

# Memorializing Crisis: The Oklahoma City National Memorial as Renewal Discourse

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*Memorials are erected to signify important people, places, and events in history. Often times, the landmarks pay homage to lives lost and locations where devastation occurred. This study analyzes the Oklahoma City National Memorial as an exemplar for how memorials, through the shared experience of grief, communicate renewal. A discussion of memorials as rhetorical artifacts is provided, the evolving literature on renewal is presented, and the mission statement and seven themes embodied in the features of the Oklahoma City National Memorial are analyzed. Ultimately, this analysis establishes that a prospective vision is essential in the memorializing process. Emphasizing shared values, finding optimism, and providing opportunities for learning are identified as practical steps toward achieving a prospective outlook.*

*Keywords: Crisis Communication; Organizational Learning; Renewal; Memorial*

We come here to remember those who were killed,  
those who survived and those changed forever.  
May all who leave here know the impact of violence.  
May this memorial offer comfort, strength, peace, hope, and serenity.  
—Oklahoma City Memorial Foundation, Memorial Mission Statement

When the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building in Oklahoma City was bombed at 9:02 a.m. on April 19, 1995 by homegrown terrorists Timothy McVeigh and Terry Nichols, the surrounding community, and nation as a whole, experienced overwhelming chaos and sorrow. The most significant terrorist attack on US soil, prior to 9/11, occurred in the middle of America's Heartland. The blast and falling rubble

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killed 168 people and left a mass of anger, confusion, and devastating sadness. As the Murrah Building still crumbled, condolences from across the nation and around the world began pouring into the community. Within hours after the bombing, makeshift memorials were created around the perimeter of the bombsite (OKC National Memorial, 2009a). Mounds of flowers, stuffed animals, poems, personal notes, cards, prayers, ticket stubs, name badges, key chains, clothing, jewelry, and hundreds of other personal items soon amassed along the chain-link fence securing the footprint of the building. The fence became the first public memorial as individuals felt a need to “leave something of oneself” behind at the bombsite (Linenthal, 2001, p. 165).

Recognizing the need for a permanent memorial site, the then-mayor of Oklahoma City, Ron Norick, appointed a 350-member Memorial Task Force that included family members of those killed, survivors of the blast, and volunteers from mental health, law, the arts, fund-raising, business, communications, and government (OKC National Memorial, 2009a). Despite the size of the task force and the raw emotions present at every meeting, in less than a year the Memorial Task Force unanimously approved the mission statement now inscribed on the *Gates of Time* at the memorial’s entrance (Linenthal, 2001). In addition to the mission statement, the Memorial Task Force also defined a list of seven themes that “visitors to the memorial should feel, experience and encounter” (OKC National Memorial, 2006, para. 24).

The agonizing process of choosing the words, symbols, and themes resulted in a memorial that we assert invites survivors of the attack, family members of those who died, and all who visit the memorial to join in a discourse of renewal. Constructing a memorial capable of reaching this level of renewal involved a delicate balance of conflict, tolerance, and cooperation. Blair, Jeppeson, and Pucci (1991) contend that such difficulty is to be expected in the memorializing process. They observe that “conflicts over whom or what to memorialize and in what ways have occurred frequently” (p. 263). Conflicts surrounding the US Holocaust Memorial Museum (Hasian, 2004), the contested site of the 9/11 Memorial in New York (Haskins & DeRose, 2003) and the memorializing of United Flight 93 (Jordan, 2008) serve as recent examples supporting Blair et al.’s observation. Thus, memorializing is a desirable yet complex process. Despite these complexities, the Oklahoma City memorial, by comparison to other American memorials, was completed in a comparatively short time “between event and public commemoration” (Blair & Michel, 2007).

With the onset of the Oklahoma City National Memorial’s tenth anniversary and the fifteenth anniversary of the bombing, the Oklahoma City National Memorial, visited by thousands every year, serves as an exemplar of post-crisis renewal in American culture. This study analyzes the Oklahoma City Memorial as an artifact that inspires a discourse of renewal. A discussion of memorials as rhetorical artifacts is provided, the evolving literature on renewal is presented, and the mission statement and themes of the Oklahoma City National Memorial are analyzed to explain how all who visit the memorial are invited to join in a consistent discourse of renewal. Ultimately, the analysis reveals a series of implications and practical applications for communicating renewal through the act of memorializing.

### Memorials as Rhetorical Artifacts

Memorials, by definition, are intended to celebrate or honor the memory of a person or event. Memorials “are places where memories converge, condense, conflict and define relationships between past, present and future” (Marschall, 2006, p. 146). From a rhetorical perspective, memorializing includes the development of symbols that relate the event itself to the act of keeping it in public memory (Mayo, 1988). N. Grider (2007) suggests that since the Vietnam Memorial, memorials have become architectural and textual in equal measure. Therefore, memorials comprise multiple symbolic elements constituting “congeries of rhetorical products” (Brock, Scott, & Chesebro, 1990, p. 15).

Visual elements of memorials are “a form of rhetoric” that “encompasses all forms of symbols” (Foss, 1986, p. 328). Thus, the visual elements of memorials signify events for viewers. This signification engenders a “rhetorical response” that “constitutes the processing of the aesthetic experience and thus the attribution of meaning to the object” (p. 429). The viewer does not, however, have “total freedom to attribute any meaning at all to the work” (p. 330). Rather, “the viewer is free to interpret the memorial or create meaning for it according to their own experiences, as long as the meaning attributed is grounded somehow in the material form of the memorial” (p. 331).

