

Meaning Making--The Premise and Promise of Interpretation

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ABSTRACT

The challenge of interpretation, on one hand, is delivering fascinating accounts of Scottish natural and cultural heritage to society --from otter biology to castle technology, and from landscape ecology to monarch cosmology. On the other hand, the challenge of interpretation is telling compelling stories -- stories of individuals, of the drama of human sacrifice, of dreams and nightmares realised, and of valour, ingenuity, corruption, bravery and fear. From societal to personal scales, the natural and cultural landscapes of Scotland deserve to be powerfully interpreted.

The challenge of interpreting Scotland will not be in finding subject matter. Topics abound, and each one is potentially both captivating and dismally dull for its intended audience. Nor will the challenge of interpreting Scotland be finding the right media for delivering interpretation to audiences. They, too, abound.

The challenge of interpreting the Scottish landscape will be in revealing to visitors *why* it should be interpreted at all, why it *matters*. This is unlikely to happen if interpretive programs are guided by the goal of "teaching" visitors about your natural and cultural history. Far beyond the dissemination of factual information, interpretation aims to create in visitors meaning, so that they can put a place into personal perspective and identify with it in a way that is more profound and enduring than random fact-learning can alone produce. Interpretation is meaning making.

Interpretation must be viewed not as an information-giving function, per se, but as a mechanism for producing meanings that bond people to the places they visit--and that create in us a sense of place and an empathy for the people who lived in times past. In empathy, not in the facts alone, lie the great lessons that history purports to teach us.

Meaningful places matter to us. Meanings extracted from a visit to a Scottish forest, glen or battlefield, constitute the experience a visitor takes away in memory. In this sense, meaning *is* the experience--the only experience any visitor has with a place. Interpretation, creatively conceived and powerfully delivered, lies at the heart of this process. Interpretation is "meaning making." When a visitor to a place extracts such meanings, the place is assured of living forever in the human mind.

Thank you for that very nice introduction, Professor Blackman. And thanks also to you Hugh and the organizing committee for your hard work over the past year in pulling together all the details of this historic event. Congratulations on convening Scotland's very first national conference on interpretation!

I also want to express my gratitude to Interpret Scotland, the Scottish Interpretation Network, the City of Edinburgh Council and, of course, to Director Blackman and the Royal Botanic Gardens, for making it possible for me to be here with you this morning.

I've got to tell you what an honor it is to be asked to keynote your very first conference on interpretation. I've personally developed a growing reverence for Scotland, mainly because I've always had the great fortune of being led about by some of your greatest natural and cultural heritage interpreters. Have you ever spent a day in highlands with Bill Taylor and Duncan Bryden, or taken an outing to Culladen or Fort George with Chris Tabraham and Emma Carver? Or hung out in a forest with the inimitable Bob Jones?

They're just five among the great Scottish interpreters I could name, but I have to say that some of my most memorable days in this great land of yours have been with them. And I've sometimes been moved while conversing with James Carter and the very inspirational Michael Glen, who in many ways is the reason any of us is here today.

This is my third visit to your country, and they just keep getting better and better. I also have to add that Reading Nigel Tranter's, *The Wallace*, a few years ago has also affected me --mainly by putting powerfully dramatic events into geographic context for me. [Yeah, I saw *Brave Heart*, but as most of you know, it was factually challenged.] I've spent the past two days in Perth doing a workshop with Lorna Brown, Julie Foster and David Downie, and all the other good people at Scottish Natural Heritage. But before I ever knew modern Perth, it was always the place (according to Tranter, anyway) where William Wallace had to sneak into the walled city at night in order to meet with a prostitute. So you can imagine how that recollection colored my perceptions of Perth these last two days! [Hey, she provided important information about people and places he needed to know about.]

Since I'll be talking this morning a lot about "meaning" and "meaningfulness," let me say more or less as a prelude that being in Perth has been very *meaningful* to me.

