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BUT HIS STRUGGLES WITH
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BIND A NATION

**BY JOSHUA
WOLF SHENK**

LINCOLN'S GREAT DEPRESSION

Abraham Lincoln fought clinical depression all his life, and if he were alive today, his condition would be treated as a "character issue"—that is, as a political liability. His condition was indeed a character issue: it gave him the tools to save the nation

BY JOSHUA WOLF SHENK

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When Abraham Lincoln came to the stage of the 1860 state Republican convention in Decatur, Illinois, the crowd roared in approval. Men threw hats and canes into the air, shaking the hall so much that the awning over the stage collapsed; according to an early account, "the roof was literally cheered off the building." Fifty-one years old, Lincoln was at the peak of his political career, with momentum that would soon sweep him to the nomination of the national party and then to the White House.

Yet to the convention audience Lincoln didn't seem euphoric, or triumphant, or even pleased. On the contrary, said a man named Johnson, observing from the convention floor, "I then thought him one of the most diffident and worst plagued men I ever saw."

The next day the convention closed. The crowds dispersed, leaving behind cigar stubs and handbills and the smells of sweat and whiskey. Later the lieutenant governor of Illinois, William J. Bross, walked the floor. He saw Lincoln sitting alone at the end of the hall, his head bowed, his gangly arms bent at the elbows, his hands pressed to his face. As Bross approached, Lincoln noticed him and said, "I'm not very well."

Lincoln's look at that moment—the classic image of gloom—was familiar to everyone who knew him well. Such spells were just one thread in a curious fabric of behavior and thought that his friends called his "melancholy." He often wept in public and recited maudlin poetry. He told jokes and stories at odd times—he needed the laughs, he said, for his survival. As a young man he talked more than once of suicide, and as he grew older he said he saw the world as hard and grim, full of misery, made that way by fate and the forces of God. "No element of Mr. Lincoln's character," declared his colleague Henry Whitney, "was so marked, obvious and ingrained as his mysterious and profound melancholy." His law partner William Herndon said, "His melancholy dripped from him as he walked."

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In 1998 I chanced upon a reference to Lincoln's melancholy in a sociologist's essay on suicide. I was intrigued enough to investigate the subject and discovered an exciting movement in the field of Lincoln studies. Actually, it was a rediscovery of very old terrain. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries Lincoln's melancholy was widely accepted by students of his life, based as the subject was on countless reminiscences by people who knew him. But in the 1940s professional historians—taking what they regarded as a "scientific" approach to the study of the past—began to reject personal memories in favor of "hard" evidence. Their wildly inconsistent application of the rule suggests that they really wanted to toss out evidence they found distasteful. Still, the effect was profound and long-lasting.

Then, in the late 1980s and the 1990s, an emerging group of scholars began, independent of one another, to look anew at original accounts of Lincoln by the men and women who knew him. These historians, including Douglas Wilson, Rodney Davis, Michael Burlingame, and Allen Guelzo, had come of age in an era when the major oral histories of Lincoln were treated, as Davis has described it, "like nuclear waste." But they found to their surprise that such sources were more like rich mines that had been sealed off. They reassessed some accounts, dug up others that had been long forgotten, and began to publish these findings, many for the first time, in lavishly annotated volumes. This work felicitously coincided—post-Richard Nixon—with popular demand for frank portraits of public figures' private lives. Today the combination of basic materials and cultural mood allows us a surprising, and bracing, new view of Abraham Lincoln—one that has a great deal in common with the view of him held by his closest friends and colleagues.

Lincoln did suffer from what we now call depression, as modern clinicians, using the standard diagnostic criteria, uniformly agree. But this diagnosis is only the beginning of a story about

how Lincoln wrestled with mental demons, and where it led him. Diagnosis, after all, seeks to assess a patient at just a moment in time, with the aim of treatment. But Lincoln's melancholy is part of a whole life story; exploring it can help us see that life more clearly, and discern its lessons. In a sense, what needs "treatment" is our own narrow ideas—of depression as an exclusively medical ailment that must be, and will be, squashed; of therapy as a thing dispensed only by professionals and measured only by a reduction of pain; and finally, of mental trials as a flaw in character and a disqualification for leadership.

Throughout its three major stages—which I call fear, engagement, and transcendence—Lincoln's melancholy upends such views. With Lincoln we have a man whose depression spurred him, painfully, to examine the core of his soul; whose hard work to stay alive helped him develop crucial skills and capacities, even as his depression lingered hauntingly; and whose inimitable character took great strength from the piercing insights of depression, the creative responses to it, and a spirit of humble determination forged over decades of deep suffering and earnest longing.

I. FEAR

The word appears in an age-old definition of melancholia: "fear and sadness without cause." To be more precise we could say "without *apparent* cause," or "*disproportionate* to apparent cause." Although this story is about melancholy throughout, the first part illustrates its dark heart, the querulous, dissatisfied, doubting experience often marked by periods of withdrawal and sometimes by utter collapse. With Lincoln it's instructive to see how he collapsed, but even more so to see how his collapses led him to a signal moment of self-understanding.

