

“ Am I not destroying my enemies  
when I make friends of them? ”

# Sensibilities FOR A Change

Diana McLain Smith | FROM *DIVIDE OR CONQUER*



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## No leader operates alone.

Not the much-celebrated Jack Welch, as he himself points out.

Not the iconic leaders of great movements, as the many friends of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. have testified.

Not even the President of the United States, as Doris Kearns Goodwin's account of Abraham Lincoln's wartime cabinet reveals.<sup>1</sup>

## Every leader, no matter how powerful, leads through relationships.

Those leaders especially adept at doing so demonstrate a set of highly developed *relational sensibilities*, among them:

- Curiosity and courage
- Humility and hope
- Appreciation and acknowledgement
- Nuance and novelty
- Generosity and generativity
- Empathy and accountability<sup>2</sup>

Each sensibility tempers or bolsters the other, serving leaders in much the same way aesthetic sensibilities serve the artist: by significantly enhancing the way they perceive, experience, and respond to the world around them.<sup>3</sup>

We can see these sensibilities at work and witness their power in a speech that comes from a very different time and context: Abraham Lincoln's Second Inaugural Address. In this address, delivered as the American Civil War came to a close, Lincoln sought to win the peace by tending to the shattered relationship between North and South.

Considered by many to be his finest speech, this seven-minute address illustrates well what historian Doris Kearns Goodwin observed: "In the hands of a truly great politician the qualities we generally associate with decency and morality . . . can also be impressive political resources."<sup>4</sup>

From Abraham Lincoln's address, we can learn about the sensibilities that defined his greatness. From his life, we can learn how to cultivate those sensibilities in mere mortal leaders.

# Imagine the Time and the Context

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After four years of fighting, the war was finally drawing to a close, but not before destroying more American lives than any war before or since. On the day of the inaugural, all those gathering in the nation's capital were anxious to hear news of the war's end. The March weather did not cooperate. A cold torrential rain began early and, like the war, refused to stop. Even so, an unprecedented number of people made their way along muddy streets to hear what Lincoln had to say. With 623,000 lives gone—one out of every eleven men of service age<sup>5</sup>—most wanted to hear only one thing: claims of victory and promises of vengeance. To them, justice meant retribution, and peace without justice meant no victory at all.

Never has a leader said more with fewer words. In a 703-word address, 505 of them no more than one syllable<sup>6</sup>, Lincoln asked the nation “to think with him about the cause and the meaning of the war.”<sup>7</sup> No finer example exists of a leader pursuing a hardheaded political goal through what we think of as softer sensibilities.<sup>8</sup>

In the few minutes he spoke, Lincoln took up three questions: Who caused the war? Why did we have to lose so much? And how can we possibly move forward together? Lincoln's answers risked disappointing his audience. Instead of appealing to people's yearning for victory and craving for vengeance, he called for healing and spoke of the North's complicity in slavery and ultimately the war.<sup>9</sup>

How Lincoln reached across the divide that stood between him and his audience, so that they might reach across the divide that stood between North and South, is a tribute to his genius.

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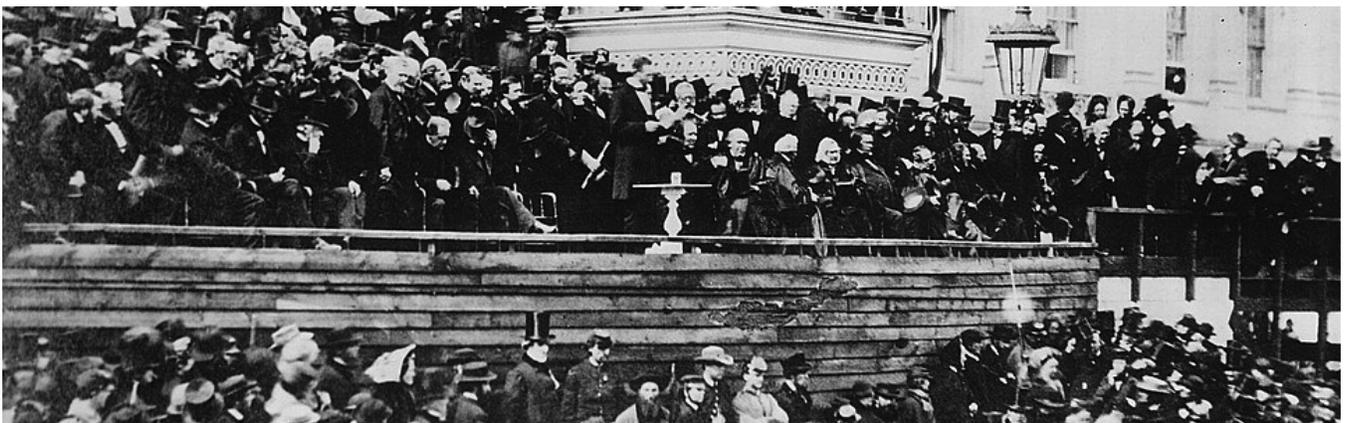
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Behind this genius are the same set of sensibilities I've observed in other great leaders who lead through the relationships they form with their followers.<sup>10</sup> With these sensibilities, Lincoln shows it's what you *see and bring out in followers* that makes for truly great leaders. As you read what Lincoln said over 150 years ago, pay attention to what he brings out in you today.

Who caused the war?

Why did we have to lose so much?

And how can we possibly move forward together?



## Lincoln's Second Inaugural Address<sup>11</sup>

FELLOW COUNTRYMEN: At this second appearing, to take the oath of the presidential office, there is less occasion for an extended address than there was at the first. Then a statement, somewhat in detail, of a course to be pursued, seemed fitting and proper. Now, at the expiration of four years, during which public declarations have been constantly called forth on every point and phase of the great contest which still absorbs the attention, and engrosses the energies of the nation, little that is new could be presented. The progress of our arms, upon which all else chiefly depends, is as well known to the public as to myself; and it is, I trust, reasonably satisfactory and encouraging to all. With high hope for the future, no prediction in regard to it is ventured.

