

Open Space

Dirty Little Words

BY JULIA CORBETT

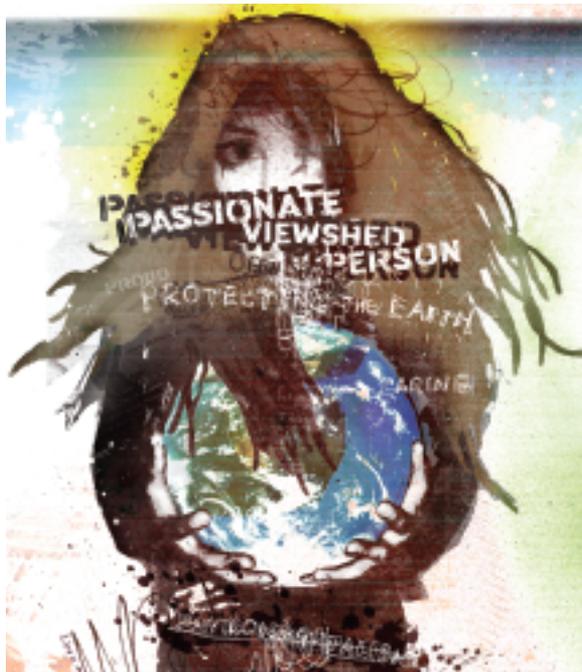
“So, are *you* an environmentalist?” the workman asked. Anywhere else, my answer would have been unhesitating. But I was at my cabin in Wyoming, surrounded by high-elevation conifers and sagebrush meadows, nestled between parcels of federal lands, and almost an hour from the nearest town. He didn’t look up from his nail gun, and I kept my eyes on the earth beneath my shovel. ▢ “Depends on what you mean by that,” I said, and instantly felt ashamed at my evasion. ▢ Last year at the University of Utah, where I teach communication, I conducted six focus groups of professionals who communicate about natural resources for a living. I wanted to learn about the challenges they face in getting their messages across to the general public. What they taught me were the dirty little words that they

“try to talk around”: environmentalist, environmentalism, and environment. The participants said they prefer euphemisms: a “conservationist” or “passionate person” to denote an environmentalist, and “open space” or “viewshed” instead of environment. The “e-words” were bad, too emotional, barriers to critical thought.

They didn’t attach their e-word avoidance solely to the rural West, though they felt it was more pronounced here. A former Californian said “environmentalist” wasn’t a dirty word there, but a South Carolinian said it was in his state. People think environmentalists chain themselves to trees, a county health official said. People believe environmentalists file lawsuits and hold up sound resource management, said a state forester. A state employee had been told to stay away from all the e-words when the 2002 Olympics came to Salt Lake City.

A friend who now calls himself a conservationist rather than an environmentalist says the word “just doesn’t mean what it used to.” All words evolve and morph, eluding ownership by any one person or group or dictionary. But is retreat the best response? How about coming out of the e-word closet? Perhaps we could borrow the strategy used by a recent women’s march on Washington and wear T-shirts proclaiming “This Is What an *Environmentalist* Looks Like.”

Ironically, in certain contexts these same emotionally charged words can carry an aura of hipness. Look at the crowded Earth Day bandwagon. Look at ads that tout products as being “good for the environment.” Some of these positive expressions are genuine, but some are not. Once the environmental movement had achieved some successes, it became a reformer to be reckoned with, inviting cooptation. As Machiavelli recognized centuries ago, “the reformer has enemies in all those who profit by the old order, and only lukewarm defenders in



all those who would profit by the new order.” If your circumstances (or profits) were better under the old order, you might try to convince the reformers that their demands are being heard, but ultimately not grant what they seek. When e-words are divorced from the threat of change, they are safe and convenient. When they are attached to reformers and their goals, they become targets to marginalize.

All this may seem unfair, but consider how the new order has often been framed. Many environmental battlefronts, like air pollution in China or the legacy of Chernobyl, seem galaxies away, divorced from everyday life. Too often the changes sought are framed as sacrifices, making our lives poorer, which seems contrary to self-interest. If environmental reformers are so dour, who wants to heed their message?

The question the workman asked me was rhetorical; he knew I was “one of them” and perhaps just wanted to hear my defense. I wish I could tell you that my reply was compelling and persuasive, but in truth the conversation went no further. Yet the brief exchange evoked for me all the power and emotion of those e-words. And why shouldn’t it? After all, it’s emotion that attracted us, spurred us to act, to find our voices in the first place. Running away from e-words, as I did in Wyoming, only endorses and affirms others’ perceptions of them. Instead, I decided I needed to bring all the e-words home, live them, embrace them, and to help convince those lukewarm defenders—whether workmen, neighbors, students, or friends—that they are not dirty words at all. 🌱

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