

# THE GIFTS OF INTERPRETATION

*Fifteen Guiding Principles for  
Interpreting Nature and Culture*



*Third Edition*

LARRY BECK

TED T. CABLE

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Interpreting Nature and Culture

*Third Edition*



**Larry Beck**

**Ted T. Cable**



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*For our sons:*

Spencer and Benjamin  
—L.B.

Tim, Eric, and Scott  
—T.C.

*Aye, starry-eyed did I rejoice  
With marvel of a child  
And there were those who heard my voice  
Although my words were wild:  
So as I go my wistful way,  
With worship let me sing,  
And treasure to my farewell day  
God's Gift of Wondering.*

—Robert Service

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# Foreword

## *to the Third Edition*

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By **Sam H. Ham, Ph.D.**

A person engages in a communication event unaware that it's something that someone else, somewhere, has called an "interpretive this or that." So now what happens? What's in store for the person? Who are the people behind the "this or that," and what are they trying to achieve with it? What principles guided their planning, development and delivery of it? How did they even know where to start? What was their thinking?

These are the questions awaiting the reader of *The Gifts of Interpretation—Fifteen Guiding Principles for Interpreting Nature and Culture*. What my colleagues, Larry Beck and Ted Cable, have produced here is certainly a how-to book; but it is not so much a how-to-do book (as they point out, many other good ones are available today), but rather this is a how-to-think book. It is a scholar's view of interpretation, rooted in seminal literatures, not only about interpretation itself, but about knowledge, philosophy, science, and human behavior. Such books are rare in the interpretation field, notwithstanding the classics given us by the likes of Freeman Tilden, Enos Mills, and others. Indeed, in the contemporary literature on interpretation, this volume stands alone.

*The Gifts of Interpretation* is a masterful collection of the authors' thoughts, views, and guiding philosophies about the act and process of interpretation. It is written as well for the university classroom as it is for the interpreter lying awake at night contemplating the value and potential of her work. It addresses itself to the real world, the one in which the interpreter on the other end of the "this or that" actually inhabits, and it speaks powerful ideas in plain and engaging language that will potentially transform one's thinking. All told, I cannot help but feel that this work is itself destined to be a classic in the interpretation literature.

As did its two previous editions, *The Gifts of Interpretation* will make you think! And that is perhaps its single greatest contribution. Many texts tell interpreters what to think, but only rarely do they provoke their readers to do their own thinking—to struggle with inconsistencies, to challenge dogma, and to question what might previously have been their own philosophical comfort zones. Toward this end, Larry and Ted engage their readers in thought, where questions rather than answers are often the outcome.

I am especially pleased to see the essays on “meaning making” and the important recognition that Tilden was correct in advancing his famous dichotomy, “not instruction, but provocation.” Although Tilden was writing about the interface between an interpreter and a visitor, he might well have been writing about books like this one. Interpreters who turn these pages will be motivated to achieve their own brand of excellence, not because of what Larry and Ted tell them, but because of the thinking Larry and Ted provoke them to do for themselves. According to decades of research (and many hundreds of published studies), this quality destines *The Gifts of Interpretation* to become a landmark achievement in the interpretation literature. I believe its impact will be felt for generations.

So what’s with the “gifts” metaphor? Or is it even a metaphor? Admittedly, when I first read the title of this new edition, I wondered whether Ted and Larry would be able to make a case that each of the chapters truly treats something “gift-like” that interpreters bear and give to others (the spark, the revelation, the story, and so forth). Is there something literal in their claim, or is the “gift” link just another warm and fuzzy idea?

Whatever doubts I might have harbored had vanished by the end of the first chapter (The Gift of a Spark). Yes, the spark an interpreter might ignite in someone else is nothing short of a gift. It is given not only freely by the interpreter, but it is the potential to catalyze the spark that validates the interpreter’s role in the first place. It is given of the interpreter’s best quality—love, and its value grows with time in the lives of those who received it.

So went my thinking through each and every one of the fifteen chapters. “Yes,” I thought. “Larry and Ted are right. This too is a gift.” What remains is for interpreters everywhere to realize that they possess these gifts and that the greatest satisfaction any of us ever receives from professional success manifests itself in knowing (truly knowing) at the end of a career that these gifts have been handed off to others countless times. There is little that is tangible or material in the rewards an interpreter hopes will result from a life of work. But, of course, that was never the point of it in the first place. As Larry and Ted remind us in their brilliant concluding chapter (The Gift of Hope):

Many interpreters ... are in their profession for reasons other than financial gain. The challenge and joy of the work itself is rewarding, along with the knowledge that one is giving a gift that cannot be measured monetarily.

I began this foreword with a premise and a fair question about it: A person engages in a communication event unaware that it's something that someone else, somewhere, has called an "interpretive this or that." So now what happens?

In a perfect world, the answer is, "something important." Potentially, many gifts are given in the form of sparks, revelations, and deeply personal connections with things that matter to the recipients; and yes, there is the gift of hope itself. Such gifts can go a long way toward defining and enhancing the human spirit. What better gift could there be, save one? That would be this book itself. Indeed, Larry and Ted have given us yet another gift of seeing interpretation through their eyes. It's a view worth having in my opinion.

**Sam H. Ham, Ph.D.**

Professor and Director  
Center for International Training and Outreach  
Department of Conservation Social Sciences  
University of Idaho

# Foreword

*to the Second Edition*

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**By John C. F. Luzader**

*“Passion!”*

The word resounded throughout the room. “Passion! Love! A deep, emotional feeling for the subject!” Like an evangelical minister, the speaker had jolted us out of our early-morning drowsiness with this emotional outburst. I was sitting in a classroom listening in awe to the impassioned teachings of an “old man” wearing a bolo tie telling all of us what was required to be an outstanding interpreter.

*“Do you know what it takes to be a great interpreter? Passion! Passion! Love! A deep emotional feeling for the subject.”*

Thus began my journey in the field of interpretation. The “old man” was Freeman Tilden and for the next few days, he took the class through his six principles of interpretation which he published as *Interpreting Our Heritage*. It was an exhausting and exhilarating passage into the field and an awakening to the realization that I had much to learn before I could consider myself a professional.

On the last day of the training, Freeman Tilden did a brief wrap-up of our experience, and as he gathered his notes and put on his hat, he turned one last time to the class. “And now it is up to all of you to come up with the seventh, eighth, ninth, and 10th principles of interpretation. Good luck, and have fun!” And with a quick exit out the door, he was gone.

