"From Shadows on the Wall to the Sun: Liberal Education and the Ascent from the Cave"

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I thank the Benson Center for giving me this opportunity to give a lecture in the Community and Disunity Series. I would also like to thank my students at the University of Colorado at Boulder who are currently in my Age of Lincoln seminar. Their questions and thoughtful participation in the class have contributed to some of what I include in my remarks this evening.

Unity is the common root in the words "community" and "disunity," this year's theme of the Benson Center's annual lecture series. The Center is dedicated to the study of western civilization, so we look to great books within that tradition to teach us, to guide our inquiries, and to help us form questions that lead to deeper understanding. The title of my lecture "From Shadows on the Wall to the Sun: Liberal Education and the Ascent from the Cave" refers to the imagery of the cave in a work by Plato entitled *The Republic*,[2] one of the greatest books in the western tradition. Among the most significant legacies of that tradition is liberal education, which aims to free the mind. Emerging from the cave provides a visual image that is easy to grasp but it is a great effort to use the knowledge derived from education, likened to moving from darkness to light in Plato's allegory, to build good communities. So, I pose the questions, What role does liberal education play in building communities? and Does the questioning that is a significant feature of liberal education disrupt or strengthen our communities?

First, let's respond to the question, what is a liberal education? In contrast to a manual education where one learns skills, a liberal education is intended to free the mind. Understood in the broadest sense, it encompasses four things: 1) education to be human beings, 2) education to make the most of our human powers, 3) education for our responsibilities as members of a democratic society, and 4) education for freedom.[3] The common element of these four points is that a good liberal education can lay the foundation for individual human beings and citizens to thrive in a true liberal society, or in a democratic republic as found in the United States. This is in sharp contrast to a totalitarian regime in which the private and the individual is diminished or denied, and uniformity prevails. The mind is closed in such a regime rather than opened and enriched through a good education. Oftentimes a liberal education takes place at a seminar table where students and teachers discuss readings and engage the author through questions and challenges. This contrasts with a professor who lectures students and engages in little or no give and take.

Liberal education embraces both a specific content and means of proceeding. The subject matter is drawn from original or primary sources that encompass many disciplines including philosophy, literature, history, mathematics, and science. The content of the writings transcends time and place. Socrates is a good example of one who contributed to the formation of liberal education. He is the main character in Plato's *Republic*. He walked the streets of classical Athens centuries ago and engaged in dialogues with his fellow Athenian citizens and others. The themes of his dialogues go beyond the particular time and place of his life and speak to readers across the centuries. He had a distinct way of initiating a dialogue, which took the form of asking a "what is" question. What is virtue? What is justice? What is friendship? are among the questions

found in the dialogues. Some of the dialogues arrived at answers to the questions, others did not. Socrates did not write anything, but his teaching has been transmitted to us by his student Plato who wrote some forty dialogues.

Socrates was known as a wise man. I'll relate a story about that in a moment, but to complete the thought about the questions that he asked, we can understand them as inquiries into the nature of things. What I mean by that is he wanted to get at the root or at the starkest meaning. This is important because once we know or have a good understanding of say, for example what justice is, we can apply it, or what virtue is, we can use it to guide or judge behavior.

The story that I share about Socrates relates to the word philosophy, which comes from the Greek and from the time of Socrates. It means love of wisdom: p*hilos* meaning loving, *sophia* meaning wisdom. When we love something or someone, we pursue it. Philosophy is also the search for wisdom. In the dialogue known as *The Apology*, Socrates recounts his trial and defense when he was accused of various crimes in Athens. We also learn what spurred him on in his pursuit of wisdom. He tells the story of his friend who asked a priestess if there was anyone wiser than Socrates. She says no and Socrates, upon hearing this, sets out to find someone wiser. He discovers that his wisdom is found in the admission to himself that he does not know anything, nor does he think that he knows anything.[4] This propels him into the philosophic life, or the life of inquiry aimed at seeking knowledge and wisdom.

