

Abraham Lincoln – Letter to Fanny McCullough – Primary Source Text

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.

Your sincere friend,
A. Lincoln.

Questions:

1. What does Abraham Lincoln mean when he writes, “I am anxious to afford some alleviation of your present distress”?
2. According to Lincoln, what will eventually cure Fanny’s sadness?
3. Why does Lincoln suggest that the death of a loved one is hardest on the young?
4. Do you think Lincoln’s letter made Fanny feel better? Why or why not?

Answers:

1. This means that Lincoln is eager to make her feel better.
2. Time
3. Because young people don't expect or think about death; when it happens it comes suddenly and unexpectedly.
4. Answers will vary. Perhaps a letter from someone as important and famous as Abraham Lincoln would help her feel better, especially because he writes from the heart and relates to her directly. On the other hand, perhaps something as insignificant as a letter from a stranger (albeit a famous stranger) can make someone feel better after they've just learned of the death of their father.