

narratives

Reading and sometimes listening to any of the hundreds, thousands, of commentators the talk now is about narrative. This party does not have the right narrative; the other party has a strong narrative — but their narrative obviously is not what they do when they swept to power. In fact, their narrative has nothing to do with their agenda. The narrative is for we the people, the agenda is for the corporations who get elected who they want to do their will.

And then I watched a young man who, the introducer said, is a famous (meaning successful) entrepreneur, whose topic is *how to make money*. He made very clear that what you produce and try to sell is almost irrelevant. To sell you must know your buyer. What does the buyer want to hear. Your sales pitch must tell the buyer what he wants to hear.

That immediately brought back the advice a gallery owner gave when I asked her whether she might be interested in showing my paintings. I had walked by the gallery, looked at what was in the window and walked inside to see what was on the walls. None of it my style, but she showed good painting. When I called her the first question she asked was, Do you sell? Yes, I sell, occasionally. I never sold very much; “occasionally” was the right word. She responded with advice. *Look at what sells, and then paint that.*

I got very much the same answer when I tried to get a literary agent. The first question any agent or publisher has always asked is *how many books have you sold?* Not what I wrote, or how good it was, but how many. Not enough to interest any publisher or agent. The cutoff point seems to be 50,000 books. If you have sold fifty thousand books then you can get an agent or a publisher. Anything less keeps you out of the trade. Of course anyone who is already famous, anyone who has a name, has no trouble getting a publisher and an agent and a million dollar contract. When I add up my book sales including sales of translated editions, it probably adds up just above a five digit number, but not anywhere near 50k.

Of course I know what paintings sell here. On this side of the island the only people with money are tourists, more specifically tourists from one of the cruise ships that make a one day stop. They buy what we call Hawaiiiana, pictures or even posters of “typical” Hawaiian scenes. Some of them buy books because the libraries on a cruise ship are not meant for serious readers. Since we have no book store any more, my friend who has a small but excellent used books store does very well.

I know what people want to read. People have emailed me many times that they liked my writing but. The but was that my writing was too negative, they needed hope. Hope, a four letter word. Brings back the memory of an Oprah show, ages ago, when I still had a TV. One of her guests was a young woman who had recently become famous; I cannot remember for what. Fashion, or music, or a love affair with a famous person. Whatever had made her famous she bubbled and radiated

youthful excitement. She repeated so many times that it was all a miracle *and I'm only 23*, that I was certain she must be at least 28. Oprah smiled, "now that you are at the top what do you wish?" The newly famous girl did not hesitate even a second and said, *To be always 23*.

The people who tell me I am too negative want to be told that they can be always as we are today. In the U.S. we use more than double the energy Europeans use. It seems we cannot accept that there is no way to keep things as they are. Nice or not nice, we, the west — or as the new language dictates, the Global North — are living unsustainably. The Global North (GN) is grossly overusing what the planet can provide. Essentially we are living high on the hog by stealing from the Global South (GS). However we call it, we cannot possibly continue to live as we do, and this "we" is the GN. Unfortunately the GS cannot rise to our profligate ways either. But we are the culprits, we did it. And we saw to it that the GS wants what we have. Impossible. Cannot be.

Of course it makes sense that we don't want to hear that. It is much easier to believe that for now we can go on as before. Big money sees to it that we don't rock the boat. Now many of us are forced to accept that we can no longer afford the huge truck that gets 14 mpg, we cannot afford a bathroom for every person in the house, airconditioning, eating out. An enormous chunk of our population is out of work, no income, homeless. Most, or many, of us still believe that if someone fixes this it will all get back to normal.

What if this *is* the new normal. The sooner we accept, the better we will adapt. Adapting to things as they are. It may get worse. We will adapt to that also. It's called survival.

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I know only one person who believes, truly, deeply, in the so-called conservative talk. The idea of going back to a more comfortable age has a lot of emotion attached to it. She calls the new Health Reform an abomination and socialist. She does not know what socialism is, "and I don't want to know!" Who doesn't feel that the world has become too damned complicated; we yearn for something simpler and the only simple we have ever known is the past as we are told it was. So the party of the right uses a narrative that is wound around the common human need for *simpler* to get rid of programs and rights that were fought for during the last 60 or more years. True, In the days of grand- and great grandparents there was no Medicare, no Social Security. Also, but that is not mentioned, a hundred years ago not many survived beyond age 65. A lot more people died from diseases we can now cure. Before penicillin medical care was palliative, giving good vibes to the sick, maybe accompanied by a bit of opium (most common medicines 100 years ago contained a bit of opium). People worked hard around the clock around the year on farms, before agribusiness. What they ate was probably healthier, but it was a lot of work to grow it, harvest, can, dry. Some people had a cool cellar but there were no refrigerators. Horse and buggy time. Is that truly what we want to go back to?