On the occasion corresponding to this four years ago, all thoughts were anxiously directed to an impending civil war. All dreaded it—all sought to avert it. While the inaugural address was being delivered from this place, devoted altogether to *saving* the Union without war—insurgent agents were in the city seeking to *destroy* it without war—seeking to dissolve the Union, and divide effects, by negotiation. Both parties deprecated war; but one of them would make war rather than let the nation survive; and the other would accept war rather than let it perish. And the war came.

One eighth of the whole population were colored slaves, not distributed generally over the Union, but localized in the Southern part of it. These slaves constituted a peculiar and powerful interest. All knew that this interest was, somehow, the cause of the war. To strengthen, perpetuate, and extend this interest was the object for which the insurgents would rend the Union, even by war; while the government claimed no right to do more than to restrict the territorial enlargement of it. Neither party expected for the war, the magnitude, or the duration, which it has already attained. Neither anticipated that the cause of the conflict might cease with, or even before, the conflict itself should cease. Each looked for an easier triumph, and a result less fundamental and astounding. Both read the same Bible, and pray to the same God; and each invokes His aid against the other. It may seem strange that any men should dare to ask a just God's assistance in wringing their bread from the sweat of other men's faces; but let us judge not that we be not judged. The prayers of both could not be answered; that of neither has been answered fully. The Almighty has his own purposes. "Woe unto the world because of offences! For it must needs the offences come; but woe to that man by whom the offence cometh!" If we shall suppose that American Slavery is one of those offences which, in the providence of God, must needs come, but which, having continued through His appointed time, He now wills to remove, and that He gives to both North and South, this terrible war, as the woe due to those by whom the offence came, shall we discern therein any departure from those divine attributes which the believers in a Living God always ascribe to Him? Fondly do we hope—fervently do we pray—that this mighty scourge of war may speedily pass away. Yet, if God wills that it continue, until all the wealth piled by the bondsman's two hundred and fifty years of unrequited toil shall be sunk, and until every drop of blood drawn with the lash, shall be paid by another drawn with the sword, as was said three thousand years ago, so still it must be said "the judgments of the Lord, are true and righteous altogether."

With malice toward none; with charity for all; with firmness in the right, as God gives us to see the right, let us strive on to finish the work we are in; to bind up the nation's wounds; to care for him who shall have borne the battle, and for his widow, and his orphan—to do all which may achieve and cherish a just, and a lasting peace, among ourselves, and with all nations.

# Relational Sensibilities

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In four paragraphs, Lincoln sets out to recast the war and, in recasting it, set the stage for peace. Far more than rhetorical technique is at work here; far more than a masterful politician attuned to his audience's needs and preferences.<sup>12</sup> Behind Lincoln's mastery is a finely honed set of sensibilities. These sensibilities informed the way he put his rhetorical skill to use and determined the political ends toward which he deployed his mastery. Let's look at each pair of sensibilities, then explore how we might cultivate them in all leaders.<sup>13</sup>

## CURIOSITY AND COURAGE

The curiosity Lincoln brought to the problem of slavery was anything but idle. It was the curiosity of a restless mind able to keep tough questions alive and to pursue them with courage wherever they led. *How did this war come to be?* For four years Lincoln had struggled with this question, trying to understand what "great good" could come of this "mighty convulsion."<sup>14</sup>

And for more years still, he'd grappled with the moral implications of slavery, struggling to understand how a country founded on democratic principles could defend the existence—let alone promote the expansion—of slavery. In the end, he came to see that slavery was not just evil at its "core" but in its "circumference."<sup>15</sup> As Ronald White Jr. recounts in *Lincoln's Greatest Speech*:

Whereas for a long time he had been willing to contain slavery politically and geographically, he had come to the conclusion in the midst of the Civil War that its moral implications could not be contained. Slavery made a lie to democratic principles.<sup>16</sup>

Having arrived at this conclusion, Lincoln might have decided to play to his political base in the North, blaming the South for slavery and for the war. But he made a different choice. When he speaks of slavery, he doesn't call it Southern slavery but "American slavery," and when he speaks of the war, he doesn't point a finger at the South but speaks of God giving to "both North and South, this terrible war, as the woe due to those by whom the offence came."<sup>17</sup>

In choosing these words, Lincoln decides to confront the ethical behavior of an entire nation.<sup>18</sup> "Instead of self-congratulation, he asked his fellow citizens for self-analysis," White observes.

No president, before or since, has so courageously pointed to a malady that resides at the very center of the American national family.<sup>19</sup>

With enough curiosity to ask tough questions and enough courage to face tough answers, Lincoln distinguished himself from all other politicians—in his day and in our own.

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## HOPE AND HUMILITY<sup>20</sup>

These two sensibilities—*hope* and *humility*—make for mighty strange bedfellows. While one rests on an abiding belief in our ability to create a better future, the other leans on an equally abiding belief in the limitations of human actors. Yet the two show up together in Lincoln's inaugural, two bookends buttressing the ideas within. In opening, Lincoln provides no grand plans, offers no comforting reassurances. Only a bit of hope coupled with a good deal of humility. Dispensing with the war's progress in a single phrase—"it is, I trust, reasonably satisfactory and encouraging to all"—he goes on to speak of its prospects, saying only: "With high hope for the future, no prediction in regard to it is ventured."

This understated account springs from years of reflection on the limited role of human actors, even those with the power of the presidency. "If I had my way," Lincoln wrote Eliza Gurney three years earlier, "this war would never have commenced. If I had been allowed my way this war would have ended before this, but we find it still continues."<sup>21</sup>

As unable to stop a war from beginning as he was to bring it to an early close, Lincoln makes no boasts or promises. Instead, he puts the future course of the war in the hands of God, while putting in the hands of an embattled nation the only hope for peace:

... if God wills that [the war] continue, until all the wealth piled by the bondsman's two hundred and fifty years of unrequited toil shall be sunk, and until every drop of blood drawn with

the lash, shall be paid by another drawn with the sword, as was said three thousand years ago, so still it must be said “the judgments of the Lord, are true and righteous altogether [.]”

Then, moving from what God might will to what the nation must do,<sup>22</sup> he adds:

With malice toward none; with charity for all; with firmness in the right, as God gives us to see the right, let us strive on to finish the work we are in; to bind up the nation’s wounds; to care for him who shall have borne the battle, and for his widow, and his orphan—to do all which may achieve and cherish a just, and a lasting peace, among ourselves, and with all nations.

