

Presenting & Discussing Difficult Topics in African American History at Museums and Historic Sites

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Grounds for Sculpture

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➤ **McLeod Plantation Historic Site, Charleston SC**

Explores African Americans' pursuit of freedom, equality, and justice from 1851-present.

➤ **Fort Monroe National Monument, Hampton VA**

Where Africans in English North America first arrived and where slavery's legal demise began in 1861.

➤ **Caw Caw Interpretive Center, Charleston SC**

Former rice plantations and site of 1739 Stono Slave Rebellion.

➤ **Middleton Place, Charleston SC**

Preserves and interprets the history of the Middleton Family, one of the Nation's founding families and their plantation's history.

Introductions

- What is your name?
- What institution do you represent?
- If your institution currently, or is planning to, address difficult topics related to African American history briefly describe...
 - The setting
 - The anticipated audience

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Making It Real

- Identify specific setting and audience characteristics that affect how topics in African American are presented and discussed.
- Discuss what “making it real” means in this context.
- Learn and discuss ways in which difficult topics in African American History can be presented authentically and meaningfully.

What is Difficult History?

It's the “baggage” we don't want to talk about

- Difficult history is history that is traumatic
- Difficult history is history of the subjugated
- Difficult history is history that is upsetting

What is difficult history for you, may not be difficult history for someone else.

What is Making it Real?

- Institutional commitment
- Mission Driven
- Engage with the community being interpreted
- Knowledge of Resources
- Knowledge of Audiences
- Knowledge of Self
 - Recognize and embrace discomfort
 - Develop empathy for history in yourself and promote empathy for history in others
 - Explore own thoughts and feelings on race and discrimination

What is Making it Real?

- Develop Narrative
 - Decentralize the Gatekeeping
 - Thematic statements to organize
 - Link audiences to resources using intangibles (traditional American ideals/universals)
 - Tell a story with multi-dimensional characters
 - Demonstrate complexity
 - Present multiple perspectives
 - Use empathetic language

Listening and Responding

- Explore cognitive and emotional processes underlying responses.
- Describe responses to making it real.
- Describe approaches to responses that facilitate learning and dialogue.
- Discuss physical and emotional safety

Underlying Cognitive and Emotional Processes

- Identity-Self and Group Narratives
 - Self- How individuals view themselves, make sense of the world and interact with others.
 - Group-Actual and perceived membership in a collective
- Cognitive Dissonance - when a person receives new information that conflicts with pre-existing beliefs or opinions.
- Loss in Learning - When new information challenges the narratives that inform someone's identity, creating a threat to their ego.
- The Melancholic White- The Lost Cause and Revisionist History

Learner Responses

- Recognition: Acceptance of inclusive narrative, because it agrees with what is already believed or experienced
- Reception: A willingness, especially initially, to receive new information
- Repetition: The instinct to repeat information that cannot be easily assimilated
- Reflection: An internal process of readjustment, often expressed through discussion

Responses

- Reconsideration: A willingness, often later in the process, to express new views and conclusions
- Restraint: A certain level of acceptance, but skeptical
- Resistance: Negative expressions in response to threatening information
- Rejection: Complete and total rejection of threatening information and does not lead to any new learning

Facilitating Learning and Dialogue

- Be in command of content
- Explore own thoughts and feelings on race and discrimination
- Read the visitor and meet them where they are
- Develop empathy in yourself and work to promote it in your site's visitors
- Recognize and embrace discomfort in yourself and your site's visitors
- Balance trauma and suffering with uplifting storylines
- Be compassionate for history and learner
- Guide, don't force, instruct or lecture
- Use effective questioning strategies that align with higher level thinking (Bloom's Taxonomy)
- Encourage visitor questions and sharing of experiences
- Recognize when to shut-up, physically move, or transition content
- Provide physical space for reflection
- Provide time and space for individual conversation and dialogue
- Maintain relevancy by being aware of current issues and relationship to history
- Remain flexible
- Attend facilitated dialogue training

Safety-Physical

- Active shooter training, site specific with role play
- Reliable secret communication system
- Develop disruptive visitor training and plan
- First aid/CPR training

