

What If We're Telling the Wrong Stories About the Climate Crisis? Rebecca Solnit and Joan Halifax discuss the power of generative narratives.

Interview with [Rebecca Solnit](#) and [Joan Halifax](#) by [Sam Mowe](#) MAY 30, 2023

This conversation is an excerpt from Tricycle's second annual Buddhism and Ecology Summit, a weeklong event series focused on transforming anxiety into awakened action.

Sam Mowe: Rebecca, in *Not Too Late: Changing the Climate Story from Despair to Possibility* you describe the climate crisis as being, in part, also a storytelling crisis. What do you mean by that? And would you also describe the climate crisis as a spiritual crisis?

Rebecca Solnit: I think the spiritual crisis and the storytelling crisis are the same crisis. Capitalism would like us to believe that we're basically selfish individuals. Private individuals. And that what we most want and need are things money can buy—lots of stuff, plus maybe some sex and some family and lovers in our immediate vicinity. What other views of human nature tell us is, in fact, the things we most yearn for are broader connection, community, meaning, purpose, hope, and awe—these other things that capitalism is very bad at, which is why it would prefer we forget them.

Then there are stories about how change works, which suggest that change is something that the powerful hand down to us. That's a problem. Another problem with the story of change we often get is also a kind of capitalist story I call "instant results guaranteed or your money back." We have a demonstration on Monday and if the powers that be don't fall to their knees on Tuesday, people too often go away expecting that if nothing happened, then it didn't work. Whereas change is actually often very indirect. There are ripple effects. The story we're told about the nature of power is that it exists among the

officially powerful politicians and the wealthy. But ordinary people, massed together, can be more powerful than anything else.

Storytellers have the ability to change the story. With climate itself, there are just so many ways the story can be told differently. We see a lot of defeatist stories: that it's too late, we have no power, there's nothing we can do, nobody cares. I saw somebody on social media saying the climate denialists and the defeatists are telling us the same thing: don't do anything, there's nothing we can do. But of course, there's not only so much we can do, but there's so much already happening right now. The more closely you look, the more exciting it is—the energy transition, the research on new, better materials and energy sources, the growth of the climate movement, and the success of its ideas, which have become part of what the majority of people around the world, believe, support, care about, and think is urgent.

There are so many ways in which how we tell the story conceals or reveals what's possible, who we are, what we desire, what constitutes a good and meaningful life, or what the future can hold.

Roshi Joan Halifax: Our stories represent our views. And our views are deeply embedded within our society and also how the economic structures, as Rebecca has pointed out, shape our experience. We've been, in a certain way, colonized by late-stage capitalism. And we are in a process of decolonization, if you will, from the stories that have contributed not only to toxifying and mortifying the earth, but also the psyches of people all over the world. From my point of view, the value of practice to look deeply into reality, to see the truth of impermanence, to understand the power of the realization of *pratityasamutpada*, of co-arising or co-dependent arising, interconnectedness, interdependence, interpenetration. To understand there is no inherent self in the absolute sense, but that we are composed of all of the elements, and in a way, we are inhabiting each other there. Our subjectivity is coextensive with all of life. So being able to have the quality of mind to perceive reality deeply will make it

possible for us to actually shift our view of reality—not the distorted view of reality that is promulgated by the economic systems that are in control of so much of our world today. It takes determination. The Buddha said, “my dharma is swimming upstream.” And this is kind of an upstream swim, quite frankly. But you know what swimming upstream does for us? It makes us a heck of a lot stronger if we manage to navigate against the current of the times toward a reality that is sane and compassionate.

“What are the stories that are constructive and liberating?”

Talking about stories, I think it is important to understand the role of myths in society. We know that myths have had a tremendously important presence in culture for thousands of years. And in a way, we’ve jettisoned the typical myths that would guide our culture toward greater integrity. Myths come out of both the social structure and the psyche. The social structures that we live in are reflected in the psyche and the psyche influence our social structures. And those structures are reflected inside of the stories that are told through time, but also point toward timeless truths. Much of my work is, how do we actually come back to narratives that are generative? What are the stories that are constructive and liberating?

Rebecca Solnit: One familiar story is that we’re constantly told we live in an age of abundance. And some of us do live in material affluence and comfort. But part of that story is the idea that what the climate crisis requires of us is renunciation. I learned once from a Buddhist leader, or maybe a Catholic person, that renunciation can be great when you’re giving up something terrible. But the idea that we’re now living in abundance and must go to austerity, I think can be turned on its head. Look at the ways that we are austere in meaning, purpose, hope, social connection, justice. We’re impoverished in clean air, clean water, healthy topsoil, in the survival of so many species, and the health of the ocean. We either feel it as a kind of moral injury, or we experience a kind of moral numbing.

We can look forward to an age of abundance in these qualities we're currently austere in, but first we have to find the language, imagination, stories, and cultural structures to recognize, name, value, and make them central to who we are. Right now, I feel like we don't see nearly enough how poor we are in so many ways. We find it so normal to live in a world so poisoned by fossil fuels. Two-hundred-thousand people in Thailand were just hospitalized for particulate matter, air pollution inhalation, and more than eight million people a year die of air particulate matter from fossil fuels primarily, which is more than in any recent war. And yet we normalize this and think everything is fine. And that we have to give stuff up. What if we're giving up poison? What if we're giving up loneliness? What if we're giving up hopelessness? Those are the stories I'm trying to tell and the stories that I think will make us brave enough to make the transitions we need to make.

Sam Mowe is *Tricycle's* publisher.

Joan Halifax is a Buddhist teacher, anthropologist, and the author of *Shamanic Voices* and *Fruitful Darkness*. She is also the founder of the Ojai Foundation and Upaya Zen Center.

Rebecca Solnit is a writer, historian, and activist. Most recently, she edited *Not Too Late: Changing the Climate Story from Despair to Possibility*.