Now I have to tell you that this has been a *very* hard time for me to be away from home. And that's because the opening day of the baseball season in the US was just three days ago. The team I've followed since childhood is, for the very first time in history, actually a good team. I realize that doesn't mean a lot to most of you. But believe me, it *does* to me. As you'll see shortly, baseball, too, is very *meaningful* to me.

But you'll be glad to know that my topic today isn't exactly baseball, and it isn't Nigel Tranter or William Wallace, either. I want to talk about interpreting Scotland, or rather I should say, about *you* interpreting Scotland.

At the outset, let me warn you that I'm a psychologist, not a student of Scottish natural or cultural history. I really don't know much about things you interpret, or hope to interpret, for your visitors—certainly not as much as all of you do. So my focus today isn't going to be on the factual nature of what goes on in the Scottish natural and cultural landscape, but rather, as you might expect of a psychologist of interpretation, on how it impacts our minds and our points of view.

However, I want to start by telling you that I work *a lot* with naturalists and historians, and people dedicated to the preservation of natural and cultural heritage. I believe that your attempts to document and understand nature and history is one of the most important things human society does. And I have a reason for saying that.

I read a very important book 25 years ago. Alvin Toffler's *Future Shock*. As some of you will recall, Toffler's premise in that book was that biologically the human species adapts slowly, through the natural selection process. So biological change takes place at a snail's pace. Culturally, however, we've changed a lot faster—and much more quickly than our biological make-up can adapt to. According to Toffler, "The amount of cultural change we've experienced just since the Industrial Revolution is equivalent to all the changes that took place between then and the birth of Christ." And biologically, we just haven't kept up. This gap in adaptation has had both physical and psychological ramifications for society that Toffler termed "future shock."

His message is that as the rate of self-inflicted cultural change has outdistanced our ability to adapt biologically, future shock has occurred. One inescapable consequence of future shock has been a break with the past. We're just too hard pressed to stay abreast with what's going on around us today to be able to preoccupy ourselves with what occurred before --whether they be great human triumphs by the likes of a William Wallace, or the spontaneous germination of a tiny new plant species. And so as we spend less and less time concerning ourselves with the past, we experience a break from it—a sort of disconnect with who we are naturally and culturally.

This is precisely the experience of the sudden and traumatic amnesiac, isn't it? Future Shock inflicts on us a kind of amnesia, and our best sources of therapy are people like you and the public and private institutions that society has created specifically to make sure that our sense of "who we are," naturally and culturally, isn't lost in rampant change.

Interpretation, in the sense that I'll talk about today, is key to that sort of therapy...just as *you* are.

So let me start with what I mean by that word, "interpretation."

Although I'm going to deal a lot more with it in the next few minutes, let me just preface things by saying that interpretation, in the sense we use that term in heritage tourism, refers to the process of providing visitors to a place—a place like Perth, Culloden, Loch Lomond, Queen Victoria Forest Park, or the Royal Botanic Garden-- with timely and compelling information. At its most fundamental level, that's what interpretation is supposed to be about.

Heritage interpretation is usually seen as serving a number of purposes. But in most people's minds, enriching visitor experiences is typically first among them when they talk about the kinds of things good interpretation ought to accomplish. And so that's what I'm going to focus on today...enriching experiences through interpretation.

The idea here is that if we give visitors the right information, in the right way, and at the right time, then they'll have a deeper, richer experience. And this has certainly been shown to be true.

From a strict commercial tourism point of view, interpretation makes eminent business sense. We know that tourists not only seek information about the places they visit (while they're on-site, and both before and after their visit), but they *demand* it as part of the experience they're trying to have, and for which they've laid down their *money*.

Of course, since what constitutes a “quality experience” varies widely from visitor to visitor, just how interpretation can best contribute to enriching their experiences is a complex question. *But make no mistake about it*, useful and timely information is central to any visitor's experience. It has a determining affect on their degree of satisfaction and willingness to say positive things about you, your region, your town and your business....even your people.

And as any businessperson knows, word-of-mouth advertising is the most powerful form of marketing. What people say to one another about your product or service will make or break your business.

