

BOOK RECOMMENDATIONS

Lata K. McGinn, PhD — Section Editor

Lincoln's Melancholy: How depression challenged a president and fueled his greatness

Joshua Wolf Shenk

Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2005

350 pages

**Reviewer: Jeremy D. Safran, PhD
Psychology Department
New School for Social Research**

 Abraham Lincoln, the sixteenth president of the United States experienced at least two clear-cut episodes of major depression, and struggled with chronic depression throughout his life. In his remarkable biography, *Lincoln's Melancholy*, Joshua Wolf Shenk carefully documents Lincoln's struggle with ongoing depression and the role it played in helping him to develop internal resources that he was able to harness to become one of the greatest American presidents. Shenk's book is at once a fascinating biography of a great man, a critique of the medicalization of psychology, an astute analysis of the interplay between culture and psychology, and a meditation on the meaning of human suffering.

Although Lincoln does not appear to have been depressed in his late teens, his friends and neighbors first became concerned about him in his early twenties, when his dedication to studying law developed into an obsessional drive, leading to a deterioration of his physical and mental health. At the age of 26, the death of his young friend Anna Mayes Rutledge appears to have precipitated a full blown major depressive episode. During this period Lincoln spent days wandering around by himself in the woods with a gun, and often spoke about suicide. His friends were deeply concerned about his welfare. Lincoln's second episode of major depression took place at the age of 31, and appears to have been related to a number of factors including problems in his political career, a fear that moral obligation would force him to marry a woman he didn't love (Mary Todd, who later became his wife), and the prospect that his best friend was either going to marry the woman Lincoln really did love, or move to another state.

Although Lincoln ultimately recovered from this episode, he continued to struggle with chronic depression and deep periods of despair throughout

his life, his presidency, as well as the Civil War. Shenk convincingly argues that this struggle taught Lincoln to tolerate the pain and disappointment of life, to face life's hardships and adversities with perseverance and without self-deception, and to develop a deep sense of clarity and resolution about what life is worth living for. Shenk documents the way in which Lincoln consciously shifted his goal away from personal contentment (which he realized he could never gain) to a concern with universal justice. Although it is customary for contemporary biographers to deemphasize the role of depression in Lincoln's life, and to emphasize his stoicism, ethical virtue, humor and political skill, Lincoln's struggle with depression was widely accepted by students of his life in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. According to Shenk, serious historians began to dismiss the evidence of Lincoln's depression in the 1950's and 60's, as cultural attitudes towards depression began to change. Shenk links this attitudinal shift to the development of a modern understanding of depression that conceptualizes it exclusively as an illness to be treated rather than as an organic part of the individual's way of being in the world. This shift in turn is associated with emphasis on personal happiness as an end in and of itself. Shenk argues, that although even in Lincoln's day, many thought of depression as "unmanly", there was also a cultural emphasis on depression (or what was termed melancholy), as a potentially valuable aspect of a man's life. According to Shenk, melancholia could signify "an existential unrest, a gloomy or morbid state that lurked in the background of one's life, but also a connection to insight and a drive for heroic action."

Shenk does not fall into the trap of romanticizing depression or of conceptualizing it in simplistic terms as an exclusively psychological phenomenon. He clearly documents the familial and probable genetic sources of Lincoln's depression as well as the psychological and environmental influences. What Shenk does provide us with, however, is a scholarly and compelling argument for the importance of conceptualizing human beings in holistic terms, and of continuing to remember the inseparability of psychological, moral and political discourse, at a time when various forces in our culture such as consumerism, instrumentalism and "quick fix" attitudes make this difficult. ■■

