

OF THE PEOPLE, BY THE PEOPLE, FOR THE PEOPLE

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Frank W. Carpenter, D.Min.

St. John's Unitarian Universalist Church, Cincinnati, OH

Today as our nation celebrates the bicentennial of one of its greatest presidents, it confronts a great challenge. As we look backward, it is all too easy to think Lincoln might be the leader we need for tomorrow. Yet the future is ever open. Let us remember when Lincoln worked in the White House, many feared he was not up to the job. It is only in hind sight, perhaps because of his assassination, many have come to think of him as a savior. Abraham Lincoln was not a messiah, he was a working man.

The great African American scholar W. E. B. Du Bois understood that about Lincoln. Du Bois loved Lincoln but refused to deify him. "I love him not because he was perfect, but because he was not and yet triumphed," he said.

When Du Bois said of Lincoln he was "big enough to be inconsistent," he meant Lincoln continually reinvented himself. Lincoln knew the nation must think anew about itself, for he thought anew about himself. For most of his life, Lincoln was a colonizationist, believing as did most northerners that African Americans must return to Africa leaving the United States a white nation.

John Stauffer of Harvard University tells us that it wasn't until mid-1863 that the trauma of war made this vision of a white nation untenable for Lincoln. He recognized that to win the war and save the nation, he needed to treat blacks as an integral part of it; believing, with Frederick Douglass, the destiny of the African American was the destiny of the nation.

Lincoln met with more blacks in the White House than any other previous president. Frederick Douglas, Bishop Daniel Payne; the Reverend Henry Highland Garnet; Martin Delany, the first black major in the Union army; Elizabeth Keckly; and Sojourner Truth were among the black leaders who visited the White House. All spoke of a man treating them with respect, differently from most other white men.

Stauffer recounts how Frederick Douglass captures Lincoln's legacy on equality, and race in his speech at the unveiling of the Freedmen's monument in Lincoln Park in 1876. In the audience were President Grant and his cabinet, justices of the Supreme Court, congressmen and diplomats, and leading clergymen, along with a few black leaders.  
[http://www.abrahamlincoln200.org/uploadedFiles/Lincoln%27sLegacy\(Stauffer\)\\_1.doc](http://www.abrahamlincoln200.org/uploadedFiles/Lincoln%27sLegacy(Stauffer)_1.doc)

Refusing to mythologize Lincoln, the great black orator said. "Truth compels me to admit---even here in the presence of this monument we have erected to his memory---that Abraham Lincoln was neither our man nor our model. He was preeminently the white man's president, entirely devoted to the welfare of the white men, and he shared toward the colored race the prejudices common to his countrymen."

Turning to the white dignitaries, “You are the children of Abraham Lincoln. We are at best only his step-children.”

But Douglas liked to keep his audience on the edge of their seats. He went on, “By prioritizing the Union over the plight of blacks, Lincoln brought the American people safely through the conflict. Had he put the abolition of slavery before the salvation of the Union, he would have alienated large numbers of people and rendered resistance to rebellion impossible.

“Viewed from the genuine abolition ground, Mr. Lincoln seemed tardy, cold, dull, and indifferent; but measuring him by the sentiment of his country, a sentiment he was bound as a statesman to consult, he was swift, zealous, radical, determined.”

Stauffer tells us, “The conservative Republican had helped steer the nation through a revolution. The white man’s president who treated blacks as stepchildren had ultimately adopted them as his own children, part of the national family. ... by honoring Lincoln, blacks honored themselves, Douglass said.”

The Emancipation Proclamation was meant to secure the nation. But it was what Lincoln called in the Gettysburg Address, “the unfinished work we are in,” dedication to the proposition all are created equal. Lincoln knew well, “stony the road we trod, bitter the chastening rod.”

Lincoln lived this unfinished work. He knew he was a work in progress, as was and is this American nation. Lincoln was a working man. Christopher Hitchens writes in the recent Newsweek, “on almost every occasion upon which Lincoln spoke of slavery, ...he mentioned ... the cruel theft of the labor power of the oppressed—something that he had himself experienced in a lesser form of serfdom when hired out by his father as a “hand” in Kentucky.” <http://www.newsweek.com/id/178859/page/2>

Some argue that what drove Lincoln was his resentment against his father, his learning as a youth when he had to pay his father everything he earned. We hear this in our responsive reading:

“As labor is the common burden of our race, so the effort of some to shift their share of the burden onto the shoulders’ of others is the great, durable, curse of the race.” (#586)

Lincoln does not say **work** is the great curse.

No, Abraham Lincoln says, **the great curse is having to do the work of others**, as his father forced him to do; as his friend Frederick Douglas was forced to do by his master.

Can we appreciate Lincoln; can we understand slavery, its curse, its release in the Emancipation Proclamation without a brief history of work?

What is the traditional view of work? What is the Biblical view of Work? Work, says the Bible is a punishment. Perhaps you recall the story of how Adam and Eve were kicked out of the Garden of Eden? Why were Adam and Eve expelled? Because Eve was bad! How sexism enters this story even before it becomes an explanation for work!