For the next 30 years, I traveled throughout the United States, Canada, and Europe participating in costumed historical events, encampments, and training sessions covering historic themes from the beginnings of European settlements in the New World to post-WWI farms. Through all of these endeavors I regularly returned to Tilden’s principles as a guide.

But I kept wondering why no one had pursued his challenge. Where were the additional principles of interpretation?

The years passed, and I had come to believe that there wouldn’t be a new set of principles for interpretation. I felt that Tilden’s challenge would go un-

answered and we would bog down in a rut of non-experimentation and little growth.

Then in 1998, a friend told me that I needed to look at a new book titled *Interpretation for the 21st Century*. I picked up a copy and opened to the chapter listings, and there it was—Chapter 15: Passion! Not only had the authors gone beyond the boundaries of Tilden’s principles, they had brought the teachings full circle with that powerful word: *Passion!*

Since the day I was made aware of the first edition of this book, I have digested, used, and trained with both texts, *Interpreting Our Heritage* and *Interpretation for the 21st Century*. I have had the pleasure of knowing all three authors. And now I regularly challenge my students with: “It is up to you to come up with the 16th, 17th, and 18th principles of interpretation. The groundwork has been laid by these men.”

**John C. F. Luzader**  
Living Museums of the West

# Foreword

## *to the First Edition*

---

**By Tim Merriman, Ph.D.**

One sunny Saturday, years ago, I led the weekly guided trail hike up into the narrow canyons of sandstone, the Giant City Nature Trail, 10 miles south of Carbondale, Illinois. My group was the usual—25 or so adults and children—all clustered around me for Stop Three, one of my favorites.

“What does this look like to you?” I asked.

“A face,” someone answered. “An Indian face!” another offered.

“Yes, a petroglyph. A face carved by native people who lived here. Do you see the feathers carved above the face?”

They did. I explained that an archaeologist told me that the carving of the face was about 1,000 years old, but the feathers were recent. Someone who knew Indians only from television added the feathers—an act of vandalism. The people were transfixed by the stone face which hovered in time and space within their minds. Physically it was just above waist height to an adult, on a square corner of Mississippian sandstone, an ancient river sandbar.

Then a young girl asked. “Where are the others?”

“What others?” I answered, a little too quickly.

“There must be others.”

“In my five years of walking this trail,” I said confidently, “I’ve never seen others.”

She was sure I was wrong, and asked my permission to look for them. I might have thought she was a pest for being so insistent that day. I hope I didn’t, but I might have.

Much to her delight and my surprise, she found four more before we finished the one-mile hike. She believed there were more. She made important discoveries that I had missed in my hundreds of trips on the very same trail. In the years that followed I found three more, after she had opened my eyes. As I led people on that same trail each week, I began seeing and feeling new things among the familiar.

You have just opened a book that takes us to familiar places in the field of interpretation. And it asks us to see it all differently with a look into the 21st century. Freeman Tilden's book, *Interpreting Our Heritage*, established a firm foundation with six principles of interpretation. Larry Beck and Ted Cable remind us that many others, including Enos Mills, have also written about the principles of interpretation. Their influence on the profession has been significant.

Beck and Cable relate the parallels between Tilden's words and those of Mills. Mills left us incredible stories of his time and all times as he wrote of his experiences on Long's Peak in the Rockies and of his travels. A little more than a decade ago, Enda Mills Kiley, the daughter of Enos Mills, gave me a copy of his book, *The Story of a Thousand Year Old Pine*. Reading it caused me to look at every tree differently, with more interest in its personal story.

The authors have taken on an awesome task and have done it very well. Those of us who have studied, practiced, and taught interpretive principles over the past 30 years have rightfully paid regular homage to Tilden. He spoke to the profession so clearly and eloquently that it became the standard, almost unquestioned. We say "Tilden's six principles of interpretation" as if there could be no more. Who would dare look for more of them?

The authors even find Tilden's principles in need of a tune-up. It seems like a sacrilege. It is not. Like the girl looking for carved faces from the past, we must continue probing our profession for deeper understandings, principles learned from practice, and new challenges. We must provoke ourselves to learn more in both familiar and unfamiliar settings.

It is time to take a different look at the conceptual landscape of interpretation. The extension of the six principles into 15 is interesting. I can almost hear the discussions among "lumpers" and "splitters" about the rightness of the "15." I silently applauded the work of Beck and Cable while reading each chapter. They document very well the many contributors to our knowledge and beliefs about the art and science of interpretation. I find no argument with the number of principles they chose. Their reasons are very well stated. They have created a new teaching and training aid of great value.

Cable and Beck frame their guiding principles around the work of Mills and Tilden, but they also take them into critical new areas for the 21st century. From basic communication techniques to high technology, they have addressed the importance of all forms of communication.

They even point out the political realities of our profession in Chapter 12. Interpretive programs must find relevance to organizational goals, build essential income sources, and seek advocates who will throw their political might behind the program. In this new century and millennium, our business and political skills will be tested along with our interpretive abilities.

Beck and Cable have been good interpreters as well. They will lead you through their thought processes with knowledge, challenges, and thought-provoking stories and ideas. They have studied diverse scholars and interpreters before them (including Bill Lewis, Grant Sharpe, Sam Ham, Terry Tempest Williams, Doug Knudson, and many others) in developing the foundation of their principles. *Interpretation for the 21st Century* will provoke you to think in new ways about this very ancient profession. May we never think we have found the only truths, the one set of principles about our profession. There will always be more to know, and change is one of several immutable rules of life. One day in the future, someone else will build from their ideas to reframe the principles of interpretation again. That is as it should be.

When I was a park interpreter, I experimented with my work with naivete, foolish courage, and passion. I remember first reading Tilden's book and feeling like I had discovered the Holy Grail. It gave this young interpreter with limited experience six general guidelines that helped me to improve. I encourage all interpreters who love to learn and grow to read this book and study Beck and Cable's guiding principles. We must all search the trails ahead. There are many more faces to find and stories to tell.

**Tim Merriman, Ph.D.**

Executive Director  
National Association for Interpretation

# Prologue

---

We walked along the narrow beach between the Pacific surf and high cliffs rising up to Torrey Pines State Reserve near San Diego, California. Our conversation about our work would be interrupted by the pleasant distraction of sandpipers hurrying ahead of us. When tired of being driven down the beach, the birds would burst off the sand and whirl out over the breakers. The flock would flash past, suddenly alight behind us, and resume feeding in our footprints. Gulls floated overhead, motionless, like kites.

