

# Environmentalism: Now With More Empathy for Conservatives

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We live in an age where stories of war, disease, hatred and celebrity wardrobe decisions spread at the speed of light. Some activists see waste and ignorance that needs to be toppled — others among us see an opportunity to widely disseminate a story that also speaks to people's fears, indignance and boredom, but swiftly moves them to an inspiring new vision of what is possible for them to create here and now. It appears we have the raw materials for such a thing: The task of turning cynicism and apathy around has, in fact, a grounding in recent Ivy-League, Nobel Prize-winning psychological research. Tesla Motors' slick electric cars make headlines and high stock prices, with promises of bigger industrial feats to come. Better Block's citizen activist-entrepreneurs, though without explicitly environmental aims, take over and renovate abandoned lots and storefronts with a joyful and reckless glee that's already gone viral. The idea that one could wrap these names, and the stories they represent, into a bigger and more powerful narrative — a story that reframes environmentalism as a sane, responsible, happy, energetic, and even profitable endeavor that inspires even the most apathetic to act — is less unthinkable.

The point of this essay is to craft such a story, one that can quickly do all of that, and explain why it would work. That story is largely about what organizations like Tesla and Better Block do that protests and marches, as of yet, don't: empathize with and reverse

a storied public distrust of environmentalism and other idealistic causes. Protests tend to exacerbate that distrust.

Activists always had a problem on their hands with public perception of climate given the breadth of the issue. Then paralysis, apathy and mistrust slipped in — all of which needs to be addressed now. An August 2014 New Scientist article interviewed Nobel Prize-winning psychologist and human decision-making expert Daniel Kahneman and gathered from him that, climate change, “a distant problem that requires sacrifices now to avoid uncertain losses far in the future,” is “exceptionally hard” for us humans to accept or tackle.<sup>1,2</sup> That's to begin with. On top of that, a popular, divisive rhetoric portrays the economy and environment as competing causes. As the authors of green technology and policy bible *Natural Capitalism* state, “When citizens who are not experts in climatology watch Nightline and hear one scientist state that automotive emissions of CO2 could lead to killer hurricanes and massive crop loss while the other says that not using carbon-based fuels will signal the end of Western civilization, the citizens are left confused and disheartened.”<sup>3</sup> What's more, stressed, combative, easily-angered, and anxious activists make activism actually look painful to be a part of — even giving in to an unhealthy part of the culture we're supposedly trying to change — an ultimately unsustainable task. As community-strengthening advocates Sophy

Banks and Rob Hopkins write in the *Transition Companion*, "It's common in our culture to override these warning signs, and we can often be praised as being heroic in keeping going in spite of them. In this we repeat the pattern of our wider culture..."<sup>4</sup> New protests seem to be exacerbating the perception issue, and all of it is reinforcing the notion that it's not worth it to act.

Tesla, Better Block and others are responding to this dilemma in a way that creates much less of a pessimistic perception. They're reducing the complexity of the humongous task of "bettering the environment" down to a few easily-understood options that do their best to not be divisive, draining, or vague; rather, they're creative courses of action, with specific examples and concrete outcomes. Vitality, there are clear reasons to believe current efforts will grow and spread as was always hoped for but never materialized. If a precise blueprint to realize environmentalist goals is the centerpiece of this new narrative, then: how do citizens' efforts form a cohesive whole with the actions of CEOs and politicians; why do we predict any of it will have any effect; and, why don't we think it's hopeless or uneconomic?

The idea that it's possible to create such a quickly told, easily-remembered story encapsulating all of this, one that actually spreads far and fast, appears to be gaining traction. Columbia University's Center for Research on Environmental Decisions (CRED) uses hard

research in psychology and economics to recommend and demonstrate their version of "appropriate language, metaphor, and analogy; combined with narrative storytelling; made vivid through visual imagery and experiential scenarios."<sup>5</sup> Climate writer Joe Romm emphasizes the importance of political narratives and their components: In his 2013 book entitled *Language Intelligence: Lessons on Rhetoric from Jesus, Shakespeare, Lincoln, and Lady Gaga*, he spends entire chapters on repetition, irony, foreshadowing and extended metaphor. Why? Even a sound bite of a well-crafted story can carry a lot of ideas with it, and stick in memory better than an army of facts and statistics can. People are working on doing this as well as possible for a climate narrative.

