

“Love Birds: A Revolutionary Valentine”

Were two love birds ever better suited, almost destined for one another? Their marriage would last fifty-four years and their names become inextricably linked. But it wasn't longevity that distinguished their pairing so much as the quality of their relationship. Affection blended with respect. They shared basic values: a preference for plain living and plain speaking with a distaste for ostentation, alike strongly opinionated, with political and religious views that were decidedly liberal. But they also shared more. Lust, yes. They were well-matched in that department, and a very un-Puritanical eroticism creeps into some of the epistles they exchanged. But they had more than sex. Abigail and John Adams also enjoyed a teasing playfulness in their communications as if the two of them were alternately team mates and rivals, but always in on a game together.

Although she was born a parson's daughter with predictably prim parents, little Abigail acknowledged that she always had a "volatile and giddy" personality, which didn't concern her was Grandmother Quincy who chiefly raised the lass, remarking that "wild colts make the best horses." The young attorney first noticed the Smith girl when she was just fourteen, describing her as a "wit" while wondering if that was a trait compatible with the feminine graces. Yet within a short time, that same high-spirited and flippant character proved irresistibly attractive, provoking the first exchanges in a lifelong correspondence, as when the suitor sent his heartthrob an invoice, payable in passion:

Oct. 4, 1762

Miss Adorable,

By the same Token that the Bearer hereof satt up with you last night I hereby order you to give him, as many Kisses, and as many Hours of your Company after 9 o' Clock as he shall please to Demand and charge them to my Account John Adams

At first, they signed themselves Lysander and Diana, named for the goddess of the moon and a famous Spartan statesman. Later, Abigail would sign her letters "Portia," modeling herself on the wife of the Roman patriot Marcus Brutus, who slew an ambitious Caesar to save the republic. But from the beginning, they called each other by another dearer, name—Friend--that would endure through all their years together.

August 11, 1763

My Friend,

If I was sure your absence to day was occasioned, by what it generally is, either to wait upon Company, or promote some good work, I freely confess my Mind would be much more at ease than at present it is. Yet this uneasiness does not arise from any apprehension of Slight or neglect, but a fear least you are indisposed, for that you said should be your only hindrance.

Humanity obliges us to be affected with the distresses and Miserys of our fellow creatures. Friendship is a band yet stronger, which causes us to feel with greater tenderness the afflictions of our Friends.

And there is a tye more binding than Humanity and stronger than Friendship, which makes us anxious for the happiness and welfare of those to whom it binds us. It makes their Misfortunes, Sorrows and afflictions, our own. Unite these, and there is a threefold

cord—by this cord I am not ashamed to own myself bound, nor do I [believe] that you are wholly free from it ...

Adieu may this find you in better health than I fear it will ... Accept this hasty Scrawl warm from the Heart of Your Sincere

Diana

Riding the Circuit Courts between Massachusetts and Maine, John thought it wise to undergo an experimental medical procedure, inoculating himself against small pox, and necessitating a period of isolation as he recovered in the sick ward. The separation, for his sweetheart, was hard to bear.

Fryday Morning April 20

What does it signify, why may not I visit you a Days as well as Nights? I no sooner close my Eyes than some invisible Being ... bears me to you. I see you, but cannot make my self visible to you. That tortures me, but it is still worse when I do not come for I am then haunted by half a dozen ugly Sprights. One will catch me and leep into the Sea, an other will carry me up a precipice (like that which Edgar describes to Lear,) then toss me down, and were I not then light as the Gosemore I should shiver into atoms ... I had rather have the small pox by inoculation half a dozen times, than be sprighted about as I am.

Three weeks shy of turning twenty, Abigail was finally released from her nighttime torments, marrying John in 1764 in a ceremony conducted by her father at the parsonage in Weymouth. Though technically wives were subject to their husbands, matrimony felt like a liberation, or at least a release from parental authority, for Abigail would write her sister Mary, "I desire to be very thankful that I can do as I please now!!!"

