

# Abraham Lincoln

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How He Made the Most of Himself

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HOW HE MADE THE MOST OF HIMSELF




A Discourse given in Boston, February 9, 1908,  
in the Church of the Disciples.

BY

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## ABRAHAM LINCOLN

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*“He that is faithful in that which is least is faithful also in much.”—Luke 16: 10.*

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ONE of the many lessons gathered from the life and career of Abraham Lincoln is this: He was prepared for great things by faithfulness in little things. First, he made the most of scanty resources and opportunities. Many another lad has been born, as he was, in a rough frontier cabin, and has spent his early years in poverty, privation, hardship and obscurity; not everyone has found in his disadvantages the rounds of a ladder for his climbing. Many another carpenter's son has seen his father at work without ever learning or caring to handle the tools. Many another boy has grown up far from school privileges, without studying at home by the light of pine-knots and without walking miles to get a grammar.

He was hungry for knowledge, but he did not get it chiefly from books. He found its beginnings in nature's kindergarten,—in direct contact with common, homely facts and realities,—the primitive stuff out of which learning is made. He could look at the world before he could read about it, and he kept open his eyes and ears—the windows of his soul.

“Books and work and healthful play” supply a fair program for one's early years. He was on short allowance of the first; play was not wanting; of work there was more than plenty. Yet, with hardly a year, all told, in school-rooms, he became one of the best educated men of the country; perhaps the better because he spent “no time learning wrong things,” or clogging and cluttering his mind with “useless lumber.” So also he was spared the school temptations to petty emulation, pride of intellect, vanity of attainment, or false shame at failure.

Yet he had his own way to make; literally to hoe his own row and to paddle his own canoe; and it was his good fortune to live in a community where everybody did the same, most being bravely poor.

His mother, who had taught the alphabet to her husband and son, died when Abraham was but ten years old. Her last counsel was, “Be a good boy; be kind



to your sister and father; love your heavenly Father." In the ripeness of his manhood, he paid this tribute to her memory: "All I am, all I ever hope to be, I owe to my angel mother." At thirteen his kind and wise stepmother was helping him to master the arithmetic, on whose flyleaf he wrote:

*"Abraham Lincoln, his hand and pen;  
He will be good, but God knows when."*

He had already felt the truth that "every boy needs to be made over in part," but he felt also that there was something in him that was worth making over; and while he made no professions and lived after the rough manner of the time, he scorned to follow inferior patterns. In the whiskey-drinking settlement, he formed the abstinent habit which he kept up all his life. But at sixteen he saved a drunken man from freezing to death by shouldering and carrying him to safety. In a speech made at thirty-three, he expressed the hope that a time might come when there should be "neither a slave nor a drunkard in the land."

Meanwhile he was making the most of his mental powers. He had a mind of his own and thought nothing too good for it. Omnivorous and receptive, he was yet discriminating and reflective. We are nourished,

not by what we swallow, but by what we digest and assimilate. Of all the good things we hear or read, how much is like the seed that falls by the wayside and takes no root!

He was always holding court, himself judge and jury. He put all subjects on trial; went carefully over evidence and argument, then stood stoutly by the verdict of his own faculties. He knew the difference between reasoned conclusions, which are really judicial decisions, and the haphazard guesses we toss to each other, or which are often thrown at us from platform, press and pulpit. Thus he became a man of convictions.

One who knew Lincoln well says that his mind fastened on whatever he heard or read till he had determined its value. He seemed intent on getting at the *meanings*, as in the woods of Kentucky and Indiana he had cracked the hickory nuts and picked out their meat. So he *thought out* everything that he deemed worthy of attention.

By this process he learned to know and measure men, as he listened to their discussions in the country store and postoffice. In their arguments and opinions he could perceive a mixture of truth and error, of wisdom and folly. He learned also to read motives be-

hind conduct—the mixture of good and evil—and thus to judge of character. He acquired to a rare degree the power of concentration, the discipline of self-control and self-use, so as to give his entire attention to the business in hand. The time was coming when he would need to have himself well in hand; when he would need to think calmly in a racket of noises or a roaring storm of public passion. Then no amount of clamor could hurry him when he thought it right to work the brakes, or hold him back when he heard the inward command to go ahead. Where the whole of him was wanted, he was “all there.”

