Abraham Lincoln's Emotional Life

by Michael Burlingame

I am a psycho-historian, that is, one who attempts to apply the insights of psychology to the study of the past. Most traditional historians pride themselves on their lack of preconceived theories which might distort their findings. They look askance at social scientists – sociologists, economists, anthropologists, political scientists, and the like – who fit their conclusions into a Procrustean bed of theory. But if pressed, most historians would concede that they do ground their work on a basic assumption, namely, that individuals, groups, and nations rationally pursue their self-interest, defined in terms of security and prosperity. Psycho-historians agree while there is much truth in that general theory, they insist that often irrational forces prove more powerful in shaping the past. Beneath the calm surface of rationality there churns a mighty undercurrent of irrationality. Psychological needs often outweigh economic, political, or social considerations and lead people to behave in ways that do not make rational sense.

The life of Abraham Lincoln is a case in point. Traditional biographers are hard-pressed to explain many unusual features of that life. Today I would like to explore some of those with you.

Many biographers have noted that Lincoln's early political career was undistinguished, especially when compared with his statesmanlike later career. In his twenties and thirties, Lincoln was – as Benjamin P. Thomas, author of the best single-volume life of the sixteenth president, put it – "an honest, capable, but essentially self-centered politician of largely unsuspected talents" and "a lucid thinker and a clever man

before a crowd." But Lincoln had shown few of the qualities that would make him a great leader in his forties and fifties. Between those two stages of Lincoln's career, he spent five years on the political sidelines, during which he ran for no public office and lost much of his earlier interest in politics. Thomas noted that after Lincoln's semi-retirement, he returned to public life a "political analyst and debater of surpassing power," speaking "with a new seriousness, a new explicitness, a new authority." The young Lincoln, something of a political hack, had somehow become a statesman.

Thomas did explain how that transformation had come about. As a psycho-historian, I try to account for it by emphasizing that Lincoln underwent a profoundly successful mid-life crisis. Some developmental psychologists have investigated the evolution of male psychology and concluded that most men in their early forties experience either a moderate or a severe crisis as they pass from the first half of life to the second half. During those years they wrestle with many questions. Have I made the right choice of a career? Have I married the right person? Have I lived up to my potential? Have I achieved the dream I formed when I was young? If I have, is this all there is to life? If I have not, am I doomed to be a failure? Have I spent too much of my energy in trying to please others, to meet the expectations of the collective while neglecting my true nature? What do I want to leave as a legacy after I am gone? How have I been damaged by the destructiveness of others? How have I damaged others? Have I allowed my capacity as a nurturer to atrophy? How am I am to deal with aging, to let go of things appropriate for younger men and accept those more appropriate for older men?

These questions are prompted by a heightened awareness of mortality. In their early forties, men realize that they probably have fewer years to live than they have

already lived. This sobering thought is made more obvious still by the death of one's parents, which many men experience in their fifth decade.

Another factor triggering the painful introspection that occurs at mid-life is a sense of failure. In the words of the late Daniel J. Levinson, a psychologist who taught at Yale: "In the mid-life transition a man comes to the depressing realization that his previous successes are not so grand as he had imagined. At best, they form a prelude to the main work, a basis on which a more substantial project can be constructed. But the important achievements remain for the future. His initial success is like a promissory note: an assurance but by no means a guarantee of better work to come. It is still more deflating to realize that, even if he is very effective in his new work, the result will not be as monumental at the omnipotent young man might have wished. . . . To the extent that he heals the wounds produced by this ego deflation, he can go on with the serious work and form a 'good enough' legacy."

As they struggle with these questions (often subconsciously), men can achieve what the eminent Swiss psychologist Carl G. Jung called "individuation," which he defined as "becoming a single, homogeneous being, and, in so far as 'individuality' embraces our innermost, last, and most incomparable uniqueness, it also implies becoming one's own self. We could therefore translate individuation as 'coming to self-hood.'" In other words, it is "a process of psychological development . . . by which a man becomes the definite, unique being he in fact is." Some men fail utterly to meet the challenges of mid-life and enter a period of decline. Others succeed moderately in coping with those challenges. A few manage to grow tremendously during their early forties, becoming fully individuated. They emerge from the crisis less egocentric, more

conscious, more rooted, more centered in themselves, more creative, and more self-accepting. They radiate a kind of wisdom and maturity that commands respect.

