

CLICKING THE ICON: EXPLORING THE MEANINGS VISITORS ATTACH TO THREE NATIONAL CAPITAL MEMORIALS

Theresa L. Goldman, Assistant Professor
Division of Forestry
West Virginia University
Morgantown, WV 26506
Theresa.Goldman@mail.wvu.edu

Wei-Li Jasmine Chen, Research Assistant
Division of Forestry
West Virginia University
Morgantown, WV 26506
wchen3@wvu.edu

David L. Larsen, Training Specialist/Interpretation
Stephen T. Mather Training Center &
National Conservation Training Center
Harpers Ferry, WV 25425-0077
David_Larsen@dnp.gov

Abstract:

This study explored the meanings visitors attach to three National Park Service sites in Washington, D.C.: the Lincoln Memorial, the Vietnam Veterans Memorial, and the Korean War Veterans Memorial. Researchers used focus-group interviews (21 interviews, 182 participants) to identify the meanings visitors attach to park resources, their interests relative to interpretive programming, and the extent to which connections between the meanings of the resource and the interests of the visitor occur as a result of exposure to interpretive programs. An analysis of focus-group interview data revealed four themes that reflect a sense of spiritual connection with the ideals of our nation; the role of Lincoln as the embodiment of our identity and aspirations; the elements of quality interpretation; and a sense of gratitude for those who served and of responsibility to maintain democratic traditions. Study results suggest several ways that an understanding of visitor meanings and place experience can improve interpretive programming.

Keywords:

Interpretation, sense of place, visitor meanings, meaning-making, connections, Interpretive Development Program, National Park Service, Lincoln Memorial, Vietnam Veterans Memorial, Korean War Veterans Memorial.

INTRODUCTION

British philosopher Edward Relph states: "To be human is to live in a world that is filled with significant places; to be human is to have and know your place" (1976, p. 1). The National Park Service (NPS) and other federal land-managing agencies are charged with caring for those places that Americans hold most dear. Interpreters at these sites tell the stories that help us define—and redefine—who we are as a people. Managing public lands goes well beyond the actions managers take to keep visitors safe, to ensure that operations run smoothly, and to preserve the ecosystem intact. An important goal of public land management, perhaps the most important goal, is to provide opportunities for visitors to come to care about the resource so that they can begin to care for the resource (Larsen, 1997). Interpretation is a powerful tool managers use to raise the level of care among visitors. Besides fostering an ethic of care, interpretive programs can yield many other positive outcomes, including helping visitors understand the intrinsic and material values of the resource (Wagar, 1978; Cherem, 1977; Trotter, 1992); increasing visitor understanding of natural processes such as glaciation and forest succession, or aspects of human history such as war and peace (Roggenbuck, Williams, & Bobinski, 1992; Masberg, 1996); promoting civic awareness of environmental and social issues (Wagar, 1978); motivating visitors to change their environmental attitudes and behaviors (Cable, Knudson, Udd, & Stewart, 1987; Ham & Krumpke, 1996; Hungerford & Volk, 1990; Knapp, 1997; USDA Forest Service, 1990; National Park Service, 1991; Lustig, 1982); and encouraging resource stewardship and responsible citizenship (Wagar, 1978; Roggenbuck et al.; Zinsner, 1992; Hiltten & Hiltten, 1997). Interpretive outcomes such as care and responsible citizenship do not arise out of a void, however; they require a sense of relationship, a sense of being connected to something that is bigger than oneself.

A sense of connection between self and "other" forms the essence of meaningful, powerful, and even spiritual experiences (McDonald & Schreyer, 1991). The National Park Service views "connections" as personal bonds or relationships with the resource that are accessible both intellectually and emotionally (Larsen, 1997; NPS, 2000a; NPS 2000b). Herb Schroeder (1990, p. 25) equates "spiritual" experience with feeling "related to or in touch with an 'other' that transcends one's individual sense of self and gives meaning to one's life at a deeper than intellectual level." Providing opportunities for spiritual experiences may not appear on any list of interpreter job duties; however, interpreters should understand the power meanings of place hold as well as the value people derive from connecting with those meanings. Daniel Dustin (1994, p. 96) offers a compelling reason why front-line interpreters, interpretive managers, and interpretive researchers should reflect upon the role of spiritual experiences in interpretation:

Management could enhance opportunities for spiritual experiences through innovations in design, interpretation, and educational services. In this regard, the value of research on spiritual benefits is not likely to be in what it does for prediction and control, but in what it does for understanding and empowerment. This research could unleash the human potential.

