

## THE ABRAHAM LINCOLN YOU DON'T KNOW

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I bet that like most people,

you know EIGHT things about Abraham Lincoln –

1. He was born in a log cabin and grew up poor;
2. He married Mary Todd, who was somewhat crazy, and looked like a dumpy version of Sally Field;
3. He spent most of his adult life in Springfield, Illinois;
4. He gained national prominence debating Stephen Douglas before he ran for President;
5. The Civil War monopolized his Presidency;
6. In mid- war, he issued the Emancipation Proclamation;
7. His Gettysburg Address and Second Inaugural Address are regarded as the most eloquent speeches in American history; and
8. John Wilkes Booth assassinated him at Ford's Theater, shortly after the Civil War ended.

These 8 points, known by all of you,

make up the skeleton of Lincoln's life,

And in the next few minutes, I want to put meat on the bones and bring Lincoln alive.

To do that,

I want to cover 3 areas of his life that you probably don't know,

that will help you understand what it was

that led him to become our greatest American hero.

**First, here's something you probably don't know about Lincoln's early years.**

That is -- from the time he was a young boy, until he left home,  
Abraham Lincoln had a totally dysfunctional  
relationship with his father, Tom Lincoln.

Tom was a sub-mediocre carpenter and farmer,  
who drifted with his family from Kentucky to Indiana to Illinois,  
was always in dire poverty, and lacked even a semblance of ambition.  
One neighbor described him as "poor white trash."

He was also illiterate -- and abhorred anyone who could read or write --

This caused real problems in the Lincoln home because as a child,  
Abe loved reading more than anything,  
because he believed reading was the key to opening up a life for success.

Instead of encouraging his son to read,  
Tom was known to throw away Abe's books,  
Because he wanted his son to spend all his waking hours farming in the fields,  
such that young Abe functioned essentially as a slave indentured to his father.

When Abe finally left Tom's home in 1831,  
for the next 20 years until his dad's death,  
there's no record that they ever saw each other again or had any communications.

And when Tom Lincoln died in 1851,  
Abraham Lincoln refused to attend his dad's funeral!

You may ask,

“Why is it important that Abe Lincoln had a hostile relationship with his father?”

How does that put meat on the bones

of what made Abe grow into the man he became?

Here's the answer:

History is filled with the story of boys (who became men) whose ambition

was driven by the desire to exceed their dad's achievements –

allowing a son to justify to himself and others

that his chosen path in life was the *RIGHT* choice,

and to have followed in his father's footsteps would have been the WRONG choice.

Besides Lincoln, historians agree that this desire to achieve way beyond what dad did,

was certainly what drove Lyndon Johnson and Ronald Reagan

out of their adult life starting blocks,

and it also inspired 39-year old Theodore Roosevelt to join the Army,

and lead the Rough Riders up San Juan Hill,

to atone for his father's cowardice during the Civil War.

And it was massive ambition, starting at a young age,

that drove Abe Lincoln to overachieve.

When he first ran for public office at age 23,

Lincoln announced:

“Every man is said to have his peculiar ambition . . . .

I have no other so great as being truly esteemed by my fellow men,

by rendering myself worthy of their esteem.”

What went unsaid in that statement,

but which Abe Lincoln surely thought at age 23 was:

“[Unlike my father], my ambition is to be truly esteemed by my fellow men,  
and, [unlike my father], I want to render myself worthy of their esteem.”

Years later, his law partner William Herndon

described Lincoln’s ambition as “an engine that knew no rest.”

Lincoln’s unquenchable thirst to rise above the dire poverty of his childhood,

and aspire to do great things, was fundamental to his personality,

and it was driven, at least in part,

by the desire to rise above his aimless, illiterate, and harsh father.

**The second thing about Lincoln you probably don’t realize,**

but which puts meat on his bones

pertains to his 23 years as a practicing lawyer.

Yes, I know you already know that before he became President,

Abe was a lawyer in Springfield –

but what you probably don’t know

was that Abraham Lincoln was a spectacular lawyer, a virtuoso,

who pushed himself to the limit,

and became one of the most respected trial and appellate attorneys

in his part of the country during the 1840’s and 50’s.

Here are some facts which help paint the picture of Lincoln the Super Lawyer:

- First – in his legal career, Abe tried over 1000 jury trials to verdict – meaning he averaged almost 1 jury trial per week for over 20 years.  
26 of our 44 American Presidents have been lawyers.  
Abraham Lincoln tried more cases than the other 25 combined.
- Next – Lincoln’s achievements in trial work were matched by his success as an appellate lawyer.  
He argued over 400 cases to the Illinois Supreme Court – and even argued 1 case to the United States Supreme Court.
- Next – because Springfield in Lincoln’s time had less than 5000 people, to generate income year round, Abe’s trial work kept him away from home and on the road 6 months a year – riding the circuit in the seventeen counties around Springfield.
- Finally – in addition to his skill and work ethic, Abe built a sterling professional reputation throughout Illinois because he had an unusual trait for a trial lawyer –  
He favored and pursued settlement of his cases over the risk and cost of going to trial.  
Famously, he once told a group of young lawyers that they should “Discourage litigation. Persuade your neighbors to compromise whenever you can.  
Point out to them how the nominal winner is often a real loser – in fees, expenses, and waste of time.”

