Melancholy leaders: Strength through suffering

by L. Gregory Jones in the February 21, 2006 issue

What prompts our fascination with Lincoln? Perhaps it is our frustration with the quality of current politicians. Our political climate seems to favor self-absorbed spin doctors rather than people whose judgments are marked by reasoned reflection and courageous action.

We also yearn for leaders of genuine gravitas, people whose strength of character enables them to draw on the strengths of those around them. In *Team of Rivals*, Doris Kearns Goodwin tells of Lincoln's profound decision to include his political rivals in key cabinet positions, a move that proved pivotal during the Civil War.

Years later, Lincoln's decision had a profound impact on Martin Luther King Jr., who describes Lincoln's leadership in his sermon "Loving Your Enemies." Like the people of the 1850s and 1860s, and those of the 1960s, we yearn for leaders who genuinely love their enemies and can chart paths beyond the polarizations.

Another book that is important for understanding Lincoln's leadership is Joshua Wolf Shenk's *Lincoln's Melancholy*. Shenk tells the story of Leo Tolstoy's encounter with a tribe in the Caucasus that knew of Lincoln, and referred to him as the greatest ruler the world had experienced. When Tolstoy showed them a picture of Lincoln, a young man noted "that his eyes are full of tears and that his lips are sad with a secret sorrow."

Shenk describes this sorrow as "melancholy." While at times—after the deaths of his sons—Lincoln's melancholy could become a paralyzing depression, and even lead to suicidal thoughts, Shenk argues that Lincoln learned to articulate the significance of his suffering so that it was not merely an obstacle to overcome but a component of his goodness and integral to his leadership.

While we tend to describe depression as a fundamental, paralyzing problem that must be treated, Shenk shows how a melancholy disposition creates "both an awful

burden and what Byron called ‘a fearful gift.’ The burden was a sadness and despair that could tip into a state of disease. The gift was a capacity for depth, wisdom—even genius.”

Lincoln manifested both the burden and the gift, combining a deep awareness of the world’s brokenness with a profound energy to be an agent of its mending. Shenk writes, “Lincoln saw the world as a deeply flawed, even tragic, place where imperfect people had to make the best of poor materials. At his worst, the burdens of this vision pressed him into ruts and troughs. At his best, it fueled a passion for redemption.”

Over time, Lincoln learned to hold together both his burden and his gift. He appreciated the complexity of life, and persevered even when situations looked hopeless. Lincoln had learned that the only way to survive was through the suffering, not by trying to evade, deny or flee it.

Shenk recognizes that Lincoln’s theological views are indispensable both to his disposition and his leadership, though he struggles to articulate their full significance. Lincoln placed his own life and that of the country as a whole within a larger, coherent story—the story of God’s purposes in the world.

What does such an account tell us about our yearning for leaders like Lincoln? Shenk briefly alludes to our contemporary demand that politicians be optimists who seem disconnected from suffering, a predicament found among Democrats no less than Republicans. We need leaders who are capable of joy and hope for the future, but we might need to turn to people who are drawn to melancholy. At the very least, we need them to be people whose joy and hope have been tested and shaped by the crucible of suffering.

Great authors from Aristotle to Edgar Allan Poe have argued that there is a close connection between a melancholic disposition and the beautiful, whether this connection is found in statesmen or writers. To be sure, this does not mean that one should seek out suffering in some masochistic way, or that one should dwell in a morose or self-pitying sense of victimization. After all, Lincoln’s leadership was marked by strength of character, humility and a profound commitment to the good of the country and its people.

Might it be, however, that the first place to turn for melancholy leaders is the church? After all, if our lives are patterned in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus

Christ, we are marked by the complexity and wholeness that Shenk describes. If we pray the Psalms daily, we'll discover the full range of suffering and hope, grief and joy, lived in the providence of God's care for us and for the world. If we learn to "bear one another's burdens" (Gal. 6:2), we'll become aware of both the fragility and the connectedness of our lives. And if we learn to live as caring communities, supporting one another in times of sadness as well as joy, we'll offer a more faithful witness than communities that are either morose or saccharine.

Perhaps, then, we not only need to revisit the significance of melancholy for shaping faithful leadership, but also to look again at sources that cultivate faithful leadership. Rather than lamenting our lack of Lincolns, we are called to engage in practices of faithful discipleship that will, over time, raise up leaders who—because they are marked by the sign of the cross—can provide the leadership needed in both the church and the world.