

Growing, Living and Being Rightly

Darcia Narvaez

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Sometimes it is hard to remember, but humans are creatures of the earth and dependent on the earth. There is no way around it. But too many human beings lately have had a tendency to forget what that means. As creatures of the earth, there are certain ways of growing that are better than others. There are certain ways of being that are better than others. There are certain ways of living that are better than others. Truly. Interestingly, they all seem to be rooted in proper right hemisphere development and functioning.

Ways of Growing

During the first few months and years of life, the functions of the right hemisphere (RH) are established, with further development through childhood. But the roots for RH development are established during the highly sensitive first years of life. These are sensitive years because human beings are born highly immature compared to other animals (9-18 months early) with the establishment and shaping of many systems set to occur after birth.

Humans evolved with a particular nest for their young, like all animals have. The human nest (Evolved Development Niche; EDN) is intensive and includes a soothing birth, lots of affectionate touch and no negative touch or coercion; warm responsive care of needs and cues with little imposed stress; self-directed free play with multi-aged mates; positive social support for child and mother from the community; multiple adult responsive caregivers. Each of EDN characteristic has been related to human health and well being (Narvaez, 2014; Narvaez, Braungart-Rieker et al., 2016; Narvaez, Panksepp et al., 2013; Narvaez, Valentino et al., 2014).

But we focus here on right hemisphere functioning. All EDN components influence right hemisphere development. When the early nest is provided, the RH grows well because it is scheduled to grow dominantly during these early years. Physiologically, scheduled growth requires a supportive environment, one that provides “limbic resonance,” a symphony of mutual exchange and internal adaptation whereby two mammals become attuned to each other’s inner states” (Lewis, Amini, & Lannon, 2000, p. 63). Dysynchrony must be repaired, first the parent and then the child eventually learning herself to do this in social relations. Toxic stress (like extensive distress crying or isolation) must be avoided so as to not derail normal development toward wellbeing. Scheduled growth also requires the proper establishment of layers of functions that underlie later layers (e.g., gene expression, neurotransmitter number and capacity).

Psychologically the RH dominance of developmental focus in the first years is related to the social knowhow being co-constructed with caregivers, implicit relational knowledge upon which lifelong social relations are constructed. This knowledge includes “vitality contours” of getting along with others in the micro-moments of being (Stern, 2010)—when to share eye gaze, how to enter and leave interactions, and so on, through a communicative musicality (Trevarthen, 1999). When early life goes well and vitality contours are well rehearsed (as in species typical development), this forms the basis for the relational attunement that undergirds compassionate morality (Narvaez, 2016).

Whether discussing physiology or psychology, development is a dynamic shaping of embodiment. The growth and development of the child occurs within a creative nexus of interaction, “an unbounded and continually unfolding field of relations” (Ingold, 2011, p. xvi), intertwining the physical, psychological and cultural. The child develops a relational pathway through the world, “a movement along a way of life” (Ingold, 2011, p. 146). RH capacities for self-governance and empathy are grown through experience of those very things.

RH functioning includes self-governance since arousal is lateralized to the right hemisphere (Schore, 2003a). For example, when the RH-governed vagus nerve is properly tuned up by responsive care in early life, the individual is able to socialize without distress and become intimate with others in the ways of the culture (Porges, 2011). Right hemisphere capacities also influence what are termed executive functions, which include not only self-control but foresight, and empathy, all highly influenced by experience in the first year but which take several decades to mature.

Most of who we are is founded on implicit social knowledge/patterns/habits established in the first years of life. These are virtually impossible to change except with extensive longterm effort. So it matters what those implicit foundations are. Unfortunately, most of the time in most families in the USA, the EDN is not fully provided. In fact, Lewis et al (2000, p. 225) describe the USA as "an extended experiment in the effects of depriving people of what they crave most."

What happens without the EDN, in conditions of undercare? Undercare undermines RH development. When one undercares for a baby, she does not fully develop social capacities for “moving with” others and natural processes. Instead, there is awkward neurobiology and sociality. Undercare builds up aversive feeling and stress reactivity at multiple physiological levels (“all the way down”). In this case, stress response systems are geared up to be hyperreactive, as it is toxically stressful to not receive EDN-consistent care. When the stress response is activated, cortisol floods the system, shifting focus to survival while dissolving synapses. Instead of the socially calming hormones of oxytocin, serotonin or prolactin, the individual spends life in a state of dread. As a result of these underdevelopments, the individual’s social relations are more likely to be governed by primitive survival systems—fear, panic, rage (plus greed, hoarding, dominance and rivalry) (Panksepp, 1998).

