

A Bigger Impact
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(1 Corinthians 9:24–27 NRSV) Do you not know that in a race the runners all compete, but only one receives the prize? Run in such a way that you may win it. {25} Athletes exercise self-control in all things; they do it to receive a perishable wreath, but we an imperishable one. {26} So I do not run aimlessly, nor do I box as though beating the air; {27} but I punish my body and enslave it, so that after proclaiming to others I myself should not be disqualified.

February 12, 1809, 200 years ago last Thursday, in a small log cabin in rural northern Kentucky Abraham Lincoln was born. Without a doubt, Abraham Lincoln is one of the most --- if not the most influential people of the modern era.

Certainly no president of these United State of America has such a hold on our minds.

More books are written about Abraham Lincoln than any other president. Lincoln lived at the dawn of photography --- and his pictures always have a haunted look to them. Some of his words will forever be in our lexicon.

His 1858 campaign speech, as he was seeking the Senate seat that was being held by Stephen A. Douglas is one such moment, even though most people believe that it was a much later speech. Lincoln quoted the gospels when he said ---

"A house divided against itself cannot stand." I believe this government cannot endure, permanently, half slave and half free. I do not expect the Union to be dissolved — I do not expect the house to fall — but I do expect it will cease to be divided.

It will become all one thing or all the other. Either the opponents of slavery will arrest the further spread of it, and place it where the public mind shall rest in the belief that it is in the course of ultimate extinction; or its advocates will push it forward, till it shall become alike lawful in all the States, old as well as new — North as well as South.

And how can any of us forget his Gettysburg address?

Fourscore and seven years ago our fathers brought forth on this continent a new nation, conceived in liberty, and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal.

Now we are engaged in a great civil war, testing whether that nation, or any nation so conceived and so dedicated, can long endure. We are met on a great battle-field of that war. We have come to dedicate a portion of that field as a final resting-place for those who here gave their lives that this nation might live. It is altogether fitting and proper that we should do this.

But, in a larger sense, we cannot dedicate...we cannot consecrate...we cannot hallow...this ground. The brave men, living and dead, who struggled here, have consecrated it far above our poor power to add or detract. The world will little note nor long remember what we say here, but it can never forget what they did here. It is for us, the living, rather, to be dedicated here to the unfinished work which they who fought here have thus far so nobly advanced. It is rather for us to be here dedicated to the great task remaining before us...that from these honored dead we take increased devotion to that cause for which they gave the last full measure of devotion; that we here highly resolve that these dead shall not have died in vain; that this nation, under God, shall have a new birth of freedom; and that government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth.

Or the Second Inaugural address:

With malice toward none; with charity for all; with firmness in the right, as God gives us to see the right, let us strive on to finish the work we are in; to bind up the nation's wounds; to care for him who shall have borne the battle, and for his widow, and his orphan - to do all which may achieve and cherish a just and lasting peace, among ourselves, and with all nations.

Lincoln changed the nation --- and ultimately changed the world.

We are here today as a part of the United States of America because of Lincoln's unswerving, uncompromising belief that the founders really believed that all men are created equal.

Fredrick Douglas who would fuss and fight with Lincoln over the years says that Lincoln was the only person who did not judge him because he was black. An amazing complement, from a man who spent a great deal of time with the main abolitionists of his day.

My hunch is that most of us would have very little problem in saying that Lincoln was one of the greatest men who ever lived.

But there is a fascinating coincidence to this story. Someone else was also born on February 12, 1809. He however has not gotten nearly as much press as his 200th birthday came and went last Thursday.

He was born in Shrewsbury, England, unlike Lincoln, to a rather affluent family. And what he is best known for is a voyage he took on a ship called the Beagle.

If you are not sure who I am talking about --- it is, of course, Charles Darwin, father of modern biology with his theory of evolution.

Adam Gopnik in his new book: "Angels and Ages" argues that Lincoln and Darwin helped shape "our moral modernity." Both opposed slavery and helped change our attitudes toward science and democracy. They were honest, fascinating men who worried their wives by doubting religion and faced harsh public criticism for their intellectual positions.

The parallels in their lives are amazing. Both lost their mothers as boys --- butted heads with their fathers --- and became adoring parents. The both grieved at the loss of children. Both were driven in a way that most people cannot comprehend or understand.

