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WILD IDEAS ARE WELCOME HERE

(The Existential Pleasures of Interpretation)

Good morning! And welcome to a Celebration of Diversity!

If, during my remarks, you have a feeling of de'ja vu - of having heard all this before - you are probably right. Much of what I want to say to you today can be found in The View From My Window: Reflections on the Gentle Art of Interpretation, my comments during seasonal training last year. I hope that you will understand that repetition is a means of emphasis. In characterizing myself last year, I said, "I have strong convictions about many things, and especially about our profession. You can count on me to express them candidly and often." I will try to make those redundancies more palatable by purposeful rephrasing.

As surely as DNA is a determinant of human heredity, and "language is the genetic code of civilization," the idea conceived over a century ago in a little known "...tract of land in the territories of Montana and Wyoming..." has endured the passage from generation to generation, from continent to continent. It has been modified by time and experience, place and circumstance, and by political ideology, but still, a little bit of Yellowstone can be seen in every National Park in the world. Truly, this place "where Hell bubbled up" is the "Mother of Parks."

I believe that Yellowstone is the best of all things that parks represent. I believe that we must honor that heritage. Nothing we do here should lessen the value of that legacy. Please share with me the vision of a Yellowstone in which uncommon excellence in interpretation is a common quality. Let there be dreamers!

Let's bring Pygmalion to the park this summer! Ovid's account describes how Pygmalion created Galatea out of ivory and desire. The King of Cypress fell in love with his perfectly crafted sculpture and Aphrodite gave life to the statue.

Nineteen centuries later, George Bernard Shaw adapted classical mythology to the stage. Henry Higgins transforms a Cockney flower girl into an elegant lady, using language as a tool rather than love. Hence, the power of the self-fulfilling prophecy, or the "Pygmalion effect". The power of expectation alone can influence the behavior of others. My expectations are high.

Nearly three decades ago, noted ecologist Raymond Dasmann wrote a book called A Different Kind of Country. In it, he said, "Nobody who has not felt the cold impersonality of a technological society can really appreciate a herd of giraffes coming in to drink at a waterhole in a twilight in which a lion roars. Nobody who has not contemplated Hiroshima can realize that among the

ways available in which a man can die, it is a rare and signal distinction to be killed by a leopard." He thus eloquently suggested that the continued integrity of human life was a function of diversity - the same diversity that contributes to the resilience of wild systems like Yellowstone.

Earlier, in the "Who's Here" exercise, we learned that each of us has brought to Yellowstone a unique blend of backgrounds, skills, interests, and expectations. While we will be wearing the same uniform and serving the same public, and while we share a common commitment and purpose, we saw that there is more diversity in this group than we might expect. That exercise was a revealing and instructive exploration of the concept of culture.

Culture is more than "good taste" in food and drink, music and art. In any assembled group, there is an infinite array of individual characteristics that are collectively expressed as the group or work culture. Work culture is the set of similarities and differences that individually personalize the members of a group...the beliefs, attitudes, traditions, experience, concepts of self, role expectations, perceptions, and physical, emotional, and psychological attributes that each person brings to the group setting. Too often, a cultural paradigm evolves that defines the correct way; the boundaries of reasonable inquiry; the limiting parameters; the acceptable norms.

It is our diversity that strengthens us - that gives character to our group - that individually distinguishes us and makes encounters with or through us memorable experiences. It is important to allow our differences free and unencumbered expression - to allow our selves to shine through. Only through the cultivation of idiosyncrasy can we avoid sharing the equalizing constraint of the procrustean bed.

The Greek philosopher Heraclitus said, "It is not possible to step into the same river twice." Our program should be so diverse that a visitor can participate in the same activity on consecutive days and have a distinctly different and memorable experience.

I believe that training is a prerequisite to cultural change. It is an ingredient essential to the stimulation of diversity. You can count on training, of at least one week, to be regularly scheduled and fully funded and mandatory in years to come.

