

Damaged Greatness

May 29, 2020

Over ten years ago I started reading almost nothing but biographies of great leaders. I was fascinated by their stories and wanted to know more. I started with Winston Churchill then Martin Luther King Jr., the Marquis de Lafayette and then “Team of Rivals,” the fabulous book about Abraham Lincoln. These men, these great leaders, are fascinating, and I’ve enjoyed reading each of their stories. They inspired me to read more and I turned my focus to biographies of US Presidents.

They all have one thing in common.

Abraham Lincoln grew up the poorest of the poor. He failed at early businesses. Two of his sons died in their teens. His wife was unstable at best. He suffered from migraines and extreme loneliness and was often seen walking alone with his thoughts.

Ulysses S Grant was an alcoholic, and a terrible judge of friends – an array of whom betrayed him throughout his life. The last one stole most of his money leaving him almost penniless just before he died.

Teddy Roosevelt was a weak asthmatic child who almost died before he was ten years old. He lost his first wife (during childbirth), and his mother – on the same day. He then handed his newborn daughter to his unattractive sister to take care of and ran away to the badlands.

Herbert Hoover was orphaned at seven years old. He was passed from family member to family member until he landed in Washington State where he was housed, but not loved. He was a terrible father, an ogre to work for and sketchy in his business dealings. He made a fortune in mining, then his business partner committed suicide and Hoover was left to pick up the pieces.

Franklin Roosevelt was a mama’s boy who had few friends growing up. He developed polio and couldn’t walk.

Harry Truman was almost blind. He was a failure at his early jobs, and every business he ever tried before he entered politics.

Dwight Eisenhower was a desk jockey at the Pentagon and was relegated to

training tank commanders. He was so discouraged he was ready to quit the military. His command of the Africa campaign was a failure.

John Kennedy suffered from excruciating back pain and was on strong pain killers most of his life.

Ronald Reagan was a “B” actor. He was divorced and emotionally distant from his family, which remained dysfunctional.

They all had one thing in common. **Every great leader suffered.** That’s the common thread. Hardship. Suffering. Pain.

But Lincoln stood in the abyss and led the country through its darkest days.

Grant won the Civil War and led the country through reconstruction.

Teddy Roosevelt brought America into the Twentieth century and made us compassionate as a nation.

Hoover single handedly saved the nation of Belgium during WWI and created some of America’s greatest infrastructure projects.

FDR led America, and the world through a world war.

Ike led the allied troops to victory and then led America in peace; which may have been harder than leading in war.

Truman ended World War II.

JFK stood up to the Russians in Cuba.

Reagan ended the Cold War.

As I read the biographies of great leaders, I was stuck by the overwhelming conclusion that great leadership always carries with it great pain. Damage. Hurt. Suffering. Those are the training grounds for great leadership.

Some suffer physically as both Roosevelts, Kennedy and Lincoln did. Some suffer emotionally as Grant, Hoover, Reagan and FDR did. Almost all experience great failure at some point in life.

What should leaders take from the biographies of other great leaders?

The theologian A.W. Tozier said, *“It is doubtful if God can use a man greatly unless He has hurt him deeply.”* That’s tough; but probably true.

When you look back at the great leaders, the ones that have risen to great challenges and stepped into the place where loneliness is the only comfort, you see people who have been hurt deeply.

But it is not the hurt or pain or suffering that defines great leaders; it is what they do with it that becomes their legacy. These great leaders, each in their own way, embraced their pain and inspired others to follow them. Most importantly, they inspired other leaders to follow them.

Lincoln turned his personal pain into his compassion for others, especially slaves.

Grant turned his weakness of trusting people into his ability to command great love from his followers and inspire other great leaders.

TR turned his own physical frailty into a work ethic that drove him to accomplish more than anyone and instill in America the core values of hard work and compassion as coexisting motives for a great nation.

Hoover turned his lifelong abandonment into a driven nature willing to take on huge projects that saved millions of people.

FDR turned his rejection by peers and his physical pain into a toughness in war, and a compassion for others who suffer.

Truman turned his business failures into relentlessly holding big businesses accountable for profiting from the war.

Ike turned his perceived mediocrity into the ability to get incredibly strong personalities – Churchill, Montgomery and Patton - to work together and to follow him.

Kennedy drew from his physical pain to have the courage to stand up to the Russians.

Reagan turned his personal rejections into fighting for others who had been rejected.

The greatest sermon I've ever heard was by Bruce W. Thielman. One of my favorite quotes from that sermon is, "*Out of the pain comes the beauty and the blessing.*" Each of the men listed above were very comfortable in their own skin. They had known great pain and they knew who they were. They knew where they came from and they knew what it was to be themselves. Out of their pain came the beauty and the blessing.

The single most important key to being a great leader is Emotional Intelligence. It is knowing who you are – your strengths and weaknesses – and leveraging both to the benefit of others.

What are the failures that make you the person you are today?

What have you done with the hardships in your life?

How has your history formed your present?

We are all a product of our past. We have all processed one way or another the pain, hardship and struggles of our past.

How does your past form your present and shape your future?

How have you leveraged who you are to be the leader you must be?

Know Who You Are And Be It!