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Rhetorical Leadership and Transferable Lessons for Successful Social Advocacy in Al Gore's An Inconvenient Truth

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Despite its apparent limitations, the film An Inconvenient Truth was not only an unlikely hit but also a successful instance of social advocacy that galvanized ordinary people. Al Gore’s rhetorical choices in the film presented a compelling, concrete vision of the stakes to be lost or gained, nurtured hope that change was possible and personal, made mortification an appealing path for coping with guilt over one’s contribution to a shared problem, demonstrated dignitas of public character that added weight to his argument, and relationally generated ethos that overcame his history as an unengaging, unmotivating rhetor. Gore’s argumentative approach is transferable and so offers valuable lessons for potential rhetorical leaders. The essay also yields a theoretical contribution on mortification. Key Words: Activism, Dignitas, Ethos, Gore, An Inconvenient Truth, Mortification, Rhetorical Leadership, Social Advocacy

Al Gore’s 2006 film about global warming, An Inconvenient Truth, met with great popular and critical success. The film weaves together the story of Gore’s early conversion and lifelong commitment to environmental issues as the unifying theme of his long political career and a presentation of Gore’s standard fact-filled, deliberative lecture on the veracity and dangers of climate change. This political documentary’s lifetime gross earnings make it the third highest ranked film in its class to date (“Documentary – Political, 1982-Present,” n.d.). The film was widely shown free of charge at churches and schools around the country and garnered high marks in critical reviews on Internet sites that rate and discuss popular films. An Inconvenient Truth’s critical recognitions included a 2007 Academy Award for Best Documentary Feature, a 2007 Nobel Peace Prize for Gore for the attention he drew to this global crisis, and being named one of Advertising Age’s three winners for top marketing and advertising efforts in 2006 (Ryan, 2007). For argument scholars, however, the film’s rhetorical success as an instance of social advocacy that successfully galvanized ordinary people to take action and become advocates themselves is its related, but more interesting achievement.

A personal conversion response is evident at the conclusion of Chicago Sun-Times film critic Roger Ebert’s (2006) review of An Inconvenient Truth. He wrote:

In 39 years, I have never written these words in a movie review, but here they are: You owe it to yourself to see this film. If you do not, and you have grandchildren, you should explain to them why you decided not to. Am I acting as an advocate in this review? Yes, I am. I believe that to be “impartial” and “balanced” on global warming means one must take a position like Gore’s. There is no other view that can be defended. . . . What can we do? Switch to and encourage the development of alternative energy sources: Solar, wind, tidal, and yes, nuclear. Move quickly toward hybrid and electric cars. Pour money into public transit, and subsidize fares. Save energy in our houses. I did a funny thing when I came home after seeing “An Inconvenient Truth.” I went around the house turning off the lights. (para. 14-16)

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Similarly, Australian writer Dave Hoskin (2007) said he initially expected *An Inconvenient Truth* to be in the same class as *Fahrenheit 9/11* and *Outfoxed*, “essentially provincial left-wing stories for a provincial left-wing audience” (p. 46). Instead Hoskin came away converted:

Although international liberals may applaud the fact that Gore is trying to raise awareness of the issue, it’s hard to escape the assumption that he will be telling us something we already know. Certainly I’ll admit that when I bought my ticket for *An Inconvenient Truth* I was sceptical that Al Gore was really going to change how I thought about global warming. I was wrong. I now believe that *An Inconvenient Truth* is the most important film that anyone will see this year. . . . Faced with such a vivid wake-up call, it’s infuriating to realize just how politicized the issue has been allowed to become, with the argument over belief having crowded far more important items off the agenda. (p. 46)

The fact that *An Inconvenient Truth* was criticized for some minor factual inaccuracies did not undermine its persuasive appeal. This unusual film ignited political discussion, social commitment, and personal conversion among the skeptical and usually apathetic, not just the true believers.

The purpose of this paper is to systematically analyze and evaluate the transferable rhetorical techniques that make the film a motivating, radiating act of social advocacy. I use familiar concepts from the public speaking and persuasion tradition as well as from Kenneth Burke to abstract and explain the successful operation of reproducible rhetorical applications to prompt individual change that does not rest on, but can contribute to demanding, top-down policy change. With the exception of some critical innovation regarding mortification, the lessons are not theoretical news. The contribution to rhetorical leadership lies in unpacking how those familiar concepts work together in practice to create a reproducible synergy that can benefit other grassroots social advocates.

**Rhetorical Leadership for Ordinary People**

In our complicated, shared-power world, no organization or institution is in a position or has the sole responsibility “to find and implement solutions to the problems that confront us as a society” or a planet (e.g., climate change); this fact can lead people to pessimism, hopelessness, and despair over seemingly insoluble problems rather than toward effective collective action (Bryson & Crosby, 1992, p. 4). Our situation is further complicated by leadership theories that assume leaders must be people who hold formal positions of power or moral authority and that leadership is reserved for the chosen few, not ordinary citizens (Morse, 1992). If we are to successfully confront the social challenges and confounding conditions of our times, we must embrace a more rhetorical understanding of leadership (see Olson, 2006). We need to recognize that the difference on many social issues must be made by “leaders who may or may not have positions of authority, but who inspire and motivate followers through persuasion, example, and empowerment, not through command and control” (Bryson & Crosby, p. 21). Rhetoric is pivotal to such leadership. “Effective leaders,” argued Fairhurst and Sarr (1996), “present the world with images that grab our attention and interest. They use language in ways that allow us to see leadership not only as big decisions but as a series of moments in which images build upon each other to help us construct a reality to which we must then respond” (p. 1). In *An Inconvenient Truth*, Gore models just such an approach to rhetorical leadership on a social issue on which he holds no formal position of authority.

Fortunately the combination of techniques identifiable in this rhetorical act is not limited to well-known figures who formerly held positions of authority; they are available and
reproducible by others willing to engage in social advocacy. Encouragingly, this perspective suggests that improving ordinary people's skills to symbolically inspire and motivate others is key to better meeting complex social problems. Leadership is everyone's responsibility, including on social issues that affect their lives but over which they do not have formal or sole authority. Teachable rhetorical skills are central to the exercise of such contemporary, often informal, leadership (see Olson, 2006). As Smircich and Morgan (1982) explained:

Leadership is realized in the process whereby one or more individuals succeeds [sic] in attempting to frame and define [with their cooperation] the reality of others. ... Certain individuals, as a result of personal inclination or the emergent expectations of others, find themselves adopting or being obliged to take a leadership role by virtue of the part they play in the definition of the situation. They emerge as leaders because of their role in framing experience in a way that provides a viable basis for action, e.g., by mobilizing meaning, articulating and defining what has previously remained implicit or unsaid, by inventing images and meanings that provide a focus for new attention, and by consolidating, confronting, or changing prevailing wisdom (Peters, 1979; Pondy, 1976). Through these diverse means, individual actions can frame and change situations, and in so doing enact a system of shared meaning that provides a basis for organized action. (p. 258)

Significantly, and particularly when considering leaders without formal authority, the process is interactive and only succeeds when the definition of reality offered by the leader is also "sensible to the led" (Smircich & Morgan, p. 259). These situations require an advocate to take

the risk of managing meaning. We assume a leadership role, indeed we become leaders, through our ability to decipher and communicate meaning out of complex and confusing situations. Our communications actually do the work of leadership; our talk is the resource we use to get others to act (Gronn, 1983), (Fairhurst & Sarr, 1996, p. 2)

Viewed from this perspective on rhetorical leadership, An Inconvenient Truth has much to teach ordinary people about successful social advocacy.

