3 CIVIC REFLECTION
SEARCH FOR PERSPECTIVE

"We can restore, we can co-exist in the flight pattern of the biggest airplanes we can get up in the air. It shows students 'I can make a difference. I can make a difference in my own backyard.'"

William Kornblum, Chair, Center for Urban Research, City University of New York, and Chief, National Park Service Cooperative Park Studies Unit

I TEACH A COURSE FOR UNDERGRADUATES IN PROBLEMS OF THE AMERICAN environment. We start with a modern classic, William Cronon's *Changes in the Land*. And we encounter the problem you always encounter. The subject produces a great deal of melancholy. It's a fundamental problem studying the human relationship to this planet. It threatens to turn students off, threatens to turn them back to the world of the video game, where they have a lot more mastery. How do you deal with the problem?

We take a trip to the Jamaica Bay Wildlife Refuge, one of those very moving places in contemporary environmental history because students have within their own city a genuine refuge you can get to by the subway or bus. A quarter of mile from the train station and they're at Jamaica Bay, where major jets are landing at Kennedy and birds are landing in the ponds.

It's a storied place in National Park Service history, in part a catalyst for the creation of Gateway National Recreation Area. Just the way Alcatraz and some of the other sites at Golden Gate were the catalysts for the creation of that super-important urban park system. But more than that it's the story of human agency in the environment, because it was created by a park maintenance man named Herb Johnson, who worked under Robert Moses, then commissioner of parks and housing in New York City and State.

RIGHT: CANADIAN GEESE AT JAMAICA BAY NATIONAL WILDLIFE REFUGE IN SOUTHEAST BROOKLYN.

RAYMOND GEHMAN/CORBIS

"The creation of the Central Park Conservancy added people to the

ABOVE EDWARD SUDENTAS/WIRED NEW YORK, RIGHT OKLAHOMA CITY NATIONAL MEMORIAL AND MUSEUM

park—zone gardeners are taking care of 15 or 20 parts of it, so the public sees the place coming back to life. They see new interpretive resources. The private money is spent in ways that are transparent, that the public can see."

Johnson purloined a bulldozer, put up some berms, and impounded fresh water. Lo and behold there were two fresh water ponds in the middle of the bay, in the middle of a big salt marsh ecosystem on Broad Channel Island, which was basically a landfill. He had permission from Moses but he went way beyond that. He was an amateur ornithologist, so he did all these plantings to attract the upland birds, the migratory waterfowl. So there it is—this magnificent place.

It's a story of the resiliency of nature. We can restore, we can coexist in the flight pattern of the biggest airplanes we can get up in the air. It shows students "I can make a difference. I can make a difference in my own backyard." I can plant plants to attract birds and butterflies. In a small way, this is a tonic to the melancholy. The Park Service addresses this problem of melancholia, too.

When people say to me the Park Service is getting bureaucratic, and that sometimes partnership is a surrogate word for privatizing the parks, I say you've got to take the long view. The view that takes in generations—and not just your children, but generations beyond your children. How will decisions made in the present affect the long view?

One of my major clients is Central Park. A lot of the people who created the park's conservancy came out of experiences with the National Park Service—in the 1960s with the seashores and in the early 1970s with the urban parks. These are people who feel deeply but understand when budgets are limited.

When you ask if private arrangements are replacing vital resources, that question can be answered empirically. The creation of the Central Park Conservancy added people to the park—zone gardeners are taking care of 15 or 20 parts of it, so the public sees the place coming back to life. They see new interpretive resources. The private money is spent in ways that are transparent, that the public can see.

