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## Interpretation and Emotion: Making Heritage Live

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Risk, Paul, "Interpretation and Emotion: Making Heritage Live" (1995). *Faculty Publications*. 393.  
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# The 1995 Interpretive Sourcebook

NATIONAL INTERPRETERS WORKSHOP

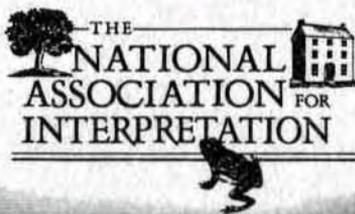


INTERPRETATION

THE REAL | MAGIC

NOVEMBER 27-30, 1995

ORLANDO



# INTERPRETATION AND EMOTION: MAKING HERITAGE LIVE

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- Keynote Address -

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**ABSTRACT:** Effective interpretation must touch emotions if it is to have the greatest desired impact. To be most effective, interpretation must help to develop and enhance a "sense of place" enabling visitors to make the park a part of themselves. Too often, interpreters ignore the intangible aspects of their subjects.

**KEY WORDS:** emotion, heart, intangibles, aesthetics, culture

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What I am about to say may shock those who feel, I think erroneously, that interpreters should be walking environmental encyclopedias ready to divulge highly technical information at a moment's notice. However, I hope the majority of us agree with Freeman Tilden<sup>1</sup> when he said that interpretation was not merely information, but information designed to reveal meanings, to provoke thought. He suggested in these few words that for us to accomplish our mission, it was essential that we understand and constructively use the power of intellectual stimulation to trigger emotion.

Effective heritage interpretation, must then appeal to feelings, to emotions, to the inner self in which intangibles vital to human completeness reside. This is particularly true if it is to promote personal identification with a sense of place and help one develop a perspective of themselves in relation to society and history. Without a clearly developed sense of self and how one relates to the present and all that has gone before, interpretation, particularly cultural interpretation is doomed, at some level, to fail.

Heritage interpretation addresses both natural and cultural history subjects, but the latter may be most critical to provide a foundation of perspective which must be in place before any true and lasting interest in the natural environment can be established. Before one can be very interested in plants, animals, geology and weather they must first have developed a personal stake in their surroundings; a sense of place and its personal value.

Today, in North America and many other highly developed countries, a sense of place is either seriously inhibited or entirely absent. A major cause of this is that most young, competitive people leave the towns and cities in which they were born seeking challenges in "greener pastures." But, one move is seldom the end of the story. Typically, in the course of their working life, many career and location changes take place. Where once multiple generations lived under the same roof, extended families now often live in widely separated locations. The result is a lack of identification with lineage, ancestry, birthplace and

<sup>1</sup> Tilden, Freeman. *Interpreting Our Heritage*. Univ. Of North Carolina Press. 1977.

birthright. Past generations become only vague images. Too often an understanding of local, country or world history is entirely lacking. One of the more frightening aspects of this is that those who have learned nothing from the past may be fated to repeat its most terrible mistakes.

Along with a lack of historical perspective, many people, especially in large cities, are growing up during a period of what might be called the homogenization of society. Almost every place looks like every other place. We tend to dress alike regardless of the continent of our residence. Facilities and amenities have acquired a certain sameness. For example, MacDonal'd's and the ubiquitous "Big Mac" seem to have cropped up throughout the globe. When all this is coupled with the rapid growth of communication technology enabling instant awareness of happenings around the globe, our world shrinks and our experiences become carbon copies.

In much of Europe, Great Britain, portions of South America, Australia and New Zealand there has, since the mid-1800's, been a progressive movement of population from farms to cities. As this migration has taken place, contact with, and understanding of our relationship with the land and the outdoor environment, has diminished almost to the point of disappearance. Now, large urban centers are made up of people with little or no understanding of cause and effect, of the essential source of their food, building materials, or the raw materials from which originate printed matter and clothing. Certainly, it is doubtful that anyone here today is wearing clothing the source of which is animal or plant fiber you have spun into thread and woven into cloth or leather from animals you raised. Neither is it likely that back home all your food is derived entirely from your own crops. And with this separation have come other more subtle attitudinal and perceptual changes. The things we value and that are relevant to us have changed and as our focus has become centered on the manmade, we have become blinded to natural phenomena found even in cities.