By 1835 Lincoln had lived for four years in New Salem, a village in central Illinois that backed up to a bluff over the Sangamon River. Twenty-six years old, he had made many friends there. That summer an epidemic of what doctors called "bilious fever"—typhoid, probably—spread through the area. Among those severely afflicted were Lincoln's friends the Rutledges. One of New Salem's founding families, they had run a tavern and boardinghouse where Lincoln stayed and took meals when he first arrived. He became friendly with Ann Rutledge, a bright, pretty young woman with golden hair and large blue eyes. In August of 1835 she took sick. Visiting her at her family's farm, Lincoln seemed deeply distressed, which made people wonder whether the two had a romantic, and not just a friendly, bond. After Lincoln's death such speculation would froth over into a messy controversy—one that cannot be, and need not be, resolved. Regardless of how he felt about Rutledge while she was alive, her sickness and death drew Lincoln to his emotional edge. Around the time of her burial a rainstorm, accompanied by unseasonable cold, shoved him over. "As to the condition of Lincoln's Mind after the death of Miss R.,"

Henry McHenry, a farmer in the area, recalled, "after that Event he seemed quite *changed*, he seemed *Retired*, & loved *Solitude*, he seemed wraped in *profound thought*, *indifferent*, to transpiring Events, had but Little to say, but would take his gun and wander off in the woods by him self, away from the association of even those he most esteemed, this gloom seemed to deepen for some time, so as to give anxiety to his friends in regard to his Mind."

Indeed, the villagers' anxiety was intense, both for Lincoln's immediate safety and for his long-term mental health. Lincoln "told Me that he felt like Committing Suicide often," remembered Mentor Graham, a schoolteacher, and his neighbors mobilized to keep him safe. One friend recalled, "Mr Lincolns friends ... were Compelled to keep watch and ward over Mr Lincoln, he being from the sudden shock somewhat temporarily deranged. We watched during storms—fogs—damp gloomy weather ... for fear of an accident." Some villagers worried that he'd end up insane. After several weeks an older couple in the area took him into their home. Bowling Green, the large, merry justice of the peace, and his wife, Nancy, took care of Lincoln for a week or two. When he had improved somewhat, they let him go, but he was, Mrs. Green said, "quite melancholy for months."

Was Lincoln's melancholy a "clinical depression"? Yes—as far as that concept goes. Certainly his condition in the summer of 1835 matches what the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* labels a major depressive

Modern clinicians agree that Lincoln suffered from depression. It's instructive to see how he collapsed, but even more so to see how his collapses led him to a signal moment of self-understanding.

episode. Such an episode is characterized by depressed mood, a marked decrease in pleasure, or both, for at least two weeks, and symptoms such as agitation, fatigue, feelings of worthlessness, and thoughts of death or suicide. Five and a half years later, in the winter of 1840–1841, Lincoln broke down again, and together these episodes suffice for modern clinicians to make an assessment of recurrent major depression.

Such labels can help us begin to reckon with Lincoln. Most basically, "clinical depression" means it was serious, no mere case of the blues. Someone who has had two episodes of major depression has a 70 percent chance of experiencing a third. And someone who's had three episodes has a 90 percent chance of having a fourth. Indeed, it became clear in Lincoln's late twenties that he had more than a



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passing condition. Robert L. Wilson, who was elected to the Illinois state legislature with Lincoln in 1836, found him amiable and fun-loving. But one day Lincoln told him something surprising. Lincoln said “that although he appeared to enjoy life rapturously, Still he was the victim of terrible melancholly,” Wilson recalled. “He Sought company, and indulged in fun and hilarity without restraint, or Stint as to time[.] Still when by himself, he told me that he was so overcome with mental depression, that he never dare carry a knife in his pocket.”

Yet as we learn about Lincoln, a fixation on modern categories should not distract us from the actual events of his life and the frameworks that he and his contemporaries applied to his condition. In his late twenties Lincoln was developing a distinct reputation as a depressive. At the

same time, he was scrambling up the ladder of success, emerging as a leader of the Illinois Whig Party and a savvy, self-educated young lawyer. Today this juxtaposition may seem surprising, but in the nineteenth-century conception of melancholy, genius and gloom were often part of the same overall picture. True, a person with a melancholy temperament had been fated with an awful burden—but also, in Lord Byron’s phrase, with a “fearful gift.” The burden was a sadness and despair that could tip into a state of disease. But the gift was a capacity for depth and wisdom.

Both sides of melancholy are evident in a poem on suicide that Lincoln apparently wrote in his twenties. Discussed by his contemporaries but long undiscovered, the poem, unsigned, recently came to light through the efforts of the scholar Richard Lawrence Miller, who was aided by old records that have been made newly available. Without an original manuscript or a letter in which ownership is claimed, no unsigned piece can be attributed definitively to an author. But the evidence points strongly to Lincoln. The poem was published in the year cited by Lincoln’s closest friend, Joshua Speed, and its syntax, tone, meter, and other qualities are characteristic of Lincoln.

The poem ran in the August 25, 1838, issue of the *Sangamo Journal*, under the title “The Suicide’s Soliloquy.” At the top a note explains that the lines of verse were found “near the bones” of an apparent suicide in a deep forest by

the Sangamon River. The conceit, in other words, is that this is a suicide note. As the poem begins, the anguished narrator announces his intention.

Here, where the lonely hooting owl
Sends forth his midnight moans,
Fierce wolves shall o’er my carcass growl,
Or buzzards pick my bones.

