

THE EDUCATION OF ABRAHAM LINCOLN BY CHIP DENTON

Abraham Lincoln was educated, as he said in his inimitable fashion, “by littles.” All his formal schooling—a week here, a month there—did not amount to one year, and mostly he educated himself by borrowing books and newspapers. He loved Robinson Crusoe and the tales of The Arabian Nights, a biography of Washington, and the poetry of Shakespeare and Burns. Someone recalled, “I never saw Abe after he was twelve that he didn’t have a book in his hand or in his pocket. It didn’t seem natural to see a feller read like that.” Fond of talking and story telling, he found a book called Lessons in Elocution and began practicing his public speaking from a tree stump.

Many of us would be afraid to let our own children’s education follow Lincoln’s course, and perhaps with good reason; but can there be any doubt that Lincoln acquired the tools of learning that would serve him (and his country) well throughout his life? In fact, it is most instructive to reflect on Lincoln’s learning not as an aberration but as an exemplar of a good education. All the elements of a classical education are there: grammar, or the learning of language and the acquisition of knowledge; logic, or learning to think critically; and rhetoric, or learning to express oneself elegantly and persuasively. These three can (and should be) distinguished, and there is an order to them: Lincoln began with a copybook, moved on to his borrowed books, and then imitated traveling preachers and politicians. But the mature Lincoln, the man who had mastered the arts of learning, was able to ply all three of these tools as one in order to debate Senator Douglas or to deliver the Gettysburg Address.

The Gettysburg Address might be Exhibit A in the case for a classical education. On a cold November day in 1863, in the middle of a war that was going badly, on the very site where fifty thousand soldiers had died only months before, Lincoln delivered a speech that could have been written only by one who had mastered the tools of learning.

That Lincoln could not have written his famous speech without the rudiments of grammar is almost too obvious to need telling. On the other hand, what might seem paltry praise will rise in our estimation if we simply set Lincoln’s first sentence before a sixth grader and ask her a few questions: What is a score? Multiply it times four and add seven. Without looking it up (Lincoln wasn’t likely to have had an encyclopedia with him on the train to Gettysburg), compute how long it had been since the nation was “conceived.” And, by the way, spell conceived. Explain the difference between a continent and a nation. Let me dictate his first sentence and you copy it perfectly, punctuating it correctly. Finally, name the famous document to which Lincoln alludes in this first sentence and recite its first two sentences. These are the sorts of things one ought to be learning at the grammar stage.

While all of these questions may teach us thing or two about our children's education (or our own), they hardly bring us to a true understanding of Lincoln's classic speech. For that we need to appreciate Lincoln's mastery of the second liberal art, logic. The address is essentially an argument, brief and succinct, but complete. It begins by reciting a proposition that it assumes to be true, "that all men are created equal" and a consequence, that all people ought to live in liberty. It goes on to ask a question about whether a nation founded on such a proposition can endure. And it argues that the horrible war that was being fought was the great test of whether the bold experiment of American democracy ("government of the people, by the people, for the people") was viable in the long run. It is not Lincoln's purpose, in a two minute speech, to debate or prove either the truth of his propositions or the validity of his argument; but it is important to realize that even in such a short speech the skeleton of a clear line of reasoning is present.

Perhaps it is Lincoln the orator, the master of rhetoric, who shines most brightly in this address. It has been said that the three goals of rhetoric are to teach, to please, and to persuade. Lincoln does all three. By his reinterpretation of the carnage of Gettysburg as a test of fundamental democratic principles, he instructs his audience. By his brevity (which was highly controversial on the occasion of his delivery), by his skill as a wordsmith ("the last full measure of devotion"), and by his use of rhetorical tropes ("we cannot dedicate--we cannot consecrate--we cannot hallow . . ."), he wins our attention and makes us open to his argument. By his appeal to the great sacrifice of the brave men who fought he persuades us to "increased devotion" to their cause.

I have tried to analyze this speech because I want us to see the fine work of a well-educated man and to aspire to get the same kind of education for ourselves and for our children. Nevertheless, I would not want to leave this marvelous speech, as it were, on the dissecting table. Its form and its subject are too great for that. I have taken it apart, but I hope that on this occasion of Lincoln's birthday we might all put it back together by reading it again ourselves and honoring the man who practiced what he preached and did himself give "the last full measure of devotion" to our nation.