In this final passage, Lincoln defines the work his fellow countrymen have yet to finish. What makes the passage so remarkable is not what it says, but what it doesn’t say. Nowhere do you find absolute certainty about who’s right—for only God knows what’s right. And nowhere can you find absolute certainty about whose might will prevail—for only God is Almighty and he may will that the war continue.

So, instead, what you find is a list of tasks to be completed: binding up the nation’s wounds, caring for all those who have borne battle, and for his widow and his orphan. Only through these humble tasks—tasks of nurturance, not of war—can the nation hope to achieve and cherish a just and lasting peace.

When you juxtapose this passage against the certainty with which so many claims are made today—about God’s intentions, about wars being won before they’re begun, about evil empires versus God-loving peoples—it’s breathtaking.

## APPRECIATION AND ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

These two words mean very different things to different people.<sup>23</sup> I bring them together here to convey a special meaning: *understanding people’s internal experiences and external circumstances with so much acuity* (appreciation) *that you make it easier for them to accept the role they played in creating those experiences and circumstances* (acknowledgement).

You can see these companion sensibilities at work in how Lincoln lays the groundwork for the entreaties with which he ends his address. Acutely aware that people are worn out, anxious, and impatient,<sup>24</sup> Lincoln knows that the charity he asks for in the end “might be too much to expect of those

who encountered such great losses.”<sup>25</sup> Even so, he doesn’t seek to reassure or comfort. Rather, he invites his audience to come along with him as he recounts events, explains causes, and contemplates the war’s deeper meaning. As he takes each of these three steps, he demonstrates an understanding of people’s experiences and circumstances, earning him the right to point to the role they’ve played in creating them. Let’s look at how he takes each step.

**Recounting Events.** In this first step, Lincoln goes back in time to recount what both sides were thinking, feeling, and intending as the war approached:

On the occasion corresponding to this four years ago, all thoughts were anxiously directed to an impending civil war. All dreaded it—all sought to avert it. While the inaugural address was being delivered from this place, devoted altogether to *saving* the Union without war—in-surgent agents were in the city seeking to *destroy* it without war—seeking to dissolve the Union, and divide effects, by negotiation. Both parties deprecated war; but one of them would *make* war rather than let the nation survive; and the other would *accept* war rather than let it perish. And the war came.

Lincoln focuses here not only on what was happening four years earlier but on what was going on in the hearts and minds of people in the North and South, including:

- *What both sides were thinking and feeling*: “On the occasion corresponding to this four years ago, all thoughts were anxiously directed to an impending civil war. All dreaded it—”
- *What both sides intended*: “—all sought to avert it.”
- *What both sides were willing to do*: “one [side] would make war rather than let the nation survive; and the other would accept war rather than let it perish.”
- *What both sides felt as if they couldn’t control*: “And the war came.”

In this public rendering of people’s private mental states, Lincoln puts to good use his ability—not just to *read* but to *appreciate*—the experience of *all* the people, not just *some* of the people. He invites his audience to see beyond their caricatures of each other to the complex feelings, thoughts, and intentions that both sides experienced. Here it’s as if he’s saying: there are no good guys or bad guys—just anxious people with good intentions and limited abilities, unable to avert a war they dreaded. And so the war came.

**Explaining Causes.** In taking this second step, Lincoln shifts attention away from people’s internal experiences and onto their external circumstances, pointing to the war’s cause:

One eighth of the whole population were colored slaves, not distributed generally over the Union, but localized in the Southern part of it. These slaves constituted a peculiar and powerful interest. All knew that this interest was, somehow, the cause of the war. To strengthen, perpetuate, and extend this interest was the object for which the insurgents would rend the Union, even by war; while the government claimed no right to do more than to restrict the territorial enlargement of it.

In this passage, Lincoln implies that circumstance, not malevolence, spawned the South’s interest in slavery and in its perpetuation: their political economy depended on it. Here he seems to be saying: there but for the grace of God goes the North; had its economy been similarly dependent, the North might have been similarly interested. In taking this tack, Lincoln helps his audience appreciate, as he does, the different circumstances the two regions faced, so that they might better understand the war’s causes and more easily forgive its consequences.

**Contemplating Deeper Meanings.** With these two steps behind him, Lincoln is ready to take up the war’s deeper meaning. Here he turns to the Bible, knowing that those listening had done so as well, and he draws on their shared belief system to examine God’s hand in the war.<sup>26</sup>

“The Almighty has his own purposes,” he starts, then quoting from the Bible, adds: “Woe unto the world because of offenses! For it must needs the offences come; but woe to that man by whom the offense cometh!” This passage—one his audience had probably read many times—becomes a set piece for his reflections:

If we shall suppose that American Slavery is one of those offences which, in the providence of God, must needs come, but which, having continued through His appointed time, He now wills to remove, and that He gives to both North and South, this terrible war, as the woe due to those by whom the offense came, shall we discern therein any departure from those divine attributes which the believers in a Living God always ascribe to Him?

This passage is by far the most controversial. By suppos-

ing that God has given the war to both North and South as the woe resulting from the offence of American slavery, he’s in effect asking the North to acknowledge its own hand in slavery and in the war. It’s not by chance that he makes this request only after demonstrating an appreciation for the internal experiences and external circumstances of both sides.

Yet even now, he knows he runs a big risk—that of offending his audience’s less developed sensibilities. And so he places these potentially divisive meanings in the context of a common Bible, appealing to his audience’s shared belief in a Living God. Thus, by the time Lincoln poses the question—“shall we discern therein any departure from those divine attributes which the believers in a Living God always ascribe to Him?”—nary a head could say no.<sup>27</sup> It was Lincoln’s extraordinary ability to appreciate what both sides were up against that earned him the right to look at their collective role in slavery and in the war.

## NUANCE AND NOVELTY

*Nuance*—the ability to pick up on subtleties, not just patterns—and *novelty*—the ability to construe things in a fundamentally new light, not simply rehash old positions—make it possible for leaders to resolve even the most intractable conflicts.

