

SERIES 9 EPISODE 1

LINCOLN'S BEARD

In October 1860, a few weeks before he was elected as the President of the United States of America, Abraham Lincoln received a letter from an 11 year-old girl from New York called Grace Bedell. Receiving letters was not unusual for a President Elect of course, but this one stood out. In this letter, Grace Bedell had some bold comments, not on his politics, but on his physical appearance having seen a picture of him from August that year.

This is part of her letter to Lincoln:

Dear Sir,

My father has just come from the fair and brought home your picture and Mr. Hamlin's. I am a little girl, only 11 years old, but I want you to be President of the United States very much so I hope you won't think me very bold to write to such a great man as you are.

I have got four brothers and part of them will vote for you any way and if you let your whiskers grow I will try and get the rest of them to vote for you, you would look a great deal better, for your face is so thin. All the ladies like whiskers and they would tease their husbands to vote for you and then you would be President. My father is going to vote for you, and if I was a man, I would vote for you too but I will try to get everyone to vote for you that I can.

I must not write any more, answer this letter right off.

Good bye!

Grace Bedell

Perhaps the tone, or the content or the suggestions in this letter is a surprise but what is perhaps even more surprising, is what happened next.

Lincoln replied quickly. He thanked Grace for her letter and then said, 'as for the whiskers, having never worn any, do you not think people would call it a silly affectation if I were to begin it now?'

Your very sincere well-wisher,

Abraham Lincoln.

This seems a small matter to be occupying the time and energy of the President Elect, but Lincoln perhaps had reason to ask the question. Up until that moment, no President had worn a full beard, and only one had had some facial hair... so this would be breaking from tradition.

Shortly after this exchange, Lincoln grew a beard. The photograph taken on the 12th August 1860 was his last beardless photograph. On the 25th November, one month after Grace's letter, a new photograph was released of Lincoln wearing a partial beard. By February 9th 1861, he was photographed with a full one which became the iconic image of his time as President.

On the way to his inauguration by train, Lincoln stopped off at a village to meet the crowds of supporters. Whilst there, he recounted the story of Grace's letter and his new beard and said that if this young lady was at the gathering, he would be delighted to see her. On his words, there was a commotion amongst the people as an old man struggled through the crowd holding the hand of his 12 year-old daughter. The old man introduced his daughter, Grace Bedell to President Lincoln and the pair chatted for several minutes. The content of that conversation was recalled years later by Grace who said:

"He climbed down and sat down with me on the edge of the station platform.

'Gracie,' he said, 'look at my whiskers. I have been growing them for you.' Then he kissed me. I never saw him again."

Lincoln was the first bearded President of the United States. All inspired by an 11 year-old girl.

APPLICATION

This story became popular following Lincoln's assassination after his first term as President. A statue depicting the meeting of Grace and Abraham Lincoln was erected in the village where it happened. TV dramas and books were created on the back of this story in 1972, 1996 and in 2010 to mark the 150th anniversary of the events surrounding the letter.

For all the things that Lincoln could have been remembered for, why is this story one of the ones that endures?

- 1. It shows Lincoln's humanity.** These little moments of connection and real life really do matter to the public. We are so used to polished images, spin, propaganda and public promises that don't always get delivered. It is refreshing to get a glimpse of the private moments that made a difference. He was busy, but he replied. He was famous but an 11 year-old girl was important to him. He wasn't too proud or too arrogant to take feedback, even something as personal as someone commenting on his personal appearance.
- 2. The beard became symbolic of the change.** As he was elected President, Lincoln's appearance changed. It was an outside manifestation of an inward change. As he was about to assume the Presidency and become a national leader, he felt that a change was needed. It became a moment where he, and we, could see that there was a new phase about to start. Most human beings like and need, moments like this; whether it is buying a new outfit for an interview, changing your hair style or look, a new pencil case to start school, a diary at the start of the new year or a change of name, all of it symbolises something has changed.

- 3. It brings hope.** When we may often feel like our lone voice changes nothing or that people in positions of power don't listen, we are reminded that sometimes it is the smallest acts of speaking out that influence a change. Grace saw the impact of her letter in a way that we may never see for ours, but that doesn't mean change isn't happening. We don't know if Lincoln had been thinking about a beard for a while and Grace's letter was the nudge, or whether he was going to do it anyway and the timing of the beard after the letter was a coincidence. Or perhaps he read the letter and made the change. We can never know the true impact or consequences of our words, but this story is a reminder that our words CAN, and DO, have an impact.

QUESTIONS

Perhaps as you start whatever you are about to start, you can adopt some of the lessons from Lincoln's Beard.

- 1. What are the moments you have experienced where someone showed you their humanity and it deeply impacted you?** Perhaps it was someone remembering something you had told them when you didn't expect they would. Or someone entering into a conversation with you that you didn't expect. Perhaps it was someone showing you a moment of vulnerability? How can we show the people who work with us some of our humanity? Where might we open up when previously we have been closed?
- 2. What change are you about to embark on and what have you done to symbolise it?** This is not a trivial thing, an outside symbol can help us remember the inward change we are trying to make. Whether it's a chart on a wall when you tick off every promise you have made to yourself or a designated place in your house where you sit to start the day... or a new hair cut or a beard...symbolism is important to humans and can aid change.
- 3. Where have you stopped using the voice that you have? Where have you given up speaking out because you think nothing is happening?** Recall some moments where your words DID make a difference: a moment of encouragement that helped someone keep going, a suggestion that helped someone conquer a problem, a comment that made someone reconsider. Our words do have power, but they have very little if we never speak them.

Abraham Lincoln's beard became iconic, as did the story of him and Grace. But not everyone was pleased. One person's livelihood was ruined thanks to that beard. If you want to hear an extraordinary twist in the story, tune in for the next edition of PiXL Pearls.

© The PiXL Club Ltd. 2025. All Rights Reserved.

This resource is strictly for the use of The PiXL Club ("PiXL") subscribing schools and their students for as long as they remain PiXL subscribers. It may NOT be copied, sold, or transferred to or by a third party or used by the school after the school subscription ceases. Until such time it may be freely used within the PiXL subscribing school by their teachers and authorised staff and any other use or sale thereof is strictly prohibited. All opinions and contributions are those of the authors. The contents of this resource are not connected with, or endorsed by, any other company, organisation or institution. This resource may contain third party copyright material not owned by PiXL and as such is protected by law. Any such copyright material used by PiXL is either provided under licence or pending a licence.