So from a purely commercial point of view, concentrating on the interpretive dimension of your product is centrally important and shouldn't be left to intuition or guesswork. Successful tourism enterprises know this, and they work as hard to plan and deliver interpretive services as they do other aspects of the their businesses. Again, information seeking is central to any tourist's experience.

Here in the Scotland, where year before last you hosted some 21 million overnight tourists who spent £4.5billion, you have a significant opportunity to capture the minds and hearts...not to mention the *pocketbooks*...of the travelling public by enriching their experiences through interpretation of your natural and cultural heritage.

And since most, if not the vast majority, of these people will be naïve and impressionable when it comes to the features of your site and the stories it offers, imagine what lasting impressions and marketing advances could be made if compelling and provocative interpretive services were purposefully and strategically aimed at enriching their experiences.

Now, just hold on to that thought for a moment, if you would. Because before I can go any further with it, I need to mention some people who aren't here with us today. These would be the "naysayers," people who for whatever reason don't accept what I just said. Some of these people may be your colleagues, or work mates, or worse, your bosses! Chances are they're people with a lot subject matter knowledge about the things you interpret, but perhaps they lack the fire in their bellies when it comes to interpretation. So since they're not here, why don't we do what people usually do in such situations. Let's talk about them.

It sometimes happens when I'm talking to people who are expert in some subject matter that they under-appreciate why interpretation for visitors is so incredibly important. They think..."Why, the importance of this place is self-evident!"

They look around at their surroundings and they see powerfully meaningful things that have natural and historic significance. Indeed, to them, the natural and cultural landscape is just screaming its meanings. And they see it all.

Indeed they *know* what that significance is because they've studied it and thought about it and processed it over and over in their minds. Some have even dedicated their professional lives to it. Almost all have been inspired by it, or moved by it, or deeply intrigued by it.

Most can readily appreciate the beauty in nature's design and the mind-boggling mystery of evolution, and many can tune into the sort of cosmic humility one feels when we contemplate the utterly awesome grand scale of nature. When it comes to history, these people can readily see in their own mind's eye just how things looked and felt and smelled back in the old days, how things *really were*, and what it must have been *like* to have lived then. The Scottish natural and cultural landscapes are absolutely *full* of meaning for experts. They think, "this place doesn't need a bunch of people running around giving talks for tourists, leading guided tours and putting up exhibits and roadside signs. Those things just clutter the landscape, and anyway, they *sugarcoat* what this place is really all about!" Kind of like *Brave Heart*, I suppose.

And some especially macho experts might even believe that if those tourists want to *truly* know what the natural and cultural history of this place are all about, then they should get off their bottoms and go study it at a university somewhere --you know, where *real* facts are taught. In fact, some experts may even look down their noses at those other people (people like tourists,

especially *outside* tourists) who are readily willing to accept what they perceive to be a shallow and superficial version of the land and its heritage. Again, kind of like *Brave Heart*.

This is *totally* understandable. Experts...like most of you...are capable of self-interpreting this place. You instinctively attach all kinds of meanings to places and objects that other people don't even see. Though you scarcely recognize that it's happening, your expert knowledge allows you to do that. You don't *need*, and often you don't *want*, any help from the outside. Your interpretation of Scotland comes from inside your own heads. That's where all the meanings are. But a question to ask yourself, of course, is whether you're very representative, in this respect, of the rest of us.

I know how that goes because, like everyone, I'm an expert at some things. Not many, but some. And one of them is baseball. I played organized baseball for 37 consecutive years, and was even *paid* to play it one year! I sleep, eat and drink baseball twelve months a year. I study it, I'm a serious historian of it, and it defines a part of my life that mere fans can't often appreciate. Yes, I am a baseball junkie and I have no desire to reform.

When it comes to baseball, I'm fascinated by esoteric details such as how the balls are made and which Midwest river the mud comes from that they're rubbed with before being put into play in a major league ballpark. I've studied the evolution of stitching patterns in the gloves, the type of wood used to make the bats, not to mention scores of statistics (baseball, if nothing else, is a sport of *endless* numbers).