An Unlikely Hit

An Inconvenient Truth has many features that seem to make it an unlikely success as either advocacy or entertainment—in spite of the studio's prodigious promotional strategy, which involved an MTV special, a slick trailer, personal appearances by the star, and a barrage of online outreach including some of the very first Google video ads (Klassen 2006; Stanley 2006). The film's format is actually a blend of autobiography and documentary. It chronicles Gore's enduring personal commitment to the environment over his lifetime, but most screen time is devoted to watching him develop and present to various audiences his stock lecture on global warming, which he supplements with many computer-generated slides. A documentary/autobiographical film centered on a PowerPoint presentation (actually Gore uses Apple's Keynote presentation software; "Durante Design," 2006) on the complex, even tedious topic of environmental problems delivered by one of America's most notably pedantic orators? Consider the parts of this unpromising combination.

Conventional wisdom, Gore's detractors say, is that "as a public speaker Gore is only slightly more animated than a corpse" (Tapper, 1999, para. 5). Gore's supporters are only marginally more impressed. Tapper reported that even staunch Democrats "embraced the media caricature of [Gore] as a 'stiff' and 'boring' animation from the Disneyland Hall of Vice Presidents" (para. 1). His campaign team also recognized "how pompous he could
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sound," though it argued this tendency stems from perfectionism rather than arrogance; still Gore was notable for his maddeningly pedantic speech pattern in which he pauses for agonizing intervals before any ... complicated word, and sounds as if he has to slow down for an audience of dullards. ... Except when used with babies, it is grating because of its inherent condescension. (Fallows, 2000, p. 45)

Political blogger Richard Greene (2006) recounted his own "desperate" attempt to help the 2000 Gore presidential campaign revitalize the candidate's speaking image:

I watched hours and hours of videotape in an effort to find one instance of "authentic passion" to show his staff. I was planning to send it with the simple note that said "do this, just do this" and you'll easily beat the Governor of Texas, who was not, and is not, a world class orator. But when it came to discussing political issues or policy, I couldn't find one. Not one. ... His exhortations, his professorial incantations, his droning mathematical rants on social security, his prescriptions for everything all had the cadence of forced emphasis, the lift of the head showing a touch of the "I know better than you" arrogance and a condescension that drove America nuts. In fact, I have to confess that in my own speeches I used to use Al Gore as a role model for what NOT to do as a speaker. ... [H]anging in on an Al Gore speech for more than 5 or 10 minutes was almost always a chore. (para. 12-15, 17)

In fact, Gore himself has mocked his own speaking style: "in wooden jokes about his wooden manner" (Fallows, p. 33).

Then, add in the duration, topic, and computer-generated slides of this film: 94 minutes of Gore on global warming—not historically Gore's most riveting subject matter. In his 1996 vice presidential debate with Jack Kemp, Gore jokingly admitted as much, turning the point to his strategic advantage: "I'd like to start by offering you a deal, Jack. If you won't use any ... football stories, I won't tell any of my warm and humorous stories about ... chlorofluorocarbon abatement" (quoted in Fallows, 2000, p. 48). Further, Ebert (2006) recounted a friend's reaction when he said he was attending a press screening of An Inconvenient Truth: "Al Gore talking about the environment! Bor... ing!" (para. 14). Finally, computer-generated slideware presentations have been roundly criticized, with the preponderance of sources arguing that the slides have an insignificant or even negative impact on learning and some arguing that faulty or unmindful use of pre-formatted presentation packages are the source of the problem (e.g., Amare, 2006; Levasseur & Sawyer, 2006; Pratt, 2003; Stoner, 2007; Thompson, 2003).

So what explains the enthusiastic response that this film drew, including personal action as well as a widening circle of social advocacy, not just theoretical agreement? Screen Education writer Andrew Fildes (2006) hit the nail on the head when he observed that An Inconvenient Truth is not carried by drama or satire or gimmicks but "lives or dies on the rhetorical skill of one failed politician, riding his particular hobby horse very well indeed" (p. 20). Fildes, too, testified to the personal impact the film had on him:

This is worth an hour and a half of your time. You are unlikely to be bored and may well be inspired to act. I was relieved that I'd chosen to catch a train into the city and then walk to the venue, despite getting lost for a while in damp back streets. [Some small guilt avoided.] (p. 21)

In spite of the film's apparent limitations (i.e., a lengthy blend of documentary and autobiogrophy featuring a notoriously pedantic former politician who uses many computer-generated slides as he lectures on a complicated, guilt-producing subject), it illustrates four important lessons for potential social advocates who want to exercise effective rhetorical leadership toward greater collective grassroots responsibility.
Redeeming Rhetorical Choices: Portable Rhetorical Lessons for Social Activists

Gore’s approach in *An Inconvenient Truth* exemplifies four redeeming rhetorical choices that interact to overcome, compensate for, or even turn to his cause’s advantage those film features that seem most problematic. As the above testimony from originally skeptical, yet ultimately converted viewers demonstrates, Gore’s symbolic choices succeeded at making his interpretation not just understandable but “sensible to the led” and a pivot for their individual action. They can serve as a model for other would-be rhetorical leaders advocating on social issues. Fortunately, the resulting rhetorical lessons are not limited to Gore, the documentary genre, the cinematic medium, or environmental issues but are readily transferable to other speakers, genres, media, fora, and issues.

Create a Concrete, Vivid, and Compelling Vision of the Improved World after the Desired Change and of the Inevitable Negative Consequences of Refusing To Change

*An Inconvenient Truth* opens and closes with panning shots showing the leafy, tranquil bank of a Tennessee river. Backed by simple music and the leisurely chirps of birds and frogs, Gore’s slow, gentle narration evokes the experience of an idyllic, soul-feeding scene, even if auditors close their eyes to shut out the visuals on the screen:

You look at that river gently flowing by. You notice the leaves, rustling with the wind. You hear the birds. You hear the tree frogs. In the distance, you hear a cow. You feel the grass. The mud gives a little bit on the river bank. It’s quiet. It’s peaceful. And, all of a sudden, it’s a gear shift inside you. And it’s like taking a deep breath and going, “Ahh, yeah. I forgot about this.”

Through Gore’s vivid description, auditors experience this paradise in peril and, his argument goes on to tell us, a paradise yet still recoverable. An hour and a half later, the conclusion returns to this same sunlit vision now cast as the very achievable end that our own actions can restore. As Melissa Etheridge belts out her original Oscar-winning song “I Need to Wake Up” (“79th Academy Awards,” 2007), this river bank scene fades to black. A question, set in simple white letters on that black background, emerges: “Are you ready to change the way you live?” This screen then dissolves to: “The climate crisis can be solved. Here’s how to start[;] go to www.climatecrisis.net.” The web address is followed by a shifting list of small, sample steps that individuals can take immediately to effect the desired change.