Ahead in the distance, high above the cliff, we saw a black bird with a strange object in its beak. Through the binoculars we could see that it was a raven. It flew closer at a leisurely pace. Occasionally, the raven perched on top of a rare Torrey Pine, or on a branch overhanging the cliff, and we could see that the object the raven was holding was a pine cone the size of a softball. What would a raven be doing with a pine cone?

The raven landed on a branch jutting out from the cliff face. Holding the cone in its beak, it looked down at us. After pausing on that perch for a few moments, the raven flew yet closer toward us to a branch extending over the top of the cliff, more than a hundred feet above the beach. After looking directly at us, the raven tossed the cone in our direction. The cone tumbled down, down, down the steep cliff bouncing off rocks, and gaining momentum in the channels of near-vertical gullies, until it came to the bottom of the ridge and skittered a good distance across the sand on the beach to rest at our feet.

We had each witnessed the unlikely prospect of the cone, somehow, careening down the cliff to ultimately land directly in front of us. We were both speechless. After leaning over to pick up the cone we passed it back and forth between us. The raven clearly did not accidentally drop the cone. It did not slip from its beak. The bird was not struggling to hold on to it. Nor did it flush after dropping the cone as if it had been startled.

We could never prove it, but we were convinced the raven gave us the pine cone. When we spoke again it was in quiet tones, seeking meaning in what had

**Interpreters are fortunate to have work that can so profoundly impact others, that is so rewarding and meaningful to conduct, and that lends itself to making the world a better place.**

just happened. We had been talking about our writing projects and the upcoming new edition of this book. Was this an omen, a blessing, an avian endorsement that held some sort of meaning? It was certainly a gift.

Sometimes nature surprises us with tangible gifts—gifts like a cone from a rare Torrey Pine, delivered airmail by a raven. At times, nature’s gift-giving is more subtle and less tangible. In fact, sometimes we might not even notice a gift. But the purpose of this gift was clear, so much so that we have changed the title of this edition of the book and associated each of the 15 principles of interpretation with a gift. These gifts include revelation, provocation, illumination, beauty, joy, passion, hope. We believe these gifts, in sum, are what interpretation is all about.

The *Gifts of Interpretation* suggests principles to use when passing on to others the gifts that nature and culture have bestowed upon us. Interpreters are fortunate to have work that can so profoundly impact others, that is so rewarding and meaningful to conduct, and that lends itself to making the world a better place.

# Preface

---

Interpretation is an educational activity that aims to reveal meanings about our cultural and natural resources. Through various media—including talks, guided tours, and exhibits—interpretation enhances our understanding, appreciation, and, therefore, protection of historic sites and natural wonders. Interpretation is an informational and inspirational process that occurs in our nation’s parks, forests, wildlife refuges, zoos, museums, and cultural sites—places like the Grand Canyon, Yellowstone, Gettysburg National Military Park, the Smithsonian Museums, Yosemite, Mt. Rushmore, Colonial Williamsburg, and Thomas Jefferson’s Monticello in the United States. Well-known international sites include Canada’s Banff National Park, the Great Barrier Reef, the Egyptian pyramids, the Tower of London, and the Great Wall of China. Although such places are inspirational in and of themselves, interpretation can add to a fuller understanding of their beauty and meaning, as well as protect their integrity. This book is intended to contribute to an evolving philosophy of interpretation.

Enos Mills was an interpretive guide in what is now Rocky Mountain National Park from the late 1880s to the early 1920s. He wrote *Adventures of a Nature Guide and Essays in Interpretation*, which was published in 1920. Mills devised a number of principles that laid a philosophical foundation for effective interpretation. He wrote, “A nature guide [i.e., interpreter] is a naturalist who can guide others to the secrets of nature.”<sup>1</sup> He believed in the importance of first-hand, experiential learning. Mills observed, “He who feels the spell of the wild, the rhythmic melody of falling water, the echoes among the crags, the bird songs, the winds in the pines, and the endless beat of waves upon the shore, is in tune with the universe.”<sup>2</sup>

Mills presented a poetic interpretation of the facts of nature. He sought to make his topics meaningful by compiling material from “nature’s storybook” in the form of its “manners and customs, its neighbors and its biography.”<sup>3</sup> Mills

**Interpretation is an informational and inspirational process that occurs in our nation’s parks, forests, wildlife refuges, zoos, museums, and cultural sites.**

developed his principles based upon his own professional experience as an interpreter.

The next landmark contribution to a philosophy of interpretation was Freeman Tilden's *Interpreting Our Heritage*, initially published in 1957.<sup>4</sup> Tilden's six "principles of interpretation" are parallel to those principles championed by Mills. Yet Tilden is far better known and is often credited with first formulating a philosophy of interpretation. The wisdom of Tilden's principles continues to be useful, but we need to relate his work to the present and engage the issues of the future.

Many have since contributed to the body of knowledge about interpretation. For example, the 1980s saw publication of an introductory handbook designed primarily for national park interpreters titled *Interpreting for Park Visitors* by William Lewis.<sup>5</sup> The early 1990s brought Sam Ham's practical sourcebook for "people with big ideas and small budgets" titled *Environmental Interpretation*,<sup>6</sup> which has since been updated. More recent is a comprehensive book designed to cross the boundaries between theory and practice—*Interpretation of Cultural and Natural Resources*.<sup>7</sup> Finally, the National Association for Interpretation is publishing a series of books specifically related to the interpretive field that includes volumes focused on personal interpretation,<sup>8</sup> interpretive writing,<sup>9</sup> interpretive planning,<sup>10</sup> interpretive management,<sup>11</sup> interpretive design,<sup>12</sup> and applied interpretive research.<sup>13</sup>

Tilden's *Interpreting Our Heritage* has remained the standard in terms of an interpretive philosophy. Aspects of Tilden's interpretive principles are timeless, but some elements of his philosophy can benefit from a current perspective. For example, Tilden's third principle of interpretation suggests that interpretation is an art—knowledge treated imaginatively. We agree. However, Tilden continued by noting that interpreters should not "read poems, give a dramatic performance, deliver an oration...or anything as horribly out of place as these." Yet such delivery methods have become increasingly popular in a broad array of interpretive settings because they have proven to be appealing and effective. A second example lies in Tilden's discussion of "gadgetry," which obviously contains no mention of today's advancing technologies and their applications in interpretive venues.

In this book, we restructure Tilden's treatment of interpretation to fit today's world. We update and build upon his well-established six interpretive principles. Then we add nine principles, many of which are grounded in the work of Mills, Tilden, and other pioneering champions of our heritage such as John Muir and Robert Marshall, and more current spokespersons such as Barry Lopez and Terry Tempest Williams. What we present is intended to be a stepping-stone in an evolving philosophy of interpretation.

