

WHAT HISTORIC SITES CAN DO WHEN THE SKY IS FALLING

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Fiona Reynolds, Catherine Leonard, and Distinguished Trustees, it is an honor to have been invited to speak with you today.

First a story ... A man came upon a little bird lying on its back with its feet in the air. "Little bird, little bird," asked the man, "Why are you lying on your back with your feet in the air?" The little bird looked at the man and declared, "Don't you see, the sky is falling, and I'm holding it up with my feet." "That's ridiculous the man retorted, "you can't hold up the sky with your feet." The little bird responded, "I do what I can."

We can not solve all the problems facing us, as human beings, as preservationists and we may not even be able to deduce clearly what they are, ... but we must, like the little bird, TRY.

Just as we are grasping the magnitude of the problems facing us-climate change, covid-19, poverty, racism, classism, sexism, to name but a few – and feel the need come together to try to solve them, we find ourselves conjoined to stay apart lest we hurt one another. If this weren't enough, we find ourselves living in a time when people across the globe, are experiencing trauma, caused by our inability to protect ourselves or our loved ones and not only from Covid 19. Recognition of the damage done by trauma – from endless wars, from physical and mental abuse, from food insecurity and more - propelled the creation of the European Society of Traumatic Stress Studies in 1993 and the founding of local societies for psychotraumatology across Europe. In the U.S., according to recent studies, a quarter of Americans grew up with alcoholic relatives and/or have been physically abused by relatives. Twenty percent were abused as a child.

What in the world, you ask, does the INTO have to do with these issues? Aren't we preservationist organizations? Aren't we charged with preserving buildings and properties? Why ever would we now take on these other issues?

In response to this question, I'll start by telling you a story of how one museum director saved his job and his museum by addressing those very questions.

Just after I stepped down from the Presidency of the Tenement Museum, Steve, a former staff member, left to take on the directorship of a children's museum located in a seaside town. He was full of ideas and very excited. On Steve's first morning in town, he was informed that the board of this museum had met secretly the night before to discuss closing the museum. Steve called me, and said, "What should I do?" My response was, "Make the museum essential."

So, Steve set about making appointments with the leaders of public and private entities all over the town. He met with the fire department, the welfare department, the day care centers, young mothers and many more. Each time, he asked one question: What could you imagine the Children's Museum could do for you? All were shocked that the director of a children's museum would come not to ask what THEY could do for the Museum, but what the Museum could do for

them. The fire chief said “We are having trouble getting fire safety information out to families. Could the museum help?” “Yes” said Steve, and he set up a program on fire safety in which children learned about what to do in case of what the fire department did. He invited fire fighters in full regalia, to speak with the children. Together they examined the firefighters’ tools, some of which became part of the Museum’s collection to be used repeatedly. Each child took a fire department pamphlet on safety back to their parents. This program, fully in line with the museum’s mission, to teach children about their world, was, and continues to be, a big hit.

The director of the town’s Department of Welfare said that abused women needed a safe place to gather and bring their children and, while the children were engaged in an alluring program developed especially for them, they could talk with one another.

The director of Day Care said the Day Care program had a long waiting list. Steve opened a museum inspired day care program at the Museum.

New mothers spoke of their isolation, but now they meet regularly at the museum over coffee, often with an expert on some child development issue.

Most recently, following the success of his other community informed programs, Steve opened a food-kitchen for families suffering from food insecurity due to Covid-19.

All the while, Steve kept his eye on the ball, and kept producing innovative, educational and fun programs for all the diverse children and families - that make up his community.

Through this work, the word got out – the Children’s Museum is essential. What would we do without it? And, I am sure, should it ever get in trouble again, the community and its private and public entities would come to its rescue.

When I was asked to speak with you, Catherine Leonard sent me an article by Tara Haelle entitled, “Your ‘Surge Capacity’ Is Depleted – It’s Why You Feel Awful.”

Surge Capacity, Haelle explained, are the mental and physical systems we humans “draw upon for short term survival in acutely stressful situations, such as natural disasters.” That’s fine, except not one of our “disasters” is short term. So, with research in hand, Haelle makes these suggestions:

1. Accept the reality of the problems as our base line or starting point. Resisting the truth of what’s wrong will just further zap our energy, energy we will need in order to act.
2. Take care of yourself. Remember the flight attendants’ instructions before every take off: *If the oxygen fails put your mask on first before helping your children.* If we don’t take care of ourselves, we are no good for anybody.
3. Do an assessment of what you need in order to take care of yourself. Time set aside daily or weekly to garden, to put your feet up and read a trashy novel, to nap, to slip into a hot bath, to dabble with art, to visit a therapist, to meditate, to cook, to not cook, to exercise, ? ... the list goes on. Make that list and then do it. If you can’t bring yourself to give yourself permission, remind yourself you are doing it for others who will profit from your refreshed body and mind.
4. Sometimes, Haelle says, the best thing to do is to say to ourselves: *This situation is terrible, but I’m going to find ways to have a good time in spite of it.* And finally,

5. Find ways to stay in touch with people you love and/or enjoy. The most important factors for facing adversity and building resilience are, Haelle reports, social support and remaining connected to people.

