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1989 NATIONAL INTERPRETERS

WORKSHOP

NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF INTERPRETATION

**PROCEEDINGS OF THE INTERPRETATION/
MANAGEMENT SESSIONS**

Denis R. Hahn, Chair - Program Committee

DEATH, SUFFERING, PREDATION, ANIMAL RIGHTS AND INTERPRETATION

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Abstract

Suffering and death have been part of the "natural scheme of things" from the beginning. Whenever any organism "eats", another dies - plant or animal. At one extreme, the stark realities of death begetting life are glossed over or carefully avoided by interpreters. At another end of the continuum interpreters permit visitors to view snakes or birds of prey capture live, institution-raised mice or other living food. Some groups have encouraged students to participate in the killing and butchering of cattle, sheep, rabbits, chickens and other animals in an effort to bring reality to the idea that humans are the ultimate omnivorous predators.

Too often interpreters live in a narrow, tunnel-visioned world consciously or unconsciously blind to the reality of life and death situations. In so doing they perpetuate a completely erroneous "Bambi, Beauty and Bounteous Love" (BB&BL) concept of the environment. Also, animal rights groups are becoming increasingly militant in their attacks. As a result, some nature centers and other environmental agencies avoid confronting such issues because they are too threatening to public relations.

Are we becoming professional "bleeding hearts" too tender and warped in our perceptions to adequately and accurately teach an increasingly urban and therefore unworldly clientele?

The Goals?

Interpretation has been defined by many people (Sharpe, 1982). But, whatever the working definition, most interpreters would agree that we have a responsibility to be more than factual. We must stimulate, provoke thought and be accurate and truthful in our presentations. And perhaps, "complete" should be added. It seems that there may be areas which are avoided or given short shrift in interpretation. They are generally those which are emotionally intense or controversial in some way and for which the interpreter feels unprepared or intimidated.

Emotional Issues

Excellent examples of such topics or issues include those in the title of this presentation. Not only are they difficult to discuss under ideal circumstances but also they have been raised, over the past year or so to national issue status (Kaplan, 1988; Koshland, 1989; Loehle, 1988). In many cases they have become so highly charged that even those interpreters and others who consider themselves unbiased have fallen into the trap of over-emotionality in relation to them. The issue of animal rights, in all its guises has screamed at us from the media in varied and strident tones and sides have been drawn up. A battle is under way of great intensity in which both groups feel an almost religious zeal in their perceived righteousness.

For What Do We Bleed?

Several kinds of people are attracted to the current foray. Some are absolutely sincere and strive with all their energy to right a perceived wrong. But, too often they are poorly informed on both sides of the issue, choosing instead to take the position which best fits their current biases. Unfortunately, "causes" too often tend to attract another kind of person who may be best described as "the professional protester". They often harbor within themselves a deep anger against things, people, and organizations. Shortfused and waiting with bated breath for the slightest opportunity to joust with the "establishment", they seem to lurk in the shadows avidly waiting their chance to leap into the fray- any fray! Still another type is the over-simplifier. They see a chance to take a stand on the side of "apple pie and motherhood" and to solve a major problem of humankind in one fell swoop. Lastly, there is the "bleeding heart" who tends to view the world through rose colored glasses. (It is frankly difficult to discern entirely between the last two. In fact, there are likely hybrids which might be called the "bleeding over-simplifier"!)

Environmental bleeding hearts often espouse a philosophy of the outdoors which this author has referred to as the "Bambi, Beauty and Bounteous Love Syndrome (BB&BL)". They apparently believe that there is no violence in "nature", only love and a neatly balanced interaction of benevolent forces.

Philosophical Preparation (Natural versus Un-natural)

There are many philosophical issues which ought to be examined by interpreters, preferably before they enter the field. But, the above concerns are deep and take time to consider and the emotional and intellectual depth to accurately and adequately assess. Why is it so rare to hear an interpreter wax philosophical on any issue? Perhaps it's because of one or all of three reasons. The first may be that the interpreter has never thought deeply enough on the issue or issues to have a personal philosophy. Perhaps the second is that they feel uncomfortable baring their souls to their clients. And the third, often found in academics, could be that they are opposed to taking a stand themselves and therefore completely avoid complicated issues in their public contact.

