

Historic Southern Indiana

Interpretation Workshop, March 2-4, 1998

Connecting the Tangible to the Intangible

Presented By David Larsen

An Interpretive Dialogue

Discouraged, the interpreter pushed himself away from the computer and headed for the park. It was night and the streets were solemn. He walked to his favorite places, but they were silent. It got worse when he found a stranger sitting on his bench.

"How can I help you?" the stranger asked in cadenced, precise tones.

"I work here. How can I help you?."

The man smiled, "Tell me, what do you do?"

"I'm an interpreter."

"What is an interpreter?"

"I give programs to visitors," the interpreter answered automatically.

"You talk to people for a living.. is that it?"

"It's not that easy. Lots of people don't listen."

"So why do you do it?"

The interpreter took a long look. The stranger was about 60 yrs. old, had a bit of a paunch, and was wearing a blue suit. He was bald but had white hair around the ears and back. He had a bright pink complexion, pouchy cheeks, pinched nose, and heavy glasses in black frames. He looked like a minister.

"I do it because people should know about this place."

"Why is that important?"

Historic Southern Indiana

Interpretation Workshop, March 2-4, 1998

"Lots of people come here but don't care. Most of them don't want to learn."

"Why should they learn about this place?"

"I wish I had an answer that would convince everyone. My job is to make the place speak--if I fail, it could be lost."

The interpreter sat down on the bench and asked the stranger his name.

"I am Harold Durfee Nedlit," the man enunciated. "Do you really believe the park can be lost?"

"Sure. Well..not the place. People have too much need for recreation to neglect the park altogether. And while I think people should be able to have a good time, I'm also sure that what parks are about--what they mean, can be forgotten for the sake of space to jog and fly model airplanes."

"So you believe that parks are threatened." Nedlit looked straight at the interpreter and asked, "Why do we have parks at all?"

The interpreter hesitated, then said, "Because people want them. People like them--they're special."

"Special? So are synagogues, schools, homes..."

"Yes, but parks are specific and special enough to get public money spent. They mean a lot to people."

Nedlit leaned forward. "Twice you've said parks mean something. What do they mean?"

"They mean lots of things. The same park even means different things to different people."

"Are the meanings tied to the place itself?"

"I don't think I understand your question."

"Are the meanings part of the places or can the meanings be separated from the places?"

"I've never really thought about it"

Historic Southern Indiana

Interpretation Workshop, March 2-4, 1998

"You should! This is a fundamental question. How can you describe your work if you don't understand the relationship between your place and what it means?"

Nedlit paused and the interpreter said nothing.

Nedlit started again, "All right, this might help. In the Gettysburg Address, Abraham Lincoln said, 'We can not dedicate-we cannot consecrate-we can not hallow-this ground. The brave men, living and dead, who struggled here, have consecrated it, far above our poor power to add or detract.' Now if Lincoln was correct, all of Gettysburg could become a shopping mall and not change the meanings of what occurred there. If that's so, why should you worry about the condition of this place? Do we really lose anything if we lose the place? You can learn all about the Civil War from books and photographs. Why visit or care about places at all?"

"Because the place itself is powerful. Without the place, meaning would be harder to find and describe--harder to get people excited about--harder to interpret. And without the place people will forget the meaning. That's what we would lose--access to meanings."

Nedlit nodded, "Like you, Lincoln recognized the importance and immediate power of the place. The last part of his speech demands the audience embrace the meaning of the place and take action, He said, 'It is for us, the living, rather to be dedicated here to the unfinished work....'

Lincoln might say that parks are icons or windows to meanings. Each park is a symbol or metaphor for a multitude of concepts and emotions. People are surrounded by these meanings every minute of their lives, but in the day to day economics of things, meanings are difficult to concentrate on and recognize. The very power of parks come from their ability to focus meanings. Each park has its own story or beauty--its own way of speaking to people about meaning. That's why some parks seem to be more powerful than others. Some parks have striking and obvious beauty, stories, and physical attributes--others are more subtle.

"So, I ask you again, why do we have parks?"

The interpreter replied, "Because they are real places that give people access to meanings."

"Yes! Parks possess meanings and have relevance."

"But so many people miss the relevance. They are too involved in their own view or are ignorant of the importance of the place."

"Ah-so why do people come to parks?"

Historic Southern Indiana

Interpretation Workshop, March 2-4, 1998

"To enjoy themselves--though some come because they care. Most visitors are happy to learn if they don't have to work too hard."

"Are they receptive to the meanings of the park?"