Our mandate this year was that training should be conducted in a creative atmosphere. It should be both cognitive and affective; it should enhance the abilities of participants to elicit positive attitudinal and behavioral responses from park visitors; it should help engender a spirit of participation, commitment, and teamwork; and, it should be fun! Elements of fact, theory, and skills were to be blended in equal measure.

Our general objectives suggested that interpretive training should: 1) Provide basic data about park resources; 2) Be a forum for the exchange of current information on critical issues; 3) Intensify our perception of interpretation as a communication process; 4) Investigate ways in which

interpretation can be a more effective instrument of park management; 5) Identify new and unconventional forms of interpretive expression, and, 6) Diversify and refine personal inventories of interpretive skills.

Robert Coles, child psychiatrist and winner of the Pulitzer Prize, once observed that ..."learning proceeds best when we rely less on sophisticated techniques and material and more on native equipment: eyes, ears, and the oldest instrument of knowledge human beings possess - ignorance, and the curiosity that is associated with it."

Today we are beginning an odyssey together. We hope that you will undertake the journey with energy, anticipation, and curiosity. You don't need to pack your bags (we have provided plenty of luggage!) - just bring an open and inquiring mind. Wild ideas are welcome here!

As you begin to peruse (I hope you will use them, too!) the materials in the packet we've given you, you may wonder why...why is George giving these books to us? Obviously the notebook contains information about Yellowstone and this training session, but Mortal Lessons, Notes on the Art of Surgery? Well, as some of you already know, I'm a bibliophile - a lover of books. And love is an expansive emotion. These are books that I've especially enjoyed and I simply want to share them with you. They are the meticulously crafted and provocative work of skilled practitioners of the art of interpretation - some of them elders of the tribe.

To my mind, no one has more evocatively interpreted the Badlands, nor penned a more impassioned plea for the dignity of birds than Loren Eiseley. "If there is magic on this planet, it is contained in water." How could the signal importance of a simple compound be more lyrically stated? No one has spoken more eloquently of the wisdom of wildness than Sigurd Olson. Why, then, a collection of essays about surgery?

If Richard Seltzer is as fine a surgeon as he is a writer, then I would not hesitate to entrust myself to his care. That he is, as well, a skilled and articulate interpretive guide to the most complex natural system on earth - the human body - is a fait accompli. The interpreter in Dr. Seltzer sees the body as metaphor: the skin is an envelope, bone is power, the liver is a magic house, the belly is a crucible where chemistries and dark rituals brew.

Don't be alarmed! I know that you have too much to do, and too little time to do it. These books are not required reading, but I hope you will become familiar with them as time permits. Pilgrim at Tinker Creek and River Notes don't weigh much, and fit nicely into a daypack. Annie Dillard and Barry Lopez would be pleasant companions on the trail. If, during this week, your interest in acclimatization and creativity is piqued, you may wish to read the books by Van Matre and Campbell. Sharing Nature with Children is a variation on the acclimatization theme and both processes are as effective with adults as with young people. Islands of Hope is an early manifesto of environmental interpretation. Its precepts are as important today as when it was written over 15 years ago. And, if you would just like to consider the process of living, read the book of that title by our final guest speaker,

Bill Eddy.

In any case, please accept this complimentary set of books. Place them in your permanent library and, as you read them, keep in mind a favorite quotation of mine from Thomas Carlyle...

"All that mankind has done, taught, gained, been, and may become is lying as in magic preservation in the pages of books."

I hope that in these lyrical, thoughtful and sometimes disturbing pages, you will find some of the same "magic" that has enchanted me. Happy reading!

For the next few minutes I'd like to share with you some philosophical odds and ends - a distillation of over 20 years of reflection on our profession.

--Interpretation is the perfect union of art and science. It can be taught, but it is also a form of intuitive/creative expression.

--Interpretation is a special way of "knowing"...it is a process of stimulating, sharing and guiding.

--Interpretation is exploration and discovery...it is serendipity.

--Interpretation is the subtle and persistent interrogation of nature.

