

FROM WHENCE DOES EMOTIONAL HEALING COME?

By Michael A. Schuler

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READING FROM CONTEMPORARY LITERATURE

From *The True Story of Hansel & Gretel* by Louise Murphey

(In a desperate attempt to lead the pursuing Nazis away from their 2 children, a Jewish father and stepmother in World War II Poland leave their children in the woods and rename them Gretel and Hansel, Aryan names. The children are taken in by a part-gypsy grandmother. The stepmother later dies, while rescuing her stepdaughter from rape. The grandmother dies in the train freight car taking her to the killing camps. The children, however, escape death by hiding in the grandmother's oven when the Nazis burn down the grandmother's house. At the end of the book, the children have made their way back to their father and the resistance fighters in the city.)

Gretel tried to remember her real name. She had dreamed about it so many times, since the wheat field, but she couldn't pull the name out of her dreams and speak it. The name had stayed gone too long, as if it were hiding from her. And her brother's name was gone too.

The man looked down at the faces of his children. So thin. Much older looking in the ravaged tightness of their skin. They looked back at him, heads tilted up and eyes shining, their lips half open. Both of them waiting to hear their names.

He spoke each name slowly, quietly, the crowd of workers that had gathered around the three catching up the sounds and echoing the names in whispers. He spoke their names over and over, and watched these gifts brought out of darkness, these bits of flesh, this blood of his blood and bone of his bone, his children, begin to smile as they became, once again, themselves...

This, in the end, if what we have. The love of something. Wild ponies. A kiss salted with tears. The scent of raspberry syrup in a bottle. Oranges. Two lost children who come to your house in the dark forest.

There is much love, and that love is what we are left with. When the bombs stop dropping and the camps fall back to the earth and decay, and we are done killing each other, that is what we must hold. We can never let the world take

our memories away, and if there are no memories, we must invent love all over again.

The wheel turns. Blue above, green below, we wander a long way, but love is what the cup of our souls contains when we leave the world and the flesh. This we will drink forever. I know. I am Magda. I am the witch.

** REFLECTIONS **

In this year that marks the 200th anniversary of his birth, it is perhaps well to remember that the man who is often ranked as one of this nation's two or three greatest presidents was a quintessential "man of sorrows." At the age of nine, **Abraham Lincoln** lost both his mother and a beloved aunt and uncle to a mysterious disease.

His father survived that plague, but was so aloof and cool toward his son that observers "wondered if there was any love between them." Then **Lincoln's** sister died in childbirth, followed by a woman who may have been the young lawyer's first serious romantic interest.

In his late 20's the political career to which the young lawyer aspired was faltering and another woman **Lincoln** had seriously courted married his best friend instead.

For much of his adult life **Lincoln** suffered from chronic and sometimes severe depression. His wife, **Mary Todd Lincoln**, had an unstable personality and eventually was committed to an asylum. In their second year in the White House **Abraham and Mary** lost their eleven year old son to typhoid fever - probably contracted from the District of Columbia's tainted water supply. **Lincoln** was so grief-stricken from this loss that members of his staff wondered whether he could carry out his duties.

And yet despite this long history of setbacks, tragedies and disappointments, **Abraham Lincoln** became a figure of mythic proportions. The question is, how did he do it? In that pre-therapeutic age, how did someone so wounded manage his pain and muster the emotional reserves to think clearly, act decisively and inspire confidence during perhaps the worst chapter in our nation's history? What sort of insights can we glean from **Lincoln's** struggle against adversity that might prove helpful today?

Most notably, he developed a mindfulness practice - not necessarily the kind taught by contemporary meditation instructors but one that did allow **Lincoln** to investigate and work through his emotional issues. His practice was to write poetry - mostly very dark poetry. This is an example:

I hear the loved survivors tell
How naught from death could save,
Till every sound appears a knell
And every spot a grave.

I range the fields with pensive tread,
And pace the hollow rooms,
And feel (companion of the dead)
I'm living in the tombs.

Lincoln was hardly exceptional in this respect. A product of the 19th century romantic rebellion, he both read and wrote poetry in order to manage the grief, melancholy and fear that afflicted him. **Emily Dickinson, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Walt Whitman and William Cullen Bryant** all employed poetry for much the same purpose.

