



## Environmental Hospice and Memorial as Redemption: Public Rituals for Renewal

Jennifer L. Adams

To cite this article: Jennifer L. Adams (2020): Environmental Hospice and Memorial as Redemption: Public Rituals for Renewal, Western Journal of Communication, DOI: [10.1080/10570314.2020.1753234](https://doi.org/10.1080/10570314.2020.1753234)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/10570314.2020.1753234>



Published online: 16 Apr 2020.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



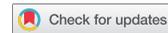
Article views: 3



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)



# Environmental Hospice and Memorial as Redemption: Public Rituals for Renewal

Jennifer L. Adams

*In this paper, I use Kenneth Burke's pollution, purification, and redemption cycle to suggest a communicative way to overcome the possible inaction that stems from environmental guilt or shame. If guilt and shame over environmental loss is to be overcome in the best possible way to allow for continued participation in communicative action about the environment, then the redemption that results from purification rituals seems necessary. I suggest that rituals for purification in the form of environmental hospice and memorial are necessary as truthful acknowledgments of those species and landscapes that have been lost, and those that will be lost in the future and the redemption found through them encourages continued environmental care.*

**Keywords:** Eco-Guilt; Environmental Hospice; Environmental Memorial; Kenneth Burke; Redemption

In July 2017, David Wallace-Wells published a shocking article in the *New York Magazine* titled “The Uninhabitable Earth” that was shared frequently on social media. In it, Wallace-Wells states, “absent a significant adjustment to how billions of humans conduct their lives, parts of the Earth will likely become close to uninhabitable, and other parts horrifically inhospitable, as soon as the end of this century” (para. 2). Sadly, Wells does not stand alone in his assessment of Earth’s bleak future. More recently, the United Nations released a report suggesting that

---

**Correspondence to:** Jennifer L. Adams, Department of Communication and Theatre, DePauw University, Greencastle, IN 46135-0037. E-mail: [jadams@depauw.edu](mailto:jadams@depauw.edu)

This paper was presented at the International Environmental Communication Association’s 2017 Conference on Communication and the Environment in Leister, England.

humans worldwide have approximately twelve years to make changes to greenhouse gas emissions to avoid extremely significant weather-related disasters (Watts, 2018). In 2016, CNN ran a headline reading “Sixth mass extinction? Two-thirds of wildlife may be gone by 2020” (Westcott, 2016). The story, covered by all major international news organizations, explained that the world had *already* lost 58% of vertebrates. Another startling story suggested that the ocean may be bereft of sustainably harvested seafood by 2048, which would be devastating to people who rely on food from the sea as their primary diet (Crowley, 2016). These reports all come with dire warnings from scientists around the world, urging humans to act immediately to try to mitigate the worst outcomes of global warming.

Yet, the president of the United States, Donald Trump, is a climate change denier who is very clear about his disdain for regulations enforcing environmental protections. By electing this administration or by choosing not to vote at all, large swaths of the US electorate demonstrated that environmental protection is not yet a vital concern. Given the lack of public concern, it is unsurprising that the nation continues to follow reckless environmental policies that will result in the permanent extinction of plants and animals as well as the environmental destruction of geographical places. These places, plants and animals are deeply meaningful to people and cultures, some of whom have made them a part of their systems of spiritual or material identity.

Despite public acceptance of environmental destruction, committed conservationists have successfully supported progressive environmental policies at the state and local level, as well as encouraging individual behavioral change. Many people recycle, disavow plastics, collect rainwater or perform other environmentally conscious behaviors as what Fredericks (2014) calls “everyday environmentalists” (p. 64).

However, at least until everyday environmentalists are a majority who influence policy, climate-harming industrial behavior will likely continue. As a result, many people who care deeply will witness the harm and loss of places, plants and animals that are important to them. As stories of loss accumulate, people who are already inclined toward environmental care may become discouraged. After all, most everyday environments in the industrial world understand the relatively small impact that individual efforts seem to have in comparison to giant industrial polluters. Most also recognize their complicity, as a member of industrial society, in continued environmental devastation. A body of literature suggests that this cognizance can lead well-intentioned people to experience feelings of environmental guilt and shame discouraging them from continued activism or even from continuing eco-friendly behaviors (Fredericks, 2014; Graton, Ric, & Gonzalez, 2016; Pensini & Caltabiano, 2012).

In this essay, I use Burke’s (1984) concept of rhetorical redemption to suggest that rituals for purification in the forms of environmental hospice and memorial are one way to acknowledge the species and landscapes that are severely threatened or lost in order to find the will to continue conservation work. Burke’s redemption model offers a useful way of understanding an emergent form of artistic, mournful rhetoric,

responding to eco-guilt. If debilitating guilt from ecological grief is to be resolved, the redemption that results from purification rituals seems necessary (Smith, 2014). Burke's model provides a rhetorical roadmap to understanding how environmental hospice and memorial allows those who have experienced environmental grief accompanied by guilt to move beyond that guilt to continue environmental care in other directions.

Importantly, environmental grief and subsequent guilt may develop in individuals who are witness to devastating ecological harm that is not necessarily terminal. For example, the devastation caused by strip mining may produce grief, even though there is a chance to rehabilitate the land. In addition, while humans might understand that a species or place is endangered, we often are uncertain about when they have gone extinct. As biologist Wilson (1999) notes,

Extinction is the most obscure and local of all biological process. We don't see the last butterfly of its species snatched from the air by a bird or the last orchid of a certain kind killed by the collapse of its supporting tree in some distant mountain forest. We hear that a certain animal or plant is on the edge, perhaps already gone. We return to the last known locality to search, and when no individuals are encountered there ... we pronounce the species extinct. (p. 225)

If extinction itself is difficult to pinpoint, then environmental hospice will necessarily carry with it some ambiguity, similar to a situation when patients enter hospice. There are even unusual situations where a patient who enters hospice is later returned to active treatment or given a "live discharge" (see Dolin et al., 2017).

