

## An Artist Rethinks Climate Change in Words and Pictures



### Mr. Jeffers is an artist and an author.

All we are as people is a collection of stories — those we are told, those told about us, those we tell to ourselves and others. They explain our identity and express our values, and they've long shaped societies — Sparta as a culture of warriors, America as the land of the free and so on. But when several conflicting stories are being told, they can also limit us, delude us and divide us. Too often they suit only the teller, not the audience.

5 I grew up in Belfast, in Northern Ireland, a land of natural-born storytellers. An invisible line cuts Ireland, my island home, in two. North of that line, the particular story around which we've built our divided identity is the perception of an enemy who lives just across the street whom we must constantly resist. If our enemy believes that something is right, it must, by definition, be wrong.

To anyone who is not from Northern Ireland, the stories we tell about one another must surely seem absurd. 10 Which is why it saddens and alarms me to witness that the same reductive ideas about one's neighbors have taken hold in the United States. And what particularly unnerves me is the way these worsening divisions in the United States have poisoned our ability to act as a single unified force to find ways to strike a lasting balance with our natural world.

15 A shared enemy can be a galvanizing force, but I can tell you from the experience of where I grew up that it won't succeed in creating a better future for anyone who gets swept up in it. Think about the debates you've had in your life. Have you ever changed people's minds simply by insisting to them that they're wrong?

Those of us worried about climate change are too often guilty of belittling the other side because we're preoccupied with being right about the existential threat we face. We don't see that losing your livelihood to, say, a fracking ban or a shuttered coal plant is a kind of existential threat, as well. And so protecting it — protecting 20 that livelihood, and the families and towns that it sustains, is the noblest of things to defend.

In my work as an author, I've noticed that we have this subconscious habit of underestimating the power of stories. We know, but we forget. If we can recognize that our stories about climate change, and about fools on the other side who don't agree with us, are what got us into this state of paralysis, then perhaps we can start working together on a new story that could liberate us from it.

25 For starters, what if we replaced the words "right" and "wrong" with "better" and "worse"? Who could argue with wanting things to be better? A simple reframing makes the story about the future we want. Now imagine we were able to do so in a way that made everyone feel included in the outcome, rather than excluded, overlooked or left behind.

30 Does this sound too naïve? A little simplistic? Creating new, climate-friendly jobs, after all, is not so simple. But in order to escape our inaction, we have got to find a place where we can begin to stand on the same side.

Whichever version of our single future story we pick is down to us. Down to all of us to tell. But will it be a story in which half of us are right and half of us are wrong? Or will it be a story that leaves us all better off?

(598 words)

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