Lincoln is a conspicuous example of such a man. Outwardly, little seems to have happened during his early forties. He practiced law diligently and paid little attention to politics. Inwardly, however, he was busy developing a deep sense of himself and his uniqueness. It was not easy for him. During those years, friends noted that Lincoln exhibited “a sadness so profound that the depths of it cannot be sounded or estimated by normal minds.”

In his mid-forties, Lincoln bemoaned his failures. In a revealing memo he wrote to himself, he compared his career to that of his arch-rival, Illinois Senator Stephen A. Douglas and concluded that “with me, the race of ambition has been a failure – a flat failure.” He had good reason to think so, for as one biographer noted: “He went into the Black Hawk war as a captain, and . . . came out a private. He rode to the hostile frontier on horseback and trudged home on foot. His store ‘winked out.’ His surveyor’s compass and chain, with which he was earning a scanty living, were sold for debt. He was defeated in his first campaign for the legislature – defeated in his first attempt to be nominated for Congress – Four times he was defeated as a candidate for Presidential Elector, because the Whigs of Illinois were yet in a hopeless minority—He was defeated in his application to be appointed Commissioner of the General Land Office.”

According to Jung, psychological growth can best occur when the ego experiences defeat: “The experience of the self is always a defeat for the ego.” Only through such a painful period of “upheaval and darkness” can a man expand his consciousness and become truly individuated.

Unfortunately for the historian, Lincoln did not keep a diary or write revealing letters about his emotional state, so we cannot trace the evolution of his psyche in his early forties. But we do know what he was like when he retired to the political sidelines at the age of forty (a hack politician) and what he was like when he reentered the political lists at the age of forty-five (a statesman). We can reasonably infer that Lincoln "negotiated a mid-life crisis in a highly constructive and positive manner," as Herman Belz, a distinguished Lincoln scholar and constitutional historian, put it.

Starting at the age of forty-five, Lincoln abandoned his earlier habit of ridiculing and belittling his political opponents. Instead he took the high road, championing the antislavery cause by appealing to the better angels of the people's nature. In doing so he attacked slavery with powerful logic, convincing historical research, and moral passion.

But why did he hate slavery so profoundly and become such a prominent leader in the crusade against it? Lincoln was no reluctant emancipator, as some would have you believe. Early on he publicly denounced the peculiar institution, well before it became politically safe to do so. In 1837, when abolitionism was extremely unpopular in central Illinois – and indeed, throughout most of the country -- Lincoln as a member of the state legislature publicly denounced slavery as "based on injustice and bad policy." He was able to get only one of the seventy-six other members of the Illinois House of Representatives to sign this statement, which was published in the journal of the General Assembly. Twelve years later, as a freshman congressman in Washington, Lincoln drafted a bill abolishing slavery in the District of Columbia, solicited support for it among the leading public figures of the city, and boldly announced his intention to introduce it. When Southern leaders threatened to break up the Union if such legislation

passed, Lincoln's supporters backed down and he withdrew his bill. In advocating abolition in Washington, Lincoln was far in advance of most of his fellow Whigs in Congress. But before 1854, slavery was not at the top of Lincoln's political agenda. In that year he announced that "I have always hated Slavery as much as any abolitionist" but hesitated to crusade against it because he thought it was dying out and he did not want to agitate a question that needlessly risked breaking up the Union. But when Stephen A. Douglas introduced the fateful Kansas-Nebraska Act in 1854, slavery seemed to gain a new lease on life, threatening to expand into western territories theretofore set aside for freedom. By implication, slavery might even become legal throughout the nation. This threat roused Lincoln from his political hibernation and propelled him back into the public arena, where he worked heroically for the rest of his life to block the expansion of slavery and eventually to abolish it.