All these things are deeply meaningful to me, and the sport itself is profoundly symbolic of my culture, of my childhood neighborhood and best mates, of first dates, songs and musical groups, times spent with family in ballparks when I played and when we went together as spectators. Baseball is, and will forever remain, central to my life. But to virtually any of you, even sports fans among you, it is probably a meaningless foreign thing that pales in humble insignificance to football and cricket, and looks about as interesting as a pile of mud. This makes us different.

Knowing this about me, it won't surprise you to hear that, before I die, I intend to make a pilgrimage of sorts to the Major League Baseball Hall of Fame in Cooperstown, New York. I've read everything there is to read about that place, and going there promises to be an incredible

experience for me. As you would expect, the "Great Hall" (or "Baseball Mahal," as I call it) is filled with exhibits, and there are life-size dioramas and special audio rooms where you can see historic memorabilia, learn about the evolution of the game, and listen to famous broadcasts of games played nearly a century ago. The average length of stay for visitors at the Baseball Hall of Fame is 2.5 hours. There is no way that I'll spend less than 8 hours there. That should tell you something.

Now I'll bet all of you are thinking, "Gee that sounds great, Sam. Wish I could go!"

But you know what? As tourists in New York, *you* too just might just enjoy a 2-hour walk through the Baseball Hall of Fame in Cooperstown. You'd probably find the experience entertaining and, depending on your view of the US, you might also be interested...or possibly even *moved*...by how that game has influenced and mirrored our culture over the past 100 years.

No, you could *never* extract the meaning from it that *I* will. But fortunately, the exhibits there don't emphasize the numbers, bat manufacturing, the stitching in gloves or other arcane baseball facts. Sure, that information is there, and very strange people like me know how to find it, but normal visitors aren't confronted with it.

That's because the exhibit designers *wisely* didn't design the experience for people like me. They designed it for visitors who were curious enough to be there, but not well-versed or even interested in the hardcore technicalities of the game. The intent of the designers wasn't to feed *my* esoteric needs, but rather to impact *your* point of view about the game of baseball. They don't need to impact *my* point of view. I'm an expert and I'm already in love with the game.

So instead of being taught about the esoteric facts of baseball, you're treated to a sort of show—a drama about baseball's meaning in American culture. Instead of exhibits on bat making and glove stitching, you'll see first and foremost the *human* side of baseball--the personalities, the accomplishments of great and famous players, the triumphs of those who overcame adversity to excel, and the meaning of the sport and its contribution to the evolution of the American psyche. Baseball's our national pastime mainly because anyone, young or old, can play that wonderful game. These are the stories told in the Baseball Hall of Fame, and these are the meanings that visitors, both national and international, leave with.

In this important sense, I'm not representative of the target audience at the Baseball Hall of Fame any more than you or your colleagues are representative of the audience of programs that would interpret the places you work. In fact, *you're* more representative of the target audience at Cooperstown than I am. Just as *I* may be more representative of your audiences than a lot of you are.

Many, and probably most, of your visitors are people who not only need, but WANT, help in attaching meanings to the Scottish landscape. To them, the same meaningful landscape that you see through your expert eyes is, at first glance, nothing more than a meaningless collection of green and old stuff—and for some of them, about as interesting...as a pile of mud.

They can have precisely the same physical experience as you, standing on the same piece of ground, under the same sky, and looking at the same scene or object, and yet have a completely different mental experience than you'll be having. This is basic psychology.

Human experience...in other words, what *is*...is purely and wholly a mental phenomenon. Nothing physical ever impacts our reality until it's registered and interpreted by the brain. If you don't believe that, then try disconnecting your central nervous system and then plunging your hand into an open flame. You won't experience it. But if you suddenly reconnect, you'll have a deeply meaningful experience. Won't you?

Likewise, the natural and cultural histories of Scotland don't exist as such...as part of our reality...until our brains interpret them. That is, until we give them meaning. And the meanings we give them...that is, the story of a place that we mentally construct...determines and *defines* our experience there. Until we mentally process the rich natural and cultural heritage of Scotland, ladies and gentlemen, it simply doesn't *exist*...and it can't impact our point of view.

