

Personalizing Tilden's Priceless Ingredient

TED CABLE

“Thus, the six principles with which I began this book may be after all (like the ‘single science’ mentioned by Socrates) a single principle. If this should be so, I feel certain that the single principle must be Love.



“You are to love people in the sense that you never cease trying to understand them and to realize that whatever faults they have, whatever levity, whatever ignorance, they are not peculiar.”

—Freeman Tilden
“The Priceless Ingredient”
Interpreting our Heritage

I confess. I have never finished a Russian novel. The problem with Russian novels is that they are filled with the names of Russian people and Russian places. I find it hard to plow through the polysyllabic nouns and keep the characters and locations straight—or even to know whether the noun is a place or person! Fortunately I have a friend who, although he too struggles, makes it deeper into the stories than I do. He recently shared this passage with me from *The Brothers Karamazov* by Fyodor Dostoyevsky. It was spoken



by a wise man with “sorrowful humor.”

I love mankind, but I am amazed at myself; the more I love mankind in general, the less I love people in particular, that is, individually, as separate persons. In my dreams I often went so far as to think passionately of serving mankind, and, it may be, would really have gone to the cross for people if it were somehow suddenly necessary, and yet I am incapable of living in the same room with anyone even for two days....

Can you relate to that wise man?
I can. I found this passage to be

personally convicting. I love my students in general, but wouldn't want to spend two hours, let alone two days, with the needy student knocking on my office door. When I worked in the field, I loved (in general) park visitors, Audubon members, REI clad-Suburu Outback owners, but with actual people I often failed to exhibit Tilden's priceless ingredient.

Tilden wrote that the priceless ingredient for effective interpretation is love. He encourages us to love individuals and “never cease trying to understand them.” Maybe you can say you love the visitors to your site; you might even call them your “Guests.” But you might find it difficult to practice love to the person who inadvertently parks on the grass or doesn't share your appreciation of spinning wheels, swamps, or snakes.

Many of us entered into the interpretation profession to, like the wise man, devote ourselves to “passionately serving mankind.” We envisioned serving mankind by enriching lives with our compelling stories or by promoting stewardship of cultural and natural resources. Often this service to others has come with sacrifices. Certainly many passionate interpreters have foregone higher salaries to serve others. (It is interesting to note that although we tend to think of *passion* as synonymous with *enthusiasm*, another older meaning

of the word passion is to suffer or sacrifice.) And yet although we may speak eloquently about serving mankind through interpretation and loving our visitors in general, unless we love actual people—flawed individuals with questions, opposing perspectives, and complaints—we are not practicing the greatest of Tilden’s principles.

Dostoyevsky’s wise man spoke to me in another way too. Many of us are trying to save the world, but we can’t work with the person in the next office or next door. As we strive to love those who come to us through our interpretation, the most difficult place to exhibit Tilden’s priceless ingredient may be in our own office or neighborhood.

In considering the application and practice of Tilden’s principle of the Priceless Ingredient we might do well to reflect on these two questions:

Do I consistently demonstrate Tilden’s Priceless Ingredient to each individual guest regardless of (as Tilden said) their faults, levity or ignorance?

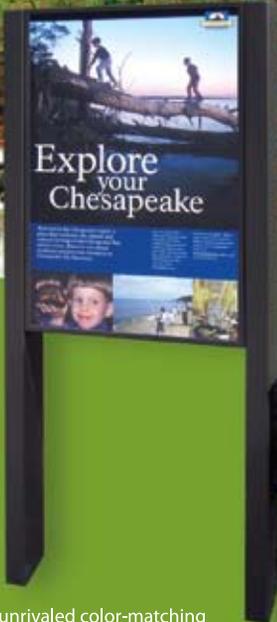
Do I demonstrate Tilden’s Priceless Ingredient towards the individuals I am around the most; those with whom I live and work?

I particularly like that the wise man reflected with “sorrowful humor” on his paradoxical shortcoming of loving everybody, but not being able to show love to anybody in particular. It is good to be able to smile at ourselves through our regret when we try, but fall short in applying Tilden’s Priceless Ingredient to real persons. Showing love to our individual guests—real people—can be challenging and it takes a conscious effort, but you may find it is easier than reading a Russian novel.

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