Traditional historians have a hard time accounting for the origin of Lincoln's hatred of slavery. It was not in his political self-interest to attack it in 1837 or 1849, for Illinois was arguably the most anti-black state in the North. It adopted an extremely stringent Black Code restricting the rights of blacks and forbidding them to settle in the state. Lincoln did not inherit antislavery views from his parents, for they evidently had no moral qualms about the peculiar institution. He did not imbibe hostility to slavery from the atmosphere, as he might have done if he had been grown up in New England; he was born in the slave state of Kentucky, lived his first seven years there, and spent his youth and adolescence in southwestern Indiana, which had no slaves but was heavily populated with Kentuckians who brought with them their anti-black, pro-slavery views. He married into a prominent slaveholding family in Kentucky. He sought political office in central

Illinois, where antislavery views were far from popular. Then why did he hate slavery so much and stick his neck out to attack it?

The question, I think, calls for a psychological answer. It is noteworthy that in attacking slavery, Lincoln failed to cite the most popular arguments against it. He did not, for instance, dwell on the physical cruelty of slaveholders and overseers, nor did he denounce the break-up of slave families, nor did he emphasize the suppression of civil liberties in the slave states, where criticism of the peculiar institution was effectively forbidden, nor did he deplore the quasi-feudalistic social order that slavery produced in the South. Instead, he concentrated on one argument to the virtual exclusion of all others, namely, that it was an outrage that some people worked hard in the hot sun all day and others enjoyed the fruits of that labor. Slavery was organized, systematized robbery. Slave owners perverted the word of God Almighty, who decreed that “in the seat of they brow shalt thou eat they bread.” The slavery apologists in effect rewrote scripture to read: “In the sweat of somebody else’s brow shalt thou eat thy bread.” Over and over again Lincoln hammered away at this central point. Of course, he did not invent that argument, but it is striking that he used it so often while neglecting to cite the others so widely and effectively deployed by abolitionists.

That peculiar rhetorical strategy cries out for explanation, one that helps account for the origin of Lincoln’s hatred of slavery. The answer, I think, lies in the treatment that Lincoln received at the hands of his father, Thomas, who rented him out to neighbors. So the adolescent Abe would perform back-breaking farm chores – chopping trees, clearing brush, splitting rails, slaughtering hogs, killing snakes, plowing and planting fields – for which he would receive around 25 cents per day. Those meager wages he would dutifully

turn over to his father, in keeping with the law of that era, which stipulated that children were the property of their fathers. Thus Lincoln could identify with slaves who worked hard all day in the hot son while others enjoyed the fruits of their labor.

We cannot say for sure if Lincoln identified his father with the slave owners, but it is clear that Lincoln and his father did not get along well. Lincoln never invited Thomas to Springfield, where he lived from his twenty-eighth to his fifty-second year. He rarely lent money to his cash-strapped sire. When his law practice took him near his father's home in Coles County, Illinois, Lincoln stayed with his cousin Dennis Hanks rather than under the paternal roof. As Thomas lay dying in 1851, his forty-two-year-old son refused a deathbed appeal for a visit; Lincoln icily enjoined his stepbrother to tell their father "that if we could meet now, it is doubtful whether it would not be more painful than pleasant." After Thomas died, Lincoln failed to attend the funeral, nor did he have a tombstone placed on his grave. Lincoln refused to name a son after his father until after Thomas's death. He indirectly belittled his sire when, referring to one of Thomas's brothers, he told a friend: "I have often said that Uncle Mord had run off with all the talents of the family."

Unlike his father, Lincoln was extremely ambitious. Where did that ambition come from? Some political psychologists maintain that such ambition is often rooted in "an intense and ungratified craving for deference." Many aspiring politicos like Lincoln expect power "to overcome low estimates of the self." The compensatory psychological benefits of political power and fame strongly appeal to those with damaged self-esteem, especially "the 'provincial' or the 'small-town boy' or the 'country boy'" who wants "to succeed against the stigma of rusticity." Lincoln is a good example of such a

"provincial." In 1860 one campaign biographer, John Locke Scripps, spoke with him and later reported that he "seemed to be painfully impressed with the extreme poverty of his early surroundings—the utter absence of all romantic and heroic elements." In the autobiography he prepared for Scripps, Lincoln virtually apologized for his humble origins, calling his father "a wandering laboring boy" who "grew up litterally without education." In that revealing sketch, Lincoln said of his meager schooling: "He regrets his want of education, and does what he can to supply the want." For the Dictionary of Congress, Lincoln in 1858 described his education as "defective." As an attorney, he felt inferior to his better-educated colleagues. His second law partner, Stephen T. Logan, recalled "an occasion when he had got very much discouraged." In a Danville court, Edward D. Baker "had got very much the advantage of him," and he "came and complained to me that Baker had got so much the start of him that he despaired of getting even with him in acquirements and skill." In 1861, Lincoln told an alumnus of Rutgers College that he "always regretted the want of a college education. Those who have it should thank God for it."