The point I'm trying to make is simply that, without planned interpretation that's been purposefully *designed and delivered* to create meanings in your visitors' minds, the places you work, and what they symbolize and signify naturally and historically to you experts, will never impact the common person's point of view the way they impact yours.

To them, your site or region may simply be a place where they spent a day or two, took a walk, ate a sausage roll, and bought some petrol. To the tour operator who's trying to make a living, this may be justifiably quite enough as long as the visitors spend some cash. But to those of you who see it as your life's work to inspire in visitors the same love and symbolic appreciation you feel for that place, such a prospect is probably unacceptable.

What this means, and the challenges you face in bringing your site to life, are what I want to address in the rest of my presentation this morning.

So what might these challenges be?

The challenge of interpretation, on one hand, is delivering fascinating accounts of Scottish natural and cultural heritage to society --from otter biology to castle technology, and from landscape ecology to monarch cosmology. On the other hand, the challenge of interpretation is telling compelling stories -- stories of individuals, of the drama of human sacrifice, of dreams and nightmares realised, and of valour, ingenuity, corruption, bravery and fear.

But which is more important?...the story of the otter...of the castle...of cosmology?...Or is it the story of one person's experience with these things?

The answer, of course, is that they're *all* important...though not necessarily to all audiences at all times. From societal to personal scales, the natural and cultural landscapes of Scotland deserve to be powerfully interpreted. You are so blessed in this country with truly dramatic raw material that subject matter isn't going to be a problem. Everywhere you look in Scotland, something catches the eye, at least the eye of this foreigner. There's a story here for *everyone*.

So obviously, the challenge won't be in finding subject matter. Topics abound, and each one is potentially both captivating and dismally dull for its intended audience, depending on how it's packaged and delivered.

Nor will your challenge be in finding the right media for delivering interpretation to audiences. They, too, abound, from personally guided tours and presentations, to costumed interpretation

and living history, to exhibitions and signs at roadside attractions, print and broadcast media...and, of course, the internet.

But be careful with media. As the Canadian philosopher, Marshall McLuhan, reminded us during the 1960s humanities revolution, the medium can be the message itself, and may in fact *get in the way* of the real message you're trying to get across. This, for example, is what occurred to travel writer Bill Bryson, in his wonderful book on Australia called *In a Sunburned Country*, when he wrote this account of an interpretive performance he watched in the town of Glenrowan about the demise of Bush Ranger, Ned Kelly. The performance was titled "Ned Kelly's Last Stand":

We bought tickets and shuffled through a door into a dim room where the spectacle was to begin. The space was designed to look like an old saloon. In the middle were benches for the audience. Before us, in a deep gloom, we could just make out the shapes of furniture and seated dummies. After a few minutes, the lights dimmed altogether, there was a sudden very loud bang of gunfire, and the performance began.

Well, call me a Whimp, drop a brick shithouse on me, but I can honestly say that I have never seen anything so wonderfully, so delightfully, so monumentally *bad* as "Ned Kelly's Last Stand." It was so bad it was worth every penny. Actually, it was so bad it was worth *more* than we paid. For the next thirty five minutes we proceeded through a series of rooms where we watch home-made dummies, each with a frozen smile and a mop of hair that brought to mind windblown pubis, reenacting various scenes from the famous Kelly shoot-out in a *random and deliriously incoherent* way. Occasionally one of the dummies would turn a stiff head or jerk up a forearm to fire a pistol, though not necessarily in synch with the narrative. Meanwhile, around each room lots of other mechanical events were taking place--empty chairs rocked, cupboard doors *mysteriously opened and shut*, player pianos played, a figure of a boy on a trapeze (hey, why not?) swung back and forth amid the rafters.

Do you know those fairground stalls where you fire a rifle at assorted targets to make an outhouse door swing open or a stuffed chicken fall over? Well, this

reminded me of that, only much worse. The narrative, insofar as it could be heard above the competing noises, made no sense at all. (p. 166).