Burke's redemption model is central to his concept of rhetorical identification through symbolic action and is his primary example of ongoing, unending human drama. Across his writings, Burke describes a rhetoric of redemption that allows individuals feeling guilt to purge it through ritualized rhetoric that provides a sense of "rebirth, or a new identity" (Foss, Foss, & Trapp, 2014, p. 194). Importantly, for Burke, everyone experiences guilt from their existential condition. In his basic "Definition of Man," he suggests that "Man [*sic*] is the symbol-using (symbol-making, symbol-misusing) animal; inventor of the negative (or moralized by the negative), separated from his natural condition by instruments of his own making, goaded by the spirit of hierarchy (or moved by the sense of order), and rotten with perfection" (Burke, 1966, p. 16). Thus, Burke conceives of hierarchies as the ultimate source of guilt or pollution: a person experiences guilt in the recognition of their imperfect position in any one of many possible social hierarchies. In hierarchies, Burke argues, "we encounter secular analogues of 'original sin,'" so that "[t]hose 'Up' are guilty of not being 'Down,' those 'Down' are certainly guilty of not being 'Up'" (Burke, 1989, p. 69). In this way, imperfection is a lifelong experience for people, and as Bobbitt (2004) noted the pollution-purification-redemption cycle fulfills an "archetypal need," thereby responding to that guilt. (p. 29).

Burke describes guilt as pollution that creates a need for purification. As Foss et al. (2014) explain, "the individual can remain psychologically or spiritually healthy only by getting rid of the guilt or pollution of some aspect of the self" (p. 195). The

processes of purification are varied and can occur in several ways but all are symbolic cures. Noted Burke scholar William Rueckert (1982) explains, “The three main archetypal clusters are pollution (hell) [or guilt], purification (purgatory), and redemption (heaven). The movement from the first to the last through purification constitutes the pattern of the rhetoric of rebirth and is the prime function of symbolic action” (p. 104). The means of redemption most thoroughly developed by Burke and subsequently explored by scholars is accomplished by scapegoating or victimage (Burke, 1973, pp. 191–220) and mortification (see Burke, 1970, pp. 190–206). However, Burke recognizes the power of any reformatory experience to bring about change, and he includes transcendence and dramatic catharsis as other possible means of purging guilt (see Bobbitt, 2004; Brummett, 1981). The cycle begins when an individual recognizes guilt, which may be collective or individual in nature, and then desires to purge (or purify) their guilt through symbolic rituals of purification including scapegoating (victimage), mortification, transcendence or change through dramatic catharsis (see Foss et al., 2014, pp. 194–197; Bobbitt, 2004). The performance of this rhetorical drama results in catharsis, purgation of guilt, and redemption, at least temporarily.

In what follows, I apply this dramatic model to better understand and possibly move past debilitating environmental guilt through redemption. In so doing, I demonstrate a novel use for Burke’s popular redemption model in environmental communication and identify new forms of environmental rhetoric centered upon loss. After reviewing the literature specific to guilt caused by environmental concerns, I outline the basic functions of environmental hospice and memorial based upon Burke’s stages of redemption. As examples, I consider how the work of *Radical Joy for Hard Times* functions as a possible environmental hospice and how the *Lost Bird Project* by sculptor Todd McGrain functions as environmental memorial. Through this analysis, I suggest that despite ambiguities in determining terminal status for species or places, the rhetoric of environmental hospice and memorial allows participants to come to terms with environmental harm and assuage the guilt that might impede their desire to continue the environmental care that is vitally necessary in our world today.

### **Pollution as Eco-Guilt**

For Burke, guilt is an unescapable ontological condition that stems directly from our natural use of symbols because of their ability to create perceptions of negativity and perfection. As Shultz (2000) explains, “Guilt is intrinsic to the social order and forms itself along a range from individual anxiety to social tension. Burke discusses guilt primarily in the context of ‘original sin,’ arguing that all subsequent guilt is a result of human conscience which results from the failure to fulfill verbal covenants” (pp. 253–254). A person need not commit a real crime or sin to feel guilty because guilt is caused by their perception that they are not as good as they could be, or that others are better than they are, or that they could be better. Because the sources of guilt are

unlimited, guilt stemming from environmental imperfection fits easily within Burke's model.

In fact, "eco-guilt" as a psychological phenomenon is well documented in the literature of ecological psychology and strategic environmental communication (Fredericks, 2014, p. 65). Eco-guilt occurs when an individual violates personal or social environmental values, and some researchers consider it a useful motivating factor in positive behavior. For example, Ferguson and Branscombe (2010) studied the role of collective guilt arising from the explicit acknowledgment of the human causes of climate change as it impacted pro-environmental behaviors and found a positive relationship. Similarly, Mallett (2012) found that eco-guilt strongly predicted environmentally friendly behaviors, and suggested that at least for the population of college students that they studied, positive environmental behaviors could be motivated through eco-guilt. Mallett, Melchiori, and Strickroth (2013) found that when people were confronted with evidence from carbon footprint calculators, those who found they had higher than normal carbon footprints experienced both individual and collective guilt which then increased their likelihood to support a pro-environmental organization. Similarly, Rees, Klug, and Bamberg (2015) concluded that a "guilty conscience" can result in an increased level of pro-environmental behavior. In fact, in contemporary environmental psychology studies, the overwhelming consensus among researchers is that both individual and collective guilt are effective positive motivators for behavioral change. This literature verifies Burke's argument that guilt can be a motivating factor for change.

Yet, not all researchers are convinced that *inducing* guilt is the best way to motivate for environmental action, precisely because guilt can cause psychological discomfort and stymie action. For example, Tangney, Miller, Flicker, and Barlow (1996) shows that for individuals with knowledge of the impending consequences of climate change, using guilt as a means for inducing positive environmental action seems futile since most already experience eco-guilt as an existential state, and an overload of guilt can lead to societal withdrawal and inaction. Similarly, Coates (2003), argued that "[The] anxiety, loss of meaning and direction, and concern for the future that many people feel in modern society can be linked to the problems of modernity and environmental destruction" (p. 134). Similarly, Fredericks (2014) concluded that "eco-guilt is a recognized and recurring part of contemporary life for some people whom I call everyday environmentalists—people who attempt to live out their environmental concern through ordinary, routine behaviors such as eating, shopping, cleaning, and transportation" (p. 65). For this group, Fredericks critically wondered, "Does environmental guilt facilitate environmentalism or lead to moral paralysis?" (p. 79). Thus, while much of the literature suggests that some guilt can be useful as a positive motivator, many recognize that eco-guilt as a constant existential state can be discouraging rather than motivating. For Burke, unresolved guilt is always simply untenable.

