

Melancholy: When Down is Up

A sermon by Rev. Steven Epperson

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Last Wednesday, before I knew what I was doing, I chose #360 “Here We Have Gathered” as our opening song this morning. We’ve sung this many times; it’s a good in-gathering hymn. But there was something about the lyrics this time that made me stop and pay attention. We’re gathered into a circle of kinship, side-by-side, it states; all ages, women and men, the innocent and sage alike, celebrating and sharing what we can of our ourselves—the small and the extraordinary—that takes place in the days of our lifetime. Come and step inside, we sing, and then, we invoke a vision of what we hope will happen when we step into that circle, our circle: may you experience a kindly word, when you speak, may you be truly heard. That outcome depends on all of us, doesn’t it?

Why do we describe and aspire to achieve these things? I think it may be there in verse three. The lyrics read: our lives have battles; they have sorrows, regrets, pain and shadows. This song names states of experience and emotion, realities that come with being human, that would be *inhuman* of us not to acknowledge and respond to with our own hard won knowledge—a knowledge that leads, by the mystery of grit and grace, to kindness and the giving of ourselves—*That’s* what heals; *There’s* where we grow. Just twenty minutes ago, we sang: “Let us not forget: we who now gather know each other’s pain; kindness can heal us; as we give we gain. Sing now in friendship, this, our hearts’ own song.” Is this our heart’s song? And if so, why?

I think it has to do with *human dignity*. Here the First Principle of our religious tradition seems rightly placed. It’s at the very head of those Seven Principles we covenant to affirm and promote; principles essential to who and what we are as Unitarians—people of all ages and kinds, gathered side-by-side in this circle of kinship of ours. In this hymn, we’re saying this is actually the kind of place, and we’re the kind of people, where you can bring your *whole self* and be welcomed, affirmed and valued--your *whole self*, not just your work self, not your facebook-for-public-display-happy-emojis-self—not these, but all of you—including, and astonishingly so: our sorrows, regrets, pain and shadows.

Human dignity—that’s where we and our Seven Principles start, isn’t it? That’s where we begin the work of building the beloved community. Dignity?—comes from the Latin:

dignitas—worthiness. And worth?—*that which is of value*; from the root word *WER*—to guard and keep. We’ve made a promise to guard and keep the value of the human person and her inherent worth paramount in our hierarchy of the Good. And what is astounding, and a pearl of great price, is that we sing a welcome, a hymn of solidarity with the whole selves we bring here: the self that is made of the substance of joy *and* sorrow, delight *and* pain and regret *and* contentment, light *and* shadow. **This** is the substance of our whole dignity as persons—the full range of our emotions tried in the crucible of life and embodied as expressed through our being-in-the-world, isn’t it? So I would think and believe.

A thought experiment: if you knew that an aspirant for national, elective office was a depressive, lonely alcoholic like John A MacDonald, would you vote for him? Or her? It’s come to pass, and not so long ago, that a candidate for national office who’s struggled with chronic emotional and mental distress, and been treated for “mental health” issues, has basically become unelectable. It’s become the untouchable third rail in political life

This has not always been the case. Think John A. MacDonald and the US president Abraham Lincoln and this statement by Ethan Watters:

“Every generation has its own idea about the human psyche. Culture shapes our views, expectations and experiences about how the mind and emotions work; it deeply influences the expression, reception and understanding of these states.”

I’m going to talk about Lincoln for awhile. # He was born on the same day as Charles Darwin, February 12, 1809. His family were hard-scrabble, impoverished farm folk. His mother died when he was nine, his beloved elder sister when he was seventeen. Father and son battled over the son’s indifference to farming and Abraham’s pensive, lonely persona and passion for reading, learning and aspiration to a career in the law. They were deeply estranged.

Lincoln was later locked into a mostly unhappy marriage; and he and Mary Todd suffered the deaths of two of their children: Eddie from TB when he was three, and Willie from typhoid fever during Lincoln’s second year in the Presidency when the boy was eleven.

Though widely respected in his 30s and 40s for his knowledge and practice of the law, Lincoln’s deep aspirations to serve the people in elective office had mostly come to nothing—one term in the US House of Representatives—to which he was not re-elected, due in large

measure to his opposition of the US War against Mexico in 1846; a war he presciently understood and opposed as a naked attempt by Southern States to extend and entrench the practice of slavery into the territories of the American Southwest.