So what do you think? Did this interpretive performance leave its audience with a sense of wonder and respect for the significance of Ned Kelly's last stand and why it was an important moment in Australia's heritage?

Did the portrayal of the events that occurred create *meaning* for the audience? Did it create *empathy* for the individuals being portrayed? Well, I guess it's fair to say that since Bill Bryson was *in* that audience, and since *he* doesn't appear to think it did, the answer must be NO.

I think his description of interpretation gone awry shows that although entertainment is essential in any communication event targeting a noncaptive audience, sheer entertainment is bound to fail when it becomes the end in and of itself. Information content and delivery systems have to be tailored to an audience, and they have to be updated or changed as audiences change.

But still, with some common sense and an understanding of who your market is, media and subject matter are the least of your challenges in interpreting Scotland.

Rather, the most serious challenge of interpreting the natural and cultural heritage of Scotland may effectively lie at the more subtle level of your motivation for doing it at all. What's your purpose? To entertain visitors, to teach them your natural history, to instruct them in historic fact, or is there something more you want to accomplish by interpreting this place?

I think there might be.

My experience tells me that the most difficult challenge you face will be in revealing to *visitors* why the place they've visited is even important to them--why it should even *matter to them*.

Again, in my experience, such a revelation is unlikely to happen if interpretive programs are guided by the goal of simply entertaining tourists or of "teaching" them about the esoteric history, biology or geology of a place, regardless of how interesting those things may be for many of us here today.

Far beyond the entertainment, and far beyond the dissemination of factual information, contemporary interpretation aims to create first and foremost in visitors *meaning*...meanings that allow visitors to put a place, or thing, or time period, or concept into some sort of personal perspective and to identify with it in a way that's more profound and more enduring than random fact-learning can alone produce...regardless of how fascinating or even mind-boggling those facts are.

We're all familiar with the "Guinness World Records" and the old newspaper column, "Ripley's Believe It or Not." How many of those have you read or heard about during your life? Growing up, I must have read hundreds of them. And every one included an account of some sort of truly astonishing human feat. But, honestly, today I cannot remember even *one* of them. Can you? Each one served the purpose of momentary entertainment, but none of them contained a *moral*, *a lesson* or something that my mind could create a meaning from. They were just isolated, albeit mind-boggling, facts that went no further than to get a "wow"...no less so than "Ned Kelly's Last Stand," as Bryson described it.

Yes, as I argued in my tongue-in-cheek unveiling of "Knockan Theory" last night, topics and communication media need to be spiced up for a pleasure-seeking audience like tourists and even local visitors, and yes, factual information is the basis for all interpretation, but the media and the facts need to be chosen carefully with an eye toward transferring meanings to visitors (what I call "themes," as some of you know). That is, the facts and media aren't an end in themselves. They're merely tools we use to get meanings across. As my colleague, Michael Richards at Old Parliament House in Canberra, Australia said after a recent workshop I did there, "Oh I get it, Sam! You're saying that at its best, interpretation is about *meaning making*."

Nicely said, Michael. And if I say nothing else of value today, I hope you'll embrace the idea that heritage interpretation (whether it's natural or cultural heritage you're interpreting) must be viewed, not as an information-giving function, per se, but as a mechanism for producing *meanings that bond* people to the places they visit--and that create in contemporary visitors a degree of *empathy* for the people who lived in times past. In empathy, not in the facts alone, lie the great lessons that history purports to teach us.

The lessons, of course, are not only amnesia therapy for victims of future shock, but they themselves contain the meanings that define our experience in a place, and make us glad that places like that have been preserved for us to visit. And isn't that what we all want? For other people to care about such places the way we do?

You see, meaningful places *matter* to us. That is, when we attach meaning to places, those places come to be important to us. Meanings extracted from a visit to a park or forest or museum constitute the *only* experience a visitor takes away in memory—this is *their* hands plunging into the open flame.