He had ambitions as well as aspirations, and was not indifferent to human praise or blame. It is said that “a young man is not far from ruin when he can say without blushing, ‘I don’t care what others think of me’.” But one rises above danger when he can truly say, with the apostle, “It is a small thing to be judged of man’s judgment; yea, I judge not mine own self; He that judgeth me is the Lord.” Sensitive as Lincoln was to prickly criticism and abuse, I think he breathed that higher air. He seems never to have been suspected of striking an attitude or posing; never of strutting or showing off, or giving side-glances to see what effect he was producing.

By twenty-one he had fashioned for himself an outfit of principles or maxims to live by, such as these: It is of no use to quarrel. Cruelty to men or animals is meanness. Truth is better and safer than lying. It is no disgrace to be ignorant, if one is willing to learn; or to be poor, if one is willing to work. But it is a disgrace to be lazy, or to get what belongs to another. One man is as good as another, and better, too; but before the law they all stand on a level.

Pushing steadily on and up, he became an active manager of small affairs, a trusted citizen, and an honest and able lawyer; an ardent patriot, a statesman and leader of men; the head of a nation in a time which tried men's souls; and, through martyrdom, the best beloved *Man* who has lived between these oceans. But his pilgrimage was a long and weary one.

We may recapitulate some of the steps or stages of this steep ascent. Beginning as a small boy to share his father's toil in the shop and out in the clearing, at sixteen he managed a ferry-boat, for \$2.50 a week; at twenty-one he paid for a pair of trousers by splitting rails; at twenty-two he was in charge of a flat-boat laden with provisions for the New Orleans market, serving for \$8.50 a month; at twenty-three he was chosen captain of volunteers for the Black Hawk war;

next he was involved with a worthless partner in a small store-keeping scheme, which broke down and left him burdened with a debt which it took him six years to unload; at twenty-five he was a student of borrowed law books; at twenty-seven admitted to the bar; at thirty-seven a member of Congress, after serving three terms in the legislature of Illinois; at forty-seven a recognized Republican champion of the doctrine, "Slavery sectional, freedom national;" at fifty-two president of the disunited United States; at fifty-six, dead by the hand of an assassin.

As he was deeply interested in the history and laws of his country, he was impelled to feel after the foundations of free institutions. He was profoundly impressed by the Declaration of Independence, and saw in it a charter of equal rights for all men, and a criterion by which to test the justice of all laws and customs. As a man living among men, he felt bound to regard the rights of every other as sacred as any he might rightly claim for himself. This doctrine of equality before the law moulded all his ideas of civil society or government; it was a lamp unto his feet and a light to his path.

He was not blind to the glaring fact of inequality among men; he regarded the average negro as inferior in

actual development to the average white man; but this inferiority did not in the least impair the negro's equal right to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. In the great debate of 1858, Lincoln said: "In the right to eat the bread, without the leave of anybody, which his own hand earns, the negro is the equal of myself, of Judge Douglas, or of any other man."

There were two theories. The aristocratic theory said, the many exist for the advantage of the few, and it is the business of government to secure the few in their supremacy. The democratic theory said, the gifted and fortunate few have no claim to superiority of rights; their advantages of ability or position increase their social obligations, and governments are tyrannies unless they guard impartially the rights of all.

The conflict between these theories was rapidly coming to a head. He saw in the union of free and slave states "a house divided against itself. It must become all slave or all free," or it must collapse.

I do not think he ever used an insincere argument merely because it would take with the crowd, or win the votes of the unthinking. He could not thus poison the public mind with a lie. He trusted to the power of plain truth, plainly spoken, and set before the people the reasons which convinced himself. If he simply

held up the light, would they not see? What else were eyes for? Yet he could not flatter; he made allowance for the blinding effect of prejudice, passion and party spirit, and waited with sublime patience for the mists to clear away.

“You can fool all the people a part of the time; you can fool a part of the people all the time; but you can’t fool all the people all the time.” Our sober problem is, what percentage can be fooled all the time? The census tables do not answer.

