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Tell Me a Science Story: Transforming Engagement with Science Using Creative Nonfiction

Janell C. Walther

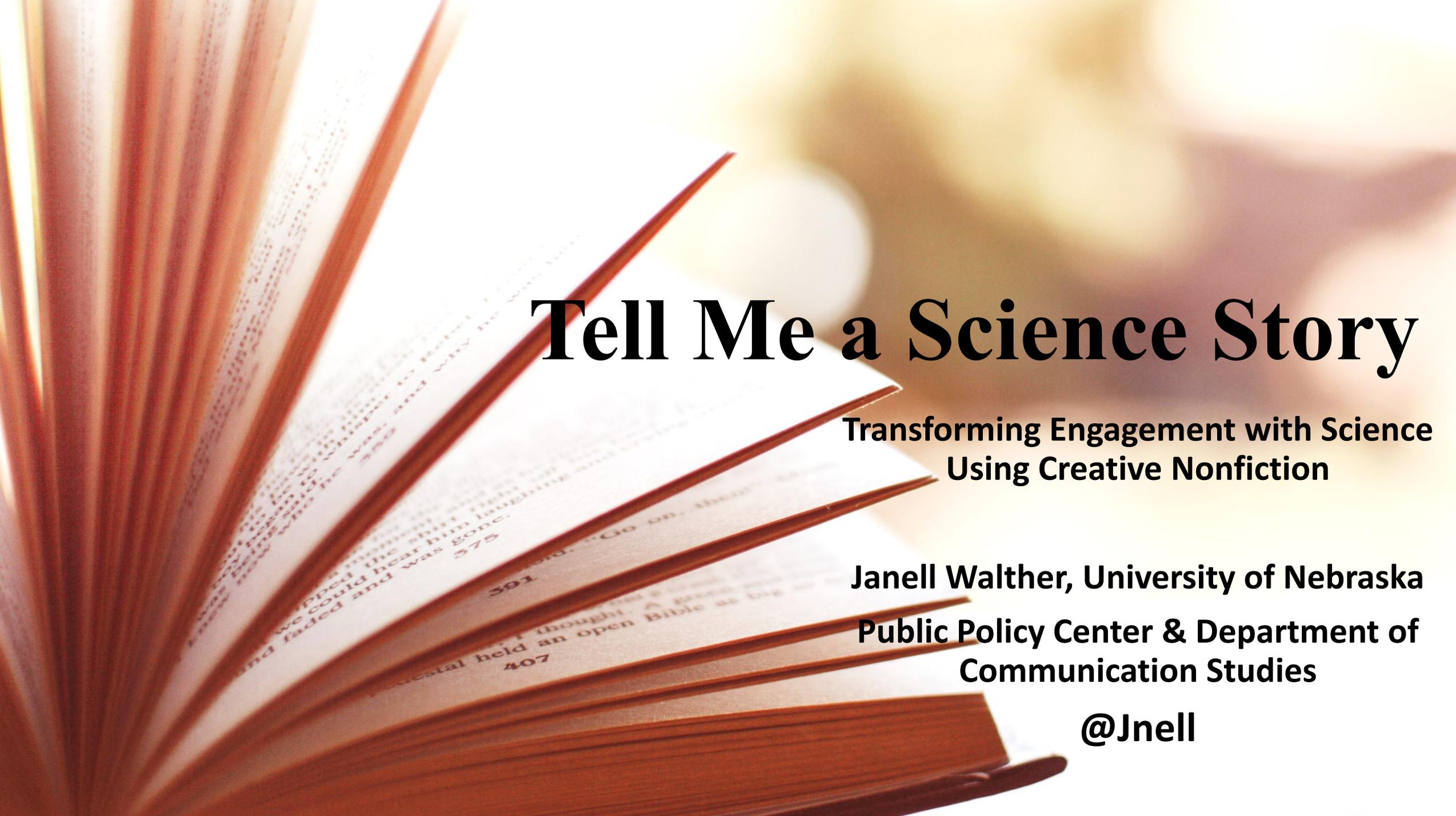
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Tell Me a Science Story