### Purification as Ambiguous Environmental Hospice and Memorial

From a Burkean perspective, eco-guilt, like all guilt, is a form of pollution that must be ameliorated to avoid social disengagement and despair. He argued, “the negativistic principle of guilt implicit in the nature of order combines with the principles of thoroughness (or ‘perfection’) and substitution that are characteristic of symbol systems in such a way that the sacrificial principle of victimage (the ‘scapegoat’) is intrinsic to human congregation” (Burke, 1989, p. 280). Inherent in Burke’s conception of guilt is its elimination through purification rituals of symbolic action, including victimage, but also including mortification, transcendence, and simple dialectical catharsis (Bobbitt, 2004). The scapegoating narrative itself involves many possible plots so that a vessel worthy of sacrifice might be an object of hate, envy, or fear, but might also be one who is “too good for this world” and an object of love and devotion (Burke, 1973, p. 40). While there may be endless reasons to experience guilt, there are also endless dramas that provide for its relief, and Burke himself only began to suggest the dramatic ways that guilt could be purged (Bobbitt, 2004).

The nature of a ritualistic response to ameliorate eco-guilt hinges upon the situational context of life and death, which is fraught with uncertainty in cases of ecological extinction. After all, if there is any chance that a species or location can survive, the appropriate response must encourage renewed and concentrated action directed toward its rescue. Yet, if a place or species is truly doomed, that action might be better directed toward the rescue of other plants, animals and places. Encouraging the ritualistic rhetoric of hospice as an appropriate response to environmental harm and the guilt it causes might prove deadly if a species or place is not doomed.

Kenneth Burke provides useful guidance in traversing the dangers inherent in using the terms hospice and memorial in his writing about the basic ambiguity of language as a symbol system. For Burke, all language is ambiguous due to the ontological distinction between the symbol and the thing that symbol describes (McClure & Cabral, 2009). Burke maintains that “language is but a set of labels, signs for helping us find our way about ... terms [that] are sheer emptiness, as compared with the substance of the things they name” (Burke, 1966, pp. 5–6). Burke’s (1969) “paradox of substance” (p. 23) is inherent in the very act of naming and defining so “that the word *substance*, used to designate what a thing *is* derives from what a thing is *not*” (McClure & Cabral, 2009, p. 76). Yet, Burke does not consider ambiguity to be a problem so much as it is a resource for identification (Simons, 2008, p. 154). Burke (1969) argues that, “what we want is not terms that avoid ambiguity, but terms that clearly reveal the strategic spots at which ambiguities necessarily arise” (p. xviii). Ambiguity is an opportunity because “it is precisely the irresolvable ambiguity of substances that motivates rhetorical constructions of ‘reality.’ Although the ambiguity of meaning and substance creates potentialities for division, it also provides for identifications among multiple meanings and realities.” (McClure & Cabral, 2009, p. 76). Words carry with

them ideological choices, so that through “one’s choice of language one could conceal or reveal, magnify or minimize, simplify or complexify, elevate or degrade, link or divide” (Simons, 2008, pp. 153–154).

The ambiguity of language allows a rhetoric of environmental hospice to function both as a means of resolving guilt through mourning for loss and as a means of motivating for action to prevent that loss. In what follows, I apply the terms environmental hospice to the work of Radical Joy for Hard Times and environmental memorial to the work of Todd McGrain. It is important to recognize that the same behaviors that I name hospice could easily be called a ritualized rhetoric of critical care. For a time, extinction itself remains ambiguous and there are numerous debates about when to declare a species extinct. Even when extinction seems clear, there are some committed individuals who still do not give up fighting for life, as in the case with researchers attempting to bring the passenger pigeon back from extinction (Marcus, 2018). Burke allows for, and even encourages, this type of ambiguity in interpretations of the act and scene.

In invoking the term environmental hospice, I allude directly to the practice of hospice for dying persons, which has become an increasingly important last stage of life for some terminal patients and their families (Meier, 2011). Hospice care for the dying involves mediating the physical pain of death through palliative care and the emotional feelings of loss through psychological counseling and talk-therapy. Typically, the focus of a hospice care team will be to help the patient experience the best quality of life in the time he or she has remaining, but hospice care also extends to the immediate social community of the terminal patient so that friends and family of the terminal patient can receive advice and care. Furthermore, for a hospice care program to be Medicaid-certified, it must also offer bereavement support to help family, partners and close friends deal with both anticipatory grief and traditional post-loss grief for at least a year after the death (Demmer, 2003). Research suggests that “survivors of terminally ill people who participated in a hospice program prior to the death showed that they had *decreased feelings of guilt, dependency, loss of control, despair, numbness, shock and disbelief*” (Steele, 1990, p. 235, emphasis added).

When applied to gravely threatened places or species, the concept of environmental hospice can be defined as the care that a human community provides for self and the environmental other. This community can be construed broadly as any group of human actors who feel emotionally connected to it, and the care they provide will vary based upon their individual role and their perspective on the ambiguous line between life and death in environmental situations. Given these different roles and perspectives, members of this community will need a rhetoric of hospice at different times, which is also demanded by the ambiguity of the exigent situation of extinction.

I am not the first to use the term environmental hospice. Bauman (2014) invoked the concept when considering the implications of sea-rise on the people who inhabit and vacation in the South Florida Everglades, which is by many forecasts expected to be mostly underwater within the next 100 years. Bauman (2014) argued,

In terms of humans, our environmental hospice care must involve at least three steps: recognizing the collective guilt of our own implication in the process, accepting re-location and loss of place and cultural memories that go along with such relocations, and constructing memorials that help us remember our former places and the errors that led to the destruction of those places. (p. 17)

In the remainder of this section, I use concepts from Burkean dramtistic theory to explore communication practices for environmental hospice and memorial that could achieve each of Bauman's goals (2014).