In 1859, Lincoln wrote that his "parents were both born in Virginia, of undistinguished families -- second families, perhaps I should say." He again pointed out that his father "grew up, litterally without education." As a child, Lincoln said, he had found "absolutely nothing to excite ambition for education." Herndon believed that Lincoln was especially ashamed of his mother's family. He also expressed some reservations about the Lincolns. When leading citizens of Logan County, Illinois, proposed to name their county seat after him, Lincoln replied: "I don't believe I'd do that; I never knew anything named Lincoln that amounted to anything." The positive reception

he received in the East in early 1860 astonished him. To a Norwich, Connecticut, minister who lauded his speech in that city, Lincoln said: “Certainly, I have had a most wonderful success, for a man of my limited education.” He was especially struck by the lavish praise of a Yale professor of rhetoric. As he told voters during his first political campaign: “I was born and have ever remained in the most humble walks of life.” A decade later he referred to himself at twenty-two as “a strange, friendless, uneducated, penniless boy.” The psychologist G. Stanley Hall speculated that Lincoln’s ambition was rooted in his feelings about his appearance: “His height, long limbs, rough exterior, and frequent feeling of awkwardness must have very early made him realize that to succeed in life he must cultivate intrinsic mental and moral traits, which it is so hard for a handsome man or women to excel in. Hence he compensated by trying to develop intellectual distinction.” In his initial political campaign, Lincoln declared candidly: “I have no other [ambition] so great as that of being truly esteemed of my fellow citizens.” That thirst for admiration lasted a lifetime; only political success would slake it and permit relief from a nagging, deep-seated sense of inferiority.

Emotional as well as material and educational poverty seems to have plagued the young Lincoln, for neither parent met his most basic psychological needs. His mother, Nancy Hanks Lincoln, may have provided her young son with love and support during his first nine years, but he evidently viewed her death when he was nine years old as an act of abandonment. In later life, he seldom mentioned her; one of the few times he did so, in his letter to Eliza Browning about his love life, it was in unflattering terms. His father offered little nurturance. Perhaps the best thing Thomas Lincoln ever did for his son was to marry Sarah Bush Johnston, but by the time she arrived in Indiana, the boy’s

psyche had endured much. Lincoln, suffering from emotional malnutrition, thought himself unloved and unlovable. To compensate for the damage to his self-esteem, he sought in the political arena a surrogate form of the love and acceptance he had not found at home; by winning elections he would prove to himself that he was lovable.

Lincoln's ambition was strong, but it might not have been strong enough to propel him to the presidency if it were not for his wife. Lincoln's marriage cries out for analysis. His law partner aptly called it "a domestic hell on earth," a "burning – scorching hell," "as terrible as death and as gloomy as the grave." In Springfield, his friends described Lincoln as "woman whipt," "woman cowed," and "hen pecked," for Mary Lincoln abused her husband physically as well as verbally. He got a taste of her temper shortly after their wedding. One morning at the Globe Tavern, an inn where they spent the first year and a half of their married life, she arrived late for breakfast, as usual, inconveniencing the other guests. Boarding house etiquette dictated that in the morning, no one could eat until all guests were seated at the table. Lincoln "was rather rasped at having the others wait for his wife," so he "somewhat whimsically chided her as she entered and took her place at the table. Whereupon she took a cup of hot coffee from a service tray and threw it at her husband and ran hysterically from the room." Lincoln "sat there in humiliation and silence" while Mrs. Jacob Early helped clean him up. A similar event that took place at dinner one night in December 1860; Lincoln "cracked a joke which displeased Mrs. Lincoln because she erroneously imagined it to be at her expense. Quicker than a flash she picked up a cup of hot tea and flung it clear across the table at Mr. Lincoln's head, then jumped up in great fury and rushed out of the room."