It's appeared to work for the other side, at least. Romm states bluntly that there's been a "messaging failure by the scientific and environmental communities, and progressive politicians."<sup>6</sup> He quotes E.J. Dionne, who wrote that "Reagan was laying the groundwork for a critique of liberalism that held sway in American politics long after he left office,"<sup>7</sup> and that, in fact, "Progressives will never reach their own Morning in America unless they use the Gipper's method to offer their own critique of the conservatism he helped make dominant."<sup>8</sup> If people do worry that activists will 'green' civilization by vanquishing industry and leaving society neutered, a

countervailing vision needs to be offered.

A short version of the new story might go like this: Tesla Motors' billions can make people trust hippies again. Despite the lack of realism of the environmental movement past, and the marketing power of established industries like oil and gas, there are many industrial magnates, policy makers and average citizens finding millions and billions of dollars in green entrepreneurship and community-building, and this effort is growing. They're proving in big and public ways that both CEOs and soccer moms can stave off climate change while avoiding draining partisan bickering.

The hope is a story that could spread at high velocity through social media and at social occasions, for once spreading hope and vigor like a virus, instead of paralysis. And if someone derives memorable slogans, rhetoric, and speeches from such a narrative, they could act as force multipliers for the climate movement. We'd be going beyond the choir to draw in a new circle of entrepreneurs and activists, and then the next, and then the next, and so on. If anyone can reasonably predict that growth potential, for a cause people want to support but supposedly didn't think would succeed, widespread appeal should actually be within sight. With luck, we'll see a story that can unite the liberal and conservative viewpoints in a successful political and social movement that decisively tackles

climate and energy. Here's an attempt at that.

## Storied Mistrust of Environmentalists

Even internationally-renowned consulting firm Price Waterhouse Coopers affirms in the dismally-titled “Too Late for Two Degrees?”, their 2012 report on climate and industry, that “business-as-usual is not an option”.<sup>9</sup> The September 2014 People’s Climate March restated this message, rightly. But if this issue really is that hard for humans to process, if the public already feels drained and disinterested, if marches seem like nothing new, then further alarms and protests just portray activism as ineffective and out-of-touch. Perhaps protests need to turn into barn-raising, teaching something or making something (which is basically what Better Block does) but now while simultaneously delivering a litany of complaints, in order to be accepted by America’s entrepreneurial culture.

Otherwise, it’ll have to be shown how protests as staunch gestures of defiance of the status quo, as principled as they are, do anything, and how they can overcome the current apathy. But Ivy League and Nobel Prize-winning authors seem to have found some methods to do just that. Igniting a spark in the public mind that turns into an entrepreneurial and political blaze might not be impossible, then.

However, in lieu of that having as strong and quick of an

effect as we need it to, the tools of business and engineering — tools which have already proven themselves to Americans — may well get us back out of the mess less-thoughtful industrialists got us into, either by creating a better future or igniting that spark.

*Reinventing Fire*, written by Amory Lovins and the Rocky Mountain Institute, and published in 2011, is essentially a bible of policy and engineering solutions to climate and energy problems, endorsed by major CEOs like Shell Oil’s, and leaders like Bill Clinton. They drive home this point as much as they can: Only if we assume a better future is hard to create, it will be. As they recount, “The December 2009 Copenhagen climate conference proved again how pricing carbon and winning international collaboration are hard if policymakers, pundits, and most citizens *assume* climate protection will be costly.”<sup>10</sup> They further assert that “[changing] the conversation to wealth creation, jobs, and competitive advantage sweetens the politics so much that any remaining resistance can melt faster than the glaciers.”<sup>11</sup>

