

# What is the Next Story?

CHARLES EISENSTEIN, JAN 9

As we move into the third decade of the 21st Century, the power of story is no longer a strange notion. We hear about ‘controlling the narrative’—the political narrative, brand narrative, etc., and even the relationship narrative. We have learned that our suffering and happiness depend much on what stories we tell ourselves about ourselves, the world, and each other.

Underneath our cultural and personal stories lies a deeper kind of story we might call a mythology. It comprises the tacit assumptions we hold in common about the nature of human beings and the world, assumptions so deep as to seem identical to reality itself. A mythology answers basic questions before one thinks to ask them: Why am I here? What is a self? What is real? What is important? How does change happen in the world? Where did we come from? Where are we going? What, if anything, is sacred? What is a man? What is a woman? What is the right way to live? What is right and what is wrong? How is one to gain reliable knowledge? Where is truth to be found? How did the world begin? What is the purpose of life?

The myths that answer these questions form the home we have inhabited. It was once, perhaps, a comfortable home. No longer. Many of us feel a profound alienation within it. Remember, the myth claims to be reality itself. Therefore, when we have experiences that don’t fit into it, we fall under suspicion of madness. Powerful forces (social, economic) conspire to conform us to the reigning story even if, as is increasingly the case, no one truly believes it anymore.

Nevertheless, upon the foundation of the old story still rests our system and much of our psychology. Today, many of us sense seismic shifts in both. We have the feeling that everything will change. What we are sensing here is the metamorphosis of these basic myths that create the world. That is why I say we are in a transition from an old to a new story. Many are well familiar with this idea, but I’d like to clarify exactly what I think these old and new stories may be.

I use the terms old story and new story sometimes a bit carelessly. Sometimes instead I speak of a “next story” or call it a “new and ancient story,” for indeed, the next story draws from ancient roots. Nevertheless, it is new for those of us who grew up immersed in the systems and psychology of the old story. I call the old story the Story of Separation. The new story, I call the Story of Interbeing, using the term popularized by Thich Nhat Hanh.

And yes, the whole idea that the world is built on a story, and that that story is now changing, is itself a story. But a story is not merely an artificial overlay of meaning atop reality. That too would be a story, holding meaning and matter, information and existence, apart. A story or a mythology is no mere human creation, though we are instruments of its creation. And it is a being in its own right. Therefore, please do not take my description of how I see the next story as an attempt to dictate it.

Old Story: I am a separate self: a bubble of psychology, a soul encased in flesh, or a biochemical machine.

New Story: I am a holographic mirror of all that is, a nexus point in an infinite web of relationship.

\* \* \*

Old Story: I exist independently.

New Story: I exist relationally.

\* \* \*

Old Story: What happens to other beings or the world need not affect me, because I am separate.

New Story: What happens to others or the world will always affect me, because self and other are inseparably related.

\* \* \*

Old Story: The driving force of human behavior, especially economic behavior, is to maximize rational self-interest.

New Story: Human beings yearn to express their gifts towards something meaningful. We each have a unique and necessary gift for the world.

\* \* \*

Old Story: Ethical, moral, pro-social behavior requires overcoming the natural tendency towards selfishness; it requires a conquest of nature internally, waging a war against the self.

New Story: Ethical, moral, pro-social behavior is a core part of human nature that expresses itself in the right conditions and can be nourished and developed.

\* \* \*

Old Story: The driving force of biological behavior and evolution is the maximization of reproductive self-interest. Nature is best understood as a life-or-death competition, a war of each against all.

New Story: Living beings seek not only to survive, but to express their gifts to the ecosystem and the totality of life, to fulfill their role and function.

\* \* \*

Old Story: The forces of nature are indifferent to humanity. The other beings of nature are indifferent or hostile to human well-being. Progress therefore comes through domination of nature.

New Story: The universe is generous. We can thrive by cooperating with the forces of nature and the rest of life.

\* \* \*

Old Story: The selfish gene is the subject of evolution, which happens through random mutation followed by natural selection.

New Story: Symbiosis and the merger of organisms into larger wholes drives evolutionary novelty. Mutations are not random. The needs of the organism, the community, the ecosystem, the planet, and even the cosmos affect the direction of genetic and epigenetic change.

\* \* \*

Old Story: Well-being comes through control of natural forces and domination of biological and social competitors.

New Story: Well-being comes through participation, community, intimacy, and sharing.

\* \* \*

Old Story: The events and people we encounter in life are basically random.

New Story: Every person we encounter and everything we experience mirrors or reveals something in ourselves. Synchronicity reveals an implicate order to the world.

\* \* \*

Old Story: Change happens through the application of force. Therefore, human progress means greater and greater ability to apply force, and to manipulate the world with greater and greater precision.

New Story: Force is but one means through which creative intelligence is made manifest. The universe operates through morphic resonance: any change that happens anywhere, no matter how small, contributes to a field in which that change happens everywhere.

