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WHITHER THE HEART(-TO-HEART)?

Prospects for a humanistic turn in environmental communication as the world changes darkly

Susanne C. Moser

Introduction

In decades hence, we will look back to the first years of the twenty-first century as the years when environmental crises accelerated, when the impacts of global environmental changes such as climate change shifted from being pervasive if intangible problems, to lived-and-felt, everyday experiences. We may well view these as the years when disasters turned from being horrific but rare exceptions to the even more heart-wrenching condition of "normal" life in a climate-altered world. Cox (2007) placed the rise of the professional field of environmental communication since the early 1980s into the context of environmental risks and degradation, and—in the face of currently accelerating environmental challenges—charged the field to serve as an ethically motivated "crisis discipline."

While this notion of a "crisis discipline" was welcomed by some and sincerely debated or even contested by others (e.g., Heath et al. 2007; Killingsworth 2007; Schwarze 2007; Senecah 2007), it would be hard to deny that much of what has been written under the flag of "environmental communication" in the late twentieth and early twenty-first century is not somehow motivated by or linked to an unease about environmental events, trends, problems, or dangers—however perceived. The rise of the subfield of climate change communication can certainly serve as "Exhibit A" for this claim (e.g., Boykoff 2011; Carvalho 2008; Carvalho 2010; Moser and Dilling 2004; Moser and Dilling 2007). From this perspective, the practice of environmental communication for many is "instrumental": it aims to inform or help mobilize a more effective societal response to these growing dangers. In turn, much of environmental communication research has aimed and become more adept at untangling the various aspects of the communication process in an effort to make it more effective. We have tracked changing perceptions and attitudes to better address our various audiences; we have identified and tested different framings, channels, messages and messengers to reach those who might influence public and policy debates; and we have unearthed a range of influences on the communication process to render it more helpful, timely, and influential. Even the more "constitutive" approach to environmental communication, which looks at communication as a symbolic act that helps humans place themselves vis-à-vis the other-than-human life world, can be read as an attempt to reckon with the human footprint on Earth. Over the 30 years since the field's inception, environmental communication has indeed matured significantly in doing all of this. With a well established technical vernacular in place, a strong set of methodologies to examine communication efforts, and growing geographic coverage of investigations that enables comparative insights into

the importance of culture, context, and communication practices, the field of environmental communication has become increasingly sophisticated (progress and achievements to which the contributions in this *Handbook* pay tribute).

At the same time that environmental crises are becoming commonplace, and environmental communication has come into its own, a third trend is inescapable in our field and in our lives: the rise of the internet, the near-saturation of social media in public use, and profound technological and political-economic changes in the media industry (Brenner and Smith 2013; Rainie 2013; The Pew Research Center 2013). Communication has become faster, more distributed, more fragmented, and yet also more media-ted as a result. Dominick (2010) has well delineated the social implications of these developments, including the growing speed of "news," the lack of gatekeepers sorting through the abundance, yes, overload of information, growing privacy concerns, the emergence of media use as escapism, and, disconcertingly, the growing social isolation despite virtual connectedness (for a visual commentary on just this effect of social media, see Cohen 2013). Environmental communication practice, without critically questioning this trend, has instead fully embraced it. These developments in technology, research, and practice entail a certain degree of reification, of distancing from that which we study and do: humans trying—sometimes desperately—to connect with each other by way of words, images, gestures, and touch.

It is not unreasonable then to ask whether we in the environmental communication field may be losing touch with the very heart of communication at a crucial time. Despite all our communication options and opportunities, despite our skill and sophistication, are we still serving the deepest purpose of all communication, namely to exchange ideas and information, to hear and be heard, to create understanding and foster connection among us (some would extend the circle beyond humans (Peterson et al. 2007)), and, ultimately, to ensure survival? This question becomes ever more important to ask of the kind of communication needed most as environmental changes, disasters, and continual degradation of our life world take on a global scale. In such a time, I would submit, what is called for first and foremost is not persuasion, education, and deliberation (though none of these will lose in importance), but kind and compassionate human support. Not conversion but respect and dignity. Not a battle of the minds, but a meeting of the hearts.