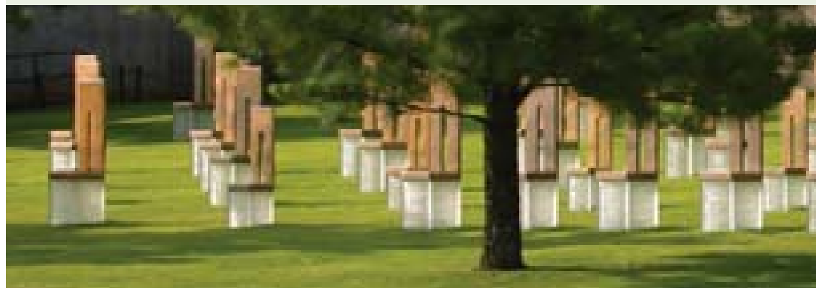
So when you're talking about partnerships, it seems to me that transparency and evaluation—not just fuzzy rhetoric but empirical evidence—that's what us scholar types look at. These are the questions that have to be answered to preserve these resources for generations.

Excerpted from an edited transcript of the Scholars Forum: The National Park Service and Civic Reflection, January 14, 2006. William Kornblum is the author of several books including *At Sea in the City: New York from the Water's Edge* and *Blue Collar Community*. Contact Kornblum at the City University of New York, email wkornblum@gc.cuny.edu.

TYRANNY OF THE WITNESS

Historical perspective can be difficult in the aftermath of events like the Oklahoma City bombing, particularly when deciding how to memorialize a site where 168 people died. Edward Linenthal, professor of history at the University of Indiana and author of *The Unfinished Bombing: Oklahoma City in American Memory,* met with members of a 350-person task force that wrestled with the issue, many who lost family members.

Linenthal observes that the "tyranny of the witness" is often problematic when those seared with violence become part of memorial projects. Yet, in Oklahoma City, people soon realized that if they wanted the process to succeed, they had to move beyond deep convictions that only their design could properly memorialize a loved one. They had to join with others to envision a more expansive function of memorialization. "It was a majestic process," he says, "because a number of people who



had never played such a role before found their public voice—and in some cases became energetically involved in the civic community."

Together, the group transcended individual ideals, creating a memorial that brings visitors directly into the reality of April 19, 1995. Linenthal, also author of *Preserving Memory: The Struggle to Create America's Holocaust Museum,* says that though everyone is a potential stakeholder in such sites—as part of the American fabric—scholars, museum experts, archivists, and other professionals must be key players because they can capture the often elusive objective perspective.

LEFT: THE FEBRUARY 2005 INSTALLATION OF "THE GATES" IN CENTRAL PARK BY ARTISTS CHRISTO AND JEANNE-CLAUDE. ABOVE: 168 CHAIRS REPRESENTING THE VICTIMS OF THE OKLAHOMA CITY BOMBING.

3 CIVIC REFLECTION
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"There was a man with three children reading an inscription about passing down the value of sacrifice to future generations. And he said, 'Do you know what that means? That means that the people here have sacrificed for you, so you could be free.' And he opened up his wallet [and] pulled out a dollar bill and turned to the Great Seal of the United States, and proceeded to show how the same symbols were on the monument."

Charlene Mires, Associate Professor of History, Villanova University

PERHAPS MY CURRENT INTEREST IN HISTORY AND MEMORY COMES FROM A visit to Fort Ticonderoga at about the age of 10. I have a distinct memory of a reenactment that involved weapons firing. When the historically accurate means of igniting the weapons failed, the re-enactor pulled a Zippo lighter from his pocket. I don't remember much from the visit, but I do remember that.

Parks are implicitly educational in allowing us to come to insights about the relationships between past and present. I was reminded of this again a few weeks ago when a colleague and I went to visit Ford's Theatre. Here were two grownups, with way too much education, walking up the steps to the president's box—and instinctively we start to creep like John Wilkes Booth.

Education in the parks happens in unstructured and unexpected ways. In 2002, I spent some time observing visitors at Valley Forge. One cold and rainy Saturday afternoon, I was near the Washington Memorial Arch, a 60-foot granite triumphal arch sitting rather incongruously in the park landscape—a Roman-style tribute dedicated in 1917. It's covered with inscriptions about sacrifice and patriotism and the iconography of the nation.