For decades before the war came, politicians in both the North and the South had been turning each other into cardboard villains with evil intentions lurking behind every action and morally bankrupt values lying behind every hint of self-interest. Ultimately this—not clashing interests alone—is what made civil war inevitable.

Lincoln understood this. In fact, by the time he delivered his address, he’d come to believe that most Americans “battled in confusion,” not truly understanding “the causes and consequences of the war.”<sup>28</sup> What troubled him most was that each side was convinced that they alone were defending some God-given right and that the other side was intent on destroying that right.<sup>29</sup> Worried that a “nation divided in war would remain divided in peace,”<sup>30</sup> he strove throughout his address to help people see the war and each other in a new light by drawing attention to aspects of the situation his audience’s caricatures of one another failed to grasp: *what both sides had in common*. As Lincoln saw it:

- “Both parties deprecated war.”
- “All dreaded it—all sought to avert it.”
- “Neither anticipated that the cause of the conflict

might cease with, or even before, the conflict itself should cease.”

- “*Each* looked for an easier triumph, and a result less fundamental and astounding.”
- “*Both* read the same Bible, and pray to the same God; and *each* invokes His aid against the other.”

To prevent his audience from rejecting this more nuanced view of the South before even considering it, Lincoln built a rhetorical bridge. On one side of this bridge, he anticipates his audience’s skepticism: “It may seem strange that any men should dare to ask a just God’s assistance in wringing their bread from the sweat of other men’s faces;”<sup>31</sup> while on the other side, he strives to put that skepticism to rest by alluding to a frequently quoted passage from the Bible: “but let us judge not that we be not judged.”

It is on this rhetorical bridge—connecting an unfamiliar idea to a familiar belief system—that Lincoln frames the war as the righteous result of a moral offence committed by *both* North and South. In proposing this novel notion, White argues, Lincoln wasn’t just setting the historical record straight:

Lincoln understood, as many in his own party did not, that the Southern people would never be able to take their full places in the Union if they felt that they alone were saddled with the guilt for what was the national offense of slavery.<sup>32</sup>

Lincoln’s exceptional ability to see things others did not is what allowed him to win the peace, not just the war. By proposing a more nuanced view of the war and its contestants, he gave the nation a new way of seeing the war and each other—a way of seeing that both sides would need to create a lasting peace.

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## GENEROSITY AND GENERATIVITY

“I don’t like that man,” Lincoln once said, then added: “I must get to know him better.” In this comment, Lincoln exemplifies two other sensibilities that informed the way he conducted himself in relationships *and* the way he conducted the war: *generosity*—the ability to *see* the best in others—and *generativity*—the ability to *bring out* the best in others.

Lincoln brought both these sensibilities to his conduct of the war. Though he executed the war with great determination, he never once approached it with malevolence. “I shall do nothing in malice,” he wrote in 1862. “What I deal with is too vast for malicious dealing.”<sup>33</sup> As Lincoln saw it, neither side intended what the war had brought: “neither side has expected for the war, the magnitude, or the duration, which it has already attained. Each looked for an easier triumph, and a result less fundamental and astounding.”

Unlike many others on the day of the inaugural, Lincoln had no trouble forgiving the South. He never saw evil intent in their actions. All he saw were the same efforts to avert war that he saw in the North. Nor did he see any calculated intention to destroy hundreds of thousands of lives. All he saw was the same astonishment at the war’s consequences.

That’s why, when his address comes to a close with the phrase—“With malice toward none; with charity for all”—it rings true. His entire speech had been an extended entreaty to both sides to see and bring out the best in each other: charitable rather than malicious feeling.

Other words of his, from the Gettysburg Address—“of the people, by the people, for the people”—endure because they define America. “*With malice toward none; with charity for all*” defined Lincoln’s vision for a post-Civil War America.<sup>34</sup>

This vision, which defined Lincoln’s legacy long after his assassination, looked beyond people’s desire for vengeance to see and bring out their more lasting desire for peace.

## EMPATHY COMBINED WITH ACCOUNTABILITY

In most cultures, empathy and accountability are a null set: where you find the one, you can’t find the other. Either you empathize with how people feel and the circumstances they’re up against, *or* you hold them accountable for their actions and the consequences they create.

In Lincoln’s address, empathy and accountability work hand in hand. One moment, he’s empathizing with what everyone’s up against or with what they’re feeling, thinking, and intending. The next, he’s confronting everyone with the moral and practical consequences of their collective actions. Had Lincoln’s empathy been untempered by accountability, he could not have looked at what both sides did to create consequences they later regretted. Yet had his sense of accountability gone untempered by empathy, he could not

have asked an embittered nation to offer only charity to the other side. By bringing the two together, Lincoln asked both sides to rise to the occasion, and he made it more likely that they would.

To work together well, empathy and accountability depend on all the other sensibilities. Lincoln's ability to empathize with his fellow countrymen springs from his own struggle to fathom the war's meaning (curiosity); from recognizing the limited control people can exert over events (humility); from understanding people's experiences and circumstances (appreciation); from grasping subtleties that go beyond conventional wisdom (nuance); and from seeing the best in both sides (generosity). Far from a rhetorical gambit, then, Lincoln's empathy is a deeply authentic expression of how he feels, and it comes across that way.

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Similarly, when Lincoln holds the nation accountable for the offence of slavery, he doesn't simply round up the usual suspects and hold them to account. He confronts the ethical behavior of an entire nation (courage); he asks the North to accept its role in slavery and the war (acknowledgment); he holds out hope that the nation can bind up its wounds and create a just and lasting peace (hope); he offers a new way of understanding the war to make that hope more realistic (novelty); and he speaks to and cultivates the best in people throughout the address (generativity). Instead of punishing either side for creating a result more fundamental and astounding than either expected, he inspired both sides to do better.

## **IMPLICATIONS: THE SOFTER SIDE OF POWER**

Had Lincoln vilified the South or relished in the North's triumph, he still would have won the war, but he could not have set the stage for peace. The power to create a lasting peace in part resides in the softer sensibilities that Lincoln brought to his leadership. With these sensibilities, Lincoln was able to reach across the divide that separated him from his followers, so they could reach across the divide that separated them from each other. In an age when neither geography nor borders can stop the spread of violence, it may be an idea whose time has come.