Whatever the reasons, it is first critical that we develop a clear understanding of what is "natural" and what is "unnatural". Far, far too often we see applied a completely artificial construct dealing with "natural" versus "manmade". Unfortunately, this presupposes that humans are somehow less than natural. Yet, unless I missed something critical in my background, humans and rats, dogs and cats, lichens and lizards, are all "organic" in the sense that they are carbon based. The differentiation is frequently carried even farther in separating "natural" and "cultural" history. Somehow, the environmentally protective shelter of pebbles or twigs a Caddis Fly larva builds around itself is "natural". But, the boxes humans build and call houses or buildings are not only unnatural but despicable. (The latter might be true. But, humans are not the only creatures capable of creating environmental havoc.)

In this context of establishing "naturalness", we humans, at our egocentric best, go even farther and assign values of "goodness" or "badness" as well as more or less elevated status to animals and other organisms in the non-human realm of our environment. A Scale of Sensitivity or Concern Pyramid evolves in our thinking.

And, it should surprise no one that we place humans at the top with numberless invisible (and therefore uncared about) micro-organisms at the lowest level. Few of us can work ourselves into a nervous froth over the billions and billions of microbes we massacre underfoot walking from our car to the house, crushing their boneless little forms into protoplasmic jelly. Likely only the tiniest fringe element stewes over the rain of death we see only as inconvenient little grease spots on our windshield as myriads of "bugs" smash their bodies into oblivion while we race heedlessly through their uncomprehending flying masses. (At least they have the decency not to scream!) But, let us exchange "bugs" for "bunnies" and the whole picture suddenly changes. Now mind you, we're talking about "bunnies", not hares or rabbits. There is, after all, something slightly less tender and lovable about a rabbit as compared with a warm, fuzzy "bunny". A rabbit is something with which the average person has little or no personal contact. At best, it is perceived only as a brief brown flash in woods or field. (If we ever saw one up close and stationary, we would realize to our horror that its ears are loaded with ticks, its fur crawling with fleas and the whole issue quickly takes on a somewhat repugnant aspect.) Nevertheless, that ominous THUMP! we hear and feel deep in our bones when in spite of our best and sometimes downright dangerous automotive acrobatics we fail to avoid a hapless rabbit on the road gives us a sickening adrenaline-steeped visceral twitch. Although we're probably responding more to the "bunny" than the rabbit.

Plants versus Animals

Humans are such paradoxes! Highly intelligent omnivorous predators that we are, we sharply differentiate between ourselves and other living things. And we do so on several levels. This is particularly true when we consider plants as opposed to animals. Although we may resort to vegetarianism solely to avoid "killing", the fact remains that whenever we eat animal or vegetable matter something dies. At least, in my biological (a term denoting the study of life) background I got the impression that BOTH plants and animals possessed some kind of special "life force" which enabled them to maintain their cellular and organismal integrity, convert and assimilate various chemicals as nutrients and reproduce themselves. Furthermore, it has always been my understanding that when I ripped the leaves off a poor quivering spinach plant and thrust them into boiling water they ceased to be alive. They died! (Salads we devour alive!) And, I was directly responsible for their death! But they, like the "bugs" on my windshield, had the gentility to not scream as they hit the scalding water or were shredded by our teeth. But, we all know that plants don't perceive let alone feel pain or fear. Correct? Perhaps. However, one scientist has performed amazing (even strange) experiments he feels demonstrates that plants DO perceive and experience fear.

Part of our problem may lie in the completely indistinct set of criteria and standards we hold regarding life itself. We are unclear in our own minds on what constitutes being "alive" and what value a particular life form should be assigned. Can it perceive? How much? Can it think? How deeply? Does it feel pain? As we do? Nowhere is this quandary more clearly demonstrated than in the current battles over abortion.

Nevertheless, at our BB&BL best, we have resolved some of the more unsavory concerns regarding life and death simply by putting them out of our mind. And, it works most of the time until we suddenly come face to face with the stark reality of the value systems we mistakenly apply to our ecosystem.

The Human Touch

A classic example occurred in the early 1900's on the North Kaibab Plateau of Arizona where efforts were made to provide paradise for Bambi (a "good" animal). In order to minimize the problems associated with being a Mule Deer, it was concluded that as many of the "bad" animals as possible should be exterminated. "Bad" animals were, by definition, those which preyed upon (or were suspected of that perverted behavior) the "good" animals of the North Kaibab. This, it was planned, would relieve the deer of the trauma and stress of possibly becoming a predatory animal's dinner and allow them to achieve true happiness and be easily available for animal lovers to observe and photograph.