"Often they are," the interpreter said, "but the park has to deliver. If you bore visitors, there are always shops and ice cream stands--and if you don't have anything meaningful for visitors, they may not come back or even remember their visit. What's worse, they may not go to the next park. That's a tragedy. Parks help visitors deal with some pretty important stuff--and when we do it right, they are moved."

"You imply that visitors are after something--what?"

"Visitors are after something of value for themselves."

Nedlit kept on, "Even the ones who want to motorboat on reservoirs and drink beer and have fun?"

"Yes, they're not in the office or working a job they hate. But that's my point, they need to have more than fun."

"You want them to find meaning."

The interpreter nodded.

"Now," Nedlit began to review, "I said parks possess meanings and have relevance and you agreed. Then you said visitors are after something of value from themselves. The next question is: What is the job of interpretation?"

"Obviously to bring the two together."

"Do you really believe that?"

"Why wouldn't I?"

"Because earlier you said 'My job is to make the place speak.' You must understand you will never make the place speak. The place has its own power and meanings. Your job is to facilitate a connection between the interests of the visitor and the meanings of the park."

The interpreter stood. "Fine, but in reality it's more complicated than that. You should come on one of my programs tomorrow and ..."

Historic Southern Indiana

Interpretation Workshop, March 2-4, 1998

"Don't you seeee...? Nedlit touched his arm. The interpreter sat back down. "Connecting visitors to meanings is the entire goal. Meanings is more important than knowing! Your job is not to inform or fill people's head with information--unless that is what they want. Giving people information who want information is fine, but it is not interpretation. The majority of your visitors are after meaning--they want to value your resource. To influence them in a memorable way requires interpretation and meaningful experiences. "

"Neither is your job to lead people to your own passionate understandings--those things you think they should know and feel. Your job is to help people discover their own relationship to and their own meanings. When you do your job well, people will often come to conclusions that you do not understand or agree with. So be it. If people come to care for your park, you have done your job!"

The interpreter argued, " What if people want to do something that hurts the park?"

"I am no way suggesting that you allow people to do harm to the place. It would be absurd to let people break the rules.

"The real challenge is how to go about spreading a preservation ethic. We agreed the park has meanings and the visitor is seeking something of personal value. Another way of saying this is that visitors are looking to be provoked and think about meanings in a new way. When that occurs, visitors form a personal relationship with the park--they come to care for the place. And cultivating an attitude of care--raising sensitivity--is what parks can do best.

"Entertainment alone is not enough to form a lasting relations of care on the part of the visitor toward the park. To go beyond entertainment you must base your work on scholarship and well considered information. Knowing and presenting current and accurate information, as well as alternate understandings of the resource, help make the meanings of the park accessible and relevant. You must also think about what various information means to all of your audiences. And, you must be able to provoke new thinking no matter what point of view a visitor might have.

"To be successful, you must view the visitor as sovereign. No matter how much you care about your place and believe its value is apparent, the visitor will ultimately decide whether the park is meaningful and worth preserving. You must meet the visitor at their point of interest, belief, and perspective and attempt to help them think in a new way.

Historic Southern Indiana

Interpretation Workshop, March 2-4, 1998

"In the end, your goal must be to facilitate a connection between the interests of the visitor and the meanings of the park in order to establish some degree of care for the park within the visitor. That, my friend, is the foundation of preservation."

After a while the interpreter said, "I agree the visitor is sovereign, Unfortunately, that worries me."

"Why?"

"I believe in what I talk about. When faced with conflicting viewpoints about the story, I make choices based on my own background, education, and beliefs. How can I interpret other points of view when I don't share those views? Especially if I think and most everyone else thinks they are wrong?"

Nedlit asked, "Are accuracy and the truth the same thing?"

"Probably not. I think information can be accurate, but the same accurate information often leads different people to different conclusions. I guess truth is something people believe in."

"Were you hired to be accurate, or to provide the truth as you perceive it or believe in it?"

The interpreter reacted, "I know I can't present my opinion, no matter how much I believe in it and call it only the truth. But some things people believe in are just crazy."

"Is it possible to accurately describe other points of view, even if one does not agree with them or thinks they are crazy?"

"I hope so. It requires a great deal of knowledge."

Nedlit kept probing, "And whose job is it to decide the values and meanings of the park, the interpreter or the visitor? Do visitors have a right to their own beliefs?"

"The visitor is sovereign."

"Then an accurate description of an alternative point of view, even if its crazy, should ultimately be judged by the audience. I'm not suggesting that all of your programs have to cover every possible perspective. You have to choose material that is accurate and relevant to your audience and leave other material out. That is part of the job. But you should know enough about your subject to respond thoroughly, respectfully, and professionally whenever an alternative view arises. Good interpreters don't create

Historic Southern Indiana

Interpretation Workshop, March 2-4, 1998

fiction--they accurately present multiple points of view--a challenge for any scholar. This shows respect for audiences and allows for communication."