While the full impact of Lincoln's address can never be assessed, three days after the inaugural, twenty-nine-year-old Charles Francis Adams Jr. wrote to his father, "This inaugural strikes me in its grand simplicity and directness as being for all time the historical keynote of this war." Adams should know. Recently promoted to colonel, he'd fought at Antietam and Gettysburg; he'd served the previous summer with the fifth Massachusetts Cavalry, an African-American regiment; and his family claimed among them two presidents: John Adams and John Quincy Adams.<sup>35</sup>

# Cultivating Sensibilities

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By studying how these sensibilities developed naturally in Lincoln, we can learn a lot about how to cultivate them in today's leaders. Goodwin's account of Lincoln's life and relationships suggest that these sensibilities spring from a combination of three factors, all of which need to be in place: challenging experiences, new meaning, and strong relationships. Let's look at how each of these factors shaped Lincoln's sensibilities and explore the implications of each for how we might improve the way we develop leaders.

## CHALLENGING EXPERIENCES

By the time Lincoln was twenty-six years old, he'd lost his mother, his older sister, an infant brother, and his first love. Though his stepmother lived on, the only person left standing from his biological family was his father, who deprived Abe of his last chance for schooling by hiring him out to neighbors to pay off a family debt.<sup>36</sup> Far from defeating Lincoln, these losses and disappointments only served to strengthen his character, as Goodwin shows by contrasting Lincoln with his two main rivals for the 1860 Republican nomination, William Seward and Salmon Chase:

... his familiarity with pain and personal disappointment imbued him with a strength and understanding of human frailty unavailable to a man of Seward's buoyant disposition. Moreover, Lincoln, unlike the brooding Chase, possessed a life-affirming humor and a profound resilience that lightened his despair and fortified his will.<sup>37</sup>

You can see this "profound resilience" at work in the summer of 1855 when "disappointment piled upon disappointment." As Goodwin tells it, a distinguished lawyer from Philadelphia by the name of George Harding asked Lincoln to help out on a celebrated patent case being tried in Chicago.<sup>38</sup> Though Harding was only looking for a lawyer who "understood the judge and had his confidence," Lincoln was "thrilled," devoting all his energies and talents to developing materials for the case.

A month later, however, the case was moved to Cincinnati, and unbeknownst to Lincoln, Harding hired in his place the renowned lawyer, Edwin Stanton. Unaware he'd been replaced, Lincoln showed up in Cincinnati ready to impress Harding only to learn that Harding had no need of him. Worse, after introducing himself, Lincoln overheard Stanton as he pulled Harding aside to whisper, "Why did you

bring that damned long armed Ape here? He does not know any thing and can do you no good."

Despite his humiliation, Lincoln stayed on to hear the case only to discover that Stanton's arguments far surpassed his own. According to one observer, an undeterred Lincoln stood "in rapt attention . . . drinking in his words." After the case ended, Lincoln told the observer he was going home "to study law," explaining:

For any rough-and-tumble case (and a pretty good one, too), I am enough for any man we have out in that country; but these college-trained men are coming West. They have had all the advantages of a life-long training in the law, plenty of time to study and everything, perhaps, to fit them. Soon they will be in Illinois . . . and when they appear I will be ready.

So what can this 150-year-old account teach us about developing leaders today? According to theoretical economist Paul Ormerod in his recent book *Why Most Things Fail*, for companies to succeed, they must expect and react flexibly to failure, as Coke did after New Coke bombed. "Coke reacted rapidly and flexibly to the disaster," he points out, even though it meant "abandoning its meticulously crafted strategy."<sup>39</sup>

This advice is hardly new. But it still goes largely unheeded, because most leaders today don't know how to put failure to good use as Lincoln did.

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Why is this? One reason is that most leaders make it to the top because they rarely fail, leaving them at a loss when they do. But another reason—one we can influence—goes to the heart of most leadership programs. The vast majority of them emphasize practice over experimentation, giving participants little opportunity to fail—or to learn how to put failure to good use. If anything, today's programs protect participants from the pain of failure by giving instructions so precise little can go wrong, by focusing mostly on people's strengths, and by calling their weaknesses not weaknesses

but “areas needing development.” The implicit motto of such programs seems to be: practice, practice, practice, because practice makes perfect.

No program should set out to create failure or humiliate participants. But developmental efforts would serve leaders better if they created opportunities for participants not just to practice but to experiment, then taught them not just how to fail but how to succeed at failing. After all, it’s not failure alone, but the ability to put failure to good use that creates flexibility and resilience. That ability depends on the next two factors: the meaning we make out of disappointing experience, and the strength of the relationships that shape, even transform that experience. These two factors allow us to convert pain and failure into resolve, so we’re ready for whatever our competition throws at us when they come to town.

## NEW MEANING

Lincoln was able to make good things out of bad experiences because of the meaning he saw in and took from them. From the time he was a young boy, he read voraciously, he listened sympathetically, and he created captivating stories. All three activities allowed him to transcend or recast painful experiences—or at the very least, endure them with good humor.

Early in his life Lincoln first broke free of the confines of a backwoods existence by reading books.<sup>40</sup> Finding those books, however, wasn’t easy. Unlike his cohorts later in life, no one gave him books or the opportunity to read them at his leisure. He had to create that opportunity for himself by borrowing books he didn’t have, or re-reading those he did. Once, he even worked two days to pay for a book he’d accidentally damaged. Perhaps that’s why, when he finally got his hands on a book, he scoured it for interesting new thoughts and ideas.