In addition, in this third edition of the book, we will expand on our notion that interpretation is a gift. Our Conclusion has previously taken this into account in a broad sense. Now, for each of the 15 principles, we title each chapter to highlight how that particular principle is a gift.



This book is written for a broad audience. Students and educators may find it valuable as a supplement to traditional, more comprehensive interpretive textbooks. The book should also be useful to field interpreters and managers at parks, forests, wildlife refuges, museums, zoos, aquariums, historic areas, nature centers, and other tourism sites.

Finally, this book is meant to guide the general reader who wants to explore and learn more about our cultural and natural legacy. For those who enjoy visiting places that commemorate our heritage, an understanding of interpretation offers the means for evaluating interpretive services and interpreting resources personally. We hope all readers find our treatment of an interpretive philosophy useful in their own lives.

# Introduction

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The legacy of any nation is encompassed by its natural landscapes, its wildlife, its historic sites, its people, its culture. As Aldo Leopold stressed, we are members of a community that includes the whole environment.<sup>1</sup> Pride in a place—an understanding of the past, a concern for the present, and a vision for the future—stems from a close attachment to the land and our cultural roots.

In the Preface we acknowledged the contributions of Enos Mills and Freeman Tilden to an evolving interpretive philosophy, and we want to continue with their impact on the broad field of interpretation.

Enos Mills (1870-1922) grew up on a farm in Kansas. In 1884, at the age of 14, he began building a log cabin at the base of Long's Peak in Colorado. In his career he led more than 250 parties of "flatlanders" up the 14,255-foot Long's Peak. He developed a lifelong friendship with John Muir, who helped him broaden his commitment as a crusader for parks and wilderness. Mills was a naturalist, mountain guide, author, and lecturer. He served on the committee that wrote the guiding mandate of the National Park Service Act of 1916:

"To conserve the scenery and the natural and historic objects and the wildlife therein ... as will leave them unimpaired for the enjoyment of future generations." Perhaps the accomplishment in which Mills took the greatest pride was the establishment of Rocky Mountain National Park. In addition to establishing standards of nature guiding and principles of interpretation, Mills developed a vision of the world in which

people might live in harmony with their environment and with each other.

Freeman Tilden (1883-1980) was a native of Massachusetts. He quit a successful career as a writer of fiction and plays to devote himself to conservation, with particular emphasis on the symbolism of national parks in American culture. His best-known work, in interpretive circles, is the classic *Interpreting Our Heritage*. He also wrote *The National Parks* (a comprehensive book that covered the natural, historical, and recreational areas of our national park system) and *The Fifth Essence* (an eloquent book about the important role of private donations in protecting our national parks). Freeman Tilden served as a consultant to four directors of the National Park Service.

**... interpretation gives meaning to a "foreign" landscape or event from the past.**

In the Preface we also addressed interpretation as an informational and inspirational process designed to enhance understanding, appreciation, and protection of our cultural and natural legacy. However, other more familiar meanings of the word interpretation confuse the general public and create controversy within the profession. Tilden observed that the word interpretation has several special implications—translation of a foreign language, for example.<sup>2</sup> For our purposes, interpretation gives meaning to a “foreign” landscape or event from the past. What is being translated (such as, glaciation of Yosemite Valley, ecosystem dynamics at Yellowstone, or events surrounding the battle at Gettysburg) may well be “foreign” to substantial numbers of visitors. The interpreter elucidates technical information about the geology, ecology, or history of an area in a straightforward, understandable, and engaging manner. Mills observed that the effective interpreter has “the faculty of being entertaining, instructive, watchful, and commanding, all without his party realizing it.”<sup>3</sup>

Others have provided great insight into this activity as well. Tilden stated the role of interpretation in a small book titled *The Fifth Essence*:

Vital to any administrative program that envisages the fullest and finest use of [our] Parks—whether areas of solacing wilderness or historic shrines—is the work of creating understanding. It is true that each preserved monument “speaks for itself.” But unfortunately it speaks partly in a language that the average visitor cannot comprehend. Beauty and the majesty of natural forces need no interlocutor. They constitute a personal spiritual experience. But when the question is “why?” or “what?” or “how did this come to be?” [interpretive] people must have the answers. And this requires both patient research and the development of a program fitted to a great variety of needs.<sup>4</sup>

Each interpreter should strive to communicate a sense of place or a sense of historic meaning in a personal, individualized manner.<sup>5</sup> The many facets of interpretation are part of what makes it so fascinating. The most effective interpreters orchestrate their interpretation to elicit a response from the audience: astonishment, wonder, inspiration, action, sometimes tears.

Interpretation is a process, a rendering, by which visitors see, learn, experience, and are inspired firsthand. Interpreters must be skilled in communication and knowledgeable in natural and cultural history consistent with their site’s mission.

At best, interpreters promote enriched recreational experiences that turn to magic, where everything comes together, where participants feel unencumbered delight in knowledge and experience—a great-

**The most effective interpreters orchestrate their interpretation to elicit a response from the audience: astonishment, wonder, inspiration, action, sometimes tears.**

er joy in living, a better understanding of one's place in the overall scheme, a positive hope for the future. Interpretation may provoke visitors to initiate a long-term path of exploration and learning related to cultural or natural history, or both.

Interpretation is important to federal agencies such as the National Park Service, U.S. Forest Service, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, and the Bureau of Land Management. Through interpretation of the landscape comes better visitor understanding of agency policies. Similarly, state, regional, and county natural resource agencies employ interpretation to explain their policies and to protect their sites.

Visitors may learn through interpretation about wise use of our natural resources and ways to minimize our impact on the environment. Good interpretation

encourages greater sensitivity to one's surroundings, heightened ecological and cultural awareness, and meaningful links to the past and future.

Interpretation tells the story behind the scenery or history of an area. It is a process that can help people see beyond their capabilities. Mills wrote, "A day with a nature guide may help to train the eyes and all of the

senses."<sup>6</sup> Interpreters, in sum, help convey a fuller appreciation and understanding of a place.

Interpretation is offered in many forms. Personal interpretation refers to programs in the form of talks, demonstrations, puppet shows, living history, storytelling, nature walks, and tours. These may occur in auditoriums, outdoor arenas (as with the traditional national park campfire program), along a trail, or following a route inside a historic building. Nonpersonal interpretation encompasses everything from self-guided trails, to exhibits, to websites, to interactive computers, to smartphone apps.

