

observed: "It is a lot more meaningful to see all the names [on the Vietnam Wall]. You see them in the textbook, but you do not really realize all the lives that were lost in the Vietnam War" (Pre 4, p. 8).

Participants reflected on why physically "being there" contributed to such a powerful experience of the meanings of the resource. One man suggested that on-site experience transforms "head knowledge" into something physical, something personal, something that activates one's emotions:

That is why I wanted to come here, because I am fascinated with American history in particular. I can't imagine a better place to come... I've read about it. I've learned about it. I've taken exams on it. But this actually makes it physical and makes it personal. You know, I've seen pictures of it, but there's nothing like walking through the Smithsonian and seeing how black people were treated at the turn of the century and how the whole civil rights movement has evolved. That's very emotional (Post 9, p. 9).

Participants recognized that resources at the Triangle function as icons; that is, they are tangible objects that serve as a "window" or "portal" to deeper meanings and a fuller sense of reality:

Woman 1: I think [this place] brings the actions of the past—brings the history—kind of like they were saying. It renews that for you, brings it to you instead of reading it in a book.

Woman 2: It's something concrete in the present that you can attach all the things you've read about and heard about, you can attach it all to it now. You have something to look at and remember everything you've learned (Pre 1, p. 11).

Although an entire site can represent intangible meanings, at the Triangle the memorials are composed of a range of symbols—some obvious, some not—each of which also represents intangible meanings. These symbols can seem remote and inaccessible, especially if they feel disconnected from one's life experience. They can also become clichés either through overuse or through a process in which the symbol's meaning is reduced to something trite or trivial. When used to full advantage in interpretation, however, participants found that these symbols linked the tangible resource to its intangible meanings:

Man: That was great, because [the ranger] is a gentleman who had been there. He has a passion for the events, for what occurred.

Woman: Particularly when he mentioned the flag. [He said,] whenever you see one of these, you know, that is the one. It is for freedom. I thought that was real personal (Post 5, p. 4).

At the Triangle, tangible objects like the flag, the Vietnam Wall, the statue of Lincoln, and the statues of combat soldiers serve as catalysts that provoke visitors to think about universal concepts like "freedom" or "sacrifice." Several participants regarded the memorials as conveying one central message, or illustrating the cohesive development of one idea, that is, freedom. One participant observed, "I see

these sites as having an overpowering message of freedom" (Post 8, p. 3). Another man viewed the phrase etched on the wall of the Korean War Veterans Memorial—"Freedom is not free"—as a unifying concept linking the three sites at the Triangle. He commented:

That saying, ["Freedom is not free"], is the high tide of the memorial; it ties into the Lincoln Memorial and the Vietnam Memorial.... "Freedom is not free" is a very powerful emphasis, just like democracy. Those people who miss the corner [where the message is etched] will miss the message. I think there should be a sign right there, right at the central point, saying, "Freedom is not free" (Post 5, pp. 3–4).

Participant comments also illustrated the power of universal concepts to provoke questions and facilitate reflection upon many levels of meaning:

Man: This setting is being used for this one concept—freedom. [As] Martin Luther King [Jr.] said in his great speech, "Let freedom ring." And there are a lot of people in the country who say are we free or aren't we free? But freedom comes at a great cost with the lives that were lost in the wars.

Woman: And there are different levels of freedom. And that's what you have to be reminded of, too (Pre 1, p. 7).

The use of the universal concept of "freedom" provoked visitors to consider multiple aspects of the topic and reflect upon its meaning for our lives today. Because the concept of freedom was viewed as relevant to their everyday life, participants reflected more deeply upon its meaning and considered ways to integrate emerging insights into their everyday lives. Participant comments suggested that one way relevance can be established is to ensure that interpretation touches the human side of visitors, satisfying, among other things, people's love of a good story: "Pure facts don't enthral. Make it human. Tell a story based on fact, but elaborate if necessary" (Pre 2, p. 6).