With words and visuals, Gore paints a concrete picture not only of the beautiful, natural world that we want to preserve but also of what the world will be like if we fail to act: inadequate drinking water, droughts, floods, wars, and increasingly harsh storm disasters. The effect of such concreteness made Hoskin (2007) observe:

Most of those sounding the alarm on climate change rely on scientific data, and it’s easy, particularly with something as abstract as gases in the atmosphere, to lose sight of what global warming really means. Blather about ice core samples is all very well, but it’s images like the snow disappearing from Mt Kilimanjaro that really demonstrate how global warming is already a clear and present danger. Suddenly, this issue becomes something tangible, something visceral, and something a lot scarier than we first imagined. (p. 47)

Gore’s rhetorical choices make the catastrophe concrete, personal, and American by identifying specifically what will happen to familiar places like Manhattan and San Francisco Bay

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1 All quotations from *An Inconvenient Truth* are the author’s transcriptions.
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if we proceed along the current course. He highlights how even those Americans who will not lose their homes or lives and who do not care about polar bears or about other people losing their houses or lives will be directly affected in smaller, but still personal ways, such as limits on their recreational and aesthetic opportunities.

Justify Hope That, In Spite of the Problem's Magnitude, Effective Change Is Possible and within the Auditors' Power and that Their Participation Is Essential to Success

Large, complex social problems can seem overwhelming to the point of debilitation. Sociologist Nina Eliasoph (1998) found that many Americans willing to engage in social action shunned larger causes in favor of issues that they perceived as "close to home" and requiring only action steps that they perceived to be "doable" (pp. 1-2). In An Inconvenient Truth, Gore acknowledges that such immobilization is conceivable on global warming, declaring that, once convinced of the existence and magnitude of the problem, some people move directly from denial to despair without attempting to act. He refutes this tendency with several related rhetorical moves. Indeed Gore actively argues that attempting change is mandated partly because of the problem's magnitude.

One strategy is to declare a moral imperative to attempt action once one acknowledges the reality of the problem's existence and its human-made causes—for the sake of our children if not ourselves. What could be "closer to home" or more "self-interested" than that? Gore thus turns what could be an obstacle to action into a lever for change. Once a "good person" of any political persuasion appreciates the degree and nature of this human-made crisis—as a viewer now presumably must by virtue of attending to Gore's overwhelming presentation of credible evidence that points consistently in the same direction, as well as the way he explicitly acknowledges and accounts for the proffered refutations and minimizations of that conclusion to date—and then fails to act, he or she, whether a politician or ordinary citizen, chooses to be "deeply unethical," argues Gore. Gore positions this as a "moral issue" that carries a "moral imperative to act" if his comprehensive interpretation of the evidence showing the problem is persuasive.

Gore's own autobiographical path is presented as exemplifying, even if reluctantly, global warming's moral imperative. From the time a college teacher convinced Gore of the truth and consequences of global warming, as the autobiographical thread of the film demonstrates, this danger became a driving force behind his political career. Gore alludes that the crises in his life, such as his son's nearly fatal accident and the Supreme Court decision giving George W. Bush the presidency over Gore in the highly contested 2000 election, always brought his life's mission back into focus, pressing on him the question "How shall I spend my time on this earth?" He describes these as times that winnowed what was trivial from what was important and also represents them as an analogy for the moral imperative to act once one realizes the obvious dangers of global warming; when what is precious is jeopardized, whether a child or the earth on which that child must exist, it would be wrong not to act.

So ultimately Gore's globe-trotting to advocate on climate change—depicted repeatedly in the film as we see him doggedly negotiate airport security with his rolling luggage and stare pensively out another car or plane window in yet another strange city as he tweaks the presentation on his trusty laptop computer—becomes a personal testimony to not only his deep conviction but to what one flawed, but determined person can achieve with respect to a global problem. The glimpses into Gore's personal life that are scattered among the film's
lecture scenes are not superfluous, and they do far more than just provide auditors with interludes from the overwhelming volume of information or humanize the rhetor, although they do that, too (see Hoskin, 2007, p. 47). Instead the autobiographical thread shows Gore as a living model of personal sacrifice and individual action against the odds, a self-deprecating road warrior on the environment's behalf. The presence of the autobiographical aspect as well as how it is done, as argued below, are essential to the success of this act of social advocacy.

Further, by presenting Gore's personal follow-through as "not so unusual" once he understood the likelihood and hazards of global warming, the film convicts us if we refuse to act once we, too, have seen the future via his presentation. Overlaying the film's last footage-to-still shot of Gore entering yet another arena to deliver his message once again is his comment:

There is nothing that unusual about what I am doing with this. What is unusual is that I had the privilege to be shown it as a young man; it's almost as if a window was opened through which the future was very clearly visible. "See that," [my teacher] said, "See that? That's the future in which you are going to live your life."

Now that Gore's auditors, too, know this future, can they as moral actors work any less diligently, even if in more ordinary ways and even when their efforts do not seem to be succeeding? Early in the film, Gore confides, "I've been trying to tell this story for a long time, and I feel as if I've failed to get the message across." But each viewer's personal response can change that outcome, Gore's argument implies.

Second, Gore gives auditors reason to believe that their actions are the essential key to making a difference. Three particular techniques make this crucial step believable. 1) Gore offers an authoritative comment that all the other parts of the climate crisis solution are already in place. His quotation from Stephen Pacala and Robert Socolow in the August 13, 2004 Science states: "Humanity already possesses the fundamental scientific, technical, and industrial know-how to solve the carbon and climate problem" (p. 968). 2) Gore goes on to argue that, given this fact, our cooperation becomes not only necessary but sufficient to success. It is not one of many missing links in the solution; it is presented as the only missing link to effectively address global warming:

We have everything we need—save, perhaps, political will. But you know what? In America, political will is a renewable resource. We have the ability to do this! Each one of us is a cause of global warming, but each of us can make choices to change that with the things we buy, the electricity we use, the cars we drive. We can make choices to bring our individual carbon emissions to zero. The solutions are in our hands; we just have to have the determination to make them happen.

3) If we only have the will to try, Gore tells us, Americans' small individual choices (e.g., buying more efficient electrical appliances and more fuel efficient cars) and steady pressure on our democratically elected leaders will "add up" to significant change. "Pretty soon" these little changes can put the U.S., established in the film as the leading absolute and per capita contributor to carbon emissions, below its 1970 emissions level. The choice and the tools for change are already in our hands.

