

### **In Memory of Abraham Lincoln**

Om. A-sa-to ma sad gam-ma-ya. Ta-ma-so-ma jyo-tir gam-ma-ya. Mri-tyor ma a-mri-tam ga-ma-ya. Avir avir ma e-dhi. Rudra yat te dak-shi-nam mu-kham. Tena mam pahi nityam. Tena mam pahi nityam. Tena mam pahi nityam.

Lead us from the unreal to the Real. Lead us from darkness unto Light. Lead us from death to Immortality. Reveal to us Thy Resplendent Truth and evermore protect us, Oh Lord, by Thy Sweet and Compassionate Face, by Thy Sweet and Compassionate Face, by Thy Sweet and Compassionate Face.

*[Transcriber note: As this was from an oral talk, I omitted some – but not all of the oral fillers like “Eh?” “You see” and omitted some of the first duplicate comments where he then repeated a phrase and corrected it... I left in some, however to try to catch the flavor of the speaker.]*

The subject of my talk this morning is: In Memory of Abraham Lincoln. Abraham Lincoln’s birthday is [the] twelfth of February and today is [the] tenth. So it has been our custom for some years to remember this great man, and the majority of Americans consider him as the greatest president of the country. So for some time we have been speaking about this great personality. He was not merely a politician, a statesman, but when we study him, more and more we discover new facets of his character which are very charming, which are very instructing.

Some years ago it was said that the books about Abraham Lincoln would run to more than five thousand, but by now it may have been seven thousand. And more and more new books are appearing, smaller and lighter as if this great man can never be forgotten. It is not true of any other president or any other great men. There have been many great men, men made [possibly men made-- couldn’t understand a couple words] in this country. But Abraham Lincoln remains in the heart of people as an object of devotion and love and adoration. Why, we cannot really explain. We can explain to some extent. We can explain about other presidents’ remarkable achievements in their period of presidency. And Abraham Lincoln’s great achievement, two great achievements: one the emancipation of slavery and the other the unification of the country. Hmm? The country was going to pieces. Some of the southern states wanted to recede [secede] and that was a great misfortune and it was given to him. He believed... he believed that it was God’s will that he came to fulfill this task, though it was a task of great pain, because he was a most compassionate man. For him to see men being killed in war was a terrible agony.

I will read – since this is – this talk is titled in memory of Lincoln, I shall read from some books and papers, some passages which have been written after his death. This is a book. It was published in 1985, Abraham Lincoln, the Man Behind the Myths, by Stephen B. Oates. I will read a few lines from the beginning of the book; the subchapter is “Man of the People.”<sup>1</sup>

“In 1858, against a backdrop of heightening sectional tensions over slavery, Abraham Lincoln stood in the Great Hall of the Illinois House of Representatives, warning his countrymen that a house divided against itself could not stand. Across Illinois that year, in a series of forensic duels with Stephen A. Douglas, this tall and

melancholy man addressed himself boldly to the difficult problems of his day: to the haunting moral contradiction of slavery in a nation based on the Declaration of Independence... to the combustible issue of Negro social and political rights... to the meaning and historic mission of America's experiment in popular government. This same man went on to the presidency, charged with the awesome task of saving the Union – and its experiment in popular government – in the holocaust of civil war. In the end, after enduring four unendurable years, he himself became a casualty of that conflict, gunned down by John Wilkes Booth, just when the war was won and popular government preserved for humankind the world over.

