

## Leadership on Mr. Lincoln's Prairie

*Chancellor Thomas Johnson speech, November 3, 2012*

Remarks given during the 38th Annual Student Laureate Convocation of the Lincoln Academy of Illinois  
held in the Old State Capitol Historic Site in Springfield, Illinois,

Three stories.  
Three remarkable people.  
Three lessons in leadership.  
Right here in Illinois.  
Right here on Mr. Lincoln's prairie.

Jane Addams -- a college student from Cedarville, Illinois -- the little town near Freeport -- was deciding what to say to her college classmates -- as their valedictorian. As a new student 3 1/2 years earlier, she had been nervous about speaking in public. But now, 3 1/2 years later, her self-confidence had grown. She had even competed in the Intercollegiate Oratory Competition at Knox College -- the only woman in the competition.

Of course, she was unhappy with her 5th place medal.  
But so was the young man from Illinois College in Jacksonville who had finished second.  
His name was William Jennings Bryan.

As President of her Junior Class, she convinced her classmates to call themselves "Bread Givers" -- to reach out to their neighbors in need.

And, in her graduation address -- 130 years ago -- at what is now Rockford College -- she told her classmates that they, too, might assume influence in the world -- "*auctoritas*"; she called it -- the term used by the ancients to describe the moral stature which has characterized leaders through history. And if "*auctoritas*" comes, she promised her classmates, it would probably not be the result of a single heroic act -- but rather by what she called "quiet, progressive development" . . . day after day . . . in the ordinary affairs of life.

Following graduation, Jane Addams did what prosperous college graduates did in those days -- she continued her education by traveling in Europe -- "The Grand Tour" -- some called it. On her second such trip she was joined by her college friend, Ellen Gates Starr. They visited castles and museums and cathedrals -- just like all the other proper young ladies from America. And then -- unlike the other proper young ladies -- they visited Whitechapel -- the London slums -- where the poorest of the poor barely survived . . . the same neighborhood where Jack The Ripper butchered seven young women at about the time they were there. They spent most of their time at Toynbee Hall -- a settlement house where Oxford undergraduates brought a measure of hope and culture to the women and men of Whitechapel. When they returned to Illinois, they began to search for a site for a similar facility -- finally renting for a dollar a year the second and third floors of a run-down old mansion that had been built in Chicago 40 years earlier by Charles Hull. And so in September of 1889, Hull House was founded. It would be Jane Addams' home until her death 44 years later.

During her nearly half century at Hull House, Jane Addams reached out to the immigrants of Chicago -- teaching them -- giving them hope and dignity -- and over time, becoming an advocate for their needs -- quietly -- but persistently -- day after day.

She supported:

- racial equality

- women's rights
- sweatshop reform
- a worker's right to organize
- and non-violence at home and abroad (what Lincoln called "peace among ourselves and with all nations").

Long before anyone talked about diversity --in a time of widespread discrimination and bigotry of all kinds --without regard for her reputation or personal safety -- she opened the doors of the Hull House to anyone in need -- regardless of

- the color of their skin
- or the sex they were born to
- or the vowels in their name
- or a disability of birth
- or the language in which their grandfathers prayed.

Perhaps remembering what she had told her classmates as their valedictorian, she didn't wait around for precisely the right opportunity to do something truly great --but rather confronted challenges and opportunities as they came -- one at a time --day after day. The work was hard. The progress was slow. For years the failures outnumbered the successes. But finally in small -- almost unnoticed ways -- they began to move forward -overcoming setbacks -- confronting the bureaucrats in City Hall -- and building a record over 46 years of service to Chicago and to the nation -- establishing:

- the first social settlement in the United States
- the first citizenship preparation classes in the United States
- the first little theater in the United States
- the first public playground in Chicago
- the first public swimming pool in Chicago
- the first free art exhibits in Chicago
- the first Boy Scout troop in Chicago
- the first college extension courses in Chicago

An ordinary person --just like you --from a small town and a humble background -- just like you -- with doubts about herself and her future -- just like you -- right here in Illinois -- right here on Mr. Lincoln's prairie.

Lincoln played an important part in the life of Jane Addams. Her father had known him while serving in the Illinois legislature. She never forgot the day when she returned home to find her father in tears. Lincoln had been assassinated. She said later it was the first time she became aware that grown-ups could cry.

