

# The Search for Knowledge: Research as Invitation and Response

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## We know to the extent to which we love Augustine of Hippo

Acquiring knowledge for the sake of knowing more seems sheer hubris, a sin museum people are not foreign to. Why do we want to know more? What do we want to know? And if, as I will argue, the acquisition of knowledge requires a personal engagement with the subject, why do we need the mediation of a museum? Can a museum really help to get to know a subject which is not immediately present?

To discuss research, the search for knowledge, one first needs to be clear on how this knowledge is to be understood and on why one desires it. This will be the first topic of this paper - very briefly. Within the cadre of museums and local life the how of research is directly related to the why of research. These two questions need to be discussed together in light of our understanding of the role which museums can play in the sharing of knowledge. These discussions comprise the second and third headings of this paper.

## Knowledge: what and why

Francis Bacon has left us with the legacy of an understanding of knowledge as power, and there is no doubt that knowledge can be used that way. If we do not want to set up museums to be peddlers of power we need to be at least aware of this potential danger.

Jurgen Moltmann argues for the distinction between a dominating and a communicative knowledge. In the latter form knowledge itself becomes a cognitive living relationship, and is motivated by love, a love which desires to know in order to be able to participate in the being of the other. In Moltmann's words: True knowing does not desire to dominate what is known in order to possess it. It wants to arrive at community with the object of its knowledge. True knowing is communicative knowing. It extends as far as the love which respects the independence of others, and loves them in their very difference ... In the shared expression of the knowing and the giving-oneself-to-be-known, a third dimension is arrived at. And where this is accomplished, the result is not merely an *esse*, but a *bene esse*. (Moltmann, p.69,70)

What Moltmann is asking for is, I think, what Nicole Weppeler described in her paper *A Museum Vision* as the transformation of the object into the subject "that has layers of significance to be uncovered and interpreted." The Dutch word for research, *onderzoek* (German: *untersuch*) - literally "to seek underneath" - acknowledges this layered nature of the subject.

## Research: why

The facade is often the first layer we encounter in a new situation, not only in front of North American small town stores, but in front of people and in front of many social activities. Part of the message given by this front may simply say "open" or "closed". The facade also extends an invitation, stated in the language of the community, to which one can respond meaningfully only if one understands this language. First encounters with people follow a culturally specific pattern, a ritual through which one is offered, as through the store window, an initial glimpse of what is considered of value in the world one is about to enter. Instruction in the ritual language of invitation and response occurs in all human communities, and is part of the initiation of each child into social life: the appropriate handshake, appropriate eye contact, how to address and acknowledge the other.

Knowing the ritual language of social intercourse is essential for the development of the identity of the child within the community. It is also the pre-requisite for further knowledge of the subject, the subsequent layers to be encountered. In tribal cultures this knowledge is passed on in secret initiation meetings. The dances of many ethnic groups are based on the ritualised invitation and response which accompany human encounter. They offer an image of how people within an ethnic culture approach each other and get to know each other. Perhaps this explains why folk dances are still seen as a key element of cultural identity, even though often they have ceased to be an active part of cultural life.

Canadian society, while acknowledging and respecting a certain amount of tribalism, operates as a civic society. Here one's identity flows from the knowledge of oneself as a participant in a culture whose fabric has been enriched by the diversity of heritage. At the civic level there are no secret initiation meetings where traditional knowledge is passed on. Local knowledge is new to most of us and hard won. Yet, one's cultural heritage determines how one relates to this place, and initiation into the community requires a knowledge of the diverse identities of its members. Thus the museum, positioned in the centre of the community and equally accessible to all, provides a place where one can begin to know the identity of others and their relationship to the land we share.

The quest for knowledge is driven as much by the desire to know the other as by the desire to be known oneself. As an immigrant, one of the great hiatuses in my life is the fact that few know the place I come from, the world which has formed me. How can I expect others to know who I am without knowing where I come from and where I have been? Being known is essential to a sense of belonging. Being known allows one to participate, to be a friend and to receive friendship. To be known and accepted - warts and all - is the subject of all human longing. The role of the museum as a public institution, representing civic society in acknowledging the lives of the people in the community it serves, cannot be easily underestimated.

The museum thus can offer a forum for the exchange of knowledge of who and where we are. Acquired through "research" - the search for what lives underneath the facades of the community - this knowledge becomes the shared wisdom which enriches the living culture of Canadians.

### **Research: how**

A desire for knowledge out of love for the subject leads to the search for encounter, the dance of invitation and response. This encounter, says Martin Buber, is unmediated.

The You encounters me by grace - it cannot be found by seeking. ... The relation to the You is unmediated. Nothing conceptual intervenes between I and You, no prior knowledge and no imagination; and memory itself is changed as it plunges from particularity into wholeness. No purpose intervenes between I and You, no greed and no anticipation; and longing itself is changed as it plunges from the dream into appearance. Every means is an obstacle. Only where all means have disintegrated encounters occur. (Buber, p.62, 63)

No tools. No expectations. No agendas. Where does this leave the museum researcher out in the field? From academia we have inherited an infatuation with technique, and have come to understand knowledge as the fruits of analytical inquiry, verifiable results, and normative methodology. We have learned to measure rather than to see, confusing measured observation with insight and understanding. Thus knowledge is confused with the theoretical description and explanation of natural phenomena, and research - the search for knowledge - is confused with the acquisition and reproduction of information. We are being held hostage by the mis that to know facts is to understand, and to juggle numbers is to fathom the universe.