“The man who died that dark and dismal day had flaws as well as strengths, made mistakes and suffered reversals just as surely as he enjoyed his remarkable achievements. But in the days that followed his assassination, the man became obscured in an outpouring of flowery orations and tear-filled eulogies. As the seasons passed, Lincoln went on to legend and martyrdom, inflated by the myth makers into a godly Emancipator who personified America's ideal Everyman.” (p. 3)

Then he goes on to say how books about Lincoln, apparently in many places it seems to be imaginations, but have been published and this was disturbing to one gentleman who was very close to Lincoln, he was his law partner, Herndon. He wrote a book and he refuted many of those myths and he began to present Lincoln -- again he had his own imaginations. He pointed out how many mistakes he made, how cruel he was. It was an awful, semi-awful picture of Lincoln. And so, two classes, two types of books began to be published: one type is that he was a great man-- almost like a god-man, and the other type is pointing out he was a common man, and he... These two kinds of literature began to be published soon after his death and the last century. But even those who wrote against him, they could not forget some remarkable traits of his character. That he was a great man, nobody... nobody doubted, but to raise this greatness to a form of mystical presentation, that was criticized.

“By 1909, the centennial year of Lincoln's birth” – he was born in eighteen hundred nine—“the two traditions had begun to blend into a ‘composite American ideal,’ as Donald has said. But it remained for Carl Sandburg, in his epochal Abraham Lincoln, to combine the saint and folklore Lincoln and capture the mythic figure more vividly and consistently than any other folk biographer. In truth, Sandburg's became the most popular Lincoln work ever written, as a procession of plays, motion pictures, novels, children's books, school texts, and television shows purveyed Sandburg's Lincoln to a vast American public, until that Lincoln became for most Americans the real historical figure.

“Yet, ironically enough, Sandburg did not set out to write an enduring epic. When he began his project in 1923, he intended only to do a Lincoln book for teenagers. He had collected Lincoln materials since his days at Lombard College in Galesburg, Illinois. Now he read voraciously in the sources, particularly in Herndon's Lincoln. And he retraced Lincoln's path across Illinois, chatting with plain folk as Herndon had done, looking for the Lincoln who lived in their imaginations and memories. As he worked, Sandburg strongly identified with ‘Abe’ and even dressed, acted, and physically resembled the figure taking shape in his

mind. 'Like him,' Sandburg said, 'I am a son of the prairie, a poor boy who wandered over the land to find himself and his mission in life'" (p. 7)

Every chapter of Lincoln's life is... has its own interest and its very appealing interest. In his boyhood as you know, he was born in Kentucky and then his father who was a farmer and Lincoln had a sister, an elder sister, two years older and his mother died and Lincoln's father in order to manage the family he married a woman from... that woman was known to him. They were friends and she had now become a widow with two or three children. But understanding that this in order to rear, to for this own little son, Abe and his elder sister, in order to keep the family, that family [home] was that cabin, log cabin and he had to do something so he married this lady. And this woman became a second mother to Lincoln and his sister. And with her own two or three children they now had a very, very touching family. And it is very interesting to read. Several books have been published about Lincoln's life in those early days after his mother's death.

From his mother, his own mother, he learned, because his mother was a deeply religious woman and from his mother he developed the interest in the Bible and in Jesus Christ. Lincoln had a great... hankering for knowledge. But in his life, he said later on, that I had barely one year of school in my whole life. What I read I had to hunt books from here and there, whatever books were available. And... But he was, he had a great enthusiasm and love for reading. And one of his early books which he liked was the Bible, and another book, Life of Washington. And Aesop's Fables. See? And to school, he had barely schooling for one year. And for the school he had to walk six miles – six miles to school and six miles back. So his childhood days were really days of tremendous hardship. But he did not mind and he was strong. He was an awkward looking boy. He, later on his legs were tall, but he was a boy of tremendous strength. Soon his father employed him in the farm and he was equally efficient and he was... everybody liked him and liked his manners, his truthfulness, his honesty and his kindness, his sympathy. All these noble traits of his character were evident even when he was a boy. Thus he grew and fortunately his stepmother was very kind and affectionate to him and his elder sister. So Lincoln always remembered not only his own mother but his stepmother all through his life, and there was a book published [a] few years ago, The Two Mothers of Lincoln. That was a remarkable touching book. And Lincoln admired and respected his stepmother as if she was his own mother.

