

Tilden in a Time of Crisis

If you aren't outraged, you aren't paying attention.

After winter, lovely spring. What outrage? On an April walk my first spring in the Cook County forest preserves, a colleague mused, this time of year you don't know whether to look up for birds or down for flowers. Spring is such a delightful time here in the midwest that its easy to overlook for a moment that we live in a time of crisis.

If you aren't outraged, you aren't paying attention. Just once I saw that on a bumper sticker – a challenge that may need no other context. Do we sink into despair adding up all the things to which we can justifiably respond with outrage? Some days it seems like the best thing would be to take my beverage of choice out to sit and watch the sun set on this life. Or do we respond that history is defined by crisis, and yet here we are still, gathered together to encourage ourselves and each other to continue?

I have the option to ride off into the sunset because my generation, for all the mess we have made of so much, has also seen progress in environmental protection, social justice, and more, and survived. I am here today because I've had the support and encouragement of many, and hope to pay back a little in what time I have left, some benefit of experience good and not so good, to encourage you to focus on finding your own way to fight the battle. You - interpreters – are essential. Focusing awareness on positive solutions to social and environmental crises, by emphasizing the beauty, meaning and value of what we hope to save and build, is what you do best.

Half a century after its first publication, Freeman Tilden's *Interpreting Our Heritage* remains one of our best guides to that awareness. Let me indulge in a bit of personal history about coming to know Tilden.

I came into interpretation pretty much by accident, a fish out of water. My education and previous experience as a sawlog forester – how many of you know what a sawlog forester is? - I chose largely because I thought it was a way to be out in the woods, away from cities and from other people as much as possible. It turned out to not be a good choice on a couple points. While forestry may in fact be about the forest, it is also very much about people. And while despite sometimes being painfully shy, I discovered that I really do like people.

And so I found myself at the Cook County Forest Preserve's Sand Ridge Nature Center, as surprised as anyone could be at landing in a job as a “naturalist,” not even sure what that meant and clueless about interpretation. Interpreter was not part of the title, or in fact the job description, in the way we more or less agree on today. A forest preserve naturalist was expected to be an old school naturalist, a jack of all trades in field science, ecology, and natural areas management. Oh, and maintain display animals, build exhibits, and present programs to schools and groups.

I knew enough science to at least keep my head above water, even though as an immigrant from farther west I didn't know the area. I'd never given any kind of talk – unless you count disastrous efforts in the one required speech class - to any sort of group. Training consisted of twice observing colleagues at school lectures, as these programs to an auditorium full of kids, were called, and then having one of them accompany me to my first. After that it was on your own, pal, and good luck.

That was winter. Spring rolled around and with the change of season an invasion of the nature center by thousands of students on spring field trips. School programs in either season were prescribed by the district and so rushed and over crowded that interpretation hardly entered the picture.

Light did begin to seep in. A great ray was the opportunity to attend an Association of Interpretive Naturalists workshop in the days when we slept in cabins, ate in dining halls, and the buffalo chip throw was by a campfire with the real thing.

Even before that my colleagues went out of their way to help me with local flora and fauna and the resources and history of the preserves. And they directed me to two books in our little library that provided lasting influence, in fact revelations, that have stayed with me for decades and to which I turn still.

Reading the Landscape, by May Watts of the Morton Arboretum, is an under-appreciated masterpiece. Her way of looking at landscapes as a detective is useful well beyond the specific examples in the book. It is about teasing out answers from the familiar: how did this place come to look this way? Why these plants and not others? What came before? What influences have different people had? Can we guess what may follow? It is a wonderful blueprint for exploration.

Reading the Landscape is also interpretive storytelling at its best. Loaded with information, it is no dull recitation of fact. Every chapter is a story that connects to our lives in meaningful ways.

Freeman Tilden tells us that is interpretation.

I hardly know how to talk about Interpreting Our Heritage without launching into a CIG workshop. If you haven't read it do so immediately. Read it again. A great advantage to being retired is that I've found time to re-read this fundamental classic, and regret that I did not make that time sooner.

For those of us coming from sciences, there is a great temptation to impart knowledge in the form of facts. Of Tilden's six principles, the one that spoke loudest to me in my early career was number two. What is Tilden's #2?

Information, as such, is not interpretation. Interpretation is revelation based upon information. But they are entirely different things. However, all interpretation includes information.i

Tilden's principles are interpreters essentials. His exposition of principles is just as valuable. On information, Tilden quotes Mark Twain:

To say that DeSoto saw (the Mississippi) in 1542 states the fact without interpreting it: it is something like giving the dimensions of a sunset by astronomical measurements and cataloging the colors by their scientific names - as a result you get the bald fact of the sunset but you don't see the sunset.ii

Twain then went on to put De Soto in 1542 into a surrounding historical context. That is an essential element of interpretation: context that relates to the audience, be they viewers, readers or listeners.

