

“That Would Be Good Both Going and Coming Back”

BY BILL TRAMPOSCH

COLLEAGUES, DO YOU KNOW HOW *THE HOBBIT* WAS WRITTEN?

Professor J.R.R. Tolkien was sitting at his desk in Oxford grading a formidable pile of examination papers in his field, linguistics. The exams were brimming with undergraduate wisdom, all except one that is. This one was blank. So, it was in this one that Tolkien, after some daydreaming, drew a little picture and under this picture he wrote,

“In a hole in the ground there lived a Hobbit...”

That poor wordless student, that “mute inglorious Milton” should have received an “A” (if not an honorary doctorate) for his lack of effort on the exam, for from this white space was born one of the most popular books in the English language, *The Hobbit*, or *There and Back Again*.

This following essay is about the importance of white space. Like an episode of *Seinfeld* (without the humor), this piece is about *nothing*, and the importance of *nothing*. Enjoy it. There are no footnotes here, no expostulation on decades of scholarly research into museum education theory, just thirty-five years of observation, first as an interpreter and now as a director, with a lot of reverent looking-on in-between. Magic can occur in our halls and within our sites, and this magic implores us to have a faith in that which *cannot* be measured, nor should be. Trust the silence. Trust the white space in which deep and enduring connections are being made in front of our very eyes. Trust the settings and ambiance we offer our guests. Trust and wait, and while waiting, look at what some great writers have said. We can measure many things, and we increasingly do, but our utmost respect must go towards that which defies measure.

Wellington, New Zealand

In 1996 the Senior Management Team of the National Museum of New Zealand spent three days in a hotel conference room on the Wellington waterfront. Across the street,

construction continued on a new, state-of-the-art museum. For its size, the museum had a disarmingly simple name, Te Papa. Senior marketers from Saatchi and Saatchi facilitated the meeting, and it had one purpose: to arrive at what marketers there call the “soul” of the Te Papa experience. We were to create a forum for the country to explore matters of national identity, but needed to answer what was to be the essence of this experience.

Now, this was much more than a discussion about mission and objectives. This was an effort to get to the affective core of what we strove to do once the concrete cured and the exhibitions and programs filled the cavernous spaces of what is now the biggest building in the country. The NZ America’s Cup Challenge team, for example, earlier pursued the same search for soul. Their efforts led to a question that defined them more than any other, it was a question they

J.R.R. TOLKIEN



“In a hole in the ground there lived a Hobbit.”

asked of themselves each time there was a potential distraction from their mission. Think about it; the answer is at the bottom of the page.*

Now it was Te Papa's turn. Three days would pass before we arrived at our answer. During that time, a growing number of easels appeared in the front of the room, and it was not long before a clear dichotomy arose. On one side of the room were descriptors like *scientific, research-oriented, impeccable, scholarly*, etc; while on the other side sat lists replete with words like *fun, entertaining, engaging, imaginative*, etc. Obviously, the facilitators had never convened a batch of museologists before, because on day three one of them exclaimed, "You people are schizoid!" Once the impact of the insult had worn off, a phrase of historian George Steiner occurred to me: "All good history teaching is more or less 'exact imagining.'" It fit, for it bore clear resemblance to a popular Maori adage:

Ka kitea ko te ngakau,
Ka kitea ko te nga whitu
(Unless the heart sees,
The mind will never see!)

Now, what difference does this make to our visitors, we asked. Will our patrons leave saying, "Eureka, I get it, this place is about 'exact imagining'?" Certainly not. But, the soul, simply defined, provides a spike upon which to hang all else. In its capturing of the affective and cognitive core of our work, it challenges us to pursue the path of the mind and the heart in all subsequent educational endeavors. It is also an institution's eye of the needle for programming, and those programs that serve the gods of exactitude and imagination will survive. Those that do not are shelved. In America's Cup terms, whatever does not make the boat go faster, doesn't happen. As another example, Disneyland (always a contentious comparison for museum workers) is all about being, quite simply, "The happiest place on earth."

Branded by a Brand

Now with Te Papa's essence identified, we were able to brand our effort so all could see through one simple symbol exactly who we were. "What image is both exact and imaginative?" we thought. Consequently, our brand became a simple thumbprint. It also, to serve our intents further, was a central symbol of identity, national identity in our case.