“When he came across a passage that Struck him,” his stepmother recalled, “he would write it down on boards if he had no paper,” and “when the board would get too black he would shave it off with a drawing knife and go on again.”<sup>41</sup>

Later on Lincoln came to read people just as closely as he read books. He studied everyone he met, asking them probing questions and listening to what lay in their hearts when they answered. By taking the time to read people this closely, Lincoln could make sense of their positions—even when he vehemently disagreed with them, as he did in 1854 when the South sought to expand slavery into the new territories

through the Kansas–Nebraska Act. Though he brought all his rhetorical skill to repudiating the act, he never repudiated the people advocating it. You can see in the line of argument Lincoln put forth then, the same line of argument he used ten years later in his Second Inaugural:

[the Southerners] are just what we would be in their situation. If slavery did not now exist amongst them, they would not introduce it. If it did now exist amongst us, we should not instantly give it up. . . .When it is said that the institution exists; and that it is very difficult to get rid of it, in any satisfactory way, I can understand and appreciate the saying. I surely will not blame them for not doing what I should not know how to do myself.<sup>42</sup>

“Rather than upbraid slaveowners,” Goodwin points out, “Lincoln sought to comprehend their position through empathy.” And then, having comprehended their position, he confronted them “with the contradictions . . . that existed in their own laws and social practices.”<sup>43</sup> Where, under the same circumstances, William Seward would appeal to a higher law and Salmon Chase to natural rights derived from heaven, Lincoln was more inclined to speak to people’s hearts. This ability to first read and then speak to people’s hearts allowed Lincoln to make sense of slavery in ways that others could not, ultimately allowing him to recast the meaning of the Civil War.

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**Lincoln was able to make good things out of bad experiences because of the meaning he saw in and took from them.**

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Throughout his life, Lincoln relied on stories to make lighter sense of painful experience. An old friend from Springfield, Illinois, once said that when Lincoln told funny stories, “. . . he emerged from his cave of gloom and came back, like one awakened from sleep, to the world in which he lived again.”<sup>44</sup> And *New York Tribune* correspondent Henry Villard noticed that when Lincoln told these stories, he not only sought to ease his own pain but “to heal wounded feelings and mitigate [the] disappointments” of others.<sup>45</sup>

These three activities—reading books for ideas, reading people for understanding, and telling stories for levity—served Lincoln well. They cultivated in him a way of perceiving people and situations that was so fresh, so acute, so finely tuned, that he was able to see in and make out of difficult experiences things others could not—things he could use to

find common ground, to withstand adversity, to persevere in the face of failure, and to help others do the same.

Despite their importance, you're unlikely to find these activities in great supply in today's leadership programs. Ideas are too impractical, especially if they're complicated; reading people closely takes too much time and has nothing to do with taking action; and funny stories are for entertainment, not for deeper meaning. What you *will* find in great supply, though, are techniques for everything from active listening to straight talk to negotiation. These techniques—taught as they are in a perceptual vacuum—not only fail to cultivate relational sensibilities, they frequently fall flat. Without a good reading of people to guide them, these techniques often come across as gimmicks, or worse, manipulative tricks.

To develop new sensibilities, leaders need more than techniques. They need to see and do things in new ways. To help, developmental efforts should do three things: expose participants to ideas that challenge their current ways of seeing; develop their ability to read people and situations with greater acuity; and help them reframe how they see difficult experiences.

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**To develop new sensibilities, leaders need more than techniques. They need to see and do things in new ways.**

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To get an idea of how to go about this, let's take the Anatomy Framework as an example (see Chapter 3). This framework goes against the grain of conventional wisdom, which holds that other people *make* us feel things.<sup>46</sup> Instead, it proposes that our feelings are a joint venture—a product of our *interactions* and the way we *frame* them, given our *repertoires*. While this idea may challenge our current way of seeing things, it also frees us up. No more waiting for the other person to change before we can feel better. We can work together to map and alter the pattern.

Another example is the Ladder of Reflection. When used in tandem with the Anatomy Framework, it develops our ability to read people more closely (see Appendix B). By asking us to pay attention to what's actually happening, the Ladder requires us to look more closely at people. And by offering a framework rather than categories as a lens through which to look, the Anatomy Framework turns our attention away from labeling people and onto to what they're doing, how they feel, and how they interact. Together the two ideas make it much harder to turn people into caricatures and

much easier to make new sense of those old situations in which you feel caught (see Chapter 4 for an example).

A third example is the design of frame experiments, each one aimed at helping people transform how they see things. As Chapter 6 illustrates, when people tether new actions to new ways of seeing, they integrate new behaviors more quickly, so those behaviors feel more natural to them and less artificial to others. By giving people guidance on how to design such experiments, we help them take actions that make new ways of seeing more practical and realistic.

Lincoln devoured new ideas and studied people closely throughout his life, continually reframing how he saw everything from himself to slavery to the role of North and South to the Civil War. By doing the same things, leaders today can cultivate in themselves the same set of sensibilities we see in Lincoln.

## STRONG RELATIONSHIPS

Lincoln's earliest and most important relationships allowed him to transform painful experiences into an enduring resilience.

If Lincoln's developing self-confidence was fostered initially by his mother's love and approval, it was later sustained by his stepmother, who came to love him as if he were her own child.... Sarah Bush Lincoln recognized that Abraham was 'a Boy of uncommon natural Talents.' Though uneducated herself, she did all she could to encourage him to read, learn, and grow.<sup>47</sup>

These early relationships gave Lincoln a gift for forging strong relationships. That gift sustained and buoyed him as he and his fellow lawyers eked out a living trying cases throughout Illinois. Sharing rooms, sometimes beds, they spent "long evenings gathered together around a blazing fire... Everywhere [Lincoln] went, he won devoted followers, friendships that later emboldened his quest for office."<sup>48</sup>

This gift for forming strong relationships also served Lincoln well when he became president. Only hours after winning the election, Lincoln set out to assemble support:

... keenly aware of the fractious nature of the youthful Republican Party and the ominous threats from the South, [Lincoln] understood that his country was entering a most perilous time . . . . "I began at once to feel that I needed support," he noted later; "others to share with me the burden." As the exhausted townsfolk

shuffled back to their homes . . . , Lincoln began to compose his official family—the core of his administration. “This was on Wednesday morning,” he revealed, “and before the sun went down, I had made up my cabinet . . . .”<sup>49</sup>

In assembling his support Lincoln didn’t seek people who would offer him blind loyalty. Quite the contrary: he chose his most powerful and most talented rivals. Over the next four years, each of these competitors—all of whom had disparaged him at one time or another—“became colleagues who helped him steer the country through its darkest days.”<sup>50</sup>