The search for knowledge pursued by the museum researcher - Moltmann's communicative knowledge - requires empty-handedness, a certain nakedness before the other. Tools and techniques have never yet improved our ability to approach and welcome the other. At best they have enabled the user to refine a previously possessed skill or remedy the loss thereof. Often the aids we design to obtain a goal prove to be a

barrier to human encounter. Ivan Illich has devoted his life trying to understand "how technology stands between me and the other, preventing me from seeing/knowing the other." During his journey through the history of technology he has confronted issues related to our (mis)use of techniques in language, education, science, and arguments on ethics. In *Tools for Conviviality* he explores the effect of the search for progress and economic growth on communal life and work. He observes how the hammer is an extension of the arm, enabling the user to refine natural skills of building and design. The power tool, however, does no more to enhance creativity, while adding the questionable features of speed and "saving" of labour, usually offset by the need for the production of energy elsewhere. When speed and efficiency become part of the measures of success one enters the world of quantitative comparison where description rather than understanding is the fruit of one's search.

With respect to museum research one may consider the inability of standardised questionnaires to improve the depth of a conversation as a case in point. An agenda designed to "structure the interview" saps a conversation of its life by preventing the surprise of real encounter. Use of technique and standardization of approach encourages us to close ourselves to the subject before us, turning people and communities into the objects of observation. This is the exact reverse of what Nicole Weppler, quoted earlier, describes as the vocation of museums: the transformation of the object into the subject.

Neither Illich nor Weppler denies, however, that there are cases where our presence or availability to the other may be enhanced by the use of technique and technology. If the truck or bus may enable the farmers of a village to transport their produce to the city for sale, the whole village may benefit. If, on the other hand the private ownership of cars becomes a status symbol, speeding up life at the cost of attention to neighbour, endangering communal life on the village road, and alienating those who have from those who have not, technology defeats the purpose of being remedial, becoming destructive of the very community it was designed to help. Likewise one can see the tape-recorder, used to enable the museum researcher to revisit a conversation, as a remedial tool, which, when used appropriately, allows the knowledge which is unveiled to be integrated into the larger picture. If on the other hand audio visual technology drives the place, pace, and orientation of the encounter the medium overshoots the role of "convivial tool" and enslaves the user.

The negative effect of technique and technology on human encounter have also been a concern to Ursula Franklin, a physicist with great compassion for the human person. In the 1990 CBC Massey Lectures she discusses the miss regarding the opportunities offered by the use of communications technology, which she prefers to call "non-communications" technology ... because very often that word, "communication", is a misnomer. Whenever human activities incorporate machines or rigidly prescribed procedures, the modes of human interaction change. In general, technical arrangements reduce or eliminate reciprocity. ... Once technical devices are interposed, they allow a physical distance between the parties. (Franklin, p.48)

This distance needs to be considered not only during the research phase, when the researcher engages with the subject, but also when the knowledge acquired is shared in the museum, and the visitor is engaged with the subject of his or her learning.

The use of technology is an art form for which there is a special role in the museum. While the receiving of knowledge relies on the art of conversation and human interaction, the sharing of knowledge with the museum visitor relies on the art of presentation. Photographs provide visual records which in their raw form are no more than the colours on a painter's pallet. In the hands of the artist they can contribute to the exchange of the knowledge. Ronald Silvers, in a paper titled *Photography, Sympatheia, and Canada's visual Heritage* discusses the power of the technique of photography and the re-printing of images in the sharing of knowledge:

The passionate viewing of photographs, the reciprocal falling into the image and the image falling within us, is the way in which *sympatheia* [Gk. having common feelings, experience] registers its significance upon our lives. *Sympatheia* is found only in the occasioned opportunity of the presence of a reciprocity between image and

viewer. The museum is particularly suited for *sympatheia* as it offers the viewer an opportunity to engage photographs for their communal features. How museums select, print, and mount their photographs ... will play a part in either enhancing or impeding this reciprocity.

Thus the use of technique becomes a powerful and highly responsible task. One needs to not just master the art of photography and printing, one needs first and foremost to know - be master of - one's subject. This mastery is founded on *sympatheia*, the love which leads to common knowledge. What the museum researcher, and especially the apprentice researcher, needs to develop first of all is the capacity for such *sympatheia*, so that eventually the responsibility to use technique artfully and responsibly may be entrusted to him or her.

### **Conclusion:**

The search for knowledge is born out of love - a desire to participate in the life of the other and the place one lives. The museum can effectively provide an arena for the exchange of knowledge, provided that those who serve its purpose recognize themselves as learners, extending an invitation to others to share and to learn, to listen and to respond.

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