Participants emphasized tangible experience, provocation, relevance, and the cohesive development of an idea; they also emphasized the importance of opportunities to form intellectual and emotional connections to the meanings of the resource. One participant, quoted previously, described the emotional impact visiting the Vietnam Wall has 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). Though overpowering, and perhaps disturbing, the intellectual and emotional connections gained through on-site experience drew the man back to the Vietnam Veterans Memorial again and again. Intellectual and emotional connections are not antithetical to each other; further, they can occur in tandem. Recall the participant, quoted previously, who was a history buff. He read history, studied history, took exams on history. By his own admission, his on-site experience borrowed heavily from his intellectual interests and knowledge base; however, the on-site experience was unique in its ability to graft emotional experience to intellectual meanings.

One strategy for fostering intellectual and emotional connections through interpretation is to incorporate universal concepts like "family":

I think the ranger touched on that a little bit when he said that he saw that there were parents here with children and [asked], "How would you feel if you lost a child? The ranger was pointing out that Lincoln lost more than one child. It is true of all these memorials. Like the ranger said, "That's somebody's brother, somebody's son, and somebody's father" (Post 8, p. 7).

Participants who attended interpretive programs expressed appreciation when interpreters provided them with the opportunity to form intellectual and emotional connections. One participant summarized his experience of an on-site interpretive program as follows:

I just thought that the [ranger program] was an incredible presentation, probably one of the best I've ever heard. I really appreciate the way the ranger made the whole thing come alive. And I thought about it in terms of how unpopular Lincoln was in his day and yet he persevered and stuck with his ideals. The ranger talked about how Lincoln was maligned in the press on a daily basis, and yet he stuck with his ideals. I like that the ranger shared that with people—the struggle that Lincoln went through (Post 1, p. 6).

**Theme 4: The Triangle inspires a sense of gratitude for the sacrifice of others and stimulates a desire to participate in democratic life.** Participants constantly reflected on the meaning of the phrase, "Freedom is not free." This quote is etched on the black-granite wall of the Korean War Veterans Memorial, but it seems to be etched on the hearts and minds of many of the participants as well. Participants revealed a sense of gratitude for the sacrifice of others and an awareness that their sacrifice bought our freedom. This conviction is revealed in the following exchange:

Moderator: So for the war memorials...do they teach us anything?

Man: They teach us war is horrible.

Woman: The price paid for liberty. There you go. I mean, we are walking around, but these actual people gave up their lives for us, you know. I mean that's a very general statement but it's true. They fought. Some of them didn't want to. Some of them were drafted. They died there. And it's like they died so we could be free (Pre 2, p. 3).

Another participant expressed a sense that war is unavoidable and that those who get caught up in these conflicts perform a patriotic service:

Nobody really wants to go and die for their country. But sometimes, it's something that has to happen. I don't know that necessarily the Civil War had to happen, but somebody had to fight, somebody called them out to fight. And they fought; they served their country (Pre 11, p. 7).

One participant commented that the memorials remind us that those who served our country had a willingness to rise to the occasion. He felt that this mindset, this

strength of character transforms ordinary people into heroes and represents an ideal for our children to emulate:

I think there is a lot to show the young people. To see that there are a lot of heroes and these people are probably just regular people. But when the situation fell upon them, they became heroes, because they did what they had to do and did it right. That could be anybody. So the children of today are going to be our presidents and heroes tomorrow (Post 4, p. 7).

Participants did not glorify war or regard the conflicts that these memorials represent uncritically. They expressed gratitude that we have the freedom to ask questions and voice discontent when our leaders engage in conflicts or ignore social concerns. In fact, the Vietnam War protests and civil rights demonstrations were some of the most salient historical events that participants associated with the Triangle. One participant reflected upon the pros and cons of this tendency to actively resist U.S. involvement in overseas conflicts and shared how this dynamic had affected him personally:

I think we're even farther. I mean that's the price of freedom, actually. I think it is [that] we have the freedom to choose and are able to question why it is that we're doing things. Being in the military, I mean, obviously we don't really get a choice of what we want to do or what we don't want to do. But as a civilian you very much have a right to call up your congressman or anyone so you can know why. That's why Desert Storm was such a big deal. We only got broad-based support when we started winning. But for those first six months prior to that, you know, there were a lot of demonstrations right here. You know, why are we even in there? I remember "Blood for oil" was the big slogan while I was waiting to be sent out myself (Pre 2, p. 4).