Composing a poem requires one to maintain sustained attention on the feelings that the subject matter evokes. You don't dash off a poem the way you do an e-mail, and that gives writers the opportunity to focus on an emotion long enough to begin to identify its source, assign it meaning and put it in perspective.

In her book *Emotional Alchemy* **Tara Bennett-Golman** contrasts mindfulness with the quality of awareness we typically bring to our daily affairs. Unless we make a concerted effort to concentrate we find our attention being fragmented by a constant stream of distractions. Moreover, we learn to use those distractions to avoid working with painful or disturbing emotions. "We tear our attention away from them," she writes

...and thus cut off the feelings prematurely. But when we fail to stay with a feeling long enough to allow it to run its course, we deprive ourselves of the opportunity to learn from it.

Mindfulness "hides from nothing" **Bennett-Golman** continues. It cuts through all our mechanisms of denial and delivers an honest picture of our inner reality. The good news is that "confidence and patience grow from this bold, challenging awareness." That was certainly true in **Abraham Lincoln's** experience.

The process can also be undercut by well-meaning friends and relatives who encourage us not to dwell on painful or negative emotions. Much of the advice people who are wounded, hurting and unhappy receive is couched in

the language of rationalization and denial. "Look on the bright-side;" "Things could be worse;" "You'll get over it - we all do;" "There's always a light at the end of the tunnel;" and so forth. Such positive aphorisms may be helpful at some point on the healing path, but not while the presenting emotions are still raw and powerful. Grief counselor **Alan Wolfelt** recommends a "homeopathic" approach to our emotional life - "to go with what is presented rather than against it."

Instead of trying to manage the grief...you realize the value of the grief managing the person. Instead of trying to quickly get away from our feelings, we savor them... Instead of trying to outmaneuver these forces and use some premature technique to return life to normal...we turn in the direction of the symptoms...

The sufferer, **Wolfelt** insists, "must descend before she can transcend."

Abraham Lincoln also developed a perspective on life that better prepared him to cope with misfortune and loss than most Americans today, and that was a second advantage. **Joshua Wolf Shenk** describes **Lincoln's** outlook as "depressive realism." He did not believe that life had mistreated him, or that he somehow "deserved" a better hand than he had been dealt. Human existence is invariably problematic and unpredictable and the resourceful individual learns to accept and then rise above their circumstances.

Over time, **Lincoln's** sadness and angst softened into what **Shenk** calls a "serene resignation" to his own fate. It was from this place that he addressed the nation's trials with an amazing combination of poise, intelligence, resolve and sensitivity. "Whatever greatness Lincoln achieved cannot be explained as a triumph over personal suffering," **Shenk** writes.

This is not a story of transformation but of integration. Lincoln did not do great work because he had solved the problem of his melancholy. The problem of his melancholy was all the more fuel for the fire of his great work.

Raised in a culture which promises a cure for every affliction and holds that it is wrong to allow any malady to go untreated, many Americans may have developed an unrealistic notion of "wellness." It does not mean the

enjoyment of unblemished happiness or imply a state of emotional well-being untainted by sadness, self-doubt or distress. "The Christian doctrine of original sin and the Buddhist Four Noble Truths teach that human life is wounded in its essence," **Thomas Moore** writes. "We are wounded simply...by being children of Adam and Eve." We enter life differently, and perhaps more productively, he observes, "when we accept that we are wounded" and don't feel this overwhelming urgency to find an antidote for every ailment.

Rather than freedom from our woundedness - an illusory ambition, **Moore** tells us - our ultimate objective should be human wholeness. That means leaving room in our psyche for those darker emotional elements that contribute to a more balanced perspective. In his book *Let Your Life Speak* **Parker Palmer** describes how he managed to sabotage his own personal and professional life by ignoring the painful sensations clamoring for attention beneath his self-inflating ego. Ultimately they could not be contained and **Palmer's** life spun out of control. Today, he writes, I "attend to my own truth" and "feel at home in my skin...for the first time."

Lincoln's introspectiveness did not cause him to obsess over his emotions to the point that he lost interest in the affairs of the world. Periods of solitude were always preceded and followed by determined professional and political engagement. At one particularly difficult time in his life **Lincoln** admitted that death held no terrors and that he could easily kill himself. What stopped him was, as he put it, "an irrepressible desire to accomplish something while I live -- something that would redound to the interest of my fellow man."