No fellow-man shall learn my fate,
Or where my ashes lie;
Unless by beasts drawn round their bait,
Or by the ravens’ cry.

Yes! I’ve resolved the deed to do,
And this the place to do it:
This heart I’ll rush a dagger through
Though I in hell should rue it!

Often understood as an emotional condition, depression is to those who experience it characterized largely by its cognitive patterns. The novelist William Styron has likened his depression to a storm in his brain, punctuated by thunderclaps of thought—self-critical, fearful, despairing. Lincoln clearly knew these mental strains (he wrote once of “that *intensity* of thought, which will some times wear the sweetest idea thread-bare and turn it to the bitterness of death”); he knew how, oppressed by the clamor, people often become hopeless, and seek the most drastic solution.

To ease me of *this* power to *think*,
That through my bosom raves,
I'll headlong leap from hell's high brink
And wallow in its waves.

This poem illustrates the complex quality of Lincoln's melancholy in his late twenties. He articulated a sense of himself as degraded and humiliated but also, somehow, as special and grand. And though the character in the poem in the end chooses death by the dagger, the author—using his tool, the pen—showed an impulse toward an artful life. Lincoln's poem expressed both his connection with a morbid state of mind and, to some extent, a mastery over it. But the mastery would be short-lived.

Like the first, Lincoln's second breakdown came after a long period of intense work. In 1835 he had been studying law; in the winter of 1840–1841 he was trying to keep the debt-ridden State of Illinois from collapsing (and his political career with it). On top of this came a profound personal stress. The precipitating causes are hard to identify precisely, in part because cause and effect in depressive episodes can be hard to separate. Ordinarily we insist on a narrative line: factor *x* led to reaction *y*. But in a depressive crisis we might feel bad because something has gone awry. Or we might make things go awry because we feel so bad. Or both.

For Lincoln in this winter many things were awry. Even as he faced the possibility that his political career was sunk, it seemed likely that he was inextricably bound to a woman he didn't love (Mary Todd) and that Joshua Speed was going to either move away to Kentucky or stay in Illinois and marry Matilda Edwards, the young woman whom Lincoln said he really wanted but could not even approach, because of his bond with Todd. Then came a stretch of intensely cold weather, which, Lincoln later wrote, “my experience clearly proves to be verily severe on defective nerves.” Once again he began to speak openly about his misery, hopelessness, and thoughts of suicide—alarming his friends. “Lincoln went Crazy,” Speed recalled. “—had to remove razors from his room—take away all Knives and other such dangerous things—&—it was terrible.”

In January of 1841 Lincoln submitted himself to the care of a medical doctor, spending several hours a day with

Dr. Anson Henry, whom he called “necessary to my existence.” Although few details of the treatment are extant, he probably went through what a prominent physician of the time called “the desolating tortures of officious medication.” When he emerged, on January 20, he was “reduced and emaciated in appearance,” wrote a young lawyer in town named James Conkling. On January 23 Lincoln wrote to his law partner in Washington: “I am now the most miserable man living. If what I feel were equally distributed to the whole human family, there would not be one cheerful face on the earth. Whether I shall ever be better I can not tell; I awfully forebode I shall not. To remain as I am is impossible; I must die or be better, it appears to me.”

This spare, direct letter captures the core of depression as forcefully as the Gettysburg Address would distill the essence of the American experiment. It tells what depression is like: to feel not only miserable but the *most* miserable; to feel a strange, muted sense of awful power; to believe plainly that either the misery must end or life will—and yet to fear the misery will not end. The fact that Lincoln spoke thus, not to a counselor or a dear friend but to his law partner, indicates how relentlessly he insisted on acknowledging his fears. Through his late twenties and early thirties he drove deeper and deeper into them, hovering over what, according to Albert Camus, is the only serious question human beings have to deal with. He asked whether he could live, whether he could face life's misery.

Finally he decided that he must. Speed recorded the dramatic exchange that began when he came to Lincoln and told him he would die unless he rallied. Lincoln replied that he *could* kill himself, that he was not afraid to die. Yet, he said, he had an “irrepressible desire” to accomplish something while he lived. He wanted to connect his name with the great events of his generation, and “so impress himself upon them as to link his name with something that would redound to the interest of his fellow man.” This was no mere wish, Lincoln said, but what he “desired to live for.”

II. ENGAGEMENT

In his middle years Lincoln turned from the question of *whether he could* live to *how he would* live. Building bridges out from his tortured self, he engaged with the psychological culture of his time, investigating who he was, how he might change, and what he must endure. Having seen what he wished to live for, Lincoln suffered at the prospect that he might never achieve it. Even so, he worked diligently to improve himself, developing self-understanding, discipline, and strategies for success that would become the foundation of his character.