Foss (1994) provides a schema for the evaluation of visual imagery and memorials centered on the identification of the function communicated, assessment of the support provided for the function, and evaluation of the legitimacy of that function. Since the creators of the memorial are not usually on hand to defend the purpose or intention of the creation, how the artifact “functions” or the action it communicates is what must be evaluated. Blair and Michel (2000) further explicate the rhetorical challenges described by Foss (1986, 1994). They contend that “the most profound rhetorical challenges faced in the design of any commemorative site” is to “make an event of the past—what the memorial marks—relevant to the needs and desires of the memorial’s own present” (p. 33).

Thus, memorializing requires more than just the marking of an event, but also the construction of what the marker should signify to future generations. If successful, a memorial “imports into the present—the time of the visitor—the tactical rhetoric that draws attention, announces resolve, and enjoins the moral agency of the individual” (Blair & Michel, 2000, p. 47). Memorials created to honor the dead are inspired by an overwhelming power of grief; the belief that the presence of the deceased can be felt and recognized; and the understanding that the place where life was lost is a special place for memorialization (Clark & Franzmann, 2006). These deep-seated motivations for memorial creation outlined next assist in the rhetorical transformation of a place of death and loss into sacred ground.

#### *Overwhelming Grief*

Upon losing a loved one, those left behind attempt to honor the dead by demonstrating their grief. Survivors feel empowered to show the world how much

their missing loved one meant to them. This seems to be one of the strongest impulses behind spontaneous memorials, like the chain link fence around the Murrah Building. Haney, Leimer, and Lowery (1997) explain that spontaneous memorials indicate a desire to institute personalized mourning rituals that do not conform to traditional mourning practices. They contend that old fashioned, ritualized mourning is perhaps inadequate or even irrelevant to modern Americans. After the Columbine shootings, for instance, community members began bringing items to the school to remember those who had been killed. The fences, tennis courts and parking lots around the school were soon adorned with spontaneous shrines of flowers and personal mementos (S. Grider, 2007).

Spontaneous memorials “help to mediate the psychic crisis of sudden and often inexplicable loss” (Doss, 2006, p. 298). While they appear suddenly, Doss explains that these memorials are “highly orchestrated performances of mourning; rituals of visibly public lamentation aimed at expressing, codifying, and ultimately managing grief” (p. 298). Spontaneous, informal memorials develop from the simple need to communicate the pain that those left behind feel, and to let others see and share in the grief. This can also be seen in memorial services like candlelight vigils, which are often organized in the wake of a tragedy to allow those touched by the tragedy to communicate their grief and take comfort in the shared experience of loss.

### *Presence of the Dead*

The second facet of memorializing is that the presence of the dead can still be felt at the scene of their death. Friends and family members return to the room where a loved one passed away peacefully or to the scene of a car crash where a loved one died abruptly in order to feel the deceased near them. Even as the environments change over time, the presence of the deceased at the scene of their death is still felt by loved ones.

The presence of the deceased is not viewed as a malevolent presence, however. Clark and Franzmann (2006) note that the location where an individual died gives “no hint of unrest or a haunting presence. There seems little doubt among those who erect the memorials . . . that the deceased is actually in heaven” (p. 590). And yet, the phenomenon of individuals returning to the site of a loved one’s death to communicate or feel close to them is common in modern society. Especially in the instance of a sudden or unexpected death, the opportunity to feel a sense of communication with the deceased may help in the grieving process, allowing loved ones to say the goodbyes they never got to say in life.

The presence of the dead also has relevance for visitors to memorials. While Foss (1994) suggests that the specificity of naming the deceased may unintentionally disconnect unrelated visitors from the site, Blair and Michel (2007) explain that “naming multiple individuals in public space not only nominates those individuals as particularly significant members of the collective, but that gesture also marks a general relationship between individual and collective” (p. 605). As such, the naming of the deceased in memorials identifies who is present, almost introducing the dead

to the visitors of the site. N. Grider (2007) describes this memorializing process as “humanization” (p. 271).

### *Significance of Location*

The third facet, understanding that a place where life is lost is worthy of memorializing, is seen in almost all forms of memorials, but nowhere as much as in those associated with great tragedies. Wright (2005) observes that “the discourse on public memory recognizes the importance of both physical place and symbolic space” (p. 55). From natural disasters to school shootings to terrorist attacks, the sites of greatest catastrophe are often transformed into places of peace and healing in the wake of the violence for which they will always be remembered. The rhetorical transformation of a “landscape of carnage and death into sacred ground” through memorializing is inspired by desires to sanctify sites of violence (Jacobs, 2004, p. 311). Rather than honoring the place where the deceased’s body was laid to rest, this sort of memorializing focuses instead on the moment when the deceased passed from the earthly plane into the afterlife, and honors the significance of that transition. In her treatise on the transformation of the profane to the sacred, Jacobs (2004) describes how the preserved crematoriums and gas chambers at Holocaust death/labor camps have become places for prayer and meditation. Gettysburg, Ground Zero in New York, and the USS Arizona are further examples of how places of great violence have been transformed into hallowed ground.

These sites become popular not only among those who lost someone, but also others who wish to share in the experience. Doss (2002) explores the reason behind these pilgrimages, saying, “people go to these sites to see and touch real-life tragedy, to weep and mourn and feel in socially acceptable situations . . . these feelings are ritualized, becoming collective and socially acceptable, through offerings and participation: through gift-giving and grieving” (p. 70). Personal losses, unrelated to the specific memorial, are mourned as a shared experience on sacred ground. Memorialization of place also recognizes that the event that took place on the site will not be forgotten, but will instead be honored, respected, and learned from so that it may never happen again.