Third, in addition to framing the situation as one in which only political will is missing and issuing a challenge for individuals to take action themselves and to advocate to those with policy-making power, Gore offers encouraging historical precedents of how huge, often morally-tinged challenges against great odds have been met successfully once Americans exercised political will. His strategy resonates with Cicero's counsel that orators draw on the past to highlight the intersection of integrity and expediency in public affairs:
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[One who urges us on the path of moral worth will collect examples of our ancestors’ achievements that were glorious even though involving danger, and will magnify the value of an undying memory with posterity and maintain that glory engenders advantage and moral worth is invariably linked with it. (Orator, II.1035:135)]

Gore calls auditors to be true to themselves and keep faith with their predecessors by acting consistently with a shared and public “American character”:

Ultimately this question comes down to this: are we as Americans capable of doing great things even though they are difficult? Are we capable of rising above ourselves and above history? Well, the record indicates that we do have that capacity. We formed a nation. We fought a revolution and brought something new to this earth: a free nation guaranteeing individual liberty. America made a moral decision that slavery was wrong and that we could not be half free and half slave. We as Americans decided that, of course, women should have the right to vote. We defeated totalitarianism and won a war in the Pacific and the Atlantic simultaneously. We desegregated our schools, and we cured fearsome diseases, like polio. We landed on the moon, the very example of what’s possible when we are at our best. We worked together in a completely bipartisan way to bring down Communism. We have even solved a global environmental crisis before: the hole in the stratospheric ozone layer. This was said to be an impossible problem to solve because it’s a global environmental challenge requiring cooperation from every nation in the world. But we took it on, and the United States took the lead in phasing out the chemicals that caused that problem. So now we have to use our political processes in our democracy and then decide to act together to solve those problems. … I believe this is a moral issue. It is your time to seize this issue; it is our time to rise again to secure our future.

Gore thus illustrates that “we” have conquered the impossible before and political will was the key. What could be more heartening and motivating as one asks Americans to make life changes and to influence their political representatives in response to a moral imperative? The rhetor personalizes responsibility for action with the charge “it is your time to seize this issue,” even as he acknowledges the collective nature of the problem and its ultimate remediation with the statement “it is our time to rise again to secure our future.” Gore’s use of “again” promises redemption for past shortcomings and an improved, achievable future that is but an extension of a proven “American character” that has seen us successfully through previous collective crises.

Provide a Model and a Path for Acknowledging Personal Guilt over Contributing to the Problem and for Engaging in Redemption through Mortification Rather Than Scapegoating

This step is symbolically important, regardless of the relative material effectiveness of auditors’ initial redemptive action. Guilt, as Burke saw it, makes society go ‘round—round the cycle of order, that is. As symbol users, humans invent orders or hierarchies that demand piety to their organizing principles. Symbol use and the possibility of “the negative” that it entails make impious behavior inevitable as humans imagine and act on alternatives that violate an existing order. Since humans are goaded by a sense of hierarchy and are rotten with perfection, such disobedience provokes guilt, which must be somehow expunged on the way to redemption via either a restoration of and recommitment to an original order or a pious commitment to a replacement order with a different organizing principle (e.g., Burke, 1966, pp. 8-24; 1968, pp. 450-451; 1970, pp. 172-272; for a chart summarizing the “Cycle of Terms Implicit in the Idea of ‘Order’,” see Burke, 1970, p. 184). The two means that Burke presented for dealing with guilt are vicimage or scapegoating, the sacrifice of a suitable substitute or acceptably consubstantial other to vicariously atone for one’s sins, and mortification, the disciplining of oneself.

In An Inconvenient Truth, Gore calls viewers to take the redemptive path of mortification rather than scapegoating. Mortification cannot undo the original deed but, insofar as it
"pays" for the wrong, it cancels the debt by ransoming or buying back innocence (Burke, 1970, pp. 175-176). Once one has faced one's culpability for, or at least complicity in, a problem, mortification amounts to "the self-abnegation of 'sacrifice.' . . . Symbolically, it is a kind of suicide, a willed variant of dying, dying to this or that particular thing ('mortification')" (Burke, 1969b, p. 266). Note that mortification need not destroy the whole of the old self, even symbolically, but must exercise fresh self-control over it as a kind of governance, an extreme form of "self-control," the deliberate, disciplinary "slaying" of any motive that, for "doctrinal" reasons, one thinks of as unruary. In an emphatic way, mortification is the exercising of oneself in "virtue"; it is a systematic way of saying no to Disorder, or obediently saying yes to Order. Its opposite is license, luxuria, "fornication," saying yes to Disorder, or disobediently saying no to Order. (Burke, 1970, p. 190)

It is important to remember, too, that "the symbolic slaying of an old self is complemented by the emergence of a new self" (Burke, 1973, p. 39). Mortification's symbolic suicide entails simultaneously forging an alternative, more positive identity. Mortification "is an assertion, the building of a role and not merely the abandonment of oneself to the disintegration of all roles" (Burke, 1973, p. 39). It is a new commitment to a more virtuous way of life, not total self-destruction, and it is not imposed on one by another but "must come from within. The mortified must, with one aspect of himself, be saying no to another aspect of himself" (Burke, 1970, p. 190). The appeal of the scapegoat as the alternative route to redemption is clear and must be thwarted because mortification's personal acceptance of responsibility and corrective self-discipline are always painful.

While Burke raised both alternatives as viable options through the catharsis of guilt to redemption, he dedicated far more publication space and intellectual energy to developing the strategy of victimage or scapegoating (see, e.g., Burke, 1969a, pp. 406-408; 1969b, pp. 252-267; 1973, pp. 39-51; 1984, pp. 284-289) than to mortification (see, e.g., Burke, 1969b, p. 266; 1973, pp. 38-39; 1984, pp. 289-290). For example, in summarizing his dramatistic theory for the International Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences, Burke (1968) made victimage through the scapegoating principle, rather than mortification, primary by arguing:

From ideas of the will there follow in turn ideas of grace, or an intrinsic ability to make proper choices (though such an aptitude can be impaired by various factors), and sacrifice, insofar as any choices involve the "mortification" of some desires. The dramatistic perspective thus rounds out the pattern in accordance with the notion that insofar as a given order involves sacrifices of some sort, the sacrificial principle is intrinsic to the nature of order. Hence, since substitution is a prime resource available to symbol systems, the sacrificial principle comes to ultimate fulfillment in vicarious sacrifice. . . . [A] dramatistic analysis shows how 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. (p. 450)

Here Burke claimed that scapegoating enacts relatively more principles of how symbols operate more thoroughly than does mortification. Likewise, in the Appendix to Permanence and Change, Burke (1984) called mortification a "variant" of victimage (p. 289), implying that scapegoating is the purer or more central form of symbolic redemption. And the appeal of scapegoating to the guilty is evident because it satisfies "the urgent incentive to be 'purified' by 'projecting' his conflict upon a scapegoat, by 'passing the buck,' by seeking a sacrificial vessel upon which he can vent, as from without, a turmoil that is actually within" (Burke, 1970, pp. 190-191). One of Burke's signature criticisms, "The Rhetoric of Hitler's Battle" (reprinted in Burke, 1973, pp. 191-220), centered on victimage; there is no complementary essay using mortification.
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Scholars following Burke also have privileged victimage over mortification. In the field of Communication, there are dozens of essays employing victimage, but only a few that look at mortification as anything other than an apologetic or image restoration strategy for a public individual or corporate entity caught in an unfavorable situation. Further, the remaining essays either look at mortification as therapeutic for past acts (rather than at its advocacy potential for shaping a shared future) or examine instances of mortification as failed advocacy strategies. Carlson and Hocking (1988) studied messages left at the Vietnam Veterans' Memorial to discern how redemptive strategies of scapegoating and mortification acted as “self-therapy” to address the guilt left over from the Vietnam War. Brummett (1981) and Check (2000) analyzed why President Jimmy Carter's mortification appeals on energy failed to galvanize public action.

