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What Is Natural? What Is Normal? (and How to Do Nothing?!)

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What do you think of when you hear the word *natural*? Perhaps an image like a hidden waterfall in the middle of a forest comes to mind. Or maybe a peaceful grove of trees or a wide open vista. But what else is *natural*? Hurricanes are natural. So are earthquakes. The coronavirus is also natural.

On the one hand, of course, we know all that to be true. On the other hand, there is a lot of confusing propaganda and manipulative language and imagery swirling around words like “natural” and “unnatural.” So I want to invite us to spend a few minutes equipping ourselves to more easily notice when seemingly innocent words (such as natural and unnatural) are deployed in deceptive ways.

A false dichotomy—a rigid binary—often gets set-up between natural and unnatural with *natural* used to mean all things healthy, true, pure, honest, authentic, simple, and real. *Unnatural*, in turn, is left to be synonymous with all things unhealthy, false, and impure. But the truth (as is often the case) is more complicated, messy, and complex. If this sermon leaves you curious to learn more, I recommend the book [Natural: How Faith in Nature's Goodness Leads to Harmful Fads, Unjust Laws, and Flawed Science](#) by the religion professor Alan Levinovitz, published recently by the UUA's own Beacon Press.

Significantly, this insight is not new. To cite an example from the nineteenth century, the philosopher John Stuart Mill wrote that, “Nature, natural, and the group of words derived from them...are one of the most copious sources of false taste, false

philosophy, false morality, and even bad laws.” Indeed, **if you look at a list of common logical fallacies, you will usually find “appeal to nature”** included (8). Just because something is allegedly “natural” doesn’t mean it wins the argument.

Historically, for instance, think of all the times that “appeals to nature” have been used to perpetuate systems of oppression. Generations of women were told they were *naturally* inferior to men. In a classic case of victim blaming, misogynists through the ages have said, “It’s not that we *want* women to be second-class citizens; it’s just the way nature intended things to be.” So you set up an unequal playing field—designed to keep the patriarchy entrenched—and when that sexist system results in men outperforming women, you say I guess that’s the way nature intended things to be. (I see what you did there!)

We could trace a similar dynamic with white supremacy and eugenics—or unpack the absurd arguments that interracial marriage is “unnatural,” when the truth is that race is a social construct in the first place, not a biological reality. If you scratch below the surface of these and many other appeals to what is allegedly “natural” and “normal” you will uncover that what’s often going on is one group is trying to impose their biases on an entire society. They are trying to mask their sexism, racism, homophobia, classism, ableism as being simply “natural” or “normal” (6).

Now, here’s the thing: for most socially progressive people today, all of that is the 101-level, relatively easy level of unpacking the false binary of natural/unnatural or normal/abnormal. So let me take the risk of turning the dial up a notch. We’re about to wade in to some turbulent waters, so let me go ahead and assure you up front that my intent is not to come down definitively on one side or the other in the various debates I’m about to name. Rather, I want to invite you to notice in each case how words like natural/unnatural are being used—and how that act of noticing can open us up to a larger spectrum of possibilities.

Consider, for instance, the case of **genetically modified food**—sometimes disparaged as “Frankenfood.” The more interesting question is not whether food is natural or unnatural, but what science has shown regarding whether it is healthy or unhealthy—as well as how genetic modifications can sometimes help us feed more people and reduce hunger and malnutrition.

Or here's another controversial one: the whole debate about **“natural childbirth.”** Take a deep breath, everyone! We're going to get through this! I've witnessed so many heated debates in this whole area. People have strong feeling about a lot of this stuff—and understandably so. But if we zoom out, I think most people would grant that the truth is somewhere in the messy middle.

Consider this: if you or someone you love is near to giving birth in a *technologically developed* country, the standard birthing process may well tend toward being overly medicalized, which may be worth pushing back against (19). And I've talked to many people who had to push back strongly to create the birthing environment that was right for them. But if you or someone you love is near to giving birth in a *less technologically developed* country with high infant and maternal mortality rates, advocating for more access to medicalized, “unnatural” births might be in order.