And now on to history. Some years ago, spurred on by the complaints of historians that Americans were uninterested in history, two historians, Roy Rosenzweig and David Thelan, set out to discover why that was. To their surprise, they discovered that far from disliking history, Americans LOVED history, just not the history taught them in high schools which they regarded as “dull” and “irrelevant,” characterized by memorized—dates, names, places – without background, context, narrative or debate. Spurning school as a reliable source, they turned to television programs such as Ken Burns’ the Civil War, Alex Haley’s Roots, and countless biographies and autobiographies which helped them understand their own situation. More than a third had investigated their own family’s history in the previous year; and two fifths had worked on a hobby or collection related to the past. And in large numbers, they turned to historic sites and museums, which they regarded as “the most trustworthy sources of historical information.” More than half the survey respondents had visited a history museum or historic site during the previous year, “They trusted history museums,” reported Rosenzweig and Thelan, “as much as they trusted their grandmothers.” The historians concluded, and I suggest you would find the same in other countries, “Americans are at home with the past. Day to day, hour to hour, the past is present in their lives. Encountering the past, living and reliving it, they root themselves in families – biological or constructed – and root their families in the world. Americans want to make a difference, to take responsibility for themselves and others. And so, they assemble their experiences into patterns, narratives that allow them to make sense of the past, set priorities, project what might happen next and try to shape the future. By using these narratives to mark change and continuity, they chart the course of their lives.”

So again, we come to the question: What does any of this have to do with INTO?

At the Children’s Museum. Steve not only made a his museum into an essential actor in his community, but by doing that, he also opened new and unusual avenues for funding – from the Fire Department, the Department of Welfare, the Covid-19 Fund, and private foundations and philanthropists focused on child welfare, abused women and children, and food insufficiency. Further, his programs made the news – over and over – making him a community spokesperson. It was not longer difficult for him to get anyone to take his call. He had become a somebody, an innovator, whom everyone wanted to know.

While Covid-19 prevents us from having large gatherings, we can meet one to one – socially distanced. Every one of our sites can send one or more people (trustees, volunteers, members) out into our communities to ask: What can our site do for YOU. The answers may well surprise you as much as your visit surprises them. But they will help you plan for the future to make your site essential. I am not suggesting you take on anything that subverts your mission or does not draw upon your site’s resources. That would be a mistake. Rather, I suggest we re-think how those resources could be used to respond to community needs. Can implementing Haelle’s suggestions improve the outlook and operation of our sites for the future?

Haelle advises that we “Accept the reality of the problems as our base line or starting point,” saying that resisting the truth of what’s wrong will just further zap our energy, energy we will need in order to act.”

I imagine you agree with that. When we visit our doctor with a complaint, we expect the doctor to name the disease before treating us. We can do this too. We can survey our community and we can also focus on a global issue which our particular site makes it qualified to address. For instance, is there any reason your natural sites could not be put to the purpose of discussing the impact of climate change? If you have a site related to an epidemic – the Spanish Flu Epidemic of 1918 comes to mind – why not use it as a jumping off point to contrast and compare what was done, then with the state we’re in now. This week, I while reading I came across a first-hand account of the reaction to the Yellow Fever epidemic which spread through the United States in the late 1700’s:

Writing of the fever in Philadelphia in 1793, Mathew Carey described how people reacted: *Many never walked on the footpath, but went into the middle of streets, to avoid being infected by passing houses wherein people had died. Acquaintances and friends avoided each other in the streets, and only signified recognition by a cold nod. The old custom of shaking hands fell into such general disuse, that many were affronted at even the offer of the hand.* I found this sad description comforting, for it reminded me that we’ve been there before, and we got out. We can get out again.

How could our sites help people take control over their daily lives? How could our sites help people have a good time? Well, if we know our community, we can make spaces for them to do what makes them happy. Many of our sites have large open spaces, good for doing art, cooking, meditation, or playing board games. Many have large properties where visitors could walk, run or bike in nature, sit in comfortable chairs outside, fly kites, play children’s games? We can furnish copies of art from our collections to inspire them, instructions for making kites, for period children’s games or games children and adults once played together, recipes from the historic site, information about the plantings they will see along their walk,

To be useful in this moment, we must ask whether our historic sites live up to that trust the public affords them. Is our interpretation of the site deep? Does it offer perspective; does it reek with integrity? Has it respected the public’s intelligence? In his groundbreaking book based on his visits to historic sites around the United States, James W. Loewen was forced to conclude, “Guides almost always avoid negative or controversial facts, and most monuments, markers and historic sites omit any blemishes that might taint the heroes they commemorate, making them larger and less interesting than life. America, Loewen concluded, has ended up with a landscape of denial. Does Loewen’s critique describe or validate your site?”

Finally, what about discussion groups – built around a topic – selected by members– for groups of 10 to chew upon. It can be based on issues raised by the history of your site. This helps our visitors connect with other people.

One topic worth considering is how our struggle with Covid-19 may usher in changes for the foreseeable future, changes which might actually help us. For instance, will the fact that we are now accustomed to wearing masks and understand their purpose lead to a national custom of putting them on automatically at the first sign of illness. That would certainly cut down the spread of colds and flu. Might our experience with the out of doors underscore the importance of

nature in our lives and find us taking advantage of it more often? Certainly, the older persons among us, having finally mastered zoom may venture on to learning other computer skills. Might we continue to explore the benefits and drawbacks of distance learning, working and distance medical care initially foisted on us by this virus. These are just some ideas. It is likely many seniors, not knowing how to do so, have never logged on-line to see our collections. Could teaching them how become a project and a gateway to their enjoyment of collections world-wide? Why couldn't our sites help people explore these and other potentially beneficial changes and why not compare these changes with those which evolved as a result of epidemics past?

INTO and our sites – all of them – can become essential in their communities and the world. To that end, they must first of all listen. I end with this quote:

Being listened to feels so much like being loved, that most people can't tell the difference.

Imagine if our communities, our visitors, and our members felt we loved them. Imagine what a difference that would make. Thank you.