In human hospice, the communication needs of the terminally ill person's friends and family include assisting with making decisions about and communicating medical options and procedures with the patient, listening to the health care providers and the patient to find acceptance that their loved one is dying, engaging in practices or conversations about locating and reframing hope in the face of terminal illness, and providing and receiving emotional support during all stages of hospice through death (see Baer & Weinstein, 2013; Coffman & Coffman, 1993). Using human hospice coupled with Burke's dramatism as models, I suggest that a rhetoric of environmental hospice is one that, at minimum, must assist an audience in (1) pollution, or accepting the impending loss of their loved species or place while acknowledging the human causes for its damage or destruction; (2) purgation, or locating and/or reframing hope in the face of tragedy; and (3) redemption, or expressing the range of possible emotional reactions to eco-grief.

First, a rhetoric of environmental hospice must function to create a sense of acceptance. When loved ones first learn of a diagnosis that may be terminal, they often feel a sense of denial about the accuracy of the diagnosis (Kubler-Ross, 1969). As such, an important function of communication for families during human hospice care is to help foster acceptance. A second function of a rhetoric of environmental hospice must be to help accomplish the reframing of hope. People facing the impending death of a loved one often experience feelings of guilt and general hopelessness, so communication that locates or reframes hope is necessary (Ragan, Wittenberg-Lyles, Goldsmith, & Reilly, 2008). A third and final function of environmental hospice is to encourage mourners to express the full range of emotions experienced by a community impacted by ecological destruction. Communication that helps family understand and express their feelings becomes important.

Sadly, hospice care almost always ends with death. In the environment, once loss has occurred, audiences must turn to a rhetoric of environmental memorial that comes with different communication needs. Often, communities mourn their loss and remember their loved ones through ritualistic funerals or by erecting memorials (see Memorial: Carlson & Hocking, 1988; Blair, Jeppeson, & Pucci, 1991 on the Vietnam Veterans Memorial; Blair & Michel, 2007 on the A.I.D.S. Memorial Quilt; Paliewicz & Hasian, 2017 on the 9/11 Memorial). Frequently, eulogies provide a verbal transformation of one's relationship with the dead to the past tense and consideration of a future in which the deceased lives only in memory (Campbell & Jamieson, 1978; Foss, 1983; Jamieson, 1978; Kent, 1991). The rhetorical means for

memorializing lost species and places is similar to the memorials of humans and human events.

When trauma or death threatens the relational status quo of a community, hospice and memorial work help participants cope with grief and express emotions associated with their potential loss. In cases of environmental destruction, there will necessarily be ambiguity in the application of doomed status to places and species that requires a parallel ambiguity in naming and a tolerance for multiple perspectives. The rhetorical dramas that I call environmental hospice and memorial allow individuals suffering the impending or actual loss of animal, plant or location to engage in ritualistic behavior that helps purge their existential eco-guilt. I now turn to two such examples.

### Redemption as Performance

So far, I have explored how eco-guilt emerging from complicity in environmental destruction can become overwhelming for people facing the loss of a gravely threatened plant, animal or place they love. This guilt may lead to feelings of despair and isolation. I have used Burke's (1984) process of redemption to support my argument that the practices of environmental hospice and memorial can function to help ameliorate these negative outcomes. I now offer two illustrative examples: Global Earth Exchanges sponsored by a group called Radical Joy for Hard Times as environmental hospice and the *Lost Bird Project* by sculptor Todd McGrain as environmental memorial. These examples demonstrate how groups of people respond to environmental grief. Interpreting these projects as environmental hospice and memorial allows audiences to transcend feelings of guilt to avoid an overwhelming sense of hopelessness that could prevent future environmental care.

Radical Joy for Hard Times (RJHT) is an international nonprofit organization founded in 2009 who describes its purpose as "bringing meaning, beauty, and value to places that have been damaged by human or natural acts" (Radical Joy for Hard Times, 2020b, para. 1). They work to bring people together through "Earth Exchanges," which are "experiential gatherings in which we visit wounded places, get to know them as they are now, share our stories of what they mean to us, and make a simple, spontaneous work of art there" (qtd. in Bullington, 2017, para. 3). Each year, members of the group gather at different locations around the world for events called "Global Earth Exchanges," that "help people come to terms with this life on a damaged planet" (Bullington, 2017, para. 2). An online flyer for the 2018 Ohio River Global Earth Exchange, co-sponsored by the Marshall University Native American Student Organization, describes the events:

We will meet ... near the boat ramp to tell stories about our connection to and concerns for the river, sing songs to the river, do readings, and make art as a gift to honor the Ohio River. The Ohio River, which has given us so much life, needs and deserves our love and acknowledgment of a deeper connection, more now than ever. (Ohio Valley Environmental Coalition, 2018, para. 3)

The organization's work, accomplishes many of the goals in a rhetoric of hospice.

First, Global Earth Exchanges help participants face and accept grave environmental damage, express emotions related to grief, as well as reframe their relationship and/or find hope beyond the damaged place. RJHT is explicit in communicating acceptance by asking participants to bear witness to gravely harmed places. A former version of their website explained, "Just as we cannot heal our personal wounds until we face them honestly and compassionately, so we must face the broken, ugly, 'wounded' places we live among in order that we can find beauty there, thank the places for all they have given, and so heal our relationship with them" (qtd in. Rite in the Wild, 2017). For some participants, facing these broken places enhances feelings of existential guilt that demand attention and reconciliation through dramatic catharsis. One person, who participated in a Global Earth Exchange at a site called the Peace River Valley in far north-east British Columbia, described that experience in personal testimony published on the RJHT website:

The Peace River valley, a place I love, is being stripped and excavated to build a hydroelectric dam ... I must remember and fully feel the love and grief ... [T]he grief was about what was currently happening to the river in preparation for the flooding of the valley. The deliberate cutting of huge cottonwoods bearing great eagle nests all along the banks. The stripping and dumping of uniquely fertile topsoil that could have fed the whole region ... But as more people joined the circle with beautiful and unusual bouquets and artwork, I let go. I had expected to feel grief and sadness but I didn't. I felt joyful and happy to be in the presence of the river again. The sheer mass and power of the flowing water echoed through my whole body. I felt awe. (Radical Joy for Hard Times, 2020d, para. 1, 2, 5)

RJHT encourages participants to acknowledge the true harm that has come to ecosystems, allowing for a symbolic experience of acceptance.