The interpreter's volume increased, "But I do this work because I have passion-I want to save the place!"

Nedlit said deliberately, "Do you have enough passion to subordinate your meanings and understandings-your beliefs, so the visitors can form their own? You will never be able to communicate to the majority of your audiences otherwise."

"But I need to get the preservation message across."

Nedlit answered, "You must understand that your audience will never bother to think in terms of preservation unless they first care about the place."

"So visitors who respond to appeals to preservation already care?"

Yes, What about your audiences who don't care? What about the vast audiences that never visit the park?"

"We have to get them to care." The interpreter went on, "But we also have to get them preserve. The stakes are high-we can't replace what we lose!"

"It is important and it is complicated. If visitors need to care first, preservation will depend on the visitor's access to the meanings of the site. You can give a preservation message successfully as long as you've met the visitors on their own terms and facilitated the visitor's connection to meanings. You have an opportunity to move everyone a little way toward stewardship. The visitor who just wants to drink beer and the pilgrim on a quest both can and need to contribute to the park's survival. It is that simple and that difficult. Difficult because it is easy to preach and think you are interpreting.

After a minute the interpreter said, "This will be hard to do."

"Interpreters facilitate a connection between the interests of the visitor and the meanings of the park by illuminating relevance. Applying this concept takes thought and practice."

Nedlit looked down and rubbed his head with both hands. As a result, his hair stuck straight out on both sides. He was oblivious to his disarray and the winglike effect it gave his face. He squinted towards the interpreter and asked, "What do your parks preserve?"

Historic Southern Indiana

Interpretation Workshop, March 2-4, 1998

The interpreter answered with a straight face, "Buildings and nature."

Nedlit took out a pad of paper and wrote it down. "Is that all?"

"No..artifacts, plants, trees, information, culture, heritage...viewsheds...events... I guess we kind of preserve people or at least information about people. You'd have to say that about events too I suppose." Nedlit kept writing. "Okay, we also preserve ecosystems and natural processes like glaciation. We preserve animals, wilderness, objects, and streams..."

"What about ideas? Do parks preserve ideas?"

"Uh...yeah. You could say we preserve the ideas of Democracy at the National Mall. We also promote the idea of preservation."

"You said you preserve systems and you supplied some natural example. What about cultural examples--say, the system of slavery?"

"We don't preserve slavery itself, but we do preserve information, objects, and buildings that involve slavery."

"Yes. Now, what about values? Do you preserve the values supported slavery?"

"I hope not. But we do preserve information about those values."

"We preserve things and ideas that people value like beauty and freedom to name a couple."

"Very good." Nedlit showed the interpreter two lists.

buildings wilderness	nature wilderness
nature objects	culture ideas
artifacts information	heritage systems
plants streams	events values
trees	people
people	ecosystems
ecosystems	process
animals	knowledge

"Now," Nedlit demanded, "tell me what the difference between these two lists."

"One list is objects that are real, the other lists abstractions."

Historic Southern Indiana

Interpretation Workshop, March 2-4, 1998

"Natural parks are places where the beauty, the order, and the power of nature are illustrated in a tangible location. Likewise, cultural and historical sites are real locations where visitors seek to find the energy and effect of events and people. Both are physical manifestations of meanings--and all of their pieces: trees, stones, and water; fences, monuments, and furniture,--they all exist to connect an intangible meaning to a physical reality.

"All of interpretation is a process of linking a tangible resource to its intangible meanings. All successful interpretive work, talks, walks, signs, exhibits, videos, -- all make these linkages! When they are most successful, these linkages go beyond words and allow visitors to experience meanings in a personal and sometimes indescribable way."

Nedlit suddenly stood up. He walked over to a trash can and pulled out an empty beer bottle.

"This will do fine," he said. "Now, I want you to tell me what this tangible object means. Supply the linkages."

The interpreter tried. "It's a bottle. It's made of glass, it's brown, it's got a label--it's empty."

"It is all of those things. But don't you see...?" Nedlit moved in close. "You are giving me nothing but information. You are just describing this bottle. I asked you what this bottle means."

The interpreter tried again. "I could use that bottle to talk about good times. It represents all sorts of things in our culture like parties, friends, and relaxation."

"Is that all?"

"No... I could also use the bottle to talk about alcoholism and prohibition and self help groups and the twelve step process."

"Yes, go on."