In summary, memorials constitute complex rhetorical messages based on language, context, and visual symbols that simultaneously address the past, present, and future. The overwhelming power of grief; the belief that the presence of the deceased can be felt and recognized; and the understanding that the site where life was lost is a special place for memorializing assist in the rhetorical transformation of a place of death and loss into sacred ground. Audiences may not correctly interpret the intended meaning of a memorial; but the variation of attributed meaning can be contained by the “material form of the memorial” (Foss, 1986, p. 331). In effect, the creation of a memorial illustrates the significance of a tragedy and establishes guidelines for how future generations should remember the event.

Memorials are therefore intended not only as an expression of grief in the face of loss, but also as a means to help ease this grief through recognition of the event and

an attempt to learn from it. Weick (2001) suggests that “Reflection . . . is synonymous with wisdom” (p. 362). Sifting out the positive experiences and learning opportunities inherent in tragedy is indicative of renewal discourse. By alleviating the constraints associated with issues of blame and fault, renewal discourse offers hope and optimism when there seemingly is none (Seeger, Ulmer, Novak, & Sellnow, 2005; Ulmer, Sellnow, & Seeger, 2007). The following section describes renewal discourse from its foundation as an organizational crisis response to its potential for better understanding healing in a community crisis.

### **Renewal Discourse**

Lippitt (1969) explains that renewal discourse focuses on the “human side of enterprise” (p. 5). Thus, the foundations of renewal discourse in crisis communication literature can be found in the value-based, post-crisis responses of organizational leaders intent on rebuilding their businesses following a crisis (Seeger & Ulmer 2001, 2002). As a natural and immediate response to crisis, renewal discourse does not concentrate on blame and strategic image restoration, but instead on healing, reconnecting to core values, and embracing learning opportunities brought to light by the crisis (Hurst, 2002; Ulmer et al., 2007). Renewal discourse “is grounded in larger value dimensions of organizations and disasters, stakeholder relationships, and in the opportunities inherent to these events (Ulmer et al., 2007, p. 131).

Seeger and Ulmer (2001, 2002) characterize renewal discourse by four features: (a) Renewal discourse is prospective, focusing on the future rather than trying to explain the past; (b) Renewal discourse focuses on rebuilding and reform to encourage growth; (c) Renewal discourse is optimistic, emphasizing the positive opportunities rather than dwelling on the negative; and (d) Renewal discourse is based on the values and vision of leadership and the ability to engender a shared vision. Successful renewal discourse also tends to adhere to certain conditions (Ulmer, Seeger, & Sellnow, 2006); (a) when crises are caused by natural disasters or other destructive means, because they provide an opportunity to rebuild; (b) when strong relationships are developed before a crisis, because stakeholders are more likely to commit to an organization they already know during the rebuilding process; (c) when an organization is able to take meaningful action and make observable changes to demonstrate commitment to improving the organization; and (d) when organizational leaders have the ability to influence the stakeholders’ rhetorical frame of the crisis. Ultimately, renewal serves as a form of post-crisis healing that allows stakeholders to “reconstitute themselves and move past the crisis” (Seeger, Sellnow, & Ulmer, 2003, p. 148).

Littlefield, Reiersen, Cowden, Stowman, & Long Feather (2009) take renewal discourse out of the organizational setting and into the contexts of communities and cultures. In their analysis of the Red Lake, Minnesota, school shooting, Littlefield et al. contend that “recognizing the unique characteristics and needs of a particular group may be at the forefront of successful renewal” (p. 365). And in fact, the adherence to traditions embedded in the history and cultural perspectives of

stakeholders reveals the potential for renewal discourse to assist community groups in navigating the healing process associated with tragedy. Ulmer and Sellnow (2001) suggest that “renewal involves a rebuilding of confidence” (p. 362). The renewal discourse following the shootings in the Native American community of Red Lake transformed “victims” into “warriors” (Littlefield et al., 2009, p. 373).

Bostdorff (2003) offers further support for this observation in her discussion of George W. Bush’s post-September 11 discourse. She draws similarities between the Puritan rhetoric of covenant renewal and Bush’s response through reference to the epideictic nature of renewal discourse. For example, she observes that both the Puritan founders and Bush viewed crises as tests of resolve and character, allowing them to praise what was valued and blame what was abhorred. Similarly, Anker (2005) contends that after 9/11 “political leaders declared that the country was attacked *because of its virtue*” in order to reconnect Americans to the core values of freedom and democracy (p. 22). She describes the melodrama of American culture to include clear distinctions of victimization, heroism, and villainy that allow the American collective identity to include the dual role of victim and hero.

Reierson, Sellnow, and Ulmer (2009) link the work of Hurst (2002) and Seeger and Ulmer (2002) to describe renewal discourse as “connecting with core values, establishing the importance of the past in the present, and spurring efforts and energy toward process and the future” (p. 116). In renewal discourse, there is an opportunity to rebuild and transcend crisis. Organizational and community leaders alike are able to frame crisis in a way that empowers and motivates those affected, engendering cooperation and support (Seeger et al., 2005). “The discourse of renewal creates an opportunity after a crisis to fundamentally re-order the organization down to its core purpose” (Seeger et al., 2005, p. 92).

