

## On a Father's Silence at Gettysberg

conflict, but how can one appreciate Sunken Road, that high-water mark of the Confederacy where Pickett failed, when the glare of a fast-food establishment distracts the soul? Nothing really impressed itself on my young mind, until my father and I went on foot to the key of the Federal position on Missionary Ridge, and found ourselves amidst the huge, scattered boulders of Devil's Den.

Devil's Den! How aptly named by the men who fought there. What a terrifying struggle was waged in the choking heat of a July summer, and the dense, acrid smoke of black powder. Though the day we walked there was still and peaceful, it was yet ominous since the sky was black, with no wind, and not even the insects made their sounds. A summer thunderstorm was brewing, and distant peals of thunder made it far easier to reflect on the great duel of artillery which had been exchanged over one hundred years ago.

And so I walked, happy-go-lucky, picking up a short wooden branch for an impromptu toy gun, and another long stick for a sword, and slashing at the weeds. I reveled in the spooky atmosphere brought on by the impending storm. Dad let me go my way.

But the playful mood quickly disappeared when I climbed up a boulder and jumped down on the other side, and suddenly found myself looking at a copy of the old Daguerreotype encased and mounted on a pole. I turned slowly to the right and found myself staring at the very spot where the Confederate had died for state's rights. And my eyes

stung, and I swallowed hard. Here was the place. This is where he died – this rock right here!

Time seems to stop at such moments, and one is never sure how much of it elapses, but I had been there for some time when my father came up to tell me it was time to go. But at a glance he realized the importance of the place, and by the tears in my eyes realized it was important to me.

Maybe an act of reverence had already begun within me when I received his lesson. I cannot remember. But if there was any reverence in me at the time, it was only a spark, and was fanned by his presence. It was the way he held himself. That was the lesson. No instructions, no explanations, no deduction; he just stood there silently, hands folded, eyes deep with respect. He did not move or speak, and allowed me to stay there until I nodded that it was time to go.

We walked back to the old Dodge without a word, just as big, heavy raindrops began to splatter on the hard and dusty earth. I got in the back seat, and looked out the back window to Devil's Den until it was out of sight.

It was at Gettysburg, I think, that I learned reverence, from my father's silence.

By the time I reached the age of reason, reverence was disappearing from the churches we attended as a family, but the museums retained it. Perhaps this came from the guards whose discreet surveillance of the tourists engenders, or rather commands, an uncommon deference for things. Perhaps it came from that typical, melancholy luminescence with which all museums seem to be lit. Perhaps it comes from the abundant use of grey stone and marble, or lofty ceilings, or the hushed voices, or even the content of the exhibits. But in my childhood, reverence was absent in the Protestant churches I knew.

Church buildings – even Protestant – had recognizable styles of architecture. The gothic, colonial, maybe even Romanesque, but by the 1970's they were being replaced with something resembling a business office. St. Paul said that we see through a darkened glass, but the churches I remember were excessively bright, whitewashed things without transcendence. The shift from brocade to burlap, chalice to cup, plainchant to insipid picnic music; the flood of the banal was not so much a raging torrent as a creeping thickness – a ponderous glacier of endless compromise with fad.

Fill a modernist church with incense, and it still has all the transcendent beauty of a reformatory. Not designed to please God, those churches were designed to please us. Which leaves us in a predicament, if we don't have the

blessing of being exposed to reverence in a church. If this is the case, where can reverence be learned?

When I was a boy of about ten, my father, who had the onerous habit of packing the family into a 1956 Dodge every summer and driving us to strange and exotic places like California, drove "back East" to see some of the great sights and listen to the waves of the Atlantic and the falls of Niagara. We stopped, for a while, at Gettysburg.

It is impossible to remember the minutiae of that trip, but one memory stands out among the rest. Let it be understood that when we went there, my mind was of full to the brim with stories about the heroes and fools, the glory and horror, the great and pathetic acts which made up the battle called Gettysburg. And of these memories gained from reading books in my room, there was one image in particular which stood out, for I had long gazed at it. It was a daguerreotype of a Confederate sharpshooter who had been slain at his post, lying peacefully next to a boulder, musket askew on his lap. How often I looked at that mournful image in my Golden Book of the Civil War.

When we arrived at Gettysburg, there was probably a tour, a talk from a ranger, and a visit to the souvenir shop which hawked such useful wares as a plastic figure of General Grant with a thermometer in his back. I am sure we visited the key places of the