

When people are asked about great presidents, no matter what one's political leanings, typically one of the greatest to be named is Abraham Lincoln. Confronting the issue of slavery, guiding the nation through the Civil War, and having to have firm resolve through the war not knowing how it would end or if he'd even have a country, he inspires people to this day.

Among them is Elizabeth Sherrill, who is a contributing editor to the Christian magazine "Guideposts" that she helped found. Now in her 90s, her grandfather had seen the funeral train carrying Lincoln's body home to Springfield, Illinois. From that moment, sobbing by the tracks, he'd taken Lincoln as the model for his own life of battling injustice.

Elizabeth was seven when her grandfather gave her her first book about Lincoln. In *Abraham Lincoln, the Backwoods Boy*, she read about the son of a near-illiterate farmer, walking miles through the snow to borrow a book. Straining his eyes to read by firelight because he had to work in the fields in the daytime. Starting to write and getting whipped when his father caught him "scribbling" instead of feeding the pigs. Lincoln went right on writing. This determined boy became her model too. She started writing, and when she had to stop to set the dinner table she was sure Lincoln would have understood her feelings.

At eight, she went to a new school. She remembered going for the first time to its library, much bigger than the one in her old school, with quiet signs on the tables and portraits on the walls. Over the librarian's desk was a color photograph of the president, Franklin Roosevelt, seated at his desk. On the right wall was a painting of George Washington standing by a cannon; on the left was one of Thomas Jefferson, holding the Declaration of Independence.

But it was the picture over the door, when she turned to leave with her new library card, that stopped her. It was a photograph, this one black-and-white: a tall, thin man with his hand on a table and with the saddest, most pain-filled face she'd ever seen. The gold letters on the frame said Abraham Lincoln. It couldn't be, she thought. Lincoln, her brave hero, who won every wrestling match? The ragged boy who told such funny stories that crowds would gather to listen? They'd put the wrong name on the photograph.

But of course it was Lincoln, and over time that portrait made him more important to Elizabeth than ever. Already she was experiencing the bouts of depression that, three years later, would lead her parents to the then-rare step of taking her to a psychiatrist. Despite her help, Elizabeth throughout her life continued to have (and still does have) occasional descents into those bottomless depths. And at these times, her model continued to be Abraham Lincoln.

Her depression had no discernible cause. His had many. The death of an infant brother was not unusual for those times. But his mother's death was as traumatic an experience as any nine-year-old could have. In the family's one-room cabin, there was no escaping

her agonies from milk sickness, a disease then ravaging their Indiana frontier community. People who ingested milk or meat from cows that had fed on the white snakeroot plant suffered uncontrollable shaking, hideous stomach pains, continuous retching. For a week, Lincoln's mother tossed in torture on her bed, her tongue turned black, unable even to speak words of farewell.

Abraham had one surviving sibling, a brilliant sister named Sarah, who was two years older and his closest companion. Abe was 18 when Sarah gave birth to a stillborn child and died.

At 22 and, in his own words, "friendless, uneducated and penniless," Lincoln left the family farm to strike out on his own in Illinois. That this disadvantaged young man was able to carve out a career for himself as a lawyer seems marvel enough. The fact that he did it while carrying the burden of depression was what astonished Elizabeth. "Lincoln was a sad, gloomy man, a man of sorrow," his long-time friend and law partner said, noting once that "his melancholy dripped from him as he walked."

Even after his successful run for a seat in the Illinois state legislature, his sense of dejection did not lift. When a bill he'd worked for was defeated, he wrote to a friend, "I am finished forever." How familiar Elizabeth was with this I've-failed-and-now-it's-hopeless feeling! And yet...as despairing as he felt, Lincoln somehow managed to succeed in every way that mattered.

It wasn't that his depression went away. An artist working at the White House in the final year of Lincoln's life remembered that "Mr. Lincoln had the saddest face I ever attempted to paint."

By Elizabeth's own late twenties, when her depression became incapacitating, reading about Lincoln's life was a pathway back to the functioning world. Sometimes all she could do was stare at a photograph of his downcast face. Yet in the strange psychology of depression, this cheered her. If Lincoln could accomplish so much while feeling so bad, surely she could get up and do a little she thought to herself.

It was not until many years later that she began to see something even more life-giving in Lincoln's story. Many times in accounts of his life, she'd noticed references to his melancholia. Now she came upon the definition of that word as used in the 19th century: *fear and sadness without apparent cause*.