Returning to our discussion of liberal education, there are other positive attributes that arise from such a pursuit. The inquiry, the questioning, the exchange that takes place in a dialogue in the classroom, or in a public place all require a certain behavior. A discussion of readings that have complex issues brings to the forefront differing opinions. If we cultivate the habit of listening to others who have varying opinions and interpretations and make an effort to understand them, while also sharing our own opinions and interpretations, this civil exchange fosters a respect for others with whom we agree and disagree. The exercise of understanding another's perceptions or prejudices moves from discussion of books and ideas at the seminar table or classroom to our daily lives where we try to understand the views of others that may disagree with our own. By taking those with whom we disagree seriously, there is a greater likelihood that they may readily engage and re-examine the positions they hold. All who are involved in the discussion are moved to articulate their views with clarity and defend them should they be challenged.[5]

Another habit that is formed is rationality. A good liberal education goes beyond the confines of philosophical and literary offerings and includes works in math and science. The student who studies the foundations of mathematics like Euclidian geometry or who work through scientific theories develop the ability to solve problems through an exercise of reason. It also sets up a contrast between objectivity and subjectivity. The effort to understand a Euclidean proof is part of an objective, rational process just like testing a scientific theory and understanding the principles that result in a scientific advancement much like Einstein's theory of relativity in contrast to what Newton had done three centuries earlier.

The application of rational thought is not limited to math and science, but it is valuable in other areas. Studying competing forms of government or governing structures or defining who should be citizens in these governments, for example, are exercises in comparative thought. The exercises also cultivate a sense of compromise. Can we have “a” and “b” or only “a”. If conditions change within the government or the country, how are policies modified. These exercises are forms of problem solving and based on a rational approach. Rationality also informs principles. Judging the actions of characters in a novel and questioning what guides their decisions lead to asking whether they are acting from a principled basis. Discerning principles can inform the development of one’s own set of principles. We have the blessing of living in a society where there is a free exchange of ideas—though we are currently in a battle to preserve it—but it is imperative to discern and defend principles that are worthy of our freedom and that will sustain it.

A preliminary response to the question about the role that liberal education plays in building communities is found in the content of the education and the habits formed. Plato gives us the image of the cave, which prompts us to think of darkness and light. The broad-based study that expands the mind and encourages our imagination to envision different scenarios or possibilities, or consequences of actions is applicable to forming communities and can be likened to moving from a dark cave to the light. The content of the works studied in a liberal education inform and lead to the acquisition of knowledge; the habits formed while pursuing a liberal education begin in the private sphere of the student and are carried into the public sphere of the citizen as one reaches adulthood. Such an education not only enriches our lives, but it contributes to the means to perpetuate a free and open community that simultaneously fosters an exchange of ideas and is enhanced by it. It would not be a totalitarian or despotic regime because free minds are a threat to the uniformity and indoctrination that must exist for it to maintain its power over the people or its student-body. Liberal education exposes the totalitarian posture for what it is: an assault on the individual, on communities, on government, and on a country. Can liberal education prevent a free society from becoming a tyranny? That depends upon the character of its people.

To return to the image of the cave, once the ascent has occurred, those in the light are not allowed to remain there but must return to the cave to teach others and to bring them into the light. Let’s leave aside the imagery of the cave for now and turn instead to our broader topic of community and disunity. We have spoken generally about community, but because it can encompass many and varied meanings, we limit this discussion to political communities and specifically the American political community. In the history of the United States there are three identifiable political communities: colonial America under the auspices of the British, a confederation of states, and a nation governed by the current United States Constitution. The U.S. Constitution was ratified in 1789, thirteen years after the 1776 declaration of independence from the British. The new nation began as a confederation of states, but efforts to reconstitute the nation began when the confederation was deemed inadequate. It is the current political community governed by the U.S. Constitution that I take up here.

There are specific instances in American history when the people and the political community have been united and other times when they have been divided or marked by great disunity. There are two significant episodes in American history where disunity has resulted in

dramatic events. The first is declaring independence from the British. The separation and discord that the colonists experienced with the British, and with other colonists who wished to remain subject to the Crown, led the nation to unify around a new set of principles as articulated in the Declaration of Independence. Regrettably, a war was fought, many lives were lost, and property ruined, but what emerged was a new nation. Abraham Lincoln, the 16th President of the United States, presided over the second time when the country experienced the greatest threat to its existence due to deep division over slavery. It was a serious question if the American political community would survive the civil war. He countered the division by looking to the documents of the American Founding to understand the principles that unified the country and find a way to move beyond the division.

Lincoln offers a unique way of looking at the two founding documents.

> [The prosperity of the United States] is not the result of accident. It has a philosophic cause. Without the *Constitution* and the *Union*, we could not have attained the result; but even these are not the primary cause of our great prosperity. There is something back of these, entwining itself more closely about the human heart. That something, is the principle of "Liberty to all" -- the principle that clears the *path* for all -- gives hope to all -- and, by consequence, *enterprise* and *industry* to all.