By the mid 1850s, with Lincoln now in well into his fifth decade, he had all but given up on the prospect of a political career and service to his nation. He had all but resigned himself to toiling in obscurity as a circuit riding lawyer in a remote corner on the frontier of the United States. And then, in the space of a mere five years, due to an improbable, tragic, concatenation of extraordinary events, he was catapulted into the highest office of his nation.

Among the phenomena attendant and contributing to his rise to the Presidency, nothing, perhaps, is as extraordinary to those of us looking at it today, than the fact, acknowledged by all his contemporaries, that Abraham Lincoln was a profoundly and chronically sad person; and I mean miserably sad. It was etched in every line of his face and the laboured steps he trod.

“I thought him one of the worst plagued men I ever saw,” said one colleague. “No element of Mr Lincoln’s character was so marked, obvious and ingrained as his mysterious and profound melancholy,” said another. And his long-time law partner and intimate friend William Herndon remarked: “His melancholy dripped from him as he walked.” In a letter written to his law partner John Stuart, Lincoln once confessed: “I am the most miserable man living. Whether I shall ever be better I cannot tell; I awfully forebode I shall not.”

Melancholy tends to have two definitions: thoughtful or gentle sadness, and the gloomy character of someone said to have an excess of black bile. This archaic notion of black bile came from an ancient understanding of human biology going back to the Greeks and which hung on well until after Lincoln’s death; and many thought Lincoln was particularly afflicted with it. The melancholy character fascinated the Greek philosopher Aristotle who famously mused: “Why is it that those who become outstanding in philosophy, statesmanship, poetry and the arts are melancholic? Many have suffered from this excess mixture in the body.... In any case, they are all, as has been said, naturally of this character.”

The sorrowful, existentially anxious and insightful experience of melancholy has long been depicted in the arts and literature of both East and West. In the early 20th century, “depression” replaced melancholia as the preferred medical and popular cultural term for this emotional state. But modern descriptions of major depression have enough in common with age-old accounts of melancholia that for the most part, we can say they are the same thing. The big difference, writes Lincoln biographer Joshua Wolfe Shenk, is that today we often hear that the

so-called disease of depression is distinct from the experience of sadness. “But in the 19th century conception of melancholy, this was part of the overall picture. A person with a melancholy temperament was seen as one fated with both an awful burden and what the poet Lord Byron called a “fearful gift.” The burden was a sadness and despair...But the gift was a capacity for depth, wisdom—even genius.” (*Shenk, 27)

Several things that stand out for me as I’ve learned about Lincoln’s melancholy. First, is that people stood by him during bouts of suicidal depression that gripped him in his late 20s and early 30s, and in later times of lowering, persistent gloom. Back before it became unmanly for a man to publicly express his grief and woe to the point that he’d confess to thoughts, feelings and plans to end his own life, back before severe, chronic depression became a stigmatic, career killing, helpless victim making “disease”—rather than being repelled, people—and especially men!—drew closer to Lincoln in bonds of intimate sympathy and solidarity. “I have often heard men say,” wrote William Herndon, ‘That man is a man of sorrow, and I really sympathize with him.’ This sadness on the part of Mr Lincoln and the sympathy on the part of the observer,” wrote Herndon, “were a heart’s magnetic tie between the two.”

And it served Lincoln well throughout his career, and, no doubt, saved his life. People stood on suicide watches; they took him into their homes for months at a time until a devastating episode lifted—they moved closer to him, not turn away, responding heartfully to his grief and discerning within it mysterious channels of the soul running strong and deep toward some extraordinary future.

A second feature of his melancholy that stands out are the strategies he employed to weather the grim aspect of his character. He was a close and devoted reader, and could recite from heart vast passages from the tragedies of Shakespeare, the poetry of Poe and Robert Burns, the Stoics of classical Greece and Rome, and the Bible. From them, Lincoln forged a worldview that enabled him, with clear eyed realism, to read and discern what had to be done as his nation plunged toward and into Civil War. He saw the world as a deeply flawed, tragic place, governed by impersonal laws or Providence—and that ours was a humble role to play in the grand mystery of life, where imperfect people had to make the best of their poor materials. (Shenk, 90-93, 133-6)

The materials he drew from included a prodigious number of stories and jokes, the telling of which, by all accounts he was a master. Once he was at a house-raising and he determined that it was time for work to stop. He started cracking jokes and telling stories, and soon enough all the men stopped to listen, laid down their tools, and ended up laughing so hard they cried.