In the first few years some 1600 Mountain Lions were killed along with virtually all wolves and most coyotes. Even bobcats were targeted. The deer? They loved it! Multiplying grandly in the absence of adequate predation they could soon be seen by visitors in huge herds in the open meadows of the North Rim of the Grand Canyon and the North Kaibab forests. Shortly however, as the deer continued to multiply, a mysterious line appeared on the landscape below which no vegetation grew. Grass, bushes and trees were stripped completely of anything green as high as a deer could reach and this browse line would stand as the high water mark of their population explosion. Then, after one particularly cold winter visitors could see all the deer they wanted. The only trouble was they were all feet up, rotting in the sun. Hundreds of deer starved to death that winter. And, the starvation went on until the carrying capacity of the land had the last say. Benevolent, well meaning and supposedly all knowing humans, applying a flawed value system based on transplanted urban criteria and gross ignorance had committed an atrocity. Death and suffering had always been a part of the balance of nature but we had tipped the scales with a heavy hand.

A few years ago, visitors to Yellowstone National Park found a Bison which had broken through the ice in a river and was hopelessly mired. National Park Service policy was to take no action. The Park was established as a great "natural" preserve where only non-human interactions took place. However, horrified visitors cried foul, attempted to rescue the stranded animal themselves and ultimately pressured the Park Service to intervene. The Bison died in spite of all efforts. Of course, national news media covered, in some detail, this example of "inhuman" and "inhumane" behavior on the part of the Park Service.

A colleague of mine once related the following tale of woe. After mentioning he had experienced a "terrible thing" the previous night he proceeded to tell me he and his 5 year old daughter had been watching television. I immediately agreed that watching that medium is usually an excruciating experience. But, he said he hadn't meant television in

general, rather the program they had watched which was a nature special on animals of Africa. And, there on their screen they saw a herd of zebras peacefully grazing in a grassland. But, he said, "soon a predatory cat came into the picture, stalking the herd of zebras". The cat quickly attacked and literally climbing the side of one zebra with its sharp claws, grasped its meal by the throat and "right before our eyes" strangled it to death! He avowed his daughter was shocked and terrified crying, "Daddy! Daddy! What's happening to the Zebra?". He said, "I knew she was too young to learn of death so I told her they were playing."

I too had been watching the special at my home and the presence of copious blood should have soon alerted the young daughter to this being a strange form of "play". But, the crowning situation was that a group of natives came on the scene, drove the cat off and took the meat back to their village where they cut it up for local distribution. I surmise that at some point my colleague's daughter caught a hint that the "playing" had stopped! Whatever, he was incensed that such a program could be shown on prime time TV and felt strongly that the camera crew, once they realized what was taking place, should have driven the cat away from the zebra herd. Apparently, it would have been alright for the cat to starve! Or, at the very least, it could have later gone about its diabolical deeds far from the watchful eye of the TV camera! We all could have continued in blissful ignorance of the realities of life on the veldt.

First, I was deeply disturbed that this man lied to his daughter. That's just not the way to raise children. Second, it is my feeling that his urban values and understandings had interfered gravely with what could have been a valuable learning experience. And third, I rather imagine that he was far more disturbed than she. It has been my experience that children handle the concept of predation far better than many adults.

Suddenly It's You

How do interpreters handle these visible evidences? What do we say to the youngster who, seeing the dead bird or squirrel, says "it's dead isn't it?" and then follows that observation with "and it's gone to live with the angels hasn't it? I wonder what killed it."

For the interpreter the worst of all worlds then exists. They have been dragged into not only the realm of death, dying and predation but also religion!! Too many times I have observed interpreters give an entirely insufficient answer and as quickly as possible move the group away from the "scene of the crime" and change the subject rather than take advantage of this invitation to talk of food chains, the brevity of life for wild animals (& humans), values, etc...

But, somehow this same reticence doesn't seem to exist when the subject is plants. We can spend interminable lengths of time discussing the death of a tree and its decomposition producing humus and nutrients. The cycle of life and death in that case seems painless and "cleaner".

A Horse of Another Color

Now let's look at some animal differentiation. Some parks sponsor fishing instruction for kids. They are provided by the park agency with rod, reel, line and (shudder!) hooks. Interpreters, often under the smiling gaze of parents, instruct the children in the best methods of impaling worms and minnows on those curved, barbed instruments.

And, if they are very lucky a fish (not noted for intelligence) will come along and take the bait, the hook piercing their throat or mouth and the fish will be dragged struggling for its life from the water to be beaten to death, have its spined severed by a sharp knife or in the worst case scenario be thrown up on the bank to die by suffocation. But of course, we're all sure fish can't really think or feel pain. All that thrashing around was just an "avoidance reaction" typical of "lower" animals. But, although they may exist, the author has never come in contact with an interpretive naturalist teaching a course in hunting and assisting the students in killing a warm blooded animal. And trapping? You must be kidding! Somehow that's entirely different.