OBJECTIVES

Three objectives guided the current study:

- To identify the meanings visitors attach to three National Capital Parks—Central sites in Washington, D.C.: the Lincoln Memorial, the Korean War Veterans Memorial, and the Vietnam Veterans Memorial. (These sites constitute an area known as the "Triangle.")
- To identify visitor interests related to on-site interpretive programming.
- To identify the types of connections between the meanings of the resource and the interests of the visitor that occur among participants who have attended an interpretive program.

The National Park Service's Stephen T. Mather Training Center and National Capital Parks—Central (NCP—Central) commissioned this study to improve on-site interpretive programs. Drawing upon their interpretive training and management expertise, they have proposed creative ways to use visitor meanings data to expand interpreter knowledge of their audience. The assumption underlying this study is that if interpreters understand the range of meanings visitors ascribe to the resource, and if they incorporate these meanings into on-site interpretive programs, they will be able to more effectively reach a diverse audience.

This study builds on previous research on audience demographics (Rakow & Lehtonen, 1988; Wallace & Witter, 1991); visitor motivation (More, 1983; Loomis, 1996; Silverman, 1995; Rakow & Lehtonen; Wallace & Witter; Hayward & Larkin, 1983); visitor attitudes and behavior (Cable et al., 1987; Ham & Krumpke, 1996; Hungerford & Volk, 1990; Knapp, 1997); and the learning process (Hammit, 1982; Meredith & Mullins, 1995; Ham & Krumpke). Previous studies focused primarily on visitor characteristics, cognitive processes, and behavioral outcomes. In general, the complex phenomenon of how visitors interact with a site was not addressed. This study explores the meanings visitors attach to park resources, their interests relative to interpretive programming, and the extent to which connections between the meanings of the resource and the interests of the visitor occur as a result of exposure to interpretive programs.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The concepts of "place" and "meanings" have achieved prominence in the fields of geography, landscape architecture, public administration, historic preservation, natural resource management, education, counseling, and cognitive and social psychology. Researchers have emphasized the importance of understanding people's meanings of place and applying the sense-of-place concept in resource management (Roggenbuck et al., 1992; Masberg 1996; Roberts, 1996; Williams & Stewart, 1998; Galliano & Loeffler, 1999). Place is a powerful concept that enables researchers to understand people's attitudes, values, motivations, and behavior more holistically (Williams & Stewart, 1998; Lippard, 1997). Specifically, place-based research explores the process of psychological engagement that transforms space into place (Tuan, 1977).

Scholars tend to tightly link the concepts of place and meaning. Tuan (1974, 1977) describes place as a center of meanings that are formed through experience. Further, place represents a *collective expression* of the intellectual and emotional meanings people attach to a place. Relph (1976) contends that place fuses meaning, action, and context. Galliano and Loeffler (1999) define place as "a geographic area that has meaning to people" (p. 1). Despite increased interest in the concept of place, Williams and Stewart (1998) argue that the concept of sense of place is "elusive, ill defined, and controversial" (p. 18). They propose five dimensions that constitute sense of place, including people's emotional bonds with a place; the strongly felt values, meanings, and symbols associated with a place; the valued qualities of a place that may go unnoticed until they are threatened or lost; place meanings that are actively constructed individually and corporately; and the cultural, historical, or spatial context that shapes cognitive responses and social interactions. These definitions suggest that places embody both personal meanings such as individual identities and histories (Tuan, 1974, 1977; Fishwick & Vining, 1992; Roberts, 1996) and communal values such as proper social relations and ethical land-use practices (Simonsen, 1989). Place exerts a powerful influence on human consciousness. People have a real but sometimes unmet need to connect with significant places. Authentic place experience is direct and genuine, and it instills a sense of interconnectedness. In contrast, inauthentic place experience is stereotyped, prepackaged, and imposed upon one from without (Relph). Galliano and Loeffler assert that understanding place meanings helps managers discern how people interact with their environment.

