

LOCAL LESSONS IN LETTING GO

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BENJAMIN FILENE
GUEST AUTHOR

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Nearly twenty years ago, I arrived in Appleton, bright-eyed, to be curator at the Outagamie County Historical Society. Brimming with excitement about my first day at my first real museum job, I stepped into... chaos. The museum had been without a curator for a little while and in the interim, the staff had had an idea that, in retrospect, looks years ahead of its time: make the community the curators! There would be an exhibit about holiday celebrations in the Fox Valley and different ethnic groups would each take charge of showcasing their own traditions.

The staff had contacted leaders from each group—Swedes, Norwegians, Irish, Hmong, Jewish—showed them their allotted square footage and told them to go crazy with exhibit-making. Which they did. Some groups set off into a whirl of shopping, collecting, knitting and gluing. They were determined to put on a big show; the staff worried that the exhibit was going to look like an airport gift shop. Other groups seemed to be doing nothing at all, drifting along in aimless meetings. Fed up, the more impatient personalities decided just to do it themselves; the other committee members resented their bossiness. Meanwhile, all the groups were looking over their shoulders at each other. The Swedes wanted to know what the Norwegians were up to, and the Norwegians, for sure, were taking no chances about the Swedes. Norwegian and Swede alike agreed on one thing: they wanted to make sure that I, the newcomer understood that yes, there is a big difference between the two.

With *Holiday Celebrations: Tradition and Change in the Fox Valley*, the Historical Society was tapping into a trend very much in the air in the early 1990s. Museums were realizing that they needed to make themselves relevant to their communities. By inviting community members to shape the exhibit's interpretations, *Holiday Celebrations* pushed into the even more adventuresome realm of "shared authority"—the notion that museums should allow their constituents to become not just passive consumers but active shapers of content. Sometimes, though, grand ideas work better in theory than in practice. As I sifted

through frustrated phone messages from community partners and tried to imagine how all these loose ends would turn into an exhibit before Santa Lucia Day or Saint Nicholas Day (which came first, anyway?), shared authority had turned into a shared mess.

Looking back, it's easier to see how the crises of *Holiday Celebrations*—and their ultimately successful resolution—can help us better understand what shared authority can mean in museums and how to translate the approach successfully into on-the-ground work.

"Shared authority" was coined by historian Michael Frisch in 1990 to describe how oral history interviewing challenges the traditional expertise of the historian. Scholars, Frisch asserted, could gain important new insights if they could open their ears—*listen* and engage in honest dialogue with people who had memories and reflections to share about historical events.

De-centering the expert, then, is not a new notion, but it does seem to have gained currency in recent years. The idea that ordinary people can be interpreters resonates strongly with the ethos of the Web. Everyone, seemingly, can be a journalist, critic and pundit. Why not a curator? Programs like Flickr, Tumblr, Omeka and Pinterest invite even casual users to gather and organize images, to label and describe them and to organize them into virtual exhibits. It seems that people are serving as do-it-yourself curators whether museums are ready or not.

Sensing a cultural shift, many museums recently have been experimenting with ways of inviting visitors to share their

creativity. Scholars Tom Satwicz and Kris Morrissy call the approach "public curation"—the idea that audiences become active participants, selecting content and offering interpretations. Others, emphasizing how such efforts challenge traditional institutional dynamics, refer to "radical trust." Examples can range from the simple to the elaborate. Almost every gallery in Charlotte's Levine Museum of the New South, for instance, has comment boards full of Post-its scribbled on by visitors. When the Levine



View of the Outagamie County Historical Society's *Holiday Celebrations: Tradition and Change in the Fox Valley* exhibit. Photo courtesy of the History Museum at the Castle

made an exhibit exploring the touchy issue of new immigrants to Charlotte (*Changing Places: From Black and White to Technicolor, 2009-2010*), it included a video talk-back booth in which visitors could record and share their thoughts on the issues. When The Oakland Museum of California faced the challenge of summarizing the turbulent years of 1960-1975 for its exhibit surveying state history (opened 2010), it instead decided to invite two dozen Californians to create “memory boxes” documenting their own experiences of that time. The Brooklyn Historical Society has devoted an entire gallery to its Public Perspectives exhibit series. Brooklynites apply and get the chance to mount exhibits on their own. Topics have ranged from Chinese immigration to gentrification and affordable housing.