In what follows, I will argue that the two major trends introduced above—the increasing frequency of environmental crises and the pervasiveness of technology-based communication—open up a gap, a profound need, that an environmental communication oriented toward human welfare and connection may be able to meet. I call such an environmental communication "humanistic" and offer it here as a promising future direction for our field. In the section below, I begin by making the case for how environmental crises are beginning to emerge in our collective experience. Next, I define and sketch the outlines of such a "humanistic" environmental communication, and then focus in on how it may serve a society increasingly in dire environmental straits. I will close with an appeal to both environmental communication researchers and practitioners to issue not just warnings and clarion calls to action but to partake in the restoration of our relationships to each other and between ourselves and the more-than-human world.

A world changing darkly

At the time of this writing, an American icon—Yosemite, the nation's oldest national park—is engulfed in flames. One of the largest wildfires in California history, in one of the worst fire seasons ever, in the context of a series of critical drought years in the state, is yet another "natural" disaster impinging on the national psyche. Going back in time through the last few years, the litany is almost biblical: extreme drought followed by floods across the mid section of the country, Superstorm Sandy in Fall 2012 unfurling its fury on the Atlantic seaboard—by many viewed as a "game changing" extreme event with lasting impacts not only on those directly affected, but on public and policy conversations in the US—and devastating tornadoes before and after that. The list goes on with record numbers of multibillion dollar events in 2011, and before that in 2010 (Smith and Katz 2013) (for ongoing updates see: www.ncdc.noaa.gov/

billions). The previous "watershed event," Hurricane Katrina in 2005, which caused more deaths than any other natural disaster in the US since the Galveston Hurricane in 1906, still echoes darkly through the media, policy debates, and environmental communication.

And that is just the picture within the US. Elsewhere, the story is equally heart-breaking and disconcerting: devastating floods in Canada and Europe—yet again—in 2013; record-breaking heat waves during the "angry" Austral summer of 2013 and long-lasting droughts with related agricultural and urban water shortages and bush fires in Australia in the years before that; in several recent years in Europe and Russia deadly cold winters; and extensive flooding from typhoons and monsoon rains, if they came at all, in Asia. How exactly all these events are related to climate change remains a hotly debated topic in science at this time, yet they all coalesce into a picture of a world increasingly perturbed, a world increasingly out of control.

To be clear, this description of havoc is not to be read as a sloppy statement about the causal links between every extreme event and climate change. Contemporary climate change did not "invent" extreme events, yet it is systemically changing the conditions for them. Careful work is being done by physical scientists to detect trends among rare events, to discern how the systemic changes relate to specific weather events, and which of these events can be attributed to human-caused global warming (Seneviratne et al. 2012). What we know is that this work is made difficult not just by the challenge of detecting trends among rare events in the midst of an always "noisy" climate, but by the fact that extreme events have more devastating impacts now because more people and more human-built structures are located in harm's way. In addition, our observation systems vary in spatial coverage and quality but many have become better over time, thus providing simply more data for recent times than for the past. And media attention to catastrophes is always a headline-grabbing business opportunity. All of these factors play into why it "seems" like there are more "catastrophes" now than there used to be. In some instances that has indeed been shown, in others uncertainty prevails—for now (Coumou and Rahmstorf 2012; IPCC 2012; MunichRe 2013; Peterson et al. 2012; Showstack 2013).

The point of this litany of extremes, instead, is precisely in the fact that "it seems" to us that change—undesirable change—is afoot. Both people's own, direct experience and the mediated communication about catastrophic events create a collective sense that something "weird" is going on in the world. Apocalypse, as Frederick Buell (2003) put it, is becoming a way of life.