But even then, perhaps there are enough people, especially in America, so mistrustful of anything ‘green’ or idealistic that something more than just stories of hopeful successes like Tesla and Better Block are needed to provoke interest. Alternately, it’s a lack of empathy on the part of the environmentalists and scientists for the public that is the real problem. Climate opposition may be based less in stubborn

adherence to a countervailing scientific theory and more in a general rejection of vaguely optimistic New Age hippies, government spenders and panicked activists; that would be a place to start reconciling. And if there are indeed people who’d like to pitch in but don’t want to be associated with a draining, divisive struggle — as some perceive the movement to be embroiled in — seeing conciliatory gestures to ‘enemies’ might just be convincing enough for them to lend a hand.

One way to understand the lack of trust is to lay some of the blame on the counterculture and progressive movements, which once overpromised and underdelivered, allowing conservatives and others to turn off. Daniel Quinn starts his 1992 novel *Ishmael* commenting on this, the narrator describing how he and others lost faith in their idealism during the “children’s revolt of the sixties and seventies”:<sup>12</sup>

“I expected to hear laughter in the air and to see people dancing in the streets, and not just kids — everyone! I won’t apologize for my naïveté; you only have to listen to the songs to know that I wasn’t alone. Then one day when I was in my mid-teens I woke up and realized that the new era was never going to begin. [...] ‘Nobody’s out to save the world, because nobody gives a damn about the world, that was just a bunch of goofy kids talking. Get a job, make some money,

work till you're sixty, then move to Florida and die.”<sup>13</sup>

It was as if the optimism bubble burst and no one wanted to buy back in: Whether it was hope for a better environment or for any kind of better society, it seemed suspect. Even really smart people seemed to lose their powers in the less-than-perfect war on poverty of the 1960's; and the same shortcomings lent ammunition to the critique of government as wasteful and harmful. Paul Tough's 2012 book *How Children Succeed* talks about Ivy League researchers, teachers and Nobel-winning economists making big advances in tackling poverty, achievement gaps, mental health and more. Along the way he tries to explain why some of these advances didn't appear earlier. He, for one, thinks it has to do with the severity and embarrassment of past missteps. As he states: "Some of the interventions that made up the War on Poverty were effective — but plenty of them weren't. And plenty more seemed to do more harm than good. And if you're someone who believes that smart people working through government can solve big problems, that is a harsh truth to admit..."<sup>14</sup> This, too, plays into, and in fact provides some evidence for, the larger conservative argument that activists need to address. Here we can see more roots of a widespread fear that something new will actually be the same old, and a lasting impression that

idealism failed once, and could easily do so again.

As the *Natural Capitalism* authors suggested earlier, we do have a paralyzing public debate particularly for environmentalism. They think this polemic is encouraged by a conflict-hungry media, and "ignores the possibility that innovative, pragmatic solutions might exist that can satisfy the vast majority of Americans and make the wrangling irrelevant."<sup>15</sup> Frame issues with even a hint of divisiveness and it risks reinforcing the notion that there are only bad options to choose from, and that maybe the problem is too big to solve anyway. The issue seems too big to fit into our "finite pool of worry,"<sup>16</sup> and we do our best to ignore it.

So now, even if activists have scientific evidence on their side and want to vocally emphasize that, they have to try something new. Specifically, they want the other side to trust that a mutual understanding is possible in spite of sharp divides. Activists remaining steadfast in their critique while earnestly examining the best, most valid parts of the opposition's reasoning may do it. That means saving scolding for after exercising patience and empathy: things that build trust. In an ideal world, this will undo many years worth of mistrust and miscommunication. But even if hardcore science-deniers still balk, others just needed to see someone argue for a position without being divisive about it, since divisiveness can be draining to be part of. They may sign on.