"Um, I could talk about advertising and glass making. I guess I could talk about trash and recycling. I could talk about the history of brewing. I could also talk about the person who actually drank the beer out of that bottle."

"Yes, yes. Would any of those linkages be incorrect?"

Historic Southern Indiana

Interpretation Workshop, March 2-4, 1998

"Incorrect? They are all just different perspectives on the same object."

"Could you say that revealing the linkages helps one get at the meanings of the tangible object?"

"Sure."

"Very good. Let's take another step. I would like you to try a model."

"I will draw a horizontal line." Nedlit showed the interpreter his pad.

Tangible: Information, Narrative

"How much interpretation sticks to only the information and the narrative? How many programs have you seen that stay on this horizontal line?"

"Way to many--some interpreters give too much detailed information, and some just give trivial information."

"Now I draw a vertical line." Again Nedlit handed over the pad.

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L _____
Tangible: Information, Narrative

E

"How many programs have you seen that stay on this line?"

"I've given those. I dealt too much with raw emotion, concepts, and abstractions. I could see visitor's eyes glaze over."

"You can understand the function of both the tangible and the intangible using the metaphor of art. Blueprint drawings are purely informational illustration. Thorough ones provide critical information, but they don't move the soul, unless you are an architect or builder and can visualize the meaning of the drawings. We can also say

Historic Southern Indiana

Interpretation Workshop, March 2-4, 1998

abstract art represents the intangible. Many of us know nothing of abstract art and fail to see the artist's intent. We are not prepared with the information required to discern the meaning of the piece. Most of us need art that is recognizable, but is somehow moving, meaningful, and even memorable..."

The interpreter interrupted, "I see. What is critical in interpretation is linking the tangible and intangible together. I can't present a program that is primarily information because it will bore visitors to tears. I also can't present a program that is too conceptual, or they will become confused or feel I'm trying to manipulate them. Successful interpretation depends on a link of the two."

"You are more right than you know. Give me an example."

The interpreter thought. "Living history. Visitors love it because it is so tangible. It links to a battlefield that is largely intangible--so difficult to imagine in all its horror--it's too abstract and removed. Living history gives us colors and brass buttons and drawn swords. But there is a problem. Too many living history interpreters just talk about the tangible. They can tell about their buttons, but give you very little meaning.

"What about a natural example?"

Nedlit nodded, then cleared his throat, "Imagine that I am giving an interpretive talk and have an old rifle in my hands. I'll begin:

"This is a model 1841 Harpers Ferry Percussion Rifle. In the 1840's, it represents the very essence of modern times.

"This weapon was made entirely by machine and entirely with interchangeable parts. It loads from the muzzle and is a rifle. This means there are spiral grooves cut into the barrel that send the ball out with a spiral--just like a correctly thrown football. This gives the weapon great accuracy.

"It fires with a percussion system. This means there is no flint and steel, no spark or flash outside of the weapon as there was with the preceding flintlock system. The hammer of this rifle strikes a small percussion cap, shaped like Abraham Lincoln's top hat. A bead of explosive located in the top of the brass ignites when it is hit. This begins the process that sends the bullet on its way.

"I like to think about the human hands that fabricated this rifle. Sometimes I imagine the parlor of the man who helped make it. I think of him living with a large family that includes his father. I like to listen to their conversations.

Historic Southern Indiana

Interpretation Workshop, March 2-4, 1998

"In my mind, the father often says "Son, you have lost the meaning of 1776. I was a craftsman. I spent eight years of my life working as an apprentice to gain the knowledge and skill needed to make an entire weapon with hand tools. I owned those tools. If I did not like the way I was being treated in the factory, I could move away and set up a gun shop anywhere. I had freedom. I controlled my own destiny. I was proud. I was what 1776 was all about.

'But you son. In your wildest dreams you will never own the all the machines it takes to make a rifle now. The day the men who own those machines decide they no longer need you, you will be lost. You have become a slave to those machines and are not a free man.'

"The son responds, 'But Father, I'm making more money than you ever could. My home has carpet, my children go to school, I own books and buy newspapers. You could only afford to buy us things we had to have to stay alive. No Father, I understand what 1776 was all about. I am as free as a man can be.'

Of course the two never understood one another. This leaves us with a question. As we ponder this rifle, a machine made of cold metal and dead wood, we might wonder about the men who made it and ask ourselves: What is the essence of freedom?"

Nedlit held up his hand and the interpreter remained silent. Nedlit scribbled on his pad for a long while, then passed it over.

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Tangible: Information, Narrative

_____ Time _____

The interpreter studied for a few minutes, then said, "I'm afraid I need some explanation."

"You've probably noticed I have set up an x,y axis."