Revelation, not just information.

Revelation, noun: a usually secret or surprising fact that is made known.

Revelation, verb: an act of making something known : an act of revealing something in usually a surprising way.iii

Are we revealing secrets in surprising ways? That's not a bad test for our efforts. For years I kept Tilden's second principle on a hand written card over my desk.

This is what Mae Watts does so well, giving not dimensions of the land in feet of elevation or acres or miles, or cataloging the plants and animals, but revealing stories that let you *see* the land. Tilden's principles are illustrated so well in Mae Watts' book that you could imagine them as colleagues.

This way of looking at the landscape as an interpreter, finding my own place in the landscape that is home, and teasing out the stories for others, is the foundation I have built on.

Both books were published in the 1950's, and can feel dated in places. A second edition of *Reading the Landscape*, published in the 1970's, and retitled *Reading the Landscape of America*, added chapters but didn't change the original. While our impact on the land itself may have changed significantly the ideas are as fresh as ever. With all the useful and insightful resources now available, you can do worse than go back to these basics.

Reading the Landscape tells us to know our place, in land and in time.

Many have written persuasively about the importance of place, Wendell Berry and Gary Snyder are a couple of my favorites. What does it mean to an interpreter?

Where do you live and work? How well do you know the land and the creatures that share it with you? Who are the people who have shaped the present, for better or worse? How does your place relate to your neighbors, nearby and distant? What is your watershed? Where are you in the global landscape and economy? How do you fit in your environment?

A life of learning is the key to your space. How do you learn?

A little at a time, sometimes painfully. Always by constant effort. What you can learn in your own back yard is enough to keep you busy, getting the bigger picture can be overwhelming.

Stay curious. Aldo Leopold once told university students, "A good healthy curiosity is better equipment with which to venture forth than any amount of learning or education."iv

Leopold was our most eloquent advocate of the value of phenology. Keeping phenology notes may be the single best way for a naturalist and interpreter to discover your place, and stay in touch with it. Phenology is tracking the ordinary, more than the unusual. The phenologist – is that a real word?- takes as much pleasure in documenting seasonal changes from year to year as the lister gets from a rarity. Certainly the historical record is of much greater value.

Keeping track of phenology forces you to stay alert to the world around you, and that will open more doors. Are you pretty good at wildflowers? What's that mushroom? Tracking butterflies? Oh – look at that gorgeous dragonfly. Phenology is intimately knowing your place.

Share with and learn from your colleagues, in your own organization and visit as often as you can other sites. Don't let an annual workshop be your one chance to expand your horizons. Learn from your predecessors. What did they have to say about your organization and its place?

Do you know your history? Local cultural and historical societies and museums, as well as larger institutions, provide valuable information and often overlooked stories that may be just what you need to give your interpretation that special connection. And you cultural and historical interpreters, history and culture can't be separated from the land. It is “natural history” after all.

Know your history – know your land.

Know yourself

You are all so busy, how do you find time for a phenology walk when the school group will be here any minute and a report is due and the boss is on the phone with yet another assignment?

I guess this is how you find out who you really are. Why are you in this business? What do you care about? A paycheck, if you are one of the fortunate, of course. Family and friends, certainly. Often these must be priorities. I know that every one of you is here for more. You are here because you care. Why do you care? How far can you go on the courage of convictions?

I have known a few, and that means a few too many, interpreters who watched the clock as closely as any bored 7th grader, bolting for the door at the stroke of the appointed hour. Yes, there are many days when other commitments demand our time. And there are many days arriving a little early, taking a walk or catching up on relevant reading at lunch time, staying a bit late to check out something you might have missed, is not burden but opportunity.

So you make the effort to learn and grow, as an interpreter and as a person. You have a personal and professional commitment to protecting our history and resources, preserving biodiversity in any way possible, to fighting for environmental justice. Now what?

Keep the courage of your convictions. Be willing to express and defend your positions.

Easier said than done. Crises are by definition controversial. First you have limits of your employment and mission. You will not accomplish anything by offending your supervisors and board of directors. Learn what limits they put on interpreting controversial issues. Remember that boards and directors are one of your most important audiences. Look for the chance to work from within.

Know your audience. Ecophobia is not just about children. Most folks who come to your site will tune out a bombardment of doom and gloom, even if you manage to put a positive spin on it.

Accentuate the positive. When you see that you've won the audience, you might slip in a reminder of threats, appropriate to your theme and that audience. Forget about saving the Earth – the Earth will do just fine without us. When you do talk about threats, make it personal, emphasize practical action, keep it positive and doable.

Use your passion to make emotional connections. Your audience won't care about what you say if it looks like you don't care. Passion, though, must be tempered by fact. No, interpretation is not presentation of information, but Tilden qualified the principle, all interpretation includes information - accurate, verifiable information.