Focusing on renewal is a way of making sense of a crisis through the lessons it can teach (Ulmer et al., 2007). Toelken, Seeger, and Batteau (2005) suggest that through renewal “crises can serve as the underlying source” for learning and change (p. 47). As a process of learning, renewal discourse “can point out fallacious assumptions or unforeseen vulnerabilities” while re-establishing core values and precipitating “consensus, cooperation, and support” (p. 47). This instructional objective in the discourse of renewal is particularly fitting with the memorializing process. As Blair et al. (1991) explain, “commemorative monuments ‘instruct’ their visitors about what is to be valued in the future as well as in the past” (p. 263).

A consistent aspect of renewal is the healing that occurs post-crisis. Seeger et al. (2003) explain that memorializing is often a vital element in the renewal process. They explain that memorials are a “symbol” of “survival” that “honor both community and individual heroes” (p. 159). For example, they note that, in Grand Forks, North Dakota, a city nearly destroyed by a catastrophic flood, a memorial erected in the center of the city “symbolizes the courage of the entire community” (p. 159).

This study contends that the creation of the Oklahoma National Memorial so soon after the Murrah Federal Building bombing in Oklahoma City served as a healing catalyst for some families and survivors, while the resulting memorial invites

survivors, residents of Oklahoma City and all who visit to engage in a discourse of renewal. For this analysis, three aspects of renewal discourse, summarized above, are salient: healing, reconnecting core values, and learning. The following sections describe the development process of the mission statement and themes of the Oklahoma City National Memorial to provide context for explaining how renewal discourse can assist in the post-crisis healing process by encouraging visitors to partake in a prospective vision.

### **Developing the Mission**

Linenthal (2001), who documented the memorial building process, noted that “less than twenty-four hours after the bombing, ideas for memorials began pouring into Oklahoma City” (p. 119). Professional artists and their agents, design firms, and monument companies offered their services. Countless individuals sent letters describing the “vision” for the memorial they received in a dream; many offered to bear all costs of constructing the memorial if given artistic freedom in its design (Linenthal, 2001). To manage the memorial development process, Mayor Norick appointed a 350-person Memorial Task Force, including 10 operational committees, a coordinating committee, and a 160-person advisory committee. Considering committees of four to six individuals often have trouble coming to a decision, coordinating a task force of that size at the height of emotional anguish must have been a daunting task. Clark and Franzmann (2006) suggest that those who experience the greatest difficulties in the grief process are those whose loved ones died suddenly, unexpectedly, and violently. And yet:

They are the very ones who may take positive action and put energy and emotion into making and maintaining memorials. This positive response counters the emphasis on inability and debilitation including impaired decision making processes and an increased morbidity. (Clark & Franzmann, 2006, p. 587)

Therefore, the rawness of the loss so closely followed by the push to erect a memorial likely committed the task force members, not just to attend the meetings, but also to persevere and complete the purpose of the task force.

Despite the collective purpose of the group, tempers—lit by emotion—flared during the meetings. Boundaries were drawn early on between organizers, family members, survivors, and rescuers (Linenthal, 2001). Organizers were considered outcasts while survivors felt guilty for living, family members reeled in anger, and rescuers were confounded by their inability to help in the midst of obvious trauma. Every word was analyzed. For example, how to describe those who died had the potential to change the facts or exclude a victim. To say lives were “lost” would have trivialized what happened, as if lives were misplaced. Many family members wanted to use the word “murdered,” but that would have excluded nurse Rebecca Anderson who was killed by falling debris during the rescue. Another controversial word was “hope.” One family member said, “I’ll never have hope again” (Linenthal, 2001, p. 185). On the day the memorial opened she told the executive director of the

memorial that she was glad they kept “hope” in the memorial (Kari Watkins, pers. comm., 2009).

While the significant size of the task force mandated the inclusion of multiple perspectives, the members fully recognized they were creating guidelines for how future generations would remember the event and had the foresight to assess the multiple meanings that could be attributed to each word and action in the development of the memorial. Feldman (2003) recognized the accomplishment of the task force in stating:

Unprecedented in its emphasis on the inclusiveness of the commemorative process, the Oklahoma City Memorial Center is rooted in a powerful discourse of personal release from suffering through public identification with other victims and survivors, defined as such by the commemorative institution and brought together through regular public ritual. (p. 341)

Proof of the inclusion of the task force’s vision for the memorial was demonstrated in the development of the memorial design-solicitation and selection process. When the high-profile consultant hired by the city was adamant that professionals on the selection committee should have the final say in the design of the memorial over family members, he was released from his position. Despite the potential backlash from the elite design community, city administrators were given a standing ovation when this news was announced to the task force (Linenthal, 2001).

The Memorial Task Force ultimately developed a 2000-plus word mission statement including a preface, context, and guidance priorities, themes, and resolutions as part of the design-solicitation packet. At the competition’s closing date, 624 memorial designs were submitted from every state and 24 countries (Linenthal, 2001). More than 15,000 people viewed the design boards, and a 15-member selection committee of eight family members, four design professionals, and three community leaders selected the design that best resonated with the prescribed mission statement and its negotiated meaning.

The Memorial Task Force’s mission statement gave purpose to the memorial, while the seven themes were defined to guide what “visitors to the memorial should feel, experience and encounter” (OKC National Memorial, 2006, para. 24). The following section describes the memorial through the themes of remembrance, peace, spirituality and hope, cherished children, comfort, recognition, and learning.