The melancholy did not go away during this period but, rather, took a new form. Beginning in his mid-thirties Lincoln began to fall into what a law clerk called his “blue spells.” A decade later the cast of his face and body when in repose suggested deep, abiding gloom to nearly all who

crossed his path. In his memoirs the Illinois lawyer Henry C. Whitney recounted an afternoon at court in Bloomington, Illinois: “I was sitting with John T. Stuart”—Lincoln’s first law partner—“while a case was being tried, and our conversation was, at the moment, about Lincoln, when Stuart remarked that he was a hopeless victim of melancholy. I expressed surprise, to which Stuart replied; ‘Look at him, now.’” Whitney turned and saw Lincoln sitting by himself in a corner, “wrapped in abstraction and gloom.” Whitney watched him for a while. “It appeared,” he wrote, “as if he was pursuing in his mind some specific, sad subject, regularly and systematically through various sinuosities, and his sad face would assume, at times, deeper phases of grief: but no relief came from dark and despairing melancholy, till he was roused by the breaking up of court, when he emerged from his cave of gloom and came back, like one awakened from sleep, to the world in which he lived, again.”

In one sense these spells indicate Lincoln’s melancholy. But they may also represent a response to it—the visible end of Lincoln’s effort to contain his dark feelings and thoughts, to wrestle privately with his moods until they passed or lightened. “With depression,” writes the psychologist David B. Cohen, “recovery may be a matter of shifting from protest to more effective ways of mastering helplessness.” Lincoln was effective, to a point. He worked well and consistently at his law practice, always rousing himself from gloom for

work. He and Mary Lincoln (whom he had wed in 1842) had four boys. He was elected to a term in the United States Congress. Yet his reaction to this honor—he wrote, “Though I am very grateful to our friends, for having done it, [it] has not pleased me as much as I expected”—suggested that through booms and busts, Lincoln continued to see life as hard.

Indeed, he developed a philosophical melancholy. “He felt very strongly,” said his friend Joseph Gillespie, “that there was more of discomfort than real happiness in human existence under the most favorable circumstances and the general current of his reflections was in that channel.” Once a girl named Rosa Haggard, the daughter of a hotel proprietor in Winchester, Illinois, asked Lincoln to sign her autograph album. Lincoln took the book and wrote,

To Rosa
 You are young, and I am older;
 You are hopeful, I am not—
 Enjoy life, ere it grows colder—
 Pluck the roses ere they rot.

At a time when newspapers were stuffed with ads for substances to cure all manner of ailments, it wouldn’t have been unusual for Lincoln to seek help at a pharmacy. He had a charge account at the Corneau and Diller drugstore, at 122 South Sixth Street in Springfield, where he bought a number of medications, including opiates, camphor, and sarsaparilla. On one occasion he bought fifty cents’ worth of cocaine, and he sometimes took the “blue mass”—a mercury pill that was believed to clear the body of black bile.

To whatever extent Lincoln used medicines, his essential view of melancholy discounted the possibility of transformation by an external agent. He believed that his suffering proceeded inexorably from his constitution—that, in a phrase he used in connection with a friend, he was “naturally of a nervous temperament.” Through no fault of his own, he believed, he suffered more than others.

Some strategies in response were apparent. As noted, work was a first refuge; he advised a friend, “I think if I were you, in case my mind were not exactly right, I would avoid being *idle*.” When he was off duty, two things gave him most relief. He told stories and jokes, studiously gathering new material from talented peers and printed sources. And he gave vent to his melancholy by reading, reciting, and composing poetry that dwelled on themes of death, despair, and human futility. Yet, somewhat in the way that insulin allows diabetics to function without eliminating the root problem, this strategy gave Lincoln relief without taking away his need for it.

Consider his favorite poem, which he began

ASIATIC LILIES

The six-foot stalks, like Amazon spears
 thrust into the bull’s-eye of a barrel sawed in half,
 all tilt east. They are javelins
 thrown by the rising moon.

Tasseled with three or four crimson blossoms,
 they advertise a roadside nursery
 the way a school basketball team, waving scarlet varsity jackets
 aloft, implores alumni to open their wallets.

I would buy an entire quiver
 trimmed so fetchingly, and so accurate.
 I would picket my patio with severe blood-blooms
 and hide like a mandarin behind my army.

—JOYCE PESEROFF

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to recite often in his mid-thirties. It was in one sense, as a colleague observed, “a reflex in poetic form of the deep melancholy of his soul,” and in another a way to manage that melancholy. One story of his recitations comes from Lois Newhall, a member of the Newhall Family troupe of singers. During an Illinois tour in the late 1840s the troupe encountered Lincoln and two colleagues, who were traveling the same circuit giving political speeches. They ended up spending eight days together, and on their last they sat up late singing songs.

As the night wore down, Lincoln’s colleagues started pressing him to sing. Lincoln was embarrassed and demurred, but he finally said, “I’ll tell you what I’ll do for you. You girls have been so kind singing for us. I’ll repeat to you my favorite poem.” Leaning against the doorjamb, which looked small behind his lanky frame, and with his eyes half closed, Lincoln recited from memory.

O[h] why should the spirit of mortal be proud!
Like a swift, fleeting meteor—a fast-flying cloud—
A flash of the lightning—a break of the wave—
He passeth from life to his rest in the grave.

The leaves of the oak and the willow shall fade,
Be scattered around, and together be laid;
And the young and the old, and the low and the high
Shall molder to dust and together shall lie.

Lincoln first came across the poem in the early 1830s. Then, in 1845, he saw it in a newspaper, cut it out, and committed it to memory. He didn’t know who wrote it, because it had been published without attribution. He repeated the lines so often that people suspected they were his own. “Beyond all question, I am not the author,” he wrote. “I would give all I am worth, and go in debt, to be able to write so fine a piece as I think that is.” When he was president Lincoln learned that the poem had been written by William Knox, a Scotsman who died in 1825.