And in fact, there is empirical evidence for a growing sense of unease, maybe even of doom, in the public; that people are "connecting the dots" between all these extreme events—almost in spite of scientists' ever-so-careful, scientifically correct, and yet sometimes evasive-sounding, attempts to not link any single disaster directly to climate change. For example, researchers in Europe, the US, India, the Arctic, and Australia have found that people increasingly perceive changes in their local environment (e.g., Akerlof et al. 2012, 2013; Krupnik and Jolly 2002; Leiserowitz et al. 2013b, c; Leiserowitz and Thaker 2012; Maibach et al. 2013), that extreme events heighten people's awareness and worry about climate change, and that the reverse is true as well (e.g., Capstick et al. 2013; Leiserowitz et al. 2013b; Reser et al. 2012). Researchers are also finding that in some, but not all instances, awareness or experience of extreme events heighten people's willingness to engage in preparedness measures and/or support adaptation and mitigation policies (e.g., Reser et al. 2012; Spence et al. 2011; Whitmarsh 2008; Zaalberg et al. 2009), and that direct experiences increase people's psychological distress (e.g., Albrecht et al. 2010; Coyle and Van Susteren 2011; Moser 2013b; Reser et al. 2012; The Climate Institute 2011). At the same time, there is still much observed "psychological distancing" from climate change observed among studied publics across the world, mechanisms that are both intra-psychically and socially reinforced (e.g., Leiserowitz et al. 2013a; Lertzman 2008; Norgaard 2011; Spence et al. 2012). These seemingly contradictory findings might suggest that people are caught in a tense dilemma between, on the one hand, a desire to avoid news of climate change (both current conditions and even more so a future projected to be worse) and the dawning realization of a climate reality that is pressing upon them in real time, on the other (Cramer 2008; Dickinson 2009; Pienaar 2011).

This emerging sense of climate change being here and maybe already worse than feared is significant as a social and psychological phenomenon, and it is at the heart of the question of what kind of environmental communication is called for in this and the coming crisis time.

The humanistic imperative of environmental communication in a world of crisis

What is meant by a "humanistic" environmental communication?

To begin to answer this question, it helps to place some definitional boundaries around the word "humanistic." What stance, perspective, or approach does the adjective describe? Among the most basic definitions I list here, the first two are of greatest interest for the purposes of this chapter, but the third is quite relevant to the topic of communication, too. Humanism is (1) a system of thought that rejects religious beliefs and centers on humans and their values, capacities, and worth;[1] (2) a deep concern with the interests, needs, values, as well as the dignity and welfare of humans; and (3) the study of the humanities, learning in the liberal arts (The Free Dictionary 2013). In short, a humanistic science—and practice—is centrally concerned with human experience, the whole of human subjectivity, and with the possibilities of fulfillment of the human potential in whatever circumstance—social, economic, cultural, ecological, and even cosmological—people find themselves in (Diaz-Laplante 2007; Kuhn 2001).

The spirit of humanism that I wish to invoke here can be further specified by elements of what humanistic communications research has to offer. According to the Humanistic Communication Research Institute, research in this field aims to understand the *substance* (its weightiness and meaning), not just the *contents* of communication (*Gehalt, nicht Inhalt*) (http://hcri.de/about). It focuses on cultural values, paradigms, and belief systems, on ethics and on how individuals and groups construct their realities and thus meaning and purpose, as well as on how communication functions within social systems and can be used responsibly within them.

Even greater inspiration, however, for a relevant environmental communication in times of crisis comes from humanistic psychology. Humanistic psychology is fundamentally interested in the subjective human experience and normatively aims for human welfare. It seeks to support individuals in a process of "self-actualization," i.e. maturing into a conscious and empowered place of self-determination, in which people creatively realize their full potential. The humanistic approach in psychology emphasizes wholeness, free will, and empathy, and stresses the good in human beings. (Even so, many humanists fully embrace both the light and dark side of being human, the cruelty and love of which humans are capable.) Over the past half century, humanistic psychology has moved from being narrowly client-centered and focused on the individual to increasingly engage the question of how individual psychology is holistically embedded in, and mutually constitutive of, social, political, and environmental contexts and challenges (e.g., Diaz-Laplante 2007; Kuhn 2001; Michael 2000). There is a deeply emancipatory impulse at the root of humanistic psychology, and as such a radical desire for human liberation from both inner and outer bondage—a normative stance that enjoys good company with other empowerment-oriented "liberation" disciplines (Moser 2013a).