One day when her husband, absorbed in his newspaper, permitted the fire in the parlor to die down, Mary Lincoln left the kitchen and asked him to add some wood to the fire. When he failed to heed her, she once again asked him, but in vain. Out of patience, she returned, armed with a piece of stove wood, and declared, "Mr. Lincoln, I have told you now three times to mend the fire and you have pretended that you did not hear me. I'll make you hear me this time." She then attacked him with the stick of wood; the next day he appeared in court with a bandaged nose.

A similar outburst occurred when Lincoln one day delivered some breakfast meat to his wife. A friend, Jesse K. Dubois, accompanied him from the butcher shop to the house on Eighth Street, where "some aristocratic company" from Kentucky was visiting. After unwrapping the meat, Mary Lincoln "became enraged at the Kind L[incoln] had bought" and "abused L[incoln] outrageously and finally was so mad she struck him in the face." He wiped off the blood and returned to his office with Dubois. As the Civil War drew to a close, a White House steward observed Mary Lincoln assault her husband: she allegedly "Struck him hard – damned him – cursed him."

Mary Lincoln also attacked her husband with cleaning implements, cutlery, and vegetables. The daughter of James Leaton, Springfield's Methodist minister in the late 1850s, heard her mother say that the Lincolns "were very unhappy in their domestic life" and that Mary Lincoln "was seen frequently to drive him from the house with a broomstick." Neither Mrs. Leaton nor Mrs. Noah Matheny "regarded Mrs. Lincoln very highly -- that is her temper and disposition generally was not at all commendable." One day in the mid-1850s, a knife-wielding Mary Lincoln chased her husband through their yard. When he realized that they were being observed, he suddenly turned about, grabbed

his wife, and marched her back, saying: "There d—n it, now Stay in the house and don't disgrace us before the Eyes of the world." One day Lincoln fled the house as his wife vented her anger with "very poorly pitched potatoes." Other neighbors occasionally saw "the front door of the Lincoln home . . . fly open and papers, books, [and] small articles would literally be hurled out." On another occasion, as Lincoln prepared to depart Springfield for a nearby town, his "wife ran him out [of the house] half dressed -- as she followed him with [a] broom." Lincoln told the serving girl "not to get scared" but to bring him some clothing, which he donned and then "went up town through [the] woodhouse & alley." Thus Turner R. King, a political ally of Lincoln, had good reason to characterize Mary Lincoln as "a hellion—a she devil" who "vexed – & harrowed the soul out of that good man" and "drove him from home &c – often & often." Similarly, in 1862 Herndon was fully justified in exclaiming: "Poor Lincoln! He is domestically a desolate man – has been for years to my own knowledge" because of his marriage to "a very curious – excentric – wicked woman."

Few biographers examine why Mary Todd Lincoln behaved so badly and why her husband put up with her. I believe that she displaced rage against her father onto Lincoln. It is not uncommon for men and women to bring unresolved psychological conflicts with their parents into their marriages. A man with a poor relationship with his mother may have trouble relating to his wife, just as women with a poor relationship with her father may have trouble relating to her husband. Mary Lincoln seems to have had buried anger at her father, Robert Smith Todd, who remarried soon after the death of Mary's mother when Mary was six years old. The stepmother, Elizabeth Humphreys, who bore her husband eight children, was unsympathetic with Mary and her siblings and evidently

urged that Robert pay attention to their own children and not the offspring of his first marriage. Mary did not get along with her stepmother and probably resented her father for having married Miss Humphreys. She probably found it difficult to express that resentment openly and instead took it out on Lincoln. He dealt with her abuse by staying away from home as much as possible, which made her even angrier.

Lincoln's unhappy marriage affected his public career, for Mary Todd proved a useful goad to his ambition. John Todd Stuart, his first law partner and a close friend, told an interviewer that she "had the fire – will and ambition – Lincolns talent & his wifes Ambition did the deed." Stuart heard Joshua Speed, Lincoln's most intimate friend, say that "Lincoln needed driving – (well he got that.)" Mary Lincoln's friend James Bradwell thought that she "made Mr. L. by constantly pushing him on in his ambition." Charles Arnold, who lived across the street from the Lincolns, declared that she was "very ambitious for her husband" and "kept nagging her husband on." Her sister Elizabeth testified that "Mrs. Lincoln was an ambitious woman – the most ambitious woman I ever saw – spurred up Mr. Lincoln, pushed him along and upward – made him struggle and seize his opportunities." A law student in the Lincoln and Herndon office stated that "there is no doubt that she was constantly spurring him on for she was very ambitious." Herndon likened her to a toothache which "kept one awake night and day." During her courtship, Mary allegedly described "the man of her choice, mentioning his unprepossessing appearance and awkwardness, and with a merry appreciation of the humor of the prediction, again said: 'But I mean to make him the President of the United States all the same. You will see that, as I always told you, I will yet be the President's wife.'" In the late 1840s she predicted to a friend that Lincoln "is to be President of the