In addition to bearing witness to the harm caused by people in these damaged places, the performance of Global Earth Exchanges encourages participants to express the various emotions they feel in witnessing these severely damaged places. An important part of a Global Earth Exchange is the telling of stories among participants, who often share their feelings about this place they love that now appears in a damaged state. A guidebook for hosting Global Earth Exchanges suggests,

When the people in your group have gathered, ask each person to introduce themselves and talk briefly about their relationship to this place or species ... As participants share their feelings, grief may arise. Anger may flare up. Some people may feel guilt because they were unable to save the place or species. Let each person speak from the heart, one at a time, without interruption or feedback. (Radical Joy for Hard Times, n. d., p. 3)

Participants are told, "Let your feelings blend with what you see and experience. Perhaps you will notice after a while that you feel inspired ... to hug a tree, weep over a polluted stream, lie down in the sand, make an offering" (Radical Joy for Hard Times, n. d., p. 4). According to one author who has attended two Global Earth Exchanges, "[The] idea of love for wounded places is compelling ... [because] the

limitation of most environmental activism. . . . is that the process goes straight from awareness to action without leaving room for emotional response. When a beloved place is injured or lost, people feel grief but they are not allowed to cry” (Brunvand, 2018, para. 6). Dramatic emotional catharsis that leads to release of guilt is an important part of this ritual.

Finally, RJHT’s Global Earth Exchanges encourage symbolic acts to reframe hope for the future. In a description of what should happen in a Global Earth Exchange, RJHT claimed that “[Once] you do take the step of going to a hurt place, you’ll discover that . . . instead of pushing you deep into despair, opening up to your feelings blazes new pathways of compassion, connectedness, and relief” (Radical Joy for Hard Times, 2020a, para 2). Those who participate in the Global Earth Exchange often physically perform an act of transformation at the damaged site by creating and leaving a “Rad Joy Bird,” an act that symbolically helps them reframe or rediscover hope for the future. According to the RJHT website, a Rad Joy Bird is a representation of a bird made of “twigs, stones, leaves, sand, even trash” (Radical Joy for Hard Times, 2020c, para 1). The symbolic purpose of creating a Rad Joy Bird is explained by RJHT: “Every time people make the Rad Joy Bird for a damaged place, they bring a spirit of joy, boldness, and transcendence both to themselves and to their place” (Joy for Hard Times, 2020c, para. 3). In this example, participants literally perform the symbolic act of transformation, creating something beautiful out of an “ugly” and destroyed landscape.

Importantly, participants also feel transformed: “People comment that a place that felt dead to them when they arrived now feels full of life. Many people remark, with some amazement, that they feel love for a place they may have been avoiding for months or even years” (Radical Joy for Hard Times, n. d., p. 5). One person posted on the group’s Facebook page: “Such positive healing work. The Global Earth Exchange is giving our community a positive way to handle some of the feelings from a massive flood” (Daucus, 2017). The process of coming together to create a Rad Joy Bird helps reframe understandings of threatened places and sometimes encourages participants to feel hope.

Although they never self-apply the term, RJHT’s Global Earth Exchanges accomplish the goals of a rhetoric of environmental hospice as a Burkean redemption drama by helping participants accept their grief and guilt, find an outlet for their emotions, and construct hope in a changed future. The goal of a Global Earth Exchange is to undertake a process of renewal for participants: “Think of this act as a gift to a place that has long been abused and neglected. You are reversing that pattern. You are giving beauty where it is sorely needed. In the process you usher yourself and your fellow journeyers into new territory, where you become creators, adventurers, takers of risk, and givers of beauty” (Radical Joy for Hard Times, n. d., p. 5) The ultimate function of a rhetoric of environmental hospice, as demonstrated by this work of Radical Joy for Hard Times, is to find strength and meaning for participants who can continue to nurture and offer care for a damaged place that they love for as long as they remain.

In cases where a place or species is certainly lost or extinct, the discourse of environmental hospice enters memorial phase that is not explicitly a part of Radical Joy for Hard Times' mission. To illustrate environmental memorial, I turn to *The Lost Bird Project*, an exhibition by artist Todd McGrain that commemorates birds lost to extinction caused by humans. McGrain created oversize bronze representations of five different extinct North American birds and arranged for their permanent installations in five different locations where a human last saw the living bird. As an example of environmental memorial, *The Lost Bird Project* allows viewers the opportunity to reflect upon the dead birds and to consider the human causes of their death.

In addition to the five permanently installed Lost Bird statues, reproductions of the originals have been exhibited in several locations. I attended the first public exhibition of the bird statues in 2014 at the Smithsonian Institute in Washington, D. C. The Lost Bird statues, including the Great Auk, the Carolina Parakeet, the Heath Hen the Labrador Duck, and the Passenger Pigeon, were installed outside as they were designed to be shown in gardens near the museum. Smithsonian Libraries organized a parallel exhibition inside the Natural History Museum titled, "Once There Were Millions: Vanished Birds of North America," describing and showing the horror of countless birds killed by people so that their feathers could be used to decorate women's hats or simply because they were slow and easy to kill, as in the case of the Great Auk.

The bird sculptures themselves are bronze, but appear slate gray or black depending upon the light. In life, these birds were each distinctive in their appearances and color patterns, some of which were strikingly beautiful. As sculptures, their individual distinctiveness is erased by the uniformity of their grayish-black patinas and by their exceptionally smooth surfaces that show no feathers or facial features. The style, texture, and color of the Lost Bird sculptures mirrors the coldness of a tomb, especially when installed in a natural setting with trees. They invoke death and inspire mourning with their lifeless forms reminding each witness that every single bird represented by these sculptures is lost forever.

The Lost Bird sculptures are all much larger than the real birds they represent. Each bird statue stands taller than most visitors and in their mass they are impossible to ignore in the way that humans were once able to ignore the plight of the birds they represent. The largeness of the Lost Birds demands that we see them, and they invite us to grieve their loss. They may inspire feelings of guilt, especially upon learning that the extinction of the birds they represent was brought on by human folly. In this way, the Lost Birds ultimately ask that we reexamine our relationship with all birds, who are important barometers for the health of a habitat.

