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“The Democratic Mind & The Democratic Spirit”

Dedicated to the memory of Dietrich Bonhoeffer

In 1960 John Knox Jessup, writing for Life magazine, made the crucial break between American patriotism and American nationalism. Patriotism, especially as faith in democracy, had a future separate from nationalism. This is part of what he wrote.

“Nation states may no longer be the most meaningful integers of creative political thought.... The great national purpose today must have something to say about human nature, how to keep it as human and as rational as possible.”

(John Knox Jessup, “The National Purpose. America in Crisis: an urgent summons.” 1960)

The opportunity before us now in America is to emerge into the full promise of democracy. Democracy requires fearlessness. In a word: citizens willing to vote their conscience and then to back it up with their lives and fortunes. To live so is to have the courage to be, to be an individual, fully, and to be and to act in a community of equal individuals.

Only fear stops us from realizing this human fulfillment offered by democracy. The fear is that our desires will not be met and so we focus only on the fulfillment of our desires. Death of course is the extinction of those desires, the end of the pursuit of happiness. But if we put aside such desires and claim the fuller freedom, the freedom to live and the freedom to die, then we can spread our wings and fly in the high air of democracy.

Now Abraham Lincoln was a tolerant humanist. In the face of the Primitive and Free Baptists (as they were called) of his day--the Evangelical Christians of the frontier--he believed, rather, in the secular ideals of the Enlightenment: Individual freedom with law over everyone; economic opportunity for both labor and capital together; and a legal union of people held together by reason and democratic government.

Democracy was the universal answer for the peoples of the world against the plague of the despotism of tyrants, and the hierarchical oppression of aristocratic elites and church monopolies. Enlightenment values were not a nationalistic code, but had come from Scotland, France, England, with a Protestant Reformation spirit rooted in Luther's Germany and Calvin's Switzerland.

Americans were, as he said, "God's almost chosen people," because of this international secular philosophy of democracy. Thomas Jefferson was his intellectual idol and, like Jefferson, he could have become a Unitarian.

But Lincoln was more than a tolerant humanist. He had fearless courage and he had bred-in-the-bone humility. So when the foundations of his tolerant, humanistic, Enlightenment world were shaken he had a personal and a communal way of coming back to life.

And so might we.

Our plight can be defined in the words of the theologian Reinhold Niebuhr as he built a case for the continuation of Democracy in the face of Communism's global threat after the victories of World War II. Our vulnerability was, he wrote, that "The social and historical optimism of democratic life...represents the typical illusion of an advancing class which mistook its own progress for the progress of the world." (Page 2, "The Children of Light and The Children of Darkness")

Now we will go back in a moment to look at how Lincoln absorbed the nearly crushing blow to his world and his world view, and how that is poignantly relevant to our day.

But let's get Reinhold Niebuhr's telling criticism of our way of thinking clear.

He is saying that we have been proud, not humble, in thinking that the progress of our middle class democratic way of life is the way the world is going, we are a part of a world of progress and the progress of the world. Therefore the world should progress as we have and are. Now he wrote that at Union Seminary in New York City in 1944.

But he had a deep warning about the foundations of our pride. Across the hall from him Paul Tillich, refugee of Nazi Germany, was writing a book of sermons called "The Shaking of the Foundations." Both these men felt the tremors that are now our earthquake.

Let me lead you through one more quote from Niebuhr if I may, "Since bourgeois civilization.... is now obviously in grave peril.... it must be obvious that democracy, in so far as it is a middle-class ideology, also faces doom."

In a word his case is that the habits of our hearts are so individualistic and materialistic that we cannot stand up to the world's need for communal justice and spiritual vitality.

And that is where Abraham Lincoln re-enters our story. Not only was he a person of fearless courage and deep humility, he was a believer in communal justice and spiritual, even religious, vitality. The end of slavery was the great moment for communal justice. The judgment and mercy of God, to Lincoln, was the beginning of charity and mercy as true religious vitality, personal and social. He, as Leo Tolstoy acclaimed, was the greatest of world leaders because he preached love for your enemies, something beyond tolerant humanism, Christ-like is what Tolstoy said. To Lincoln democracy was more than a middle class way of life.

So what happened to Lincoln? How might that be relevant?

Well it all really happened on January 4th of 1854.

There was in Illinois a political opponent of Lincoln's who was emerging on the national scene. He was a slick talker. He had a beautiful young, young, wife, whose father gave him a slave plantation in Mississippi for their wedding. He

desperately wanted to become President. He liked all the best things money could buy. He also wanted to make a lot of money. So he thought that he could get congress to decide to have a corporation build a rail line through the north out to the far west. That would make his area even richer, and him too. There had been talk of building this rail road through the south so that slavery could extend into Texas and then even Mexico and the Mexican part of the new war-annexed California area. Well all this very well dressed, rich, best-cigar-and-wine man had to do was to make a deal with the South. In exchange for their NOT having the rail road, he would introduce a law that would say each state could decide whether it was slave or free on its own.

This was a negotiation, a best deal. It had nothing to do with Enlightenment values or even democracy itself. Slavery would become a states' right and not a national issue. So Stephen A. Douglas got his Union Pacific Railroad and the South got its chance to really make national its regional slave way of life. Immediately civil war, local violence, hate crimes, broke out in Kansas as people fought to make it one way or the other.

Immediately the Whig Party disintegrated. A whole political party dissolved because of what this one man did to prepare his way to the White House. The other party, the Democratic party, permanently split. The national church denominations soon split. Presbyterians became two churches, north and south, not one.

Nothing like this had happened in their modern times, and it rivals the Great Depression and 9/11 in our time. A seismic shift, an earth quake, in other words. The shaking of the foundations.