Eve succumbs to the temptations of the snake, eats the apple, gets Adam to eat it. They wear clothes, mostly because they start thinking for themselves

Along comes God, angry. He says to Adam, "Because you have listened to the voice of your wife, and have eaten from the tree about which I commanded you, saying, 'You shall not eat from it'; Cursed is the ground because of you; In toil you will eat of it All the days of your life. "Both thorns and thistles it shall grow for you; And you will eat the plants of the field; By the sweat of your face You will eat bread.." Genesis 3:19

Having to work for a living is a punishment.

Slavery? Really bad punishment! For really bad people.

What does it mean to have an ideology claiming work is punishment? Is not such an ideology an effort by some to shift their share of the burden of existence onto others? Writing about our present crisis economist Michael Hudson recounts a conversation with a commercial banker. "We've had an intellectual breakthrough," the banker said. "It's changed our credit philosophy." Imagining a new magical mathematics formula, Hudson asked "What is it?" "The poor are honest," the banker said, his jaw dropping open as if to say, "Who would have guessed?"

His meaning clear, the poor pay their debts as a matter of honor, even at great personal sacrifice and what today's neoliberal Chicago School language would call uneconomic behavior. Unlike Donald Trump, they are less likely to walk away from their homes when market prices sink below the mortgage level. This gullibility does not make economic sense, but reflects a group morality that has made them rich pickings for predatory lenders such as Countrywide, Wachovia and Citibank.

<http://www.counterpunch.org/hudson02122009.html>

The notion that working for a living is a form of punishment is embedded in our culture. Is it a wonder people have to deal with depression, self-hatred, self-rejection so much of the time? Drugs, anti-depressants, alcohol. Rather than sorting out what our lives are about, we are told that we must pay our debts. The financial crisis is feeding a long term psychic malaise which Jimmy Carter noticed thirty years ago. The dismal science of economics can make us feel all ugly inside. We feel the stress, depression, boredom and loneliness permeating everyday life, but fear change, fear of giving up low priced gas. If the price of gas goes up, will we be able to pay off our mortgages, our credit card debt?

Lincoln's father considered his son to be in debt to him. Such relationships do not make for democracy. Lincoln's vision in the Gettysburg Address still stands as the highest

expression of the democratic vision: of the people, by the people, for the people. Unitarian minister Theodore Parker frequently used the phrase, 'Democracy is direct self-government, over all the people, for all the people, by all the people.' [William Herndon](#), Lincoln's law partner, wrote in his Lincoln *biography* he brought Lincoln some of Parker's sermons. Lincoln marked Parker's phrase with a pencil. [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gettysburg\\_Address](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gettysburg_Address)

Neither Parker nor Lincoln would recognize what we have today. Today it seems more

Four score and seven years ago our original investors brought forth a new corporation, conceived in servitude .... We are now dedicated that this corporation shall have a new birth of cash flows; and that this government of the bankers, by the bankers, for the bankers, shall not perish from the earth.

Not new to Lincoln, nor Andrew Jackson. Again in Lincoln's words, "As labor is the common burden of our race, so the effort of some to shift their share of the burden onto the shoulders of others is the great, durable, curse of the race."

Work is common to us all. Here is another point where the Biblical view is different from the Darwinian view. From an evolutionary point of view, work is part of the adaptation to reality, the struggle for existence required of us all. If some are able to shift their burden off on others, is it a not a moral issue, rather than scientific?

Lincoln knew the unfinished work he spoke at Gettysburg. This makes perhaps the greatest monument to his legacy and the Emancipation Proclamation the establishment on the centennial of his birth of an organization "dedicated to the great task remaining before us."

The NAACP was intentionally organized on the 100<sup>th</sup> birthday of Lincoln to honor his legacy.

In the summer of 1908, the country was shocked by the account of the race riots at Lincoln's home town. Springfield, Illinois. A mob including many of the town's "best citizens," raged for two days, killing and wounding scores of African Americans. In the *Independent* of September 3rd, William Walling wrote under the title "Race War in the North.,"

"Either the spirit of the abolitionists, of Lincoln and of Lovejoy must be revived and we must come to treat the Negro on a plane of absolute political and social equality, or [we] will soon have transferred the race war to the North." He ended calling for a "large and powerful body of citizens ... to come to their aid."

W E B Du Bois helped form the organizing committee and was long term editor of the NAACP journal THE CRISIS. On the time line of the NAACP, one is horrified by what we read. The entry for 1913, for example, says "President Woodrow Wilson officially introduces segregation into the Federal Government. Horrified that the President would

sanction such a policy, the NAACP launched a public protest.”

<http://www.naacp.org/about/history/timeline/index.htm>

Here at St. John’s the NAACP is on our time line. I brought up from our Library this framed letter from the local chapter of the NAACP thanking us for our contribution in 1964 for \$456.

As we now face a great national crisis, it is still true as Lincoln said at Gettysburg, that “It is for us, the living, ... **to be dedicated here to the unfinished work** “ “that all ... are created equal.”