Seward was the first to appreciate Lincoln’s remarkable talent, quickly realizing the futility of his plan to relegate the president to a figurehead role. In the months that followed Seward would become Lincoln’s friend and advisor in the administration. Though Bates initially viewed Lincoln as a well-meaning but incompetent administrator, he eventually concluded that the president was an unmatched leader, “very near being a perfect man.” Edwin Stanton, who had treated Lincoln with contempt at their initial acquaintance, developed a great respect for the commander in chief and was unable to control his tears for weeks after the president’s death. Even Chase, whose restless ambition for the presidency was never realized, at last acknowledged that Lincoln had outmaneuvered him.<sup>51</sup>

These men supported Lincoln by loving and challenging him during his darkest days as commander in chief. It was Lincoln’s cabinet that saw the nation through war—not any one man alone, not even Lincoln. Had he not succeeded in making friends of his political enemies, things might have turned out very differently—for Lincoln, for his team, and for the nation. As it was, Lincoln and his team were able to weather the single worst moment in American history and to create out of that moment a lasting peace.

## IMPLICATIONS: CULTIVATING RELATIONAL SENSIBILITIES

Anytime you set out to cultivate sensibilities, you face a chicken-and-egg problem. People can’t develop new sensibilities without engaging in certain activities—like reading people or reframing how they see them—yet they can’t undertake these activities skillfully unless they already have highly developed sensibilities.

Developmental efforts have to start somewhere. Since you can’t start with sensibilities that participants don’t have, you have to start with the activities that will develop them, even if those activities—absent the sensibilities—make participants uncomfortable at first. Such activities include: exposing participants to ideas that challenge their current way of seeing things, giving them tools with which to observe and read people more closely, and offering them guidance on how to conduct frame experiments. Over time, each of these activities enhances the way people perceive, experience, and respond to the world around them.

How much time it takes depends on the context in which these activities take place. The ideal context emphasizes reflection and experimentation (not just action and practice), creates opportunities to fail (not just to succeed), and builds psychologically safe relationships (not purely competitive ones). This type of context allows relational sensibilities to take root quickly, while the activities above accelerate their development.

# With High Hope for the Future, No Prediction in Regard to it is Ventured

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Since Lincoln's time, the world has shrunk, boundaries have collapsed, technologies have advanced, and science has solved many a mystery. Yet people keep struggling to get along and keep fighting when they don't. Despite our best efforts, we haven't made as much progress on the social front. Even today, we keep trying to change everyone else by getting them to do this or that differently. But the problem is more fundamental: it speaks to our relationships and how they both shape and are shaped by what goes on in our hearts and minds.

Lincoln was ahead of his time—and ahead of ours. We still have a lot to learn from his example, especially if we look at the sensibilities that defined his greatness and focus on cultivating them in ourselves and in each other.

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Lincoln was ahead of his time—and ahead of ours. We still have a lot to learn from his example . . .

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My recent efforts to cultivate those sensibilities in a seminar called *Leading through Relationships* give me hope.<sup>52</sup> First sponsored by Merrimac five years ago, the seminar included six up-and-coming young leaders, all of them men, all of them skeptical. “What is this seminar, anyway?” they asked the firm's leadership after being nominated to participate. Then, discovering it was about relationships, they secretly dubbed it, “The Brotherhood of Love,” convinced they were in for a long touchy-feely ride.

The first day of the seminar only confirmed their worst fears. After hearing words like “sensibilities” and learning that they would be reading books like Maya Angelou's autobiography, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, and Joseph Conrad's *The Heart of Darkness*, they knew they were in trouble. Worse, they saw from the syllabus that they had to write up three case stories, describing three relationships in detail: one with a superior, one with a peer, and one with a subordinate. And as if that wasn't bad enough, they saw that they had to discuss them publicly with one another. No, this wasn't their father's Oldsmobile.

Yet by the end of the first year, the group enthusiastically elected to continue, and now, five years later, we still meet monthly. Along the way, the group grew into their tongue-in-cheek “Brotherhood of Love” appellation. The first sign came when, early on, one of the participants noticed that Maya Angelou was coming to town to spend an evening at

Boston's Symphony Hall. Deciding to go, the group bought tickets, and on the night of her appearance, we all piled into our cars, scrunched down into our crowded balcony seats, and soon found ourselves carried away by a voice that rose and fell on the same sensibilities you see in this chapter. The group went in thinking it was a chick evening; they came out inspired.

The next sign came when the group confronted its first conflicts. In the course of mapping their interactions and exploring their differences—some of them quite emotional—they came to see that they'd been turning each other into caricatures, that they were inadvertently encouraging behaviors they didn't like, that what they saw was often what they got, that there's always more going on than meets the eye, and that there are better or worse ways to uncover what lies there. In the course of learning these things, through both their interactions and their case stories, they came to see each other and themselves in a new light.

Over the years, this new perspective made it easier for them to see and bring out the best in each other, to get curious and then courageous enough to satisfy that curiosity, to appreciate what they were each up against and to acknowledge their own shortcomings, to offer hope from a more humble point of view, and to empathize with others' experience while also holding them accountable for their part in creating it.

While I venture no predictions for the future of such work, I do have high hopes. This seminar suggests it's possible to cultivate relational sensibilities. I find that encouraging because, as Yogi Berra said, “The future ain't what it used to be.” More than ever we need to cultivate in ourselves and in our leaders the sensibilities we saw in such abundance in Lincoln.

# Reflections

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“ . . . if civilization is to survive, we must cultivate the science of human relationships—the ability of all peoples, of all kinds, to live together and work together in the same world, at peace.

The only limit to our realization of tomorrow will be our doubts of today. Let us move forward with strong and active faith.