Some participants, especially those of the older generations, asked penetrating questions about war, sacrifice, and gratitude. Their concerns could be summarized as follows: "Is this tendency to question why a mixed blessing? For those who serve today, do we maintain a sense of gratitude? Do the younger generations take their freedom and the sacrifice of others for granted?" One woman expressed her concerns in the following way:

The loss of lives was the price of freedom; [it] was so much more costly. It seems like the Vietnam [War] has so much of a negative emphasis. As an older person, it bothers me. Because a lot of people paid a very high price for freedom—I wonder if they appreciate it (Post 5, p. 2).

Participants also expressed a sense of gratitude that we live in a democracy, that we have options other than war. One woman commented that because our democratic system is in place, we can defuse conflicts before they escalate:

I think the reason why we have memorials is that they are like cemeteries or tombstones that you can go to; and if you or your family were involved, you can go and feel the passion. But also, for those who have never been to war,

for them to realize that people actually die. Sometimes we glorify war. People see marching bands and that kind of stuff. The veterans are hidden away. The importance is to realize how lucky we are, especially when we think about all the other countries. We do have politicians to [determine] what the goals are. We can sit down at the table and negotiate, [we can consider] all the possibilities. Some wars are avoidable (Post 5, pp. 2-3).

Participants stressed that not only can we work within our democratic system to avoid unnecessary conflict, but we are duty-bound to do so. Moreover, as citizens of a democracy our duty extends beyond decisions about war and peace. It extends to every decision we make about how we want to function as a society. One man perceived a moral obligation on the part of all Americans to strive to uphold the ideals upon which our nation was founded—even if achieving those ideals actually exceeds what is humanly possible:

We have a higher responsibility than other nations because we are the ones who said that "All men are created equal." And we are the ones who set ourselves up as the supporters of that ideal. Other countries did not do it. Nobody else ever made that promise or claim. And if we are going to make it—and we've made it for 220 years now—if we are going to make that claim, then we have the responsibility to at least attempt it. We are all human and no one is going to achieve that; but we have a high responsibility to attempt it (Post 4, p. 6).

Participants recognized the importance of equality and social justice; they also perceived that there is strength in diversity. One man suggested that as we work together to overcome problems, a common bond of unity emerges:

[This place teaches us that] however big the problem, and however diverse the people involved, if you all have a common goal you can get together and do it. All races, all religions, they have experienced what these [sites] memorialize. And we've all [overcome the problems] in the U.S. together (Post 1, pp. 4-5).

Participants felt, as citizens of a democracy, that we owe a debt of gratitude to those who have served. In addition, we have a responsibility to participate in democratic life. The Lincoln Memorial, the Vietnam Veterans Memorial, and the Korean War Veterans Memorial help us connect with our past, understand its meaning for our lives today, and renew our commitment to building our desired future. One woman suggested that the function of the memorials, and our job as citizens, is to remember what others have done, and what our country is all about, and to "keep it present":

I think connecting with your past can help you plan for your future. You can know what happened in the past, and see what's going on in the present, and figure out if you want the same thing in the future or not. And they represent a lot. They stand for a lot. They've done a lot of hard work—the people

that we've honored. And remembering that, keeping it present, helps us live as a nation, as a whole (Pre 1, p. 4).

#### DISCUSSION

The results of this study contribute to an understanding of how the concepts of place and meaning operate in an interpretive setting. Results reveal how visitors interact with a memorial landscape to cultivate a sense of place. Results also yield insight into how visitors engage in the meaning-making process. By highlighting the richness of visitor meanings and place experience, study findings beg the question: How should an expanded understanding of visitor meanings influence interpretive work?