## New Mindsets

A larger issue, and the source of the most earth-shaking possibility here, may be in the fact that many people don't believe they have the capacity to handle things they're unfamiliar with. Cognitive psychology gives us a lot of tools to escape this helpless thinking: two recent books especially do so, Daniel Kahneman's *Thinking, Fast and Slow* and Paul Tough's *How Children Succeed*. Both contain research that can effectively change how one thinks, but perhaps the most powerful and versatile idea of the lot is the growth mindset. This originated from Stanford's Dr. Carol Dweck, who saw a huge difference between people "who believe that intelligence and other skills are essentially static and inborn," as in a fixed mindset, and people "who believe that intelligence can be improved," as in a growth mindset.<sup>17,18</sup> Losing the fixed mindset takes the leash off human ability. For example, in several of the controlled experiments Dweck and others have run, students were told that intelligence can increase with hard work, and that it's not just a fixed quantity they're stuck with. The students who heard this improved their grades significantly. Why does that happen? It could be in part because the 'growth mindset message' eases or even removes distracting fears that take mental energy to fight, like fear of confirming that one is bad at math.

Free of that, one can use that energy to work hard.<sup>19</sup>

Can we actually make people 'better' this way? It could well be. Nobel Prize-winning economist James Heckman was on "This American Life" defending these ideas and even the host, Ira Glass, said, "he can sound positively Utopian". Heckman acknowledges that making people better is a big goal, but presses on anyway: "[O]ne of the reasons why people don't think it's a possibility is they think these traits are fixed at birth or fixed so early there's not much we can do about it...[But] these human capabilities can be shaped...There are these happy times in science and social science and knowledge where different strands come together. And I think we're at such a time."<sup>20</sup>

It seems, then, we've got a lot of research about why people can find it difficult to identify and pursue optimistic choices. But wherever that thinking came from, we can start to undo it. Then perhaps the technology and policy solutions we need can be paired with the energized, persevering and optimistic people needed to implement them.

Daniel Quinn in *Ishmael* argues a big and optimistic vision is something we've needed all along: "People need something positive to work for... [they] need more than to be scolded, more than to be made to feel stupid and guilty. They need more than a vision of doom. They need a vision of the world and of themselves that inspires them. Stopping pollution is not inspiring. Sorting your trash is not inspiring..." A

vision of people becoming truly better than they are might do it.

But it can be made easier with concrete examples of how to contribute, or if it's clear how individual efforts tie into the larger picture. That's where Quinn and others in the counterculture stop short; then other leaders pick up the slack, like Rob Hopkins, founder of the Transition Towns community-organizing movement. His life mission appears to be to find those concrete examples. As he states in his 2013 book *The Power of Just Doing Stuff*, "The problems we face are big, and most of us are not used to thinking that we can do anything on that kind of scale...we need to see some kind of pathway of possibility — see that our actions actually can make a difference."<sup>21</sup> That is, motivating average citizens to pursue global-scale goals requires showing how individuals working a human-scale 9-to-5 can play a role in something much bigger. It also means showing off pilot projects that are impressive enough to inspire trust in the promise of a better future.

## Powerful Pilot Projects

*Natural Capitalism, Cradle to Cradle, The Upcycle* and *Reinventing Fire* don't neglect how large and seemingly intractable the problems we face are. Still, they do not devote nearly as many pages to problems as to extensive and detailed solutions, in analyses backed up by people like Bill Clinton, and reviewers at GM, NASA, Boeing, Ford, Johnson Controls and more. They seem to

recognize that vague optimism and angry scolding aren't useful, nor are they craved — rather, the 'how', the practical details, the things people can still do — that's what will make ears perk up. *The Upcycle* takes this a step further, with radically hopeful rhetoric: "You are a known positive. No need to think of yourself as misplaced in the natural world, or that you cause destruction...Be successful. We hope to enjoy all that you share. And tell your children that things are looking up."<sup>22</sup> Perhaps this is exaggerated, but it may be novel enough to get attention. Even entrenched pessimism may be roused.