### **Memorial Themes**

On October 9, 1997, President Bill Clinton signed the Oklahoma City National Memorial Act of 1997 and officially established the memorial. On April 19, 2000, five years after the bombing, the memorial itself was formally dedicated. The memorial grounds include many symbolic elements to depict the atmosphere of loss and renewal held within the *Gates of Time*. Every element of the memorial reflects, in some way, at least one of the seven themes laid down by the Memorial Task Force. These themes—remembrance, peace, spirituality and hope, cherished children,

comfort, recognition, and learning—are embodied in the features of the memorial, shaping the feelings and experiences of visitors to the memorial and ensuring positive, healing feelings. The symbolic memorial allows for memorialization of the losses suffered without causing visitors to be bogged down by grief, anger or hatred, but instead instilling them with a sense of hope, optimism, and renewal. In this section, we characterize the enactment of each of the seven themes in terms of salient renewal strategies (see Table 1).

### *Remembrance*

The mission statement insists that those who visit the memorial, “develop an understanding of the victims and survivors as individuals,” and that, “the range of cultures, races and ages of those attacked” be evident (OKC National Memorial, 2006, para. 25). In this manner, remembrance serves to maintain the individuality of the Oklahoma City victims and survivors. This recognition serves as the first step in the healing stage of the renewal process. Any memorial that overlooked the complexity and diversity of those harmed by the bombing would fail to provide the foundation for memorializing.

In response to this objective, the theme of remembrance is widely reflected in the memorial grounds. The twin *Gates of Time* that mark the formal entrances to the memorial grounds represent remembrance by signifying the moment in which the world was altered. The first gate is inscribed with 9:01, marking “the innocence of the city before the attack,” and the second is inscribed with 9:03, marking “the moment we were changed forever, and the hope that came from the horror in the moments and days following the bombing” (OKC National Memorial, 2009b, para. 3). By remembering the short span of time in which the world was, for so many, irrevocably altered, the *Gates of Time* are a simple yet powerful means of communicating this brief yet vital window of time to the memorial’s visitors.

A second example of remembrance can be found in the *Field of Empty Chairs* within the footprint of the Murrah Building. Representing each person killed in the tragedy, 168 chairs crafted from bronze, glass, and stone symbolize the empty chairs at the dinner tables of the victims’ families. Each chair has a victim’s name inscribed on the glass base, and the chairs are grouped according to the floor where the victims were located and the blast pattern. Smaller chairs represent the 19 children killed in the blast. The *Field of Empty Chairs* signifies those lost in a manner that is both solemn and uplifting, as the delicate structures of the chairs memorialize the fallen in a simple and elegant way, without calling to mind the bleak image of gravestones.

**Table 1** Mission themes by renewal element

Healing	Reconnecting values	Learning
Remembrance	Cherished children	Learning
Peace	Spirituality–hope	
Comfort	Recognition	

Another facet of the memorial that embodies remembrance is the *Survivor Wall*, built on the remaining walls of the Murrah building. The *Survivor Wall* is constructed from pieces of granite salvaged from the fallen building, on which are inscribed over 600 names—the names of those who survived the bombing. While these individuals did not die in the attack, many suffered serious physical or psychological injuries. Since the blast caused damage across much of the downtown area, thousands of individuals could have declared themselves a survivor. These individuals were deeply affected by the bombing and this portion of the memorial remembers their pain in a way that is unique from those who perished and yet is equally poignant.

### *Peace*

The mission statement envisions an atmosphere that provides “a quiet, peaceful setting where visitors have opportunity for reflection” (OKC National Memorial, 2006, para. 26). Emphasizing peace is fitting with the renewal process. Renewal cannot begin without a prospective focus. Similarly, one cannot experience peace while in an angry, blameful, or hectic state of mind. Thus, in terms of renewal, the Memorial Task Force wisely recommended the memorial be situated in a peaceful setting.

The theme of peace is reflected throughout the memorial’s rolling, grassy grounds, but nowhere more so than in the reflecting pool that bisects the memorial. The pool runs the length of what was once Fifth Street and features a thin layer of water flowing endlessly over slabs of polished granite “providing a peaceful setting for quiet thoughts” and creating a seamlessly calm surface that “shows the reflection of someone forever changed by their visit to the memorial” (Oklahoma National Memorial, 2009b, para. 4). The sound of the trickling water and the seamless reflection of the sky and grounds make the memorial a haven, a small verdant pocket in the heart of the city that stands in peaceful defiance of the violence that once took place on Fifth Street.

### *Spirituality and Hope*

Even though the word “hope” was controversial in the meetings, the resulting mission statement placed high value on spirituality and hope. The Memorial Task Force wanted the memorial to both “convey the sense of deep loss caused by the bombing” and “evoke feelings of compassion and hope, and inspire visitors to live their lives more meaningfully” (Oklahoma National Memorial, 2006, para. 27). In doing so, the Memorial Task Force insisted that the memorial, “speak of the spirituality of the community and nation that was so evident in the wake of the attack” (para. 27). Through the theme of spirituality and hope, the mission statement reconnects with widely shared values—a strategy fitting with the renewal process.

Spirituality and hope are epitomized by the *Survivor Tree*. The tree is an American elm that once stood in the parking lot across from the Murrah Building. The tree was heavily damaged by the blast, and was nearly chopped down during the bombing investigation to allow recovery of evidence that had been driven into the tree’s trunk.