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understanding of a place.**

## **Evolution of an Interpretive Philosophy**

Mills was among the first to use the term interpret to describe his nature guiding at Long's Peak, Colorado. He presented various philosophical principles in *Adventures of a Nature Guide and Essays in Interpretation* in 1920. Tilden wrote the first edition of *Interpreting Our Heritage* in 1957. The guiding principles of Mills and Tilden are strikingly similar to each other and to the progressivism education principles of John Dewey, a contemporary of Mills.<sup>7</sup> To track, and credit, the evolution of an interpretive philosophy, we present Tilden's six principles of interpretation along with consistent observations from Mills.

Tilden's First Principle is, "Any interpretation that does not somehow relate what is being displayed or described to something within the personality or experience of the visitor will be sterile."<sup>8</sup> And Enos Mills observed, "The nature

guide is at his best when he discusses facts so that they appeal to the imagination and reason.”<sup>9</sup> He continued, “The nature guide who understands human nature and possesses tact and ingenuity is able to hold divergent interests. ...”<sup>10</sup> This focus on the needs and desires of the visitor is appropriately the first element to be considered by the interpreter.

Tilden’s Second Principle is, “Information, as such, is not interpretation. Interpretation is revelation based upon information. But they are entirely different things. However, all interpretation includes information.”<sup>11</sup> And Enos Mills determined, “A nature guide ... has been rightfully associated with information and some form of education. But nature guiding, as we see it, is more inspirational than informational. The nature guide arouses interest by dealing in big principles—not with detached and colorless information.”<sup>12</sup> Mills continued, “The aim is to illuminate and reveal the alluring world.”<sup>13</sup> The purpose of interpretation goes beyond providing information to reveal deeper meaning and truth.

Tilden’s Third Principle is, “Interpretation is an art, which combines many arts, whether the materials presented are scientific, historical or architectural. Any art is in some degree teachable.”<sup>14</sup> Similarly, Mills described a colleague as having “a purpose—a vision. Daily she accumulated experience and information. These she handled like an artist. ... Our [interpreter] had the art and the vision which enabled her to make these outings permanent, purposeful, growth-compelling experiences.”<sup>15</sup> This principle challenges all interpreters to treat interpretation as a creative activity.

Tilden’s Fourth Principle is, “The chief aim of interpretation is not instruction, but provocation.”<sup>16</sup> And Mills observed, “This new occupation [interpretation] is likely to be far-reaching in its influences; it is inspirational and educational ... and possess[es] astounding possibilities for arousing the feelings and developing the unlimited resources of the mind.”<sup>17</sup> Thus, interpreters are challenged to inspire intellectual and emotional responses.

Tilden’s Fifth Principle is, “Interpretation should aim to present a whole rather than a part, and must address itself to the whole man rather than any phase.”<sup>18</sup> And Mills quoted Liberty H. Bailey as follows: “This [recipient of good interpretation] will see first the large and significant events; he will grasp relationships; he will correlate; later, he will consider the details.”<sup>19</sup> Interpreters must be aware of the entire sphere of their interpretation and communicate that whole as an overriding theme or thesis.

Tilden’s Sixth Principle is, “Interpretation addressed to children (say, up to the age of 12) should not be a dilution of the presentation to adults, but should follow a fundamentally different approach. To be at its best it will require a separate program.”<sup>20</sup> And Mills suggested, “This childish desire to know, to learn, will assure mental development if information be given in a way that appeals. ... The experiences these children have and their reflections concerning the things seen give them the ability to reason, and develop their observation and imagi-

nation.”<sup>21</sup> Interpreters must be aware that different life stages present different needs and interests, and therefore different approaches to interpretation.

Out of respect for the work of Tilden and Mills, and particularly because of the familiarity so many interpreters have with Tilden’s six principles, our framework of principles begins with a re-statement of Tilden’s. Note that the principles have been re-worded to better reflect their treatment in the chapters that follow. In addition to these six principles, we offer nine new principles that provide a more elaborate interpretive philosophy.

Here, then, are the 15 principles, which are presented in detail in the following chapters:

1. To spark an interest, interpreters must relate the subject to the lives of the people in their audience.
2. The purpose of interpretation goes beyond providing information to reveal deeper meaning and truth.
3. The interpretive presentation—as a work of art—should be designed as a story that informs, entertains, and enlightens.
4. The purpose of the interpretive story is to inspire and to provoke people to broaden their horizons.
5. Interpretation should present a complete theme or thesis and address the whole person.
6. Interpretation for children, teenagers, and seniors—when these comprise uniform groups—should follow fundamentally different approaches.
7. Every place has a history. Interpreters can bring the past alive to make the present more enjoyable and the future more meaningful.
8. Technology can reveal the world in exciting new ways. However, incorporating this technology into the interpretive program must be done with foresight and thoughtful care.
9. Interpreters must concern themselves with the quantity and quality (selection and accuracy) of information presented. Focused, well-researched interpretation will be more powerful than a longer discourse.
10. Before applying the arts in interpretation, the interpreter must be familiar with basic communication techniques. Quality interpretation depends on the interpreter’s knowledge and skills, which must be continually developed over time.
11. Interpretive writing should address what readers would like to know, with the authority of wisdom and its accompanying humility and care.
12. The overall interpretive program must be capable of attracting support—financial, volunteer, political, administrative—whatever support is needed for the program to flourish.
13. Interpretation should instill in people the ability, and the desire, to sense the beauty in their surroundings—to provide spiritual uplift and to encourage resource preservation.

14. Interpreters can promote optimal experiences through intentional and thoughtful program and facility design.
15. Passion is the essential ingredient for powerful and effective interpretation—passion for the resource and for those people who come to be inspired by it.

## **Benefits of Interpretation**

To *individuals* who are attracted to our programs, we offer an engaging activity that can be recreational, educational, and deeply meaningful. At the most basic level, the program may be a diversion for someone—an antidote to despair. But interpretation offers much more.<sup>22</sup>

At historic sites, the program may offer a chance to better understand our history and to reflect on such universal concepts as liberty, justice, and civic responsibility. Many of our cultural sites celebrate the drama of human conduct. The story of any nation includes men and women who have exhibited great courage and integrity in the face of adversity. What of our past helps us to better understand the present? What are we called to do, as individuals, in light of our past? Answers can be found as interpreters find meaning in events and help people to personalize that meaning.