United States some day; if I had not thought so I never would have married him, for you can see he is not pretty."

Mary Lincoln's ambition for her husband became something of a byword in central Illinois. In 1856, when friends urged Lincoln to seek the gubernatorial nomination, Democratic Congressman Thomas L. Harris of Petersburg remarked that he "never will be dunce enough to run for governor – (unless his wife makes him.)" She "made no effort to conceal her belief that her gifted husband would some day be President. At social functions she would talk confidently of his future, predicting his nomination and election. Lincoln always objected to this."

In another way Mary Lincoln indirectly helped stimulate her husband's interest in a political career. According to Lincoln's friend and fellow attorney, Milton Hay, she made "his home tolerably disagreeable and hence he took to politics and public matters for occupation. If his domestic life had been entirely happy, I dare say he would have stayed at home and not busied himself with distant concerns." Joshua Speed believed that "if Mr Lincoln had married another woman – for instance Speeds wife [–] he Lincoln would have been a devoted husband and a very – <u>very</u> domestic man." An unidentified close friend of Lincoln's (perhaps Speed) maintained that "Mary Lincoln, by her turbulent nature and unfortunate manner, prevented her husband from becoming a domestic man." This domestic misery, he maintained, "operated largely in his favor; for he was thereby kept out in the world of business and politics. Instead of spending his evenings at home, reading the papers and warming his toes at his own fireside, he was constantly out with the common people, was mingling with the politicians, discussing public questions with the farmers who thronged the offices in the courthouse and state

house, and exchanging views with the loungers who surrounded the stove of winter evenings in the village store. The result of this continuous contact with the world was, that he was more thoroughly known than any other man in his community. His wife, therefore, was one of the unintentional means of his promotion." If Lincoln had married Ann Rutledge or some other woman more agreeable than Mary Todd, he would probably have spent more time "buried in the pleasures of a loving home" and thus "the country would never have had Abraham Lincoln for its President." Herndon said that if "Lincoln had been happy in his marital relation he never would have been known or heard of outside of his acquaintance as a lawyer. He was by nature a domestic man, a lover of home and children."

Mary Lincoln was, according to the Pennsylvania Republican leader Alexander K. McClure, a constant trial to her spouse. He bluntly stated that Lincoln "had a crazy wife when he entered the presidency, and many as were his sorrows because of the war and bloody struggle for the preservation of the union, the crowning sorrow to one of his domestic taste and love of home and family, was the dark shadow that Mrs. Lincoln cast upon his life." Lincoln's friends "all knew the situation and her failings were overlooked, although few, if any, of Mr. Lincoln's close political friends entertained the respect for Mrs. Lincoln that should have been accorded the Mistress of the White House."

One of those political friends was Carl Schurz, who spent time with Mary Lincoln during the Civil War. He wrote of her husband: "it was no secret to those who knew the family well, that his domestic life was full of trials. The erratic temper of his wife not seldom put the gentleness of his nature to the severest tests; and these troubles and struggles, which accompanied him through all the vicissitudes of his life from the modest

home in Springfield to the White House at Washington, adding untold private heartburnings to his public cares, and sometimes precipitating upon him incredible embarrassments in the discharge of his public duties, form one of the most pathetic features of his career." In an interview, Schurz put it even more strongly, calling the marriage "the greatest tragedy of Mr. Lincoln's existence."

For all the misery she caused her husband, Mary Lincoln also helped him develop his uncanny ability, so useful to him as president, to get along with difficult people. Throughout the Civil War, Lincoln showed preternatural tact in dealing with egotistical senators, generals, congressmen, editors, cabinet members, and governors. He was able to do so in part because he had had a lot of practice in dealing with a difficult person at home.