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THE SOCIOMORAL DIMENSION OF MUSEUM DESIGN

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courts, until the early twentieth century, had the power to sentence an offender convicted of a violent crime to a public whipping. The two chief types of whips used were "the lash" and "the cat-o-nine-tails". The lash was made of knotted cords or thongs of rawhide attached to a handle. The cat-o-nine-tails consisted of a number of dried and hardened thongs with metal or rawhide interwoven with wire. The wires were often hooked and sharpened so that they would tear the flesh. To increase the pain of the whippings, salt or vinegar was poured into the wounds. Severe corporal punishment such as this was gradually replaced during the nineteenth century by imprisonment.

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Historically, one cannot fail to see that such concepts as truth and justice change with the times. History is often made by what men believe to be true at the time. In presenting an exhibition one tries to transmit knowledge, inculcate democratic ideals and create democratic citizens. Morally one must help to create a more humane, fair and sophisticated society. An exhibition is one medium through which such ideas can be expressed, viewed, and analyzed.

continued from page 34: The relationship between Art and Morality

25. Sigmund Freud, On Creativity and the Unconscious (New York: Harper and Row: 1958), p. 12.
26. Although Freud uses the word "intention", it should be clear that neither of us is guilty of the "intentionalist fallacy" since both Freud's description of response to the statue and my use of the concept of reciprocity are independent of any ends the artist may have had in mind other than to create art.
27. Iredell Jenkins, "Aesthetic Education and Moral Refinement," in Ralph A. Smith, ed., Aesthetics and Problems of Education (Urbana: University of Illinois Press: 1971), pp. 178-199.
28. Immanuel Kant, Groundwork of the Metaphysic of Morals, trans. T. K. Abbot (New York: Library of the Liberal Arts: 1926), p. 429.
29. cf. H. B. Acton, Kant's Moral Philosophy (London: MacMillan, St. Martin's Press: 1970), p. 37.
30. K. Keniston, "Student activism, moral development and morality," American Journal of Orthopsychiatry, 40, 1970, pp. 577-592.
31. S. Milgrim, "Behavioral Study of Obedience," Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology, 67, 1963, pp. 371-378.
32. G. Hill and B. Isenberg, "Testimony documents indicate Beech Models had unsafe fuel tanks," Wall Street Journal, July 30, 1971, pp. 1, 6.
33. For an alternative view of the similarities between aesthetic and moral judgment, see Joseph Margolis, "Aesthetic and Moral Judgments Against Compartmentalization," in Ralph A. Smith, ed., Aesthetic Concepts and Education (Urbana: University of Illinois Press: 1970), pp. 164-181.

ENDINGS: AN EXHIBIT ON DEATH AND LOSS

by Janet Camien,

In June of 1984, The Children's Museum, Boston, opened an exhibit called "Endings: An Exhibit About Death and Loss." This opening to which, purposely, no press had been invited, was the result of over ten years of sporadic discussion, research, fundraising efforts and the kind of private thinking exhibit developers often do that is known at the Museum as "looking out the window."

The germ of the idea to do an exhibit for children about death was first brought to the Museum in 1971 by Elaine Heumann Gurian when she first came to be the Director of the Exhibit Center. Death was one of four exhibit topics she hoped to develop. The notion was -- and still remains -- that subjects that interest, confuse or concern children, and about which there is usually little or no conversation with adults, are important topics for an institution such as ours to tackle. The other themes she proposed at the time were for exhibits on hospitals, handicaps, and feelings. By the time we opened "Endings", exhibits called "Hospitals" and "What If You Couldn't: An Exhibit About Handicaps" had been successfully done by us and copied by other museums and discovery centers.

As a first step, some of the basic concepts for an exhibit on death and loss were shared with the museum staff by Kaki Aldrich, a gifted teacher and a natural history developer at our museum. Kaki was well acquainted with the kinds of questions and concerns children are likely to have about mounted museum specimens, activities involving specimen dissections, life cycle study and notions about death itself. Her passion to do an exhibit that would forthrightly discuss death was made more pronounced by her long bout with cancer, her need to come to terms with her own mortality, and her need to share these ideas and feelings with her own adolescent children and other young people and adults.

Some seven years ago, I first became involved in helping Kaki to get the basic exhibit concepts on paper for the museum's first forays with possible funders. However, it was not until four years after Kaki's death that any funding agency at all showed an interest in the project. Finally, about four years ago, both a state and local agency asked to see a draft proposal. Up until this point, the exhibit had simply been "a good idea". Now -- without Kaki -- we were being asked to show how that "good idea" could become a tangible reality. Because of my original work with Kaki, because of my development work on the exhibit about handicaps and also, I fear, because no other developer was eager to take it on, I was appointed to the task.