**To *individuals* who are attracted to our programs, we offer an engaging activity that can be recreational, educational, and deeply meaningful.**

Likewise, a natural history program offers the opportunity to connect with the beauty found in nature. It may offer moments for contemplation and reflection. We can celebrate the stability and resilience of nature. Rachel Carson wrote:

There is symbolic as well as actual beauty in the migration of the birds ... There is something infinitely healing in the repeated refrains of nature—the assurance that dawn comes after night, and spring after the winter.<sup>23</sup>

The splendor of nature and a greater understanding of its wonders can comfort and inspire us. Individuals can find solace, direction, and hope through interpretation.

Furthermore, identification with our land and culture helps to sustain us as a *society*. Historian Roderick Nash indicated that the landscape shaped our national character—one of independence, freedom, perseverance, and tenacity.<sup>24</sup>

Democracy requires an informed public, and interpreters are a source of knowledge and inspiration in this regard. Thomas Jefferson wrote:

I know of no safe depository of the ultimate powers of society but the people themselves, and if we think them not enlightened enough to exercise that control with a wholesome discretion, the remedy is not to take it from them, but to inform their discretion.<sup>25</sup>

As interpreters we help to inform the discretion of our audience members. Through interpretation we enhance understanding and appreciation of our cultural and natural legacy—that which defines us as a democracy. Society has much to gain from our interpretive efforts.

**Interpreters have daily opportunities to influence lives. Our privilege, and our obligation, is to help others enjoy, reflect upon, and find meaning in the places we work.**

Finally, challenging circumstances provide each of us an opportunity to give more of ourselves, and through giving we receive blessings in return. Love for a culture and landscape allows interpreters chances to share their inspirational enjoyment with others.

Interpreters have daily opportunities to influence lives. Our privilege, and our obligation, is to help others enjoy, reflect upon, and find meaning in the places we work.

Our commitment to the profession of interpretation will enhance our own sense of purpose and well-being. We need to be connected and support each other in a reaffirmation of civilized values. Our profession is a noble one.



### *An Interpreter Is ...*

To sum up this introductory chapter and the principles put forth, we suggest an interpreter is someone who works with people to convey the meaning of our cultural and natural landscapes and the features that comprise these landscapes. An interpreter is invested in a lifelong quest for learning and experience, and in sharing that accumulated wisdom. He or she is familiar with and practices effective communication techniques and strives to create meaningful and provocative stories. An interpreter has a grounding in the liberal arts and stays current with the news (local, regional, national, international) to better relate to a vast consortium of visitors.

An interpreter can communicate excitement for the resource and inspire a response. An interpreter is deeply concerned with the welfare of visitors—their

safety, their dignity, and the quality of their experiences. He or she interprets imaginatively by knowledge and personal example.

An interpreter acts out of authority and humility, confidence and compassion, integrity and respect for others, stability and enthusiasm, and joy.

An interpreter respects the moral worth of visitors and their potential for growth. The interpreter is enthused and energetic about the place, the visitors who come there, and the work at hand. An interpreter strives to embrace the wonder and beauty of life.



S.P. 122  
Of the graceful Third  
Sunday, 16 Aug. '88  
at

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# C H A P T E R

# 1

## The Gift of a Spark

*To spark an interest, interpreters must relate the subject to the lives of the people in their audience.*

*No man can reveal to you aught but that which already lies half asleep in the dawning of your knowledge. The teacher who walks in the shadow of the temple, among his followers, gives not of his wisdom but rather of his faith and his lovingness. If he is indeed wise he does not bid you enter the house of his wisdom, but rather leads you to the threshold of your own mind.*

—Kahlil Gibran

As Kahlil Gibran reflected, receiving information is a deep and personal matter. The knowledge and experiences we gain constitute who we are. Interpreters must relate to the people to whom they interpret if they wish to lead them to the “thresholds” of their minds.

People choose when, where, what, and how to learn based on their interests. Richard Saul Wurman wrote, “Learning can be seen as the acquisition of information, but before it can take place, there must be interest; interest permeates all endeavors and precedes learning . . . . Learning can be defined as the process of remembering what you are interested in.”<sup>1</sup>

Freeman Tilden suggested the “chief” interests of visitors to sites of natural beauty and cultural significance are in whatever touches their personalities, experiences, or ideals.<sup>2</sup> This is the backbone of effective interpretation; taking

**This is the gift of a spark;  
finding common ground with  
your visitors to draw them into  
the wonders of your site.**

information about cultural and natural resources and making it relevant to the audience.<sup>3</sup> This is the gift of a spark; finding common ground with your visitors to draw them into the wonders of your site.

Interpretive messages must be interesting to capture attention, meaningful so people care, and compelling so people no longer think or act the same after hearing them. By identifying key interests of particular audiences, the interpreter has, at least, a broad target at which to aim.

## The First Principle in Theory

Tilden’s dictum to relate information to the visitors’ “chief” interests may have been intuitive, but it is grounded in solid theory. For years, educational psychologists and theorists have been suggesting that people learn by integrating and storing information in the context of their past experience.

### Cognitive Map Theory

William Hammitt analyzed Tilden’s interpretive principles in the context of cognitive map theory, a widely adopted view of how people process information.<sup>4</sup> This theory suggests that people receive information, code it into simplified units, and then store it in relationship to other existing information. As information continues to be stored in this way, a network of informational units form and are linked by pathways of commonality. These units and pathways collectively form cognitive maps—a person’s structure of storage and organization of information. Subsequent stimuli “spark” the internal model that best matches them.

Effective interpretation produces external stimuli that trigger existing maps, thereby allowing the audience to “get it” and store the information in relation to other information they already possess. If the interpreter expresses irrelevant or completely unfamiliar information, then existing maps will not be triggered. We should, ideally, be aware of the common knowledge and experiences held by an audience relative to the topic of interpretation. With this awareness, we may target messages to trigger existing maps and to build on that scaffolding.<sup>5</sup>

Another important factor with implications for interpreters is that when a map is triggered, people can perceive more than what actually exists in the immediate environment. Hammitt suggested that “few individuals who have

caught trout and cooked them over a campfire cannot view a photograph of such a scene without visualizing the landscape, smelling the smoke and feeling the warmth of the fire, and even tasting the fish.”<sup>6</sup>

### The External-Internal Shift

Consistent with cognitive map theory, brain researchers have delved into how our brains determine which stimuli are attended to and which are ignored. Scientists have identified a process called the external-internal shift that explains how people attend to communication by relating to their experiences.<sup>7</sup>

Before focusing attention, the brain stem passively receives many sensory stimuli from our sense organs. The brain cannot process all the information, so it actively scans the stimuli, searching for anything that requires immediate attention. It ignores or merely monitors other stimuli. During this search the brain is constantly switching its focus between external events and internal memories and interests.