During times of crises, she would walk six miles through the summer heat from Hull House to the new Lincoln Park where Saint Gauden's magnificent statue of Lincoln had just been erected -- to seek inspiration and renewal. Etched into the stone wall at the base of the statue were words from Lincoln's Second Inaugural which gave meaning to her life -- and to ours: "With malice toward none," Lincoln said, "with charity for all."

Over the years, she attained -- by "quiet, progressive development" the moral authority -- the "*auctoritas*" about which she had spoken at her college graduation.

When she died in 1935, over 50,000 people passed through Hull House to pay her tribute. Walter Lippman characterized her life as "the mystic promise of American democracy".

She had never been elected to public office. The closest she came was being appointed as a garbage commissioner. She would scrupulously walk the streets of Chicago early in the morning -- checking up on the garbage collectors -- making sure they were doing their job.

A year or so after her death one of her admirers the American poet, Langston Hughes, was commissioned to write a poem about the immigrants she had served.

At your age, Langston Hughes was a student at Columbia University. Going to college had always been his dream -- but he never thought he'd make it. Abandoned -- first by his father and then by his mother -- he was shipped off to Lincoln, Illinois, to be raised by his eighty year old grandmother -- amid almost Dickensian poverty. But like all Dickens stories, a hero came to the rescue. Her name was Miss Ethel Welch, his high school English teacher. She taught him how to write poetry --and she also taught him about Abraham Lincoln.

In Washington, D.C., Lincoln towers far above us in a marble temple. At Mount Rushmore, we have chiseled his face into the side of a mountain. There is a danger when we enshrine our heroes -- when we lift them onto pedestals. But there was less chance of that in Lincoln, Illinois --particularly in the classroom presided over by the magisterial presence of Miss Ethel Welch.

No one got out of her class -- at Lincoln High School -- in Lincoln, Illinois -including the young man named Langston Hughes -- without learning the true story of Mr. Lincoln -- not just the legend -- including the setbacks and the tragedies in his life:

- He failed in business in 1831, she told him.
- He was defeated for the Legislature in 1832, she told him.
- He failed in business again in 1833.
- Suffered a nervous breakdown in 1836.
- Was defeated for Congress in 1843.
- Defeated for Congress again in 1848.
- Defeated for the Senate in 1855.
- Defeated for Vice President in 1856.
- Defeated for the Senate again in 1858.
- And elected President of the United States in 1860.

Langston Hughes learned the lesson of Lincoln -- his perseverance -- how he never gave up -- from a master teacher in Lincoln, Illinois, Miss Ethel Welch.

She also encouraged him to write poetry.

And years later -- after the death of Jane Addams -- he was commissioned by Lester Granger, Executive Secretary of the National Urban League to write a poem about the immigrants she served --particularly the black immigrants -- and those who came before them as slaves.

How they came here in search for freedom and a better life.  
How they helped build a better nation . . . together.  
How they fought poverty and prejudice . . . together.

Langston Hughes knew exactly what he meant. He had grown up in poverty --in a broken home --"a child at risk" we'd call him now. His skin happened to be black, but the term "African-American" had not yet been invented. The names he was called were much more hateful and bigoted. He happened to be attracted to his own sex, but the term "gay" had not yet been invented. The names he was called were much more mean-spirited and cruel.

While at college, he woke up one night to find a cross burning in front of his dormitory. He was the only black student living there.

"Write a poem," Lester Granger said, "about the immigrants Jane Addams served."

Tempting though it may have been for him to respond to the hatred and the cruelty and the bigotry he had faced, he remembered what Jane Addams had done. He remembered what Miss Ethel Welch had taught him. And the words he wrote were words of brotherhood and unity. He called his poem "Freedom's Plow".