Darwin is, of course, embroiled in one of the major debates between progressive Christianity and conservative/fundamental Christianity.

That is the debate between Darwin's theory of "natural selection" or what we call Evolution and Creationism (or how it is often disguised today as Intelligent Design).

Darwin created the question in many people's minds - Can religion and science exist side by side - or are their mutually exclusive of one another.

In a nutshell, Evolution is the process of change that takes place in all forms of life over generations. This happens through a process that Darwin called natural selection, and the idea is that traits that are helpful to the survival of a life form are more likely to be passed on to the next generation, than traits that

are harmful to the survival of the life form. Thus over time, we evolve or change.

This way of seeing the world was radical. For many people it challenged their literal understanding of the bible which suggested that the earth and everything on it was created over a seven day period by God.

This debate still rages among some religious people. Scientists, for the most part, have fully adopted the theory of Evolution. Scientists who are religious have been able to create a synchronicity of their faith and their scientific backgrounds. This is not a debate that is worth getting into in this setting, but if you want to know more, there are some great resources out there.

It is a measure of their accomplishments, of how much Lincoln and Darwin changed the world; that the era into which they were born seems so strange to us now.

On their birth date,

- Thomas Jefferson had three weeks left in his second term as president.
- George III still sat on the throne of England.
- The Enlightenment was giving way to Romanticism.

At the center of what people then believed, was that man was the crown of creation. Well, some men – that is, since the institution of slavery was still acceptable on both sides of the Mason–Dixon line — it would not be abolished in New York state, for example, until 1827, and while it had been illegal in England since 1772, it would not be abolished in English colonies until 1833.

And Darwin, at least at the outset, was hardly even a scientist in the sense that we understand the term—a highly trained specialist whose professional vocabulary is so arcane that he or she can talk only to other scientists.

But change the world they did.

Darwin changed biological sciences in a way that few others will ever do. His observations in the Galapagos Islands changed how most people understand the world to work. He forced Christianity to take into account science – something that was never done before. Remember Galileo was excommunicated by the church because he saw the world in ways that seem normal to us today, but to the people of his day were heresy.

Our 44th president would not have been possible without Abraham Lincoln – and while we can all have our opinions about President Obama – we cannot deny the fact that his election would not have been possible only a few years ago.

So, who is greater - Lincoln or Darwin.

A year ago Newsweek posed this very question.

This is what they wrote:

Lincoln and Darwin were both revolutionaries, in the sense that both men upended realities that prevailed when they were born. They seem—and sound—modern to us, because the world they left behind them is more or less the one we still live in. So, considering the joint magnitude of their contributions—and the coincidence of their conjoined birthdays—it is hard not to wonder: who was the greater man? It's an apples-and-oranges—or Superman-vs.-Santa—comparison. But if you limit the question to influence, it bears pondering, all the more if you turn the question around and ask, what might have happened if one of these men had not been born?

I think that if I was to answer that question today - it seems pretty simple. Lincoln, without a doubt, has more influence today.

But maybe it is because we are slowly clearing the fog of racism in our own lives that we can see the unbelievable impact that he had. My life is different because of the stand that Lincoln took. He will forever be one of my hero's. I have read, and will continue to read countless books on him and his life.

Darwin, on the other hand, is still embroiled in the fog clouds of Evolution vs. Creationism (or Intelligent Design). I can embrace his theories, but I cannot easily apply them to my own life, like I can Lincoln's.

I have never read a book on Darwin's life - my only real experience is the movie *Inherit The Wind*; a highly inaccurate portrayal of the Scopes trial.

That is why to me, the debate is unfair.

My hunch is: 100 years from now, when people gather together and remember the remarkable coincidence of Lincoln's and Darwin's birth both men will be hailed as hero's for their willingness to run the race and complete it. But it will be Darwin that people revere, because his theories will help us to realize that regardless of color we are all interconnected.

As we ponder the lives of these two remarkable people I think that there is a lesson for all of us.

Both men passionately embraced the opportunities that presented themselves. They never gave up in what they saw, or what they believed. Both were common men.

Nothing special – no different from you or me.

Yet, they changed the world.

We too can make a huge impact in the world if we will grasp the opportunities that are before us.