Instead, the tree was spared, and began to regrow in spite of the damage dealt. The mission statement includes a resolution that states, “one of the components of the Memorial must be the *Survivor Tree* located on the south half of the Journal Record Building block” (Oklahoma National Memorial, 2006, para. 37). The tree now stands in pride of place on a terrace at the highest point of the memorial; inscribed around the deck wall are the words, “The spirit of this city and this nation will not be defeated; our deeply rooted faith sustains us” (OKC National Memorial, 2009c, para. 10). The *Survivor Tree* has become the most recognizable symbol of the bombing memorial, representing strength and regrowth, even in the face of greatest tragedy. Seedlings from the tree can now be purchased through the memorial gift store and planted as personal symbols of survival.

### *Cherished Children*

The Memorial Task Force made paramount the nearly universal value of protecting and nurturing children. The mission statement asks that the Memorial Complex “include a special place for children.” Moreover, the statement requires that there be “a component designed to reach kids on ‘their level,’ both physically and cognitively” to help them “learn and feel something they can carry with them as they grow and should offer them assurance that the world holds far more good than bad” (OKC National Memorial, 2006, para. 28). This value placed on children not only reflects a reconnection with important values, it also addresses the fact that children were murdered in the bombing. As such, this theme represents a difficult but essential aspect, reconnection with values in the renewal process.

The theme of cherished children is shown in the children’s area, where a wall comprised of tiles painted by children overlooks an area of chalkboards where children are encouraged to write their feelings upon visiting the memorial. The need for this area was inspired not only by the children lost in the bombing, but also by the overwhelming influx of encouragement that came from children from all over the world upon hearing news of the bombing. The area is meant to help children continue to express their feelings as “an important component of the healing process” (OKC National Memorial, 2009b, para. 9).

### *Comfort*

The mission statement requires that memorial be a “comfort to visitors” and “ultimately offer an uplifting experience—elevating the memory of the dead and survivors and, in some way too, the spirit of those who visit” (OKC National Memorial, 2006, para. 29). In this manner, providing comfort serves as a renewal strategy for turning ones focus to healing opportunities, not just for the survivors of the bombing, but for the visitors as well.

Comfort is expressed through the Memorial Fence, a section of the original fence installed around the bombing site to protect both the site and visitors to it. As noted, during the days following the bombing, visitors who came to view the site would

leave all sorts of mementos on the fence—everything from stuffed animals and key chains to photos and poems. When the memorial was constructed, a portion of the fence was relocated to the western edge of the site, and to this day visitors still leave items on and along the fence in homage to those lost. Items are periodically collected, catalogued, and stored in the memorial museum, though some items have remained on the fence since the days after the bombing. The desire to console and comfort the families of the fallen as well as pay tribute to the bombing victims is one which resonates strongly with visitors, and has made the fence an established part of the memorial site. The spontaneous outpouring of support at the fence as a natural and immediate response to crisis is also indicative of renewal.

### *Recognition*

The Memorial Task Force viewed recognition of the “professionals who worked to rescue and treat survivors and to recover victims of the blast” as well as “the many volunteers who supported rescue, recovery and medical personnel by providing supplies, food and shelter, as well as emotional and spiritual support” as an essential component of the memorial (OKC National Memorial, 2006, para. 30). They also extended this recognition to include honoring the “spirit of unity that characterized the response of the community and nation following the attack” (para. 30). The Memorial Task Force insisted that such recognition should not “diminish the tragedy, but rather, that it offer an inspiring contrast between the brutality of the evil and the tenderness of the response” (para. 30). This “spirit of unity” is referred to today as the “Oklahoma Standard” (Linenthal, 2001). The cultural identification of reaching out to help each other as a community standard demonstrates a reconnection to core values. By valuing the service and contributions of courageous and dedicated volunteers, the Memorial Task Force created a sense of meaning and renewal in the memorial.

The theme of recognition is best illustrated in the rescuer’s orchard, a grove of trees that seemingly rush up the side of the hill to surround and protect the survivor tree. The trees are meant to represent the people who rushed in from across the country and the globe to provide help in the days following the bombing. Inscribed on the wall facing the orchard are the words, “To the courageous and caring who responded from near and far, we offer our eternal gratitude, as a thank you to the thousands of rescuers and volunteers who helped” (OKC National Memorial, 2009b, para 8). The rescuer’s orchard recognizes the efforts of this army of volunteers not only in their protective placement around the *Survivor Tree*, but also in the variety of trees planted in the orchard which include both local trees like the Oklahoma redbud, Oklahoma’s state tree, and foreign varieties like the Amur Maple and Chinese Pistache.

### *Learning*

Within the theme of learning, the Memorial Task Force called for a learning center that could provide information about the area “before and after” the blast, as well as,

“the loss of a sense of innocence and security that can follow a terrorist attack” (OKC National Memorial, 2006, para. 31). Most importantly, this theme required that the primary focus of education be on the most important lesson learned from the Oklahoma City bombing: “an understanding of the senselessness of violence, especially as a means of effecting government change. It should convey the imperative to reject violence” (para. 31). This focus on learning, particularly the rejection of violence, provided a clear focus on renewal.