The man she'd wed was ambitious for himself and his family, determined to make a mark upon the world. Yet his legal practice and then election to the Continental Congress meant extended time away. Never one to underestimate his own talents, he wrote his wife,

... I am not ashamed to own myself bound, nor do I believe that you are wholly free from it ...

Adieu may this find you in better health than I fear it will ... Accept this hasty Scrawl warm from the Heart of Your Sincere

Abigail oversaw the farm and ran the household in John's absence, superintending also the upbringing of the growing brood of Adams offspring, Nabby, John Quincy and Charles. John admonished,

Handwritten text in blue ink, likely a transcription of a letter or document. The text is dense and appears to be in a historical or legal context, possibly related to the American Revolution or colonial education. The handwriting is somewhat cursive and difficult to read precisely.

When John elaborated in another letter, lamenting the woeful state of learning in the colonies, his wife was moved to speak up,

If you complain of the neglect of Education in sons, What shall I say with regard to daughters, who every day experience the want of it. With regard to the Education of my own children, I find myself soon out of my debth, and destitute and deficient in every part ...

I most sincerely wish that some more liberal plan might be laid and executed for the Benefit of the rising Generation, and that our new constitution may be distinguished for Learning and Virtue. If we mean to have Heroes, Statesmen and Philosophers, we should have learned women. The world perhaps would laugh at me, and accuse me of vanity. But you I know have a mind too enlarged and liberal to disregard the Sentiment.

Adieu ever yours. Breakfast waits. Portia.

Conflict with Britain meant rationing, first as American colonists boycotted tea and other products they considered unfairly taxed, then tightening belts even further as trade dropped to a trickle. But defiance of the home country also stirred a defiant attitude among many women, as Abigail recorded to her husband,,

It was rumoured that an eminent, wealthy, stingy Merchant (who is a Batchelor) had a Hogshead of Coffe in his Store which he refused to sell to the committee under 6 shillings per pound. A number of Females some say a hundred, some say more assembled with a cart and trucks, marched down to the Ware House and demanded the keys, which he refused to deliver, upon which one of them seazd him by his Neck and tossd him into the cart. Upon his finding no Quarter he deliverd the keys, when they tipd up the cart and dischargd him, then opend the Warehouse, Joisted out the Coffe themselves, put it into the trucks and drove off.

It was reported that he had a Spanking among them, but this I believe was not true. A large concourse of Men stood amazd silent Spectators of the whole transaction. Portia

John himself may have been amazed when he received a letter from his wife dated March 31, 1776, addressed to him in Philadelphia, where delegates were beginning to debate separation from the motherland.

I long to hear that you have declared an independency—and by the way in the new Code of Laws which I suppose it will be necessary for you to make I desire you would Remember the Ladies, and be more generous and favourable to them than your ancestors. Do not put such unlimited power into the hands of the Husbands. Remember all Men would be tyrants if they could. If perticular care and attention is not paid to the Ladies we are determined to foment a Rebellion, and will not hold ourselves bound by any Laws in which we have no voice, or Representation.

That your Sex are Naturally Tyrannical is a Truth so thoroughly established as to admit of no dispute, but such of you as wish to be happy willingly give up the harsh title of Master for the more tender and endearing one of Friend.

Abigail knew her complaint would be taken only half-seriously, and that's how John responded, predicting that the new demand for equality and civil freedom would eventually lead to the inmates running the asylum.

Neither of the two were populists. Both believed there existed a natural aristocracy of brains and talent. But they were united in their opposition to slavery, not entirely free of the prejudices of the time, but surprisingly enlightened. Abigail gave an involuntary shudder at a Shakespeare play as she watched the dark-skinned Othello lay hands upon fair Desdemona. But when a schoolhouse in Braintree threatened to close if a black pupil were allowed to attend classes, she became a local champion of racial integration. And in the same letter where she urged her husband to "remember the ladies," Abigail reflected that Virginia must possess some virtues for producing a Washington, but she remained wary and suspicious of the slave-holding south:

I have sometimes been ready to think that the passion for Liberty cannot be Equally Strong in the Breasts of those who have been accustomed to deprive their fellow Creatures of theirs. Of this I am certain that it is not founded upon that generous and Christian principal of doing to others as we would that others should do unto us.

