



**New England Journal of Environmental Education**  
**JUNE 2007**

**Environmental education, environmental awareness, and comparison with the Elizabeth Kübler-Ross stages of grief in dealing with death and dying.**

*By Robert Sanford*  
*Department of Environmental Science, University of Southern Maine*

The New England Journal of Environmental Education is published by the New England Environmental Education Alliance. The views and opinions expressed in the articles are those of the individual authors and do not necessarily represent those of the New England Environmental Education Alliance.

Copyright 2007 by the New England Environmental Education Alliance and by the respective authors.  
All rights reserved.

## **Environmental education, environmental awareness, and comparison with the Elizabeth Kübler-Ross stages of grief in dealing with death and dying.**

*By Robert Sanford*

*Department of Environmental Science, University of Southern Maine*

“I don’t really think there are any *real* problems; I think it is all political,” remarked Bob, after a lecture on climate change. Bob was a student in my introductory environmental science course at the University of Southern Maine. The course is offered every semester as a general science elective for students and provides a foundation for environmental science majors. It is also a science course for pre-service teachers. When I first began teaching this class, I noticed a steep learning curve for students who seemed to go through several stages of environmental awareness. Some students seem to first deny there are environmental problems, and then, as they learn more, they become angry, and later depressed about problems with the environment. Naturally, I cannot bring students to awareness only to leave them at the door of anger or despair. So I talk about environmental activism and about making a difference, and I incorporate a civic responsibility exercise into the course.

“People are wrecking the world - they should get off the planet,” Andrea exclaimed angrily after one of my PowerPoint presentations in the fourth week of class. Andrea had begun the semester with very strong feelings and struggled with what she saw as apathy on the part of the rest of the class. Lately, Al Gore’s movie, *An Inconvenient Truth*, and the whole issue of global warming has caused me to worry even more about my students’ awareness and reactions, and I have observed a correlation with Elizabeth Kübler-Ross’s stages of grief in dealing with death and dying (1968). Consequently, I have prepared a table below illustrating the connection as I see it, and I am interested in finding out if other environmental educators have noticed the same thing.

<b>Kübler-Ross Stages of Grief in Death and Dying</b>	<b>Stages of grief and environmental awareness</b>
1. Denial (This isn't happening to me!)	1. Denial (There is no problem with the environment!)
2. Anger (How dare God do this! Why is this happening to me?)	2. Anger (Why are they wrecking the environment?)
3. Bargaining (I promise I'll be a better person if...)	3. Bargaining (What if we get the government to...)
4. Depression (I don't care anymore. I can't bear going through this.)	4. Depression (It's all going down the tubes. I think I will homestead in Alaska/Maine)
5. Acceptance (I'm ready for whatever comes.)	5. Acceptance (Earth will survive us - it has another two billion years to go. Meanwhile, there are things we can do right now.)

“What if the government just makes everyone live within their assigned ecological footprint?” asked another student, Janis, halfway through the semester. Aha, *bargaining*, I thought to myself. Elizabeth Kübler-Ross’ stages seem to capture what I have been observing. And they provide a reminder that I cannot just leave the students at Stage 4 or any of the earlier stages; I have an ethical obligation to give them the tools for the next stage. As part of delivering the tools for awareness and action, I am mindful of Hungerford’s four levels of increasing knowledge development in environmental education (Hungerford *et al.* (1980)):

- Level 1 Ecological foundation
- Level 2 Conceptual awareness - issues & values
- Level 3 Investigation and evaluation
- Level 4 Environmental action skills - training and application

About halfway through the course I noticed many of my students seemed rather sad. What kind of teacher would I be if I brought them to awareness only to leave them depressed? Would being active help them to feel engaged and able to accomplish change?

As we promote active learning and place-based education, we want to ensure that Level 4 is informed by Hungerford’s earlier levels as well as by the Kübler-Ross stages. Some educators have expressed a concern that students just jump into action and don’t know what

the heck they are doing (Hungerford *et al.* 1980). Yet we need action. Surveys of high school students show a sense of disconnect and powerlessness, and lack of commitment between self and the larger community (Berman, 1990). An environmental connection, a true sense of place, transcends a particular social community and creates its own community with the individual. For example, Edward Abbey wrote about the desert, lived in it, and derived community from it. In his writings, we can see how he progresses from awareness to anger to action (e.g., *Desert Solitaire*, 1968).

Towards the end of the course, as the students presented their civic engagement projects, I realized at least some of them had come through the stages and entered into terms - some even declared environmental science as their major. They realized they could not change the environment or other people overnight, but they could make changes in their own lives and they could see how little changes add up. I couldn't help everyone with their struggles - Andrea took a leave of absence from school. But Bob did change his views and Janis became an environmental science major.

As we bring students to environmental awareness, whether through formal coursework or a gradual awakening through reiterative outdoor lessons, or even through epiphany, we act as guides. Accordingly, we share the host-like obligations of all guides; we must be careful to steer the guest away from dangerous precipices, yet we must make the journey stimulating. Environmental education gives connection; it gives opportunity to enter and engage the world around us. Knowing what stage we are at can make all the difference in sending students forth with knowledge, hope, skills, and perhaps a bounce in their step and enthusiasm in their heart.

## References

- Abbey, Edward (1968). *Desert Solitaire: A Season in the Wilderness*. New York: McGraw-Hill.
- Berman, Shelley (1990). *The Real Ropes Course: The Development of Social Consciousness*. Pp. 1-18 in Shelley Berman, et al. (1990). *Educating for Social Responsibility*. Cambridge, MA: Educators for Social Responsibility.
- Hungerford, Peyton, and Wilke (1980). "Goals for curriculum development in environmental education." *Journal of Environmental Education* 11(3):42-47.
- Kübler-Ross, Elizabeth (1969). *On Death & Dying*. New York: Macmillan.