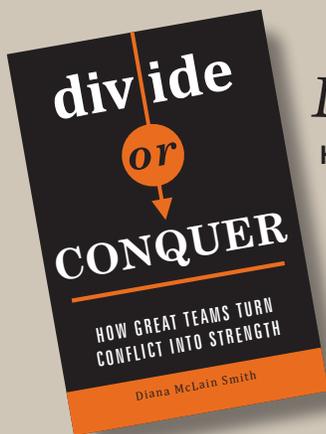
”

*Franklin Delano Roosevelt  
Written the day before his death*

# Endnotes

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1. Welch, Jack: *Straight from the Gut*, xi: "When you write a book like this, you're forced to use the narrative 'I' when it's really the 'we' that counts." King, et al, *A Knock at Midnight*. Goodwin, *Team of Rivals*.
2. I won't argue that these sensibilities and only these sensibilities distinguish leaders who lead through relationships. While my clinical research suggests this is the case for all practical purposes, more research needs to be done to explore if other sensibilities might also matter or matter more.
3. *Oxford American Dictionary* defines the term sensibility as "the ability to appreciate and respond to complex emotional or aesthetic influences; sensitivity." Eliot Eisner, *The Enlightened Eye* develops this notion in much of his work as does his student and my friend, Hilary Austen Johnson in *Artistry in Practice* and "Artistry for the Strategist." The two of them have influenced my own thinking here about the limits to theory and technique when aiming to develop the artistry of any practice.
4. Goodwin, *Team of Rivals*, xvii.
5. White, *Lincoln's Greatest Speech*, 23.
6. *Ibid.*, 48.
7. *Ibid.*, 59.
8. Compare Goodwin's observations in *Team of Rivals*, xvii.
9. White, 179.
10. James MacGregor Burns makes a similar point in his classic book *Leadership*, when he distinguishes between two types of leadership (transactional versus transformative) based on the quality of the relationship that leaders form with their followers. In Burns's more recent book, *Transforming Leadership*, he builds on his earlier idea to argue, as I do, that transformative leaders become dynamic agents of social change.
11. Lincoln's handwritten copy of the address, included in White's book along with a typed version, includes various errors identified in the text with [sic]. For ease of reading, I have corrected those errors.
12. Lincoln is a good example of what Jim Collins calls a Level 5 leader—someone who "builds enduring greatness through a paradoxical blend of personal humility and professional will." I believe it was Lincoln's highly developed sensibilities that allowed him to function at such a high level, even under stress. See Collins, *Good to Great*, 17–40.
13. I am indebted to White's account of Lincoln's Second Inaugural Address, which greatly influenced the thoughts that follow.
14. White, 143. Expressed in a letter to Eliza P. Gurney, a Quaker minister from Philadelphia.
15. *Ibid.*, 145.
16. *Ibid.*
17. My italics.
18. White, 159.
19. *Ibid.*, 150.
20. I considered including humor as one of the sensibilities, especially since Lincoln's humorous stories helped him greatly when his many losses threatened to strangle hope. But in the end, I came to believe that his humorous stories were not so much a sensibility as the vehicle through which he developed them. As I later argue, it is through these stories that Lincoln was able to create meaning and strengthen relationships—two of three conditions that need to be in place for relational sensibilities to grow.
21. White, 142.
22. *Ibid.*, 168.
23. The term *appreciation* can mean either: (1) the recognition and enjoyment of the good qualities of someone or something, or (2) a full and sensitive understanding of someone or some situation. In the world of organizational behavior, Cooperrider and his colleagues use the term in the first sense. They argue against what they call a problem-oriented view of the world because it undermines the innovative and inspirational stance required to challenge existing social orders and to create new ones: "The action-researcher is drawn to affirm, and thereby, illuminate the factors and forces involved in organizing that serve to nourish the human spirit." See Ludema, Cooperrider, and Barrett, "Appreciative Inquiry," 189. I emphasize the second meaning of the term in order to make a different point: you can't challenge or fundamentally alter the underlying structure of any social behavior or situation unless you have a highly sensitive understanding of the experiences and circumstances that led people to create that structure.
24. White, 86. This awareness came from a steady stream of correspondence and countless meetings in which he listened to what people said of the war, its causes and its effects.
25. *Ibid.*, 168.
26. *Ibid.*, 102.
27. *Ibid.* From the moment Lincoln spoke the words "The Almighty has his own purposes" until the moment he finished, the only sound the crowd could hear was a steady chorus of "Bless de Lord." According to abolitionist Frederick Douglass: "The whole proceeding was wonderfully quiet, earnest, and solemn. ... There was a leaden stillness about the crowd. ... The address sounded more like a sermon than a state paper." The quotes are from Royster, *The Destructive War*; cited by White, 78–79.
28. *Ibid.*
29. Whereas the South saw the North destroying states' rights, the North saw the South destroying human rights.
30. White, p. 86.
31. *Ibid.*, 182.
32. *Ibid.*, 145.
33. White, 170.
34. *Ibid.* 164–165.
35. *Ibid.*, 184.
36. Goodwin, 47–53
37. *Ibid.*, 49.
38. *Ibid.*, 173–175.
39. "Conversation" in *Harvard Business Review*, June 2007, 28.
40. Goodwin, 51.
41. *Ibid.*, 52.
42. *Ibid.*, 167.
43. *Ibid.*, 167–168.
44. *Ibid.*, 103.
45. *Ibid.*, 280–281.
46. Including advice offered by Daniel Goleman in his groundbreaking book *Emotional Intelligence*. Building on current thinking about how to offer feedback, he recommends that people say things like, "When you forgot to pick up my clothes at the cleaners, it made me feel like you don't care for me." As Goleman points out, statements like these are a big improvement over: "You're always so selfish and uncaring. It just proves I can't trust you to do anything right." But they can still feel like an veiled accusation to the person on the receiving end (you're responsible for making feel this way), and they can prevent the person feeling uncared for from seeing his or her part in creating that effect (perhaps they have been asking the other person to do so much that he or she is overwhelmed and forgot).
47. Goodwin, 49.
48. *Ibid.*, 8.
49. *Ibid.*, 280.
50. *Ibid.*, xvi.
51. *Ibid.*, xvi–xvii.
52. I created this seminar as part of my clinical research to see if it was possible to cultivate new sensibilities in adults. For the past five years, that seminar has served as a learning laboratory. In subsequent writings, I will use this research to illustrate in greater detail how to cultivate relational sensibilities and how to design activities and contexts to accelerate that development. Clearly we need to figure out how to do this more quickly and more broadly than I did. But it is a start and hopefully an informative one.



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