RIGHT: THE NATIONAL MEMORIAL ARCH, CIRCA 1910, VALLEY FORGE NATIONAL PARK. THE GRANITE STRUCTURE WAS INSPIRED BY THE ROMAN ARCH OF TITUS.

R. KENNEDY/GPTMC

LEE SNIDER/CORBIS

There I witnessed a man with three children reading an inscription about passing down the value of sacrifice to future generations. And he said, "Do you know what that means? That means that the people here have sacrificed for you, so you could be free." And he opened up his wallet and I thought what's going on? He's paying his children for visiting the site? I didn't know. But he pulled out a dollar bill and turned to the Great Seal of the United States, and proceeded to show how the same symbols were on the monument.

That was memorable for them. There was no programmed lesson, but there was space and opportunity.

I also believe in the value of educating teachers in the parks, whether or not they bring students.

THE BEST THINGS HAPPEN WHEN THERE IS TIME FOR REFLECTION AND creativity. One summer at Independence Hall, a middle school teacher figured out how she could use masking tape on the floor of her classroom to recreate the space of an 18th century home. She took photographs of the pottery fragments at Franklin Court to develop a lesson. Those fragments led to issues of imports and boycotts and eventually the causes of the American Revolution. I doubt that a field trip ever occurred.

A teacher workshop spent time in Philadelphia's Liberty Bell Center. There had been much discussion on how to acknowledge the proximity of the bell to a site of slavery—the home of George Washington when he was president. And ultimately the exhibits did acknowledge the powerful convergence.

An African American teacher from Brooklyn later emailed me, "I've never been so moved [as when I] read the words on the wall dealing with the promise of liberty and freedom that has yet to be fulfilled . . . I think it is the fact that a public acknowledgement has been made in a government place that will be read by people from all over the country and the world that makes it so meaningful to me. My first thought was I wish that my children were here to see this. My second thought was hope really exists for this promise."

She added, "Have you seen the movie *Gladiator*? During the last scene when Maximus is dying he says, 'There was a dream that was Rome. It shall be realized' . . . there was a dream that was America too and it too shall be realized. You guys have restored my faith in the telling of history after having this experience."

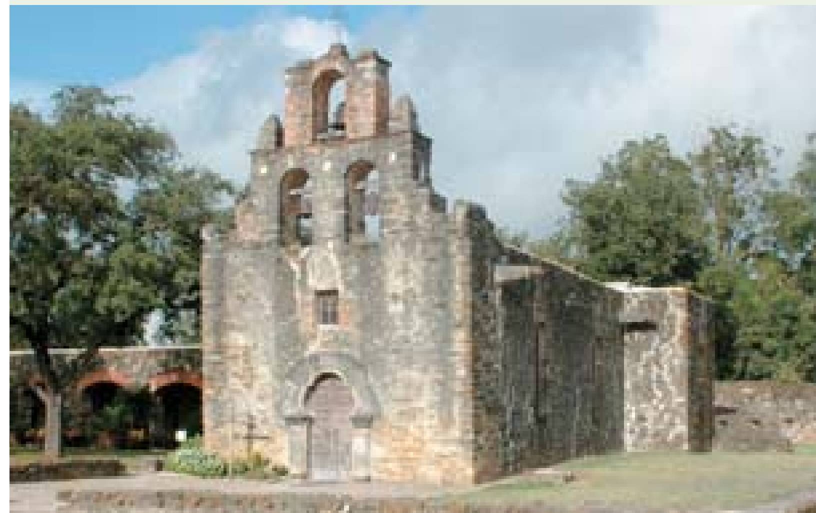
Here was someone responding as a citizen, as a teacher, as a parent to an experience made more powerful by acknowledging the controversy, by engaging the issues that had been subordinated for a long time.

So to the question of how can the Park Service foster civic awareness, reflection, and responsibility, my short answer is to provide the space and the opportunity.

