the principle of equality. Gary Wills is right in saying that Lincoln’s attitude toward this principle was more in keeping with the transcendentalist religious philosophy of his time, as best exemplified in the preachings of the Unitarian minister, Theodore Parker, than it was in keeping with a strictly rationalist philosophy ([14], p. 90).

Finally, Lincoln’s spirituality is defined by his living religious faith in an omnipotent, mysterious, yet just and caring God, a God of world history as well as of individual, personal history, a God imaged in the Puritan tradition of Lincoln’s forebears but a God integrated with the newer theologies of Lincoln’s 19th century American transcendentalist contemporaries. Furthermore, his religious faith allowed him to simultaneously experience himself as an instrument of God’s will while at the same time as needing to rely on reason, dialogue, and all manner of methods central to responsible moral action.

This composite picture of Lincoln’s spirituality may, at first glance, suggest that Lincoln’s spiritual development tells a story about one among many culturally situated pathways of development, and indeed, that is the case. But being culturally situated does not mean having little or no universal message or truth. In this post-modern era we are acutely aware that there are a multitude of pathways and images of God and what is sacred that are quite different from Lincoln’s pathway and his image of God presented in the Second Inaugural Address. We need to know whether the differences should matter and whether there can be messages and insights for those outside of Lincoln’s culture.

For Lincoln, while going through the “fiery trial” of the Civil War, his image of God truly mattered. Furthermore, it is impossible to conceive of the Dalai Lama, Gandhi or many other spiritual heroes with very different images, successfully meeting the challenges that Lincoln faced—not because they are less worthy than Lincoln but because they do not match up well with historical American religious, cultural and political traditions. This observation is another way of saying that, when evaluating spiritual development, we need to be attuned to context and culture and how a particular pattern and pathway can determine whether a spiritual person is successful.

However, there are lessons from Lincoln that are universal lessons. They are universal because anyone, anywhere is apt to see in figures such as Lincoln a spirituality that is both valuable and real. Lincoln's humility, compassion, and overall character should not be thought of as essentially cultural but as essentially human. Lincoln's devotion to a great moral principle defining how we should live together in an inclusive community that is just and caring is not a relative principle. It is a universal principle that transcends culture. And Lincoln's living, personal faith in a mysterious and good power behind, through, and infused everywhere in life is a faith that can appeal to all. There are, then, lessons from Lincoln that tell us much about what is universal in spiritual development.

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