Thus he, the twenty-one, the first twenty-one years of his life were passed in... from Kentucky they moved to Indiana and his mother died in Indiana. That grave was there in the forest. And then he, at the age of twenty-one, he left his home, because in his heart he felt that he was born, God had brought him for something great. That urge which he could [not] explain, or nobody could explain that urge drove him from his... that life of boyhood and youth. When he was twenty-one he moved to Illinois, a place called New Salem, a village, and there he became a partner of a shop. And he used to ... a shopkeeper. He was not the owner, but he was the help [in] the shop and got some money. But his honesty was remarkable. It is said in his biography that once a customer has come from several miles away – maybe five or six miles – and she had made some purchases from that village store. And then Abraham found that he had given her change, which was less than what

was proper. In other words, six cents or eight cents that lady owned not to the shop. And, in order to... he thought it was his duty to give this money back to her. So he walked those six miles in order to give back those, that excess money that unconsciously, unknowingly was charged to her. For the return he went and he returned the six cents. Similarly, many incidents were told, available in the literature, in the Lincoln literature. His honesty and his truthfulness. And so he was a shopkeeper for some days. That village is now, the government has kept that village intact, as it was in Lincoln's days, a simple village. And there... then later on he became postmaster of that little village. See? And it was there he began to study as much as possible.

Here and there he would find some book and would spend hours in reading the book, whatever book he had. So even without schooling he began to enrich his knowledge. And then, and people found that this young man was exceptionally intelligent and so they began to urge him, "Why don't you enter into politics and law?" So he began to enrich his knowledge and then he sought a post in this... He came from New Salem, which was a village, he came to Springfield. Springfield was then the capitol of Illinois. And there these ambitions began to take shape. He would be a lawyer. Or he would first try to go to the election and this period when he describes his own life is so touching. And it is so simple and touching that he does not hide anything, you see – that he came from a low very poor village and he was a wood splitter. He was a laborer. Nothing he hid, you see. He had nothing to hide. And so his political life began to... in Springfield.

This is from another book. A few sentences, I'll read from this book. [Lincoln for the ages]<sup>2</sup> "Lincoln as a dramatic subject.... We only know now that he remains as he has always remained, the most majestic, the saddest, the noblest, and the most compassionate and dramatic figure in the history of the American scene." (p. 354) "As his closest associates insisted, no one had a right to say he knew Lincoln intimately." There were... "These were areas of his life which he shared with no man." (p. 413)

In one book which one of his contemporaries wrote, his name was Mr. Rice<sup>3</sup>, that he was a loving people, a man of the people. He had no reservation of friendship and distinction of caste or color but you could talk to him freely. But in one area there... one area where you could not understand him. As if suddenly he was talking and he had gone to another mood, a mood which was... which could not be understood. And that has been mentioned in many works, that he was a man of moods and there was one mood which was inexplicable. And this author, a Mr. Rice says, probably this was the... his innermost core of his heart, there was a truth. Hmm? Where he found himself, you see, and that was, you could say that was a spiritual, a deep spiritual instinct. A deep spiritual instinct which you could not express. If you say it is God, it does not explain. You see?

On the outside, Lincoln, you could say, he was... you could not say he was not a man of religion. He did not join any church, any Christian church, but he had studied the Bible thoroughly. The Bible was his constant companion and his... many of his writings and speeches we find its quotations. Appropriate quotations from the Bible. And often in his thoughts we find he mentions "It is God's Will." Something has happened. Everybody's troubled. But he himself, feels that it is...