Excerpted from an edited transcript of the Scholars Forum: The National Park Service and Civic Reflection, January 14, 2006. Charlene Mires is the author of *Independence Hall in American Memory*. Her previous work as a journalist earned her a shared Pulitzer Prize in 1983 for general local reporting. Contact Mires at Villanova University, email charlene.mires@villanova.edu.

EMBRACING RELIGION

"Religion is a razor's edge," says Edward Linenthal, editor of the *Journal of American History* as well as professor of history at the University of Indiana. Few subjects are as volatile and polarizing and yet religion is intricately bound up with the past. But whenever the subject comes up, he says, "eyes glaze over and excuses are made—it's too difficult to talk about."



What role should religion play in interpreting the past? Who owns the truth about it? The authority of historians, scholars, and other professionals is frequently contested by those who fervently believe in their own versions of history. Says Linenthal, "One would not dream of balancing a board of planners at the Holocaust Museum with holocaust deniers, of balancing geologists with creationists. And yet at the Grand Canyon bookstore at least, just this issue has raised its head."

Linenthal says that examining the role of religion in American history could be one of the most exciting interpretive efforts ever. If civic engagement means anything, he adds, it means talking about the things that really matter, like religion. It is too important to ignore.

"Of course, there could be enormous pressure to use interpretive programs as cultural capital," he says. "Is the Park Service ready to tell how religion has been mobilized in American society in ways both comforting and horrifying? Is the public ready? It's a central challenge if we're really serious about telling the American story."

LEFT: LIBERTY BELL, INDEPENDENCE HALL NATIONAL HISTORICAL PARK.
ABOVE: SAN ANTONIO MISSIONS NATIONAL HISTORICAL PARK.

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"The parks were my classroom. They were where I learned about the American land; where I learned about the American people; where I learned about the American nation; where I learned my love of being an American. And I put it this way to remind you that one of the missions of the National Park Service is to be a school of American nationalism—to teach the love of the United States."

William Cronon, Professor, History, Geography, and Environmental Studies, University of Wisconsin

I MUST SAY A FEW WORDS FOR NATURE. WE'VE BEEN TALKING ALL DAY AS IF the National Park Service has as its main mission the interpretation of American history. Yet I could gather my biology colleagues on a panel and not notice there was a historical project at all. They would say the mission is to protect biodiversity—wild nature, non-human nature. I believe, as an environmental historian, that both projects are equally important. In fact I think they're the same. To do the one without the other is the defeat of both.

I was born in 1954 and if you place me in American history that means I grew up in the late 1950s and early 1960s and especially in 1965 on a great road trip that my parents took, driving all around the West visiting the national parks. And I frankly do not think that I would be sitting in front of you today if it were not for that.

The parks were my classroom. They were where I learned about the American land; where I learned about the American people; where I learned about the American nation; where I learned my love of being an American. And I put it this way to remind you that one of the missions of the National Park Service is to be a school of American nationalism—to teach the love of the United States.

RIGHT: THE GRAND TETON MOUNTAIN RANGE FROM ONE OF THE HISTORIC CABINS ON MORMON ROW.

JOHN R. HUSETH

GALEN ROWELL/MOUNTAIN LIGHT

LEFT: MIST OVER THE MERCED RIVER, YOSEMITE NATIONAL PARK.

I'm not talking about unthinking, unreflective love, but a fully mature, ambiguous, passionately complicated love in which what we love is also what we hate. And we recognize the struggle that has gone into the making of the nation so that we can recognize both the good and the bad.

One of the things that you protect in the parks are core American values. You are the keepers of our myths, not myths in the false sense of the word but myths in the true sense of the word, the things that embody the deepest values that Americans have struggled with each other over and that they hold dear.

One of the words invoked many times today is freedom. And if you reflect you know that it leans toward both poles of our political spectrum. There is a version that is about freedom from the power of the state to oppress the individual. And there is version that is about freedom from social injustice.