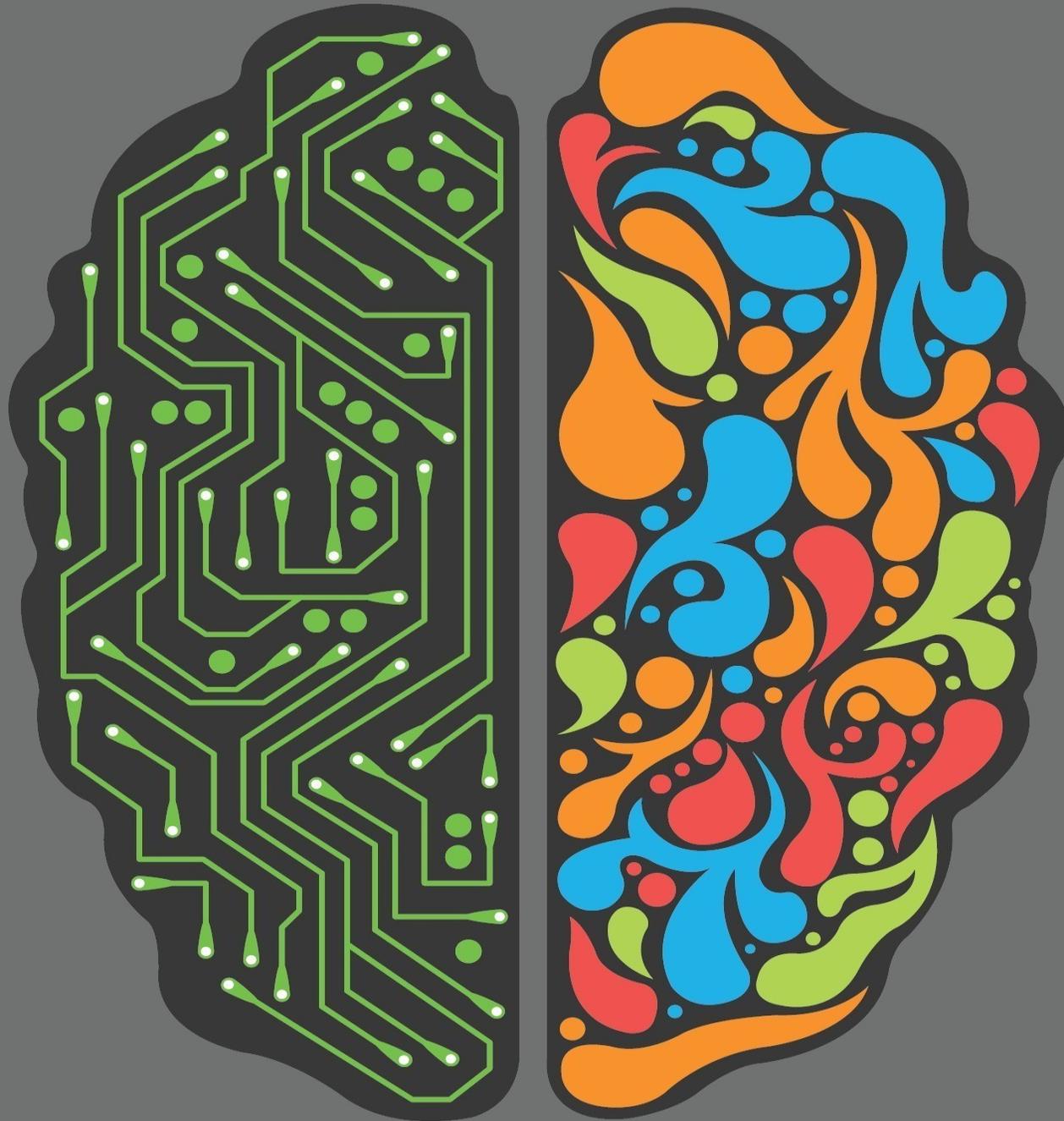
**Transforming Engagement with Science
Using Creative Nonfiction**

**Janell Walther, University of Nebraska
Public Policy Center & Department of
Communication Studies**

@Jnell



***Pay attention!
Engage!***



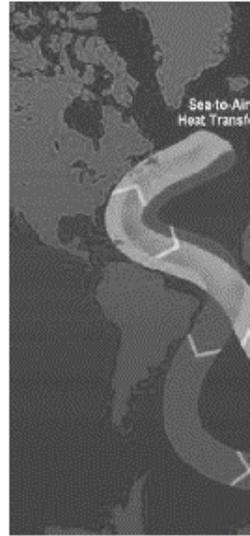
Once upon a time 

Just a Minute! Fix the Planet?