In a host of ways, then, museums are exploring how stepping back from the omniscient expert voice can encourage personal engagement and bring alternate viewpoints into the gallery. But questions remain about giving authority to the public. Will other audiences want to see and hear the opinions of their fellow visitors? What if the amateurs get their facts wrong? And in this new world, what happens to professional curators? Do they just hand over the keys to their constituents and go home?

These are among the pressing questions of our moment in the museum world, but I see kernels of answers in my awkward *Holiday Celebrations* project from long ago. The turning point in the development process came when the staff and I realized we needed to do both more and less. Those angry phone calls, I slowly began to realize, were a plea for help. The community groups didn’t want just to be left all on their own; they wanted help from a real curator. Green as I was, I was as close as they were going to get. I began to hold meetings with the various groups. We had conversations about what main ideas they hoped visitors would remember when they left the exhibit; we talked about what objects they had and what could be borrowed; I went looking for images that illustrated key ideas; the museum’s designer and I worked up some simple question-and-answer flip-up labels that called attention to some similarities across the ethnic boundaries.

The most fraught meeting was with representatives of the Jewish community. We just couldn’t seem to generate momentum for the exhibit section on Hanukkah that we had assigned them. Finally, one of the most respected leaders of the group, David Bailyn, exploded in anger: “What are we doing here? Hanukkah is just a minor holiday that got inflated because of Christmas!” Heads around the table began nodding and suddenly the reason for our problems became clear. When I asked what they would prefer to focus on, everyone said Passover, and we were on our way. The resulting exhibit included rich first-person reflections on Passover’s meaning, along with a sidebar about how America’s secular-Christian culture had elevated Hanukkah beyond its traditional scale.

In the end, *Holiday Celebrations* wasn’t a fancy exhibit—many museums have done more sustained and daring exercises in sharing authority—but visitors found it engaging,

and the community contributors were proud of the result. Looking back, the experience left me with three core lessons about community-engaged exhibits and “letting go” of authority. First, the museum staff’s original instinct in handing the exhibit over to the community representatives was in one key respect correct: hearing about people’s experiences in their own voice is powerful and moving. As Michael Frisch pointed out, honoring first-person voices is in itself a form of sharing authority.

The second lesson, though, was that public curation is no short cut. Simply handing off authority and telling people to create does not work. Professionals need to establish some parameters and frameworks to make such projects succeed. Practitioners have found that the amount and quality of participation in a gallery increases when visitors’ creativity is guided by smart questions to prompt discussion, stencils to guide drawing or menus to sharpen choices. It may seem paradoxical, but limits—word counts, canvas boundaries, time limits—encourage free-form work.

Finally, my first foray into community curation shows that this approach requires not less but more from professional practitioners. To make the holiday exhibit work, I needed to use listening and facilitation skills that I had never been taught in graduate school. It was a misstep to push the Jewish community to do Hanukkah, one that could have been avoided through fuller conversations at the outset of the project.

In the end, the memory of *Holiday Celebrations* helps me see “radical trust” as both less revolutionary and more complex than it sounds. On the one hand, it’s an idea that itself has a significant history behind it; it does not require huge new financial investments to explore; and it retains key roles for professional practitioners. On the other hand, it demands of museums a deep commitment to open conversation, an ability to live with uncertainty and a willingness, for once, not always to have the last word. If museums can succeed in addressing the old and new challenges that sharing authority presents, they may find powerful new ways to make themselves essential to the communities that sustain them. Museums can become places where visitors not only go to see themselves, but to express themselves and, even, to find themselves. ■

Benjamin Filene is Associate Professor and Director of Public History at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro (UNCG). Prior to UNCG, Filene was Senior Exhibit Developer at the Minnesota Historical Society (1997-2006) and Curator at the Outagamie County Historical Society (1994-1997). He served as lead developer on the Minnesota History Center’s exhibit *Open House: If These Walls Could Talk*, winner of a WOW Award for innovation and an Award of Merit from the American Association for State and Local History. Portions of this article draw on a collection he co-edited: *Letting Go? Historical Authority in a User-Generated World* (2011).