Lincoln continues,

> The expression of that principle, in our Declaration of Independence, was most happy, and fortunate. *Without* this, as well as *with* it, we could have declared our independence of Great Britain; but *without* it, we could not, I think, have secured our free government and consequent prosperity. The assertion of that *principle*, at *that time*, was the word *"fitly spoken"* which has proven an "apple of gold" to us. The *Union*, and the *Constitution*, are the *picture* of *silver*, subsequently framed around it. The picture was made, not to *conceal*, or *destroy* the apple; but to *adorn* and *preserve* it. The *picture* was made for the apple -- *not* the apple for the picture.

He adds a final thought,

> So let us act, that neither *picture*, or *apple* shall ever be blurred, bruised or broken. That we may so act, we must study, and understand the points of danger.[6]

The principle of liberty was dear to Lincoln. These words date from 1861, after his election to the Presidency. He again recognizes the prominence of the Declaration of Independence in the opening lines of the Gettysburg Address, delivered in 1863: "Four score and seven years ago (1776) our fathers brought forth on this continent, a new nation, conceived in Liberty, and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal." As he commemorates those who have a final resting place on the battle-field, he resolves "that these dead shall not have died in vain—that this nation, under God, shall have a new birth of freedom—and that government of the people, by the people, and for the people, shall not perish from the earth."[7]

The self-evident, universal truths articulated in the Declaration of Independence that Lincoln recognized— "that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness"—were truths that had never been used as the foundation of government.[8] The political community was thus formed: the ideals and principles of the Declaration and the structure of the Constitution as informed by the republican form of government, the separation of powers, the bicameral legislature, and federalism lay the foundation for a just political community. The citizens gave their consent to this government and remain the sovereign authority as held in the Declaration.

In one of Lincoln's earliest addresses, to the Young Men's Lyceum of Springfield, Illinois in 1838, the subject of his remarks was the perpetuation of our political institutions. In response to the increasing disregard for law, the prevalence of mobs, and the risk of the alienation of affections from the government, Lincoln argued a means of overcoming this.

> Let every American, every lover of liberty, every well wisher to his posterity, swear by the blood of the Revolution, never to violate in the least particular, the laws for the country . . . As the patriots of seventy-six did to the support of the Declaration of Independence, so to the support of the Constitution and Laws, let every American pledge his life, his property, and his sacred honor . . . let it become the *political religion* of the nation.[9]

These are but a few examples of Lincoln's comments on the founding documents. He revered them. They both informed the posture of the nation and framed a government for the citizenry. He also saw them as binding one generation to the next as expressed in one of his most famous phrases: "the electric cord in that Declaration that links the hearts of patriotic and liberty-loving men together, that will link those patriotic hearts as long as the love of freedom exists in the minds of men throughout the world."[10] The principles of liberty and equality were among the ideas that unified the American people and were at the foundation of the American political community. This does not mean that perfect harmony existed, on the contrary a democratic republic thrives on free and fair debate where disagreements abound, where compromises are reached, new issues arise, and old issues resurface. It is in these instances where there is mutual respect between adversaries and opponents, and rationality prevails in tackling the arguments. Recall that these are habits formed in a good liberal education. Lincoln adds reverence as a third habit: "Let reverence for the laws, be breathed by every American mother, to the lisping babe, that prattles on her lap -- let it be taught in schools, in seminaries, and in colleges; let it be written in Primers, spelling books, and in Almanacs; -- let it be preached from the pulpit, proclaimed in legislative halls, and enforced in courts of justice."[11]

It is ironic that the very document that brought forth a new nation, the Declaration of Independence, contained the phrase that highlighted what was to become one of the greatest divisions in the nation: the self-evident truth that all men are created equal. The phrase itself did not divide, but how it was interpreted brought division. Those in the southern states who denied the humanity of the men and women whom they enslaved, rejected the universal nature of this statement. Stephen Douglas, Senator from Illinois, argued the following.