The theme of learning is perhaps one of the most strongly recognized themes in the memorial, and is represented by the Oklahoma City National Memorial Museum housed in the Journal Records Building. The museum is a three-story construction which “leads the visitor relentlessly from terror and loss through rescue and recovery to hope and healing” (Pool, 2002, p. 2) by exploring the bombing from a variety of angles. Everything is taken into account, from news reports the day of the bombing and an audio recording that captured the moment of the blast to stories about the victims as told by their families and the steps toward renewal the community undertook. The museum even features a space to house other exhibitions related to the memorial, such as the traveling exhibit: *A Shared Experience: 04.19.95–09.11.01*. The exhibit emphasized “the critical transition from architectural destruction to communal resurrection” in Oklahoma City and New York (Feldman, 2003, p. 840). This emphasis on learning and understanding the circumstances surrounding the bombing and the events that followed are meant to further commemorate the experience and ensure that, through learning, such a similar horror can never again be enacted on the same scale. Continuing the prospective focus of the memorial, the information on the perpetrators, McVeigh and Nichols, is relegated to a separate room in the basement that documents the timeline of evidence collection, court trials, and convictions. McVeigh’s execution is noted only as a dash on the timeline.

The seven themes laid down by the Memorial Task Force are embodied in the features of the memorial, shaping the feelings and experiences of visitors to the memorial. These themes resonate with renewal discourse, in particular, the aspects of healing, reconnecting core values, and learning. Wan (2008) explains that resonance is constructed based on the “fit” or “association” between the concepts presented and those stored people’s long-term memory (p. 476). The salient aspects presented in the themes resonate with the collective memory of grief and recovery, justifying the use of the Oklahoma City National Memorial as an exemplar for how memorials communicate renewal.

### **Memorials as Renewal Discourse**

The Oklahoma City National Memorial creates opportunities for visitors to engage in a discourse of renewal. While Foss (1994) contends that the creator’s intention is often irrelevant to the visitor’s experience, the Memorial Task Force ensured visitors would know their intentions, not only as displayed through the seven themes stipulated in the mission statement, but in the displaying of the mission statement

itself inside the memorial museum. The themes provide support for the “functions” of the memorial, legitimizing the communicative action of renewal.

The memorial’s symbolic focus of remembrance maintains, in Foss’ (1986) terms, a “welcoming stance” (p. 333). Building the *Survivor Wall* with granite from the demolished Murrah building and the understated, yet poignant, message conveyed in the *Field of Empty Chairs* signify the loss of life and how it occurred without a shocking or disturbing visual display. Had the memorial vividly depicted the graphic violence witnessed in the aftermath of the bombing, a discourse of renewal would not likely have occurred. As Marschall (2006) explains, “many memorials encourage remembrance of the dead or the painful event” through “narrative” and “visual” forms “of the past in an attempt to encourage the viewer to repeat then ‘live through’ the emotional experience” (p. 159). A discourse of renewal dismisses this rearward focus in favor of a prospective and optimistic focus on resilience (Seeger & Ulmer, 2001, 2002). The Oklahoma City National Memorial founders were wise to choose this subtle form of remembrance. Memorials that encourage a highly emotional reliving of the event “can appear empty and lifeless, especially as their proliferation throughout the world has led to the overuse of *pathos formulae*” (Marschall, 2006, p. 159).

The use of subtle visual symbols in the Oklahoma City National Memorial also allowed for the creation of a peaceful setting that was inviting to children—two themes envisioned by the task force. A more literal or violent form of remembrance would likely have created a contradiction violating both themes. As such, the monument allows for the reemphasis or return to core values—in this case, peace and regeneration—that is characteristic of renewal discourse (Ulmer et al., 2007).

The comfort instilled by the Memorial Fence is an inviting feature for visitors. Open mourning permitted on a grand scale, like at the Oklahoma City National Memorial, provides comfort by allowing individuals to deal with their previous losses in ways that may have been discouraged or restricted by the minimalism of contemporary mourning (Aries, 1974; Franzmann, 1998). Even in Oklahoma City, outside the memorial, “There seemed throughout the city—indeed throughout the culture—an unspoken statute of limitations on mourning” (Linenthal, 2001, p. 96). Within the confined space of the memorial, individuals experience the greatest freedom to mourn and release the emotions they are no longer permitted to express in society. Sharing in the comfort offered by the messages, dedications, and gifts along the fence, visitors are invited to add to development of symbols that relate the event to the act of keeping it in public memory (Mayo, 1988), and thereby, join in the memorial’s discourse of renewal.

The *Survivor Tree* remains the most profound symbol of spirituality and hope instilled in the Oklahoma City National Memorial. In the wake of the blast, the tree appeared lifeless—badly damaged with no leaves remaining. As time passed, the tree regenerated itself and is now situated prominently within the memorial. Foss (1986) explains that, as the audience assigns meaning for an object, “the boundaries imposed on interpretation by the physical object do not determine specific meaning for the work but rather discourage certain interpretations and encourage others by

providing experiential limits to the range of interpretation open to a viewer” (p. 330). The history of the *Survivor Tree* and the context in which it resides signify hope and rebirth—two aspects central to renewal (Seeger et al., 2005).

Finally, the Oklahoma City National Memorial’s commitment to conveying lessons of the senselessness of violence and the viability of peaceful resolution to conflict is clearly fitting with a discourse of renewal. Rather than simply lauding the courage and wherewithal of the community responding to an attack, the memorial offered a Dionysian perspective designed to invite interpretation and critical thought to inspire a pedagogical end (Stow, 2007). As Toelken et al. (2005) suggest, through renewal “crises can serve as the underlying source” for learning and change (p. 47). By pointing out “fallacious assumptions or unforeseen vulnerabilities” while re-establishing core values and precipitating “consensus, cooperation, and support” (Toelken et al., 2005, p. 47), the Oklahoma City National Memorial invites a dialectic tension capable of “simultaneous national celebration and critique” (Stow, 2007, p. 195). According to Stow (2007), a Dionysian account offers “a more balanced, less *hubristic* perspective” (p. 201) that “uses the sacrifice of the honored dead to inspire the polity to confront difficult political choices, and thereby to embrace a potentially new political identity and a different set of political solutions” (p. 196). To reiterate Blair et al. (1991), “commemorative monuments ‘instruct’ their visitors about what is to be valued in the future as well as in the past” (p. 263). The lessons shared at the memorial have clear relevance to the tragedy of the bombing and foster a prospective vision for peaceful resolution to the inevitable conflicts of the future through the reconstruction of core values.