The concept of meanings also plays an important role in the education, counseling, and cognitive and social psychology literature. In these disciplines, researchers focus on the nature of knowledge and how we come to know what we know. Postmodernism, constructivism, and multiculturalism represent three distinct conceptual frameworks within which the concept of meaning is analyzed (D'Andrea, 2000; Silverman, 1995). Postmodernism calls into question traditional assumptions about the nature of truth (i.e., truth as absolute) and tends to view reality as a socially constructed phenomenon (Schneider, 1998; Tierney, 1993; Hayes, 1994). Constructivism is a process by which individuals (i.e., psychological constructivism) and groups (i.e., social constructivism) actively construct meaning and ascribe significance to life experiences (Mahoney & Lyddon, 1988; Sexton & Griffin, 1997; Guterman, 1994). Multiculturalism examines the unique belief systems and truths that people from diverse cultural groups create to define their identity and understand their life experiences (Daniels & D'Andrea, 1997; Sue, Ivey, & Pedersen, 1996). The process of meaning-making is a hotly contested area within constructivism (Phillips, 1997). Gergen (1994) contrasts two opposing views regarding the origin of meaning:

In the intersubjective account of meaning, the mind of the individual serves as an originary source. Meaning is generated within the mind and transmitted via words or gestures. In the relational case, however, there is no proper beginning, no originary source, no specific region in which meaning takes wing, for we are always already in a relational standing with others and the world (p. 264).

Whether meaning-making is viewed as an intersubjective or relational phenomenon affects how educators, counselors, and interpreters engage in professional practice. If meaning is purely intersubjective, then all meaning is ascribed and represents an independent construction of the individual. If meaning is strictly relational, then meanings held toward an object, event, or place accumulate over time, forming a socially agreed-upon domain with which individuals interact. Some scholars resolve this debate by acknowledging multiple processes and influences in the construction of meaning:

To have a position that is credible, constructivists of both types—psychological and social—have to find room for the fact that our knowledge is about something. And whatever it is, that it is about, has to be granted a role in influencing our constructions.... Nevertheless, I do not want to deny that the social constructivists are on to something—something they spoil by overstatement; this is the fact that our constructions are not, and could not possibly be, solitary individualistic endeavors... the activity [of meaning-making] is inextricably social and depends upon the use of social resources (Phillips, 1997, p. 191).

Phillips (1997) links three components in his conceptualization of the meaning-making process: individual ascription; social consensus; and the specific attributes of the object, event, or place. The National Park Service's Interpretive Development Program (IDP) adopts a similar approach to understanding meanings. The IDP views meanings as inherent in the resource (i.e., "the resource possesses meanings and has relevance") due to social consensus and specific attributes of the resource (Larsen, 1997). The IDP also recognizes that visitors ascribe personalized meanings to the resource (NPS, 2000a). Thus, a resource represents layers of meanings, while humans bring various perspectives to the site. The IDP also emphasizes the importance of incorporating universal concepts into interpretation. A universal concept, as defined by the National Park Service, is any intangible meaning (e.g., idea, concept, system, process) that is relevant to almost everyone but that does not mean the same thing to any two people (NPS, 2000a). Universal concepts can be any broadly relevant concept, including, for example, beauty, family, love, death, justice, change, survival, power, and freedom. They can be applied to human relationships, cultural resources, or the natural environment. Ham (1992) refers to these concepts as "highly personal things," including "ourselves, our families, our health, our well-being, our quality of life, our deepest values, principles, beliefs and convictions" (p. 13). Universal concepts can be used to tap into the memories, values, and experiences that many visitors share (Silverman, 1997; Wagar, 1975).