The last two verses of the poem were Lincoln’s favorites.

Yea! Hope and despondency, pleasure and pain,
Are mingled together in sun-shine and rain;
And the smile and the tear, and the song and the dirge,
Still follow each other, like surge upon surge.

’Tis the wink of an eye, ’tis the draught of a breath,
From the blossoms of health, to the paleness of death.
From the gilded saloon, to the bier and the shroud
Oh, why should the spirit of mortal be proud!

When Lincoln finished, the room was still. “I know that for myself,” Lois Newhall recalled, “I was so impressed with the poem that I felt more like crying than talking.” She asked, “Mr. Lincoln, who wrote that?” He told her he didn’t know, but that if she liked, he would write out a copy of the poem for her. She was eating pancakes the next morning when she felt something behind her. A great big hand came

around her left side and covered hers. Then, with his other hand, Lincoln laid a long piece of blue paper beside her.

III. TRANSCENDENCE

In his mid-forties the dark soil of Lincoln’s melancholy began to yield fruit. When he threw himself into the fight against the extension of slavery, the same qualities that had long brought him so much trouble played a defining role. The suffering he had endured lent him clarity and conviction, creative skills in the face of adversity, and a faithful humility that helped him guide the nation through its greatest peril.

CLARITY. Some people, William Herndon observed, see the world “ornamented with beauty, life, and action; and hence more or less false and inexact.” Lincoln, on the other hand, “crushed the unreal, the inexact, the hollow, and the sham”—“Everything came to him in its precise shape and color.” Such keen vision often brought Lincoln pain; being able to look troubling reality straight in the eye also proved a great strength.

The hunch of old Romantic poets—that gloom coexists with potential for insight—has been bolstered by modern research. In an influential 1979 experiment two psychologists, Lyn Abramson and Lauren Alloy, set up a game in their lab, putting subjects in front of a console with lights and a button, with instructions to make a particular light flash as often as possible. Afterward, asked how much control they had had, “normal,” or nondepressed, subjects gave answers that hinged on their success in the game. If they did well, they tended to say they’d had plenty of control; if they did poorly, very little. In other words, these subjects took credit for good scores and deflected the blame for poor scores.

But the depressed subjects saw things differently. Whether or not they had done well, they tended to believe that they’d had no control. And they were correct: the “game” was a fiction, the lights largely unaffected by the participants’ efforts.

According to the dominant model of depression, these findings made no sense. How could a mental disease characterized by errors in thinking confer advantages in perception? Abramson and Alloy pointed to a phenomenon called “depressive realism,” or the “sadder but wiser” effect. Though psychiatry had long equated mental health with clear thinking, it turns out that happiness is often characterized by muddier inaccuracies. “Much research suggests,” Alloy has written, “that when they are not depressed, people are highly vulnerable to illusions, including unrealistic optimism, overestimation of themselves, and an exaggerated sense of their capacity to control events. The same research indicates that depressed people’s perceptions and judgments are often less biased.”

Of course, whether such “less biased” judgments are appreciated depends on the circumstances. Take a man

who goes to a picnic, notices only ants and grass stains, and ignores the baskets full of bread and wine. We would call him a pessimist—usually pejoratively. But suppose a danger arises, and the same man proclaims it. In this instance he is surely more valuable than the optimist who sits dreamily admiring the daisies.

In 1850s America an old conflict over slavery began to take on a new intensity, and in 1854 Lincoln joined the fight. That year Senator Stephen A. Douglas engineered the repeal of the Missouri Compromise, which had prohibited slavery in a large swath of the Northwest, and laid down a policy of “popular sovereignty,” which delegated slavery policy to local voters. To Lincoln the new policy was a Trojan horse, an ostensibly benign measure that in fact would stealthily spread slavery through the nation. He thought the conflict must be engaged. “Slavery,” he said, “is founded in the selfishness of man’s nature—opposition to it, is his love of justice. These principles are an eternal antagonism; and when brought into collision so fiercely, as slavery extension brings them, shocks, and throes, and convulsions must ceaselessly follow.”

Lincoln began to speak openly about thoughts of suicide. “Had to remove razors from his room—take away all Knives and other such dangerous things—&—it was terrible,” his closest friend recalled.

In Douglas, whom he battled repeatedly through the 1850s, Lincoln faced a preternatural optimist, who really thought that moral and practical choices about slavery could be put off forever. In October of 1854, in a preview of their epic debates four summers later, Lincoln squared off against him in Springfield, Illinois. The physical contrast between the two men underlined their temperamental differences. Douglas stood five feet four inches, a foot shorter than Lincoln, and seemed packed with charisma. He had penetrating eyes and dark hair that he styled in a pompadour. Lincoln was not just tall and gaunt but a truly odd physical specimen, with cartoonishly long arms and legs; he looked as if he wore stilts under his trousers. He spoke with a kind of high-piping voice, but at the pace of a Kentucky drawl. Before he rose to speak, he looked, wrote a reporter named Horace White, “so overspread with sadness that I thought that Shakespeare’s melancholy Jacques had been translated from the forest of Arden to the capital of Illinois.”