Now here is how Lincoln felt when he got the news that Douglas's Kansas Nebraska Act of January 4th 1854 had passed, Lincoln who believed in Enlightenment values and in America's world-wide promise of democracy.

“(It and Douglas)...took us by surprise—astounded us—We were thunderstruck and stunned; and we reeled and fell in utter confusion.” (Shenk, p 130)

Can you imagine Lincoln thunderstruck, utterly confused, reeling and falling?

Can you imagine anything happening in your life, our life, our time, that could so upset the apple cart of our way of life? Make our values seem arbitrary not established, make our decency seem compromised, make greedy selfish people prominent and marginalized people endangered, and the promise of America itself called into question? Can you?

Now Lincoln's life had had the normal successes and tragedies of middle class American life. He had lost his father, father-in-law and one son, his second son, in 1850. But he had a new son and his law practice was growing. His political life, however, was over, that seemed sure.

Except, Lincoln was a person of fearless courage, deep humility, and he really did believe in equality, law, justice, the union, Enlightenment values and the promise of America as the gift of self-government for people rather than a tyrant's control.

So along with telling us that he was astounded and stunned and reeling and falling he said, "But we rose each fighting, grasping whatever we could first reach—a scythe—a pitchfork—a chopping axe, or a butcher's cleaver. We struck in the direction of the sound; and we were rapidly closing in upon him."

Lincoln knew his Revolutionary War history and his Scottish history, and Douglas would not last.

Things would get worse. The Supreme Court would rule that Black people did not exist before the law. Slavery was unreachable by any legal means. It looked like the Supreme Court itself was in the pocket of the South and that the President was in cahoots with the Court, the branches of the government were not holding each other in check. Congress was powerless and hopelessly divided.

But from the dark moment of January 1854 nine years pass, and by 1863 Lincoln himself is about to appoint the new Chief Justice of the United States, an anti-slave man if there ever was one, Lincoln had the Emancipation Proclamation on his desk, and the 13th Amendment as the King's Cure for slavery was within his grasp. He was the President and his belief in a legal

union of the people held together by law and the idea of democracy was about to have its new birth of freedom.

None of that would have happened had Lincoln not had fearless courage and deep humility. Why and how did he have such virtue, and did it make his belief in democracy more than just a middle class ideology? Our critic of the limits of our ideals, Niebuhr, wrote that, "If democracy is to survive it must find a more adequate cultural basis than the philosophy which has informed the building of the bourgeois world."

We must live for more than our individualism and our materialism; and we must have a way of settling the conflicts between private wealth and commonwealth. The American dream cannot be, nor ever was, just the pursuit of our own happiness, nor the gaining of our own wealth. We will need a social idealism rooted in the deep qualities of our individual self—and that is what Lincoln had, those two deep qualities, fearless courage and deep humility.

Those are requirements for the survival of democracy. Fearless courage comes with the ability know both how to live and how to die. Death is the central religious issue in life. Lincoln always was thinking about death. He brooded over death, he lived death in his heart and soul. His dead mother at nine, his dead sister at 19, the dead love of his life, and his dead sons, and then the war dead. He was willing and able to identify with these deaths, feel them, know them, willing to participate in the life of death and dying. He didn't love death in any way, but he, like any religious saint—kept death ever before his eyes, always in his heart, as his way of also loving life.

The corollary to fearless courage is tragedy, and tragedy, as the Greeks knew, is the birth place of humility. Tragedy is the cauldron that, if held at the right distance, warms the body and the soul. Tragedy is the depth of life known and felt. The Shock of Recognition, said Aristotle, is the end of pride.

Now surprisingly death and tragedy come into our lives as democratic things. Socrates, like Jesus, took death out of the hands of the aristocrat and the warrior and made choosing death a matter not of national or tribal or city honor, but a matter of mind, a matter of belief, a matter of The Logos, the

Torah that gives meaning and value to life. Socrates was willing and able to choose death for the sake of the honest pursuit of knowledge and even more wisdom, the knowledge of virtue. And he would rather die than live a lie, or a falsehood, or an unacknowledged truth. That is the essential virtue that makes democracy work: A love of truth freely given, freely known, and a willingness to sacrifice. There is a Buddhist way to do this, a Christian way to do this, an Islamic way to do this, a Hebrew way and a Hindi way to do this, and a supremely human, Stoic, way to do this.

Once we choose to love truth and knowledge freely we can decide how to live and how to die, and that decision takes fear out of life. The Stoics discovered what FDR repeated, that the only thing we have to fear is fear itself. Once we no longer fear losing our this, or losing our that, then we are free to have the life that is before us. Courage to master the fear of death is essential then for democracy to work. We need the free mind to vote as we choose and the courage to give our lives, fortunes and sacred honor for that vote, that belief. And to give that freedom, that right, that respect, humbly, to everyone in our communal society.

The Moravians have grave yards where men together and women together are buried, separately, as are children. They call it The Democracy of Death. We die into the human family not our own family. The democracy of death starts now while we are still alive, alive and desiring the courage to live fearlessly.

Fearless life saps the power of the tyrant who depends on our fear like a vampire on blood. And tragedy saps the pride that keeps us from seeing the other as our self.

Tragedy is the source of that deep humility, and Lincoln had a tragic heart and a tragic mind. He read the tragedies of Shakespeare. He had too, for his own comfort and nurturance. He loved the tragic and the romantic poets Burns and Byron. And of course he had the saddest face in the world because he had the greatest capacity to hold sadness, and so he had no selfish pride, and that made him free to lead and to guide, to follow and to belong to know how to live and how to die.

Democracy then is rooted in our ability to have these virtues, and our religious life, our spiritual life, is the path by which we discover and nurture them, for ourselves, for our nation, for our world. The democratic mind has a fearless heart of courage rooted in a deeply humble spirit.

Let it be so.