The use of universal concepts in interpretation can increase the likelihood of provocation. Because universal concepts are relevant to more people, visitors are more likely to have ascribed personalized meanings to those concepts. Tilden (1977) identifies the visitors' chief interest as anything that relates to something within themselves. The IDP maintains that interpretation facilitates a connection between the meanings of the resource and the interests of the visitor (Larsen, 1997). Connections are defined in the IDP "Module 101" as (a) "linkages" and "relationships" that are "broad based and accessible both intellectually and emotionally" (Larsen,

1997; NPS, 1997; NPS, 2000a) and (b) as the linkages that visitors forge with the resource when they "develop an active stewardship ethic" (NPS, 2000a). Loomis (1996) emphasizes the importance of facilitating resource meanings/visitor interest connections: "Interpretation should not only raise curiosity (attract central attention) but also provide opportunities for involvement by relating content to personal meanings" (p. 41). The best interpreters always strive to connect their ideas to the lives of their audiences, creating opportunities for intellectual and emotional connections to the meanings of the resource (Mahaffey, 1973; Ham, 1992; Silverman, 1997).

Unique challenges and opportunities present themselves as one tries to interpret resources, such as the memorials in our nation's capital, that reflect such diverse meanings as war and peace, freedom and slavery, civil rights, and an obligation to serve (Martinez, 1988; Machlis, 1992; Bennett, 1998). Wasserman (1998) notes that memorial landscapes can function as sacred space, "transmitting community stories and validating those actions deemed honorific in a given culture" (p. 43). The memorial landscape is a place for memory, mourning, reflection, healing, ceremony, and collective ritual action (Wasserman). Memorials, however, are often caught in the cross-fire of conflicting interpretations regarding the meanings of past events. At sites such as the USS Arizona Memorial and Little Big Horn Battlefield National Monument, "history lives and the unmistakable specter of controversy thrives" (Martinez, p. 144). Both World War II veterans and visitors of Japanese descent have found the interpretive signs at the USS Arizona Memorial offensive. Little Big Horn reflects the dark side of the American government's political agenda and reminds visitors of the painful wounds inflicted upon the society and psyche of Native Americans. Interpretation at battlefields and war/peace memorials must convey complex and often contradictory meanings: honor, bravery, triumph, and sacrifice—as well as the human and environmental costs of war, including the pain and loss of soldiers and civilians, increased disease, general malnutrition, the destruction of habitat, increased pollution, economic upheaval, and demographic changes (Bennett; Machlis). When discussing whether the realized or desired outcomes of these conflicts justified the human and environmental costs, multiple perspectives must be employed. By discussing events comprehensively, interpreters can reach an audience who themselves have diverse beliefs about the cultural politics of war and peace.

An expanded understanding of the meanings of the resource, a sense of connecting with significant places, and spiritual experiences sound like worthwhile goals, but is this what visitors want? Visitors come to sites with a range of preexisting meanings, but it is often unclear what meanings they bring. How does on-site experience influence the meanings visitors attach to these sites? Do visitors really care about relating to park sites in a way that transcends their sense of self and provides meaning at a deeper than intellectual level (Schroeder, 1990)? When interpretive rangers are overwhelmed with daily responsibilities and visitors' "ludicrous questions" (Tilden, 1977, p. 46), they can easily overlook the extent to which these dynamics might be in play. This study was therefore undertaken to better understand the meanings visitors ascribe to three significant places on our national landscape: the Lincoln Memorial, the Vietnam Veterans Memorial, and the Korean War Veterans Memorial.