Historic Southern Indiana

Interpretation Workshop, March 2-4, 1998

The interpreter grimaced, "I hate math."

"Bear with me," Nedlit passed it of. "In a conceptual way, I can graph my interpretive program with this tool. This is a diagram that show the intent or plan for my talk. The geometry is not perfect, but the graphic illustration might be helpful.

To begin, I have described the horizontal or tangible line as 'time,' in reference to the time required to present my interpretive program. I also described the intangible line as 'relevance and provocation' referring to the access to meanings I presented in the program.

"I used the rifle as my tangible or icon. The graph illustrates both the tangible information I wanted to convey in my program as well as the broader meanings that information supports. I began by providing some basic information about the rifle. That information is represented by the horizontal line that begins at the meeting of the two axis. The first time I linked the rifle to an intangible meaning was when I made the statement, 'In the 1840s, it represents the very essence of modern times,' Note the number 1 on my graph that labels the first vertical line. I then used that linkage to provide information about how the weapon was made, loaded, and fired. That information is represented by the horizontal line to the right of the 1. I then linked the weapon to the people who may have made it--see number 2. I provided just a bit of information about one gunmaker's living arrangements. I then linked the tangible weapon to the intangibles of craftsmanship and freedom. Then I linked the tangible weapon to the intangibles of craftsmanship and one definition of freedom at number 3. I used the character of the gunmaker's father as a tool for interpretive presentation. He conveyed information about craftsmanship and freedom. Then I linked the intangibles of affluence and a differing definition of freedom to the gun at number 4. The son provided the interpretive presentation vehicle to for information about the Industrial Revolution and some of the attitudes toward freedom that developed with it. Finally, with number 5, I linked the weapon to the very essence of freedom by asking the audience a rhetorical question.

"The graph is a tool that describes--it does not measure or prescribe rules. It accounts for all three elements of a good interpretive product: tangible/intangible linkages--another way of saying relevance, information, and presentation technique. The graph is a tool that helps interpreters organize programs and think through their intent. It is important to know the goal for an interpretive program, as illustrated by the graph, is a cumulative effect on the visitor that connects their interests to meanings. I hoped that each linkage I presented provoked visitors, and the information I provided helped them understand additional meanings. Each linkage provided an opportunity to find those

Historic Southern Indiana

Interpretation Workshop, March 2-4, 1998

meanings. If I am successful, by the end of my program, visitors will think differently about the rifle than when I started."

"I think I know what you mean, but explain 'cumulative' again.

"Some interpreters view their programs as a simple chain of information--no part of which has any more value than the one before. Each part of a talk or stop on a tour is just the next piece of chronology or narrative. More sophisticated interpretation attempts, over the time invested in a piece of interpretive work, to build an idea or set of ideas to some sort of conclusion. That approach to interpretation hopes to have visitors thinking at broader levels of meaning than when they begin.

"Now, any interpretative program is better if it uses tangible/intangible linkages rather than straight information--even when the linkages are unrelated and of more or less equivalent relevance, they provide access for visitors to find meanings. My model talk, though, attempts to link the rifle to a larger context one step at a time. For instance, linking the rifle to modern times allowed me to deliver information about the technology of the 1840s. This linkage allowed me to make another link between the rifle and craftsmanship and then present information about the father's perspective. That linkage supported the next and so on--eventually to the ultimate linkage of the rifle to the visitor's own definition of freedom.

"I can see that. Each linkage revealed its own meaning, built upon other linkages, and considered together, had a total effect."

Nedlit nodded, "The intangible/intangible linkages provided relevance and provocation, the information explained and elaborated on meaning.

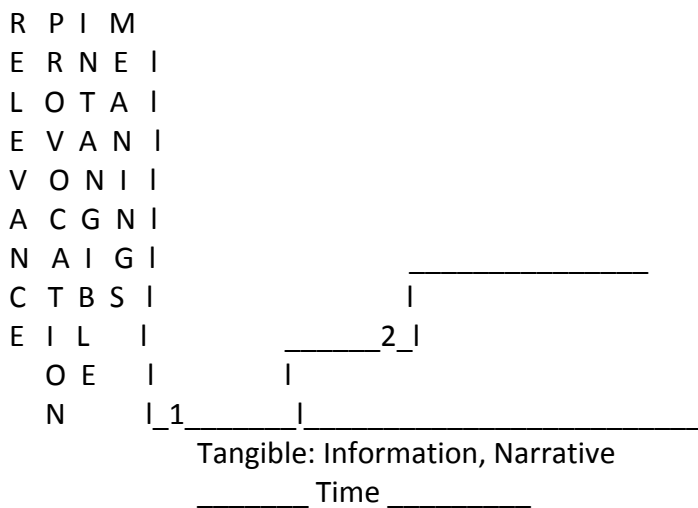
"Now, the graph can be viewed from another perspective. The interpreter has a graph that plans the program and the visitor has an imaginary graph that records how they reacted to the program. The hard thing for interpreters to comprehend is that the visitor's charts will look different."