He made the most of himself at the head of the government. He knew himself disparaged and dis-trusted by many who had helped to elect him; and men of national repute thought it a public duty to take the reins out of his hands. He quietly stood on his dignity, accepting his just responsibility and holding others to theirs. Many thought Seward our foremost statesman, and wished him, as Secretary of State, to dominate the administration. Lincoln good-naturedly disregarded this intrusive side-pressure, and said, “Mr. Seward is my clerk.”

It was said that no public man ever had so much advice thrust upon him. “It is my duty,” he said, “to hear all; but, at last, I must, within my sphere, judge what to do and what to forbear.”

He was blamed by the anxious and suffering people for situations and events which were inevitable. The man at the wheel has all he can do, and sometimes more, to hold the ship steady to her course; he cannot lay the waves, nor control the winds, nor hurry up the sun. How could he or anyone know which among the untried generals could win victories with armies of raw recruits? How could he be held responsible for the regimental officers selected and commissioned by the twenty-five different state governors?

See also how he made the most of his moral qualities. If the sense of duty had been sluggish or fitful, the people of Illinois would never have heard of "Honest Abe." For a time he "tended" the country store. Little did he think that eighty years later it would be told how he had hastily followed a customer to hand him a few cents of change, or that he walked a considerable distance to carry to a woman a quarter of a pound of tea, because he discovered that he had made an error in the weighing. By being faithful in the least, was he not in training to be faithful also in much?

A man who sees and corrects his error is no longer in error. The truth makes him free. Watts calls "I was mistaken" the three hardest words in the English language. But honesty banishes from the heart—as



would God it might banish from Christendom—the petty pretence of infallibility. Is not Lincoln's memory all the sweeter to his countrymen because he wrote to Gen. Grant: "I was wrong and you were right"?

The land was rocking with the earthquake of the greatest civil war ever fought on this planet. To sit steadily in the presidential chair and to guide the policy of the government through those four dreadful years, required a combination of solid qualities rarely incarnate in any man of any land or time. Those qualities had been growing into his character for half a century,—clearness and breadth of vision, self-possession, absolute rectitude of purpose, justice, generosity and tact in dealing with men, consciousness of a mission, full persuasion of a righteous cause, and confidence in the overruling Providence that "out of evil still educes good."

"The occasion," he said, "is piled high with difficulties, and we must rise with the occasion." Often he had to find a way, or make one. Early practice had sharpened his inventive wits. He had navigated a flatboat amid cross currents, sandbars and snags. At 23, a company of young volunteers chose him captain to lead them in a campaign against the Indians. In his ignorance of the manual of arms, he sometimes depended on "horse sense" in framing the word of command.

Marching across country, they came up against a rail fence. "Halt!" he ordered. "You are dismissed for two minutes. Reassemble on the other side of the fence."

As he had learned to build cabins of rough logs when there were no sawmills, so he was obliged to select human material for public places when as yet there was no Civil Service Commission to supply lists of competent candidates. Of course he was deceived and misled by recommendations too easily or too eagerly given; of course he made mistakes in appointments. The wonder is they were so few and that none were fatal.

Isaac H. Phillips calls him a great ruler of men. He adds: "The man who has learned to rule others must first have learned to rule himself." He never blustered, and though, like Washington, capable of "terrific anger," he held it in, and converted its explosive force to working energy.

A never-failing fund of humor was his life-preserver, and it helped him to see things in due perspective and proportion, so that in the noisy crowd of small problems he could distinguish the greater, and lay out the leading lines of duty and policy. "I never go snipe-shooting when the bears are in sight," said he. This

largeness of view goes with largeness of soul, and with that magnanimity which can overlook affronts and subordinate personal feelings to the public weal. Contemptuous ill treatment did not blind Lincoln to Stanton's great capacities for cabinet service, and he made him Secretary of War, and took his later rudeness good naturedly. "Did Stanton call me a fool? Well, he is generally right. And what kind of a fool did he say I was?" So when Secretary Chase offered his resignation because it had become known that he had intrigued to snatch from his chief his second nomination, Lincoln saw "no reason for a change," and ultimately made his would-be rival Chief Justice of the Supreme Court. In the same spirit, he had once bathed the face of a rowdy whom he had pounded black and blue for indecent words spoken in the presence of women.

