

### *Permanence and Change: In a Nutshell*

If I understand the theories of Kenneth Burke's *Permanence and Change*, a basic summary of the book could be:

1. Man reads his environment and draws a conclusion.
2. Man examines his conclusions and discovers that his environment could be interpreted a second (or even third, etc) way. Man consequently is confused by his new outlook on life and no longer understands "truth," what he accepts as a single correct interpretation.
3. Man comes to terms with his new outlook and can understand his environment in a way that allows him to survive.

In light of this timeline, it reminds me of an old expression I picked up somewhere: "When something ceases to change, it begins to die." Several times in human history, one brave soul has dared to challenge that which was accepted as "true." Hundreds of years ago, people "knew" the world was flat; challenging that truth allowed for the discovery of the American continents and our very existence here in the United States today. The fates of millions of people would have been drastically different had that "truth" not been challenged. More recently, people "knew" that the Earth was the center of the universe; challenging that "truth" led to a man landing on the moon, and the results of that challenge are still not completely known.

Burke states: "[Man] must not *surrender* to the environment that oppresses him; he must *change* it" (172). Burke is not putting forth an ultimatum; he is, rather, stating the attitude of humans. Man attempts to avoid surrender through challenging "truths" that are not favorable to his continuance. Changing the Earth from "flat" to "round" suddenly opens up a world of possibilities, including colonization, exploration, treasure hunting, and trade. Naming a man "free" as opposed to "slave" changes the life of a man; one could even argue that it changes the man himself, although biologically he is still the same man. By changing the vocabulary, perspective also changes. For decades, white Americans struggled in "stage 2," considering that their environment could be interpreted in another way; they were confused by the outlook forced upon them and struggled with the "truths" they battled. Some white Americans are still in stage two, struggling against what they view as *surrender* (accepting African Americans as free and equal) and *change* (altering the views of the majority, reversing the change forced upon them after emancipation).

In the Biblical story of the conversion of Saul, it is clear that not everyone struggles against changes. Saul did not fight the changes in his environment; he surrendered and changed how he saw his environment rather quickly, as his "source of being" shifted. Burke states: "When a man so vigorous as Saul had of a sudden ceased to be Saul, in that dramatic interim between the loss of his old self and his rebirth as Paul, we may expect to find his structure shaken to its very roots" (156). Change is part of the evolution of all people; Christians believe that Saul's conversion was a critical moment in the life of the church, without which Christianity may not have become what it is today.

Choices made while challenging or surrendering to an interpretation of an environment paint the evolution of human history and continuously bring me around to thoughts of fate vs. free will. Each choice has a ripple effect, and the three steps to criticizing signs in the environment help us understand the chain of events in hindsight.