--In the process of interpretation, parallels between natural phenomena and their sociocultural analogues are often disclosed. They may be used to reinforce learning.

--In a sense, interpretation as a human enterprise was "discovered" by the Greek philosopher Thales 600 years before Christ. He suggested that the universe is governed by natural laws and that man is capable of understanding those laws.

--Interpretation is the process of building "bridges of understanding" over which the visitor can freely move from present to past, and from the synthetic to the natural world.

--Accurate information is one of the best tools of interpretation, but in a fashion analogous to energy traveling through an ecological pyramid, information undergoes a form of entropic decay when it passes from its primary source to secondary, tertiary and higher levels. The further a fact is from its origin, the less reliable it is.

--Smiles, handclaps, and other conventional measures of visitor satisfaction may only be socially obligatory expressions.

--If attitude/behavior modification are important objectives of interpretation, then the expression of informed and constructive discontent are important indicators of success.

--Environmental interpretation and environmental education are cut from the same cloth - they are simply tailored to fit different sized people

--Environmental education is concerned with forestalling the apparently inevitable process of alienation from the earth that characterizes the passage to adult life. Environmental interpretation is concerned with helping adults to recapture the simple, unsophisticated and natural sensitivities of childhood.

--Interpretation is a form of education, and, like good education, it has both cognitive and affective modes.

...it speaks to both sides of the brain.

And to the heart.

Like good education, it must also be fun.

--The task of the interpreter is difficult. One must first attempt to put aside the erroneously conceived notions of the visitor. And then begin to provocatively build in them a sense of informed concern.

--The "real" currency of interpretation is an amalgam of emotion and thought.

--Interpretation is the art of enriching the visitor experience with understanding and meaning.

--Whenever possible, an interpreter should speak in the universal languages of wonder, curiosity, and joy.

--Interpretation can be a catalyst for sociocultural change...in a sense, the interpreter is a "guru" for the visitor who is stalking the wild identity.

--Interpretation, like religion, should comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable.

--Thou shalt occasionally remain silent and let the resource speak for itself.

--Provocation is best achieved when it is an expression of the interpreter's identity.

--Interpretation that doesn't provoke you will not provoke others.

--Interpretation is not standing in front of an audience, but being part of it. The audience is often the interpreter's most valuable resource.

As a second generation National Park Service employee, I am especially sensitive to tradition. I honor my father and his contribution to the legacy of the Service, but I am concerned that the inertia of tradition not become an encumbrance to progressive change. I believe that playwright Eugene Ionesco was partially right when he said "only the ephemeral is of lasting value."

As orderly change characterizes and strengthens natural systems, so it lends integrity to human effort. While I know that "the only person who likes change is a wet baby", I am an advocate of impermanence.

Let me reiterate a quotation germane to this point: "Risk toward expansive and worthwhile goals is essential. There is no growth, no inspiration, in staying with what is safe and comfortable."

During this training, and in the months ahead, you may occasionally feel uncomfortable. You may be asked to take a risk or two, and to accept failure as part of the process of personal and professional growth. You will be encouraged to explore new avenues of interpretation...to develop the faculty of viewing conventional things in unconventional ways. "At the core of the inventive act is the capacity to see the commonplace as strange."

"Creativity has no definition; it isn't a thing, or a goal, or a law. Creativity is an attitude, a process, a happening . . . there is no shape to creativity. Like people, it comes in assorted sizes, shapes, and colors. It is an event not limited to art or science, an event that takes place in the kitchen, on the street, at the office. Sometimes it's results are tangible, in a good soup, a painting, a special filing system. Sometimes its results are intangible and seen only in passing, by the manner of a walk, the joy of a greeting, the revelation of a dream. Creativity means freedom. It means risk, it means reflection."

You have that freedom, and I expect you to use it. I will, once again, be observant for the risk-takers and encourage those reluctant to make creative departures.

The essence of creativity is constructive discontent...the willingness to deviate from the norm; the set of common assumptions and shared beliefs of what is possible...what is the "right" or "only" way. The development of successful paradigms lends stability to systems of thought or action, but often results in resistance to change.