This focus on understanding human experience together with the desire to support human unfolding may at first seem counter-intuitive as a crucial focus for environmental communication. Yet is that human experience not at the heart of living through a time that will be increasingly disrupted by environmental crises, surprises, and profound change? Is it not a task of environmental communication to help understand such a time and make sense of it? Are the questions of who we are as humans and how we are to behave in the Anthropocene not at the core of the question of how we relate to "nature"? Is our human unfolding from now on not deeply linked to the fate of the Earth (Barnosky et al. 2012; Chakrabarty 2009; Palsson et al. 2013; Rockström et al. 2009)?

It is to these questions that a third understanding of the "humanistic" speaks, namely the essential contributions from the humanities. Like them, a humanistic environmental communication must reflect back to us our past, present, and future, our actions and desires, our beliefs and illusions, our truths and deepest needs, our destructiveness and creativity, our brightest and darkest natures. Environmental communication and the humanities share an interest in culture, values, worldviews, and frames, in stories and other forms of artistic or culturally resonant expressions of the human–environment relationship. Like for the humanities, the *raison d'être* of a humanistic environmental communication lies not merely in dissecting analysis but in curative synthesis. While it arguably remains difficult for social scientists and the humanities to draw more fully on each other's work, a humanistic environmental communication can help foster this exchange by embracing and seeking to more fully understand from both perspectives the human experience in a climate-altered world.

How can a humanistic environmental communication serve a world in crisis?

Now, as the world is beginning to see more frequent crises and disruptions, now is the time to ask what kind of environmental communication is needed. Elsewhere, I considered the tasks of environmental leaders in such a world, and asked which metaphor best described their future assignment: is it to "[b]e a steward, shepherd, arbiter, crisis manager, grief counselor, future builder?" (Moser 2012: 435). Maybe it is all of these or maybe something altogether different. In any event,

> the leaders of the future will face not just new, more difficult, and more pervasive environmental challenges than past and present leaders do, but they will need to be adept in a range of psychological, social, and political skills to navigate the inevitable human crises that will precede, trigger, and follow environmental ones … [They] will need to mentor, guide, and assist people in processing enormous losses, human distress, constant crises, and the seemingly endless need to remain engaged in the task of maintaining, restoring, and rebuilding—despite all setbacks—a viable planet, the only place the human species can call its home.
>
> (Moser 2012: 435)

Supporting those in crisis compassionately

A first answer then to the question of how a more humanistic environmental communication—both as a field of research and as a field of practice—might serve a world of crisis is an instrumental, and therefore normative, one: to attend to the people and other-than-human members of our life world to help them cope with and adjust to a crisis-stricken world. This clearly adds a layer of meaning to the notion of a "crisis discipline." It is not just about speaking to an *environment in crisis*, and that something ought to be done about it, but it is about communicating meaningfully and supportively to those *living through crisis*. If communication is indeed both symbolic and material, about mirroring our world back to ourselves and constructing meaning, about self-expression and mutual understanding, about exchange of information and, ultimately, survival, then kind and supportive communication is essential to the ability—human and otherwise—to cope and adapt to a changing climate.

Truth telling

Such support entails first and foremost helping others and ourselves to face the unfolding changes and crises. We have a long way to go to "getting real" about the legacy we have created for ourselves and all the co-inhabitants of this planet (Moser 2012). There is much "truth telling" to be done, and not simply

in the way of cataloguing the unfolding catastrophes, or blaming others or ourselves, but in the way David Orr has so beautifully appealed to us:

> Telling the truth means that the people must be summoned to a level of extraordinary greatness appropriate to an extraordinarily dangerous time … Telling the truth means that we will have to speak clearly about the causes of our failures that have led us to the brink of disaster … Telling the truth means summoning people to a higher vision.
>
> (Orr 2011a: 330–331)

Communicating the truth will help us be clearer, analyze our situation more honestly, and bring us to a higher vision of ourselves, i.e. help us move up the humanistic ladder of self-actualization.

Expressing grief safely

There will also be the endless need to create communal spaces in which our emotional experience of this world can be expressed safely. While most Western cultures do not support much public display of grief, grieving our (recurring) losses we will all do. A humanistic environmental communication can serve a crucial social healing function in making space for it in how it portrays and supports this inevitable human experience. In this way it will help strengthen people's capacity to be in their own and with others' distress.