For example, while an interpreter is telling the audience how to react if they encounter a bear, a listener may recall a childhood observation of a bear. The listener’s attention shifts to the personal bear story, and he or she merely monitors the presentation while processing the personal story. In fact, because we can think six to seven times faster than people can talk, most of the time we are “talking” (that is, thinking) to ourselves. This explains the ease in tuning a speaker out, especially if the information is not relevant to one’s interests or past experiences.

Such mental shifts between external and internal events seem to be an important factor in maintaining and updating long-term memory. Recalling memories strengthens neural networks that contain and process them.

Most important for interpreters is the knowledge that people tend to seek out stimuli and situations (e.g., movies, books, trips, conversations) that will trigger these memories and build on them. Educators Robert Sylwester and Joo-Yun Cho observed, “When we consciously seek such specific information, our attention system primes itself in anticipation. It increases the response levels of the networks that process that information, and it inhibits other networks.”<sup>8</sup> Relating the message to the knowledge and experiences of the audience teaches new information, reinforces old information and memories, and gives the audience satisfying personal experiences.

**Relating the message to the knowledge and experiences of the audience teaches new information, reinforces old information and memories, and gives the audience satisfying personal experiences.**

### Meaning-Making

Another communication paradigm has been developed called meaning-making. In essence, this model redefines communication. No longer is communication considered merely a linear sender-receiver process. Rather, meaning-making conceptualizes communication as a negotiation process between parties whereby information is created rather than transmitted. Individuals receiving the information shape the meaning based on their store of past knowledge and experiences.<sup>9</sup> Because visitors actively create meaning through the contexts they bring to the interpretive site, being aware of their perspectives, knowledge, and past experiences is useful for successful interpretation.

Research conducted at two nationally significant interpretive sites (National Museum of American History of the Smithsonian Institution and Old Faithful of Yellowstone National Park) applied the meaning-making paradigm. Results indicated that “personal interest was the most frequent reason given for selecting an interpretive experience as most meaningful.”<sup>10</sup>

### A Review of the Theoretical Literature

In an article that appeared in the *Journal of Interpretation Research*, Sam Ham draws on recent advances in cognitive and behavioral psychology. He notes “hundreds of published studies” in the past three decades that offer application to the cause-and-effect relationships of good interpretation. In this definitive article Ham concludes, “... the only caring any of us is capable of doing will be that which is based on the meanings we, ourselves, make. Interpretation that provokes visitors to think in positive ways about a thing can make that thing matter to them. When things matter to us, we are likely to act in their behalf if confronted with the opportunity to do so.”<sup>11</sup> Ham provided evidence, rooted in cognitive science, to support the National Park Service adage: Through interpretation, understanding; through understanding, appreciation; through appreciation, protection.

### The First Principle in Practice

With respect for theory used to conceptualize effective communication, interpreters must know about their visitors. Knowing the audience is important in any communication, whether by a preacher, professor, or politician. Many interpretive agencies now realize the importance of knowing the needs and wants of their customers. They conduct visitor surveys to assess the characteristics of their clientele in an attempt to determine what is meaningful to them. By finding what is meaningful to visitors, interpreters may provoke them to further think for themselves in making emotional and intellectual connections with the resource.

## Demographics

Most visitor surveys have focused on identifying the visitors' demographic characteristics. Whether the audience is local or transient, rural or urban, foreign or domestic—all have ramifications for targeting interpretive messages. To the interpreter, this means carefully considering these characteristics and choosing approaches, metaphors, anecdotes, and stories that will match visitor interests.

If a site has many repeat visitors, interpreters must change interpretive offerings more frequently or schedule special events to recapture interest continually. With repeat visitors, interpreters can offer a sequence of programs with increasing sophistication, thereby allowing visitors to advance to progressively higher levels of understanding. If a site has mostly first-time, non-repeat visitors, programs do not have to be changed as frequently. Then program offerings should be broad and meaningful in presenting the compelling story of the site.

Most adult visitors have some level of rural and urban experiences, regardless of where they live. With children, however, this may not be as likely. For example, those who interpret to school groups need to know whether they are coming from rural or inner-city school systems. Using subways and high-rise apartments as metaphors for burrows and nesting colonies would miss the mark for farm kids. On the other hand, city kids might not know the source of their water or food. Many, for example, think that bread originates from the grocery store.

Foreign audiences may require language translations or background information to provide frameworks that already exist in the minds of domestic visitors. Furthermore, history is understood differently by Americans and many foreigners. Mexicans may have a different view of Texas settlement, and Europeans may view “new world” colonization differently. The Japanese have a different perspective than Americans on events leading to the end of World War II.

Still other visitor characteristics that might affect the interpretive approach include gender, race, and educational levels. Sometimes the ethnic or religious background of the audience is important, particularly in developing countries where ethnic and religious beliefs strongly affect how people perceive the use of natural and cultural resources. Interpreting to different ages—children, teenagers, and older persons—is the focus of Chapter 6.

## Beyond Demographics

A study conducted at the Ronald V. Jensen Living Historical Farm, in Utah, found that the staff intuitively knew the demographics of their visitors. However, despite high levels of staff-visitor contact, interpreters did not understand visitors' motivations and satisfactions.<sup>12</sup>

Most visitor studies have merely documented visitor characteristics and participation patterns. According to the Jensen Farm research, in cases where the staff is in regular contact with visitors, such studies may not be necessary. Interpreters seem to grasp quickly general audience demographics.<sup>13</sup>

**Understanding who is interested in what subjects is important, but understanding why they are interested in those subjects is also vital.**

However, to respond to visitors fully, research should concentrate on visitors' values, motivations, attitudes, and satisfactions. Indeed, knowing these traits allows us to predict the demographics that likely accompany them—although we usually assume that only the reverse is true.<sup>14</sup>

### Targeting Motivations and Learning Styles

Research designed to assess the visitors' motivations allows interpreters to more successfully apply this first principle. Understanding what audience members already know, and what motivates them, permits interpreters to present more interesting, pertinent, and challenging information.

Understanding who is interested in what subjects is important, but understanding why they are interested in those subjects is also vital. The reasons may be surprising and provide clues for presenting information in interesting ways. For example, visitors could be interested in an old locomotive because their fathers or grandfathers worked for the railroad. Or they may be interested because they are fascinated by how steam-powered machines work. Or they could have a passion for American history and westward expansion. Or they may have been enamored with trains as kids.