Sometimes sustainability efforts are viewed as measures that “greenies” take in order to stop global warming, or to “fix” the environment.⁸ This is how many see cap-and-trade bills, Congressional legislation touted as a way to create a marketplace for carbon dioxide emissions, which in turn would motivate corporations to curb greenhouse gases and, hopefully, ultimately help reign in global warming. Therefore, some people feel resistant to discuss “sustainability.” They might ask: What would it really mean to “fix” the planet or even mean to have it be broken? Who says it’s broken anyway?

The Earth’s Conveyor Belt

We visited with Dr. Mike Hayes, a climatologist and current director of the University of Nebraska’s National Drought Mitigation Center. Dr. Hayes told us how the analogy of a “conveyor belt” can be used to describe an elaborate model of deep ocean currents that transfer heat and salt around the globe on a 1,000-year cycle. These cycles have a major effect on climate. Indeed, the climate is greatly affected by the oceans, and there is a large difference in the amount of carbon



Just a Minute! Fix the Planet?

ONE STIFLING AUGUST AFTERNOON¹ in Omaha’s Old Market, as I minced my way through a constellation of molten chewing-gum smears, I was blindsided by a kid with a clipboard who asked: “Do you have a minute for the environment?” “Huh?” I snapped, surprised at the unexpected intrusion. “What exactly do you mean by that?”

The kid, Jared Dubin, a 19-year-old from Kearney, explained that he was working for a local environmental group pushing a Congressional cap-and-trade bill, touted as a way to create a marketplace for carbon dioxide emissions, which in turn would motivate corporations to curb greenhouse gasses and, with luck, ultimately help reign in global warming. He had taken this \$7.25-an-hour assignment in part because it sounded like a cool cause, but, after four weeks of confronting a variety of rude and disinterested people, he was feeling burned out. He’d learned a few things and had had all kinds of conversations—some crazy, some offensive and a few satisfying and provocative. I guess he was hoping for the satisfying kind from me.

“Do you really think we can ‘fix’ the planet?” I asked. I admit I had never given this question a lot of thought. Most people don’t ponder such big issues—especially as they are walking innocently down the street. But, now that he had my attention, the idea intrigued me.

¹ This excerpt was adapted from Eric Hagerman’s piece “Just a Minute,” published in the literary journal, *Creative Nonfiction* (Spring 2010).

Results: Engagement

“I definitely felt more engaged with the first one [creative nonfiction] and less tuned out because I had somebody interpreting their response for me. So when he was like “Oh, I was surprised” then I think “Oh, so was I, I was also surprised by the piece of information.” So **I was more engaged with it personally** even if I didn't retain all the numbers... “

“[The story] **seemed more relatable** I guess, as a normal, average, everyday person than a whole bunch of scientists talking about facts. Where the facts were still in here, the way that it was written was more along a story line.”

Results: Knowledge

In terms of the broad information though, that [the Newsletter] was really good. It was concise and it brought up a few different valid viewpoints, so it was good to get a little **more in-depth perspective** of what I think all of us have all heard talk, rumblings about.

I know as a teacher I have to go both ways. I present for some of the students that want that are just “give me the hard facts and move forward” and then the others that you have to tell a story to **reach them anyway you can.**

Results: Bias

“I like this how [the Newsletter] is almost straight facts where the other one was ‘I did this’ or ‘I did that.’ Well, who is speaking? **Who are we listening to?**”

Right, because I think people can grasp it but also to make it so it's not politically motivated so you get... kind of a fair and balanced **both sides** of the argument. For example, I think about Al Gore going out and presenting this whole global thing. That turns a lot of people off because they don't like Al Gore. So to the extent that you can leave politics out of it when you are trying to inform the general public

Science, Make Room for Humanities

