

CLIMATE CHANGE CHRONICLE 3

The Story of Plato's Cave

Regular readers of these chronicles will know that I like to use stories to explain the various aspects of climate change. In this chronicle I will borrow one of the oldest and most famous stories that have come down through the ages. It is Plato's (470–399 BCE) allegory of the prisoners in the cave. I hope you enjoy it.

The Cave and the Prisoners.

Plato asks us to imagine this situation. A group of prisoners have spent their whole lives shackled in a cave. Behind them is a fire. It is projecting images on the cave wall in front of them. They see the images and think they are seeing the real world. But then one of the prisoners escapes. Outside the cave he sees a very different world—the real world. But then he is blinded by the sun. He goes back into the cave and tells the prisoners he has seen the real world. This disturbs them and they become hostile. For them his claim is bullshit. Because the “outsider” has been blinded by what he has seen the prisoners don't want to go outside the cave. Socrates, Plato's contemporary, reflecting on the allegory noted that the prisoners probably killed the escapee because he wanted to lead them into an unreal world.

Application

Let us imagine that we are all prisoners and, in terms of our consciousness, we see three inter-related images flashing on the wall in front of us. They are the images of three systems influencing one another.

The first is an image of our economic systems—neoliberal systems—that we have created. The second image is government systems that we have also created. The third image is the image of our legal systems. These three inter-related images on the cave wall represent much of life as we have come to know it. For we the prisoners of today these systems are accurate reflections of the real world essential to our continued existence.

One day some of us escape. Outside the cave we see the systems in a very different light. A whole new and real world opens up to us. We realize that the prisoners still inside the cave have a distorted human consciousness and we want to help them by telling them about the real world we have seen.

Our neoliberal economic global systems demand continuous profits. The creators of these systems believe they have a fundamental right to exploit the limitless resources of Earth. But they refuse to recognize that the resources are not limitless. Their system is damaging the living Earth and jeopardizing the continued existence of all species, including our own.

Our legal systems have been dominated by the very powerful rulers of the neoliberal economic systems. They have convinced the political leaders to do their bidding. Many of the parties are willing to do so. Their priority is to gain more power to remain in existence. In a sense they become prisoners of the financial powers. They open their doors to highly-paid lobbyists and to gain access to media. They establish close working relationships with those corporations and do their bidding.

Finally, down through the last hundred years the powerful business interests and the governments have had a profound effect on the legal systems. Corporations have been deemed “persons” with the rights of persons. Laws have been developed supposedly to protect the environment. But for the most part they are not protectors. They are created to limit the damage corporations can do to the environment. And, as we have seen in recent years in our country and in the U.S., if laws are seen to impede the “rights” of corporations they can easily be removed.

What’s the difference between the way the prisoners inside the cave see the systems and the way those of us who have escaped from the cave see them? The prisoners inside the cave see the systems as real. They almost become part of them. They can’t see their own continued existence without them. But we escapees have a different perspective of the systems. It is hard to communicate what we have seen of the real world to those who are still imprisoned by their systems.

We try to tell the prisoners in the cave what we have seen. But we can’t give them a clear picture of the real world outside their cave or what will inevitably happen if we don’t change our systems. They react against us. They see us as blind people trying to destroy the world they have created and depend upon.

As escapees from the cave we must turn to creating positive systems in the real world: developing living economic systems that can thrive within a living earth; political systems developed in local communities that function from the bottom up; legal systems that are based upon Earth law.

Our goal for survival is to create a mutually enhancing relationship between our species and Earth. But it won’t be easy. We must develop the spiritual resilience for the long struggle. And we must learn how to deal with the opposition of those still shackled to their systems. As Frederick Nietzsche has noted—“*Those who hear not the music think the dancers mad.*”

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