Although none of these three essays offers a successful model of mortification in social advocacy, they are instructive for determining what advocacy centered on a mortification appeal would minimally have to do or avoid doing to succeed in rallying people to a social cause with an individual action commitment. Brummett (1981) noted that Carter’s strategy of mortification did not fail because he requested sacrifice. Instead it failed partly because the public did not believe that Carter would follow through with sincerity (an issue of dignitas, I will argue) and partly because there was too much readily accessible and strong counter-evidence to some of his factual claims. The ancient Romans did not distinguish sharply between public and private morality, as we commonly do; morality was not separate from one’s public image or behavior, and moral character was understood as a public rather than private issue (Brinton, 1983, pp. 174-175). A man’s dignitas “was the intersection of his personal worth with the public recognition that worth was due... Dignity was thus the civic stature or standing, [sic] it was a man’s public character” (Goodwin, 1997, p. 71).

Carter, who was much admired for his outstanding private morality, apparently was not viewed as consistent in enacting a public morality. By contrast, An Inconvenient Truth persuasively documents Gore’s single-mindedness in pursuing this public cause, often at his own expense, through a lifetime of disappointments and sacrificing a comfortable retirement to carry the message globally. One of the key elements of dignitas is the public figure’s consistency at enacting the moral character that befits one. Cicero wrote, “If anything at all is seemly, nothing, surely, is more so than an evenness both of one’s whole life and of one’s individual actions” (Duties, I.111). According to Walzer (2006), Quintillian, following the Stoics, also held that “our individual nature is manifest and strengthened as we make choices consistent with it throughout life. The moral life thus involves estimating one’s own nature, choosing accordingly, and living consistently with this character” even if it means personal sacrifice to the point of death, as in Socrates’ case (p. 276). The film poignantly develops Gore’s dignitas or consistent public character in relentlessly fighting for the environment and, for contemporary audiences, also shows him as a man of good private moral character, a dutiful son, loving father, and loyal sibling. The film creditably establishes that Gore has no political aspirations to be served (unlike Carter in his bid for re-election), only shared concerns with the audience.

Furthermore, in An Inconvenient Truth, Gore takes on directly his opponents’ assertions of strong, readily accessible counter-evidence, the second factor to which Brummett attributed Carter’s failure. Gore deals carefully and thoroughly with the counter-evidence and alternative explanations for climate change as well as with the political reasons that make them appealing, quite apart from their accuracy. He explicitly establishes that not only is his factual evidence the best available, but the overwhelming majority of the most credible
scientific experts agree with his conclusion. He shows matter-of-factly that his interpretation is an encompassing explanation of the realities that the audience has witnessed (e.g., intensified storms) and reasonably accounts for sign evidence that may initially appear contrary to his conclusion (e.g., an increase in droughts as well as floods).

Check (2000) suggested that for mortification to be an effective advocacy strategy auditors must believe that they are responsible for a problem. Again, Gore's presentation of easily understandable, overwhelming evidence relentlessly but nonjudgmentally hammers home the importance of even small individual choices in contributing to or reversing dangerous climate change. And he hinges his request for action on the audience's acceptance of his factual presentation. If auditors are convinced of the truth of his explanation, then they have a moral imperative to act. If they are not first convinced, no such obligation to sacrifice should weigh on them. Thus, Gore does not ask for action based on faith or authority but on facts that the auditors must judge for themselves. Second, Check argued that mortification is a less useful strategy when "people perceive that others are taking advantage of their altruism" (p. 407) and that Carter failed to dissuade Americans from the view that his energy plan would give unfair advantages to some at the expense of others. An Inconvenient Truth avoids this pitfall altogether by calling for individual action and decisions rather than imposing a top-down plan, like Carter's, that decides the sacrifices for everyone. By encouraging individual advocacy as well as personal life changes, Gore suggests that the way to go is from the grassroots up to tell the bureaucracy what measures people are willing to take and encourage officials to change policies accordingly, not vice versa. Further, Gore argues that every little bit of individual change counts in solving this global problem; we do not have to wait until a master plan passes into law or a treaty is signed to make a real difference.

Finally, and although not on social advocacy, Carlson and Hocking's (1988) analysis of messages left at the Vietnam Veterans' Memorial is helpful because it highlights the roles of self-address (i.e., a sharing of identity between the rhetor and audience) and acceptance of culpability (again, shared by rhetor and audience) in mortification. In An Inconvenient Truth, Gore acknowledges guilt not just as a human who contributes to the climate problem but as an elected leader who long failed in his attempts to solve it from the top down. The tireless grassroots lobbying and globe-trotting depicted in An Inconvenient Truth seem to be part of Gore's own mortification process. He asks auditors, too, to share the guilt of insufficient action with him and to redeem themselves through individual "follow-up"—not necessarily identical to his sacrifices, but whatever mortification steps they are inspired from within to take now that they grasp the gravity, causes, and cures of climate change. The film's coup de grâce, which I explain next, offers a parallel case of Gore accepting failure and responsibility, then self-correcting.

An Inconvenient Truth's account of Gore's family's response to the death of Nancy, his beloved older sister and only sibling, is crucial to the film's rhetorical success in urging social action focused on mortification instead of victimage. After all, as Hoskin (2007) noted, "None of us likes to feel responsible for a problem, particularly a problem on the scale of global warming, and therefore it is simply human nature to search out ways of dodging this responsibility" (p. 47). Gore's painful revelations in this personal part of the film provide both a cautionary lesson and an inspirational means for dealing with guilt by mortification, even in an unpromising situation. His family grew tobacco for many years on the hobby farm it kept while Gore's father served in the U.S. Senate. Nancy, Gore's protector and friend, began smoking as a teenager; eventually she died of lung cancer, which devastated the family. Gore's family quit farming tobacco once it realized the painful truth of the evidence
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in the widely publicized, but largely ignored 1964 Surgeon General’s report. In some small way, the family had been a part of the economic pattern that produced the cigarettes that led to Nancy’s cancer. Gore discloses, “Whatever explanation [for farming tobacco] had made sense in the past didn’t make sense anymore.” His family members wished they had “connected the dots” sooner.

Though culpable for contributing to global warming, ordinary citizens, with the aid of Gore’s presentation, have the chance to connect the dots foretelling this crisis before the worst hits and to mortify themselves to divert or soften the impending consequences. Gore’s use of his family’s humiliating story not only presents the model for similar redemption through confession of and mortifying atonement for prior sins (i.e., sacrificing future tobacco profits), but also suggests the possible deflection of such dire tragedy this time—if auditors accept the signs Gore highlights and promptly embrace self-discipline. This episode in the film reverberates as “a parable about human nature, reminding us that no one, not even the guy who seems to have all the answers is immune from hubris” (Hoskyn, 2007, p. 47). This argument humanizes Gore by telling of his family tragedy and the role his family members felt they played in perpetuating the deadly system that ultimately took Nancy’s life. It also models a way to acknowledge responsibility for, alone for, and avoid further guilt—this time in a situation where, Gore implies, mortification is relatively more likely to make a direct material improvement in addition to the symbolic cleansing it provides.

