

# The Cognitive Science of Story

Can storytelling help us create a sustainable future?

presentation by BrightFlame

Center for Sustainable Futures

Teachers College, Columbia University

[www.tc.edu/sustainability](http://www.tc.edu/sustainability)

“Story is the world’s first virtual  
reality.

“You literally are there.”

~ Lisa Cron, author of *Wired for Story*

# We make sense of the world through story

- While experience is the best teacher, story is 2<sup>nd</sup> best since it simulates experience
- We try out new things
- We play out *What ifs* for various universal themes

“Narrative cognition is central to how humans reason and make sense of their experiences. We create personal or natural narratives from the events of our lives which become a resource for future knowledge, beliefs, and goal reasoning.”

~Tory S. Anderson, Georgia Institute of Technology

# Stories change beliefs

- We form beliefs as we experience our way through life and as we try on stories.
- Once beliefs form, facts will not get in.
- Only stories will change beliefs.



***THEY WANT TO BE FANS FOREVER.***

A public relations firm in Brazil countered the beliefs that stop people from donating organs by changing the narrative.

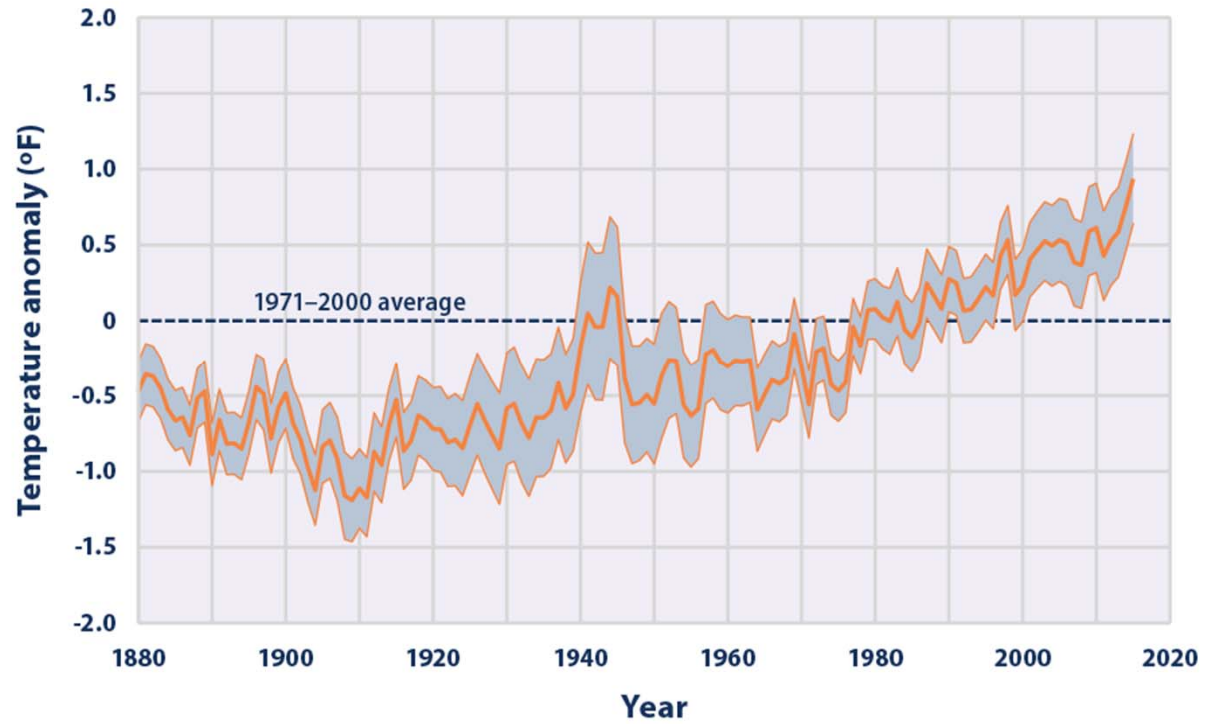
***flock.***



What story does  
this ad tell?



Which image is more persuasive and likely to get more traction, more buy-in for action?





# Reframe the story

- When we visualize the future we wish to create, we tell ourselves a new story.
- The story creates a new frame that affects our belief about what is possible.
- When you see/taste/hear/smell/sense that future, you engage emotion and make it real for yourself. You create a more fleshed out and believable target that inspires you. You shape your stories to reach the goal.
- You are more likely to inspire others and help reframe the story for them.

**To change the world, change the story!**

“Create new story that will let in facts.”

~ Annette Simmons, *The Story Factor*

# Emotion is the precursor of action

“In the long run, numbers numb, jargon jars, and nobody ever marched on Washington [or any political capital] because of a pie chart. If you really want to connect with your audience [including yourself!], give them what they’re waiting for – what we are always waiting for. Tell them your stories.”

~Andy Goodman, author, speaker, and consultant  
in the field of public interest communications

At the start of the workshop, BrightFlame led a visualization of the future we want to create. Here is what participants produced to capture the session:



**BrightFlame** is Strategist for Regenerative Earth Practices at the Center for Sustainable Futures. She is known worldwide for her teaching and writing that blend spirituality, science and activism towards a just, regenerative world. Her key focus is helping people connect with the Earth and develop a de-centered relationship with Nature and all beings. See her article “On Being the Earth” for a flavor of her work: [www.tc.columbia.edu/sustainability/news/stories-source/stories/on-being-the-earth/](http://www.tc.columbia.edu/sustainability/news/stories-source/stories/on-being-the-earth/).

Aligned with this theme, she is pursuing publication of her speculative fiction manuscript *The Working* and her recent short fiction appears in *Wards Literary Magazine*, Issue 06. (wardslitmag.com)

She holds a masters in educational psychology and loves to create experiences and workshops to help change the world. With her partner, she tends a native plant sanctuary.

# Selected Resources

- Annette Simmons (.com), author of *The Story Factor*, on communicating with stories.
- Andy Goodman teaches and writes about the power of story, particularly for nonprofits. [www.thegoodmancenter.com](http://www.thegoodmancenter.com)
- George Lakoff (.com), author of *Don't Think of an Elephant*, on framing. He is retired Distinguished Professor of Cognitive Science and Linguistics at the University of California at Berkeley and now Director of the Center for the Neural Mind & Society ([cnms.berkeley.edu](http://cnms.berkeley.edu)).
- Lisa Cron, author of *Wired for Story*, is a story coach who draws on the science of story. [wiredforstory.com](http://wiredforstory.com)
- Tory S. Anderson. “Goal Reasoning and Narrative Cognition.” presented at 2015 Annual Conference on Advances in Cognitive Systems, MIT. <http://goalreasoning.mit.edu/sites/default/files/documents/anderson.pdf>
- See how a media firm teamed with Recife Sports Club in Brazil to change the story about organ donation: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=E99ijQScSB8>