

A Soulful Sense of Place

Fostering Connections in Yourself and Your Visitors

ERICA WHEELER

We set out on a wildlife cruise across the upper Mississippi River, the “working river” as some people call it, and headed for a slough. On the way we saw an eagle’s nest, great blue herons, and other birds. Near a beaver lodge, the captain cut the motor and we just idled there, surrounded by greenery, water, and sky. We were a short ride from La Crosse, Wisconsin, but we were hidden from the city view behind the trees. It was a world away. We were in the wilds.

I led the third-grade students out to the bow of the boat and did a sensory “sense of place” activity, asking them to tune in to what they could see, hear, smell, taste, and touch. I took notes of what they said so that later we could create a song together based on their reflections.

Then I asked them to place their hands over their hearts, Pledge of Allegiance style, and to tell me what they felt. “Calm!” the kids blurted out, “Peaceful!” “Happy!” One little boy with glasses, the shy one, spun his head around and, looking me right in the eyes, exclaimed, “I feel like I belong here!”

This is why I do the work I do. I



Caption

know it’s why you do the work you do, too.

As our world become more fast-paced and stressful, we need the rootedness that comes from a sense of the past, from the ongoing cycles of nature, from making meaning from the world around us, not just what comes into our in-boxes.

Richard Louv wrote in his classic book *Last Child in the Woods*, “If

children do not attach to the land, they will not reap the psychological and spiritual benefits they can glean from nature, nor will they feel a long-term commitment to the environment, to the place.”

A disconnect from nature and the past can occur in anyone. If you’re concerned that disconnect—that people don’t care about places or take care of places—using the arts and reflection to help people discover meaning and value in your place could be a game changer.

In 1896 John Muir, whom many credit with the very idea of interpretation, wrote, “I will interpret the rocks, learn the language of flood, storm, and the avalanche. I’ll acquaint myself with the glaciers and wild gardens, and get as near the heart of the world as I can.”

What was unique about Muir is the intimacy he developed with the places he explored, and how he shared that intimacy with others. Getting near the heart of the world is what I mean by having a “soulful sense of place.” It’s the combination of facts and feeling, information and emotion. It’s how we subconsciously weave together those qualities to make sense of our lives and the world, not just in a



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general sense, but also in an up-close, intimate, personal way.

As a sense-of-place singer/songwriter, artist, and educator, I help people discover and articulate their personal connection to place. In my work with interpreters and visitors across the country, I have witnessed how often people, especially if they think they're not the creative type, become articulate when they start to describe a place they love and why.

What's true is that you don't need to be an artist or a historian to have a soulful sense of place. As human beings, we're hardwired to experience life through our senses, and to feel with our hearts. All we need is the opportunity to slow down and tap into our senses, and listen to that heartbeat.

Self-expression can be facilitated. Everyone I've met has stories of place and belonging; they only need the opportunity, a little inspiration, and encouragement to express themselves.

Artists express how they see, think, and feel. Articulating how places make us feel helps to create that personal bond with a place. And from that personal bond comes the kind of caring and engagement that leads to stewardship. I believe that connection to place is the largest untapped resource we have to cultivate the future of conservation.

As author and scientist Stephen Jay Gould wrote, "We cannot win this battle to save species and environments without forging an emotional bond between ourselves and nature as well—for we will not fight to save what we do not love."

It's What People Want

To some people in the interpretive field, this all might sound too touchy-feely. How can state and federal employees even "go there" with people? Isn't it kind of taboo because it veers off into a "religious" connection to a place?

Personally, I know that to reconnect with my heart and my spirit is a reason that I visit places. And I know I'm not alone. When I ask people to tell me what they liked

about a place they've been, they may start out by telling me some of the features they saw, or something new they learned. They might talk about an experience they had with someone or by themselves.

Then they'll get a faraway look in their eyes and start to describe a sunset or the smell of the salty air. They might talk of the scent of pines as they reached out to hold a loved one's hand. They'll start sounding like a poet, musician, or dancer. They'll exhale slowly and say, "Honestly, I just liked the way it made me feel."

I have asked people in these informal surveys, what if you were offered a reflective, integrative program that helped you articulate your experience in a creative way, your own personal "touchstone" to help you tap into that feeling any time, would they have liked that? The resounding answer was, "Yes!" An opportunity to be reflective and creative sounded like a perfect way to round out their visit.

People visit places for different reasons. They come for recreational, educational, and scenic experiences. They also come for quiet, reflection and spiritual rejuvenation. Thus it makes sense to offer interpretive programs that engage the heart and mind.

What would our natural and cultural heritage sites would be like if they worked harder to facilitate personal, emotional, and even spiritual connections between people and place? What if that was central to their mission statements, educational programs, interpretive signs, and all their visitor services?

Just as your park, museum, nature center, zoo, or historic site's programs provides a much-needed opportunity for education and learning, it also provides much-needed refreshment for the soul. Especially in today's fast-paced world, your place can provide a tonic to the stresses of life. Using the arts to connect people and place can help.

The Arts and Interpretation

In *The Myth of Progress*, author Tom Wessels writes about how facts are not enough, because facts only lead to knowledge. He writes, "Reflective practice is essential to convert knowledge into understanding and, eventually, wisdom."

Artists help people reflect and experience the world around them in new ways. Songs, stories, essays, paintings, and poems about places help us see and appreciate places with new eyes.

The arts help us understand more than we did before, and they often

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elicit a feeling that helps us connect to a place in a new way. Art that resonates with us can change the way we think or feel in an instant. In this way, art can inspire stewardship. Many places have benefited from the passionate voice of those who loved and cared about them.

Art can be a tool for self-exploration, done alone, to enrich one's own life and help make sense of the world. It can also be a form of communication and fellowship with others, of sharing ideas, thoughts, feelings, inspirations.

Many people have a creative self that got lost or discouraged along the way. When we are given the safety and encouragement to express ourselves, verbally or in another form, there's a freeing feeling that goes along with it, as though there was something inside all along that was just waiting for a chance to come out.

We don't all express ourselves the same way, and we certainly don't view places the same way. But in

my work with thousands of people, there are some commonalities that I've observed. Everyone has a point of view, whether they have ever articulated it before or not. And that view can grow, change, and expand.

Your role as an interpreter is to mentor people to explore their point of view.

Inspiring a Soulful Connection to Place

Whether you offer your own arts-based program or bring in an artist to facilitate a program, you provide a way for your visitors to make your place personally relevant to their lives. And that is the goal of interpretation itself: To help visitors forge intellectual and emotional connections with your resource.

Mentoring someone to tune into your place in a soulful, reflective way is a gift you can provide to help people create meaning that will last longer than a postcard or other souvenir. A workshop or performance that is both arts-based and interpretive will touch hearts and minds and can make a real difference.

There are many simple, integrative tools you can implement, such as offering ways for visitors to tap into their senses. These can compliment or add depth to the programs you are already offering. They will help people experience your place in a deeper, more meaningful way, creating personal experiences that will last a lifetime.

Erica Wheeler is a "sense of place" artist and educator. She has offered her Soulful Landscape performances, workshops and trainings at parks, museums, events, and education centers across the country. She was the keynote speaker at the 2007 NAI National Workshop, and her CD "Good Summer Rain" won the 2008 NAI Media Award for "Best Interpretive Music."

To learn more and to download her free eBook, Seven Soulful Ways to Connect to Place, visit www.ericawheeler.com (click on "Outreach and Education").