

LibraryCrunch

Service for the Next Generation Library: A Library 2.0 Perspective by Michael Casey

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The Power of Photography

I am by no means a Civil War buff but I do love and appreciate photography's role in history and [these recently revealed photographs](#) of Lincoln at Gettysburg in 1863 are absolutely amazing. You can read the Center for Civil War Photography's [press release \(PDF\) here](#).

Notice, also, [the kind of conversations](#) photos like this create. Verlyn Klinkenborg, [writing in the New York Times](#), uses the photos to discuss the greater scene being shown on the fields of Gettysburg. Klinkenborg writes:

Perhaps that's what is so convincing about this photograph. At the edges of every crowd — even at moments of intense historical importance — there is an unknown someone being distracted by the world, uninterested in what's happening behind his back. You can see it here. We feel the power of what Lincoln was saying more strongly than those who were present did — that is, we feel its ongoing power. But if you begin walking outward from where Lincoln stood, how far would you have to go before any trace of the extraordinary nature of that day had vanished into the ordinary? The evidence of this photograph suggests that you wouldn't have to go far at all, a few hundred yards at most.

I don't quite know why this thought seems to matter so much to me. Perhaps it's the irreverence of the world, the way it is always tempting you to pay no attention to that great human being uttering words that will live forever behind your back. Perhaps it's the fact that the moments we have traditionally called history are really just brief disruptions of the heavy, dense fabric of ordinary life. Perhaps, too, it's the way that humans, for all their ability to concentrate, will nearly always behave, if given the chance, like the animals we are — easily distracted, diverted by a sudden motion, drawn off guard by the glint of light on a camera lens.

Posted by Michael on November 28, 2007 03:09 PM | [Permalink](#)

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