

“In this sad world of ours, sorrow comes to all”: Lincoln’s Empathetic Humanity

By December of 1862, Abraham Lincoln had reached a markedly low point in his life. On December 17, Lincoln’s close confidant, Orville Browning, described the president’s state in his journal: “I saw in a moment that he was in distress – that more than usual trouble was pressing against him.”¹ Browning went on to record in that same entry that Lincoln confided that he felt more despondent than at any other point in his life, lamenting to Browning, “We are now at the brink of destruction...it appears to me the Almighty is against us, and I can hardly see a ray of hope.”² For Lincoln, 1862 had been a trial; he faced great tribulation and was at the precipice to either endure through it or collapse under the weight of the monumental tasks before him.

On February 20, Lincoln faced the personal tragedy of the loss of his son while working diligently to guide the nation through the first and devastating year of the Civil War. The president was observed in a “stupor of grief” for the days following his son’s untimely death.³ The loss of his Willie was undoubtedly shattering, yet the demands of Lincoln’s position and national crisis at hand required Lincoln to persevere and effectively perform his executive duties.

By the bitter winter of 1862, Lincoln carried the weight of the war, a new national strategy of emancipation, the demands of presidential management, and the sting of personal loss. During the month of December, the Union Army lost at Fredericksburg, and Lincoln faced strain within his cabinet. For any man, one of

these factors alone might contribute to a breaking of the spirit and a sense of personal failure, but Abraham Lincoln endured.

From the beginning of the year to the drafting of his condolence letter to Fanny McCullough, Lincoln had sunk into a melancholy state – “his six-foot-four-inch frame seemed to stoop under the weight of his burdens.”⁴ Although Lincoln was unquestionably affected by the events he encountered, he maintained composure and practiced that virtue which he so often invoked when giving advice to others: perseverance. While essayist Joshua Wolf Shenk argues for Lincoln’s behavior as depressive, through the Fanny McCullough letter, it is hard not to argue Lincoln’s capability to turn his experience into a purposeful example for others.

Lincoln had the opportunity to inspire purpose out of tragedy when he was repeatedly asked by his friend and newly appointed Supreme Court justice, David Davis, to write a letter of condolence to the twenty-two year old daughter of a deceased friend. Lieutenant Colonel William McCullough had been killed while refusing to surrender to confederate troops near Coffeesville, Mississippi on December 5, 1862.⁵

William McCullough met Abraham Lincoln while Lincoln rode the Eighth Judicial Circuit Court through central Illinois as an attorney. McCullough was a well-respected citizen of Bloomington, Illinois and bore the title of sheriff for three terms and Circuit Clerk for four terms.⁶ It was in his capacity as Circuit Clerk that he met and knew Abraham Lincoln. When Lincoln rode the circuit through McLean County, he had a group of friends and families with whom he regularly stayed. The David Davis family, Leonard and Laura Swett, the Ormes, and the McCulloughs were all

counted amongst Lincoln's Bloomington social circle. Leonard Swett, Judge Davis and Lincoln were known as "the great triumvirate of the eighth judicial court," with McCullough being an important component of the McLean County leg of the court.⁷ McCullough became an ardent Lincoln supporter from the time that Lincoln ran and represented the seventh district as a Whig through his 1860 presidential campaign.

At the outbreak of the Civil War, William McCullough's patriotic commitment outweighed his physical handicaps. He had lost his arm in a thresher accident and lost eyesight in one eye when his gun backfired while celebrating at a local parade.⁸ McCullough, forty-eight years old at the outbreak of the Civil War, petitioned to be able to fight for the Union. His petition was accepted and McCullough joined Colonel T. Lyle Dickey's Fourth Cavalry Regiment as a Lieutenant Colonel along with 92 other men from McLean County in 1861.⁹ He was an adept horseman, and was well respected by his comrades. Thus, his physical impairment did not deter him from being ranked as Lieutenant Colonel and serving bravely for the Union cause.