Part of what I'm inviting us to do is to avoid overly romanticizing what is “natural,” or too quickly assuming there is one “normal” that is right for all people, times, and places (22). In the words of Dr. Alan Levinovitz, the author I referenced earlier:

“Natural” is not synonymous with beautiful, healthy, true, or good. Once freed from this...understanding of nature, it becomes possible to discuss the potential benefits for natural childbirth—and there are many—without evangelizing obedience to nature. It also becomes possible to state clearly the benefits of unnatural childbirth—and there are many—without being labeled a heretic.... Then a new space will open up where **nature can be seen for what it really is: one among many potential sources of knowledge and value**, which differs in importance from culture to culture, or from person to person. (23)

So many of these issues are not “problems to be solved” with one solution for all people, times, and places. Instead, they are **“polarities to be managed”** with most people finding themselves at different points on the spectrum in various seasons of their lives ([Johnson 2014](#)).

A similar sort of confusion can be at play in the Anti-vaccine movement. (Speaking of controversial topics!) I've spoken at length about this topic [in the past](#), so

for now I'll limit myself to saying that I hope the connection to my larger point is clear that sometimes what is *natural* is the disease that can kill us—and what is *unnatural* is the science that can save our life.

Or to give a personal example, each evening before going to bed, I take a medicine called Synthroid. It's literally an unnatural *synthetic* substitute for human thyroid hormone since I had half of my thyroid removed. Neither surgery, nor synthetic hormones are particularly “natural,” but I'm very grateful for both—because if the only alternative was letting nature takes it's course, I wouldn't be here.

And here's the larger point. Once we begin to really appreciate that natural isn't always good and unnatural isn't always bad, we are less susceptible to manipulative advertising and we can more freely explore *all* the possible options and make the choice that is right for us individually and/or collectively according to the best information available to us at the time. And crucially, we can allow *others* that same freedom, which may include making different decisions than the ones that are right for us.

Dr. Levinson expresses the paradox of our human situation this way: “**Never say never; never say always.** No foundational principles of Nature's laws predetermine your position.... The default is uncertainty, ambiguity, and openness to complexity and change.” Now, I readily confess that there are times that I would prefer certitude, but more often than not, rigid certitude lands us in the realm of orthodoxy and fundamentalism. **We may not always like uncertainty, ambiguity, and openness to complexity and change, but they are, for better or worse, very UU!** We are a big tent religious movement, with room for a diversity of choices—and a wide range of what is considered within the realm of normal.

Along those lines, as I move toward my conclusion, I want to bring in one other book that I finally made time to read in these very “natural” days of the pandemic. (As we've been exploring, what could be more natural than a virus!) The book I wanted to bring up is titled [How to Do Nothing: Resisting the Attention Economy](#) by Jenny Odell, an artist and writer who teaches at Stanford University.

I've found her book to be a helpful touchstone in this “new normal” in which we find ourselves. To adapt the framework we've been playing with, what's “natural” might

be to let the virus have its way with us—since physical distancing and wearing masks does feel *unnatural* to most of us. So how might we best respond in such an odd time as this?

Odell's *subtitle*, "Resisting the Attention Economy," gives you one indication of what her book is about. She invites us to notice the ways that social media and related platforms are designed to be addictive. They are specifically trying to manipulate our human psychology to hook us into returning to their platforms as frequently as possible and for as long as possible, so they can sell our attention to advertisers and increase their profits. That's the attention economy, and I've had a lot of conversations with many of you over the past few months about your struggles to resist the lure of too much social media or too much news.

So what about the *title* of Odell's book: "How to do nothing." Is the answer to just not do anything? Odell writes that, "**The first half of "doing nothing" is about disengaging from the attention economy; the other half is about reengaging with something else**" (xviii). What is that other half for you? We are now four months in to physical distancing—and the pandemic appears to be far from over. Looking back over the past few months, be honest with yourself: **what's been working for you? What hasn't?**

What do you feel led to experiment with in the coming months of the pandemic? What shift do you want to make in your "new normal?" What wants to emerge in your life? **What do you feel led to do, join, create, or reengage with?** What might this crisis unexpectedly make possible for us individually and collectively?