“A good story or joke has the same effect on me,” he said, “that I think a good square drink of whisky has on others. It puts new life in me...and if it were not these stories, jokes and jests, I would die...they are the vents of my moods and gloom.” “The core of all humor,” says Robert Mankoff, the cartoon editor of *The New Yorker*, “the reason for it all, is unhappiness.”

Profoundly alienated, comics often describe themselves as set apart from life—a fearful gift indeed. Far from being nihilists who will do anything for a laugh, most are, in fact, unusually obsessed by an intimate acquaintance with human nature and its moral and ethical dilemmas. Even in his humour, however, Lincoln revealed a search for meaning and compassion. As President, he explained several times, why he pardoned soldiers who deserted for cowardice, saying: “Why, it would frighten the poor devils to death to shoot them.” (see Shenk, 113-18)

Finally, throughout his life, in spite or because of his fearful gift, Lincoln knew that he had a great work to do—and the suffering he had endured gave him a clarity, discipline and faith in his final short years to achieve that work in that hardest of times: the titanic struggle to keep the Union together and end slavery for all time—*that’s* what set him apart and beyond all his contemporaries. His story confounds all who see melancholy or depression as a grab bag of disease symptoms to be eliminated. Suffering, though no one would wish for it or seek it out, can be a fearful gift for emotional growth. “What one actually needs,” the psychiatrist Viktor Frankl argued, is not the absence of tension or a happy aspect; rather, it is “the striving and struggling for a worthwhile goal.” Frankl proposed that all of us, especially those bearing the unkind load of emotional weight need a purpose that will draw on our talents and lead us to something like redemption. (see Shenk, 124)

For Lincoln, that purpose was his tragic, necessary destiny to lead a people at war with themselves, to end the thoroughly rotten scourge of slavery destroying the States and thus give rise to a new birth of freedom, and with charity for all, to help bind up the nation’s wounds in order to achieve a just and lasting peace. It was a titanic burden, and this melancholy man was uniquely, fearfully gifted to bear its load.

It’s a huge historical canvas; but I want to share one detail of it. Thousands wrote personal letters to Lincoln, to most of which he personally replied. I want to read one of them.

People feared for the life of Fanny McCullough, a sensitive twenty-one year old woman who, on receiving the news of the death of her father in combat, sank into a ghastly suicidal depression. A friend of both Lincoln and the grieving McCullough family wrote to the President

asking if he would write a letter of condolence to the young woman. On December 23, 1862, with the war a disaster for the Union, and many in his own party demanding he resign, Lincoln took up his pen and wrote the following letter:

Dear Fanny: it is with deep grief that I learn of the death of your kind and brave Father; and, especially, that it is affecting your young heart beyond what is common in these cases. In this sad world of ours, sorrow comes to all; and, in the young it comes with bitterest agony...The older have learned to ever expect it. I am anxious to afford some alleviation of your present distress. Perfect relief is not possible, except perhaps with time. You can not now realize that you will ever feel better. Is this not so? And yet it is a mistake. You are sure to be happy again. To know this, which is certainly true, will make you some less miserable now. I have had experience enough to know what I say; and you need only to believe it, to feel better at once. The memory of your dear Father, instead of an agony, will yet be a sad sweet feeling in your heart, of a purer, and holier sort than you have known before. Please present my kind regards to your afflicted mother,
Your sincere friend
A Lincoln.

There is nothing necessarily ennobling about melancholy and the suffering it brings; I'd wish them on no one. That said, the agony involved can smash through the incessant allure of ego; it can reveal an accurate sense of our own limitations; that there are some things we just can't control—like the pain of our failures and grinding heartbreak over the death of a friend or loved one. And the moments of peace and the easing of grief?—those too comes from somewhere beyond our control; and in ways past my knowing, it can give rise to an awareness of what others are enduring. And when that happens, we feel a call, a moral responsibility, to respond.

And thus we sang together in our opening hymn, and I bring these words to a close:

“Life has its battles, sorrows and regret: but in the shadows let us not forget: we who now gather know each other's pain; kindness can heal us: as we give we gain. Sing now in friendship this, our heart's own song.”

*(It's clear that the idea for this sermon and much of its content was provided by the extraordinary book written by Joshua Wolf Shenk, *Lincoln's Melancholy: How Depression Challenged a President and Fueled His Greatness*; for a powerfully accurate rendition of the mature Lincoln in film—I highly recommend Daniel Day-Lewis's portrayal in the Stephen Spielberg movie *Lincoln*.)