METHODS

This study used focus-group interviews to bring together a cross section of visitors to three National Capital Parks-Central sites: the Lincoln Memorial, the Korean War Veterans Memorial, and the Vietnam Veterans Memorial. The study sites were selected based on predetermined selection criteria related to location, resources, programming, and staffing. NCP-Central was chosen due to its proximity to the Stephen T. Mather Training Center and West Virginia University. In addition, in conjunction with two other research locations (Great Falls Park, Virginia, and Rock Creek Park, Washington, D.C.), NCP-Central contains a diversity of park resources and a wide range of potential visitor meanings. The Lincoln Memorial is a tribute to President Lincoln and the Union he sought to preserve. The memorial records Lincoln's *Gettysburg Address* and *Second Inaugural Address*. The steps, plaza, and reflecting pool in front of the Lincoln Memorial have functioned as a place of protest and a forum for discussing issues such as race, civil rights, war and peace, and AIDS. The Vietnam Veterans Memorial is the most visited NPS site in Washington, D.C. The site commemorates the sacrifice of American military personnel during one of the nation's least popular wars (NPS, 1998b). A journalist from the *New York Times* described the memorial as "a hallowed site" with a "spiritual dimension that transforms it into something like a sacred shrine, where pilgrims come and devotions are paid" (Niebuhr, 1994). The Korean War Veterans Memorial is dedicated to all those who served during the Korean War (1950-1954), the first major conflict of the Cold War. The returning veterans were the first Americans not to receive a hero's welcome in recognition of the hardships they endured in their fight for freedom (NPS, 1998a). Taken together, the three study sites at NCP-Central represent diverse meanings related to war and peace, freedom and slavery, civil rights and patriotic duty, national leaders and common heroes, and the fundamental ideals upon which our nation was founded.

A total of 182 visitors participated in 21 focus-group interviews conducted over a period of six days during summer 1998. Interviews were held on a consecutive Thursday, Friday, and Saturday in mid-July and on a consecutive Thursday, Friday, and Saturday in early August. Interviews were conducted on both weekdays and weekends, and in the morning, afternoon, and evening on each of the six days to ensure that the sampling pool contained the widest possible range of visitor types. Focus-group interview participants were recruited from among those who had attended an on-site interpretive program (9 groups, N=87) and from among those who had not attended an on-site interpretive program (12 groups, N=95). For the purposes of this study, groups of participants who had attended an on-site interpretive program are referred to as "post-groups"; groups that had not attended an on-site interpretive program are referred to as "pre-groups." The average size of a focus group was 8 to 9 participants, including individuals, couples, friend groups, and families with children. To recruit participants, at a specified time, park rangers and researchers working in a 3- to 4-person team canvassed the area between the Lincoln Memorial and the reflecting pool, inviting each individual or group encountered to participate in the focus-group interview. Approximately one visitor (or group of visitors) for every 10 approached agreed to participate. Park rangers

who presented on-site interpretive programs recruited post-group participants via announcements that preceded and followed their interpretive talk. Interviews were conducted on site under a canopy tent set up alongside the reflecting pool in front of the Lincoln Memorial. Refreshments were served. Door prizes such as tickets for the White House, Washington Monument, and Holocaust Museum were provided to participants.

Self-selection bias exists for this sample population because participation was voluntary and overall participation rates were low. However, those who agreed to participate may have been as motivated by the cool beverage and a chance to sit down in the shade, or the opportunity to obtain White House tickets without waiting in long lines, as from a keen desire to discuss their on-site experience. Some participants may have participated primarily because someone in their group agreed to participate and they felt they had to go along. Therefore, although participants were self-selected, their motivations for participating were varied.

Focus-group interviews were ideal for this study because "...the intent of focus groups is not to infer but to understand, not to generalize but to determine the range, not to make statements about a population but to provide insights about how people perceive a situation" (Krueger, 1994, p. 87). Focus-group data also have high face validity because of the believability of participant comments (Krueger). During the focus-group interview, researchers sought to elicit participant responses to open-ended questions about visitor meanings, interests, and connections. Sample interview questions include the following:

- What drew you to the site today?
- What do these sites teach us?
- When you look at the statue of Lincoln, what thoughts go through your mind?
- What would you tell the younger generations about this place?
- When you are here, do you have a sense of interacting with history? How so?
- If you were a ranger, what would you tell your audience?
- (For those who had attended an interpretive program.) Did the ranger's talk help you think about this place in a new way?

Focus-group interviews were tape-recorded and transcribed verbatim.