Without cause she wondered? Lincoln had so many reasons to be depressed! They'd only multiplied throughout his life, culminating in the death of his two little sons and the terrible slaughter of the Civil War. But his melancholia suggested something more, something closer to the medical condition recognized today as clinical, or persistent, irrational depression.

It's only in the last few years that researchers have delved into this aspect of Lincoln's life. A family history of depression, "the Lincoln horrors." Lincoln's own conviction that

he was constitutionally subject to melancholy, which he dubbed “my peculiar misfortune.” His frequent talk of suicide—there was a period when he didn’t dare carry a pocketknife for fear of using it to kill himself. Two major breakdowns, the first in his mid-twenties (the typical onset age for unipolar depression in men), the second in his early thirties.

“I am now the most miserable man living,” he wrote at age 32. “If what I feel were equally distributed to the whole human family, there would be not one happy face upon the earth.” Concerned friends removed razors from his room, mounted a suicide watch and feared for his sanity.

In an effort to escape his misery, Lincoln underwent the standard medical treatment of the times—a weeklong torment that would have included starving, bleeding, dunking in icy water, purging with black pepper drinks, swallowing mercury, applying mustard rubs that burned the skin raw. He emerged emaciated, exhausted and, unsurprisingly, feeling worse than ever.

Today’s medicine offers effective drugs and skilled counseling. If these methods had been available then, Lincoln might have been a less sad and tormented person. But, Elizabeth wonders, would he have been as great?

She notes the insight she got from learning about his mental battle. Many researchers today, she says, looking afresh at Lincoln’s melancholia, are grateful that he was not “cured.” From his chronic depression may have come the coping skills, the realism, the wisdom that steered the nation through its greatest crisis. What strengths may depression have bestowed on our greatest president?

Humor. Jokes and storytelling were Lincoln’s lifelong refuge from despair. As the casualty figures in the war mounted, grief threatened to overwhelm him. Far from a sign of callousness, his humor helped him bear the horrors he felt so deeply. “I laugh,” Lincoln told a disapproving member of his cabinet, “because I must not weep.” Humility. He had the modesty of a man continually aware of his own defects. In an age of swaggerers, this highest official in the land called himself “a man without a name.” Knowing his own failings, he could forgive those of others. As Northern leaders called for continual retribution from the defeated South, Lincoln appealed for “malice toward none.”

Dedication to a great cause. It was the issue of slavery that pulled Lincoln back from the brink of suicide. Despairing of himself, he determined instead to devote his life to others.

He also had a dependence on God. “I am driven to my knees,” he said, “by the conviction that I have nowhere else to go.” He saw himself not as captain of the ship but as the humble helmsman, striving to steer as the true Captain directed. Humor, humility, service to others, faith—these are qualities, that, hopefully, all of us aim at. That it was not despite his depression, but in part because of it, that Lincoln’s character developed as it did—this is the wondrous promise he holds out to people like

Elizabeth. His arena was a national one, her's is one of family and neighbors. But the fact that God can use the negatives of our lives, even the blackness of depression, to shape us to his purposes—this is good news indeed!

For our part, the key is wanting to be shaped. The problem is, as we all know, life can be quite hard. It can be easy to be dispirited; we can doubt God; doubt ourselves; we can lose our way. Saint Paul was certainly aware of this too as he ministered to the communities he set up, and in our second reading today he cuts to the chase: "I should like you to be free of anxieties." So how do we do that? Lincoln had so much to worry about, but he triumphed and helped lead our nation through one of it's darkest hours. How do we do the same thing both for our own benefit and to help others?

For one, we trust in God. Saint Paul in the second reading, in talking about marriage, it may seem like he's endorsing unmarried life and looking down a bit on marriage. But his point isn't to be negative about marriage, rather he's saying "give your undivided attention to the Lord." All of us, single, married, priests, laity, old and young, we are meant to do that. Elsewhere in Philippians 4 Paul says to "have no anxiety about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which passes all understanding will keep your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus." When we look to the saints, we see them doing that for fears great and small. Blessed Helen of Udine as fearful of loud noises; Saint Augustine was told to take 40 monks to England and go on a journey to at the time was a largely pagan and potentially hostile country. But they trusted in God. When we look to the Eucharist; when we ponder how 366 times (one for every day of the year plus one for leap year) "be not afraid" appears in the Bible; and of the words of Jesus before He ascends "remember I am with you always even to the end of the age," we can find comfort. Moses speaks of future prophets in the first reading, including one coming who the people should not dismiss as if he were only human and someone they must listen to. This is Jesus, who is still with us

