

Character quotes from Abraham Lincoln: who beckoned us to seek “the better angels of our nature”

Compiled by the Abraham Lincoln Center for Character Development at Lincoln College



Intellect

“Upon the subject of education, not presuming to dictate any plan or system respecting it, I can only say that I view it as the most important subject which we as a people can be engaged in.” – Lincoln in his first political announcement, Mar. 9, 1832

“A taste for reading, gives access to whatever has already been discovered by others. It is the key, or one of the keys, to the already solved problems. And not only so. It gives a relish, and facility, for successfully pursuing the unsolved ones.” – Lincoln in his address to the Wisconsin Agricultural Society, Sept. 30, 1859

“He regrets his want of education, and does what he can to supply the want.” – Lincoln reflecting on his childhood from his 1860 autobiography

“The way he became educated was by never being ashamed to confess his ignorance of what in fact he did not know, by always asking questions where he could probably elicit information, and by studying all his life.” – Leonard Swett, on the Eighth Judicial Circuit with Lincoln

Honesty

“In very truth he was, the noblest work of God -- an honest man.” – Lincoln in a eulogy for Benjamin Ferguson, February 8, 1842

“Resolve to be honest at all events.” – Lincoln, in Notes for a Law Lecture, July 1, 1850

“For a man who was for a quarter century both a lawyer and a politician, he (Lincoln) was the most honest man I know. He was not only morally honest but intellectually so.” – Samuel Parks, an Illinois state legislator, fellow attorney, and friend of Lincoln’s, date unknown

Empathy

“I have no prejudice against the Southern people. They are just what we would be in their situation. If slavery did not now exist amongst them, they would not introduce it. If it did now exist amongst us, we should not instantly give it up.” – Lincoln in the U.S. Senate debate at Ottawa, Aug. 21, 1858.

“In the untimely loss of your noble son, our affliction here, is scarcely less than your own.” – Lincoln in a letter to Ephraim D. and Phoebe Ellsworth on the death of their son in the Civil War, May 25, 1861

“They do not want much and they get very little. Each one considers his business of great importance and I must gratify them. I know how I would feel in their place.” – Lincoln on the many that appealed to him personally in the White House, as quoted by Helen Nicolay, date unknown

“Both read the same Bible, and pray to the same God; and each invokes His aid against the other... let us judge not that we be not judged.” – Lincoln in his Second Inaugural Address, Mar. 4, 1865

Courage

“I expect to maintain this contest until successful, or till I die, or am conquered, or my term expires, or Congress or the country forsakes me...” – Lincoln in a letter to his secretary of state, William Seward, June 28, 1862

“The dogmas of the quiet past, are inadequate to the stormy present. The occasion is piled high with difficulty, and we must rise -- with the occasion. As our case is new, so we must think anew, and act anew.” – Lincoln in his Message to Congress, Dec. 1, 1862

“I never, in my life, felt more certain that I was doing right, than I do in signing this paper. And my whole soul is in it.” – Lincoln to William Seward in signing the Emancipation Proclamation, Jan. 1, 1863

Civility

"Understanding the spirit of our institutions to aim at the elevation of men, I am opposed to whatever tends to degrade them." – Lincoln's to Theodore Canisius, May 17, 1859

"Be careful to give no offence, and keep cool under all circumstances." – Lincoln to Mark Delahay, May 12, 1860

"In all our rejoicing let us neither express, nor cherish, any harsh feeling towards any citizen who, by his vote, has differed with us. Let us at all times remember that all American citizens are brothers of a common country, and should dwell together in the bonds of fraternal feeling." – Lincoln in "Remarks at Springfield IL," Nov. 20, 1860.

"I am a patient man---always willing to forgive on the Christian terms of repentance; and also to give ample time for repentance." – Abraham Lincoln to Reverdy Johnson, July 26, 1862

"Do good to those who hate you and turn their ill will to friendship." – Lincoln to Mary Lincoln, date unknown

Perseverance

"Always bear in mind that your own resolution to succeed, is more important than any other one thing." – Lincoln to Isham Reavis, Nov. 5, 1855

"This too shall pass away. Never fear." – Lincoln to Norman Judd following his 1858 U.S. Senate race loss

"The power of hope upon human exertion and happiness is wonderful." – Lincoln, Fragment on Labor, Sept. 17, 1859

"You cannot fail, if you resolutely determine that you will not." – Lincoln to George Latham, July 22, 1860

"Adhere to your purpose and you will soon feel as well as you ever did. On the contrary, if you falter, and give up, you will lose the power of keeping any resolution, and will regret it all your life. Take the advice of a friend, who...deeply sympathizes with you, and stick to your purpose." – Lincoln to Quintin Campbell, June 28, 1862