On December 9, 1862, Judge David Davis and the Honorable Leonard Swett received a private dispatch from Colonel Dickey alerting them to the news of McCullough's death.¹⁰ Because Davis was in Washington, the duty fell to Swett to notify the McCulloughs of their loss. Leonard and his wife, Laura, immediately spoke with Nannie, Fanny's older sister, and together they broke the news to Fanny and her mother. Upon hearing about her father's death, Fanny was "so agitated and inconsolable that Swett sent for a doctor."¹¹ Shortly after the doctor came, Fanny locked herself in her room.

After several reminders from Davis, Lincoln penned a condolence letter to Fanny on December 23, 1862. When considering the duress and pressure that Lincoln was under as he wrote these words, the short letter is a profound sentiment. In a few sentences, Lincoln showed his great capacity for empathy and put aside his own personal anguish to provide encouragement to a friend in need. He did not dwell on the official issues at hand though David Davis suggested that; “the cares of the government are heavy on him now.”¹² Instead, Lincoln spoke compassionately for the particular grief of a girl he knew.

In the opening of the letter, Lincoln addressed Fanny’s loss and indicated that, “it is affecting your young heart beyond what is common in such cases.”¹³ Although he does not otherwise indicate it, Lincoln was referring to the “condition” of Fanny McCullough after news of her father’s death. David Davis had learned from Mrs. Swett that Fanny, “neither ate or slept since the tidings of her Father’s death, but shuts herself in her room, in solitude, where she passes her time in pacing the floor in violent grief, or sitting in lethargic silence.”¹⁴ It is likely that Davis relayed this information to Lincoln as a means to convince the busy president that the matter was pressing.

Lincoln went on in the letter, “in this sad world of ours, sorrow comes to all; and, to the young, it comes with a bitterest agony, because it takes them unawares.”¹⁵ Some historians, such as David Donald, posit that this line of Lincoln’s letter marks this as an extremely significant document. According to Donald’s interpretation, It is one of the only times that Lincoln makes a reference to his mother’s death, his own childhood tragedy. Donald suggests that Lincoln’s

childhood loss was hugely impactful because Nancy Hanks Lincoln did not hold a belief in the afterlife.¹⁶ Her death signified finality, and it created a shocking, sudden, and potentially spiritually confusing loss for Lincoln at a young age. Lincoln does not explicitly define this as a moment of spiritual definition, but one might speculate that in the face of trauma, especially during the formative years, Lincoln may have developed his distance in regards to personal piety at the death of his mother. Lincoln took the moment of reflection in writing his letter to Fanny McCullough to formulate what he had experienced many years prior.

Lincoln then conveyed wisdom on the process of grieving. This section of Lincoln's letter to Fanny mirrored his common propensity to admonish and encourage towards perseverance. He understood that "perfect relief is not possible, except with time"; he lived through the grief of many losses to know better than to tell Fanny that all would be well. He offered a simple, even formulaic solution: she needed only to accept the truth that her misery could be immediately assuaged if she would believe that she was "sure to be happy again."¹⁷ While some might take this as a flippant turn of phrase, Lincoln was being sincere in his advice.

His sentiment to Fanny was not unlike his charge to George Latham that, "you *can* not fail, if you resolutely determine, that you *will* not."¹⁸ Though the letters are drafted for different purposes, it is not difficult to draw on some important similarities. Lincoln, in both letters, gave advice to a young person that he knew in both; the young person is under personal distress. Lincoln related to them the wisdom of empathetic experience: in Latham's case, failure, and in Fanny's, the

bitter grief of loss. Ultimately, it was Lincoln's intimate understanding of death that enables him to write with such conviction and truth.

