

A VISUAL GUIDE TO TODAY'S TRIBUNE

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TRIBUNE VOICES

Four score and one 7-year-old's tears ago

It wasn't on our way. But we steered there anyway. A red zigzag on the road map was all it took. That and what turned into a few hours' drive through the mountains, in the rain, with no shoulder to the right, and big trucks barreling by on the left.

And there was that boy in the back seat, after all, the boy who had learned all the words, who had traced the story of the president who ended slavery. Somehow, he had decided that he needed to stand on the crest of the hill in the midst of the half-circles of square white stones, the unmarked graves, arranged state by state in the most somber of roll calls. He needed to stand where the words first were belabored over the stretched-out limbs of the forever-sleeping soldiers.

It was the Gettysburg Address, three short paragraphs that he had learned at school, read out loud in assembly and recited one night at dinner, delightfully reading "deducted" instead of "dedicated" each time he came to that particular mix of d's and c's and t's that, apparently, is interchangeable to the 7-year-old orator.

The little boy—one who most of the time spouts numbers and news about ballfields and the players who play there—somehow had been transfixed by these words and this speech and this spot on the map.

And since we were driving to Washington anyway, he figured, why not swing up into Pennsylvania, that bread-loaf-shaped chunk in the jigsaw puzzle, and drive to the little town where the great speech was etched into the national memory.

We stopped for a map and directions. We maneuvered our way around farm fields once soaked in blood. We parked near a hill, strode past long stone fences, crossed a country road, and walked and walked until we couldn't get closer to where Lincoln's shoes must have stood firm against the hard, cold soil that had seen and heard too much and then at last was consecrated and laid to rest in peace and the broadcloth of history.

There was no steering him elsewhere. No approximation of history.

He decided it had to be just as it was. Had to be him reading the words out loud, to the cold winds, and the three grown-ups (his big brother, really, at 15 and shaving, is nearly a grown-up) who love him so very much, who stood somewhat astonished at this insistence on honoring history.

He had carried along a parchment, written in script, signed "Abraham Lincoln, November 19, 1863," but he couldn't make out the 19th Century swirls and dips and swoops of soot-black ink.

So, when we stopped for the map, he had handily gotten the words typed out, more to his liking, more like the pages of books he now reads by the hour, this boy who not long ago struggled with words in any form.

So there we were at the top of the hill, just in front of the great marble monument, with the plaque marking the spot.

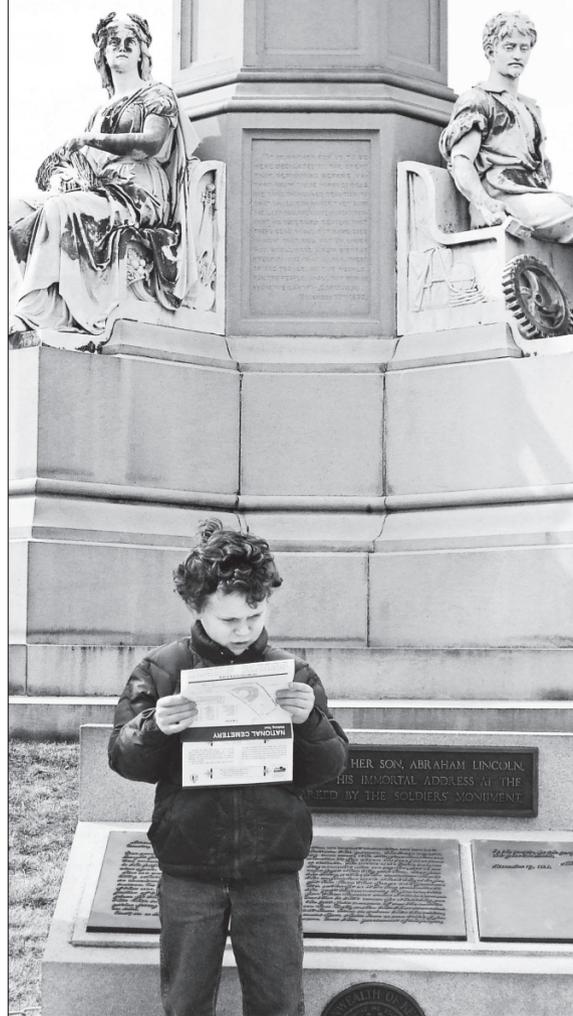
The boy settled in, maybe as Lincoln had, pulled the words from his pocket, unfolded the ridges, began.

"Four score," he started, of course. And then carried on. The words coming in that familiar cadence and rhythm we all know, all of us who in some schoolroom somewhere pored over the Civil War pages, tried our hand at memorizing, maybe for the very first time, with this particular passage.

Somewhere, though, near the part where Lincoln wrote that "we can not dedicate, we can not consecrate, we can not hallow this ground," the words slowed to nearly a halt.

We looked in, each of us, zeroed our eyes on his face, trying to read the root of the slowed-down reading.

Only then, as the next few words sputtered, did I see what I thought looked like a tear. And then another and another.



The words of the Gettysburg Address are familiar, but where they'll lead one still so new to this world isn't always known.

He was crying and reading, the boy who would not let the tears stop the cadence, the moment, not until the end when we all crushed him, a tangle of arms, cheeks, tears.

"Sweetheart, what is it?" I asked, not sure if the hard words had netted his courage, swallowed his sense of the moment.

"It's the soldiers," he managed to choke out in a short few syllables, before burying his face in my sleeve.

We all stood in this knot for a minute or two. I knew that I, for one, was etching the moment into my mind, into my picture of this boy who was not often considered the one with his pulse in sync with the poetry and pain of a world marred by bloodshed and tombstones.

Sometimes on a cold afternoon, at the crest of history, you discover the script that you've dotted and crossed in your head, the script of your own child, is not what you thought it was.

And you stand there, wiping back tears, his and your own. And all of a sudden you understand a whole new chapter has been written.

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A version of this essay originally appeared on Mahany's Web site, pullupachair.org

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