

LINCOLN'S
ADVICE TO YOUNG MEN
REGARDING
GOOD AND BAD HABITS

AN ADDRESS
BY
JUDD STEWART

AT THE THIRD ANNUAL DINNER OF
THE LINCOLN FRATERNITY
FEBRUARY 12, 1917
PLAINFIELD, NEW JERSEY



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SINCE man is largely the product of environment it is necessary in order to get a correct conception of a man to consider the surroundings and the conditions under which he grew up.

When Abraham Lincoln was born there were no railroads, steamships, telegraph, telephone, trolleys, electric lights or gas, not even coal-oil, or kerosene lamps. His studying by the light of a log fire or a tallow dip was not an indication of great poverty; the only other light to be had was a tallow candle.

The log cabin in which Abraham Lincoln lived was without windows, but generally speaking was the same kind of a house that the majority of his neighbors lived in. In the western part of the country log houses were quite common in my boyhood and I was born in one and helped to mould candles, so there is nothing peculiar in these physical surroundings of Abraham Lincoln's youth and I can personally testify that log cabins and primitive living do not of themselves contribute to greatness. He was habitually free from envy, for he was not much, if any, worse off than his neighbors. His early life grounded him in the principles of honesty until honesty became a habit: Honesty of thought, honesty of purpose, honesty to himself. Early habits are more lasting, and it was his

habit of honesty formed early in life which lasted till his death: A habit he could not break.

He grew up among ordinary common people, not bothered with morning and afternoon and extra edition newspapers, free from the struggle of the present day for wealth and untroubled in his mind by the desire for excursions, shows, and excitements common to men of to-day.

His weekly newspaper had no cartoon page to distract attention: he developed in character free from avarice, from malice, envy or jealousy, without pretense or desire for show or fame, without any particular ambition other than that of desiring that people should think well of him and *that* only by being worthy of their esteem.

As a boy and as a young man he was more mature probably than his boyhood associates and this may have been due to his physique. His honesty earned him the title of "Honest Abe" and his maturity is shown best in his letter to his law partner in 1848. Lincoln at the time was a member of Congress and although only 39 years old had in a letter referring to Alex Stephens' speech said that it brought tears to his *old* eyes.

The letter *from* Herndon evidently complained about some political friction and Lincoln wrote: "Your letter covering the newspaper slips was received last night. The subject of that letter is painful to me and I cannot but think there is

some mistake in your impression of the motives of the old men. I suppose I am now one of the old men and I declare on my veracity, which I think is good with you, that nothing could afford me more satisfaction than to learn that you and others of my young friends at home are doing battle in the contest and endearing themselves to the people and taking a stand far above any I have ever been able to reach in their admiration. I cannot conceive that other old men feel differently; of course, I cannot demonstrate what I say; but I was young once and I am sure I was never ungenerously thrust back. I hardly know what to say. The way for a young man to rise is to improve himself every way he can, never suspecting that anybody wishes to hinder him.

“Allow me to assure you that suspicion and jealousy never did help any man in any situation. There may sometimes be ungenerous attempts to keep a young man down, and they will succeed too if he allows his mind to be diverted from its true channel to brood over the attempted injury.

“You have been a laborious studious young man. You are far better informed on almost all subjects than I have been. You cannot fail in any laudable object unless you allow your mind to be improperly directed. I have somewhat the advantage of you in the world’s experience, merely by being older and it is this

that induces me to advise." Sage advice from so young a man!

It is I think true that charity and kindness are found more frequently in poor people than in rich, and being poor may account for the great gentleness, kindness and charity which Lincoln displayed. The letter to Herndon from which I quoted was written in July, 1848. In December of the same year he wrote a letter to his half-brother which is a good example of kindness, charity, honesty and common sense. He wrote—

"Your request for eighty dollars, I do not think it best to comply with now. At the various times when I have helped you a little you have said to me "We can get along very well now" but in a very short time I find you in the same difficulty again. Now this can only happen by some defect in your conduct. What that defect is I think I know. You are not lazy and still you *are* an *idler*. I doubt whether since I saw you, you have done a good whole day's work, in any one day. You do not very much *dislike* to work and still you do not *work* much, merely because it does not seem to you that you could get much for it. This habit of uselessly wasting time is the whole difficulty, and it is vastly important to you, and still more so to your children that you should break this habit. It is more important to them, because they have longer to live and can keep out

of an idle habit before they are in it easier than they can get out after they are in.

"You are now in need of some ready money; and what I propose is that you shall go to work, 'tooth and nail' for somebody who will give you money for it. Let father and your boys take charge of things at home, prepare for a crop and make the crop; and you go to work for the best money wages or in discharge of any debt you owe that you can get. And to secure you a fair reward for your labor, I now promise you that for every dollar you will, between this and the first of next May, get for your own labor either in money or in your own indebtedness I will then give you one other dollar. By this, if you hire yourself at ten dollars a month from me you will get ten more making twenty dollars a month for your work. In this, I do not mean you shall go off to St. Louis or the lead mines, or the gold mines in California, but I mean for you to go at it for the best wages you can get close to home in Coles County. Now, if you will do this you will soon be out of debt, and what is better you will have a habit that will keep you from getting in debt again, but if I should now clear you out, next year you will be just as deep in as ever. You say you would almost give your place in heaven for seventy dollars or eighty dollars. Then you value your place in heaven very cheaply,

for I am sure you can with the offer I make you get the seventy dollars or eighty dollars for four or five months' work.

"You say if I furnish you the money you will deed me the land and if you don't pay the money back you will deliver possession—nonsense. If you can't now live with the land, how will you then live without it? You have always been kind to me and I do not now mean to be unkind to you. On the contrary, if you will but follow my advice, you will find it worth more than eight times eighty dollars to you."

On the same sheet of paper he wrote a letter to his father in which he said "I cheerfully send you the \$20 which you say is necessary to save your land from sale."

In addressing the temperance society at Springfield on Washington's Birthday, Lincoln closed by saying "To add brightness to the sun or glory to the name of Washington is alike impossible. Let none attempt it. In solemn awe pronounce the name and in its naked deathless splendor leave it shining on."

This may now be truly said of the name of Lincoln.

"He wore no official robes either on his body or his soul. He never pretended to be more or less, or other or different from what he really was." An honest man.

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