"You're moving too fast, I'm not following."

"My graph showed the linkages and intent of my program--from my point of view. Remember, however, the visitor is sovereign. The audience will rarely receive the program exactly the way I sent it. For example, I believe many visitors, if asked to draw a tangible/intangible graph for the program I presented, would record this." Again, Nedlit worked on his paper.

Historic Southern Indiana

Interpretation Workshop, March 2-4, 1998



"A visitor who drew this graph would have been bored by the information concerning the production and firing of the weapon. Up to this point, the talk was largely informational. It's also likely that visitor would have found my linkage about freedom to be patronizing. For this person, the linkages that were relevant involved the father and son and different definitions of freedom.

"The cumulative effect for that visitor would be different than I intended. That's not a problem because the visitor has provoked to explore meanings nevertheless."

"You're saying that's okay?," the interpreter asked.

"Yes. Interpretation is art. When you look at a painting, you have your own relationship to the work. You will find your own meaning or you won't. Your understanding of the meaning of the painting may overlap with the artist's intent, but it will surely not coincide exactly. If the piece is truly good you will see personal meanings the artist was never aware of."

"But you're changing everything! My bosses insist I have a theme. You're telling me that the audience doesn't need to get my theme for me to be successful. Hey, I'm happy to drop the theme altogether."

Nedlit answered with a supercilious smile. "Don't you see. I didn't say the interpreter should not have an intended message. Themes for individual programs and park themes are critical! You said yourself your park is about something important! Themes help you focus on what the place is about." He was almost growling. "Look, you can view themes, organizations, correct grammar, good camera shots, presentation techniques, and other such skills as tools. All artists have tools. A painter must learn about color and perspective before the masterpiece is on canvas. A concert cellist must

Historic Southern Indiana

Interpretation Workshop, March 2-4, 1998

practice scales endlessly. However, when the performance occurs, we do not hear those scales--we hear great music.

"No interpreter gets very far without tools. Linkages do not absolve the interpreter from using those tools. Linkages are the vehicles interpreters use to reveal and provoke. But interpreters have to do more. Good interpreters must examine their graphs and programs and find effective presentation techniques for presenting linkages and information. No matter what kind of interpretive media, an interpreter can ruin a perfectly good linkage by delivering it poorly."

The interpreter needed more. "I have problems with the definition of tangibles in your example. Tangibles should be real things. They should be three dimensional. That father and son in your talk weren't real. They're not tangible."

"You are right--strictly speaking, tangibles are real things. In my talk, the rifle was always the tangible linked to a variety of intangibles like craftsmanship, affluence, and freedom. The father and son were interpretive vehicles or techniques that conveyed information about craftsmanship and the industrial Revolution as well as ideas and beliefs about the nature of freedom.

"But you didn't even have a rifle. How could that be a tangible?"

"The rifle did not exist. However, because it is an easily recognizable object, I was able to use an imaginary rifle as a tangible.

"Try not to confine your thinking too closely with definitions. I'm sure you've noticed that in the lists that began all of this I placed some words in both the tangible and intangible columns.

"I did so because we could argue over the categorization of a word like 'wilderness.' Some people see wilderness as a real and definite, touchable place. Others view wilderness as an undefinable idea. For the sake of this discussion, arguing over its categorization does no one any good. Our concern is with the meanings of wilderness and how to communicate that to visitors.

"Similarly, the words tangible and intangible are themselves tools that should be used only if they are helpful for us to understand the process of interpretation. Remember, that is our task. We are describing a process--not cutting absolute linguistic form into stone. If you find other words that work better for you, so be it. You might try 'concrete/abstract' or even stuff/glue."

Historic Southern Indiana

Interpretation Workshop, March 2-4, 1998

"Okay...that means easily recognizable descriptions of simple objects, people, commonly understood concepts, though technically intangibles, can act as vehicles to impart information and explore broader meanings."

"Yes--you might say they can be used quite tangibly. We have been speaking in abstractions. It is up to you to apply them to the specifics. You must think about these ideas and you must practice identifying tangible/intangible linkages, both in your own programs as well as others. Practicing this is essential to success.

"I'm afraid your graph is too confining. I've done good work without it. I'm afraid trying to quantify what you described yourself as art."

