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"Of the Human Heart": Personal Significance and the Key to Interpretation

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Abstract

About seven months ago, I was asked during an interview for my current internship what I thought the National Park Service could do to gain the interest of more millennials. This question was posed to me in light of the fact that I am a member of the millennial generation. And what was my incredibly insightful answer, you may ask? "I don't know." There were some rambling and incoherent sentences before I finally delivered that bombshell of a response, but that was my final answer, much to my embarrassment. Now that I am almost a month into my second National Park Service Internship at Minute Man National Historical Park in Concord, Massachusetts, I feel like I can answer that question, even if I am seven months late.

[excerpt]

Keywords

National Park Service, Millennials, Minute Man National Historical Park

Disciplines

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Comments

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THE GETTYSBURG COMPILER

ON THE FRONT LINES OF HISTORY

“Of the Human Heart”: Personal Significance and the Key to Interpretation

This post is part of a series featuring behind-the-scenes dispatches from our [Pohanka Interns](#) on the front lines of history this summer as interpreters, archivists, and preservationists. See [here](#) for the introduction to the series.

By [Alex Andrioli '18](#)

About seven months ago, I was asked during an interview for my current internship what I thought the National Park Service could do to gain the interest of more millennials. This question was posed to me in light of the fact that I am a member of the millennial generation. And what was my incredibly insightful answer, you may ask? “I don’t know.” There were some rambling and incoherent sentences before I finally delivered that bombshell of a response, but that was my final answer, much to my embarrassment. Now that I am almost a month into my second National Park Service Internship at Minute Man National Historical Park in Concord, Massachusetts, I feel like I can answer that question, even if I am seven months late.



The author and her supervisor, Leslie Obleschuk, in front of The Wayside: Home of Authors.

Photo courtesy Michelle Blee, June 29, 2016.

What millennials want is personal significance. Yes, another earth-shattering answer from yours truly. It seems so obvious – maybe that's why I didn't think of it earlier in my interview – but like many other humans, millennials want to see themselves in whatever story a specific National Park is trying to tell. Often times, I feel like older generations think of millennials as some new subspecies of humans and they are trying very hard to figure us out. Yes, we tend to be more tech-savvy with shorter attention spans, but like everyone who came before us, we are a bit selfish in the sense that we want to understand why something is important so that we can care about it.



The Minute Man Statue that stands watch at the North Bridge was sculpted by a young Concord man, Daniel Chester French, in 1874 for the 100th anniversary of the battle at the North Bridge in 1875. Civil War cannons were melted down to create the statue which depicts a generic farmer leaving his plow and picking up his musket to defend his “land and liberty.” Later on in his career, French created the sitting Abraham Lincoln Memorial in Washington, D.C. Photo taken by author, June 23, 2016.

The National Park Service tries to bring personal significance to their visitors through their Interpretive Development Program. It is a constant uphill battle to, as David Larsen implied in the title of his article, “Be Relevant or Become a Relic”. In it, he perfectly captured the complex art that is interpretation:

Interpretation does not provide answers; it poses questions. Interpretation does not teach; it offers opportunities for emotional and intellectual connections. Interpretation does not educate; it provokes increasingly sophisticated appreciation and understanding. Interpretation does not tell people how it is; it reveals personal significance.

From what I have experienced while working for the Park Service, the general public, including millennials, does not want to be told how to feel. They usually understand that a place is significant; the most obvious reason is that it’s a National Park so there has to be significance. However, whenever they go on a tour or listen to a ranger program, they don’t want to just hear about who, what, where, when, and why. They want to have the “so what?” answered and maybe even take the next step after the “so what”: “what now?” “So what” explains the significance of something and “now what” is where the general public can take the personal significance and act on it. What will they do with the information they have learned and developed through your interpretation? Who knows? It all depends on what they find important; *if* they found anything important in what you have bestowed upon them as an interpreter.

Larsen warns against problematic strategies when connecting with visitors through interpretation. “Interpredata” is what Larsen likens to taking “a drink of water from a firehose.” Too much information with no chance for visitors to connect to what you are telling them is the first deadly sin. The second, “interpretainment”, is all show with no message. “Interpreganda” is telling your audience how to feel or only sharing one point of view. This one-sidedness often produces a problematic phenomenon called “the single story”, which was elaborated on by Chimamanda Adichie during a TED Talk, where only one perspective is presented and the audience leaves thinking that that is the only story to be told. Finally, “interprecation” is the hybrid of interpretation and education. Although the two share many similarities and often overlap they cannot substitute one another. It’s like identical twins: you can’t have one without the other, but you can’t mistake one for another. Not only is that bad parenting, but that’s bad interpretation.

Even if one could avoid these four interpretive no-no's and include all of the essential facts, it's still not enough. Probably one of the hardest parts of being an interpreter is not having the answers for everything. For example, one of my jobs at Minute Man NHP is to give a twenty minute talk at the North Bridge. I explain the first day of the American Revolution, April 19, 1775, and what specifically happened at the North Bridge between the British soldiers and colonists. However, within that short twenty minute talk, I also have to find a way to convey the importance of the events that happened at the North Bridge without telling my audience what that importance means to them. Personal significance is, well, personal. I can't tell a group of people how the events of April 19, 1775 affects them because what I would tell them is really my own personal connection to that day.

I used to think that interpreters had to have all the answers, to be the most knowledgeable person in the room. Now I understand that to be a good interpreter, you have to be the person with the right questions and that you have met "the public where they are."

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