Visioning alternative futures

To be clear, a humanistic environmental communication—in supporting the much-needed capacity to cope and adapt to change and crisis—is not to be construed as a handmaiden to silencing discontent. Instead, it will insist on the emancipatory, empowering impulse of the humanistic tradition. In seeking to support human evolution toward our highest possible self, it must seek, communicate, and engage in exploring new cultural ideals and aspirations that will lessen the destructive human impact on the planet. A humanistic environmental communication would be committed to serving social transformations toward a more sustainable existence on Earth.

Fostering authentic hope

To this end, as is increasingly well understood in climate change communication, more than "narrators of doom" are needed. To overcome feelings of overwhelm, anxiety, fear, and helplessness in the face of ongoing crises and seemingly insurmountable challenges, people need true hope. Such hope can only be constructed from realistic goals, a clear or at least imaginable path, from doable tasks and a meaningful role in addressing the problems at hand (Bell 2009; Fritze et al. 2008; Hicks et al. 2005; Orr 2011b). Hope thrives where such arduous work is undertaken together (Bonanno et al. 2011; Moser 2007; Wheatley 2002). As the environmental journalist and blogger, David Roberts, so aptly put it, "When we ask for hope, then, I think we're […] asking for fellowship. The weight of climate change, like any weight, is easier to bear with others" (Roberts 2013).

Framing and urging on the transition

A humanistic environmental communication must play a critical role in helping to hold that unavoidable tension between pain and hope, out of which forward movement will come. It must help build people's ability to hold the paradoxes of crisis and normality, of immediacy and long time horizons, of destruction

and beauty, of change and durability. For between repeated crises, there will be rebuilding; between death and destruction there will be birth and renewal; between fire, flood, and furious storms, there will be regrowth, rest, and recovery. But in the midst of crisis we will forget larger goals. In the face of setbacks, we will waver in our commitment. Thus, a humanistic environmental communication must help frame the transition from that "truth" of what is, that David Orr called for, toward a different, more sustainable future. It must assist the rise and ongoing renewal of authentic hope. And because the weight of the work we must do is heavy and long, it must connect, more than divide us—back with each other, to our own humanity and deepest human nature, and to the more-than-human world around us.

Mirroring who we become along the journey

A humanistic environmental communication must not be merely instrumental, however, in the sense of assisting us in alleviating immediate needs or mobilizing us to address the underlying causes of our distress. It must also be constitutive: helping us to understand this time, what is happening around and with us, and why; assisting us in reconsidering and reimagining who we are in the Anthropocene and how we fit into and belong in the larger Earth community.

As the Pulitzer Prize-winning poet, Jorie Graham, discovered in compiling an anthology of American poetry entitled *The Earth Took of Earth*, the Age of Discovery fundamentally changed seafaring people's perception of the geography of the known. Setting out from a familiar place to completely unknown lands manifested in a changed imagination, in remarkable shifts in language, turning *journeys* from searches within familiar territory into dreams "of finding an unknown *destination*" (Graham 1996). Curiously, as Sodré (2005: 71) explained, in the Arabic language, the word "Earth" shares the same linguistic root as the word "destiny." A humanistic environmental communication can help map and mirror this new human journey when not our rootedness in place and geography is at stake but our steady, or at best cyclical, experience of time, our deep sense of stability. Human destiny understood then not as a divinely, predetermined end state, but as an actively and interactively created becoming, an unfolding that arises out of our inescapable interwovenness with an Earth on which everything is now in flux and unstable in ways unknown to the human species, this human journey into *terra quasi incognita* (Schellnhuber 2009) will be a truly worthy topic for charting in our field.

Closing: the restorative power of a humanistic environmental communication

In this chapter, I have tried to build on the notion of environmental communication as a crisis discipline introduced by Cox (2007) by outlining what a humanistic emphasis in our field may look like, and how it may be increasingly needed if the world enters a perpetual "crisis mode." What seems to be needed most is in direct tension with increasingly technologized forms of communication.