This period of reflection can be transformational, impacting how one relates to the present and conceptualizes the future. Indeed, a brochure available at the Smithsonian exhibit explicitly describes the transformational experience: "These sculptures compel us to recognize the finality of our loss. They ask us not to forget, and they remind us of our duty to prevent further extinction" (Smithsonian Gardens,

2014, para. 2). In an article about the lone Heath Hen statue near Columbus, Ohio, where the last living bird was seen, the author describes the motive of people who are traveling to visit all five Lost Bird statues: “What draws [them] onwards in their journey is not the depression of the past, but the reminder of what needs to be done for the future” (Columbus Audubon, n. d., para. 7). These statues explicitly remind viewers of their complicity as humans in the death of these birds, guilt that can be ameliorated through the process of mourning inspired by McGrain. In that period of reflection, some viewers may be inspired to transform their relationship with other living birds who are not extinct by learning from these lost species that we must change our behaviors in the future. In this way, the *Lost Bird Project* can be interpreted as a Burkean redemption narrative that functions in ways similar to other, more traditional memorials of people or human events.

The ritualistic rhetoric of RJHT and Todd McGrain represent examples of a Burkean drama that requires audiences to confront and accept environmental devastation and the accompanying feelings of existential guilt. I have identified RJHT’s Global Earth Exchanges as environmental hospice and the *Lost Bird Project* as environmental memorial even though their creators never apply those terms. Both function as a possible means of purification for humans who are plagued with feelings of eco-guilt that are unavoidable for most American environmentalists in our contemporary world.

### **Dramatic Transcendence Leading to Environmental Care**

Rueckert (1982) notes that for Burke, “Purification is always a process—movement and change—something is always expelled or sloughed off, and the end is always a change of some kind, whether physical, spiritual, or psychological. Of necessity, purification is almost always depicted by ‘active’ or ‘process’ images” (p. 104). Importantly, as I have imagined them, environmental hospice and memorial both involve a ritualistic purging of guilt that accompanies eco-grief thereby enabling or encouraging environmental care, directed toward the threatened place or species or toward others. As Bauman (2014) noted, “Part of the process of mitigating the sense of loss and grief will involve constructing new ways in which we can relocate and live together in more eco-socially responsible ways” (p. 18). The rhetoric of environmental hospice and memorial allows individuals the ability to do just that.

Scientific research demonstrates that with no radical change in human behavior, the world will continue to warm, causing the continued loss of plants, animals and geographical places. Human grief and guilt are sure to follow. As environmental humanist Rose (2013) wrote, “We live in a time of almost unfathomable loss, and we are called to respond” (p. 1). Burke’s redemptive model features guilt as inherent with the human condition and proposes that humans dramatically respond in ways that purge their guilt through victimage, mortification, transcendence or other dialectical change. Environmental hospice and memorial are dramatic responses that can allow participants to transcend their grief by facing and accepting ecological

harm and then responding with ecological care in this or other situations while allowing for the ambiguity required by participants who are unsure of the true prognosis facing any threatened species or place.

The scholarship on eco-guilt aligns with Burke by reinforcing the notion that guilt can motivate behavior change. As Lysack (2013) articulated “Awareness of an impending mega-extinction exacts a personal emotional toll that cannot be merely remedied through therapy” causing guilt and loss that lead to “a heightened sense of responsibility to care and advocate for the Earth” (pp. 236, 238). Even when one place, animal or plant is lost, others remain in a struggle for existence that can still be impacted by human behaviors.

The manner in which a person participates in a redemption drama is always individual, thus responding to the ambiguous nature of this environmental situation. In a Burkean analysis of departing comments written by visitors to the Vietnam War Memorial, Carlson and Hocking (1988) demonstrate that memorials are redemptive for people in different ways. Because each person interprets the war itself in different ways, “each visitor carries his or her own source of guilt: anger unresolved, responsibilities unmet, deeds unfinished or promises unkept” (p. 206). In order to decrease pain caused by guilt, “individual rituals of redemption are performed at the Memorial. The responses are always tragic, for there is no way to make light of Vietnam, but each visitor completes the tragedy differently” (p. 206).

Likewise, environmental guilt is an individual experience, especially given the ambiguity surrounding when a place or species is terminally doomed or extinct. Individuals participating in environmental hospice or memorial ritual are also constructing a redemption drama that best suits their perceptions and needs. The flexibility that comes from the individualistic nature of responses, coupled with our natural desire to be redeemed from eco-guilt, increases the likelihood that these memorials will successfully inspire renewed environmental care. Birds lost to extinction or damaged places create guilt, but hospice and memorial rituals require that “[w]itnesses are asked to contemplate what is before them, thus perhaps finding peace and completion in the lesson offered by the ritual” (Carlson & Hocking, 1988, p. 207). Environmental hospice and memorial reminds participants of the grave consequences of not doing everything we can to care for what remains of our threatened, precarious environment. In this way, these dramas allow participants to transcend guilt and participate in positive future action.

In this essay, I have theorized that some environmentalists, when faced with the overwhelming grief caused by ecological harm, will experience eco-guilt that stems from their complicity as a human in environmental destruction. Burke postulates that overwhelming guilt is stifling and must be ameliorated through redemption dramas, and so I argue for environmental hospice and memorial as one way that we may constructively purge eco-guilt. Rhetorics of environmental hospice, like RJHT’s Global Earth Exchanges, and environmental memorial, like McGrain’s *Lost Bird Project*, require one to face and accept grave harms, but they are not hopeless. These are rituals done in the face of our continuing failures to save beloved species

and places allow for the honest accounting of human behaviors and their environmental costs. Burkean redemption dramas may not always have a happy ending, but they always fulfill our need to temporarily relieve guilt.