*When a man starts out with nothing,  
When a man starts out with his hands  
Empty, but clean,  
When a man starts out to build a world,  
He starts first with himself  
And the faith that it is in his heart –  
The strength there,  
The will there to build.  
First in the heart is the dream.  
Then the mind starts seeking a way . . .  
The hand seeks tools to cut the wood,  
To till the soil, and harness the power of the waters.  
Then the hand seeks other hands to help,  
A community of hands to help . . .  
Heart reaching out to heart,  
Hand reaching out to hand,  
They began to build our land.  
Down into the earth went the plow . . .  
Turning the rich soil went the plow in many hands . . .  
White hands and black hands  
Held the plow handles,  
Ax handles, hammer handles,  
Launched the boats and whipped the horses  
That fed and housed and moved America . . . They made up a  
song:*

**KEEP YOUR HAND ON THE PLOW!  
HOLD ON . . .**

*That plow plowed a new furrow  
Across the field of history.  
Into that furrow the freedom seed was dropped.  
From that seed a tree grew, is growing, will ever grow.  
That tree is for everybody,  
For all America, for all the world.  
May its branches spread and its shelter grow  
Until all races and all peoples know its shade.*

**KEEP YOUR HAND ON THE PLOW!  
HOLD ON!**

Sometimes we learn the lessons of leadership from unexpected teachers and in unexpected places . . . which brings me to the third and final story.

The people who were there will never forget the important lesson they learned that day. It was in Bloomington, Illinois, at the Special Olympics. There were nine contestants for the 100 yard dash. All nine of them assembled at the starting line, and at the sound of the gun, they took off. But one little boy didn't get very far. He stumbled and fell and hurt his knee and began to cry. The other eight children heard the boy crying. They slowed down. They turned around. They ran back to him. Every one of them ran back to him. One little girl with Down Syndrome bent down and kissed the boy. "This will make it better," she said. The little boy got up. And he and the rest of the runners linked their arms together -- and finished the race together -- and joyfully crossed the finish line together, and when they did, everyone in the stadium stood up and clapped and cheered -- amid tears of joy -- because deep down they knew that what matters in life is more than winning for ourselves -- what really matters is helping others win, too -- even if it means slowing down now and then -- even if it means changing direction now and then.

For Jane Addams -- that simple truth became the measure of her stature -- of her role in our history as a people -- helping others move forward -- responding to what Lincoln called "the better angels of our nature".

On December 10, 1931, Jane Addams of Cedarville, Illinois, was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize -- the first American woman to be so honored.

She shared the prize that year with Nicholas Murray Butler, the President of Columbia University. Everyone knew why he won it --for establishing the Carnegie Endowment for World Peace -- but in the case of Jane Addams, there was no specific act -- no particular achievement cited as grounds for the award.

Professor Frederick Strang, Chairman of the Selection Committee said:

*In her quiet, kind-hearted way . . . little by little . . . day after day . . . she became the first woman of the land . . . nearly its first citizen . . . because she never surrendered her faithfulness to the less fortunate . . .*

Tempting though it may have been to wait to perform virtuously at some important moment, for Jane Addams, as for most of you --the test of character --the opportunities for leadership -- will come in the ordinary circumstances of living -- where the tests are daily -- and the results inexorable in their accumulation.

We always asked our college speech professor how many points a good speech should have.

And she always answered, "At least one."

And so, here's mine: A state that could produce

Public servants like Jane Addams  
Poets like Langston Hughes  
Architects like Frank Lloyd Wright  
Lawyers like Clarence Darrow  
Authors like Carl Sandburg and

• Statesmen like Abraham Lincoln will surely provide greatness from your generation as well -- perhaps even from this company.

They're gone of course -- those great sons and daughters of the Land of Lincoln-

But through your generation  
Their "work goes on"  
Their "cause endures"  
Their "spirit lives"  
And "their dream will never die".

That very noble dream of

--Of a shy, young girl from Cedarville, Illinois, who broke bread for the hungry -- and looked after the garbage on the streets of Chicago -- and changed the face of the nation.

And that young man from Lincoln, Illinois, who taught us about tolerance and brotherhood -- but most of all about perseverance -- about never giving up -- the way Lincoln never gave up.

"Keep your Hand on the Plow," he said. "Hold on," he said. "Hold on."

*Remarks given during the 38th Annual Student Laureate Convocation of the Lincoln Academy of Illinois held in the Old State Capitol Historic Site in Springfield, Illinois, on November 3, 2012, by Thomas S. Johnson, Chancellor of the Lincoln Academy. Mr. Johnson graduated from Rockford College and Harvard Law School and practices law in Rockford, Illinois. He is a director of the Abraham Lincoln Association, the nation's oldest and largest organization devoted to documenting, preserving, and celebrating America's Lincoln heritage.*