Touching the subject of religion, her husband said that his own brand of Christianity consisted of following the Ten Commandments and the Sermon on the Mount, complaining that the church had forgotten the simple moral teachings of its founder.

John was reacting to the cold-blooded Calvinism on which he'd been reared. But too much warmth from the pulpit could also be nerve-wracking. In New York, where he was stationed during his tenure as Vice-President, he and Abigail struggled to find a church to their liking. The Congregational preachers there clung to the old-fashioned doctrines of predestination and tried with "noise and vehemence to compensate for every other deficiency." Listening to their "foaming," Abigail told a friend, was like "doing penance,"

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making her long to her "liberal good sense" from the pulpit: "true piety without enthusiasm, devotion with grimace, and religion upon a rational system."

More to their liking were the sermons of Richard Price, a dissenting clergyman whose services the two attended while on appointment to Great Britain. Although ordained a Presbyterian, Price's doubts about the divinity of Jesus had turned him toward Unitarianism—like his friend Joseph Priestly, who succeeded him in the same pulpit. A superb mathematician, Price shared the Adams' scientific interests. But when the reverend presided over the christening of their grandchild William, Abigail was so flustered that she had to take to her bed, causing her miss several of his lectures on "electricity, magnetism, hydrostatics" and other researches which she described as "going into a beautiful country ... a country to which few females are permitted to visit or inspect."

Dr. Price had been a strong supporter of the colonies in their revolt against England. In *Observations on the Importance of the American Revolution, and the Means of Making It a Benefit to the World*, published just after the war, Price argued that complete religious liberty ought to prevail in the new nation, along with a system of education that "teaches how to think, rather than what to think." He spoke admiringly of the Massachusetts Constitution that John had written, guaranteeing that "every denomination of Christians demeaning themselves peaceably and as good subjects of the Commonwealth" should have equal protection of the laws. "This is liberal beyond all example," Price declared, "I should however have admired it more had it been more liberal and the words all men of all religions been substituted for every denomination of Christians."

"I am happy to find myself perfectly agreed with you, that we should begin by setting the conscience free," John wrote back. It was the beginning of a lifelong friendship, and Abigail told their son John Quincy that traveling the few miles from London to Hackney each Sunday was well worth the effort, "to hear a man so liberal and so sensible and so good as he is."

Their eldest son tended to be more traditional in his faith than either father or mother, but when the break occurred in New England that divided so many congregations down the middle, Abigail made her position clear. "I profess myself a Unitarian in Mr. Channings sense," she told her son. "The soil of N England will not cultivate nor cherish clerical bigotry or intolerance although, there is a struggle to introduce it." In a letter dated May 4, 1816, she staked out her non-trinitarian beliefs even more firmly, telling the junior Adams "There is not any reasoning which can convince me, contrary to my senses, that three is one, and one three," adding in an aside to a friend that her husband considered their son an "Excellent politician, but no theologian."

Yet Abigail's letters mention religion only rarely. Along with observations on politics, education, and culture, more mundane matters predominated. As might be expected, the pair corresponded about money, household finance and investing, which Abigail mostly managed with a shrewd business sense that enabled the family to retire with a modest prosperity that stood in sharp contrast to former presidents like Jefferson and Madison who were bankrupt by the end. From selling pins to buying depreciated Continental I.O.U.s to purchasing land in far off Vermont, Abigail always had some scheme for turning a profit. And slowly the nest egg grew.

might have shattered other marriages seemed only to strengthen their bond.. The equality, candor and compassion that marked their relationship were surely ingredients that helped keep their romance alive. And in a lesson for our age, which has grown impatient with manners, they were unfailingly courteous to one another.

As much as John Adams became a founding father of our nation, Abigail became a founding mother, calling for women's full legal rights and by her own dignity and composure proving they were entitled to nothing less. And yet through her loyalty and gentleness as mate, she showed that political independence and relational interdependence must go hand in hand, reminding us that no charter of freedoms would be complete without the command to love.