If we know the reason for the interest in a particular subject, then we can structure the content of the interpretation to fit that interest. This means we must ask visitors why they are interested in various interpretive possibilities. Such research may be conducted formally (questionnaires or structured interviews) or informally (in conversation).

We should also be aware of whether visitors want to learn and, if so, how they want to learn. Ross Loomis reviewed social psychological studies that suggested visitors vary in their "need for cognition" and in how they process information.<sup>15</sup>

Different preferences for learning may include those who like to read material, those who like to hear a presentation, those who want to see first-hand what is being interpreted, and those who want to be physically involved. Some people learn best through reflection and others through social interaction.

To enhance interest and effectiveness, some interpretation researchers identify visitors' learning styles and then match exhibits to these specific learning preferences. A study at the Milwaukee Public Museum used the popular Myers-

Briggs Type Indicator as an instrument to identify learning styles of visitors. As a consequence of this research, the museum modified a rainforest exhibit and determined that matching learning styles with exhibit presentation can result in increased learning.<sup>16</sup>

### **Barriers to Participation**

Interpreters also should know why people do not visit interpretive sites so barriers may be eliminated. Knowing who is absent, and why, may be as pertinent as knowing who attends. Fear and negative perceptions are two widespread and powerful barriers to visitation to, and interest in, natural areas. Researchers have found that many people find wildland settings to be scary, disgusting, and uncomfortable.<sup>17</sup> Likewise, many people hold images of museums as being formal, stuffy, and elitist. We can strive to correct misconceptions and structure interpretive possibilities so they are accessible to those who are otherwise inhibited. For example, personal comfort, esteem, and security are key interests of these potential visitors and interpretation can be adjusted accordingly.

**Knowing who is absent, and why, may be as pertinent as knowing who attends.**

Knowing and addressing visitors' interests does not mean pandering to any desire of the audience. For example, part of what makes natural settings attractive is the contrast they provide to civilization. Such aspects of the setting should not be compromised. But, when the interests of the audience are appropriate for the site and consistent with management objectives, interpreters are wise to attend to those interests.

## **How to Capture Interests**

Even if the visitors' interests are correctly identified, poor delivery will cause attention to wane. Effective interpretive delivery must be mastered and applied (see Chapter 10). The following is a discussion of some general considerations for delivering messages to capture and maintain interest.

Interpreters can capture attention by using movement, noise, bright colors, unusual objects, or with startling statements, either written or spoken. Attention is limited, and many stimuli are constantly competing for it. Mihalyi Csikszentmihalyi and Kim Hermanson wrote, "Even though we are surrounded by increasing waves of information, the amount of it that any person actually notices and then retains in memory may be less than it was in the days of our cave-dwelling ancestors, and it certainly cannot be much more."<sup>18</sup>

After attention is captured, the task becomes one of maintaining interest. Poor mechanics can derail the interpretation. Can the speaker be clearly heard? Is the exhibit text easily read? Are visuals comprehensible? If not, interest vaporizes and audiences escape—mentally, if not physically.

We can make interpretation more interesting by using personal language. The word *you* immediately makes the audience members think of themselves. This is a key component in implementing this first principle because self-

**After attention is captured, the task becomes one of maintaining interest. Poor mechanics can derail the interpretation.**

referencing quickly engages and involves the audience—it creates an inviting opportunity for them to relate to the material. Other personal words such as *your*, *we*, and *our* can be similarly effective when used in a positive context.

Posing relevant questions is a good technique for maintaining interest. People will try to answer questions, even rhetorical ones. Asking personalized questions such as “What would you have done?” with reference to a historical event connects the person with the subject. Visitors immediately imagine what their own conduct would have been under the historical circumstances. The gift of a spark brings visitors into the historic mindset.

Visitor interests can be tapped in histories, personal and otherwise. We are all historians.<sup>19</sup> Although far removed from the dates, famous names, and places taught in history classes, people engage in history-related activities all the time. We make photographic records of our personal and family histories through snapshots and videos. Our homes become museums filled with baby books, scrapbooks, and yearbooks. Diaries and journals provide a personal historical record. We are also history makers.<sup>20</sup> History is the composite of innumerable personal biographies.

Although we are all historians and history makers, people generally consider history to be dry, impersonal, and serious—something remote and distant from their lives.<sup>21</sup> Yet, people consider the past to be relevant and personal. People connect with the past, whereas history conjures images of obscure presidents and wars. The challenge for interpreters is to capture interests in such a way so that people may “personalize the past.”<sup>22</sup>

Another approach to stimulating interest is leading the visitor through personal discovery. Most people enjoy the sense of accomplishment that comes from making discoveries. Discovery-oriented programs in interpretive settings allow people to gain new insights and to see previously known facts in new ways.

Discovery approaches have been popular in formal science education settings for many years. One science educator noted, “Discovery has become a big word in science education ... discovery and rediscovery appear more and more to be essential elements of learning experiences. ...”<sup>23</sup> Discovery lends

itself to the application of this first principle because information is personally revealed to the individual investigator. Discovery carries with it elements of suspense and surprise. Interactive exhibits increase personal involvement and can provide mental challenges through puzzles or games that lead people to discover new facts or relationships. By providing discovery situations, interpreters provoke interest and connect the subject matter with the audience.

**Enthusiasm reveals the interest of the interpreter and sparks the interest of the audience.**

Humor and novelty may also contribute to capturing and maintaining interest, but the most powerful force is enthusiasm. As enthusiasm is contagious, so is interest. William Everhart, former director of the National Park Service, when asked what it took to become an interpreter, replied, “There [are] few essentials. You have to be a genuine enthusiast, almost impelled to share your knowledge with others.”<sup>24</sup> Enthusiasm reveals the interest of the interpreter and sparks the interest of the audience.



Interpreters should not only stimulate curiosity and capture interest for the duration of someone’s visit to an interpretive site, but also strive to provoke continued interest. This can be accomplished initially by relating to the visitor’s chief interests. From there, visitors may be self-motivated to new horizons. Anatole France wrote, “Do not try to satisfy your vanity by teaching a great many things. Awaken people’s curiosity. It is enough to open minds; do not overload them. Put there just a spark. If there is some good inflammable stuff, it will catch fire.”<sup>25</sup>

Interpreters must know the visitor’s key interests to determine where and how to place the spark. We must strive to understand the “inflammable stuff.” Delivering the message effectively ensures that the inflammable stuff will ignite. When fires of curiosity burn, the interpreter has successfully applied this first principle and has led visitors to the thresholds of their own minds, where learning and inspiration occur. This is the gift of a spark.