Here we find a third clue to **Lincoln's** ability to deal successfully with persistent and deep-seated emotional issues. This was a man committed to the common good, who believed that he had something to give and who found in service to others an answer to despair. "The age-old prescription for melancholy...is to try to set the mind on a concrete project, something outside oneself," **Joshua Wolf Shenk** writes. Otherwise, morbid, hopeless thoughts "take on a life of their own, creating a frenetic powerlessness."

That assessment is shared by **Elizabeth Berg**, who thinks that doctors and therapists ought to prescribe more service projects. Positive emotional energy is released by the work we do on behalf of others -- when the mindful investigation of our inner life is accompanied by compassionate engagement with the greater community of life.

Lincoln's commitment was to his fellow human beings, but we can choose instead to mend the fabric of the natural world. "There is a synergistic interplay between planetary and personal well-being," **Theodore Roszack** insists. As we work to heal Gaia, Gaia's healing powers begin flowing into us.

Abraham Lincoln spent his formative years laboring on the family farm - hard work that he did not particularly relish. That experience did, however, sensitize him to nature and to the suffering of other sentient beings. More empathetic than most young men of that era, **Abe** once declared to his stepsister that "an ant's life was to it, as sweet as ours to us." Did **Lincoln** believe in nature's therapeutic value? It's hard to say, but it's an idea that has achieved significant currency today.

Some therapists now believe that whatever emotional problems a person may have, they are likely to be aggravated by a "nature deficit disorder." **Lynda Wheelwright Schmidt**, a Jungian analyst, reminds us that civilization has only been around for a few thousand years. For most of humankind's time on this planet the natural world was our primary source of both physical and emotional sustenance.

Traditional healers are more attuned to this reality than most. **Leslie Gray**, a Native American therapist with a degree from Harvard also studied with a Cherokee shaman. He convinced her that emotional healing can be powerfully enabled if we find a place in nature that "gives us a feeling of being whole." The Native American poet **Joy Harjo** underscores that point with these lovely lines:

Eagle, that Sunday morning, over Salt River,
Circling in blue sky in wind
Swept our hearts clean with sacred wings...
Breathe in, knowing we are made of
All this, and breathe, knowing
We are truly blessed because we
Were born, and die soon, within a
True circle of motion,
Like eagle rounding out the morning inside us.

Communion with nature should, however, be complemented by companionship with individuals who will allow the slow, halting and idiosyncratic process of emotional healing to unfold naturally. While in the throes of depression, **Parker Palmer** recalls how many well-meaning people tried to "fix"

him" while what he really needed was someone who would "stand patiently at the edge of my mystery and misery."

Most people, he observes, are uncomfortable in the presence of suffering. They deal with their own anxiety by glibly proposing solutions, hoping to distract the sufferer from his or her distress. That strategy inhibits the ability of both parties to deal honestly and openly with discomfiting emotional issues.

Lincoln was fortunate because emotional illness had not acquired the stigma it came to possess in the 20th century. On the contrary, pervasive sadness and melancholy were thought to signify depth of character and hard-won wisdom. His friends empathized with **Lincoln**, but were not nearly so quick to offer advice or try to alter his dark mood.

Thomas Moore used a similar approach with a disillusioned and depressed 70 year-old Catholic priest. Rather than presenting possible remedies, **Moore** simply brought "an attitude of acceptance and interest to Bill's condition." He tried "to appreciate the way his soul was expressing itself" at each session. **Bill's** condition did improve, and he began to use the same technique with his own parishioners. "I will never again to tell another person how to live," **Bill** said. "I can only talk to them of their mystery."

In the reading from *The True Story of Hansel and Gretel* shared earlier there is a line that reads, "He spoke their names over and over...and his children began to smile as they became, once again, themselves."

To become ourselves - our true selves - that which, as **Parker Palmer** put it, "we were created to be" is what the journey is all about. This is the final gift and goal of the hard, prolonged process of emotional healing. But here it is important to remember that the "self" that embarks upon the journey is not the same one as emerges en route. The experience of suffering invariable reshapes and refines us. We can never recover some cherished childhood "self" for we will have long ago lost our innocence and acquired scars that can't be removed.

Perfect emotional health is not the point. We should seek, rather, to be at peace with a more integrated, emotionally educated and whole self so that, like **Abe Lincoln**, we can move into the future with the "sad, sweet hope that better times will someday come."