Our proposal to potential funders elicited two very dissimilar reactions: "This really is about death! We can't fund this!" from one agency which shall remain nameless, and "This is exciting, let's talk" from our eventual funders, The Massachusetts Foundation for the Humanities and Public Policy (MFHPP). Even after MFHPP and the museum staff had agreed to proceed on the exhibit, we all still had to come to grips with the reality that we were actually going to do an exhibit about

DEATH. There was no precedent for an exhibit on death and loss. Now the truly difficult work began.

The concerns of the funding agency and our staff were the same:

*how were we to be truthful and yet provide a potent, meaningful experience for the visitor without being frightening or unnecessarily provocative? As Kent Jacobson of the MFHPP put it, how were we going to find the line between a "too hot" and a "too cool" experience?

*how were we -- especially in light to the above -- going to accommodate the interest and understanding of a huge variety of age groups?

*how were we going to sort through, and select from, the massive amount of information available on this topic? (This at least was a familiar problem.)

The underlying question voiced by our detractors but rarely, once we were committed to the project, by us or our supporters, was this: If childhood is a time (or should be a time) of innocence and enjoyment, then are adults responsible for the safekeeping of this magical time? Was our addressing this topic for children tantamount to child abuse, i.e., the destruction of something we ought to be helping other right-thinking adults to preserve?

These same detractors were willing to grant that it was conceivable that under some circumstances an adult might need to counsel a child about death. But why should a children's museum assume that it could have anything useful to say about this most distressing subject? Great thinkers, religious leaders, scientists and philosophers had been grappling with the enigma for centuries! The subject was too sophisticated for us, and our audience was too unsophisticated for the subject. Our best course was to say nothing.

In many ways these arguments harkened back to the same arguments one encounters when one approaches sex education for children and adolescents, and to the kinds of hesitations that were expressed over the concept of "mainstreaming" disabled children when we developed our exhibit on living with handicaps and the handicapped, which we called "What if You Couldn't...?" Plainly put, the message of the detractors is always that neither adults nor children are "ready" for reality, and that in those difficult areas, the discussion of reality is a private affair: making sex or death or disability public, is destructive and "naughty."

Once we had agreed to implement the project, one of our first tasks was to form an advisory council from the religious, therapeutic, artistic and educational communities. The list of advisors was impressive, and they as a group allayed many of the fears. The psychologists, particularly, strengthened our commitment to the "straightforward" approach and assured us that our fear of "uncorking" visitors with a "too hot" experience was probably not valid. We were also careful to hold a number of open staff meetings in which any member of the museum's extended

family could feel free to add ideas, voice concerns, or just find out what, exactly, we were planning.

Both these meeting processes were incredibly useful as barometers of the concern or enthusiasm we would later hear voiced by our visitors. It was here that we got our first lesson in "one man's ceiling is another man's floor", for it soon became clear that the exhibit could contain many elements that, while approved by the majority, would cause a minority to become queasy. In each case, the majority would feel surprise that this or that element (a casket, a dead frog, a film of an actor being "shot", embalming fluid, etc.) had caused someone else to feel ill at ease. It soon became clear that if we erred on the side of caution there would be no exhibit. We would simply have to take some risks, and we in no case are unhappy that we did so.

The development process for the exhibit hinged on these meetings, and on an immense amount of research. Most of this research was reading: child development theory, death education curriculum, studies, cultural approaches to death and mourning, etc. Some of the research was "try-out": putting live, newly-dead and mounted specimens out in the museum, observing visitor reactions and talking with visitors of all ages about what they were seeing and touching. Part of the research process involved interviewing experts of various kinds and continually running ideas by them for comment, approach and content. It included informally talking and listening to friends and acquaintances about their own experiences with death. Finally, it also had to include exploring and sharing our own ideas and feelings about death and loss. And it turned out that everybody had a story they wanted to tell, once the subject was opened. Often this awakened emotions that surprised both the listener and the teller.

It became even clearer that this was a topic that wanted airing, and this increased my own commitment to explore the topic as deeply as the museum/exhibit context would allow.

The original exhibit concept was more natural history oriented, more technically complicated and less interested in contemporary artifacts that concern death, than the actual exhibit finally turned out to be. When the exhibit opened, it consisted of four areas:

*an area that explores a few of the most obvious stages in children's changing understanding of what death is. Activities such as a peek-a-boo game, and a game in which the visitor decides which artifacts are alive, which are dead and which were never alive, work well with children who are at the stage this activity represents.