In the sixteen months over which I wrote and revised this essay, there have been devastating wildfires, floods, and storms that have forever altered landscapes, at least for my lifetime. The last male white rhinoceros died (Nuwer, 2018) and an insect “apocalypse” has been declared (Jarvis, 2018). In response, many people who grieve these and other losses will likely reflect upon their own complicity for all this destruction. Their guilt will need to be muted so that it doesn’t become debilitating, and scientists agree that people have very limited time to act in ways that help avert the worst damage. Environmental hospice and memorial, as Burkean redemption dramas, are the vital rhetorical rituals that we need, providing encouragement to continue the environmental care we desperately need into the future.

### Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

### References

- Baer, L., & Weinstein, E. (2013). Improving oncology nurses’ communication skills for difficult conversations. *Clinical Journal of Oncology Nursing*, 17(3), E45–E51. doi:10.1188/13.CJON.E45-E51
- Bauman, W. (2014). Facing the death of nature. *Tikkun*, 30(2), 20–21. doi: 10.1215/08879982-2876629
- Bauman, W. (2014). South Florida as matrix for developing a planetary ethic: A call for ethical perceptions and environmental hospice. *Journal of Florida Studies*, 1(3), 1–21.
- Blair, C., Jeppeson, M. S., & Pucci, E. (1991). Public memorializing in postmodernity: The Vietnam Veterans memorial as prototype. *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, 77(3), 263–288. doi:10.1080/00335639109383960
- Blair, C., & Michel, N. (2007). The AIDS memorial quilt and the contemporary culture of public commemoration. *Rhetoric & Public Affairs*, 10(4), 595–626. doi:10.1353/rap.2008.0024
- Bobbitt, D. (2004). *The rhetoric of redemption: Kenneth Burke’s redemption drama and Martin Luther King, Jr.’s “I Have a Dream” speech*. Lanham, MD: Roman and Littlefield.
- Brummett, B. (1981). Burkean scapegoating, mortification, and transcendence in presidential campaign rhetoric. *Central States Speech Journal*, 32(4), 254–264. doi:10.1080/10510978109368104
- Brunvand, A. (2018, July 31). Radical Joy for Hard Times book review. *Catalyst*. Retrieved from <https://catalystmagazine.net/radical-joy-for-hard-times-review/>
- Bullington, J. (2017, March 13). Radical Joy for Hard Times: How to live on a damaged planet. *In These Times*. Retrieved from <http://inthesetimes.com/rural-america/entry/19967/radical-joy-for-hard-times-trebbe-johnson-global-earth-exchanges>
- Burke, K. (1966). *Language as symbolic action: Essays on life, literature and method*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Burke, K. (1969). *A grammar of motives*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Burke, K. (1970). *The rhetoric of religion: Studies in logology*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

- Burke, K. (1973). *The philosophy of literary form: Studies in symbolic action* (3rd ed.). Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Burke, K. (1984). *Permanence and Change*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Burke, K. (1989). *On symbols and society*. (J. Gusfield, Ed.). Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Campbell, K. K., & Jamieson, K. H. (1978). *Form and genre: Shaping rhetorical action*. Falls Church, VA: Speech Communication Association.
- Carlson, A. C., & Hocking, J. E. (1988). Strategies of redemption at the Vietnam Veterans' memorial. *Western Journal of Speech Communication*, 52(3), 203–215. doi:10.1080/10570318809389636
- Coates, J. (2003). *Ecology and social work*. Halifax, NS: Fernwood Publishing.
- Coffman, S., & Coffman, V. (1993). Communication training for hospice volunteers. *Omega: Journal of Death and Dying*, 27(2), 155–163. doi:10.2190/251V-5WXL-K3H6-08RJ
- Columbus Audubon. (n. d.). "The five-bird quest": Finding meaning in the lost bird project. Retrieved from <http://columbusaudubon.org/five-bird-quest-finding-meaning-lost-bird-project/>
- Crowley, C. (2016, December. 13). A new warning says we could run out of fish by 2048. *The Blog, Huffpost*. Retrieved from [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/grub-street/a-new-warning-says-we-cou\\_b\\_13615338.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/grub-street/a-new-warning-says-we-cou_b_13615338.html)
- Daucus, S. (2017, June 15). Such positive healing work [Facebook post]. *Facebook*. Retrieved from [https://m.facebook.com/story.php?story\\_fbid=1630154260359220&substory\\_index=0&id=100000939868771&\\_rdr](https://m.facebook.com/story.php?story_fbid=1630154260359220&substory_index=0&id=100000939868771&_rdr)
- Demmer, C. (2003). A national survey of hospice bereavement services. *OMEGA – the Journal of Death and Dying*, 47(4), 327–341. doi:10.2190/E2DY-42C7-7QP6-7052
- Dolin, R., Holmes, M. G., Stearns, S. C., Kirk, D. A., Hanson, L., Taylor, D. H., & Silberman, P. (2017). A positive association between hospice profit margin and the rate at which patients are discharged before death. *Health Affairs*, 36(7), 1291–1298. doi:10.1377/hlthaff.2017.0113
- Ferguson, M., & Branscombe, N. (2010). Collective guilt mediates the effect of beliefs about global warming on willingness to engage in mitigation behavior. *Journal of Environmental Psychology*, 30(2), 135–142. doi:10.1016/j.jenvp.2009.11.010
- Foss, K. (1983). John Lennon and the advisory function of eulogies. *Central States Speech Journal*, 34(3), 187–194. doi:10.1080/10510978309368139
- Foss, S., Foss, K., & Trapp, R. (2014). *Contemporary perspectives on rhetoric: 30th anniversary edition*. Long Grove, IL: Waveland.
- Fredericks, S. E. (2014). Online confessions of eco-guilt. *Journal for the Study of Religion, Nature & Culture*, 8(1), 64–84. doi:10.1558/jsrnc.v8i1.64
- Graton, A., Ric, F., & Gonzalez, E. (2016). Reparation or reactance? The influence of guilt on reaction to persuasive communication. *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, 62, 40–49. doi:10.1016/j.jesp.2015.09.016
- Jamieson, K. H. (1978). *Critical anthology of public speeches. Modcom: Modules in speech communication*. (R. A. Applebaum & R. P. Hart, Eds.). Palo Alto, CA: Science Research Associates.
- Jarvis, B. (2018, November. 27). The insect apocalypse is here. *New York Times Magazine*. Retrieved from <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/11/27/magazine/insect-apocalypse.html>
- Joy for Hard Times. (2020c). RadBird. *About*. Retrieved from <https://radicaljoy.org/about/>
- Kent, M. (1991). The rhetoric of eulogy: Topoi of grief and consolation. *Studies in Communication and Culture*, 1(5), 109–119.
- Kubler-Ross, E. (1969). *On death and dying*. New York, NY: MacMillan.
- Lysack, M. (2013). Emotion, ethics, and fostering committed environmental citizenship. In M. Gray, J. Coates, & T. Hetherington (Eds.), *Environmental social work* (pp. 231–245). New York, NY: Routledge.