> I hold that the signers of the Declaration of Independence had no reference to negroes at all when they declared all men to be created equal. They did not mean negro, nor the savage Indians, nor the Fejee Islanders, nor any other barbarous race. They were speaking of white men. They alluded to men of European birth and European descent—to white men, and to none others, when they declared that doctrine.[12]

The Chief Justice of the U.S. Supreme Court, Roger Taney, argued in the Dred Scott Court case opinion a point similar to Stephen Douglas'. After quoting the opening lines of the Declaration of Independence, including the truth that all men are created equal, he states:

> The general words above quoted would seem to embrace the whole human family, and if they were used in a similar instrument at this day would be so understood. But it is too clear for dispute, that the enslaved African race were not intended to be included, and formed no part of the people who framed and adopted this declaration; for if the language, as understood in that day, would embrace them, the conduct of the distinguished men who framed the Declaration of Independence would have been utterly and flagrantly inconsistent with the principles they asserted; and instead of the sympathy of mankind, to which they so confidently appealed, they would have deserved and received universal rebuke and reprobation.[13]

It is important to note that the court decision was not unanimous. Justices John McLean and Benjamin R. Curtis wrote dissenting opinions criticizing among others Taney's question "Can a negro, whose ancestors were imported into this country, and sold as slaves, become a member of the political community formed and brought into existence by the Constitution of the United States, and as such become entitled to all the rights, and privileges, and immunities, guarantied by that instrument to the citizen?" Justice Curtis responded: "At the time of the ratification of the Articles of Confederation, all free native-born inhabitants of the States of New Hampshire, Massachusetts, New York, New Jersey, and North Carolina, though descended from African slaves, were not only citizens of those States, but such of them as had the other necessary qualifications possessed the franchise of electors, on equal terms with other citizens."[14] The words of Stephen Douglas and Roger Taney represent how the United States was severed in two, with the divide between states prohibiting slavery and states permitting it worsening as time passed.

It was the issue of slavery that brought Lincoln back to politics long before the words of Douglas and Taney were spoken. He admitted that "the repeal of the Missouri compromise (which banned slavery north of latitude 36°30') aroused him as he had never been before."[15] His stance against slavery eventually brought him to the Presidency as a Republican, the new political party that argued against the expansion of slavery in its 1860 platform.

In one of Lincoln's most famous speeches, he laid out the stakes in grave terms. He delivered his House Divided speech on June 16, 1858 in Springfield, Illinois to an audience of 1,000 attendees at the Republican State Convention. I quote the opening lines:

> If we could first know where we are, and whither we are tending, we could then better judge what to do, and how to do it.

> We are now far into the fifth year, since a policy was initiated, with the avowed object, and confident promise, of putting an end to slavery agitation.
> Under the operation of that policy, that agitation has not only, not ceased, but has constantly augmented.
> In my opinion, it will not cease, until a crisis shall have been reached, and passed.
> "A house divided against itself cannot stand."
> I believe this government cannot endure, permanently half slave and half free.
> I do not expect the Union to be dissolved -- I do not expect the house to fall -- but I do expect it will cease to be divided.
> It will become all one thing or all the other.[16]

Lincoln was stark in his warning. The presence of slavery in the nation was causing a divide, but the deeper division was how to reach the principle of equality stated in the Declaration. Lincoln was clear. “There is no reason in the world why the negro is not entitled to all the natural rights enumerated in the Declaration of Independence, the right of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. I hold that he is as much entitled to these as the white man.” He continues, “I agree with Judge Douglas he is not my equal in many respects—certainly not in color, perhaps not in moral or intellectual endowment. But in the right to eat the bread, without leave of anybody else, which his own hand earns, *he is my equal and the equal of Judge Douglas, and the equal of every living man.*”[17]

In his speech on the Dred Scott decision, he articulated similar sentiments, but in this case, with respect to women.

> He [Taney] finds the Republicans insisting that the Declaration of Independence includes ALL men, black as well as white; and forthwith he boldly denies that it includes negroes at all, and proceeds to argue gravely that all who contend it does, do so only because they want to vote, and eat, and sleep, and marry with negroes! He will have it that they cannot be consistent else. Now I protest against that counterfeit logic which concludes that, because I do not want a black woman for a slave I must necessarily want her for a *wife*. I need not have her for either, I can just leave her alone. In some respects she certainly is not my equal; but in her natural right to eat the bread she earns with her own hands without asking leave of any one else, she is my equal, and the equal of all others.[18]

Lincoln’s appeal to the natural rights in the Declaration of Independence is evident. But was it sufficient? The urgency evident in his speeches can be understood if we refer to the image of the house. Whether we think that the South was building a separate house or rebuilding the house that was originally supported by the Declaration and the Constitution, either would prevent the proposition that all men are created equal from ever prevailing. This would no longer be a democratic republic that strives for equality and liberty, but instead something very different as Lincoln clearly states in the following remarks:

> That is the real issue. That is the issue that will continue in this country when these poor tongues of Judge Douglas and myself shall be silent. It is the eternal struggle between these two principles -- right and wrong -- throughout the world. They are the two principles that have stood face to face from the beginning of time; and will ever continue to

> struggle. The one is the common right of humanity and the other the divine right of kings. It is the same principle in whatever shape it develops itself. It is the same spirit that says, "You work and toil and earn bread, and I'll eat it." No matter in what shape it comes, whether from the mouth of a king who seeks to bestride the people of his own nation and live by the fruit of their labor, or from one race of men as an apology for enslaving another race, it is the same tyrannical principle.[19]

The urgency was also made apparent by what Lincoln advanced as a conspiracy "among Democratic leaders to make slavery a national institution. Chief Justice Roger Taney, who wrote the Dred Scott decision, along with Franklin Pierce (14th President of the United States and a northern Democrat), James Buchanan (15th President of the United States and a northern Democrat), and Stephen Douglas (Democratic Senator from Illinois)."[20] In the face of this deep divide, Lincoln did not waver. He concluded his House Divided speech recalling the strength of the Republicans two years prior.

> Of *strange, discordant,* and even, *hostile* elements, we gathered from the four winds, and *formed* and fought the battle through, under the constant hot fire of a disciplined, proud, and pampered enemy.
> Did we brave all *then* to *falter* now? -- *now* -- when that same enemy is *wavering*, dissevered and belligerent?
> The result is not doubtful. We shall not fail -- if we stand firm, we shall not fail.
> *Wise councils* may *accelerate* or *mistakes delay* it, but, sooner or later the victory is *sure* to come.[21]

Lincoln spoke these words in 1858, and while he was not successful in the contest for the U.S. Senate, his political career was not at an end.

Lincoln's speeches and his contemporaries afford us examples of what unified the American political community and what divided it. The third and last example that we draw from Lincoln is the debates that took place in the lead up to the 1858 Illinois Senate election, commonly known as the Lincoln-Douglas Debates. That unity and division will occur in political communities is a given, and both are on full display in the American political community. My lecture addresses the role that liberal education can play in building communities. The debates show how the stark differences between Mr. Lincoln and Mr. Douglas were addressed in a manner that is consistent with habits that are formed by a liberal education. First, there was a respectful exchange between the two men and a willingness to listen and respond to their opposing positions. Second, they formed rational arguments to persuade those listening, the citizens of Illinois.

Debates between candidates were common in local Illinois elections, and Lincoln and Douglas had debated previously. Lincoln's opponent was Stephen Douglas who served in the U.S. Senate from 1846 until his death in 1861. The seven joint debates between Lincoln and Douglas represented a significant departure from the normal routine of an election campaign. The two candidates agreed to the following rules: the opening speaker would have one hour, the second man an hour and a half, and then the first speaker would have thirty minutes for rebuttal. Thousands of people gathered to hear Lincoln and Douglas, from late summer to early fall in

1858. There were parades and rallies complete with brass bands and glee clubs that greeted the candidates as they moved from one town to another. It is reported that Douglas traveled in a special train trailing a flatcar on which was mounted a cannon. Lincoln had a more modest mode of travel. There were seven debates in different cities throughout Illinois: Ottawa (August 21, 1858), Freeport (August 27), Jonesboro (September 15), Charleston (September 18) where 12,000 people are reported to have attended, Galesburg (October 7), Quincy (October 13), and Alton (October 15).

In addition to those who attended the debates in person, the debates were reported and printed in "The Press and Tribune" (for the Republicans) and the "Times" (for the Democrats), both published in Chicago. Each paper assigned a team of reporters to accompany the debaters and to record the speeches in shorthand. The speeches were taken down verbatim and published in full. The first publication of the Lincoln-Douglas debates as a book appeared in 1860.[22] Lincoln did not succeed over Douglas in the 1858 Illinois Senate race, but these very same issues and arguments were at the forefront of the 1860 Presidential election in which Lincoln was victorious.