They still can't do what Tesla Motors' story can, though. Tesla is making headlines, cover stories and billions of dollars in electric vehicles.<sup>23</sup> What that story suggests is that if ever we were wrong about electric cars being unprofitable, maybe we'll be wrong about the rest. Maybe all we need to do is apply the thinking that was applied to Tesla to everything else — to renewables, agriculture, manufacturing, transportation — and we'll get the future we want. That thinking might consist of a mature growth mindset, driven and idealistic but grounded in recognition of unpleasant truths. Founder Elon Musk, Fortune's 2013 businessperson of the year, in his own words, "thought the likeliest outcome was failure"<sup>24</sup> when he was starting Tesla and commercial space-flight company SpaceX. Chris Anderson of TED writes in the cover story that what propelled them past near-disaster was Musk's "conviction," — i.e. his

“strength of feeling that the possibility had to be pursued”.<sup>25</sup> This isn't to say he's completely noble or perfect: Fortune more recently suggested he can also be brilliantly manipulative.<sup>26</sup> But it's still exciting to see someone so invested in creating a renewable future also possess the self-control and grit to realize it with well-designed products and business strategies. A Tesla car in yet another driveway is a new opportunity for conversations about making something truly valuable while doing something good for the environment, in ways that maybe some of us thought we couldn't — shrewd money-making, but perhaps also genius activism.

Of course, having only Elon Musk as a role model is limited. Others will act only if they can do so in their own locale, or only if they can act while also placing a high priority on safeguarding themselves from a potentially turbulent future. This is why the Transition Towns movement started, which strives to bring any given community from zero activism to local solar panel businesses, as a means to create and inspire a better future while also preparing for whatever the future actually holds. The movement has published dozens of books pointing to business and community innovations Transition has inspired in towns and cities across the world. Better Block does the same, but sometimes better, and without an explicit environmentalist bent, with trainings that involve participants going out and doing the stuff that participants in Transition Town

workshops and trainings only learn how to do, such as renovating public land without permits and test-running coffee shops on sidewalks for a day.<sup>27,28</sup> In short they appear to be figuring out better ways to use their volunteers' time. And isn't that exciting? Ordinary citizens care enough about what they're evangelizing, of which creates a snowball effect of innovation on their own. Lyft, Uber, AirBnB, Couchsurfing.org, RelayRides and more give such community building and resource sharing even more tools. So for the many who think protesting is the only meaningful thing you can do as an individual: it's not. The means to strengthen our communities can grow at the pace of technology, and can do so much for our collective hopes.

One particularly powerful example of this happens to be Pittsburgh, Pa. neighborhood Larimer, which recently received \$30,000,000 for green community-building projects after a decade or more of organizing.<sup>29</sup> The residents, largely minority and not exactly rich, still had a powerful enough vision of what Larimer looked like in the 1960's that they were able to persuade everyone else living there, along with officials in city hall, that there was a path out of the decay of the 1990's. They were right. These were ordinary citizens working nine-to-five jobs — if they could do this, probably anyone can.

## New Narratives

Of course, there are still polluting companies out there.

One shouldn't go about completely neglecting the problems, the sources of the problems and the ways in which those problems are obfuscated. Price Waterhouse Coopers' 2012 report uses all the tools of a famed business consultancy to predict that “businesses, governments and communities across the world need to plan for a warming world — not just 2°C, but 4°C and, at our current rates, 6°C,” and that yes, “business-as-usual is not an option.”<sup>30,31</sup> What if Better Block's street-level activism and Tesla's industrial scale activism could be used as platforms to speak out against companies we know aren't changing, or are launching marketing campaigns to bolster fossil-fuel interests? We could offer realizations of an alternative vision while also acknowledging some companies are subpar.