Analysis of interview transcripts was accomplished using the following process: (1) hand-coding the data; (2) sorting the data into related categories; (3) analyzing categories to identify recurring patterns and themes; (4) clustering and specifying the range of visitor meanings, interests, and connections; (5) making contrasts and comparisons; (6) subsuming particulars into generals when appropriate to do so; and (7) ensuring conceptual coherence (Weber, 1990; Miles & Huberman, 1994). Steps 3 through 7 represent an iterative process in which related participant comments were examined and either further subdivided or collapsed to form coherent groupings. Once internally consistent groupings were identified, their underlying unity or significance was verbalized in a theme statement. A qualitative approach allowed researchers to explore the multiple factors that shape a process or a

perspective, including how these factors interact on a situation-by-situation basis (Weber; Miles & Huberman). In addition, a qualitative approach was appropriate due to the study emphasis on visitor meanings: "Qualitative researchers are interested in *meaning*—how people make sense of their lives, experiences, and their structures of the world" (Creswell, 1994, p. 145). Researchers also conducted a computerized keyword frequency analysis and developed a profile of participant demographics.

RESULTS

Participant Demographics

Focus-group interview participants (N=182) were approximately half male (47%) and half female (53%). They were from diverse geographic regions: 13% were from Washington, D.C., Virginia, and Maryland; 60% were from states east of the Mississippi River; 15% were from states west of the Mississippi River; and 12% were international visitors. Participants from the United States represented 30 states and the District of Columbia. International participants came from England, Canada, Israel, Mexico, China, France, Nigeria, and Germany. Participants were drawn from a wide range of age groups: 14% were under 13 years of age; 17% were 13 to 25 years old; 30% were 26 to 40 years old; 25% were 41 to 55 years old; and 14% were 56 years of age or older. The majority of participants were first-time visitors to the site (44%), though 17% had visited the site twice, 16% had visited the site 3 to 4 times, and 17% had visited the site 5 or more times. (Note: 6% of participants did not indicate the number of times they had visited the site.) Most participants were of Anglo descent (90%), though participants of African (4%), Hispanic (2%), and Asian (4%) descent did engage in the interview process.

In terms of demographics, the 182 participants interviewed in this study closely mirrored participants in a much larger visitor study (N=2,720) conducted at National Capital Parks—Central during summer 1998 (Littlejohn & Hoffman, 1999). One notable difference between the two study populations is that the current study included more participants who had visited the site 5 or more times (17%), compared to Littlejohn and Hoffman, who found that 8% of their sample had visited the site 5 or more times. Similarly, 44% of participants in the current study were first-time visitors to the site, compared to 56% first-time visitors in the Littlejohn and Hoffman study. Although the relative proportions still hold, these differences suggest that repeat visitors may have been more inclined to participate in an on-site focus-group interview, and first-time visitors may have been less inclined to do so. The close demographic correlation between the two studies across all information categories suggests, however, that the current study obtained a fairly representative sample of on-site visitors.

Visitor Meanings, Interests, and Connections

Four themes emerged during data analysis. The data revealed the meanings that visitors attached to the sites, the interests visitors had relative to interpretive programming, and the connections visitors made as a result of exposure to on-site interpretive programs. The four themes reflect: (1) a sense of spiritual connection

with the ideals of our nation, (2) the role of Lincoln as the embodiment of our identity and aspirations, (3) the elements of quality interpretation, and (4) a sense of gratitude for those who served that in turn stimulated a desire to maintain democratic traditions.

Theme 1: The Triangle embodies the ideals of a nation and functions as a sacred place. The Lincoln Memorial, Vietnam Veterans Memorial, and Korean War Veterans Memorial confront visitors with an array of historical events, eras, and episodes—some of which are disturbing and others of which represent our highest aspirations. These sites seemed to elicit a sense of interacting with something bigger than oneself. They challenged visitors to consider whether there is anything that can or should lay claim to our allegiance. One participant likened these memorials to a “cathedral of the soul”:

What these three monuments mean to me is the spirit that pervades these grounds, [and this] is the spirit of sacrifice and humility, but at the same time, greatness. Because the people who died [in these conflicts] left their mark here, [they] left their mark on the whole country. The dream is not quite finished, but it is still in the process of becoming a flower. All these three sites come together and they bring that [message]—without pain there is no gain. I do believe that places like this are the cathedral of the soul. They bring out the depth of human beings and you begin to see what a nation is supposed to do to make all living things free (Pre 4, p. 4).¹

Participants recognized that although these sites represent an ideal, collectively and individually we have not always lived up to that ideal. Nonetheless, these sites focus attention on what ultimately *does* matter. One participant expressed this sentiment as follows:

This is an opportunity for us to show the rest of the world what our ideals are supposed to be, and when we do something stupid, and when we show the wrong side of ourselves, maybe people coming here will say, “Somebody made a mistake, but this is what America really means.” This is not about the gentleman sitting on that chair; it is about what these things tell us (Post 4, p. 3).