According to Yi-Fu Tuan (1974, 1977), places anchor meanings. By actively engaging in the on-site experience, visitors form their own personalized meanings as well as interact with the societal meanings embedded in a place (Silverman, 1995, 1997; Williams & Stewart, 1998). For example, the Vietnam Veterans Memorial links visitors to diverse meanings and experiences:

[The Vietnam Wall] brings people into the collective realm, engendering a community sense of loss...At once the wall serves as a magnet for those dealing personally with loss (Scruggs, 1994), as a centerpiece of discussion for those wrestling with the rational disillusion of the 1960s, and finally, as a foundation for the rebirth of a people rent apart by war (Wasserman, 1998, p. 45).

Further, the memorials at the Triangle represent a story etched in bricks and mortar. They are:

[A] specific, contextual story about a moment in time that becomes encapsulated—told and retold—in built space...[the memorials] lend an air of stability and continuity to the story. Its meanings are not in the building, except in the sense that they have been projected onto it and its elements (Yanow, 1998, p. 218).

As visitors interact with the memorials, they tend to respond to the social content embedded into (or projected onto) the structures at the conscious and unconscious level (Yanow, Rambo, 1999). The meanings participants articulated were highly personalized, but they also reflected the recurring themes of freedom, sacrifice, patriotism, gratitude, unity, perseverance, equality, democracy, heroism, and responsibility—all concepts that would be touted in any civics classroom. Participants recognized this function of the memorials. One woman confessed, "You are supposed to be inspired by something powerful and by the ideals" (Post 4, p. 12). Despite these seemingly preprogrammed responses, results suggest that the Triangle does provide an authentic experience for visitors. Participants often expressed the ways in which they were moved by the memorials, rather than a sense of being manipulated to feel pat sentimentality or trite emotions. A woman from England noted the "ego" involved in the American memorial landscape while simultaneously articulating the value the memorials have for Americans and non-Americans alike:

[The memorials] bring the emotion to it, [they bring] the humanity to a building or an area. And let's not forget these are buildings, but they generate a feeling of emotion that is [associated with] human rights or the anti-war demonstrations or whatever. It brings people together. I mean, let's not forget they're a glorification as well. It's like, "Hey, look at us; we're the best," which I find very American. But you've got to take it with a sense of levity and not take it too seriously, you know. It's Americanism. It's like you say, it means a lot of things to Americans and to people from around the world (Pre 2, p. 5).

On-site experience can lead to a sense of belonging to a place, and past experiences serve as powerful triggers to enhance on-site experience (Fishwick & Vining, 1992; Silverman, 1995). For example, the woman quoted above, who recognized that the memorials were socially engineered to elicit specific emotional responses, also related how the Lincoln Memorial had influenced her and her family over time:

I remember being a little girl with my parents. And every time I read anything about [Lincoln] or learned anything about him, I pictured the memorial, the statue. I then brought my children back and I felt a little more in charge. . . . And for myself, I have more understanding of it. It is good to get that feeling (Post 4, p. 12).

Rolph (1976) identifies what could constitute a "place imperative." That is, people may function best as human beings when they form intellectual and emotional connections to significant places. As people cultivate a sense of place, their relationship is restored to the land, to the larger community, and by extension, to themselves (Simonson, 1989). If the meanings visitors encounter at a specific site seem relevant to their everyday life, they will tend to exert a greater effort to engage these meanings (Tilden, 1977; Silverman, 1995).

At the heart of the interpretive endeavor is the meaning-making process. Rambo (1999) specifies the mechanism through which meaning-making occurs:

Interpretation [i.e., the getting of symbolic resources] and intention [i.e., the giving of symbolic resources] are symbolic control actions directed toward real instances of symbolization and a cultural pattern of possible instances. The control is exercised, in part, within transactions. . . . Control is the contingent element of meaning, experienced as the necessity to exert effort in order to understand and be understood. Also, it is within this relationally open, improvisational moment of the cultural process—where structure becomes text and text becomes structure—that creativity and change are possible, and indeed inevitable (p. 323).