At least as importantly, the personal imperfection Gore reveals here is a powerful antidote to what social activists Baumgardner and Richards (2005) identified as one of the main barriers to potential followers seeing themselves as social actors who could make change in the world: feeling trapped in their own contradictions and not pure enough to speak out. Baumgardner and Richards maintained:

There is a huge fear that we’ll be revealed as hypocrites so, in search of moral perfection, we’re paralyzed from doing anything. . . . We [Baumgardner and Richards] are advocating, quite simply, that if you wait until you are perfect and free of conflicts, you will never change anything in the world. In fact, all of our most-loved social justice superstars have lives that are riddled with contradictions. (pp. xxii-xxiii)

In this autobiographical episode of An Inconvenient Truth, Gore not only advocates speaking to others on behalf of change—even when one’s life contains complicity or participation in the problem—but also publicly relives his pain to prove that one can endure the embarrassment of contradiction and go on to make some difference.

Reputation May Be Known in Advance or Displayed in the Rhetorical Act, but Ethos Is Recreated in Each Encounter by the Relationship that the Rhetor Develops with Auditors through His or Her Rhetorical Choices

As indicated in the previous section, for the Romans a rhetor’s reputation for a consistent public moral character contributes to successful advocacy whether it “show[s] up in the speech” or is “known to the judges” beforehand (Brinton, 1983, p. 174). An Inconvenient Truth dramatizes Gore’s dignitas for auditors ignorant of it and reminds or fills in further details for those already aware of it. Such a reputation gives an advocate’s message greater weight with auditors, argued both Cicero (Orator, II.xxxi.333-xxxi.334) and Quintillian (Institutio, XII.i.12). In fact, Quintilian claimed that for his ideal orator (i.e., Cato’s “good man, skilled in speaking,” Institutio, XII.i.1) his “first desire is that he should be a good man” (Institutio, II.xv.33). Although reputation may be enhanced by and displayed in a particular rhetorical act, its existence precedes that act.
Alternately, ethos adds a fundamentally relational dimension to an advocate's credibility based solely on his or her choices in the rhetorical act. In the Greek tradition, ethos is rooted in how the arguer exhibits good sense, virtue or good moral character, and goodwill toward the audience in the particular encounter (Aristotle, Rhetoric, II.i.5). According to Aristotle, ethos is an important artistic mode of proof that must be reinvented in each interaction of rhetor and audience and is indispensable to its success:

The orator persuades by moral character when his speech is delivered in such a manner as to render him worthy of confidence... But this confidence must be due to the speech itself, not to any preconceived idea of the speaker's character; for it is not the case, as some writers of rhetorical treatises lay down in their "Art," that the worth of the orator in no way contributes to his powers of persuasion; on the contrary, moral character, so to say, constitutes the most effective means of proof. (Rhetoric, I.i.4)

Ethos emerges because every text projects an implied character for the rhetor through its display of his or her choices and the rhetor-audience relationship cultivated as a result. Fulkerson (1979) explained:

Any rhetorical choice thus has two dimensions. A choice effective in its own right becomes doubly effective because it fictionizes a writer as the sort of person who makes such choices—a wise, shrewd rhetor worth listening to. Likewise, a choice that fails presents an image of a rhetor who had no better judgment than to make that choice. (p. 130)

By contrast, reputation relies more heavily on inartistic factors like background, credentials, position, and history with the auditors than on the artistic choices by which a rhetor interacts with the audience in a particular rhetorical encounter. It shifts the focus of judgment from an advocate's current rhetorical choices to the accumulated past, though the current choices may validate or challenge the image built on that past.

Gore's performance in An Inconvenient Truth beautifully illustrates specific means by which even an advocate who has a longstanding history of pompous, pedantic, arrogant, wooden, and technical speeches can, with a single rhetorical act, replace that image with a much different, more relationally inviting impression that encourages auditors to join him or her in social action. Fulda (2006) noted the before-and-after contrast in this case by comparing Gore's speaking history to his performance in the film:

During his losing 2000 presidential campaign, Gore had the reputation of being "wooden". There is none of that here... Here he seems human, humorous and sincere... Gore struts his stuff with the passion and confidence normally reserved for promoters of "get-rich-quick" schemes or television evangelists and... it is hard to resist his sincerity. (pp. 20-21)

A contributor to a website catering to those with interests in professional public speaking wrote:

No matter if you voted for Gore... you owe it to your children to see this movie. It convinced me. And one of the reasons it is convincing is that Gore gives quite simply the best executive presentation I've ever seen... This is not the Al Gore who used to joke about his being the wooden one in the roomful of Secret Service agents (a joke that itself was so wooden, so scripted, as to be a parody of an effective speaker). Agree or disagree with Al, if you're a professional speaker or speechwriter, ya gotta see this film. (Jan, 2006, para. 3, 14-15)

Greene (2006) raved that viewers finally can see "the real Al Gore," a "shockingly warm, intimate, passionate and soulful man" transformed in this "superb film" through "the simple yet awesome power of being one's self. That that power wasn't there in 2000 but is, so
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profundely, in the movie, illustrates what is possibly the political teaching for our time" (para. 3-4, 6). The resulting relationship not only elevates Gore as a rhetor but energizes and empowers his auditors. Hoskin (2007) reflected this sentiment:

Sure, we can whine about our leaders, and we can feel ashamed . . . But that's not going to get the job done, and amid all the other strategies that Gore provides to combat global warming, the most empowering is that we can take the lead ourselves. Some things in life are worth doing and they're worth doing now. (p. 47)

As these comments attest, Gore's rhetorical artistry in this case overcame individuals’ earlier negative or lukewarm impressions of him as an advocate and won these auditors into a new relationship with him and his recommendations.

Second, the three aspects that contribute to an advocate's ethos are not immutable attributes of a rhetor or his or her reputation; they depend on and emerge only within the context of a relationship constructed with auditors in a specific encounter. In other words, ethos blossoms when those whom the rhetor is addressing perceive that the text is a good faith extension of the rhetor's practical wisdom, virtue, and goodwill toward their concerns. To illustrate this relational dimension, which is the *sine qua non* of ethos, I will draw comments from the four public responses to the film just cited (i.e., Greene, Fildes, Hoskin, Ian).