"Lincoln replied that he was more than willing to die, but that he had done nothing to make any human being remember that he had lived, and that to connect his name with the events transpiring in his day and generation and so impress himself upon them as to link his name with something that would redound to the interest of his fellow man was what he desired to live for." – Joshua Speed, Lincoln's good friend, recounting Lincoln's melancholy in 1841

Vision

"My politics are short and sweet, like the old woman's dance. I am in favor of a National Bank, I am in favor of the Internal improvement system, and a high protective tariff. These are my sentiments and political principles." – Lincoln, campaigning for the Illinois state legislature, Aug. 1832

"The way for a young man to rise, is to improve himself every way he can, never suspecting that any body wishes to hinder him." – Lincoln to William H Herndon, July 10, 1848

"They (the nation's founders) meant to set up a standard maxim for free society...constantly spreading and deepening...the happiness and value of life to all people, of all colors, everywhere." – Lincoln in a speech on the Dred Scott decision in Springfield, June 27, 1857

"The leading object (of government) is, to elevate the condition of men -- to lift artificial weights from all shoulders - - to clear the paths of laudable pursuit for all -- to afford all, an unfettered start, and a fair chance, in the race of life." – Lincoln in his Message to Congress, July 4, 1861

"If they (Negro people) stake their lives for us, they must be prompted by the strongest motive--even the promise of freedom. And the promise being made, must be kept." – Lincoln to James Conkling, Aug. 26, 1863

Responsibility

"Having faith that right makes might, let us to the end, dare to do our duty as we understand it." – Lincoln at New Haven, CT, March 7, 1860.

"Leave nothing for to-morrow which can be done to-day." – Lincoln, Notes for a Law Lecture, July 1, 1850

"You may think it was a very little thing...but it was a most important incident in my life. I could scarcely credit, that I, a poor boy, had earned a dollar." - Abraham Lincoln to William Seward on his first job, date unknown

"The proudest ambition he could desire was to do something for the elevation of the condition of his fellow man." – Lincoln to John Conness, Nov. 13, 1863

"It is for us the living, rather, to be dedicated here to the unfinished work which they who fought here have thus far so nobly advanced." – Lincoln in the Gettysburg Address, Nov. 19, 1863

Leadership

"I can say for one that I have no other so great as that of being truly esteemed of my fellow men, by rendering myself worthy of their esteem." – Lincoln in his first campaign for public office, Mar. 9, 1832

"I will not take part in any hangings. Enough lives have been sacrificed." – Lincoln as recorded by Gideon Welles on the hanging of the Confederate leaders, Apr. 1865

"The President is ...the most perfect representative of the purely American character now in public life— perhaps the most perfect that ever has existed." -- William O. Stoddard on Lincoln, July 21, 1862

"Executive force and vigor are rare qualities. The president is the best of us." – Secretary of State William Seward on Lincoln, Apr. 1, 1861

Humility

"I know wish to make the personal acknowledgement that you were right, and I was wrong." – Lincoln to General U.S. Grant, July 4, 1864

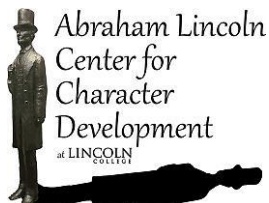
"I attempt no compliment to my own sagacity. I claim not to have controlled events, but confess plainly that events have controlled me." – Lincoln to Albert Hodges, Apr. 4, 1864

"I happen, temporarily, to occupy this big White House. I am living witness that any one of your children may look to come here as my father's child has." – Lincoln to 166th Ohio Reg., Aug. 22, 1864

"I do not impugn the motives of any one opposed to me. It is no pleasure to me to triumph over any one." – Lincoln in a speech after his re-election, Nov. 8, 1864

"Though high in position, the humblest could approach him and feel at home in his presence. Though deep, he was transparent; though strong, he was gentle; though decided and pronounced in his convictions, he was tolerant towards those who differed from him." Frederick Douglass in his oration to the memory of Lincoln, Apr. 14, 1876

"He was not a born king of men. . .but a child of the common people, who made himself a great persuader, therefore a leader, by dint of firm resolve, patient effort, and dogged perseverance. . . There was probably no year where Lincoln was not a wiser, cooler, better man than he had been the year preceding." Horace Greeley, on Lincoln, in 1891



***"Character is like a tree, and reputation like its shadow.
The shadow is what we think of it; the tree is the real thing."***
– Abraham Lincoln, as quoted by Noah Brooks, in Scribner's Monthly, August 1879.