

Climate Narratives

by Bill Herbst

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Narratives are the mechanism that shapes public opinion about most everything. Narratives are story lines. They presume to define the content and form of the drama of civilization — the ongoing plot of our collective life — convincing us that the story is unfolding in one way or another. Narratives define what's important and what's not, what's urgent and what can be relegated to the back burner, what's supposedly true and what's false. Both personal and collective narratives exist. Each of us has an individual story, and all of us together have one. Even though collective narratives tend to focus less on our lives as individuals than on our involvement in groups, they tell us what we should care about and how much, as members of society, as participants in culture, and as citizens of a nation. The often paradoxical connection between our personal lives — individual happiness and fulfillment — and our collective involvement in civilization are both subject to manipulation by narratives.

As I have written before — often — the great triumph of western psychology over the past 150 years occurred not in the arenas of mental health or therapy, but in mass mind control. Understanding the psychology of human beings as individuals and especially in groups has been a primary goal of social science, and, at every step along the way, principles have been discovered and techniques implemented for shaping opinion.

This is not to suggest that the therapeutic dimensions of psychology are nonexistent. Many theorists, practitioners, and students of modern psychology have worked to improve human health by smoothing the difficult path to maturity. Traditionally relegated to the realm of religion and spiritual realization, the institution of modern psychology has moved therapy out of the monastery and closer to the mainstream. But that effort has always been overshadowed and largely swamped by the more common interest in controlling human behavior to benefit commerce. Marketing, advertising, and propaganda have been the great triumphs of 20th- and 21st-century psychology. These manipulations have proven stunningly successful, so much so that they pulsate everywhere, in damn near everything society does. It's all about selling — selling products, selling ideas, selling attitudes, selling beliefs.

In the late-19th century, German philosopher Frederich Nietzsche wrote that God was dead, an assertion that announced the changing zeitgeist that would emerge in the 20th century. It didn't mean that monotheistic religions would vanish — they haven't — but it did predict a turbulent shift in collective human beliefs. For

instance, official excommunication for public display of heretical beliefs lost much of the restrictive power it had wielded for the Catholic Church over more than a millennia.

Something similar is happening in the 21st century with the concept of truth. Truth isn't necessarily "dead," although one might think so, given its long illness. It's more that the invocation of truth as an authoritative confirmation of belief is now suspect to the point of discredit. Bullshit has always called itself "truth," and sometimes done so quite successfully. In certain instances, bullshit posing as truth received rave reviews and overwhelming support from a gullible public. Now, however, bullshit has merged with mass marketing — it's not necessary for everyone to believe any particular bullshit, just a high enough percentage to guarantee brisk sales of the product or dissemination of the idea being hawked.

And so we come, once again, to climate change. Since the ruling elites and political policy-makers are unable and/or unwilling to take the crisis seriously, it falls to us — the great unwashed masses — to force them to deal with the problem through a mass mobilization from the grass roots up.

What's in the way of that mobilization? Many factors, but the one I want to address in this commentary post is *dueling narratives*. In the mainstream, a prevailing set of narratives supports the status quo of business-as-usual and lobbies for maintaining the day-to-day operations of society mostly as they are, with only minimal changes to commercial, social, and military activities. The other set of narratives suggests that we need major changes in very basic ways, and we need to make them NOW. I am obviously in favor of the latter set of narratives.

On the next two pages is a table that presents these conflicting narratives in a simple but comprehensive fashion, as 13 bullet-points or arguments. Taken as a whole, these 13 contrasting narratives give a pretty good picture of where Americans are now and where we need to be with regard to climate change. The battle of narratives is a key factor in shifting public opinion toward an effective grass-roots mobilization to address climate.

This table is taken from the essay "*Leading the Public into Emergency Mode*," by Margaret Klein Salomon. The table presents the narratives under the headings "False Narratives" versus "Truth." I'd prefer "prevailing assumptions" versus "accurate information", since the whole question of lies and fictions versus capital-T truth gets very dicey, but I'll leave the table's headings as published.

Although not well-known by the public, Salomon is a leading voice in the climate change movement. Her support among environmental activists is considerable:

"Margaret Klein Salomon is an invaluable guide to this moment." — Bill McKibben
"Salomon's work continues to lead the conversation." — Michael Mann
"No one has been more inspiringly clear-eyed about the climate emergency or what it demands than Margaret Klein Salomon." — David Wallace Wells

Salomon founded the organization *The Climate Mobilization*. Here's a link to the organization's web site: <https://www.theclimatemobilization.org>

Salomon's personal web page is entitled "The Climate Psychologist" — <http://theclimatepsychologist.com> — and her page on medium.com currently contains four invaluable essays — <https://medium.com/@margaretkleinsalomon>

False Narrative	Truth
2°C or 1.5°C of warming above pre-industrial levels represent "safe limits" to global warming.	1°C of warming is already dangerous. The climate is warmer now than at any time since human civilization began, and life threatening effects are already here.
Our grandchildren may be in a "climate emergency" sometime in the future if we don't change.	We are in a climate emergency right now.
We still have a sizable global "carbon budget" left to safely burn before things get really out of control.	There is no carbon budget left to guarantee a high probability of remaining below 1.5°C, a level of warming that would itself cause devastating impacts.
The transition to net zero greenhouse gas emissions can be a multi-decade effort. (I.e., we can continue emitting greenhouse gases for decades longer!)	There is no carbon budget left. We must stop emission as quickly as possible and begin drawing down greenhouse gasses from the atmosphere in order to ensure the survival of human civilization.
Climate justice and other social justice objectives are compatible with carbon gradualism.	The world's poor are already suffering climate change impacts such as displacement and food insecurity, and it will get much, much worse if we allow emissions to continue.
It's not worth solving the climate crisis and saving billions of lives unless we simultaneously create a utopian society.	There is no hope of achieving a better society if human civilization fails. Survival is the top priority.
Ending emissions will be "cheap," "easy" or "painless" and can be accomplished smoothly but slowly via market-based policy instruments alone (such as an emissions trading system or a carbon tax).	It is too late for a gradual, free-market approach. Sufficiently rapid transition can only be achieved with government coordination.
If we only reduce the fossil fuel industry's stranglehold on politicians, the problem will solve itself.	Our entire society must mobilize to implement a solution.
The climate crisis is only a dirty energy or electricity issue that can be solved without massive ecosystem restoration, the transformation of industrial and animal agriculture, and a revolution in land use and soil management.	Agriculture and land use are responsible for a large fraction of global greenhouse gas emissions. These sectors must be transformed to draw down excess carbon from the atmosphere.

A zero emissions-only strategy (without drawdown and possible cooling) is all that is needed to protect us from climate catastrophe.

Current atmospheric concentrations of greenhouse gasses are already unsafe and must be reduced.

Carbon drawdown approaches and solar radiation management should not be discussed as legitimate options or studied since they will only distract from emissions reduction and societal transformation.

All solutions must be considered, including temporary measures such as solar radiation management that can serve as a bridge to a sustainably safe climate.

The broader overshoot, sustainability, and mass extinction emergencies relating to over-consumption and economic growth are not worth mentioning or factoring into our policies as we respond to the climate crisis since they are overwhelming, not widely accepted by the public, and seem far away.

The effects of climate and environmental breakdown are already being felt globally. The public largely recognizes this, and is beginning to demand transformative change.

We are "fucked" – absolutely nothing we can do will help the situation. Science shows humanity will definitely go extinct by 2030 and all those calling for actions to avert catastrophe are spreading delusional "hopium."

The vast majority of scientists believe there is still a window of opportunity to address the crisis, but we must act as quickly as humanly possible.