- Mallett, R. (2012). Eco-guilt motivates eco-friendly behavior. *Ecopsychology*, 4(3), 223–231. doi:10.1089/eco.2012.0031
- Mallett, R., Melchiori, K., & Strickroth, T. (2013). Self-confrontation via a carbon footprint calculator increases guilt and support for a proenvironmental group. *Ecopsychology*, 5(1), 9–16. doi:10.1089/eco.2012.0067
- Marcus, A. D. (2018, October 11). Meet the scientists bringing extinct species back from the dead. *Wall Street Journal*. Retrieved from <https://www.wsj.com/articles/meet-the-scientists-bringing-extinct-species-back-from-the-dead-1539093600>
- McClure, K. R., & Cabral, K. (2009). Clarifying ambiguity and the undecidable: A comparison of Burkean and Derridean thought. *Qualitative Research Reports in Communication*, 10(1), 72–80. doi:10.1080/17459430903131604
- Meier, D. E. (2011). Increased access to palliative care and hospice services: Opportunities to improve value in health care. *Milbank Quarterly*, 89(3), 343–380. doi:10.1111/j.1468-0009.2011.00632.x
- Nuwer, R. (2018, March 20). Sudan, the last male Northern White Rhino, dies in Kenya. *The New York Times*. Retrieved from <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/03/20/science/rhino-sudan-extinct.html>
- Ohio Valley Environmental Coalition. (2018). *Global earth exchange*. Retrieved from <https://ohvec.org/join-tri-state-water-defense-june-16/>
- Paliewicz, N., & Hasian, M. H. (2017). Popular memory at ground zero: A heterotopology of the national september 11 memorial and museum. *Popular Communication*, 15(1), 19–36. doi:10.1080/15405702.2016.1261142
- Pensini, P. M., & Caltabiano, N. J. (2012). Collective guilt and attitudes toward recycling: Data from a North Queensland sample. *Journal of Tropical Psychology*, 2, 1–7. doi:10.1017/jtp.2012.4
- Radical Joy for Hard Times. (2020a). How to gather together. *Practice*. Retrieved from <https://radicaljoy.org/practice/>
- Radical Joy for Hard Times. (2020b). [Main Page]. Retrieved from <https://radicaljoy.org/Radical>
- Radical Joy for Hard Times. (2020c). *Stories: Standing at the river*. Retrieved from <https://radical-joy.org/discover-stories/>
- Radical Joy for Hard Times. (n. d.). Earth exchange guide for hosts [pdf.]. *Practice*. Retrieved from <https://radicaljoy.org/practice/>
- Ragan, S., Wittenberg-Lyles, E. M., Goldsmith, J., & Reilly, S. S. (2008). *Communication as comfort: Multiple voices in palliative care* (LEA's Communication Series). New York, NY: Routledge/Taylor and Francis Group.
- Rees, J., Klug, S., & Bamberg, S. (2015). Guilty conscience: Motivating pro-environmental behavior by inducing negative moral emotions. *Climatic Change*, 130(3), 439–452. doi:10.1007/s10584-014-1278-x
- Rite in the Wild. (2017). *Radical Joy for Hard Times: 2017 Gainesville earth exchange*. Retrieved from <https://www.riteinthewild.com/2017-global-earth-exchange.html>
- Rose, D. B. (2013). In the shadow of all this death. In J. Johnston & F. Probyn-Rapsey (Eds.), *Animal death* (pp. 1–20). Sydney, Australia: University of Australia.
- Rueckert, W. H. (1982). *Kenneth Burke and the drama of human relations*. Berkeley: University of California.
- Shultz, K. (2000). Every implanted child a star (and some other failures): Guilt and shame in the cochlear implant debates. *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, 86(3), 251–275. doi:10.1080/00335630009384296
- Simons, H. (2008). The rhetorical legacy of Kenneth Burke. In W. Jost & W. Olmsted (Eds.), *A companion to rhetoric and rhetorical criticism* (pp. 152–168). Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing Ltd.

- Smith, L. (2014). On the 'emotionality' of environmental restoration: Narratives of guilt, restitution, redemption and hope. *Ethics, Policy, and Environment*, 17(3), 286–307. doi:10.1080/21550085.2014.955321
- Smithsonian Gardens. (2014). The lost bird project. *Past Exhibitions*. Retrieved from <https://gardens.si.edu/exhibitions/the-lost-bird-project/>
- Steele, L. (1990). The death surround: Factors influencing the grief experience of survivors. *Oncology Nursing Journal*, 17(2), 235–241.
- Tangney, J. P., Miller, R. S., Flicker, L., & Barlow, D. H. (1996). Are shame, guilt, and embarrassment distinct emotions? *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 70(6), 1256–1269. doi:10.1037/0022-3514.70.6.1256
- Wallace-Wells, D. (2017, July 9). The uninhabitable earth. *New York Magazine*. Retrieved from <http://nymag.com/daily/intelligencer/2017/07/climate-change-earth-too-hot-for-humans.html>
- Watts, J. (2018, October. 8). We have 12 years to limit climate change catastrophe, warns UN. *The Guardian*. Retrieved from <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2018/oct/08/global-warming-must-not-exceed-15c-warns-landmark-un-report>
- Westcott, B. (2016, October. 28). Sixth mass extinction? Two-thirds of wildlife may be gone by 2020: WWF. *CNN*. Retrieved from <http://www.cnn.com/2016/10/26/world/wild-animals-disappear-report-wwf/>
- Wilson, E. O. (1999). *The diversity of life*. New York, NY: W.W. Norton.