The Lincoln Memorial, Vietnam Veterans Memorial, and Korean War Veterans Memorial triggered strong emotional responses among participants. The Lincoln Memorial and the plaza in front of the Lincoln Memorial provide a nationally recognized gathering place for social movements and a forum for discussing civic issues. Participants encountered these sites as a holy ground, a sacred place that embodies ideals and aspirations. One visitor indicated that for him the site symbolizes our tradition of free speech:

¹Each “pre-group” and “post-group” was numbered. Pre-groups were numbered 1–12; post-groups were numbered 1–9. Participant quotes are attributed to the pre-group or post-group in which the comment was made. The page number indicates the page of the transcript in which the quote occurs.

Even just walking up here, I was recalling that Dr. King had spoken here and other events had taken place here. And to just associate [this place] as a big meeting ground for different causes and the protesting of the war in Vietnam. It's just a symbol (Pre 2, p. 5).

One woman commented:

I don't know—when I look at Lincoln, I just feel warm inside or something. It is very difficult to explain. It is something that makes your body kind of shake and say, “I am proud to be part of this country” (Pre 5, p. 1).

The Triangle has the potential to overwhelm visitors with the sheer force of what it represents and what it signifies for people's lives today. One man conveyed this sense when he said:

I think it is all overwhelming. It is hard to take it all in at one time. So, I'll have to come back, multiple times. I don't think you can really get a true feeling for what it is [in] one time or two times (Pre 11, p. 5).

Another man acknowledged the profound effect that the Vietnam Veterans Memorial continues to have on him: “We have been here many times and you know what? I cry every time I come to the Vietnam Memorial. I can't help it” (Pre 5, p. 2).

Theme 2: Lincoln is a symbol of unity, strength, and freedom. The Lincoln Memorial evokes the ideal of freedom and represents the unification of the nation. The statue of Lincoln constitutes the focal point of the memorial, reminding participants of the service he rendered for his time, for all time: “Lincoln kept the nation together” (Pre 3, p. 5) and “Lincoln so solidly represents the Union, and also the idea that the country is one” (Post 4, p. 9). Lincoln also possessed a strength of character that inspired participants and added meaning to their lives:

I think the Lincoln Memorial reminds me how important it is that we stay united as a nation. I really admire Abraham Lincoln—his integrity and what he stood for, that he stood by what he believed no matter what happened. I really admire him for that. That means a lot to me (Pre 4, p. 2).

Participants who attended an on-site interpretive program recognized Lincoln's unwavering resolve, citing specific ways in which he persevered despite failure and personal adversity:

Man 1: *Perseverance* is the word for Lincoln for sure. He failed so many times at elected office before he was elected as President. Before he was elected to Congress, he failed many, many times....

Woman: Lincoln had such a hard life. He failed in business three or four times. He had a nervous breakdown. He lost children. He lost his first love—

she was not his wife. Yet he persevered. [He is] considered to be a great man now, and he was.

Man 2: He never quit (Post 8, p. 3).

Participants recognized Lincoln's accomplishments and strength of character, but they also related to him in very personal ways. One woman explained, "Abraham Lincoln is my favorite president. He is very inspirational, clearly a man who had a heart" (Post 6, p. 2). Even the ubiquitous photo-taking sessions that rangers sometimes dismiss as nothing more than a quest for the perfect "Kodak moment" can have deep underlying significance for visitors. One participant expressed the feeling he had as he climbed the steps to the Lincoln Memorial and then caught a glimpse of the statue of Lincoln:

[Regarding] the statue of Abraham Lincoln, I always wanted my picture to be, to have a picture close to the great man who made the important, I will say, history of making this country. I think he was one of the first and the most important ones (Post 1, p. 2).