As one visits the Oklahoma City National Memorial and experiences the prospective vision, core values, and instruction it provides, these messages stand the test of time by translating openly to current and future crises and threats (Blair & Michel, 2000). The memorial creates a context of peace and comfort that allows visitors from across the country and all over the world to remember the victims and experience the emotional healing that is a universal component of the indomitable human spirit. Healing leads to finding optimism in the midst of tragedy. Similarly, the values openly expressed in the memorial address both the sense of loss felt in Oklahoma City more than a decade ago and the perpetual and universal values of community and dedication. As visitors to the memorial relive the crisis, they are invited to reconnect with values focusing on children, spirituality—hope, and the selfless dedication of the many who served as first-responders and volunteers. In doing so, the memorial affirms the resilience of these values. An optimistic, prospective focus is established. Thus, by generating a discourse of renewal, the Oklahoma City National Memorial has lasting relevance for visitors now and far into the future.

The Oklahoma City National Memorial serves as a testament to the capacity for renewal. The memorial has a reach that reflects the character of those directly affected by the crisis, but also has a universal appeal by expressing the values many visitors hold dear. Future research should consider how the lessons learned by those who helped to bring the Oklahoma City National Memorial into existence might be

valuable to those working with other memorials, such as the World Trade Center or Hurricane Katrina. This research could foster the purposeful use of renewal discourse in the memorializing process and, ultimately, contribute to a better understanding of how memorials might best serve their constituents. The following practical applications provide a starting point for community leaders and communication practitioners to establish renewal through the memorializing process.

### Practical Applications

This analysis of the Oklahoma City National Memorial demonstrates that a discourse of renewal is amenable to both discursive and nondiscursive symbols. Those who want to communicate a discourse of renewal in the commemorative process would be wise to consider nondiscursive symbols in lieu of, or in addition to, discursive symbols. Nondiscursive symbols are amenable to subtle messages, allowing viewers to move beyond tragedy and contemplate, instead, notions of resilience and optimism. The following practical applications are most fitting for community leaders and communication practitioners who would be most likely involved in the development of a public memorial to a community crisis.

The Murrah Federal Building Memorial Task Force devoted considerable time to identifying and emphasizing a prospective vision. In doing so, the task force was able to move beyond the horrific event and focus on key values shared by all parties involved. Establishing such a prospective vision is an essential step for those who wish to establish renewal through the memorializing process. A forward-looking perspective characterizes the crisis as a starting point, rather than an ending, and thereby emboldens a community to endure in the wake of hardship. The Oklahoma City National Memorial's emphasis on shared values, optimism, and learning offers further clarity on the practical steps needed to establish a prospective vision in the memorializing process.

Simply emphasizing the future is not sufficient for a memorial to inspire a discourse of renewal. The Oklahoma City National Memorial legitimized its prospective vision by identifying consistent values that are not limited to the victims, their friends and relatives, and the area residents. Rather, the values they emphasized were also relevant to all who value justice and peace. Community leaders and communication practitioners charged with organizing the construction of memorials would be wise to follow this example. Identifying and expressing shared values is an essential step in creating a memorial that fosters identification and healing.

Ulmer et al. (2007) emphasize that optimism is essential in the discourse of renewal. Naturally, seeing optimism in a dreadful terrorist event appears, at the outset, absurd. The loss and suffering that accompany crises must be acknowledged. Still, the Oklahoma City National Memorial communicates optimism via a newfound sense of unity and resilience. Visitors are encouraged to find peace, hope, and confidence in the willingness of ordinary people to serve as heroes in trying times. Those who seek to communicate renewal in their memorials should take time to

reflect on the events and to visualize the optimism inspired by the community's commitment to overcoming the crisis.

Finally, the Oklahoma City National Memorial's dedication to teaching provides visitors with a sophisticated understanding of the tragedy and acknowledges the complexities of civilization. As Hurst (2002) explains, such learning opportunities are essential to the memorializing process. From the perspective of renewal, teaching is a dimension of the prospective outlook on the crisis. Thus, leaders and practitioners should take a Dionysian approach and reflect on the event in hopes of determining the lessons learned. These lessons need not be limited to the event itself. Rather, the larger scope of the event, its systematic causes, and the opportunities for enhanced knowledge and resilience should be emphasized.

Jacobs (2004) suggests "the tendency toward the sanctification of sites of violence" is especially important in cultures "seeking ways to publicly remember and memorialize acts of terrorism" (p. 311). The Oklahoma City National Memorial provides an example for how memorials can inspire a discourse of renewal. The healing power of shared grief allows visitors to look beyond the tragedy to see the optimism encouraged through renewal. This prospective vision is a foundation of renewal. Establishing shared values, finding optimism, and providing an opportunity for learning are practical steps for community leaders and communication practitioners who wish to establish renewal through the memorializing process.

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