"Lot's of interpreters do it intuitively or with other models and tools. And, I agree interpretation is an unquantifiable art. But is not an undescrivable or unlearnable art. The graph is a tool that attempts to describe and teach interpretation--it does not measure or quantify.

"The graph I showed you describes that most basic approach to interpretation--the process of providing information that supports a linkage of tangible and intangible, which provides the opportunity for more information which, in turn, supports another link and on. That approach, consistently applied, is sure to improve the overall effect of your work. As you get better, you could add more tangibles and more complicated linkages to any given program. When you are really proficient, you will be able to link tangibles and intangibles as if they were instruments in a symphony. I'm not sure it will be necessary or even possible to chart those programs. A quality outcome is more important than the graphics that describe it."

Nedlit was not finished. "There is even more to this idea of tangible resources being linked to intangible resources. Are all tangible/intangible linkages equal in their effectiveness?"

"No. You've already shown me that with your description of interpretation as art. The visitor is sovereign. Some linkages work better for some people than others."

"Give me an example."

"No problem," the interpreter answered. "An interpreter could hold up a broken piece of pottery and make a tangible/intangible link to the system and process of archeology. That interpreter could go on and make other linkages to reveal more meanings, or could just provide information on archeology. Now, just the information would make sense to my brother the archeologist, because he could connect the information to what he already knows. For me the linkage would be helpful, but would

Historic Southern Indiana

Interpretation Workshop, March 2-4, 1998

probably need more linkages to find further meaning. So I would say that linking a pottery sherd to the system of archeology would provide limited relevance."

"What was most meaningful to you in my gun talk?"

"The different definitions of freedom and your use of family. You got me thinking about generational conflict--fathers and sons arguing."

Nedlit leaned back, "Now, what do family and freedom have in common?"

The interpreter said, "Just about everyone can relate to them."

"Exactly. You are now approaching the power that makes interpretation most effective. There is a whole group of intangibles we will call 'universal concepts.' Universal concepts are relevant to almost everyone."

"But not everyone will agree on what family or freedom mean."

"They don't have to. Though all people have widely different points of view regarding specific universal concepts, the concepts themselves are relevant to almost everyone."

"Year, I'm thinking of my best programs--the interpretation that seems to work every time. It always involves concepts like beauty, race, change, family, spirit..."

"Give me more."

"Power, pain, uh..., probably nature itself, God or gods, survival, love, hate, sacrifice is another one, maybe bravery and cowardice. The list could go on an on."

""Whoa! It's like mythology. We're talking about the questions and forces and forms of the universe. Universal concepts are the stuff people have been trying to figure out since the beginning of history."

Nedlit smiled, "Some would call them archetypes. They are the intangibles that are most relevant to the most number of people. Intangibles that few people agree on, but most everyone cares about."

"I'm not sure I like the word universal. Will everybody--all cultures and all people relate to these subjects?"

Historic Southern Indiana

Interpretation Workshop, March 2-4, 1998

"Some people will say no and certainly some of those concepts will be more relevant to a given individual than others. However, I need to caution you again--do not be captured by definitions.

"What is important is that some concepts are more relevant to more people. We could argue whether a given concept is universal or not. We should not spend much time doing so because, again, we are reaching for relevance, not drafting a dictionary. Intangible subjects of the very broadest relevance exist and a good interpreter needs to use them."

"I can see how this would work for historical and cultural interpreters--there is so much human to talk about. But I'm not sure it will be effective for natural interpreters."

"It already is! We have not invented anything new about interpretation. We have only described successful interpretation as it already exists. Interpreters who work at natural sites have been connecting specific and tangible flora, fauna, geology, and geography to intangible processes, ecosystems, ideas, and universal concepts since the profession began. Universal concepts like beauty, time, harmony, survival, family reproduction, and change are quite powerful and are at the very heart of quality natural history interpretation. They may be presented with different techniques and have different implications, but natural history interpretation still attempts to place the audience in a relationship with that which is larger than themselves. At times all universal concepts, natural and cultural, are more appropriately experienced than explained--but that is part of your business as well isn't it--revelation I mean?"

"Okay, let me see that list."

Nedlit handed the pad over. The interpreter stared at it for a while, then folded it so all three lists, the tangibles, the intangibles, and the universal concepts were visible.