When a creative person challenges a paradigm, a hula hoop becomes more than a child's plaything. It is seen as a way to define a miniature world for interpretive exploration with a hand lens. Snowshoes become flotation devices for walking on tidal mudflats. The creative person sees in a model sailboat an entre' to a discussion of birdflight. A few pieces from a jigsaw puzzle can aid an interpreter to explain plate tectonics, and a simple pocket mirror can help people to see the elusive "Onceler," nemesis of the Lorax.

Begin to think metaphorically - to develop a repertoire of interpretive analogies. They can be immensely helpful in simplifying your interpretation of difficult concepts or complex phenomena.

You will have virtually unlimited creative license this summer. If you've had an idea for an activity but have been reluctant to pursue it, do it now. Don't fail to try something just because it has never been done, or because you've heard that it isn't done that way in this park. Those of you who have

been here before know that it is commonly said that there is a right way, a wrong way, and "the Yellowstone way." I, for one, believe that the Yellowstone way has not always been the best way. We need to continually search for more effective ways of meeting the challenge of interpretation in Yellowstone.

Now, some verbatim references from my remarks of last year. I've tried, but I just can't seem to say these things more clearly. This is important stuff. Things the boss feels strongly about. Listen up!

Definition of a "typical" visitor experience is not possible. Each experience is unique and it would be an impertinence to attempt to structure a similar experience for all visitors.

The visitor/park interaction is and should be an intensely personal encounter ...tempered by the background, knowledge, experience, interests, and expectations of the individual. Those factors are properly beyond the influence of the park interpreter.

However, every visitor ought to have the opportunity to interact with the park in three ways:

1. To react physically and emotionally with the environment;
2. To learn about its features, phenomena, and history; and,
3. To consider the relevancy of their experience to contemporary life and times.

At each level, the park interpreter functions in a different role. At the first, as a facilitator; at the second, as a teacher, and at the third, as a provocateur...in the Tilden sense.

Some of you may be familiar with behavioral psychologist Abraham Maslow. He suggests that the extent to which certain basic needs are satisfied governs human behavior. Only when the most fundamental needs are met can a person turn his attention to the next lower priority in the hierarchy. The structure of this "hierarchy of needs" has a direct bearing on the susceptibility of the visitor to involvement in an interpretive program or activity.

A variation of Maslow's hierarchy as it applies to a park setting might look something like this:

Physical: The need for food, drink, and shelter...the need for relief from a painfully distended bladder...and to have the family comfortably settled in a campsite.

Safety/Security: The need for protection from others, or from the elements...the need for emergency assistance...the need for knowledge of hazards, and to know that if something happens, a ranger will immediately materialize.

Social: The need for association and social intercourse...the need to be with others of one's kind, the need to set up one's tent so close to another that a skilled acrobat would find it difficult to negotiate the space between tents without tripping in the ropes. At this level, the visitor may first seek involvement with others in interpretive groups.

Ego: The need for respect...the need to be a leader or authority...the need to learn, the need for acceptance and adulation - the Scoutmaster Syndrome.

Self-fulfillment: The need to achieve, to perceive larger meaning, to understand and appreciate. This is the level at which interpretation can be most effective.

It is important that you keep the imperative nature of these needs in mind when planning or conducting an activity. You can't expect to have the full attention of a visitor who is afraid that an enraged grizzly is lurking around every corner. Nor is the visitor who has just driven 500 miles only to learn that all campsites are full likely to be in a receptive frame of mind.

I am a disciple of Freeman Tilden. His principles of interpretation are in the nature of immutable law. I commend them to your attention once again.