Rambo's formulation suggests that meaning-making is essentially transactional; that is, it is an exchange of symbolic resources through a give-and-take interaction that requires significant effort. A meaningful transaction constitutes a quality on-site experience. Study results suggest that visitors come to the Triangle seeking an

experience. They do not primarily seek knowledge or learning—although interpreters and educators sometimes view learning as the visitor's primary motivation. If learning were their main objective, visitors could obtain almost all relevant information off site. Instead, visitors seek intellectual and emotional connections with the meanings of the resource. Because of the transactional nature of meaning-making, many visitors want their on-site experience to be facilitated. Visitors may be aware that the resource has meaning—they know there is something powerful there—but they may lack the knowledge or personal experience to connect to those meanings or interpret what they are seeing. One couple described how attending an interpretive program at the Korean War Veterans Memorial totally changed the nature of their on-site experience:

Man: We walked through and we didn't understand what we were seeing. [What the ranger] described changed the whole picture for us. We were not educated very much [about] the Korean War. We saw that and I said, "Yeah. . . . I recognized it for what it is. But I didn't know what it means.

Woman: We were the lucky ones. How many people walk through it but do not know what they are seeing? (Post 5, p. 5).

Many visitors, perhaps most, ascribe and connect with meanings they can only vaguely articulate or decipher. For example, one participant found herself at a loss to adequately explain her experience:

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 question remains then, How should an expanded understanding of visitor meanings and on-site experience influence interpretive work? If interpreters understand visitor meanings, they should be less inclined to underestimate visitors, and this in turn should facilitate respectful dialogue. In addition, visitors tend to rally around certain meanings as highly significant and highly relevant. Incorporating these meanings into on-site interpretation increases the likelihood of establishing relevance and facilitating intellectual and emotional connections. Martinez (1988) suggests that by understanding visitors' "preconceived ideas" and "sincere interests," interpreters may increase the likelihood of "building the bridge" between visitors and the resource. However, interpreters are not limited to incorporating generalized visitor meanings. For example, an effective interpretive technique might be to include actual visitor quotes in interpretive programs. Because visitor meanings are not a static phenomenon, interpreters should strive to continually expand their understanding of visitor meanings. The simplest way for interpreters to expand or update their knowledge of visitor meanings is to conduct informal visitor interviews. Asking a few simple questions like those used in these focus-group interviews (i.e., What drew you to the site today? What do these sites teach us?) should enable interpreters to better understand visitor meanings. In addition, the simple act of talking to visitors and eliciting their perspectives should help renew an interpreter's passion for the resource and for the visitors themselves.

The crux of interpretation is this: how can interpreters facilitate intellectual and emotional connections between the meanings of the resource and the interests of the visitor? Moreover, in transactions in which meanings are exchanged, some symbols are controlled and others are left uncontrolled depending on the actors' interests (Rambo, 1999). Therefore interpreters must also exert effort to expand the scope of the meanings that are "controlled," to use Eric Rambo's terminology, or alternatively, the range of meanings that visitors have the opportunity to attend to. In their efforts to expand the scope of meanings visitors can connect to, interpreters confront the "taken-for-grantedness" of many important meanings in contemporary society. They also confront the need that all human beings sometimes face, that is, the need to have their domain of interests enlarged:

...At most only a small part of what is in the field of attention is experienced as a problem that has to be solved. All else is taken for granted. In principle every interpretation or intention can become problematic. Any sign within a text can be called into question regarding its meaning.... The taken-for-granted elements of cultural structure and text suffice actors' interests, and limit attention in what must be called an unwitting, non-purposive way. They are a reality constraint on interest attainment.... The decisive issue is whether actors can reopen taken-for-granted cultural structures and see their interests within them (Rambo, 1999, pp. 332-333).