*an area that explores through artifacts, photos, and text, the similarities and differences among the death beliefs and rituals of a variety of religious and cultural groups. There is special emphasis on the contemporary artifacts that are most familiar: a gravestone, a casket, etc.

*an area that explores life cycles, animal death and a human death. Human death is illustrated by a large-format story about a family

in which the grandfather dies. It tells, from beginning to end, what happened from the time he went to the hospital to the time immediately following his burial. This section also includes three small diaramas showing the work room of the funeral home, the "wake" and the ceremony at the cemetery. This section may be the single most loved part of the exhibit.

*a resource area where videotapes for children play continuously, and many books and articles are available for both parents and children. Particularly touching is a video recording of a puppet play in which two child-like puppets and the puppeteer explore the grief, anger and guilt aroused by the death of a playmate. Most of these materials are available from our Resource Center to be checked out.

Initial response to the exhibit on Death and Loss, particularly from the media, was overwhelming. It included both local and national TV, radio, newspapers, and later international radio and newspapers. There was more coverage than we had received on any exhibit ever before, and it made us feel at once privileged, overwhelmed and frightened. Some of this coverage fell into the "hard news" category rather than the "human interest" category to which we were used. Some newscasters featured interviewers wearing shocked and/or ironic expressions while pursuing questions they were sure the public would want to know: Shouldn't children be protected from these "harsh realities"? Wouldn't exposing them be destructive? Wasn't the whole idea just morbid? (read "naughty").

This torrent of publicity naturally caused a torrent of mail, mostly from interested parties who had never seen the exhibit. The congratulatory mail came from therapists, theologians, hospice staff, funeral directors and other museum people. The "hate" mail came from people concerned with the "childhood as innocence" notion, or concerned with a single issue, such as "How dare you mention decomposition?" Some were concerned with a religious concept: "There is no death, there is only resurrection. How dare you tell children otherwise?" A few letters also fit into the religious/political category. These letters informed me for the first time that to be called a "humanist" was not necessarily a compliment. We answered each of these letters painstakingly.

In our exhibit about disability, we had feared reactions like the above but never received a single one, with one exception. We were awarded a "Bad Taste Award" in a local chic magazine. I believe the reason is that handicaps are something the public at large does not "own". Those who do are happy when anyone takes disability out of the closet. Death, on the other hand, belongs to all of us. Therefore, and this is part of the exhibit, we all are allowed to have things to feel, think and say about it.

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The basic disagreement, whether it is an adult's duty to tell the truth to children, or to protect them from the truth, will continue to be debated. Yet, a year of observation and feedback from visitors to the exhibit has encouraged us to believe we have made some good choices.

Most evaluation takes place informally at our museum. Developers, floor staff and interested others spend time on exhibits and arrive at intuitive perceptions about exhibit elements or an exhibit on a whole. We also solicit responses informally from the public and do formal evaluations. A great variety of evaluation strategies were used for the Death and Loss exhibit.

The first intuitive responses from staff were totally contradictory. Staff reported that there were both more and less visitors here than at other exhibits in a given day, that visitors were spending both more and less time here than other places, etc. We had clearly created an exhibit whose direct comparison with its fellows was difficult.

The observations that do seem true over time are:

*visitors do not use staff here as in other exhibits ("Go ask the nice lady..."). In fact, they rarely use them at all. And staff feel they are intruding, should they behave as they are trained to do in other exhibits. ("Hey! Did you see this part over here?")

*visitors read and write more in this exhibit. They make extensive use of our "Talk back" sheets. There are four "Talk back" stations in the exhibit which solicit a variety of information:

-Do you remember the death of anyone in your family? Do you remember the birth of anyone in your family?

-Are you named for someone who died?

-What do you and your family believe happens to people after they die?

-Tell us what you think of the exhibit. Share your own experiences with death.

Although all the boards at the "Talk back" stations are used, the last is by far and away the most popular and represents such a range of opinion and reportage and sheer bulk that I have still failed to create a categorization that can contain them all. Roughly, they are:

*about 50% anecdotal: "When my grandma died I felt..."

*about 20% congratulatory: "Thank you for doing this..."

*about 10% upset: "Morbid, scary"

*about 5% thoughtful: "I didn't think this was a good idea, but..."

*about 5% suggestional: "You ought to add this, delete that"

*or relevatory: "I never knew that..."