Nearly three decades ago, Freeman said:

1. "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." He spoke of relevance. Dinosaurs, cannibals, and sea urchins are relevant...so are grizzly bears, calderas, geysers, and ecological skirmishes.
2. "Information, as such, is not interpretation. Interpretation is revelation based on information." He spoke of concepts and themes. Facts alone are like stones without mortar...it is the connections that bind information into strong and meaningful structures.
3. "Interpretation is an art, which combines many arts. Any art is in some degree teachable." He spoke of diversity and of learning and practising. We must all continually seek ways of increasing our competence as communicators. Concern for this principle is one rationale for annual training.
4. "The chief aim of interpretation is not instruction, but provocation." He spoke of intellectual awareness. This afternoon, Rod Nash will demonstrate the fundamentals of this art.
5. "Interpretation should aim to present a whole rather than a part, and must address the whole man rather than any phase." He spoke of the mind and the heart. Interpretation speaks to both sides of the brain. It should appeal to the emotional self as well.

6. "Interpretation addressed to children should not be a dilution of the presentation to adults, but should follow a fundamentally different approach." He spoke of the sense of wonder. Ted Geisel, better known as Dr. Seuss, believes that "adults are obsolete children." I believe that if we stress sensory involvement in our interpretive activities, we can help adults free the child within them. Interpretation that is effective with children is almost always effective with adults. The opposite is not always true.

I believe that there is a special kinship between the very young and the elderly. Both are more sensitive and responsive to the emotional influences of the natural world. Perhaps it is because they are both closer to their origins than those of us in our middle years.

Friend Heraclitus also said, "Man is most nearly himself when he achieves the seriousness of a child at play."

I believe that good interpretation is defined by the following qualities. It is:

Intriguing - It generates interest and curiosity. It captures the attention of visitors.

Imaginative - It communicates in innovative ways. It stimulates the development of new or different ideas or concepts. It causes the visitor to look at familiar things in different ways.

Involving - It encourages visitor participation; it draws the visitor into intimate personal contact with the environment. It involves visitors as active participants rather than just observers.

Informative - It conveys meaningful information or new knowledge about the park and the kinds of places and things it represents...it reveals something of man's inalienable relationship to the natural world.

Influential - It effects positive changes in visitor attitudes and behavior. This summer, Bill Lewis, in concert with Drs. Gary Machlis and Sam Ham of the University of Idaho CPSU Sociology Project will be attempting to learn some things about this important long-term objective of interpretation.

I also believe that interpretation should be:

Candid - If you don't know something, admit it. Interpret issues honestly and objectively. Fairly represent opposing viewpoints.

Opportunistic - Capitalize on interpretive opportunities as they develop. Avoid imprinting the same format on every situation. Be cautious not to develop a fixation on facts, figures and features. Beware the Imperative of the Trail - the tendency to be so intent on reaching the destination at trail's end that you overlook a multitude of exciting discoveries along the way; and,

Personalized - Let your programs be an expression of you. Share yourself with the visitor. Develop your own style.

What, then, are the characteristics of the "authentic interpreter?" A ramble through Webster's suggested the following lexicon of descriptive qualities. A good interpreter is:

articulate
 candid
 committed
 concerned
 courteous
 creative
 curious
 expressive
 informed
 inquisitive
 observant
 open-minded
 opportunistic
 perceptive
 personable
 resourceful
 responsive
 sensitive
 and
 unconventional.

Obviously not everyone can be expected to possess all of these qualities - I simply urge you to cultivate as many of them as you can.

In his book, essayist Richard Seltzer writes of "the exact location of the soul" Some time ago, my friend and mentor Freeman Tilden said, "The early Greek philosophers looked at the world about them and decided that there were four elements: fire, air, water and earth. But as they grew a little wiser, they perceived that there must be something else. These tangible elements did not comprise a principle: they merely revealed that somewhere else, if they could find it, there was a soul of things...a fifth essence, pure, eternal, and inclusive."

As Raymond Dasmann would say, Yellowstone is a very "different kind of country." While you are here, may you discover the "fifth essence" and help visitors to perceive the soul of Yellowstone.

Namastay! I salute the god within you.

George B. Robinson, Chief of Interpretation
 Remarks to Seasonal Interpreters

Training, June 6, 1983
Yellowstone National Park