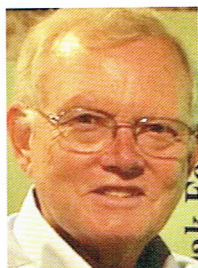


Misinformation and the Responsibility of Interpretation

Interpreters are valued and trusted. In our roles as tour guides, naturalists, historians, archeologists, educators, and the many other specialties of our trade, we are seen as knowledgeable experts providing fact-based, research-based information, stories, and experiences. And we gladly provide this service to all people from every walk of life.



JAY MILLER

Enos Mills said our work is to inspire, Tilden said we are to reveal a whole concept through the art of interpretation, Beck and Cable say our stories give a sense of who we are, Sam Ham says our expertise helps people make meaning from things they may know little about. They all tell us that we have a substantial responsibility: A responsibility to our visitor, to the resource we interpret, and to getting it right—to doing our best to not spread misinformation.

Misinformation comes in several forms. One is the obvious: getting the facts wrong, making misstatements, errors in the information. Facts are the foundation for good interpretation and we deal in a lot of facts. Getting something wrong is pretty easy, and pretty easy to correct once the error is pointed out. The worst case is when a visitor points out our mistake in front

of an audience of 100. But recognizing an error and getting it right is part of the job. We do the research, make the corrections, and we improve.

Accuracy is part of the responsibility of interpretation.

Another error of misinformation is telling only part of the story. In my presentation titled, “Tell the Whole Story,” I note that events we interpret have multiple sides and our obligation for truth requires that we seek out and tell each side. The adage, “The winners write the history,” is true, and that’s the first story we learn and what we tend to tell. But in digging deeper we learn the rest of the story, and our interpretation reveals deeper meanings. Beck and Cable state that interpreters may be tempted to select the easy stories and avoid the more contentious or grim side of history, yet this avoids part of the truth.

Finding a balance is part of the responsibility of interpretation.

A third error is what I call “pat the bunny” interpretation—an error of omission. This is an error of superficial interpretation where the interpreter creates worthwhile experiences but never reaches beyond the obvious, superficial level. Patting a bunny or touching a snake are great interactions and can have profound results, but that’s not all there is. Depending on the audience, interpretation should create experiences that engage visitors

with the larger concepts of how our world works. Interpretation takes an example, a single item, and connects it to a whole concept. To paraphrase John Muir: Take hold of one thing and you find it hitched to everything else in the universe. We may not want to go that far, but when you do snake programs the snake is the beginning point that connects with a larger concept.

- Habitat? That’s your story, the snake is the gateway.
- Territory? That’s your story, the snake is the gateway.
- Climate? That’s your story, the snake is the gateway.
- Adaptation? Camouflage? Predator/Prey? Your tool is the snake, your goal is understanding of the larger concept.

John Muir also said, “I’ll...get as near the heart of the world as I can.” Connecting to a larger truth is a responsibility of interpretation.

Interpreters are valued and trusted, and that comes with responsibilities for accuracy, establishing balance by telling all sides, and connecting to big concepts that explain our world.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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