Emerson said of Lincoln: "His heart was as great as the world, but there was no room in it to hold the memory of a wrong." Lincoln himself wrote to a friend: "Speed, die when I may, I want it said of me by those who knew me best, that I always plucked up a thistle and planted a flower where I thought a flower would grow."

Thus he made the most of himself by making much of others, by living for interests larger than his own.

Many anecdotes illustrate how he "fitted" into his various relations—domestic, industrial, social, civil and national. Firm as a rock, he was yet tender with the gentleness of Jesus, gracious to the ungracious, and reasonable with the unreasonable. Centuries hence men will read of his pardoning the young soldier condemned to be shot for being overcome by sleep when on sentry duty. "I think," wrote the Commander-in-Chief, "this boy can do us more good above ground than under." The lad returned to the ranks and died a hero, in defence of the flag.

Lincoln was not given to swearing, but in the course of his life he took and kept two great oaths. On his second visit to New Orleans, when twenty-two, he was shocked and revolted by the brutality of a slave-market. To his fellow boatman, Hanks, he said, with hot indignation: "If I ever get a chance to strike at that institution, I will hit it hard, by the eternal God!" He protested later against the injustice of slavery, but disapproved of the agitation for its abolition, though strenuous for its non-extension. He said to me: "On principle, I am as much opposed to slavery as the most radical abolitionist; but I happen to be a lawyer, and I see that we have no legal power to deal with slavery in the States."

The other oath was taken at his inauguration, March 4, 1861, when he solemnly swore that, as President, he would, to the best of his ability, "preserve, protect and defend the Constitution of the United States." This oath carried with it the awful responsibility of a war for the maintenance of the Union. In securing that object, the time came when the life of the nation required the death of slavery, which was really its only armed enemy. Was the germ of the first oath still latent in the second?

We have seen that perhaps for half a century Lincoln had been storing up the power—physical, intellectual and moral—by which he was to become the saviour of the Republic and the deliverer of the oppressed. We may be sure that the hand which held the helm of our Ship of State, through a storm which would have foundered the stanchest monarchy on earth, had never been enfeebled by open or secret vice. Does not this give us in miniature the story of the nation's salvation in war? In the Free States a hardy population had been trained by respect for labor, while the masses of Southern white men—no whit less brave—had despised industrial discipline as fit only for their inferiors.

In a deeper way Lincoln made the most of himself by not obstructing the inner springs of power and wis-

dom. Without religious profession or adhesion to churchly traditions, he was a profound believer in unseen realities—in “that infinite and eternal Energy from which all things proceed.” The religion of his mother was at the centre of his life.

“Himself from God he could not free.”

Must not what men have called the Supernatural be the inner secret and spring of all human excellence? Are not wise, pure, noble men the incarnations and clearest manifestation of the highest force we know anything about? Here was wisdom, patience, firmness, justice and self-giving like God’s, as we have learned to think about God from our best Teacher. When power is put to good uses, when masterly qualities go out to service, is not God manifest in the flesh?

To do great and good things, take no credit and say nothing about it, this is God-like. The Supreme Artist, it has been said, does not sign His pictures. He paints the sunset but writes no initials on its border. Lincoln lived to see both Houses approve the amendment which forever prohibits slavery; but when congratulated and praised for this crowning victory, his instinctive response was, “God only can claim it.”

Being human, he had his limitations, defects and

errors; being honest, he was humble. But his faults seem quite a negligible quantity when set beside his heroic services, his sublime virtues, and the massive grandeur of his character.

“He was genuine.” That tells the story. His genuineness carried with it fidelity to his early and later opportunities, fidelity to himself, to his country and to mankind. His image will be idealized and his name will be cherished so long as Impartial Liberty, guarded by Impartial Law, shall be the aspiration of the peoples, the program of civil progress and the goal of humanity.

One word more. The great historic achievement with which Lincoln’s name is associated—the turning back of the wave of barbarism from overflowing this continent—was made possible only by the co-operation of millions of loyal men and women. If the Republic is to be saved from the next and possibly greater dangers which he sadly foresaw, it will be because other loyal millions, in successive processions, take on their hearts and hands the same high tasks, in the same high spirit, under the guidance of that wisdom which ever points out to the right-hearted and right-minded the new duties of new occasions.









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