

Book and Resource Review Section

Editorial

Reading the Classics in Recreation and Parks

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When attempting to provide for a liberal education in our field, a number of questions arise. Among them is: What is the role, if any, of the classics in recreation and parks? In *The Closing of the American Mind* (1987), Allan Bloom explored the role of the great books, the classics and literature in making students aware of the order of nature, and of man's place within it. He examined the conflict that he saw occurring in higher education in the 1980s, the conflict between the absolutism often present in the study of the classics in the humanities, and the relativism of moral virtue in openness, when all alternatives are held in equal regard. Keeping mindful of such perceptions and continuing conversations, we presented a workshop at the 2003 NRPA Congress in St. Louis, Missouri in which we examined the great books or "classics" in the recreation and parks field.

The study of the great books offers advantages to students, professors and working professionals. First, reading the original author addressing a problem that has not yet been solved is often a refreshing, even re-creational act. For example, many students derive the same sense of advocacy and enthusiasm from reading one of Leopold's original essays in *A Sand County Almanac* that he had in writing them. Many students find Freeman Tilden's classic *Interpreting our Natural Heritage* as exciting and encouraging today as when it was written.

Second, students often gain a perspective of different times and places and how people viewed their world. Any fair reading of Veblen's *The Theory of the Leisure Class* will provide insights not only into its ostensible subject, but into Veblen himself, and his *fin de siècle* culture. It is clear that some of his attitudes are different, even chauvinistic, when compared to those held by most people today. Indeed, after reading Veblen, some may even feel like throwing his book across the room. But such affective responses to writing are benefits in their own right, piquing interest and stimulating conversation on topics whose relevance remains eternal.

Third, reading seminal works can give students confidence and promote self-efficacy because they will have engaged the original source and not someone else's interpretation of it. For instance, when one reads Maslow's discussion of his "hierarchy of needs" set forth in his book *Motivation and Personality*, she or he is likely to find out that Maslow himself is one of the biggest skeptics of his own theories.

A fourth advantage is that the reading of any canon helps to provide the basis for a common experience among those within the field or discipline. Students from different universities who have read Brightbill, de Grazia, or Veblen have an opportunity to bond with each other through these common experiences. Reading books together helps to promote an intellectual and professional community; the kind of community where ideas are important, and one where all can debate and disagree, while still remaining collegial.

Yet a fifth advantage can accrue to the greater university and the surrounding community. Our field, or discipline if you will, is rooted in leisure and can make an important contribution to others through its mission to improve the human condition. In the search for wellness and happiness, leisure looms large. DeGrazia notes in 1962's *Of Time, Work and Leisure* that "Leisure stands in a class by itself....Happiness can appear only in leisure. The capacity to use leisure rightly, he [Aristotle] repeats, is the basis of the free man's whole life" (p.13). This theme is also echoed in Charles Brightbill's *The Challenge of Leisure* where he suggests that "We must, under any circumstances, try to deal intelligently with the problems of leisure. If we do learn how to use leisure to cultivate our minds, hands, and hearts, we shall preserve and strengthen human values as well as make leisure contribute to the order, rather than the disorder, of life" (1963, p.15). Conceptually, the study of leisure serves as an important nexus between recreation and parks and other disciplines in higher education which are also searching for higher truths and greater insights.

The search for some consensus on the classics in this project began with a series of related workshops starting in 1986 and continuing through the present. The first session devoted to the classics in recreation and parks was scheduled for the NRPA Congress in Miami, Florida in 1998, but was unfortunately cancelled due to Hurricane Georges. Thus, the 2003 NRPA session in St. Louis was in some ways at least five years in the making.

Procedurally, the process to identify the classics in the recreation and parks discipline began with a small, informal survey of professors and practitioners. Respondents represented interests in outdoor recreation, travel and tourism, therapeutic recreation, park management, recreational sports, and youth services. Primarily using an e-mail based questionnaire, the survey was conducted during the spring and summer of 2003. Seventy-five separate titles made the complete list, with the following twelve representing the "top of the list" in order, by frequency and rank in the survey.

1. Thorstein Veblen. *The Theory of the Leisure Class*. 1899.
2. Sebastian de Grazia. *Of Time, Work and Leisure*. 1962.
3. Josef Pieper. *Leisure: The Basis of Culture*. 1952
4. Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi. *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience*. 1990.
5. Johan Huizinga. *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play Element in Culture*. 1950.
6. Aldo Leopold. *A Sand County Almanac*. 1949.
7. Dean MacCannell. *The Tourist: A New Theory of the Leisure Class*. 1976.
8. Freeman Tilden. *Interpreting Our Heritage*. 1957.
9. Gary Cross. *A Social History of Leisure Since 1600*. 1990.
10. Charles K. Brightbill. *The Challenge of Leisure*. 1963.
11. Staffan Linder. *The Harried Leisure Class*. 1970.
12. Thomas Goodale and Geoffrey Godbey. *The Evolution of Leisure*. 1988.

Because of the methodology used, we make no claim that this list is definitive. Rather, it is just a snapshot of the preferences of a small sample; not comprehensive, and surely not final. But even with these limitations in mind, it is still an intriguing list, and perhaps a starting point.

And it is hard to take a look at the list without wondering what influences, even biases, helped shape it. Still, despite its shortcomings, there are some interesting observations to be made. Among the most salient points included the fact that the average age of entries on the complete list was over 40 years old, that most of the books were written by outsiders to the recreation and parks field, ; and that the few books written by insiders had relatively small popular distributions outside of our academic field.

Given all this, perhaps our list not only serves to remind us of the need to read and utilize the great books of our field in teaching and practice, but also of the need for some of us to begin to write the next generation of books to become “must-reads” for a future canon.

So here’s to the next Nozick, Rawls, Chomsky, Faludi, Paglia, and Bloom from our own field. And for that matter, to the next Faulkner, Steinbeck, or O’Connor, as well. Cheers, and tally ho!