Participants considered Lincoln's contributions in the context of other leaders and the cadre of unsung soldiers. One man observed that Lincoln did not establish the democratic system that he labored so earnestly to preserve; thus, his contributions stand only in relationship to the accomplishments of those who went before him:

[Lincoln reveals] the power and the significance a really strong and charismatic leader can have on a nation. He kept the nation together. [Lincoln reveals] the importance of the leader at that time. Lincoln couldn't have done what Washington did. Washington couldn't have done what Jefferson did. Each one is unique for what they did for the country. There is a stark contrast between all of them. They all had a key role to play (Pre 3, p. 5).

Similarly, one woman identified Lincoln as one among many who served, as one among many who paid the ultimate price for their country:

Something that strikes me is not just Abraham Lincoln. I have a second cousin whose name we go to see on the Vietnam Wall. Our country stands for not just heroes like Lincoln, but for all people. That is what I think of all those monuments. It is really wonderful to be in a country that lifts up Lincoln and lifts up my cousin (Post 1, p. 4).

Participants recognized Lincoln's role in preserving the union, his strength of character, his fellowship with those who have furthered the cause of democracy and freedom, and his commitment to freeing the slaves. Some participants related to Lincoln in a personal way; others used his ideals and beliefs as a foil to assess where we are today, what we have accomplished, and what remains undone. One man saw in Lincoln's commitment to equality an idea that was ahead of its time:

I know that it was his ideal that all people would be equal; not necessarily that it's true yet. But it's an ideal to strive for, I guess. I don't think that it's

true that people are equal, but it was an ideal that was ahead of its time. That's why he was unpopular.... (Post 9, p. 5).

Several participants acknowledged the "dark side" of U.S. history that slavery represented. Two participants contemplated Lincoln's sense that the human toll exacted by the Civil War was, in essence, divine retribution for the sins of the land. By focusing on the idea of "penance," these participants began to ask penetrating questions about whether our penance has in fact been completed, and whether the price for our sins has been paid in full:

Man: Another important point is that Lincoln believed deeply that the Civil War was about penance. We as Americans, both North and South, had committed a crime by buying into slavery. And we did not know when the war would end—there was a sentence there—maybe it will not end until every drop of blood is paid for with a drop of blood. That is very important. Americans tend not to want to think about the dark side. And what we have done is wrong. And that is something we can have with an historical perspective, [we can have] a new attitude. Lincoln is very contrasting, and maybe Americans can share that feeling, the sense that this is our penance, and that this war is going to go on until God has decided that we paid for it.

Woman: Maybe we have not yet paid for it.

Man: Exactly.

Woman: So there should be a connection between now and the past. What he is saying is that what we [think we] accomplished, perhaps we didn't (Post 4, pp. 10–11).

Theme 3: Visitors have a strong sense of what constitutes a quality interpretive experience. Participant comments revealed an appreciation of the same interpretive elements that are valued by the interpretive profession. Participants articulated the importance of tangible experience and the use of tangible objects in interpretation. They demonstrated a strong desire to be provoked and find relevance. They emphasized the power of the cohesive development of an idea. And they revealed the importance of opportunities for intellectual and emotional connections.

Physically being present in a significant place, moving through the site, viewing it from different angles, and immersing oneself in the richness of sensory experience added to visitor enjoyment. One participant commented upon this dynamic when he said, "Anyone can read a book, [but] when you're here, you get the tactile sensation of enjoying history" (Pre 2, p. 8). At the Triangle, tangible experience had the power to bring home the reality of the people, events, and ideas being commemorated. One participant referred to the sculptures of soldiers at the Korean War Veterans Memorial, saying, "They are so real...they just say so much" (Pre 6, p. 6). Another participant agreed: "You see the faces and then you have a personal sense of what they must have been feeling" (Post 3, p. 7). On-site experience helped visitors sense the magnitude of the lives lost in the Vietnam War. In comparison to seeing the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in the pages of a textbook, one child