Study results reveal that visitors actively ascribe meanings to site resources, though they do so to varying degrees and levels. For every visitor who explores the taken-for-granted aspects of what freedom means, for example, there are undoubtedly many more who lack either the personal experiences or the motivation to probe deeper. The degree to which a meaning is taken for granted varies on an individual-by-individual and a meaning-by-meaning basis based on the individual's perceived interests. It is important to note that taken-for-grantedness is not problematic in and of itself; rather, it is a mechanism by which individuals streamline the matters to which they devote conscious attention, thus enabling them to function in everyday life (Rambo). However, creativity and change require unpacking and reexamining that which is taken for granted. National parks, and the interpretive opportunities they provide, set the stage for such reexamination and function as an important arena within which this kind of reflection occurs.

Interpretation facilitates the process by which meanings move from being taken for granted to being actively engaged; therefore, interpreters should consider some of the ways in which this shift occurs:

Much [that is taken for granted] is just below the awareness of interest and symbolic control, former problems that carry a trace of their having once been resolved, but which could be visited again if needed. Some of what is taken for granted is in fact periodically opened up as a problem, readdressed, then laid to rest again in a ritualistic cycle. Some is relegated to a trust in, or solidarity with this- or other-worldly others: an assurance that others hold insight the actor is lacking. Some is actually a nagging project for future resolution (Rambo, 1999, p. 333).

One educator reflected on taken-for-granted meanings through her participation in the focus-group interview. The insights she gained motivated her to reexamine her approach to teaching history:

You know, listening to this whole conversation, what's interesting to hear and what you're saying, maybe our approach to teaching history needs to be examined so that we look at the big picture, because those are the type of questions you are asking—the big picture questions. What is coming out of these wars that is affecting us as a people, as a nation? And maybe the focus of how we teach it to the kids might be, "What have all these conflicts and wars given us, or not given us, or [how have they] made us what we are today?" [We could] look at it as a big picture instead of individual actions (Post 3, p. 10).

Interpreters wrestle with the taken-for-grantedness of meanings. They also wrestle with the difficulty people have in conceiving of natural and cultural systems holistically and from multiple perspectives. Eric Rambo (1999) frames the challenge as it relates to the cultural realm thusly: "[T]here are no system needs, per se, but only the interests of individuals—who imperfectly and episodically conceive something equivalent to a system, and take an interest in it" (p. 337). Interpretation provides a brief episode during which visitors can connect intellectually and emotionally with the meanings of the resource, (re)establish a system-level perspective, and expand the scope of their interests—a process by which they come to care *about* the resource so that they can care *for* it.

## CONCLUSION

"Clicking the icon" is an apt analogy for what happens when visitors interact with resources at the Lincoln Memorial, the Vietnam Veterans Memorial, and the Korean War Veterans Memorial. Computer users click screen icons to speed navigation and accomplish specific tasks. In some respects, visitor experience parallels that of computer users. When visitors engage the meanings of site resources—when they "click the icon"—windows pop up, revealing a larger set of meanings. Sometimes a "click" executes a whole new program and new identities or new insights into how things function as a system emerge. "Clicking the icon" represents the process by which visitors make intellectual and/or emotional connections with the meanings of the resource. This study identified a wide range of meanings that visitors attach to three significant places on our national landscape. It also explored how visitors interact with a memorial landscape to create a sense of place, how visitors engage in the meaning-making process, and the role an expanded understanding of visitor meanings could have in improving interpretation. Understanding how the concepts of place and meaning operate in an interpretive setting, and integrating that understanding into interpretive program development, represents an ongoing challenge for the interpretive profession.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The authors wish to thank the West Virginia University Agriculture and Forestry

Experiment Station, the Stephen T. Mather Training Center, and National Capital Parks—Central for the financial and technical support they provided to this research effort. The authors also wish to recognize three anonymous reviewers for constructive suggestions that greatly strengthened the final manuscript. We dedicate this article to the memory of our three mothers—Patricia Ann Goldman, Li-Fang Kao, and Phyllis Ann Larsen—women who lived life in such a way that being taken for granted was not an option and creativity and change always had a place at the table.

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