It is impossible for us to really feel as our ancestors felt a hundred years ago. The past is as unimaginable as the future. For me, I choose the future, with my eyes wide open, looking left and right and up and rarely back.

That same party also has another narrative: *it is a sort of moral duty to get rid of debt and big government*. Not based on economics, as history clearly shows that the opposite is true. In times of great economic troubles only government can activate a sluggish economy, even if government has to borrow to do that. History also shows very clearly that times of high taxes for the rich are times of economic blossoming. Low taxes for the rich are times of economic stagnation.

But that narrative is moral, not scientific. In the first few months after gaining seats in Congress, and a majority of governors, they reduced or abolished taxes for business and corporations, and then systematically, and in concert, began to destroy all laws and practices that made this nation “the richest nation on earth.” We are that no longer. The corporations, now mostly international, are without doubt the richest and most powerful they have ever been. But the nation, meaning We the People, have sunk to a level we did not even imagine ten years ago. What *conservative* means is back to the 19th century.

In a country that for unimaginable reasons firmly insists there can be only two parties the nation is now split in two. There was a vague sense before that one party was more “left”, the other more “right” in theoretical politics. But the right has moved further right for the last 30 years and the left has played catch up, trying for a middle that moves ever right to approach the other party. The party of the right wants reduction of the debt, the party of the left goes along with that, as it goes along with almost anything the right wants to do. The right is a minority, but they are the loudest, own the Media, and so, own the country.

Now, finally, We the People seem to be waking up to what is going on — never mind the narratives. Now perhaps all politicians are beholden to Big Money, and BM does not need We the People. BM sits on many trillions of dollars, but does not want to spend them in house, there is more money to be made overseas. Many of the biggest banks, the oil, coal, and gas companies, the pharmaceutical and chemical companies may have been American companies once at a time, but they are now global corporations. Many, probably most of them do not pay any taxes at all for one reason or another.

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Started writing about narratives shortly after the last new moon. Tomorrow is the full moon. Again I am asking myself why I want to write about these so-called narratives when I know that the people of the Media talk about that although they must know, as I do, that the narrative is only window dressing. They do whatever it is they collectively have decided to do even though almost all of what they plan to do is against the will of “the people.” Their narratives are meant to make us think

they are doing all this for us, or because we want it. The recent demonstrations everywhere should have shown that We the People know what they are doing and we don't like it. We don't want it. There are polls enough to tell what we think, want, expect. But polls do not matter as we do not matter.

My real question, curiosity, is *How can "they" believe all they say and do?*

What does BM think of impoverishing an entire nation. What kind of future does BM see for itself and for humankind. Do they really believe that they can survive on a planet burning up because they systematically stop any effort to change our ruthless exploitation of what we call resources. How can BM not believe in what all scientists tell us about climate change. They can't be stupid; or are they. Don't they have children and grandchildren?

The narrative is the movie they show us how they want us to see them. They may think it is a clever movie because a few people believe that narrative. Most of us don't pay much attention, probably. We sit in front of our TVs.

I think that what is really going on is that their narratives, plural, are so far from real, as most of us experience real, that it confuses. We are the bull, BM the matador, flapping his (or her) red flag to this side and that, behind the matador, in our nose. We are mesmerized by the red cloth narrative that goes up and to the right and behind and down and far away. We don't know what is happening any more; we are dazed. That is the moment when the matador pushes his fine sword in our heart to wild applause in the stadium. Ultimate power subdued again by a single person — with important helpers who make themselves invisible. The bull is power. The slender matador is clever in making the bull run, excited by the red flashes. The matador pivoting in place while the bull runs this way and that until exhausted and confused we stand with our head low, giving ourselves to the sword.

What's in it for the matador, BM, other than the applause?

robert wolff, march 2011