sometimes he would use the word, God, sometimes the word, Providence. But he had a deep faith in God, which did not conform to the Christian tradition. And that is why people used to criticize him, [that] he was an infidel. And this second biographer Herndon, who was his law partner, he has mentioned that. "Lincoln died a heretic." (lightly laughs) You see? And that was of course objected to and criticized by many people that this... out of jealousy this man, this Herndon had written these things. Anyway Lincoln, you could not say that he was, even though he did not attend any church, but he was deeply religious. In one place he said, "Certainly..." This is from another book... [Lincoln for the Ages] "Lincoln believed himself to be an instrument in the hands of God. He insisted that he had registered an oath in heaven to finish the work that he was in, fully cognizant of his responsibility to God." (p. 412) "As his closest associates insisted, no one had a right to say he knew Lincoln intimately. There were areas of his life which he shared with no one [original quote = "man"]...Certainly Lincoln gave the world the impression and set the example of a man with profoundly religious sense of responsibility and faith. . A New England Congressman, Henry C. Deming of Connecticut, said that Lincoln was once asked why, in light of his obvious piety, he did not join a church. And Lincoln reportedly replied, 'When the church will inscribe over its altars as the sole qualification for membership, the Saviour's... statement for the substance of both law and gospel, 'Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and all thy mind, and thy neighbor as thyself,' that church will I join with all my heart and soul." ((p. 413-- original said when any church...)

Many churchmen, see, understood him, understood that he was a deeply-- his faith in God was very deep and they did not mind his not joining any church formally. And many of these churchmen had also written about him after his death. It does not matter whether he believed [in] God in the way we believe, but we cannot say that even for a moment he was not dissociated from God. Even in his busy moments, even in the great struggles of the Civil War, he carried God in his heart. That is the area which the people could not touch. People saw him as a noble man, an intelligent man, [saw] his kindness, his compassion and his genius... You see? Even his generals. He began to read military books. And even he used to. He was the Commander in Chief as the President is in this country the Commander in Chief. And he used to give military advice to the generals. And they were always, and sometimes they were very effective, you see?

In the midst of all these occupations, one seems to believe when he studies Lincoln deeply that he was... his mind in the deepest core of his heart he was in union with his God. And he's constantly he's feeling that it is by God's Will that even this terrible war, this terrible bloodshed, it had its ultimate use. Eh? It is by God's Will that this is happening. He never lost faith, even in the darkest moment. I will read a passage. This is from another book. "Those who follow his life must be impressed with the equal serenity of Lincoln's temper, in moments of the darkest adversity as in the hours of his greatest triumph." [Rice. Reminiscences of Abraham Lincoln, p. 8 – original said the greatest triumph]

As readers of Lincoln Literature know that he was a person who loved to tell jokes. Even in serious discussions he would somehow draw the allusion to some

incidents and which amused everybody. And sometimes one person asked him why you be the president why you should... are fond of so many jokes and all? "But if I do not tell these jokes, do you want me to cry?" [He laughs lightly. ] I don't want to cry, this is an antidote for crying, you see.

Now, his, his sadness of his face... that there are many books and which review this (?) [couldn't understand last two words]. Now this sadness has... can be interpreted and books have been published to explain this sadness which was always visible. He was... His face was... his eyes were remarkable eyes, but there was an inherent sadness in his face and there have been books which tried to explain this sadness. Great men who see the future and see the present and the present as so different from the future. The problem is which has come to his vision of his country and he... the behavior patterns of his contemporaries were so different that it gave him a great pain. So why these people do not understand? Why these people are acting so foolishly.

The Civil War was not at all necessary, you see, and Lincoln tried his best, hard to avoid that. He sent representatives, he called the leaders of the South, and absolutely there was no necessary and they did not understand this great country which had been given to these people. Eh? And it had so much potentiality in the future. It could do so much good to the world. And these things, they are not understanding. And this was, this was a conflict you see. And this conflict brought that sadness. It was not something his sadness of bereavement you see, though he had many bereavements in his life. But which he bore patiently and with great faith in God. It is God's Will. And so when this war, this Civil War, was inevitable he did not shrink from it. He had great courage and self-reliance and in certain matters he did not... he did not accept the opinions of his colleagues. Because he felt that it is God Who is giving me the light. So he had that great self confidence and it is this self confidence that led the war to victory. When people were disheartened and people from all quarters were saying: "Have peace. Have peace. Let the South have their way. Let the South have their slaves. What does it matter?" And Lincoln did not believe this. Lincoln saw the future of this country. The future of this country and so he would not compromise this way. How... whatever how difficult it was, but he would not compromise. He stood firm in his convictions, you see.