But wait, there's more! Having now spent almost our entire advertising budget on this so-called search for our *soul*, we had little funding left to promote the museum. But, we soon discovered that none would be needed. Within a day, word got around the islands that the new National Museum, already a controversial project because of its vast size, had paid Saatchi and Saatchi hundreds of thousands of dollars for a thumbprint! Our next few weeks were spent rationalizing this expenditure with ratepayers. Newspapers, radio, and television were as ravenous in their interest as the public was angry about the expense. When the ink dried in the press (and on our sign), it turned out to be a brilliant debacle, for within a week our little *Te Papa* thumbprint had achieved 94 percent brand recognition within New Zealand. Like a banned book in Boston, the public now needed to see this place, and they knew—thanks to our

brand—just how to find us! Opening day attracted 20,000 visitors (open twenty-four hours), and each year since 1998, more than one million people (in a country of four million) enter its doors.

"Who knows what beautiful and winged life... might unexpectedly come forth..."

The best museums and historical sites tend to do exact well. This paper, though, is a call to have faith in those affective aspects of our work that change behavior in ways we may never know or understand. We can measure attendance, fundraising efforts, revenues, size of collections, but do we appreciate as much the immeasurable aspects of our work? Education by definition brings about change. Sometimes that change can be measured, but more often our *ultimate* influence upon our visitor eludes us, possibly becoming apparent many years later. On my first day of work as President of the New York State Historical Association, for example, I received a call from a gentleman from Texas. He recounted fondly a visit he had made to Cooperstown twenty years earlier. In particular, he recalled a very engaging tour that he took with an interpreter who obviously loved her work. The interpreter created a world around the wooden ware, he said, in such an engaging way that it would be a highlight of his visit. In fact, so engaging was this tour that he became a collector himself! His collection, now a most extensive and revered one, would become (if we wished) a gift to the Association.

We so wished!

Everyone has heard the story which has gone the rounds of New England, of a strong and beautiful bug which came out of the dry leaf of an old table of apple-tree wood, which had stood in a farmer's kitchen for sixty years...from an egg deposited in the living tree many years earlier. Who knows what beautiful and winged life, whose egg has been buried for ages...may unexpectedly come forth from amidst society's most trivial and handselled furniture, to enjoy its perfect summer life at last.

—Thoreau, *Walden*, "Conclusion"

Making a Place for the Magic

Once we understand and embrace the essence of our mission, and once we set measurable and manageable objectives, then the fun can begin. Now we can work to become more than the sum of our parts. There are three key ways for us to increase, ensure, and appreciate the magic that is so much at the heart of a great museum experience:

1. Be more than a museum or historical organization.

It is essential that we build and offer the best museums possible and that, at the very least, we provide our guests with that which is expected of a professional museum experience. But, this is hardly enough, for who among us talks enthusiastically about an experience that delivered *exactly* what was expected? We tend to talk about those things we did not expect. Here is an example from the world of department stores. A father had been hearing from his daughters and his

* Will it make the boat go faster?

wife that a national clothing store provided superb service. In the face of mounting family clothing bills, he naturally grew suspicious, so one day ventured into the store himself, albeit with a bit of an edge. There he was fitted for a suit which would need some altering. The salesperson said it would take a day, and the father said that, unfortunately, he was leaving for Asia in several hours and really needed it before he left. Failing to meet that deadline, the salesperson was undeterred. He had both the authority and the initiative to have the finished suit delivered to the father's hotel in Japan where it sat in a box upon his bed when he arrived *with* a note regretting that it could not have been available earlier. This story is now featured in best-selling books on service and excellence, and often recited (as it is here) as an example of the difference that is made by providing much more than the expected.

Let's challenge ourselves to identify those gestures and amenities that provide an experience beyond what one expects: flowers in the restrooms; piped-in period music in our halls; scents and sounds that evoke images that support our themes. Furthermore, recognizing and recounting the efforts of staff who are working to exceed visitor expectations is a key part of this process of striving to become much more than a museum, and to become that kind of place about which people talk. Profession-wide, our best advertising is through referral, and such efforts prompt legions of visitors to become our best emissaries.

2. Tell stories that connect and reveal. Museums are story houses, replete with tales that "introduce us to our human kin across the ages" (Edmund Morgan). We all know this, yet it is remarkable how little we exploit this option in our interpretations. Our labels are often overly long, objective scripts that resemble more a paragraph in a textbook than any form of engaging interchange with our audience. Furthermore, labels oftentimes lack elegance and poetry in their didacticism. For best practices look to the exhibits of the Monterey Bay Aquarium. Each is a little masterpiece of writing. Failing this, read any caption in a *National Geographic*. Each is almost always an example of exact imagining. Be they labels, interpretations, programs, or publications, all of our efforts should strive to pull and envelop the learner into the experience, an experience that is as rich in the affective voice as it is impeccable in the cognitive.