The melancholy mattered because his observers could sense the depth of feeling that infused Lincoln’s oratory.

Others could hit all the right notes and spark thunderous applause, but Lincoln’s eloquence “produced conviction in others because of the conviction of the speaker himself,” White explained. “His listeners felt that he believed every word he said, and that, like Martin Luther, he would go to the stake rather than abate one jot or tittle of it.”

Opposing the *extension* of slavery on moral grounds but conceding its *existence* as a practical necessity, Lincoln found himself in an unenviable spot. To supporters of slavery he was a dangerous radical, to abolitionists an equivocating hack. His political party, the Whigs, was dying off, and a new organization—which eventually took shape as the Republicans—had to be built from scratch out of divergent groups. But Lincoln stayed his course with an argument that reached the primary force of narrative. The United States, he said, had been founded with a great idea and a grave imperfection. The idea was liberty as the natural right of all people. The flaw—the “cancer” in the nation’s body—was the gross violation of liberty by human slavery. The Founders had recognized the evil, Lincoln said, and sought to restrict it, with the aim of its gradual abolition. The spirit of the Declaration of Independence, with its linchpin statement that “all men are created equal,” was meant to be realized, to the greatest extent possible, by each succeeding generation. “They meant to set up a standard maxim for free society,” Lincoln said, “which should be familiar to all, and revered by all; constantly looked to, constantly labored for ... even though never perfectly attained.”

This political vision drew power from personal experience. For Lincoln had long applied the same principle to his own life: that is, continuing struggle to realize an ideal, knowing that it could never be perfectly attained. Individuals, he had learned from his own “severe experience,” could succeed in “the great struggle of life” only by enduring failures and plodding on with a vision of improvement. This attitude sustained Lincoln through his ignominious defeats in the 1850s (he twice lost bids for the U.S. Senate), and it braced him for the trials that lay ahead. Prepared for defeat, and even for humiliation, he insisted on seeing the truth of both his personal circumstances and the national condition. And where the optimists of his time would fail, he would succeed, envisioning and articulating a durable idea of free society.

CREATIVITY. On February 25, 1860, Lincoln stepped off a train in Jersey City, New Jersey. He claimed his trunk, made his way to a crowded pier, and caught a ferry to Manhattan Island, where in two days he would deliver a speech in the Cooper Union’s Great Hall. It was the chance of his career—an audience before the lords of finance and culture in the nation’s media capital. But when Lincoln arrived on the island and called on a Republican colleague, he wore a “woe-begone look” on his face and carried a dour message: he said he feared he’d made a mistake in coming to New

York and that he had to hole up and work on his speech. "Otherwise he was sure he would make a failure."

Lincoln's literary prowess is as well appreciated as any aspect of his life; like so many of his rhetorical efforts, his stand at Cooper Union would be a triumph. On February 27 more than 1,500 people filed into the Great Hall. As soon as Lincoln began to speak they were engrossed, and by his closing line—"Let us have faith that right makes might, and in that faith, let us, to the end, dare to do our duty as we understand it"—they were spellbound. "No man ever before made such an impression on his first appeal to a New York audience," said the next day's *New York Tribune*.

Lincoln said that he *could* kill himself; yet he had an "irrepressible desire" to accomplish something. He wanted to link his name with great events—ones that would "redound to the interest of his fellow man."

Yet Lincoln afterward seemed impervious to the praise. "No man in all New York," said Charles Nott, a young Republican who escorted him back to his hotel, "appeared that night more simple, more unassuming, more modest, more unpretentious, more conscious of his own defects." Nott saw Lincoln as a "sad and lonely man."

The link between mental illness and creativity is supported by a bevy of historical examples—Charles Darwin, Emily Dickinson, Benjamin Disraeli, and William T. Sherman, among many others from Lincoln's time alone, suffered from mood disorders—and a wealth of modern research. Many studies have found higher rates of mood disorders among artists, and the qualities associated with art among the tendencies of mentally disordered minds. But the dynamic is a curious one. As the psychologist and scholar Kay Redfield Jamison has written, "There is a great deal of evidence to suggest that, compared to 'normal' individuals, artists, writers, and creative people in general, are both psychologically 'sicker'—that is, they score higher on a wide variety of measures of psychopathology—and psychologically healthier (for example, they show quite elevated scores on measures of self-confidence and ego strength)."

With Lincoln sadness did not just coexist with strength—these qualities ran together. Just as death supports new life in a healthy ecosystem, Lincoln's self-negation fueled his peculiar confidence. His despair lay under a distinct hope; his overwhelming melancholy fed into a supple creative power, which allowed him not merely to see the truth of

his circumstances but to express it in a stirring, meaningful way. The events in New York help illustrate the basic progression: Wariness and doubt led Lincoln into a kind of personal crisis, from which he turned to work. Afterward he largely turned aside acclaim to return to wariness and doubt, and the cycle began again.

After Lincoln's election as president in November of 1860, the troughs of despair became deeper, and the need for creative response became all the more intense. Now his internal questions of self-worth and his abstract feelings of obligation were leavened by direct responsibility for the nation in a crisis of secession, which led soon after his inauguration to war. The trouble fell hard on him. The burdens of his office were so great, he said, "that, could I have anticipated them, I would not have believed it possible to survive."