In this sense, meaning *is* the experience, and the experience of visitors can only lie in the meanings they attach to places and events and objects. The premise of my presentation today is that interpretation, creatively conceived and powerfully delivered, lies at the heart of this process. Interpretation makes meaning, and in turn, these meanings define the experience that *every* visitor anywhere will *ever* have.

Recent research on what visitors to historic sites *want* from their visit, and the nature of the experience they seek, suggests a reason for interpretation that extends far beyond its information-giving function. Two studies conducted by anthropologists...one in an historic town and the other at a national historical park...revealed an interesting impulse in heritage tourists called “numen seeking.”

Now what in the world is that, you're no doubt asking.

“Numen” is a term that humanists, and now anthropologists, have borrowed from Latin to describe what many people want from their excursions into the past. In its etymology, “numen” translates literally as a beckoning from the gods. Metaphorically, it connotes a spiritual force or influence that human beings associate with an object, a phenomenon or a place. According to anthropologists Catherine Cameron and John Gatewood, the concept of numen-seeking was first introduced into the literature in 1958 by Rudolf Otto, in his book on religious experience titled *The Idea of the Holy*, where he described numen as a religious emotion or experience that can be awakened in the presence of something we interpret as being “holy.”

According to Otto, a numinous experience is a sort of religious rapture or ecstasy...a deeply spiritual effect that places and objects can have on us. Other observers have variously described this effect as “a special sociocultural magic” that closely parallels Abraham Maslow’s notion of “peak experiences” and leisure psychologists’ concept of “flow experiences” in outdoor nature-based recreation.

Regardless of where they occur, numinous experiences are typically characterised by three psychological qualities: intense engagement (or focus), a loss of the sense of time passing, and a transcendence of self. For you neurochemists out there, this no doubt means that lots of dopamines and endorphins are flowing during a numinous moment.

Numinous experiences have been repeatedly documented in visitors to heritage sites. Richard Kurin gave a vivid description of these effects in his account of a major Smithsonian travelling exhibition called *America’s Smithsonian* that, over a 2-year period, took 300 of our national treasures from Washington DC to 12 cities across the country.

In his evaluation of the public’s response to *America’s Smithsonian*, Kurin describes a range of emotional reactions to these treasures—the awe struck woman, overwhelmed by the original Rembrandt Peale portrait of George Washington, who actually called it “holy”...the man *describing* his reaction to the to the Abraham Lincoln artefacts as “*IN*describable”...and the many times that museum staff observed people crying in front of exhibit cases.

But numenesque experience isn't just about old things and historic places. Similar accounts have been documented among viewers of a travelling exhibit of fliers that were put up on fences and lamp posts in New York by families looking for lost loved ones in the immediate aftermath of September 11. And, of course, the great conservation writers, David Attenborough, Scots John Muir, Kenny Taylor and Frank Fraser Darling, and US conservationists Rachel Carson and Aldo Leopold, have all invoked descriptions of precisely this kind of rapture associated with natural phenomena and places of sheer fascination and overwhelming natural beauty.

The validity of these descriptions is probably self-evident to a group like this, and probably to just about any group of people. I mean, haven’t we *all* been moved at one time or another by a *place*, a *view*, an *object*, or even by an *idea* that was so profound it transcended us, or provoked

us to contemplate a higher meaning of things—much as occurred to Henry Thoreau during his awakening experiences with nature at Walden Pond in the 1830s?

Two studies by Cameron and Gatewood, one done at the historic industrial town of Bethlehem, Pennsylvania and the other at Gettysburg National Battlefield Park in the US, corroborate Kurin's observations. Cameron and Gatewood, researched outdoor heritage sites and displays that conjured in visitors what they described as "visceral, emotional responses to an earlier event or time." Their findings also showed that in both settings about a third of the visitors were what they called "active numen-seekers"...people who said explicitly that they wanted to experience the setting in highly personal ways. But according to Cameron's and Gatewoods analysis, virtually every visitor has both the desire and the potential to experience history at a numinous level.