### **The Sky**

Jack Borden, whose love of the continually changing spectacle of the sky founded an outdoor education program in the United States called For Spacious Skies<sup>2</sup>. When people in downtown Boston, Massachusetts were asked during a frontal passage producing spectacular cumulus cloud displays in a crystal blue sky to close their eyes and describe the existing sky conditions, they could not do so. The beauties above them had no bearing on their lives. They were likewise oblivious to the calls of songbirds trilling through the metropolitan canyons or wildflowers in vacant city lots. In short, they had developed a "tunnel vision" excluding all but the narrow confines of their self interests. The need for people to "feel" the richness of their cultures and "sense" the beauties of natural resources has never been more needed as we find ourselves more and more able to relegate such things to the trivial. But, the things we trivialize we devalue and ultimately they are lost. Historical buildings and districts disappear in clouds of dust as we worship "progress" and modernity rises over the crushed remains of the past. People treasure monetary and material acquisitions and have no comprehension of the value to the human spirit of diversity and the effect of historical perspective or encounters with tranquility, peace, isolation and aesthetic experiences in the outdoors.

Interpretation can expand our horizons and provide life changing experiences. Rather than through the often demanding and mandatory atmosphere of formal education, most interpretation takes place during leisure time, by choice, and is considered by most audiences to be a form of recreation or enjoyably recreative learning.

There are many ways interpreters may reach the human emotions; the spirit; the heart. Perhaps Jack Borden was right. The sky, particularly the night sky, is a rich resource which tugs at our sense of the infinite and the eternal. During an interpretive star talk in the silence of a velvet black night, our minds

<sup>2</sup> Borden, Jack. Personal Communication.

reach across light years of time and our comprehension stretches unsuccessfully to comprehend. Von Del Chamberlain, now the Director of the Hansen Planetarium in Salt Lake City, Utah, planned and executed the first coordinated effort to train U.S. National Park Service rangers in sky interpretation. His writings<sup>3</sup> have served as a catalyst motivating many interpreters.

### Historical Interpretation

For too many of us, history was introduced by a teacher we were convinced was selected for their antisocial tendencies. It may have been introduced while we were too young and our perspectives limited by immaturity. Whatever else, it was almost without exception, begun at a time irrelevant to us. What if our introduction to the past began with our own family history; with a tracing back from our own birth through father and mother; grandparents and great grandparents? A four generation group sheet accompanied by a pedigree chart and illustrated with small cameo photographs beside each ancestor's name can be a treasure. Certainly children will be more interested in that approach rather than a long dissertation on the Magna Charta. Workshops done by interpreters could provide help in doing the necessary family research and with help from local historians could progress through community to county, province, state, country and world. Educators as well as interpreters would all do well to remember Tilden's urging to start with a person's own experiences.

Emotion can be used even more imaginatively as the interpreter develops creative techniques for leading walks which traverse the mystical boundary between the present and past.

At twilight, near a small midwestern town in the United States, a group of lantern carrying people wend their way into a historic cemetery where amid the monuments and the flickering shadows, a creative interpreter resurrects those who have passed away. Once again, their lives and stories live and for at least a few select people, history becomes the present. In cemeteries, the stories of the past need not be forgotten.

In the darkness of a park in Canada, a uniformed interpreter begins the evening campfire program only to be interrupted by the measured clip clop of a horse approaching. A voice hails the camp and from the past, the ghost of the first Royal Canadian Mounted Police Constable killed in the line of duty materializes from the night, his crimson uniform tunic glowing in the firelight.

At Mt. Rainier National Park in the state of Washington, a group of people on a night nature walk see a dim, flickering light in the pitch blackness of the forest. Cautiously and quietly approaching, they find themselves by an old log cabin. The door creaks open to reveal an old woman in a long dress, her white hair in a bun at the back of her head, who puts down her knitting and in a squeaky, aged voice announces that she's old Ma Longmire, an early settler, long dead, who has come back to see how things are where she and her husband first settled.

The opportunities for 1st person interpretation are limitless and include soldiers, pioneers, explorers, signers of a country's enabling documents, ancient Roman legionnaires or Samurai warriors.

Of course, all of these presentations could have been done more simply by traditional interpretation. And, in many ways, it would have been effective. But, at what level? First person interpretation is rich in essence but limited in detail. Third person, traditional interpretation is weak on essence and strong on detail. There is a place for both types of interpretation. However, if reaching the heart is the goal, those revitalized spirits from the past will win hands down.

<sup>3</sup> Chamberlain, Von Del. (1976). "Interpreting the Sky". In Sharpe, Grant. *Interpreting the Environment*. John Wiley & Sons, Inc.: New York.

Historical artifacts or in some cases, reproductions which can be touched and lifted, bring history to life in a more subtle but nonetheless important manner. The person who handles a sculpture has touched the hand of the artist. He or she who touches a prehistoric arrowhead or spear point reaches through the veil and into the dim, forgotten and largely unknown past in a manner not possible through the mere spoken or written word.