Yes, Lincoln tried over 1,000 jury trials --  
but only as a last resort, after all hope for settlement had passed,  
meaning Lincoln practiced Alternative Dispute Resolution  
more than a century before lawyers fully embraced it in the 1980's.

So, now that you know these specifics about Lincoln's legal career, again you may say,

"How does that put meat on our bare bones knowledge  
to better understand what made Lincoln great?

Here's my answer:

Abe Lincoln didn't become our most discerning and eloquent President by accident.

- Where did he get his capacity to make good decisions  
amidst complicated facts and people in conflict  
during the frenzied times of the Civil War?

Because Lawyer-turned-President Lincoln, as a thorough researcher,  
made sure he knew all the facts and the law  
before making big-time war decisions  
that sometimes required his pushing the envelope  
on America's constitutional limits.

Gathering complete information, in the midst of conflict  
and analyzing law where clear precedent doesn't always exist,  
is what great litigators do in handling lawsuits and appeals.

- Where did he get his superior skills as a speaker and writer?  
Lincoln had unmatched communication skills as President because he used a powerful combination of logic, tone, rhetoric, imagery, metaphor, and storytelling – whether speaking broadly to the masses or privately to his Cabinet – because that's what great lawyers do in making their arguments – they choose the right words, and use the right tone, to suit the particular audience, which causes what they say to have higher powers of clarity and persuasion.

Five years ago today, here in Dallas, I spent Abraham Lincoln's 200<sup>th</sup> birthday,

with Pulitzer Prize winning Civil War historian James McPherson.

That day, I asked him, "Could Lincoln have accomplished all he did as C-in-Chief, if he hadn't been a consummate lawyer?"

Dr. McPherson replied without hesitation,

"No way. His superior legal skills were essential to his successful leadership throughout the Civil War."

**The third fact about Abraham Lincoln's life,**

that you probably don't realize, but what empowered his great moral leadership, was the breadth and depth of his faith in God, which expanded greatly during his years as President.

Over the course of his life, Lincoln traveled a spiritual odyssey.

As a child and adolescent, Abe totally rejected the hellfire and brimstone churches where Tom Lincoln worshipped.

Later, after leaving home, during his tumultuous courtship of Mary Todd in Springfield,

Lincoln battled depression to the point of becoming an infidel for awhile.



But he turned the corner in his faith journey in 1850,

after his second son Eddie died at age 3.

Mary Todd Lincoln understandably grieved deeply over losing Eddie,

and could find solace only at the Presbyterian Church in Springfield.

So, for the next 10 years, until he got elected President,

Abe joined her there every week he was in town,

and the Presbyterian minister, James Smith,

became Lincoln's first spiritual mentor.

Spending a decade in Smith's church,

enhanced Lincoln's Biblical perception of right and wrong,

and triggered his expanded role

as the country's most persuasive moral voice

against slavery's expansion into the Western territories.

After becoming President in March 1861,

Lincoln soon found a Presbyterian Church in Washington, D.C. to his liking

and there, he found the second great spiritual mentor of his life, Phineas Gurney,

who played a huge role in helping Lincoln overcome his grief

when his beloved 11 year old son Willie died in the White House in 1862.

Later in 1862, after Willie's death,

Lincoln told his Cabinet about his plan to issue the Emancipation Proclamation,

and said it was something he had to do

because it would fulfill a commitment Abe had made –

“to my Maker!”

Eleven months after the Emancipation Proclamation issued,

Lincoln ended his Gettysburg Address with his desire that:

“this nation, under God,  
shall have a new birth of freedom . . .”

By March 1865, with the war's end in sight,

Lincoln gave his Second Inaugural Address,  
a speech historian Ronald White calls Lincoln's Sermon on the Mount,  
the one that ends “With malice toward none; with charity for all . . .”

This masterpiece of an address contained only 703 words,

and in it, Lincoln spoke the word “God” 14 times,  
quoted 4 separate and distinct Scriptures, and invited the nation to pray –  
not once, not twice, but 3 different times.

And for his coup de grace, to cement his legacy as a spiritual leader,

the final bill he signed into law the week before he died  
was the one which requires American coins to bear the words, “In God We Trust,”

### **So, these are 3 aspects of Abraham Lincoln's life story**

you probably didn't know before this afternoon,  
that hopefully strengthen your understanding  
of what fueled his ambition, his talents, and his moral authority.

- First, a son disconnected from a hostile father,  
and this generational tension inspired Lincoln's ferocious ambition  
to leave behind his humble beginnings, and fully develop his brilliant mind,  
and RISE above his childhood circumstances, and go out into the world  
so as to be esteemed by his fellow men, and make his mark on history.

- Next, a consummate trial and appellate lawyer whose 23 years of clear communication, thorough research, persuasive advocacy, and problem-solving dispute resolution, gave him the skills necessary to keep the country's wheels turning throughout the Civil War; and
- Finally, a person of deep and expanding faith in God, which empowered the moral force of his personality – that causes him to be revered today, and every day since his assassination, as the Great Emancipator, and the man who persevered through four brutal years to reunite the perfect union of our United States of America.

I'll close with this thought that occurred to Walt Whitman in 1879:

“Why if the old Greeks had had this man,  
what trilogies of plays –  
what epics –  
would have been made out of him!”