Many museums have opted for high-tech solutions when telling their stories. Fine, but (as Thoreau said of the Fitchburg Railroad) consider these as merely means to an end. The end (and the beginning) is the story itself and, if riveting enough to begin with, it is often a story told best by simply sitting down face-to-face with a gifted storyteller.

Example: In 1841, while sailing aboard the whaleship *Acushnet*, Melville heard a tale that changed the course of his life and that of American literature. It was the story of the whaleship *Essex*, sailing in the Pacific in 1820, being rammed and sunk by a great sperm whale. With only their whaleboats remaining, the crew decided to make their way toward the distant ("civilized") coast of Chile rather than

drift with the trade winds into the more proximate Marquesas, marked by terrifying stories of cannibalism. The story was well known and remembered well by subsequent whalers sailing in those very seas. Horrifically, the *Essex* crew, in their quest to reach Chile, itself resorted to cannibalism in their very effort to avoid it. This story captivated the young Melville, and ten years later it would become the source for *Moby-Dick's* dramatic finale. In subsequent years, the story would capture the attention and the skill of award-winning historian Nathaniel Philbrick (*Heart of the Sea*). And it followed that Nat's book would soon inspire producer Ric Burns to capture the tale in a documentary film (*Into the Deep*). Today, we tell the story daily and

simply in the Nantucket Whaling Museum in much the same way it was related to Melville.

Stories that connect with identity are better still. For example, when Ric Burns was on Nantucket filming *Into the Deep*, we asked if he would consider doing a gateway film in which our island itself was to be the protagonist. This film would introduce visitors (as well as remind residents) of the rich history of Nantucket, Melville's "elbow of sand." Furthermore, it would underscore how the story of Nantucket, an island that is a National Historic Landmark, is very much an American story of reinvention and innovation. Today, we have that gateway film, *Nantucket*, and it has become the reason why 43 percent of our visitors enter the Whaling Museum today.

3. Watch and trust the power of imagination.

To use B.F. Skinner's words, we are daily "overdosed by stimuli." So distracted are we by the cacophony that surrounds us, our attention spans are increasingly shorter and, worse, our grounding to place and with identity becomes eroded. Museums are places in which key reconnections are made. They are sanctuaries wherein we are enveloped by the consoling message of consistency. Remember where so many gathered during the frantic moments surrounding 9/11: at the city's great museums! Our halls are still points in the turning world. They are transformative in their ability to take us away from our normal lives and return us again, with refreshed perspective. They cause us to forget where we are while helping us remember who we are and who we can be.



And when I'm weary of considerations,
And life is too much like a pathless wood,
Where your face burns and tickles with the cobwebs,
Broken across it, and one eye is weeping
From a twig's having lashed across it open,
I'd like to get away from earth awhile
And then come back to it and begin over,
...

I'd like to go by climbing a birch tree,
And climb black branches up a snow-white trunk
Toward heaven, till the tree could bear no more
But dipped its top and set me down again.
That would be good both going and coming back
One could do worse than be a swinger of birches.

—Robert Frost, “Birches”

My first day in museums occurred at Old Sturbridge Village, an authentically recreated New England village and surrounds. I was to be an interpreter working two days in a nineteenth-century blacksmith shop and three days on a Federal period farm. It was 1976, our nation's bicentennial year. My supervisor welcomed me at the door of the Department of Interpretation. He handed me an empty notebook and led me into the center of the Village. He said simply, “Sit here and watch. Take notes. We'll talk tomorrow.” That was the last I saw of him and to this day I am uncertain as to whether he was too busy to spend time with me or just plain brilliant in his instruction. It was one of the best days of my career.

Around me that morning the village was awakening. I heard axes in the forest; the ox-driver's calls of “Gee” and “Haw” filtered through the trees between the farm and the Center Village; and the clang of a hammer in the blacksmith shop down the lane. And the best noises were yet to come, that building crescendo of visitor voices, especially those of children. They reveled in this setting, so very different than any they had ever experienced in, say, Roxbury or Worcester. That day I witnessed the potential of historic places to interpret themselves in affective ways, and I learned that often fewer words, gently placed in just the right place, made for the best of museum experiences. It was clear that in such an evocative setting, that which is unsaid is often much more influential than that which is.