Craft demonstrations allow the rebirth of ancient skills. Observing a glassblower, candle maker, cooper, tanner, silversmith, tinsmith or blacksmith holds visitor attention in a way no unillustrated recitation can. Crowds gather and often stand for extreme lengths of time oblivious of anything but the project unfolding before them.

### **Natural Resource Interpretation**

Perhaps nowhere is it easier to transcend the immediate and the physical than in the outdoors. It may be at the top of a mountain, far above timber line as we watch alpenglow gild the surrounding peaks. Or perhaps it happens as, in solitude, we watch the graceful but predatory soaring of a hawk riding ridge born thermals. These are times when words are superfluous, intrusive, unwarranted and un-needed. These are times an interpreter meets their most intense challenge; that of being quiet, of ceasing to inform or to interpret in the knowledge that they can do nothing to enhance and much to degrade the experience.

Such experiences can alter our lives, change our perspectives and cause us to reorder our priorities. They can be therapeutic and less recreational than re-creational. They can restore our soul and lift us as on eagle wings to peak experiences. Most often, these quiet times are best experienced with a minimum of people.

Open spaces draw our minds and hearts. Our souls extend toward the far horizon. I sat one day at sunset on a lonely point jutting into the Grand Canyon of the Colorado in Arizona. Ravens soared casually past, clowning in their mastery of air and space by folding their wings and tumbling only to spread them again to soar effortlessly away. Violent-green swallows knifed through the air making impossible right angle turns as they banked like feathered supersonic fighter jets and streaked by my head. A mile below in the depths of precambrian rock, a tiny appearing but mighty Colorado River slid silently by. The sun sank, darkness welled upward and my senses were jolted with a sudden awareness of my minute size. With perfect clarity I understood what an anonymous author felt when they wrote:

"The silence roared! I staggered back and heard my varnished ego crack!"

It may be gentle like the call of a Hermit Thrush at dusk, stirring as the cry of a loon or the bugling of a bull elk. It may be awe inspiring like the rifle crack of subzero trees exploding against the background booming and rumble of shifting ice floes in the arctic. It may be the prickles along the back of our neck in response to the minor shift in the distant and echoing howl of a wolf. Whatever else, all these things have in common that they are more than solely biological information on vocal cords and meteorological phenomena. They are the heart and soul of the highest and best interpretive opportunities. When they are coupled with the skill and power of communication; the use of powerful words and phrases, dramatic timing, pauses for effect, variations in pitch, rate and volume and appropriate interpreter silence, they masterfully enhance emotional experiences and leave indelible lifelong impressions.

So, what is it that we do? We are teaching by analogy. We are heritage storytellers.

A wilderness survival student of mine summed it up after narrowly escaping death in a kayaking accident and prolonged and dangerous wait for rescue.

"I couldn't remember all the facts you taught me about characteristics of poisonous plants and such, but I *could* remember all the stories you told about people who made mistakes that caused their death. And, I didn't repeat them. Your stories saved my life."

Some years ago, a pilot film appeared on United States television. Called "Kung Fu," it documented the adventures of a youth of about 12 entering the Shaulin Temple in China to undergo years of education and training in that marshal art. Over the years he learned to cope with physical and emotional stresses, to avoid evil and to move silently even upon rice paper spread on stone floors.

One day, he entered the room in which his blind master stood, walking not on rice paper but, I would have thought, soundlessly on the massive stone blocks of the floor. Immediately, the old sightless master heard him and turning, called him by name.

Shocked, the young man asked, "how is it that you who cannot see can do this thing?" The master responded, "Can you hear your heart beating?" "No," the young apprentice admitted. He could not. "Can you hear the grasshopper at your feet?" Looking down, the awed young man now saw the tiny insect for the first time and of course admitted that he had neither seen nor heard it.

"Then," the old man replied, "the question is not how is it that I who cannot see can do these things, but how is it that you who can, cannot?" "In time," he said, "you too will learn these things."

That wise old man was not talking of heartbeats and insects. He was speaking of sensitivity and awareness to ourselves and our surroundings. He was talking of perception and comprehension of all things around us and an ability to feel and respond to all those with whom we come in contact.

Interpreters, exercising their unique blend of information transmission, sensitivity to surroundings and to visitor needs, the ability to tailor activities to specific situations and locations, to use dramatization, and above all, a special sense of the importance of that which they interpret, are vital if the world's population is to retain or regain an appreciation of the intangible aspects of life. But, they must be unafraid of purposefully presenting their messages in a manner carefully calculated to reach much more than the human head. By knowledge of self and all that is about them, as well as hearing and responding to the needs of all they meet, they must reach the heart as well. If in this we fail, our job as interpreters is woefully incomplete.

# History & Culture

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No discipline is better suited to reward our studies than history.

-Malcom X