For another, we can trust in other people. Moses in our first reading is giving a farewell speech; the people are about to enter the promised land, and all along they experienced God's love and care. Moses led them, but back when he began his ministry, he said to God that he was a lousy speaker and Pharaoh wouldn't listen to him; God said he would call Aaron to be his mouthpiece before Pharaoh. Jesus called the apostles to assist him, including Paul to do the work of ministering to the Gentiles. So who are the people we can turn to for help, advice and counsel? Who are the people we can turn to to listen to us? Sometimes too this may include talking to a professional. If you find yourself never relaxing, struggling with eating, tired all the time, unable to sleep or having a panic attack, it's good to talk to someone who can help you. I keep a list of therapists given to me by the archdiocese that I recommend to people if they ask. But more often, its just finding a good confidant who can help you spiritually and through the peaks and valleys of life.

We can also trust in ourselves too. Christ wants to help us carry our cross, but we have to carry it too. God is not going to wave a magic wand and say "no more problems."

God has given us each different gifts. Sometimes doubts take over though. But there is a saying "courage is fear that has said it's prayers." Fortitude is a virtue. It means facing difficult situations and doing what we are called to do or the right thing. Saint Jerome said facing our fears and doing our duty in spite of them is an important way of taking up our cross. Sometimes evil spirits try to dissuade us. Sometimes through our own self-doubts we can't act and become paralyzed. Or other times the results don't come right away. Yes, sometimes we may fail - many times like the saints did and many famous inventors and scientists did. Failure is a part of life; but we pick ourselves back up when we fall either morally or spiritually or in trying to do the right thing. We accept that sometimes a person might not change right away if we are trying to help them. We accept that we also have to make a decision too and can't brood forever about making it, be it our vocation or how to handle a family situation or situation at work or school or confronting someone, whatever it may be. God is with us, but we also have to act and should do so without fear. As with Lincoln, we too must remember God is the captain of the ship, and we are the helmsmen.

And, while trusting in ourselves, it's important to take care of yourself and have a balanced life. Look at your health; do you exercise; eat well? Do you have some time for silence or prayer or meditation? Do you find something that relaxes you? For me, I get out and take pictures; I go for a walk with my dog; I curl up with a book on the couch; I start my day typically on an elliptical machine while watching an old game show. Doing this helps me forget about things for a bit and relax and better prepared for each day.

It's also important to remember things will ultimately work out in the end. Fr. Dittberner, a professor I greatly admired at seminary, had that as a saying and reminded it of us when we called him up while stuck in Paris due to a volcano going off in Iceland that grounded all flights for a week. Things did work out. But sometimes it's hard to see that. We see a loved one going down the wrong path. We wonder will the pandemic ever finally end. We get in tough situations in our lives with our battles with sins or wonder about the state of the world. But just because we can't always see through the forest, it doesn't mean we aren't going in the right direction. Lincoln had a dedication to the greater causes of the Union, and eventually the evil of slavery. We need to think big and see the greater mission God has called us to do. We also have to accept that there are setbacks on that mission. As Elizabeth noted with respect to Lincoln, sometimes the difficulties we face ultimately can result in us becoming stronger.

Twenty years ago, I was working one morning and it was a few weeks before I was to start at seminary. I had some time on my hands in the morning, so I started ruminating. What if this does not work out? What if I'm making the wrong decision? What am I thinking doing this which requires a 6 year commitment when I just finished college? Three times that morning I tried to reach the vice rector and bail out. I can still hear the voice mail in my mind. But I did not have the guts to leave a message. And later in the day, I calmed down, and I prayed over it. And a few weeks later, I left home on that adventure. It's had ups and downs; but I am at peace and know I am doing what I am called to do. I am still sometimes very much afraid when I give a challenging homily or stand up in front of people or deal with a tough situation in a parish. I get nervous about

the world sometimes when I worry about civil liberties, the economy, or the state of affairs in the world. There is no getting around the challenges; but all of us have a job to do, and while it won't always be easy, we can see it through to its completion, for God is with us, and has empowered us to make a difference in this world. May we not be filled with worry, but with hope - knowing that when we work together, what an incredible impact we can make.