These values die if they are not constantly re-enacted and re-embraced. If we act as if they were achieved things, if we act as if this nation had full liberty, had full freedom, had full justice, we kill these things. They die because they have to be re-empowered and struggled over yet again by each new generation that encounters the burdens of taking on these values.

AND THAT'S WHY CIVIC ENGAGEMENT IS THE CORE OF THIS PROJECT. IF YOU are the keepers of a tomb for past struggles, they have no relationship to us. We are trying to live up to values that we can never fully achieve, but that define who we are. Not the divine right of kings, but a nation that looks to the land, to nature, to history as the core of our nationalism, the great romantic project of the 19th century.

You have enormous strengths as an agency.

You are the stewards of arguably our most important treasures. You have huge popularity. You have an extraordinary sense of mission. You have passionate employees. You have a vibrant institutional culture. Yet I warn you as with all of us that our strengths are also our weaknesses.

I believe that's a characteristic of being a grownup—to recognize that one's strengths are one's weaknesses. And that managing one's weaknesses is part of taking advantages of one's strengths.

The fact that you have well-bounded parks, with essentially monopoly power—you don't have to listen to many people in deciding what happens—is why you need to be reminded that talking with your neighbors and visitors is civic engagement. You can get away for a long time without listening because you have the power not to. But you betray your mission if you don't engage the communities you serve.

You have extraordinary institutional culture. You have the immense loyalty of the people who work for you. But there is a kind of inward-turning that comes with that. You move up in the agency by moving around. That means loyalty to place is sometimes undermined by hierarchal mobility. Yet you are an agency that is all about honoring place.

And then you have the problem of avoiding controversy. We've had great advice here. Controversy is about teachable moments.

"You are the keepers of our myths, not myths in the false sense of the word but myths in the true sense of the word, the things that embody the deepest values that Americans have struggled with each other over and that they hold dear."

Controversy is about an opportunity to make values come alive again. If we try to finesse by coming up with a bland interpretation, we kill the past the same way textbooks do. One of the reasons kids don't remember is that textbooks usually are horribly boring with no connection to them. Unfortunately some of your interpretations are that way, too. You commit the same sins that academics do in going for the least common denominator instead of going for the passionate story. What were they arguing about back then? What was so important?

SO A FEW TIPS. IT'S ALL ABOUT CONNECTIVITY, MAKING CONNECTIONS. The things you are trying to interpret do not end at park boundaries. Don't get locked in. Often the most important things are five miles outside the park. Just because you don't control them doesn't mean they're not part of the narrative. If visitors keep your story going 200 miles past the boundaries, then you are interpreting the United States of America and not just a location you have bureaucratic control over.

The parks should connect to their surroundings, to the larger landscape, the larger history. They should connect to each other. You tend to interpret discretely when you have the makings of a pageant of America—if you could only connect the elements into a larger fabric. Narrate the entire system. Hard to do—don't hear me say it's easy. But I don't think you've solved that one.

Connect nature with culture. The deep institutional divides in this agency have not served you well—and not served our nation well. They have not served nature well. They have not served history well.

Your greatest opportunity is to interpret them together. So embrace environmental history as a core idea, not as a little add-on. It brings together your missions.

Connect past with present. Connect each of us with each other. Connect your visitors with the idea that the project of freedom is not finished. It will never finish. It cannot finish. We have to make it real each new day.

The history and the nature we encounter in the parks are about the future we're building together, one that reminds us we are Americans together in this shared enterprise. That's the core message the national parks should seek to engage.

So all power to you, keep up the good work.

Excerpted from an edited transcript of the Scholars Forum: The National Park Service and Civic Reflection, January 14, 2006. **William Cronon is the award-winning author of *Changes in the Land: Indians, Colonists, and the Ecology of New England* and *Nature's Metropolis: Chicago and the Great West*. He is also the editor of *Uncommon Ground: Rethinking the Human Place in Nature*. Contact Cronon at the University of Wisconsin, email wcronon@wisc.edu.**