Lincoln and Liberal Education

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Abraham Lincoln remains alive to us these days, in part because of the extraordinary performance by Daniel Day Lewis in the film *Lincoln*. In one thoughtful scene, Lincoln sits in a teletype office and wrestles with the question of human and racial equality and the awful institution of slavery. He harkens back to one of the great foundational texts of western civilization, Euclid's *Elements*, a beautiful book of elementary geometry written over 2,000 years ago.

In the film, *Lincoln* cites Euclid's first common notion: "Things which are equal to the same thing are equal to each other." He calls it true "because it works, always has done and always will do." And then he reminds us that Euclid called it "a self-evident truth", putting us in mind of another great work of civilization, America's own Declaration of Independence: "We hold these truths to be self-evident: that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their creator with certain unalienable rights, and that among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness."

Lincoln, self-educated, a versatile and critical thinker, questioned prevailing assumptions of his day, and, in his search for truth, drew upon mathematical axioms as a storehouse of principles he might apply to his political philosophy. This is what liberally educated people do, people who are broadly and deeply educated in the great movements of history, in the foundational texts and fundamental insights of physics and philosophy, literature and biology, music and theology, sociology and yes, mathematics -- people who have acquired a kind of worldly wisdom that allows them to rise above and see behind the barriers to understanding and action, and take the imaginative leap that is often necessary to solve a problem or find a solution. These are also the people who have developed the skills of listening attentively, speaking persuasively, arguing logically and working collaboratively to bring an idea to fruition.

Lincoln was a practical man, a worldly politician, not just a theoretical thinker. Was it true, he must have asked himself, that the truths proclaimed in the Declaration were self-evident? And if self-evident, then why were they not universally recognized and slavery abolished? So the practical man in Lincoln must have come to the conclusion that if they were not self-evident or their self-evidence not sufficient, they would have to be proved -- some four score and seven years after the writing of the Declaration. Thus, his Gettysburg Address changed the terms of the question from "holding a self-evident truth" to "dedicating oneself to a proposition" that all men are created equal. No longer an axiom of mathematical logic accessible to reason, this would become a proposition requiring proof in action, following an act of will, in a great civil war, dedicating thousands and thousands of lives in the interest of securing freedom for those who had been denied the right to claim equality under the law. And still more, Lincoln asked "that from these honored dead we take increased devotion to that cause for which they gave the last full measure of devotion..."
This rhetorical change in our founding document represented a momentous re-founding of our nation, from one resting on an axiom of reason to one requiring our dedication to realizing the dream of equality through an act of liberation.

This commitment to liberation, to the principles of liberty, to freedom of speech and action, is what undergirds our nation. And it is our national duty to assure that each generation of citizens is well educated in the arts of freedom to protect them from attack and from atrophy. It ought to be the first concern of our schools, from pre-kindergarten through college, that our young acquire the freedom to make intelligent choices concerning the ends and means of both their public and private lives. This requires the cultivation and practice of the art of reason and understanding and discipline in analysis, argument and interpretation so that they may be free from the tyrannies of unexamined opinions, current fashions and inherited prejudices.

Our nation was founded on the idea that good government is grounded in its citizens' intellectual freedom; our strength depends upon this idea. Our economy is grounded in the notion of free enterprise; the freedom we have to test our ideas against the needs and demands of the community has helped build the prosperity we have enjoyed as a society. This too depends upon the intellectual freedom of our citizens. And so it is with our social order and moral character.

For the sake of our country, then, we need our citizens to have two kinds of education that are in a very healthy tension with one another: (1) an education in the political and intellectual foundations, including the economic, scientific and social traditions and principles that have shaped our nation, and (2) an education in the arts needed to question and examine those very foundations and traditions in the light of reason, so that we may keep them vibrant and alive, and so that we may redefine and improve on them when we discover we have good cause. These are called the arts of freedom because they are grounded in the kind of free inquiry that helps us understand our world better and inspires in us a sense of wonder and longing to learn more.

Our nation's liberal arts colleges were established to help cultivate this freedom of intellect through examining the seminal texts that underlie and inform our understanding of the world, and through developing the arts of inquiry. These colleges are dedicated to cultivating the arts of freedom to develop the self-sufficiency that is fit for our republic—fit for a republic that champions the right of all of its citizens to pursue the happiness that belongs to them, for making a life worth living, one that brings opportunities for success in making a living too.

We who are responsible for our nation's liberal arts colleges take this to be our public trust, one to which we give a full measure of devotion. We serve the common good, and this in turn serves our nation well, keeping it strong and vibrant, able to undertake the challenges of tomorrow because it has a citizenry that has some understanding of the intellectual and moral virtues required and the strength of will to use them well—a fitting legacy of Abraham Lincoln.

I confess to taking special delight in the response to the Lincoln movie by many members of the St. John's College community to which I belong, celebrating that scene where Lincoln was shown to have read Euclid's Elements, a seminal book read by every St. John's student, just as every St. John's student later reads this country's founding documents and Lincoln's speeches.
The spotlight shown by the film on all of these texts rightly justifies our calling them great and transformative, words that we apply to the liberal education they make possible.

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