Safety-Emotional

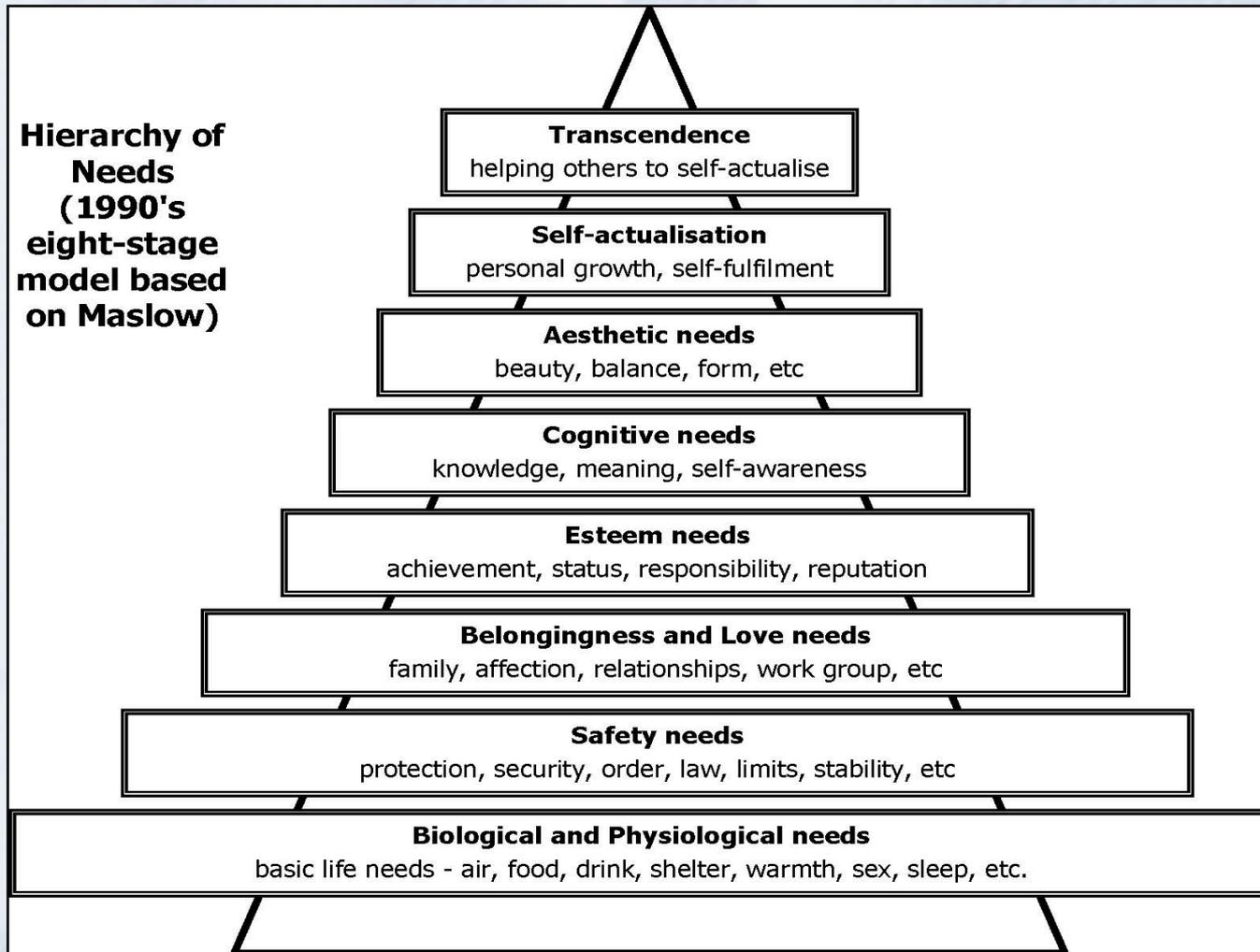
- Institutional support
- Develop team mentality
- Recognize that each interpreter will have a different experience based on a variety of factors and make appropriate accommodations
- Try to always have a backup
- Provide time for processing
- Do not force emotional interpreter into engaging with public
- Provide mechanism for discussing experiences one on one with supervisor and peers.
- Provide mechanism for group discussions among interpreters
- Provide safe opportunities to express rage and sorrow

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Taking it Home

- Explore what “Taking it Home” means to museums and historic sites
- Describe ways to create opportunities for “Taking it Home”
- Share specific examples of “Taking it Home”

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Sources

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Rose, J. (2016) *Interpreting Difficult History at Museums and Historic Sites*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield.

van Balgooy, M. (ed.). (2015) *Interpreting African American History and Culture at Museums and Historic Sites*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield.

More Information

American Association of State and Local History

- Home Page: <http://www.aaslh.org/>
- Technical Leaflets: <http://resource.aaslh.org/view/complete-list-of-technical-leaflets/>

Shawn Halifax-Customized training workshops and interpretation consulting.

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- Ethical Interpretation of History Workshop
- National Association for Interpretation Certified Interpretive Guide Workshop