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The varying narratives of climate change

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Eco Catholic

A lot depends on the story you tell, not just for you but also for the environment around you.

Climate change has fostered abuse narratives. We abused the environment for this long, and now we must go into recovery mode. Our dark narratives are about the theme of abuse; our hopeful narratives are about recovery. Recovery alone is way too small a destination for this time -- we need a more muscular story.

Just 140 years ago, we were able to see 100 feet down into Lake Tahoe's legendary clear blue waters. But over time, the view has muddied, with scientists now recording clarity of just 75 feet. I can scare you with more statistics, and as important as it may be to know lake clarity, it is even more important to clarify the narratives. Do they hold true?

In the abuse-and-recovery narrative, there is a hint of sexual violation. Somebody hurt somebody, and she has to get over it and beyond it. There is the gnawing fear, persistently, that sometimes the damages are irreparable.

Rita Nakashemi Brock uses another interesting narrative when working with veterans. The founder of the Soul Repair Center based in Fort Worth, Texas, she argues that while some have post-traumatic stress syndrome, even more have a spiritual disease. She calls it "moral injury," which means "having to make difficult choices under extreme conditions, experiencing morally anguishing events or duties, witnessing immoral acts of behaving in ways that profoundly challenge their own values."

Moral injury is a disempowering narrative. Its antidote is moral virtue. Many of us are seeking moral virtue out of our moral injury around climate change. We know we are part of something that we don't think we can stop. Underneath the moral injury narrative there is a sense of impotence. Somebody else is in charge, and it is not me.

In the abuse-and-recovery narrative, we also depend on the addiction narrative, seen in our experience with fossil fuels. Addiction is the cumbered decision to get some short-term relief for a long-term problem, where short-term relief only makes the long-term problem worse.

A more pedestrian narrative is also possible. I call it the "things fall through" hypothesis. Many of us know what this means around our calendars or our work projects: When things fall through and the invited guests can't come to the party or the boss can't deliver what we need for the next project, we do small repairs. We back up the car and take a new turn. We start over. Rarely do we grieve the things that have "fallen through."

Whether we understand climate change as abuse and recovery, addiction and recovery, or just that things have fallen through, it is important to free our minds for clearer stories.

The ones we have now are too psychological. They are not theologically tough enough.

I prefer the death-and-resurrection narrative. The old ways are gone. I can't get any more short-term relief without risking the shortening of life and lives. The new ways are coming. They will surprise us. But first we have to go to Golgotha before we can empty these tombs.

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