

WHEN NATURAL'S NOT NORMAL



“NATURAL” IS A HIGH-VALUED WORD FOR MOST OF US THESE DAYS. STILL IT DOES GET A BIT TRICKY AT TIMES.

It means, on the one hand, just what’s normal, or expected, in a situation. As in, “It’s natural to grieve a loss.” But it goes regularly a bit deeper and signifies flows from the primary “nature” of a process or thing. So I might assert, “Economic collapse is the natural result of unregulated greed.” And sometimes, more often than we might like these days, what’s “normal” is not at all in accordance with the deeper nature of things. What happens then?

For instance, walking empty-handed into a store is for so many of us still the most natural thing in the world. What’s even slightly noteworthy about that, you ask? Right--you don’t see it either. Well, from the deeper perspective, empty-handed store entry is dangerously unnatural. We should be walking in mostly hands-full--with our own set of reusable bags and/or containers. What’s “normal” here is a profound violation of the life-sustaining cycles of Nature. It’s an extremely high-volume, one-way process that threatens the entire biosphere. It’s only when your attention is drawn to the huge amount of discarded packing and carrying materials thrown out each week, and you connect that to the garbage landfills and the presence of plastic cups in the water a thousand miles out to sea—that you start to see.

I spent my junior year of college in Germany. There, I walked empty handed a few times into stores—but stopped very quickly. The cashiers had no bags. You got your own Gepacknezte (“package nets”) and carried them around with you. Otherwise the checkout person looked at you and said, “So vat do I put dis shtuff in?” Still, back in the US, I lost this good habit almost immediately. A good nylon Gepacknetz would crunch down so small you could almost put it in your pocket, yet would hold the equivalent of nearly two of the plastic shopping bags we throw out constantly today. They didn’t—and still don’t—sell such elegant nets here.

One habit I did bring back from junior year, and never lost, had to do with how I used silverware eating. In my family, the proper way to eat involved moving food to your mouth always with the fork only in your right hand. So, to cut something, you shifted the fork to your left hand, picked up the knife, made the cut, put the knife down, shifted the fork back to your right hand, and loaded and transported the bite. When things were hard to stabilize on the fork (think peas), we kids used our fingers as a pusher and got yelled at. In Europe, the fork stays always in the left hand, the knife in the right. The knife is a slicer, but also constantly used as the perfect pusher, to build nice bites. If there is a natural way for two-handed beings to employ knives and forks—this is it. Fewer unnecessary moves, more functionality. I never looked back.

The truth is, we are facing this “what’s natural isn’t normal for us” situation a lot these days. From petroleum-based, largely singly occupied vehicles, to turning off unneeded lights, to how much sugar

we consume—many of our habits are going to need changing.

The two instances from my junior year abroad shed some light on how this can work. Shifting to the European silverware regime was totally up to me—not dependent on any wider cultural mores or supply chains. I didn’t need different utensils. Furthermore, how I ate was either so unnoticeable, or else if noticed so demonstrably more functional and elegant and “continental”—that I could only gain socially from the change. Carrying my own shopping bags into stores on the other hand cut against the grain of American consumerism in so many ways. Widespread pre-existing cultural choices already made rendered my small choice an uphill battle. Not even the better tools existed.

As we enter now a period of profound reassessment and change, there will be many invitations to shift what is narrowly “natural” (normal) for us towards what is “natural” in the wider and deeper senses. Consider making the easier personal choices not all at once, but steadily--as you can. At the same time, don’t beat yourself up too much if you are slower to make the harder ones, where so much in our current culture makes them difficult. Make at least symbolic efforts, and lend your awareness and communication skills to the shifts in broader consciousness that will make the right things easier, and eventually normal.

“Natural,” at bottom, means “balanced” on broader and deeper scales. So, being the change you wish to see, here, means first of all staying balanced in your own efforts to change. In the end, embodying this deep sense of “natural” as you evolve is likely to provide the most success and the strongest impact. ▲