Then he had some admonitions about death. He was very fond of reading a poem about the evanescence of human life. And over and over he got that poem by memory. And he was very fond of this poem. It is a poem written by a Scotch writer and from this he would quote sometimes and himself he would read. Showing the evanescence of human life and at that time the problem of death was in his mind. Is... what is the ... what is the truth, the truth about man? Who is the real man? Is this real man that is functioning with his work, with his body, with his duties, with his family? Is this the whole history of man, or is there some afterlife? Is there a new possibility for man in another life?

These questions began to haunt his mind. And once he had a dream – a dream that at night he was walking in the corridors of the White house and he heard some cry... somebody was crying in some corner. And he walked and he found in one corner there was a coffin and surrounding the coffin there were several men and women. They were crying. Then Lincoln (all this [is] in [a] dream) then Lincoln

asked, "Who has died?" Then somebody answered, "The President." And this, this impressed him very much. 'President' means he... means he saw his own death. And from that time he was very interested in this problem of immortality, the problem of death. Does man survive death? Whoever would come he would ask this question.

There was a Christian minister, a very famous Christian minister of his time and he asked him: Reverend do you believe in immortality? And he was a Christian, he had to believe or otherwise he would not be allowed to remain a minister, you see. Every Christian belongs... believes that if he has faith in Christ then after death he would go to heaven. So it is a cardinal belief in the Christian [faith]. So he said, of course I believe in immortality as the Bible says. But [Lincoln] he was not satisfied. Now General Grant one day came to visit the President and he asked General Grant. "General do you believe in immortality?" Then the General said.... General was a busy general he had no time for these kind of philosophical and theological things. He said, "Of course there must be. I see so many people dying and there must be some..." Like that he avoided the question. Then one day a Shakespeare[an] actor came, [a] young man who was a prominent actor in Shakespeare drama. And Lincoln was very favorite of him because Lincoln was very favorite of Shakespeare—as Bible and Shakespeare also. So he asked this young man, "Read, repeat something from Shakespeare" and this man repeated from Hamlet, "To be or not to be"-- the question like that. And he was very happy. Then Lincoln asked him, "Do you believe in immortality?" He said, "Yes." "Well, why? Why do you believe in immortality?" "Well I have, I have felt that I can never be... it is a feeling from the depth of my heart... that I can never be absent from any moment of time, either in the past or in the present or in the future. Something in me is immortal. Something in me is timeless. Something in me, all the time is not away from time. Time is always present, you see. This is my experience. This is not a theology. This is not my theory, but I feel that when I think about myself, was I present two thousand years ago and I find the answer, 'yes'. You cannot run away from time. And that time is in me. In the depth of my consciousness there is some immortal principle that is present in all points of time." And Lincoln was very happy to hear this answer. He jumped up from his chair, the book says, and he said, "Now I have got my philosophy." His philosophy means that he understand[s] the true nature of the self.

Then one night this idea came to him. In those days, difficult days, he could not sleep much. So one night he had, he woke up and this idea came to him. Who is this Lincoln? This Lincoln who is acting as the President and is this the true Lincoln? Or there is something more in this who is more than Lincoln or this present, you see? And he remembered Emerson and there was a movement, the Transcendentalists, you know. And he remembered. Then he thought that probably God is playing with man—in the man he has entered as an immortal principle and this immortal principle through trials and errors and all would slowly become universal. And that principle cannot be limited in one in one single, one body, limited body. That principle is an infinite principle, an eternal principle which is at the back of all the changing phenomena of life and democracy can be defined as when man realizes his identity with this Immortal Principle. Then, that is the true

meaning of democracy – that is, the unity of all mankind, not through some outward... literature or theology but as a living truth. Man is indeed one with the universal. And that universal is God, or Providence, whatever His name you say. There is an Immortal Principle, which is trying, and He has created man and man's duty is to one day to find his identity with this Universal Principle. And that Universal Principle that we could say, "God."