As I have tried to show, the notion of a humanistic environmental communication in a world of crisis is in some sense an extension of the field of crisis communication (e.g., Bonanno et al. 2011; Heath et al. 2007; Kasperson and Kasperson 2005; Seeger 2006). It clearly must—at minimum—convey information about the crisis at hand, manage confusion, logistics, and public relations, and otherwise mobilize action to address them. But it must do far more than that as crises become our daily bread. As Seeger (2006) argued, environmental communication must "enhance the quality of public discourse and, in turn, the quality of public judgment regarding environmental matters" (p. 96). Such judgment will be improved if we are not in fast-paced reactivity, but instead can find havens of calm in which to heal, recover, regroup, and recommit to the rebuilding and transforming that requires thoughtful attention. What I have suggested here is that such havens are made from compassion, truth telling, grieving, visioning, true hope, supporting movement toward a better future, and mirroring back to us our journey.

What we know from crisis communication is that to restore ourselves and our environment from the trauma experienced, we need to make sense of what is happening, we need to regain a sense of control and confidence, and reclaim our capacities to manage our lives. We will do so more easily if we can draw on or re-establish our social connections, and if at all possible, as well our sense of socio-ecological belonging, our sense of place. These conditions have been found repeatedly to aid in individual and community resilience (Armitage et al. 2012; Bonanno et al. 2011; Dynes 2005; Fresque-Baxter and Armitage 2012; Morrow 2008). A humanistic environmental communication, fundamentally driven by a desire to provide solace in a time of difficulty, a hope to foster understanding and create meaning in a disrupted, disruptive environment, a wish to restore and sustain human welfare in the midst of rapid change, and a longing to support human emancipation and evolution in the Anthropocene toward our highest selves, such a discipline and practice is not just a crisis discipline, but a restorative one.

It is in this notion of environmental communication as restorative that I return to the two strands of argument from which I began. One spoke to a kind of disassociation resulting from living in the cyberworld of technology-based communication, namely the dangers of people being engulfed in endless streams of information about the world and being seemingly connected with each other through digital media in virtual worlds yet becoming increasingly absent from the world of tacit experience and true social relations (for searing critiques and discussions of how such technologized communication changes us socially, psychologically, and physiologically, see, e.g., Carr 2010; Slater 2008). As David Orr sharply observed:

> Our experience of an increasingly uniform and ugly world is being engineered and shrink-wrapped by recreation and software industries and pedaled back to us as "fun" and "information." We've become a nation of television watchers, googlers, face bookers, text messengers, and twitterers, and it shows in the way we talk and what we talk about. More and more we speak as if we are voyeurs furtively peeking in on life, not active participants, moral agents, neighbors, friends, or engaged citizens. (Orr 2011c: 8)

Far from placing humanistic environmental communication on the Luddite end of the disciplinary spectrum, the appeal here is simply not to forget that which matters most in crisis, and even more so as crises become commonplace: real connection. While a tweet may help locate a survivor, a story intimately told might help us make sense amidst chaos. While a message board may give crucial information, a poem might restore sanity. While a blog may serve to air frustration, in-depth conversation and dialogue will help chart the difficult path forward. Thus, environmental communication, in remembering its shared etymological roots with words such as making common, communion, sharing and fellowship, must help restore real human connection.

The other strand of argument took off from a description of the environmental conditions, particularly climate change and growing climate-related disruptions, that will confront us with ever increasing incidences of extreme events and crises. The charge to environmental communication laid out in these pages is one of helping humans not just weather these coming storms and making sense of them, but assisting humans to restore our human-to-human and human-to-life world connections, and in the inevitable tension between loss and hope find our way toward a more sustainable expression of homo sapiens living on Earth. In this way it can be a discipline that helps restore heart—*eros*, the innate desire for wholeness and connectedness—back to our everyday lives, each other, and our relationship to the more-than-human world.

Note

1 Note, however, that the issue of whether religious, transcendent experience and thought should be included in humanistic thinking is a continually debated topic and for many resolved toward an inclusive answer (Edwords

2008; Gordon 2003; Kuhn 2001). This will not be further discussed here, but is of relevance to the extent that, in crises, humans not only seek explanations that frequently invoke the supra-natural ("acts of god"), they also seek solace in one form or another of religious faith and in spiritual community. I thus include the consideration of the spiritual, religious, and transcendent in the humanistic approach suggested here.

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