\* \* \*

Old Story: The world outside the human is deterministic or random. It has no innate intelligence or order. Life evolved essentially by chemical accident.

New Story: Intelligence, order, and life are basic properties of the universe. The world is full of beings, and of being. Order and complexity emerge spontaneously out of chaos.

\* \* \*

Old Story: The great purpose and destiny of humanity is to bring order and intelligence to a world that has none of its own.

New Story: The purpose of humanity is to participate in the unfolding of life and beauty in the cosmos.

\* \* \*

Old Story: Only what can be weighed, counted, or measured is real.

New Story: Reality has a qualitative dimension that will always elude reduction to quantity.

\* \* \*

Old Story: The universe is like a machine, best understood by analyzing the action of mathematically describable forces on its parts. To understand something, take it apart.

New Story: The universe is alive. Reductionistic causal explanations cannot grasp the phenomenon of life. Emergent qualities of wholes explain the behavior of the parts.

\* \* \*

Old Story: At bottom, reality consists of generic building blocks with standard properties, each identical to the others. The uniqueness of macro objects is merely the result of different permutations of the same generic building blocks.

New Story: Every being, even an electron, is unique. That's why each behaves differently (quantum acausality). Reality is the totality of the relationships among unique beings at every scale.

\* \* \*

Old Story: The universe progresses inexorably toward greater entropy. The amount of usable energy is finite and ever-decreasing. Scarcity is built into physics.

New Story: New energy and new matter are forever being born. Infinite energy is available from literally nothing. Abundance is built into physics.

\* \* \*

Old Story: Consciousness is the byproduct of brain electrochemistry, and ceases upon death.

New Story: The brain is a receiver or a seat of consciousness, which outlasts the body and the brain.

\* \* \*

Old Story: The soul (if it exists at all) is separate from the body, which is basically a flesh robot.

New Story: The body is the soul made flesh.

\* \* \*

Old Story: Spirit is outside matter (either in a separate realm, or not existing at all).

New Story: Spirit and matter are not separate. Modern society simply does not recognize many aspects of the world, casting them out of matter into a separate realm called spirit.

\* \* \*

Old Story: God is separate from creation (either ruling it from outside, or not existing at all)

New Story: There is nothing that is not God. God and creation are one. All is sacred.

\* \* \*

Old Story: Mind is superior to emotion, spirit is superior to flesh, high is better than low, God is in

the sky.

New Story: High and low, spirit and flesh, sky and soil, mind and emotion are all integral, necessary, and coequal notes in the symphony of being.

\* \* \*

Old Story: Human life before science, technology, and civilization was a brutal struggle for survival.

New Story: Stone Age life was abundant in terms of diet, art, music, spirituality, leisure, and culture.

\* \* \*

Old Story: Science has brought us from ignorance and superstition to true knowledge.

New Story: Knowledge and ways of knowing outside of science are essential to human development and practical affairs.

\* \* \*

Old Story: Technology has brought us from abject helplessness to mastery over the material world.

New Story: Humans can develop capacities that modern technology cannot dream of—through partnership with the world rather than mastery of it.

\* \* \*

Old Story: Health comes through control: over the body, the genes, the environment, and human interactions.

New Story: Health comes through aligning our interventions with the innate intelligence of the body, and bringing health to soil, water, and the rest of life.

\* \* \*

Old Story: Our hi-tech, scientific, developed society is more advanced than those in undeveloped parts of the world. Their progress means becoming more like us.

New Story: Indigenous and traditional cultures are in certain ways more highly advanced, more developed, than modern society. We have much to learn from them.

\* \* \*

Old Story: Nature is separate from ourselves. It is the “environment” containing resources for us to use.

New Story: Nature is part of us and we are part of nature.

\* \* \*

Old Story: The destiny of humanity is to perfect our understanding (through science) and control (through technology) to rise above nature, leave earth behind, conquer disease, suffering, and even death.

New Story: The destiny of humanity is to bring all our gifts and powers into the service of life, to create beauty and wonders, and to witness what life creates through us and around us. It starts with healing the damage done in the Age of Separation.

\* \* \*

You can see that neither of these two stories is a disconnected list of things we like or things we don't like. Each item coheres with all the others. This explains the natural alliance that someone working to end punishment-based "justice" may feel with someone working to develop holistic beekeeping practices. What exactly is this movement of which so many of us feel a part? We are drawing from the same story, seeking the same story, sometimes acting from the same story. We are trying to translate it into relationships, politics, systems, gardens, parenting, work, education, technology, money, medicine, and religion. We may not always agree on what the story is. We may hold healthy resistance to uniformity of our stories, but that doesn't matter because ultimately we are not their creators. It is our stories that create us.

Here I have offered my best, groping attempt at putting into words something much bigger than words. I hope nonetheless that the words will aid in understanding the world we have inherited, whose systems and structures are built on the scaffold of the Story of Separation, as well as the world that may come as we draw on and enact the Story of Interbeing. Can you imagine what the world will look like, when the Story of Interbeing assumes the status of obvious truth?