Plant and Animal Solitary Confinement and Concentration Camp

In order to permit visitors to closely examine animals and plants which otherwise might be invisible many parks and nature centers display "captive" organisms in cages and terraria. In years past these living displays were permanent. The animals within spent their entire lives in captivity often subject to bacterial, fungal, and psychological diseases they would never face in the normal environment. More frequently today in order to prevent such problems they are recycled back to the outdoors after only a short stay unless they have been found injured and nursed back to health at

the center but found incapable of fending for themselves in the wild. In any case, captive plants and animals must be fed. Of course, in most cases plants may be fed innocuously by merely sprinkling "fertilizer" on their substrate. But animals, particularly carnivorous predators pose another problem in feeding. They often refuse to eat anything that is not "on the hoof". This may be alright if done after hours. But, one nature center director chose to use feeding time as an important lesson for visiting school children. At snake feeding time mice, raised at the nature center for this purpose like cattle for McDonald's predatory people (remember Big Mac's and fries?), were placed in the reptile enclosure. Shortly, both predator and prey became aware of each other's presence and after a brief scuffle and strangulating squeeze one or another of the snakes could be observed contentedly (remember, all wild animals think like people!) disarticulating its lower jaw and with measured tractor motion, slowly working the hapless mouse (remember Mickey and Fievel the mice?) nose-first, down its gullet until all that remained of the mouse was the tip of its slowly disappearing tail and a lump in the snake. All went well for some time until adults began to hear of this exercise in sadism and a public hew and cry went up to cease and desist this abnormal and perverted violence. Even the local newspaper went into action with a large and inflammatory editorial denouncing this uncalled for activity.

Ultimately, the nature center director survived the onslaught and today has moved on to permitting visitors watch captive raptors swoop across a large room and snatch warm, frightened mice from the floor for dinner.

But, the pervasive concern is what those hopefully well-meaning protesters thought this was all about. Did they assume that in the wild kibbled dog food sprinkles down on a regular schedule from a heavenly commissary to feed all "Creatures Great and Small"? Did their Bambi, Beauty and Bounteous Love ideas completely preclude the fact that every hour of every day snakes as well as a multitude of other animals were by fang, claw, constriction and venom terminating the lives (killing - there, I said it!) of sweet little brown-eyed creatures and eating them? Why should it be different in the nature center?

What of Cultural History?

Cultural history creates a further difficulty. A talk entitled "The Hot Interpretation of War and Conflict" (Uzzell, 1989) was presented at the 2nd World Congress on Heritage Presentation and Interpretation by Dr. David L. Uzzell. He talked of the tendency in interpreting war and the instruments of war to emphasize the glory and adventure of conflicts or make the visit to a battlefield a pleasant family "day out" rather than really confront the horror of human conflict and make strong points using graphic depictions, even though some might be shocking and traumatic. After completing two weeks of touring park and historic sites in England prior to the conference my wife and I had been struck by the "sanitized" manner of presenting in castle after castle and armory after armory all the equipment of war from the ancient sword, battle axe and mace to rifle, mortar and machine gun of modern warfare. It was common to find the weapons artistically arranged in geometric patterns across walls or in showcases. Interpretation of their uses was all very "proper" - palatable to even the most delicate sensibilities and ages. It was apparent that the interpreters were "tastefully" presenting the information. But, there was no real message; no feeling of discomfort brought about in the audience as there probably should have been given the subject matter.

While visiting Fort Tilden on Sandy Hook, New Jersey, an interpreter stationed there told us that she didn't want to interpret the armament of the fort at all and purposely avoided references to the violence of war. What lesson can we learn from this? Out of sight out of mind? How much better would it have been to present the moral issues of war as well as the physical dimensions of the battlements?

It appears that interpreters can (and unfortunately often do) interpret in grandly boring detail, by genus and species, every organism that walks, crawls, flies, swims, or vegetates and all the chemical constituents of its environment as well as uncounted inanimate objects, artifacts and histories. But, throw in a war, some suffering, a little predation, death and morality and too often we run in panic-stricken flight to the rear.

Our Charge - Be Real and Complete!

It is time to incorporate total honesty, entirety and moral implications into interpretation. But, we will never be able to do it until as interpreters we become completely honest with ourselves and gain an entire understanding of not only the ecosystem but also the moral implications (or moral irrelevance) of all interactions therein as they impinge on EVERY

portion of the earth-animate and inanimate, organic and nonliving. Unless we do this interpretation will cease and become merely insipid information lacking mental provocation in every way.

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