<u>Tangibles</u>	<u>Intangibles</u>	<u>Universal Concepts</u>
building	streams	nature
artifacts	plants	knowledge
plants	trees	freedom
trees	people	pain
people	ecosystems	race
ecosystems	animals	god
animals	wilderness	power
wilderness	objects	survival
objects	information	spirit
information		bravery
		violence
		hate
		sacrifice
		beauty
		family
		change

Historic Southern Indiana

Interpretation Workshop, March 2-4, 1998

Then the interpreter said, "Let's say I'm an interpreter at Prince William Forest, I can see the beginnings of a program here. I could use a place I know for the tangible resource. It's on a stream where the water strikes rocky cliff and has to make a turn. I'd apply that tangible place to the intangible process of erosion. I'd try to frame the whole talk in the universal concept of power. I'd ask the question, 'Which is stronger, rock or water?' The answers would provide information on how the water would eventually dissolve the rock and how the sediment would help carve the stream bed."

"Very nice," Nedlit clapped his hands. "Do you have another?"

"I saw a talk at Mesa Verde once. An interpreter used a piece of corn to describe the system of agriculture used by the Anasazi. But he went further. He established an entire community of people with skills, appreciation of beauty, and spiritual beliefs all built around that piece of corn. I see now I remember his talk because he appealed to universal concepts about family, community, time and religion."

"Notice," Nedlit warned, "not all linkages have to appeal to the universal and when they do, the universal does not have to be overwhelming to be successful. An interpreter can describe a flower within its ecosystem and in the process focus attention so that visitors might notice beauty--a universal concept. If well presented, visitors will come to view the flower as meaningful both because it contributes to the whole as well as for its aesthetic grace. Successful interpretation need not move us to tears--it has to provoke us to care."

The interpreter picked up the pad again and began to draw. "I'm getting it now. My supervisor showed me a chart this morning and I didn't really understand what he meant. It's been annoying me all day."

Compelling story Compellingly told	Compelling story Mundanelly told
Mundane story Compellingly told	Mundane story Mundanelly told

The interpreter explained, "I think the Compelling Story Compellingly Told quadrant describes interpretation that appeals to significant meanings and universal concepts. That would be the Compelling Story part. The Compellingly Told part would occur when an interpreter used all the interpretive tools you described."

Nedlit said, "I see your point. That, of course, would be the best kind of interpretation."

Historic Southern Indiana

Interpretation Workshop, March 2-4, 1998

"The Compelling Story, Mundanely Told quadrant describes interpreters who are working with meaningful material, but for whatever reason, don't communicate it well. The Mundane Story, Compellingly Told represents all those interpreters who can put on a great show, but don't get at the meanings. Visitors are entertained by those interpreters but the park doesn't benefit much. Visitors walk away from those interpreters saying 'Wasn't she talented' but those visitors aren't coming to positions of care. Worse still, other interpreters think those interpreters are doing the job as well as it can be done. Mundane Story, Mundanely Told illustrates interpreters who don't understand the meaning of the park and who don't have or use the communication tools."

"Do you realize you have just articulated a standard? A high standard! You have just said that presenting information in a skillful way is not good enough. You're saying skillful presentation alone is not even interpretation--it's just good public speaking. Interpretation is more than information--it requires the skillful revelation of meanings. Interpretation is art that links the tangible resource to broader meanings."

"Yeah," the interpreter responded and was silent. Finally he said, "It's scary."

"I still can't prove why."

Nedlit's voice was almost soothing. "You will never prove the importance of this place to everyone. You will only be able to create opportunities for people to realize it on their own. You must be an artist."

"Being an artist is hard work and takes courage. In your field, the job is for professionals who will work and struggle and risk to allow other to find their own meanings--that is the critical part, you must strive to be an artist and a teacher. Your art must be designed to communicate, not just express. Be such an artist and you will persuade. You will not change all the attitudes you hope to--at least not very soon. But if you are an artist and a teacher, not a showman, if you deal with meanings what are accessible to your audiences, you will move that audience to care--and you will acquire power. An artist must be on a quest and a quest is a lonely and dangerous thing. You may fail with the greatest of intentions. But if you do your job well, the world will have to care."

Again there was silence. Eventually Nedlit spoke, "Really, we haven't been talking about new ideas. We've just arranged them in a different way. Everyone struggles for meanings and everyone want to communicate. This tangible/intangible model is just your description of what interpretation does--it won't work for everyone. Those it does not work for can find other descriptions just as powerful and useful--and they will also find those descriptions in themselves."

Historic Southern Indiana

Interpretation Workshop, March 2-4, 1998

Nedlit and the interpreter sat on the bench, a place the interpreter had known for years. There, he had discussed a hundred different programs and talked with and about thousands of visitors. A nail was working up out of the wood. The interpreter pressed it with his thumb. Suddenly he raised his head and looked Nedlit in the eye.

"When will you be back?" asked the interpreter.

Nedlit smiled, "Don't you seeee.... the next time you need me."