About half of the "Talk back" sheets are written by adults and half by children. Those who tell a personal experience usually also tell us that they "like" the exhibit. The most gratifying responses, of course, are those that say things like "I love this exhibit becorige this tells the truth (sic)." Best of all, children freely use the "Talk back" sheets for the purpose originally intended: to "vent" their own experiences.

A more formal evaluation is now in process. It includes:

- *observations of visitors at various places in the exhibit;
- *interviews upon leaving;
- *mailed-home questionnaires;
- *comparison of the number of visitors who pass by or enter the exhibit, compared to another cultural exhibit with a similar entrance configuration.

As a consequence of this evaluation process, the exhibit has been revised and slightly condensed once since its installation. Visitors can now get the "lay of the land" immediately and select the aspects of the exhibit they want to view or skip. The exhibit will remain at our museum in its current configuration until the fall of 1985, after which it is slated to travel nationally.

Generally, both staff and the public have found the idea of a Death and Loss exhibit more threatening in concept than in reality. The biggest question, "How on earth are you going to do that?!" has been answered. The biggest fear, that people would be "uncorked", begin sobbing or even throw up, obviously did not occur. The biggest hope, that children and adults would be interested, relieved, moved and talk to each other, has often been met.

Although this is by no means a perfect exhibit, it is, I think, an interesting start and important step in the creation of exhibits that respond to perceived social needs. Is it a museum's place or responsibility to tackle current social issues? We obviously think the answer is "Yes". I believe that in the coming years similar institutions will be focusing, with increasing frequency, on such varied issues as ecology, evolution theory, gene-splicing and uses of nuclear energy. Museums will face social issues, such as death education, sex education, child and sexual abuse and substance abuse; the social issues that interest and/or worry us all.

The challenge will be to present issues that are provocative in a non-provocative fashion, and to present them without bias and with tolerance for a variety of points of view. At the same time, we must continually be aware that we are housing exhibits, not clinics, and that our responsibility is to give information. This includes information about where therapeutic help is available, rather than dispensing the therapy ourselves. As museum professionals we must take care and we must take risks. The public will then decide whether or not such use of our museum suits their interests and needs. Our repeated experience is that the public is "ready" for us and excited by what we have to show them.

CREATING A HOLOCAUST RESOURCE CENTER WITHIN THE NEW YORK STATE MUSEUM

by Norma Ball, Director, Holocaust Resource Center, New York State Museum

Editor's Note: The New York State Museum Holocaust Resource Center/ Exhibit was created in conjunction with the Greater Albany Jewish Federation through a legislative grant sponsored by New York State Senate Leader Manfred Ohrenstein and advised by a state-wide non-sectarian committee.

It has long been my belief that museums have a moral obligation to be more than simply institutions for the preservation and display of our past and present environment. As institutions, museums must move from the sterile, lifeless display of "things," toward becoming an integral, active part of the education and enlightenment of their visitors.

For almost 20 years I have taught the Holocaust; what led up to and followed this darkest hour in human history. Some of my most important students over the years have been teachers who want to learn how to relate the story of the destruction of European Jewry to their students in such a way that man's potential for evil against his fellow man is seen not as an isolated "Jewish" incident, but as a frightening possibility in and for all of us. Through the years teachers have come to me expressing a need for a tangible resource center as a tool to help them teach their students; and through the years I have had in my mind a dream of an exhibit and accompanying resource center which would excite an interest for more information, provide that information, while paying appropriate tribute to those human beings who survived Hitler's "Final Solution" as well as those few who stood up in defiance of the Nazis.

My dream was to have a permanent exhibit and Teacher Resource Center within the New York State Museum at Albany, a place available to every teacher and student in the state. My first task was to make explicit the multiple reasons why a Holocaust exhibit was appropriate for the New York State Museum.

The issues of the Holocaust are not just Jewish issues. The story is one of a loss of humanness; of world-wide governmental apathy; of political expediencies; of complicity; and of human expendability. And although the story is overwhelmingly a dark one, there are wonderful examples of personal and group heroism; of the highest form of kindness and sacrifice; of real strength and caring; of something positive rising from the ashes. These stories are vitally important in teaching the lessons of the Holocaust, within any educational and cultural institution. In addition, one of the most touching and perhaps least known strands of Holocaust history happened in upstate New York in 1944 at Fort Ontario; making the link to New York State unquestionable and the New York State Museum a specially valid location for such an exhibit. Once the exhibit idea was accepted by the New York State Museum, the question became one of it's most appropriate locations within the Museum itself.

The story of New York's role in the acceptance and absorption of immigrants to this country is chronicled in "New York Hall." It is the