In their words, the numen-seeking "impulse is not necessarily exclusive of other motives, such as information seeking and entertainment, but it *is* distinguishable." For example, in the active numen-seeking group, their content analysis of visitors' free-response descriptions of what they "wanted to get out of their visit" included a preponderance of statements such as:

"To develop a feel of the experience of the people of that time, what they were thinking, what their reality was."

"[To get] a feeling of the place, a way to connect with what was."

"I like to reflect and remember it, to be part of it."

And according to Cameron and Gatewood, perhaps the most illustrative numinous remark was:

"I want to feel the aura of the period, gain a sense of connectedness with the way people lived. I want to use my mind to really experience it, not just the externals."

And in research I did two years ago (with Dr. Betty Weiler at Monash University in Australia) on what constitutes quality in nature interpretation, we asked visitors in the Galapagos Islands to comment on anything that stood out in their minds about the interpretation they received from their guides. One man, who was clearly moved by his experience, wrote:

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“I developed a new perspective on what is really important in life and in this world.”

Another wrote about the deep effect her guides' enthusiasm had on her:

"Their eyes nearly light up when they talk about the animals. and now so do mine. Perhaps it's the magic of Galapagos, but even though they [the guides] see the same things day after day, they have the quality and passion of a small child on Christmas morning—anxiously awaiting what they will find. They certainly made my trip the most memorable I'll ever take. No, that's not true—I'm coming back here one day!"

It's clear, isn't it, not only from these research findings, but from our own common experience, that our most profound experiences at natural and cultural sites occur when we engage our minds and emotions with what we're seeing and doing...developing a reverence for what's there or for what occurred there, for how it *really was*...feeling connected to the place and perhaps to the people who've lived or died there....in other words, *empathy*. Ladies and gentlemen, this is not just about learning cool facts in the Guinness Word Record/Ripley's Believe-It-or-Not tradition. It is not an information "carnival" we're talking about here. Something far more profound was going on inside of the heads of the people whose words I just read to you.

At its best, interpretation of anyplace will be aimed at far more than giving fascinating facts about green and old stuff. It will be aimed at producing deep and enduring personal insights into things -- both natural and historic --that have forever changed this world, regardless of how big or tiny they may be. That, I hope you agree, is far more than just learning cool facts about plants, animals, rocks and people.

Interpretation as meaning making will produce not simply scores of properly entertained “fact-knowers” who leave tourism dollars in their wake, but rather it will instil in tourists and local people alike a newfound empathy and reverence for their own natural and cultural place in the universe, their *roots*. It will make them *care*.

Ladies and gentlemen, like all of you, I *know* that feeling. It's what I felt the day I lost myself in the powerful drama told by the exhibits in Holocaust Museum in Washington, DC. It's what I felt the morning Chris Tabraham walked me through the field at Culladen and recounted the chilling events that mothers and siblings of the fallen watched from nearby hillsides. And it's what I felt when I read Nigel Tranter's account of the life of William Wallace. In fact, because

of that book, and because of where I am this morning, I feel it right now as I'm talking to you. And it's undoubtedly how I'm going to feel when I walk among the exhibits in the Baseball Hall of Fame someday.

The lessons of nature and history are powerful teachers. They can provoke us to attach powerfully numinous meanings to places, objects, organisms, times and events, and to the people who lived them. If we will only interpret them well.

You see, interpretation is *not* just entertaining fact giving. It is nothing of the sort. It's meaning making.

The best and most powerful interpretation of your site will be designed and purposefully orchestrated to satisfy the numinous needs of a society in search of its identity...an identity that has been lost somewhere, or confused somehow, in the rampant and ever-accelerating change of our future shocked world.

In this way, a visitor's very presence at a natural or cultural site makes him or her part of the story, part of their *own* heritage...a connection that simply cannot fail to produce deep and enduring meanings about the place. And when these numinous meanings occur in our minds, we'll indeed come to care about the things and the special places that preserve and perpetuate our story, just as the subject-matter experts already care about them. Interpretation is *meaning making*. And this is both the premise and the promise of what each of us in this auditorium can do. Let's do it well.

Thank you for your kind attention.

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