Good sense or an indication of practical wisdom emerges when auditors perceive an advocate's performance as well-informed, analytically precise, and quick without being arrogant. Fildes (2006) complemented Gore for providing "overwhelming evidence for his claims" that is "very recent" and with "full details of sources and data" available on the website offered at the film's conclusion; Fildes noted that, though there are "one or two minor errors and nitpicks," they do not detract from the overall argument, and he had no luck locating any substantial arguments to refute Gore's main claims (p. 21). Hoskin (2007) commented on how Gore makes the scientific information coherent and accessible to a lay audience without condescending and while accounting for evidence that may seem counter to his main claim:

We have become accustomed to hearing about global warming in a muted, disconnected way (usually accompanied by vague rumblings about "disagreement in the scientific community"), but at last someone has marshaled all the fragments of information and woven it into a single, breathtaking whole . . . . The science is explained clearly and carefully, and we can see exactly how global warming visibly impacts on our world. (pp. 46-47)

Ian (2006), the professional speech devotee, began his list of praises for Gore's presentation with "he knows his content" and "uses compelling images and animations onscreen to support his argument. I did not see one bullet point in the whole thing" (para. 4, 7). Fildes (2006) concurred, writing, "In fact, it may be the best PowerPoint demonstration that you have ever seen" (p. 20). Indeed, even Gore's use of slideware promotes and offers opportunities for him to develop relationships with auditors, both those on-screen watching him speak live and those viewing such interactions in the film. His slides are not merely ways to "dispense or cover material" and make information more comprehensible and meaningfully framed for a lay audience, though they surely do that (Stoner, 2007, p. 362). Modeling effective framing, Gore also uses the slides as opportunities to forge relationships between himself and the auditors and among auditors themselves by "induct[ing] audiences into [cooperative] ways of understanding" (Stoner, 2007, p. 362) and representing the common stakes of inaction. An Inconvenient Truth's lecture scenes aptly enact pedagogical recommen-
dations that a presenter use slideware primarily to create relationships with various audiences rather than to just cover content (see Stoner, 2007). In the process Gore appeals to a shared view of common sense, such as when he visually and verbally compares the short-sightedness of choosing profit over protecting the environment to the choice between a stack of gold bars and the continued viability of the planet on which they have monetary value. The live audience that film viewers watch Gore address chuckles appreciatively at the folly of choosing profit over the possibility of a future in which to spend it. Gore excites auditors’ practical wisdom as he demonstrates his own.

*Good moral character* is conveyed when, based on choices in the rhetorical act itself, the audience accepts that the rhetor speaks with integrity and sincerity, likely makes virtuous decisions, inspires confidence that he or she discerns what is right, and demonstrates the courage of his or her convictions. Fildes (2006) pointed to *An Inconvenient Truth*’s autobiographical interludes as designed to reinforce the integrity of this disappointed politician. Personal details on Gore’s various inspirations and family life are mixed with extreme close-ups of a thoughtful and grimly determined man, politically isolated by his views and set against a world out of focus as he hunches over his Apple laptop or peers out of a plane window. (p. 21)

Greene (2006) was emphatic that Gore’s display of “authentic passion” (para. 7) is what transforms viewers’ longstanding negative or, at best, lukewarm predispositions toward him as a speaker. The film shows “an irreplaceable quality of character and leadership” (para. 9) that makes Gore inviting and motivating this time around in a way that was missing from his previous public forays. Greene went so far as to write that the authentic passion and centered calm Gore exhibits in the film put him in a class of leaders with Franklin and Teddy Roosevelt, Winston Churchill, John and Bobby Kennedy, Martin Luther King, Ronald Reagan, and Bill Clinton (para. 7-8, 19). For Hoskin (2007) the evidence of good moral character lay in the existence and the film’s crafting of the story of Gore’s willingness to change in the uncomfortable wake of his sister’s death:

But the moment that really reverberates sees Gore talking about working on his father’s tobacco farm. At first, as Gore shows vintage ads depicting doctors endorsing cigarettes, it looks like just another comparison is being drawn with the global warming skeptics. We smile, appreciating the grim humour in this little history lesson, but then Gore reveals that his sister was a smoker . . . and that she later died of lung cancer. Gore’s father stopped farming tobacco soon after, and Gore himself went from being a passionate supporter of the tobacco industry to an anti-smoking crusader. The moral of course is not that they didn’t know, but that they had failed to see the big picture and how their actions could ultimately boomerang upon them. It’s a story that could easily have been played for cheap emotion, but blessedly there’s no Oprah-style psychobabble here, no attempt to exploit a tragedy. (p. 47)

The film shows Gore as a person who made mistakes, acknowledged them, and went on to become a constant advocate for public good.

*Goodwill toward the audience* is nurtured when auditors trust that the advocate acts and gives advice in their best interest with no self-serving or hidden agenda. Hoskin (2007) observed that, given his situation, Gore could have used *An Inconvenient Truth* to position himself as the heroic Democrat trying to save the world. The surprise, however, is that the film feels so humble. Gore wryly introduces himself as “the man who used to be the next president of the United States” and confesses in the first five minutes that sometimes he feels like he has failed. . . . Despite occasional jabs at Republican environmental policies, ultimately this is a film that feels inclusive; a film, quite literally, for the whole world. (pp. 46-47)
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Not only does Gore pass on glorifying himself, even including some self-deprecating remarks and humor, but he also takes on the dirty, nearly impossible job of tackling global warming when he could be enjoying a comfortable retirement relaxing or speaking on more inconsequential, less controversial, and more lucrative matters. Given the magnitude, technicality, and diffuseness of this problem and its solution and the fact that most people do not want to assume responsibility for humans' role in global warming's causes and cures, Hoskin called it "a small miracle that Gore: a) decides to make the attempt anyway; b) doesn't shy away from technical detail; and c) emerges as such an electrifying advocate" (p. 47). In a world where no one is "in charge" on complex issues like global warming, an issue which is no more his individual responsibility than anyone else's, Gore chooses to lead by framing a complicated issue in a sensible way that empowers and calls ordinary auditors to action. The film documents that Gore sacrifices the comforts of home, family time, and leisure to tirelessly promote the common good rather than serve himself. He steps up and literally becomes the "engaging" and "electrifying" speaker that he never was when the stakes were more personal because of his conviction that "the scientists are in agreement almost to a person. It is a political problem, and thus it is up to people like himself to take on the job of shifting the paradigm" (Fildes, 2006, p. 20). That Gore is on the same side as his ordinary auditors seems plain.

These three dimensions—good sense, good moral character, and goodwill toward the audience—are evident in the rhetorical relationship that Gore develops with auditors of *An Inconvenient Truth*, at least as these four perceived it. In spite of Gore's past speaking performances, his work in the film exhibits that and how an advocate can forge a fresh, warm, motivating relationship with skeptical auditors through the choices in a single rhetorical encounter. Developing the advocate-auditor relationship must be a primary goal that guides a potential rhetorical leader's choices. When successfully achieved through the symbolic choices in a particular rhetorical encounter, ethos can both motivate auditors and create new alliances that positively empower them.

**Conclusion**

This essay began with contentions that leadership is everyone's business, that leadership operates not only through big decisions but in series of small moments that build interpretations of reality to which we must respond, that we need leaders who inspire and motivate others through persuasion, example, and empowerment rather than command and control, and that such leaders rely on symbol use to develop a shared interpretation of events that can foster coordinated action. This piece's first set of lessons are for ordinary individuals without formal positions of power who need to convince and inspire other ordinary people to accept responsibility for social problems and engage willingly in painful personal change to fix them. As I have argued, this process depends on something more than presenting an intellectually persuasive case that is "sensible to the led." For action to follow, the advocate must cultivate auditors' sense of investment and responsibility, hope, and relationships. Auditors must also perceive that their actions are necessary, not trivial, and that enough pieces of a possible solution are already in place to make acting now worthwhile. This essay demonstrates the effectiveness of drawing out the concrete, individual stakes of a huge social issue and simultaneously balancing the magnitude of the problem with good reasons to believe that one's personal efforts can make a difference. Although we are still waiting for major policy changes on the environment, perhaps because of the large-scale political
currents that Gore also discusses in *An Inconvenient Truth*, there is evidence that many people are more careful about their own energy use and are expressing their views to their representatives. These are indispensable steps toward successful change and the ones directly within auditors’ power, this film persuasively argues. This analysis abstracts specific argumentative strategies by which one can unite inartistic evidence of one’s public moral character with artistic ethical appeals in the moment to build motivating relationships. The combination is more than cumulative as the inartistic and artistic proofs interact, especially if the advocate simultaneously comes across as humble. Planning one’s social advocacy to feature and capitalize on such interactions can assist aspiring rhetorical leaders.