Observing Lincoln in an hour of trial, Harriet Beecher Stowe wrote that he was unsteady but strong, like a wire cable that sways in storms but holds fast. In this metaphor we can see how Lincoln's weakness connected to a special kind of strength. In 1862, amid one of many military calamities, Senator O. H. Browning came to the White House. The president was in his library, writing, and had left instructions that he was not to be disturbed. Browning went in anyway and found the president looking terrible—"weary, care-worn, and troubled." Browning wrote in his diary, "I remarked that I felt concerned about him—regretted that troubles crowded so heavily upon him, and feared his health was suffering." Lincoln took his friend's hand and said, with a deep cadence of sadness, "Browning I must die sometime." "He looked very sad," Browning wrote. "We parted I believe both of us with tears in our eyes." A clinician reading this passage could easily identify mental pathology in a man who looked haggard and distressed and volunteered morbid thoughts. However, one crucial detail upsets such a simple picture: Browning found Lincoln *writing*—doing the work that not only helped steer his nation through its immediate struggle but also became a compass for future generations.

HUMILITY. Throughout his life Lincoln's response to suffering—for all the success it brought him—led to greater suffering still. When as a young man he stepped back from the brink of suicide, deciding that he must live to do some meaningful work, this sense of purpose sustained him; but it also led him into a wilderness of doubt and dismay, as he asked, with vexation, *what* work he would do and *how* he would do it. This pattern was repeated in the 1850s, when his work against the extension of slavery gave him a sense of purpose but also fueled a nagging sense of failure. Then, finally, political success led him to the White House, where he was tested as few had been before.

Lincoln responded with both humility and determination. The humility came from a sense that whatever ship carried him on life's rough waters, *he* was not the captain

but merely a subject of the divine force—call it fate or God or the “Almighty Architect” of existence. The determination came from a sense that however humble his station, Lincoln was no idle passenger but a sailor on deck with a job to do. In his strange combination of profound deference to divine authority and a willful exercise of his own meager power, Lincoln achieved transcendent wisdom.

Elizabeth Keckley, Mary Lincoln’s dressmaker, once told of watching the president drag himself into the room where she was fitting the First Lady. “His step was slow and heavy, and his face sad,” Keckley recalled. “Like a tired child he threw himself upon a sofa, and shaded his eyes with his hands. He was a complete picture of dejection.” He had just returned from the War Department, he said, where the news was “dark, dark everywhere.” Lincoln then took a small Bible from a stand near the sofa and began to read. “A quarter of an hour passed,” Keckley remembered, “and on glancing at the sofa the face of the president seemed more cheerful. The dejected look was gone; in fact, the countenance was lighted up with new resolution and hope.” Wanting to see what he was reading, Keckley pretended she had dropped something and went behind where Lincoln was sitting so that she could look over his shoulder. It was the Book of Job.

“Everything came to him in its precise shape and color,” Lincoln’s law partner observed. Such keen vision brought Lincoln pain; being able to look troubling reality straight in the eye also proved a great strength.

Throughout history a glance to the divine has often been the first and last impulse of suffering people. “Man is born broken,” the playwright Eugene O’Neill wrote. “He lives by mending. The grace of God is glue!” Today the connection between spiritual and psychological well-being is often passed over by psychologists and psychiatrists, who consider their work a branch of secular medicine and science. But for most of Lincoln’s lifetime scientists assumed there was some relationship between mental and spiritual life.

Lincoln, too, connected his mental well-being to divine forces. As a young man he saw how religion could ameliorate life’s blows, even as he found the consolation of faith elusive. An infidel—a dissenter from orthodox Christianity—he resisted popular dogma. But many of history’s greatest believers have also been its fiercest doubters. Lincoln charted his own theological course to a living vision of how frail, imperfect mortals could turn their suffering selves to

the service of something greater and find solace—not in any personal satisfaction or glory but in dutiful mission.

An original theological thinker, Lincoln discounted the idea, common among evangelicals, that sin could be wiped out through confession or repentance. Rather, he believed, as William Herndon explained, “that God could not forgive; that punishment has to follow the sin.” This view fitted with both the stern, unforgiving God of Calvinism, with which Lincoln had been raised, and the mechanistic notion of a universe governed by fixed laws. But unlike the Calvinists, who disclaimed any possibility of grace for human beings not chosen for that fate, Lincoln did see a chance of improvement. And unlike some fatalists, who renounced any claim to a moral order, Lincoln saw how man’s reason could discern purpose even in the movement of a vast machine that grinds and cuts and mashes all who interfere with it. Just as a child learns to pull his hand from a fire, people can learn when they are doing something that is not in accord with the wider, unseen order. To Lincoln, Herndon explained, “suffering was medicinal & educational.” In other words, it could be an agent of growth.

In *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, William James writes of “sick souls” who turn from a sense of wrongness to a power greater than they. Lincoln showed the simple wisdom of this, as the burden of his work as president brought home a visceral and fundamental connection with something greater than he. He repeatedly called himself an “instrument” of a larger power—which he sometimes identified as the people of the United States, and other times as God—and said that he had been charged with “so vast, and so sacred a trust” that “he felt that he had no moral right to shrink; nor even to count the chances of his own life, in what might follow.” When friends said they feared his assassination, he said, “God’s will be done. I am in His hands.”