Also, it's worth noting regulation favoring carbon-cutting could still greatly add to the flame, if it manages to be conservative-friendly enough, and it does suggest the stories we tell should also mention these alternative pathways when we get a chance. Books like *Nudge* by Richard Thaler offer that there are many ways to encourage good decisions without coercion (with a nudge, rather than a push) or creating new overly costly government bureaucracy — both major concerns on the right. In this vein, we see ambitious political activism and a push for party-bridging legislation coming from an organization called the Citizen's Climate Lobby. They want a carbon “fee”, which like a carbon

tax, imposes fees for carbon use, but gives back refunds and more in the same amount at the end of the year, no matter what. Then, more money is given if more carbon is saved. Supposedly this would be “revenue-neutral, giving this proposal a much better chance of attracting the Republican support needed for passage”.<sup>32</sup> Whether it’ll work better than what Tesla is doing, or gain critical mass more easily than community-building, remains to be seen, but it does offer one more path of action for people working more on the individual level.

That said, there’s so much more that can be said besides what many have not evidently heard yet: This is possible to do. We don’t have to tear ourselves apart to do it, it’s just plain hopeful and not divisive, and you can take part whatever your resources.

Plus, it may be that the business route can do the most for activism overall. If massive profit is generated on the industrial scale,

it proves this seemingly all-consuming malevolent force that is capitalism doesn’t have to be destructive. All those risking the future in the name of profit: It’s beginning to look like they’re just lazy and uncreative slobs, not real, hard-working capitalists. It’s also that we get more certainty that unchecked business forces won’t necessarily obliterate whatever citizens create. What’s more, if we could see business (supposedly callous) suddenly become an unstoppable force for good that would be a great and powerful story to tell. That’s a dramatic way of seeing it, but it may still speak to the fears and apathy people feel, in ways the struggle of protests or bland, but useful regulation can’t. If it’s possible to give people a job that allows them to not contribute to a broken system, while giving them a stable, reasonable income — that’s the real political gain.

How to exactly craft a messaging strategy based on such

a narrative that will be impactful is a topic for another essay. Joe Romm in *Language Intelligence* devotes a whole chapter to the importance of repetition: repeating specific words and narratives many times, over and over, with the knowledge that that’s the only way they actually reach all of your audience. CRED has its tables of non-jargon words. The environmental movement hasn’t really used any of this yet, but it can.

And so if cognitive psychologists voice severe doubts as to how much it’s possible to convince people, one can counter that people have only just started to tackle this thing for real. We have seen only the tip of the iceberg of what climate change can do to us, but we’ve also only seen the smallest beginnings of human efforts to stop it.

1 George Marshall, "Understand faulty thinking to tackle climate change," *New Scientist*, August 18, 2014 <<http://www.newscientist.com/article/mg22329820.200-understand-faulty-thinking-to-tackle-climate-change.html>> (accessed October 24, 2014).<sup>2</sup> George Marshall, "Understand faulty thinking..." *New Scientist*.<sup>3</sup> Paul Hawken, Amory B. Lovins, and L. Hunter Lovins, *Natural Capitalism: Creating the Next Industrial Revolution*, Boston: Little, Brown and Co., 1999, 310.<sup>4</sup> Rob Hopkins, *The Transition Companion*, White River Junction, VT: Chelsea Green Pub., 2011, 183. <sup>5</sup> "The Psychology of Climate Change Communication." *Center for Research on Environmental*

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<sup>10</sup> Amory B. Lovins, *Reinventing Fire: Bold Business Solutions for the New Energy Era*, White River Junction, VT: *Chelsea Green Pub.*, 2011, 239.<sup>11</sup> Ibid.<sup>12</sup> Daniel Quinn, Ishmael, 1992, Reprint, New York, NY: *Bantam/Turner Books*, 1995, 5.<sup>13</sup> Ibid.<sup>14</sup> Paul Tough, *How Children Succeed: Grit, Curiosity, and the Hidden Power of Character*, Boston, MA: *Houghton Mifflin Harcourt*, 2012, 187.<sup>15</sup> Hawken et al, *Natural Capitalism*, 310.<sup>16</sup> "The Psychology of Climate Change..." *Center for Research on Environmental Decisions*. <sup>17</sup> Tough, *How Children Succeed*. 97.<sup>18</sup> Ibid, 97.<sup>19</sup> Ibid, 98.<sup>20</sup> Ibid. <sup>21</sup> Rob Hopkins, *The Power of Just*

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