The essay also illustrates how one can overcome past ineffectiveness, explaining how even a formerly unappealing speaker with a tough and technical topic can meet those challenges to develop a freshly positive relationship with auditors. Gore’s choices of how he used slideware, autobiographical moments, and documentary footage relationally connected him with auditors and built alliances with and among them that inspired responsible action, as responses to the film showed. The revelations about Gore’s life and his mistakes model how a single sadder, but wiser individual can correct for earlier contributions to a larger problem (e.g., tobacco deaths, climate change) through mortification, rather than victimage, and go on to make some positive difference. These same patterns can motivate auditors to accept responsibility and act in ways that not only practically address the shared material problem but also are symbolically fulfilling because they expunge guilt. In the process, it is crucial that the advocate identify with auditors as someone who is also imperfect and culpable and who shares with them in the blame, responsibility, and atonement for contributing to the shared crisis. This case, too, shows that, while social issue advocates need not be perfect, successful rhetorical leaders must not impose higher standards of purity or action on their auditors than they themselves are willing to consistently fulfill.

Concomitantly, the social advocate must anticipate and plan an effective, non-defensive response to charges that his or her efforts are incomplete and so hypocritical—a common way to sabotage the motivation to act of the ordinary people whom the advocate seeks to mobilize. The most dangerous criticisms of Gore’s advocacy in *An Inconvenient Truth* were charges that he himself consumed more energy than he should, even in light of the film’s message that, once one understands the nature of the crisis, one has a moral imperative to act on that knowledge. Particularly in light of Baumgardner and Richards’s (2005) insight that Americans avoid involvement in social causes because they fear being labeled hypocrites if they are not totally pure on all related counts, Gore’s response to such attacks and its consistency with the reasonably attainable personal steps that his film asks of auditors is a reassuring and helpful model. The day after *An Inconvenient Truth* won its Academy Award, the Tennessee Center for Policy Research (2007) issued a press release criticizing Gore’s own use of energy and saying that he “deserves a gold statue for hypocrisy” (para. 1). The statement claimed that Gore’s Nashville mansion used “more than twice the electricity in one month than an average American family uses in an entire year” (para. 5) and “more than 20 times the national average” in 2006 (para. 4). A former Gore adviser scoffed, “I think what you’re seeing here is the last gasp of the global warming skeptics. They’ve completely lost the debate on the issue so now they’re just attacking their most effective opponent” (quoted in Tapper, 2007, para. 4). Debate raged on blogs and in other fora (see, e.g., “Al Gore’s Personal,” 2007; Zeller, 2007).

Had Gore initially presented his position more dogmatically or reacted more defensively to this attack, it may have been a more damning, disabling assault. Instead of disputing the
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figures, Kalee Kreider, a spokesperson for the Gores, simply noted that the couple works from home and reaffirmed “the bottom line is that every family has a different carbon footprint. And what Vice President Gore has asked is for families to calculate that footprint and take steps to reduce and offset it” (quoted in Tapper, 2007, para. 5). Kreider went on to argue that the Gores’ energy efficiency measures combined with their investment in energy from renewable sources “bring their carbon footprint down to zero” (quoted in Tapper, para. 7). This result may be heartening to undecided potential followers, particularly those who fear being charged with hypocrisy if their attempts at change are incomplete or imperfect. Gore does not vilify energy use in general or pretend to abstain from it or ask people to be fanatics who eschew all energy use (i.e., mortify their desires completely). Instead, Gore stands for reasonable self-discipline by minimizing his total energy use and offsetting the impact of what fossil fuel he does use as he strives for a “carbon-neutral lifestyle” (Hall, 2007, para. 11). Others, like Ian (2006) who took a shot at Gore for the “beefy carbon footprint on the planet that this travel schedule [shown in An Inconvenient Truth] must have imposed” (para. 12) seemed sympathetic to such non-totalizing, compensatory logic. Quickly relenting, Ian continued, “But I guess he can be forgiven given the message he carries” (para. 12). Asking for and modeling more realistic choices than abstinence (e.g., moderate self-discipline and compensation for unavoidable consumption of nonrenewable energy) makes Gore’s message seem less judgmental, his social advocacy less vulnerable to the hypocrisy attack, and the mortification path to redemption that he models seem more feasible.

In summary, the main contributions of this sustained case analysis are to show how familiar rhetorical concepts operate in contemporary practice and to offer specific strategies for reproducing and maximizing their impact through interaction with each other. The result is not theoretical “news” but an effort to make rhetorical theory more manageable and practically useful to social advocates, whether or not they are rhetorical scholars. Hopefully, to borrow from Polanyi (1958/1974), this move adds to the beauty and power of the system without enlarging its theoretical scope; it can tell more fluently what it says about nature, but cannot say more than it could say before. So we can achieve greater economy and simplicity in our interpretative framework, and keenly enjoy this as the display of intellectual elegance, without saying anything substantially new. (p. 145)

For argument scholars, one additional theoretical lesson emerges from this analysis. It unravels what qualities must be present for mortification to work as a strategy of social advocacy that encourages individuals to assume responsibility for and take action on a complex social issue. There is a great need for more research on mortification as an argument strategy. In particular, we need to identify and analyze successful instances of mortification used in social advocacy, not just in image restoration or apologia. What choices make a call for mortification uplifting and motivating rather than inviting defensiveness? How can mortification that involves ongoing effort and self-discipline be made more attractive than apathy or self-interest, responses to shared problems that Eliasoph (1998) demonstrated are every bit as produced as social engagement and require significant effort to generate and sustain? We also need to examine secular cases where religious conviction is not present to back up the mortification argument. In other words, what moves people to sacrifice for the shared good, aside from commitment to a divine mission or altruism? Aden (1994) observed that victimage is often a “tool of the majority,” promising the majority cleansing at someone else’s expense (p. 57). How can mortification be made an equally or more appealing response to guilt among the majority than is scapegoating someone else?
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Finally, we need to study successful examples mindful of Burke's indications that mortification need not be totalizing, but may involve moderate changes (e.g., reducing one's participation in a vice to more regularly practice the complementary virtue) and always entails an internally-motivated remaking of a better, more disciplined self. Examining the advocacy of those who model mortification that entails wisely disciplining oneself to forge a more positive, socially responsible identity should be helpful as we seek a better understanding of the interaction among ethos, dignitas, rhetorical leadership, and constructive social change.

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(Original work published 1962)