The griefs of his presidency furthered this humble sense. He lost friends and colleagues to the war, and in February of 1862 he lost his eleven-year-old son, Willie. In this vulnerable period Lincoln was influenced by the Reverend Phineas D. Gurley, whose Presbyterian church he attended (but never joined). In his eulogy for Willie, Gurley preached that “in the hour of trial” one must look to “Him who sees the end from the beginning and doeth all things well.” With confidence in God, Gurley said, “our sorrows will be sanctified and made a blessing to our souls, and by and by we shall have occasion to say with blended gratitude and rejoicing, ‘It is good for us that we have been afflicted.’” Lincoln asked Gurley to write out a copy of the eulogy. He would hold to this idea as if it were a life raft.

Yet Lincoln never used God to duck responsibility. Every day presented scores of decisions—on personnel, on policy, on the movement of troops and the direction of executive departments. So much of what today is delegated

to political staffs and civil servants then required a direct decision from the president. He controlled patronage, from the envoy to China to the postmaster in St. Louis. His desk was piled high with court-martial cases to review and military dispatches to monitor. In all his choices he had to rely on his own judgment in accordance with law, custom, prudence, and compassion. As much as his attention focused on an unseen realm, Lincoln's emphasis remained strictly on the material world of cause and effect. "These are not ... the days of miracles," he said, "and I suppose it will be granted that I am not to expect a direct revelation." Lincoln did not expect God to take him by the hand. On the contrary, he said, "I must study the plain physical facts of the case, ascertain what is possible and learn what appears to be wise and right."

Lincoln's peculiar vision of the sacred led him to defy the conventions of his day. For centuries settlers in the New World had assured themselves that they were special in God's eyes. They were a "City upon a Hill," in John Winthrop's phrase, decidedly chosen, like the Israelites of old. Lincoln turned this on its head when he said, "I shall be most happy indeed if I shall be an humble instrument in the hands of the Almighty, and of this, his almost chosen people, for perpetuating the object of that great struggle." The country, Lincoln said, was *almost* chosen. Out of that phrase emerged a crucial strain of Lincoln's thinking. As others invoked the favor of God in both the North and the South, Lincoln opened a space between mortal works and divine intention. Among his papers, after his death, his secretaries found this undated statement that has come to be known as the "Meditation on the Divine Will."

The will of God prevails—In great contests each party claims to act in accordance with the will of God. Both *may* be, and one *must* be wrong. God can not be *for*, and *against* the same thing at the same time. In the present civil war it is quite possible that God's purpose is something different from the purpose of either party—and yet the human instrumentalities, working just as they do, are of the best adaptation to effect this

After this first passage the handwriting grows shakier; the words practically tremble with the thoughts they express. First Lincoln crossed out the last word he had written.

His purpose. I am almost ready to say this is probably true—that God wills this contest, and wills that it shall not end yet—By his mere quiet power, on the minds of the now contestants, He could have either *saved*

or *destroyed* the Union without a human contest—
Yet the contest began—And having begun
He could give the final victory to either side
any day—Yet the contest proceeds—

Lincoln's clarity came in part from his uncertainty. It is hard to overestimate just how unusual this was, and how risky and unpopular his views often were. Most religious thinkers of the time, the historian of religion Mark Noll explains, not only assumed God's favor but assumed that they could read his will.

"How was it," Noll asks, "that this man who never joined a church and who read only a little theology could, on occasion, give expression to profound theological interpretations of the War between the States?" Viewing Lincoln through the lens of his melancholy, we see one cogent explanation: he was always inclined to look at the full truth of a situation, assessing both what could be known and what remained in doubt. When faced with uncertainty he had the patience, endurance, and vigor to stay in that place of tension, and the courage to be alone.

As his presidency wore on, his burden grew heavier and heavier, sometimes seeming to threaten Lincoln's sanity. The war consumed a nation, dividing not only the two opposing sections but, increasingly, the northern states of the Union. Emancipation became a reality, which only inflamed the conflict. Lincoln became increasingly isolated. But he continued to turn from his suffering to the lessons it gave him. Throughout his term he faced the prospect of humiliating defeat, but he continued to work for just victory.

Many popular philosophies propose that suffering can be beaten simply, quickly, and clearly. Popular biographies often express the same view. Many writers, faced with the unhappiness of a heroic figure, make sure to find some crucible in which that bad feeling is melted into something new. "Biographies tend conventionally to be structured as crisis-and-recovery narratives," the critic Louis Menand writes, "in which the subject undergoes a period of disillusionment or adversity, and then has a 'breakthrough' or arrives at a 'turning point' before going on to achieve whatever sort of greatness obtains." Lincoln's melancholy doesn't lend itself to such a narrative. No point exists after which the melancholy dissolved—not in January of 1841; not during his middle age; and not at his political resurgence, beginning in 1854. Whatever greatness Lincoln achieved cannot be explained as a triumph over personal suffering. Rather, it must be accounted an outgrowth of the same system that produced that suffering. This is a story not of transformation but of integration. Lincoln didn't do great work because he solved the problem of his melancholy; the problem of his melancholy was all the more fuel for the fire of his great work. ▽