Mark Twain, in reasoning from meander cutoff changes that had shortened the Mississippi significantly in a couple of decades since his time as a river pilot, argued that it once must have extended hundreds of miles into the Gulf of Mexico, and sometime in the future it would be just a couple miles from Cairo to New Orleans. He concluded that "There is something fascinating about science. One gets such wholesale returns of conjecture out of such a trifling investment of fact."v

Your information must be backed up by reliable sources.

Many of us disparage creationists and climate change deniers for their failure to acknowledge scientific research and knowledge. Are there not those on "our" side who are also guilty of selective reporting and other bias? Keep your critical thinking cap on. The easiest person to fool is yourself.

Know your resource. Check your sources stay abreast of new developments. Keep learning. Aldo Leopold once defined an ecologist as one who is "skillful in seeing facts, ingenious in forming hypothesis, and ruthless in discarding them when they don't fit."

For interpreters we could change "hypothesis" to "compelling stories."vi An interpreter is one who is skillful in seeing facts, ingenious in forming compelling stories, and ruthless in discarding them when they don't fit.

Make no mistake, this is A Time of Crisis.

One dictionary definition of crisis is: an unstable or crucial time or state of affairs in which a decisive change is impending; *especially* : one with the distinct possibility of a highly undesirable outcome.vii

Crisis is nothing new. Looking back at the critical issues of a quarter or a half century ago, how overwhelming it all seemed, and yet indeed progress has been made.

I don't need to talk about all the different ways in which not only biodiversity, but our very own well being and even survival continue to be threatened. Crisis demands action. Conservation Biology as a distinct field was created as a response to perceived failure of existing science and conservation efforts to address the loss of biodiversity. It is our duty to embrace principles of conservation biology, and to do all we can to promote their implementation in our own organizations, home lands, and personal lives.

Now Tilden's fourth principle, the one that stirs up the most lively discussion in training workshops, is the one I rely on: The chief aim of interpretation is not instruction but provocation. That is, to provoke thinking, not just more controversy.

Stick to basics. Know your Audience, Know your Resource, Practice Appropriate Techniques. To interpret and educate and *provoke* effectively go back to the sources that have inspired you; as I will to John Muir and Aldo Leopold, Watts and Tilden and many more. Keep your curiosity alive, new discoveries and inspiration await every day.

Stay positive. Treat your own potential nature deficit, as I must. Renew yourself. Edward Abbey said “It is not enough to fight for the land; it is even more important to enjoy it.”^{viii} That might seem an upside down priority, if there is no open land how can we enjoy it? But if we don't enjoy it and help instill that joy in others, then we won't fight for it.

Escape to “big nature,” wilderness and national parks, may be your cup of tea. Great – rejuvenating indeed. It is even more important to be in love with your neighborhood. We live in a world of loss, the wild world whittled away day by day. When a new generation knows less of nature, how will they ever know what they have lost? How can we be stewards of what we've never known?

I find it nearly impossible to relate to the extinction of passenger pigeons, a phenomenon so outside my experience I can not even properly imagine it. What will the children of today learn to value? Its up to us to protect and pass along every bit we can.

Some years ago when forest preserve staff was asked to identify significant sites the Illinois natural areas inventory might have overlooked, a former supervisor of mine said, loud and clear, “every damn green inch!” Your own terrain, your own green inch really matters.

Most of us will not reach the inspirational level of John Muir or Aldo Leopold or Edward Abbey. That doesn't mean what we can - and must - do is any less important. In this audience are those who can be that inspiration. All of us must strive to be mentor, leader, and inspiration to those around us.

Most of all, be a passionate teller of stories - inspiring and accurate stories. We need solid ground to stand on, but science alone too often fails to make any emotional connection to the radiant beauty of this earth. Here is the unique and essential role of the interpreter: to suffuse science with poetry, to encourage both the logical and emotional relationship to nature, fostering in our audience respect and love of land, and the understanding needed to care for it.

We live in a world of wounds and loss. Embrace outrage. In 1934 Aldo Leopold said, “There is a feeble minority called conservationists, who are indignant about something. They are just beginning to realize that their task involves the reorganization of society...”ix Reorganization of society is no small task - we must be more than a feeble minority.

Know your place and live well there. Live the life you believe in. Care for yourself and your family, care for your neighbors and community. Set an example. Three centuries ago John Locke said "The actions of men are the best interpreters of their thoughts."x How do others interpret you?

- i Interpreting Our Heritage, 1957
- ii Life on the Mississippi
- iii <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/revelation>
- iv U. of N. Mexico address, 1920, quoted in Meine, Loipold Life and Work p. 183
- v Twain, opcit
- vi intro lecture, last Wildlife Ecology class, 1948, Meine p. 514
- vii Merriam-Webster on line <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/crisis>
- viii High Country News, (24 September 1976),
- ix The Arboretum and the University, 1934
- x An Essay Concerning Human Understanding, 1689