Lincoln ended the letter to Fanny with a comforting and profoundly truthful statement: "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." Lincoln was attempting to convince Fanny that there was value to enduring through the pain of grief. The "purer, and holier" feeling that Fanny might someday feel was Lincoln's way of suggesting that pain and suffering had the potential to produce a more complete and refined life than one without it. As a man who took the advice of the Bible seriously, Lincoln seems here to be holding on to the maxim from Romans that, "tribulation worketh patience; and patience, experience; and experience, hope."¹⁹

In fact, Fanny did endure although the details of her life are not many. Tragically, Fanny received news of the death of her suitor, Joseph Orme (also the brother of her brother-in-law, William Ward Orme) just days after she received the letter from Abraham Lincoln, on December 31. Her beloved brother-in-law also died in 1866 after suffering from tuberculosis that was contracted during the campaign at Vicksburg.²⁰ She did, however, go on to endure the tragedies as Lincoln had advised. She eventually married another Orme brother, Frank, and they moved to Washington, D.C. Fanny McCullough Orme died childless at eighty years old.

In the midst of a dark and trying year, Lincoln rose out of his own experience to comfort a young girl. He did not reflect in the letter on his own experience, but he spoke with great vulnerability and candor to expose truth and direction for Fanny

McCullough. Shenk has argued that Lincoln's melancholy fueled Lincoln's greatness: that Lincoln's response to suffering "helped him to be effective and creative; and his persistent and searching eye for the pure meaning of the nation's struggle – contributed mightily to his good work."²¹ Ultimately, Lincoln's greatness was in his ability to fortuitously follow his own good advice and persevere through trial in order to achieve great things for the sake of others.

¹ Orville Browning. *The Diary of Orville Hickman Browning Volume 1, 1850-1854*. ed.

² Browning. *The Diary of Orville Hickman Browning Volume 1, 1850-1854*. 1: 599-601.

³ Washington correspondence by Van [D. W. Bartlett], 26 February, Springfield, Massachusetts, Republican, 28 February 1862.

⁴ Shenk, Joshua Wolf. *Lincoln's Melancholy: How Depression Challenged a President and Fueled His Greatness*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 2005. 187.

⁵ Dretske, Lisa, and Candace Summers. "William McCullough."

<http://mchistory.org/research/resources/william-mccullough.php> (accessed June 16, 2014).

⁶ Fraker, Guy C. *Lincoln's Ladder to the Presidency: The Eighth Judicial Court*. Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2012. 83.

⁷ Eckley, Robert S., *Lincoln's Forgotten Friend: Leonard Swett*. Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2012. 121.

⁸ Fraker. 83.

⁹ Eckley, 121.

¹⁰ Swett, Leonard. *Leonard Swett to Judge David Davis*, December 9, 1862. Letter. From Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library, *The David Davis Papers*, Box 41, Folder: O-9 (accessed June 19, 2014).

¹¹ Eckley, 121.

¹² Davis, David. *David Davis to Laura Swett*, December 21, 1862. Letter. From Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library, *The David Davis Papers*, Box 41, Folder: O-9 (accessed June 19, 2014).

¹³ Lincoln, Abraham. *Abraham Lincoln to Fanny McCullough*, December 23, 1862. Letter. [Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln](#), edited by Roy P. Basler et al.

¹⁴ Swett, Laura. *Laura Swett to David Davis*, December 13, 1862. Letter. From Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library, *The David Davis Papers*, Box 41, Folder: O-9 (accessed June 19, 2014).

¹⁵ Lincoln. *Lincoln to McCullough*. Letter.

¹⁶ Donald, David Herbert. *"We are Lincoln Men": Abraham Lincoln and His Friends*. New York: Simon & Schuster Paperbacks, 2003. 6.

¹⁷ Lincoln. *Lincoln to McCullough*. Letter.

¹⁸ Lincoln, Abraham. *Abraham Lincoln to George Latham*, July 22, 1860. [Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln](#), edited by Roy P. Basler et al.

¹⁹ Romans 5:3-4, KJV

²⁰ Dretske, Lisa, and Candace Summers. "William Ward Orme and Nancy "Nannie" McCullough Orme Dyson." [William Ward Orme](#) (accessed June 16, 2014).

²¹ Shenk. *Lincoln's Melancholy*, 189.