Do not try to satisfy your vanity by teaching a great many things. Awaken people's curiosity. It is enough to open minds; do not overload them. Put there just a spark. If there is some good inflammable stuff, it will catch fire.

—Anatole France, in Tilden's *Interpreting our Heritage*

Years later I would see a film on PBS about Frank Oppenheimer's magical palace—the Exploratorium in San Francisco. Oppenheimer was the brother of J. Robert Oppenheimer, father of the atomic bomb. Frank worked at Los Alamos with Robert in those frantic days that led to the sudden end of World War II. He also, like his brother,

ROBERT FROST



*“That would be
good both going
and coming back.”*

Walter Albertin, New York World-Telegram & Sun Collection

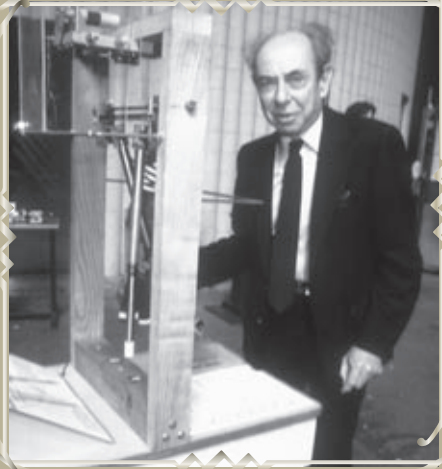
taught physics at the University of California, Berkeley. Each of the Oppenheimers was blacklisted after the war because of cursory involvement in Communist Party affairs and Frank, yearning to teach, founded the Exploratorium, a museum of science. But, it was meant to be (and is) much more than this. The PBS special made that point so profoundly that the day after seeing it, I called him (as I happened to be in California at the time). Surprisingly, Oppenheimer himself answered the phone, his gentle voice asking how he might help me. I told him that I worked at Colonial Williamsburg and that I had a deep fascination about how people learned in museums. I asked if I could interview him. “Certainly,” he said. The following day would be extraordinary.

A young boy named Eddy greeted me at the Exploratorium (housed in the gigantic Palace of the Legion of Honor). He was the son of Frank's secretary and for the next forty-five minutes Eddy was to be my indefatigable tour guide. Here was an exhibit on magnetism; there was one on echoes; over here we would learn what makes a rainbow. “Come here, mister,” said Eddy over and over again, eager to show me his next favorite exhibit.

After a while, Frank joined us and I asked him, among other questions, how he measures the success of his exhibits. Physicist that he was, I was prepared for charts and graphs. Rather, he led me over to the exhibit on centrifugal force. A family of four was huddled over it, each very engaged. Frank looked at them, then at me, winked, and then with his cane he knocked over a chair behind the family. It made a very loud noise. Many people looked over to see what was the matter, but the family did not budge. Rather, they remained engaged in the exhibit. Oppenheimer, twinkle in his eye, said, “That's a good exhibit.”

Frank watched the public closely. His office sat in the center of the Exploratorium. If exhibits failed they were taken

FRANK OPPENHEIMER



Nancy Rodger, Exploratorium

"That's a good exhibit."

down immediately. Appropriately, only the fittest survived. It is still this way in the Wonder House. Of course, there are more increasingly sophisticated ways than Frank's to survey audience behavior. It is always helpful to remember, though, that simply watching is best.


I then asked Frank what prompted him to create the Exploratorium. He said that he did it out of worry over

the generations of children growing up in the post-nuclear world, children who did not appear to have that natural curiosity that marked his and Robert's childhoods, children seemingly disinterested in the workings of the natural phenomena that defined our planet. Oppenheimer was on a quest to discover ways through which to connect with imaginations; to provide that necessary space in which just enough was said, in which just enough was done, to assist with the lift-off of the "winged life" of one's curiosity and imagination.

At age eleven, Ernest Hemingway visited Nantucket with his mother, who was a suffragette. While she attended meetings, he spent time in the Fair Street Museum of the Nantucket Historical Association. Captivated most of all by the museum's massive jaw bone from an eighty-seven-foot sperm whale, one wonders how such a youthful encounter with a remarkable object influenced the future author of *The Old Man and the Sea*.

"Awaken people's curiosity. It is enough to open minds." ●

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