

WHAT SO ★ PROUDLY ★ WE HAIL

The American Soul in Story, Speech, and Song

Letter to Fanny McCullough

ABRAHAM LINCOLN

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Less well known than his letter to Mrs. Bixby, a grieving mother, is this painfully beautiful letter of condolence that President Abraham Lincoln (1809–65) wrote to a teenage girl, Fanny McCullough, the daughter of an old friend from Illinois who had been killed in action. The letter, written in his own hand, was composed a week before Lincoln issued the Emancipation Proclamation for which he was still struggling to gain political support, and ten days after the disastrous battle of Fredericksburg. The letter thus speaks volumes about the heart of its author, as well about the heart of its intended recipient.

Why is death of a father (or mother) especially difficult for a young person? Has Lincoln spoken well to Fanny's grief? How exactly does he try to console her? What does he mean by saying that "the memory of your dear Father . . . will yet be a sad sweet feeling in your heart, of a purer and holier sort than you have known before"? Imagining yourself in Fanny's place, how would you have reacted to this letter and this prophecy?

Executive Mansion, Washington, December 23, 1862.

Dear Fanny

It is with deep grief 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 bitterest agony, because it takes them unawares. The older have learned to ever expect it. I am anxious to afford some alleviation of your present distress. Perfect relief is not possible, except with time. You can not 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.

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Your sincere friend

A. Lincoln

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