

# LINCOLN LORE

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## SYMPATHY—LINCOLN'S COMPASSION FOR THE BEREAVED

Three letters of condolence which Abraham Lincoln wrote after he became President of the United States reveal his genuine compassion for the bereaved. It is doubtful if there exists in the literature of any people a trilogy revealing sympathy, composed by one hand, comparable to the letters written by Lincoln to Fanny McCullough, the parents of Col. Ellsworth, and the Widow Bixby.

### *Letter to Bereaved Parents Upon Death of a Son*

E. Elmer Ellsworth, twenty-four years of age, was the outstanding drill master of the country. Upon Lincoln's first call for volunteers, Ellsworth immediately went to New York and organized a regiment recruited from the members of the fire department of the city. It was known as the First Zouaves.

While Ellsworth and three companions were capturing a Confederate flag which was flying from the Marshall House in Alexandria, Ellsworth was shot by the proprietor of the hotel. His body was taken to the East Room of the Executive Mansion where it lay in state. It was this casualty which caused Lincoln to write his now famous letter of sympathy to Ellsworth's parents.

Washington, D. C., May 25, 1861.

To the Father and Mother of Col.

Elmer E. Ellsworth:

My dear Sir and Madam,

In the untimely loss of your noble son, our affliction here, is scarcely less than your own—So much of promised usefulness to one's country, and of bright hope, for one's self and friends, have rarely been so suddenly dashed, as in his fall. In size, in years, and in youthful appearance, a boy only, his power to command men, was surpassingly great—This power combined with a fine intellect, an indomitable energy, and a taste altogether military, constituted in him, as seemed to me, the best natural talent, in that department, I ever knew. And yet he was singularly modest and deferential in social intercourse—My acquaintance with him began less than two years ago; yet through the latter half of the intervening period, it was as intimate as the disparity of our ages, and my engrossing engagements, would permit—To me, he appeared to have no indulgences or pastimes; and I never heard him utter a profane, or an intemperate word—What was conclusive of his good heart, he never forgot his parents—The honors he labored for so laudably, and, in the sad end, so gallantly gave his life, he meant for them, no less than for himself.

In the hope that it may be no intrusion upon the sacredness of your sorrow, I have ventured to address you this tribute to the memory of my young friend, and your brave and early fallen child.

May God give you that consolation which is beyond all earthly power—

Sincerely your friend  
in a common affliction—

A. Lincoln.

### *Letter to a Young Lady upon the Death of Her Father*

When the Civil War broke out, William McCullough, who was exempt from service because of the loss of an arm and defective eyesight, obtained permission from President Lincoln to be mustered into the Fourth Illinois Cavalry. He was made a lieutenant colonel and took part in several important engagements.

He is described as "a superb horseman of martial appearance, with a full resonant voice, white hair and beard, a natural leader of men, a courage that feared

no one." It was McCullough's courage which finally cost him his life. Refusing to surrender to a superior force near Coffeeville, Mississippi, he was killed on December 5, 1862.

Lincoln learned that one of McCullough's daughters, Fanny, whom he had known during the circuit riding days, was greatly upset by her father's death and refused to be reconciled to it. This was the occasion for the following letter which she received from Abraham Lincoln:

EXECUTIVE MANSION

Washington, December 23, 1862.

Dear Fanny:

It is with deep regret that I learn of the death of your kind and brave Father; and, especially, that it is affecting your young heart beyond what is common in such cases. In this sad world of ours, sorrow comes to all; and, to the young, it comes with bittered agony, because it takes them unawares. The older have learned ever to expect it. I am anxious to afford some alleviation of your present distress. Perfect relief is not possible, except with time. You cannot now realize that you will ever feel better. Is not this so? And yet it is a mistake. You are sure to be happy again. To know this, which is certainly true, will make you some less miserable now. I have had experience enough to know what I say; and you need only to believe it, to feel better at once. The memory of your dear Father, instead of an agony, will yet be a sad sweet feeling in your heart, of a purer, and holier sort than you have known before.

Please present my kind regards to your afflicted mother.

Your sincere friend,

A Lincoln.

Miss Fanny McCullough.

### *Letter to Widow on Loss of Sons*

In the Fall of 1864 Governor Andrews of Massachusetts had occasion to correspond with the War Department and mentioned that Lydia Bixby, a widow, had sent five sons to the war, all of whom had been killed. He said he wished a letter might be written by the President to this widow.

The letter was written by the President and forwarded to General Schouler at Boston, who delivered it to Mrs. Bixby on Thanksgiving morning, 1864. The letter, which has become the best known of all of Lincoln's correspondence, follows:

EXECUTIVE MANSION

Washington, Nov. 21, 1864.

To Mrs. Bixby, Boston, Mass.

Dear Madam:

I have been shown in the files of the War Department a statement of the Adjutant General of Massachusetts that you are the mother of five sons who have died gloriously on the field of battle. I feel how weak and fruitless must be any word of mine which should attempt to beguile you from the grief of a loss so overwhelming. But I cannot refrain from tendering you the consolation that may be found in the thanks of the republic they died to save. I pray that our Heavenly Father may assuage the anguish of your bereavement, and leave you only the cherished memory of the loved and lost, and the solemn pride that must be yours to have laid so costly a sacrifice upon the altar of freedom.

Yours very sincerely and respectfully,

A Lincoln.