I am not arguing that Lincoln and Douglas sat at a seminar table at any point during their education. Lincoln's education was basic in the formal sense, but that did not stop his efforts to teach himself. His stepsister remarked, "Abe was not Energetic Except in one thing—he was active and persistant in learning—read Everything he Could—Ciphered on boards—on the walls."[23] Stories about his self-teaching abound including giving speeches as a teenager, joining a debating club when he arrived in a new town, and sitting under an oak tree studying law with borrowed books.[24] It is significant that he chose to read and study those works that are included in a traditional liberal arts curriculum: Shakespeare, Euclid, and the Bible. While liberal education traditionally takes place in a classroom, it is not a requirement. The pursuit of knowledge with books that broaden the scope of one's learning is the chief concern. Lincoln's speeches and writings are a testament to his endeavors throughout his life and the Lincoln-Douglas Debates are a prime example. The point about liberal education is that a formative process can occur while one is learning and pursuing an intellectual inquiry. There is no guarantee that a good liberal education or the habits formed will lead all to embrace the lofty ideals of liberty and equality as espoused in the founding documents or even be willing to engage in debate, which requires acknowledging that there are other arguments to be heard. I contend that we are better for making the effort.

Let's return to the image of the cave for a fuller description, using Socrates' words in the *Republic*. He begins,

> Compare the effect of education and the lack of it upon our human nature to a situation like this: imagine men to be living in an underground cave-like dwelling place, which has a way up to the light along its whole width, but the entrance is a long way up. The men have been there from childhood, with their neck and legs in fetters, so that they remain in the same place and can only see ahead of them, as their bonds prevent them turning their heads. Light is provided by a fire burning some way behind and above them. Between the fire and the prisoners, some way behind them and on a higher ground, there is a path across

> the cave and along this a low wall has been built, like the screen at a puppet show in front of the performers who show their puppets above it.
>
> . . . such men would believe the truth to be nothing else than the shadows of the artifacts . . . Consider then what deliverance from their bonds and the curing of their ignorance would be if something like this naturally happened to them. Whenever one of them was freed, had to stand up suddenly, turn his head, walk, and look up toward the light.[25]

There is much more to Socrates' description, but we return to our topic of liberal education.

We must consider another of the features of a liberal education: questioning. Asking questions is very much a part of liberal education. In the description of my lecture, I noted that lightness and darkness also mimic the rising and setting of the sun in the natural world. There is a degree of regularity and uniformity that human beings share in this common, daily experience. But living in the natural world is only a part of our existence. As human beings, we have the potential to strive for much more. Achieving a richer life through education, or as Socrates describes in the *Republic*—emerging from the darkness to the light is a metaphor for liberal education—can free the mind and it can enrich our lives and those around us.

When we move from the regularity of the physical world to the disruptive and chaotic world of the political community, the distinctive feature of a liberal education is questioning. Questioning initiates inquiry and spurs debate as we discussed previously with the example of Socrates and his asking "what is" questions. He asks questions that oftentimes lead his interlocutors, listeners, and readers of the dialogue to question what they know or think they know. The question that I pose is whether questioning disrupts or strengthens our communities. I argue that it does both. With respect to the American political community, questioning can determine whether the country is abiding by the principles that were articulated at the founding of the nation or if it has veered off course. It sets the tone for active engagement instead of complacency. It also offers an opportunity to discover whether there is agreement for the direction of the country, and if not, highlight points of disagreement so that a consensus can be reached, or a compromise sought. The questions may bring to light conflicts, which may disrupt, but if we can resolve the conflicts, we will ultimately be stronger.

We are currently experiencing stark divisions in America. Lincoln's House Divided Speech is an entrée to considering the state of our own country and the divide that has emerged. To realize the parallels that exist between Lincoln's time and ours, we need only remove the words slave and free in the phrase "I believe this government cannot endure, permanently half slave and half free" and rewrite it to read: "I believe this government cannot endure, permanently embracing the principles of the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution and rejecting them." This represents a far greater disunity in America because the very foundation is being called into question and being rejected by some. We are no longer in Lincoln's America of the 1840's and 1850's where those who defended slavery were building a new house in their efforts to spread slavery throughout the nation. We are now in a time when some have as a goal to tear down the America that began in 1776. Despite the efforts of Lincoln and others, a civil war was fought that cost the nation dearly. No one can predict what the future holds, but recapturing an education that contributes to a foundation for forming good, strong political communities that

strive to realize the lofty ideals envisioned at the founding, and that instills the necessary education for a self-governing people, may keep us from dire outcomes.