So these thoughts came to him. And he was, he felt that his days are gone. Though he had...he was elected for the second time but in his heart of heart, he felt that somehow he would die. And so when people used to talk of his protection and all, he would say, "How can you protect me? Any sniper from any corner can shoot me." So he did not care to bother about whether when death comes and how death comes. He did not bother about [that]. He felt that he is... whatever is working and it is through the Will of God. He has never done anything which is against the Truth of God. A firm conviction. And so if death comes, he had that confidence, that faith, that it would be, [that] it is also the Will of God. And he was not afraid of death.

"He realized..." in another book [Lincoln for the Ages, p. 413]. "He realized how in his own life that all human reliance is vain without the assistance of that Divine Being and told his friends in Springfield I cannot succeed. With that Assistance, I cannot fail." Lincoln "is one of the few men in history, our own history and all history whose religion was great enough to bridge the gulfs between the sects and to encompass us all."<sup>5</sup> [Willard Sperry, Dean of Harvard Divinity School.]

So it is as days are going and we are facing new and new problems this great life shows us many clues, many sources of inspiration and behavior, which we can practice. He is never gone. Many presidents have come and ruled and many presidents in this country have done wonderful things but Lincoln is special. You feel that. When you visit the Lincoln Memorial in Washington, that great statue sitting there and you cannot but feel that you are in the presence of a living personality who is the personification of compassion, of truthfulness, of honesty, and of power. That power is not material power, but spiritual power. You cannot but feel, and you are overwhelmed.

So in our humble way on this day, we have remembered this great American and he is... he does not belong to America alone. More and more I am told, in Soviet Russia people are studying Lincoln seriously. And in many other countries. And his way was not a violent way but the way of love and equality, as he has written and he was ... his writings you see are... so beautiful. People say that he is a super first class writer even though he had schooling for one year. But in his short Gettysburg Address, or in his Second Inaugural Address the language, spontaneous language that comes from his heart touches us deeply... touches deeply. So we should, we who are in this country and we have seen the changes that were happening in this great country, this great country Lincoln he believed that it is not... it has contribution for whole world. And slowly these things are becoming true.

*Next Sunday Swami Ganeshananda will speak and his subject will be the Lord... Serve the Lord with Gladness. And this coming Wednesday there will be Upanishad class which will be conducted by myself. And this Saturday is the birthday of Sri Ramakrishna... the coming Saturday. And there will be the usual celebration in the*



*evening at 7:30. And before that, on Friday – not Friday, on the 12<sup>th</sup>, this 12<sup>th</sup> there will be another function we have every year – the night of Shiva, Shivaratri, with a short program of... of devotional music and worship and that is on the 12<sup>th</sup>, Tuesday and Wednesday the Upanishad class and Saturday the birthday of Sri Ramakrishna in the evening.*

Madhu .... [chants in Sanskrit]

Sweet blow the winds and the very oceans give forth blessedness. May the herbs and plants give us health and happiness. Sweet unto us be the nights and dawns. May every particle of Mother Earth be charged with blessing and may the Heavens shower us with benediction. Sweet unto us be the noble forest trees. Sweet unto us be the shining sun. Sweet unto us be all living creation. Om. Sweetness, Harmony, Peace.

1. Oates, Stephen B. Abraham Lincoln, the man behind the myths. New York, Harper & Row, c. 1984.
2. Newman, Ralph G. Lincoln for the Ages, Doubleday & Co., Garden City, NY c. 1960.
3. Rice, Allen Thorndike. Reminiscences of Abraham Lincoln by Distinguished Men of His Time. Harper & Brothers Publishers: New York, c. 1909.
4. Newman... Lincoln for the Ages...
5. Sperry, Willard -- Harvard Divinity School in Trueblood, Elton, Abraham Lincoln: Theologian of American Anguish.