I conclude my thoughts this evening with a return to unity, the word that began our inquiry. Plato's image of the cave initiated this lecture and another image from the *Republic* concludes it, that of the body. In response to a question posed to Socrates "Is there any greater evil we can mention for a city than whatever tears it apart into many communities instead of one?" he responds, "There is not." We leave aside Socrates' discussion of community but look to the image that he offers:

> And the city which most closely resembles the individual? When one of us hurts his finger, the whole organism which binds body and soul together into the unitary system managed by the ruling part of it shares the pain at once throughout when one part suffers. This is why we say that the man has a pain in his finger, and the same can be said of any part of the man, both about the pain which any part suffers, and its pleasure when it finds relief . . . the best managed city certainly resembles such an organism.[26]

We leave aside the *Republic* and turn to the democratic republic in America and remind ourselves that no political community is perfect, nor will any political community ever perfectly achieve its ideals. The ideals of the declaration of independence are offered as self-evident truths: the principle of equality and the unalienable rights of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness as well as others. The government that was formed to secure these rights derives its just powers from the consent of the governed. It reminds us that the foundation of the sovereignty of the people requires participation and vigilance. Consent is given on an ongoing basis and the judgment of whether the government is securing the rights of American citizens or thwarting them is a constant exercise. We must also look to our fellow citizens and engage them, whether it be through questioning or dialogue and ask them whether they embrace the founding principles of the nation or reject them. The image of the body that I just quoted from Socrates is one that serves to remind us that as a nation the citizenry is part of a whole. There may be painful dialogues in our future, but as the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King argued in his "Letter from Birmingham Jail," we must reject monologue. King also shares with us a rendition of the cave:

> Just as Socrates felt that it was necessary to create a tension in the mind so that individuals could rise from the bondage of myths and half-truths to the unfettered realm of creative analysis and objective appraisal, we must we see the need for nonviolent gadflies to create the kind of tension in society that will help men rise from the dark depths of prejudice and racism to the majestic heights of understanding and brotherhood.[27]

The nonviolent gadfly is Socrates.

Abraham Lincoln lived through a civil war and Socrates was condemned to death after being put on trial. We must do better. We must fight for the institutions that allow for a free exchange of ideas and live lives that are worthy of them.

Notes

1. Senior Scholar in Residence 2020-2021, Benson Center for the Study of Western Civilization, University of Colorado Boulder. This lecture is part of the Benson Center's Conservative Thought and Policy "Community or Disunity?" Series, delivered on November 17, 2020.

2. Plato, *Republic*, trans. G.M.A. Grube (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1974). The discussion of the cave is at the beginning of Book 7, 514-518e.

3. *An Introduction to the Great Books and to a Liberal Education*. The Great Ideas Program #1, Encyclopedia Britannica (January 1, 1959).

4. Plato, *Four Texts on Socrates: Plato's "Euthyphro", "Apology of Socrates", and "Crito" and Aristophanes' "Clouds,"* trans. Thomas G. West and Grace Starry West, rev. ed. (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1998), 21d.

5. Eva Brann in her essay entitled "Civic Education" develops the idea that respect, rationality, and reverence are habits that result from civic and liberal education.

6. Abraham Lincoln, "Fragment on the Constitution and the Union" (c. January 1861) in *The Writings of Abraham Lincoln*, ed. Steven B. Smith (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2012), 321-22.

7. Lincoln, 417.

8. Declaration of Independence.

9. Lincoln, 10-11.

10. Lincoln, 148.

11. Lincoln, 11.

12. Lincoln, 203.

13. Dred Scott v Sandford, Opinion by Chief Justice Roger Taney, March 6, 1857, Legal Information Institute, https://www.law.cornell.edu/supremecourt/text/60/393/.

14. Dred Scott. Dissent by Justice Curtis.

15. Gienapp, 49.

16. Lincoln, 126-133.

17. Lincoln, 165.

18. Lincoln, 115.

19. Lincoln, 221.

20. Gienapp, 60.

21. Lincoln, 133.

22. Information on the Lincoln-Douglas Debates is from *Abraham Lincoln and Civil War America* by William Gienapp and *The Lincoln-Douglas Debates* edited by Robert W. Johannsen.

23. Gienapp, 6.

24. Gienapp, chapter 1.

25. Plato, *Republic*, 514 a-c, 515 c-d.

26. Plato, *Republic*, 462 a-e.

27. King, Letter from Birmingham Jail, Birmingham, Alabama, 1963, Teaching American History, http://teachingamericanhistory.org/library/document/letter-from-birmingham-city-jail/.

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