When early life does not go well, the child can be stressed and socially dysynchronous, leading to more stress and a preference for being alone. The child can become an empty shell with a psyche divorced from soma, intellectualizing life or controlling others to alleviate anxiety. Flexible, relational attunement was not learned so the social world seems impenetrable, requiring a set of external rules for behaving because the natural mode of learning implicit relational knowledge did not get established properly.¹

Ways of Being

What seeds sprout in the early months and years under inherited conditions? Seeds for receptive intelligence, which includes emotional intelligence but also receptivity to other-than-human, a bigger picture of relations. Those without these capacities ridicule them as “women’s intuition” or “superstition” or worse. An illustration of the types of capacities the right hemisphere has is provided by Jill Bolke Taylor, neuroscientist. These would typically be nurtured by early life experience consistent with the EDN, during the period when the brain’s

¹ There are interventions, such as therapy, that can revamp the brain in terms of self-regulation and social functioning.

right-hemisphere comes on line. [NOTE: The right hemisphere tends to process, filter and act on the world nonverbally, whereas the left hemisphere tends to house the areas of the brain related to verbal processing and expression.] Taylor (2008) described the sudden and unexpected right-hemisphere dominance she experienced after having a stroke in her left cerebral hemisphere: “Our right hemisphere is designed to remember things as they relate to one another. Borders between specific entities are softened, and complex mental collages can be recalled in their entirety as combinations of images, kinesthetic, and physiology. To the right mind, no time exists other than the present moment, and each moment is vibrant with sensation. ... the moment of *now* is timeless and abundant ... The present moment is a time when everything and everyone are connected together as *one*. As a result, our right mind perceives each of us as equal members of the human family. It identifies our similarities and recognizes our relationship with this marvelous planet, which sustains our life. It perceives the big picture, how everything is related, and how we all join together to make up the whole. Our ability to be empathic, to walk in the shoes of another and feel their feelings, is a product of our right frontal cortex.” (Bolke-Taylor, 2008, pp. 30-31).

Some of the capacities that Taylor identified—dominant sensation of the present moment, of the big picture and relationships, and of energy—are often not given attention in a science-y worldview that attends primarily to the physically measurable, isolated and controlled. But she correctly identified these characteristics as fundamental to our morality, at least the morality of connection and compassion. (Detached from right hemispheric functioning, morality can be turned into one of utilitarian cold logic—dangerous to living systems.)

The relationally attuned morality that Taylor evokes develops from the proper development and use of RH capacities. I call it an *engagement mindset*. It is receptive to the other as an equal, as a partner in co-constructing the present encounter. Its characteristics are flexible attunement, beholding the other as they are (and not according to self-protective filters), playful appreciation and resonance with the other.

Engagement ethics are more obviously present among foraging communities, representative of the majority of humanity’s history (e.g., Ingold, 2011; Wolff, 2001). Societies that stay in physical contact with their infants and children in the manner of the EDN, are more likely to be peaceful societies (Prescott, 1996). EDN experiences within a community led to sociality allowing for peaceful cooperation even with shifting membership among groups (e.g., Dentan, 1968; Hill et al., 2010). One could postulate that the range of personality differences are much greater in “civilized” nations (towards the pathological and antisocial), as a result of modern childrearing practices that have degraded the early nest, which gives psychologists much more to do.

Ways of Living

Proper right hemisphere development allows full communication systems to be seeded, including with other-than-humans (e.g., animals, plants). One can see how early seeds sprout into sensibilities for the common good, a sense of oneness or Common Self with all entities, undergirding a cooperative orientation to getting along with the natural world. In fact, these capacities are apparent in societies that provide the EDN and live close to the earth. Integrated Right Hemisphere living is different from what we see around us in civilized societies. Instead of being caught in intellect and intellectualizing, the heartmind guides life. The flourishing individual demonstrates more receptive relational emotions than self-protective ones--this extends beyond the familiar ingroup to outgroup humans and nonhuman entities. A sense of

connection to the Whole and its mystery is always present. This is a right hemisphere orientation.

Flourishing societies live within a balanced biodiversity. A flourishing society is one that lives with the earth where non humans are considered partners, not adversaries, where relational responsibility to all Life is fundamental. We can see this in traditional Native American community practices. The community uses ritual and story to maintain a sense of connection to the Whole, to tap into the oceanic energies and discern appropriate action. Human beings are “formed by this mystery, touched by it, shaped by it, breathed into by it, and are part of its constant song” (Windeagle and Rainbow Hawk, 2003, p. 67). The maintenance of harmony and a sense of sacredness toward all life are central to living life well. The society raises well their young, empowering their freedom to follow their unique spirits and contributions to the Whole. The individual is generative in the context of flourishing for All. Narratives and understandings are within the scope of earthly living. Humans live optimally when they live the earth-balanced life.

These societies have an implicit sense of the living earth. Western science more recently has been uncovering this same knowledge (Mancuso and Viola, 2016). For example, plants have the five senses that we have identified in ourselves: sight hearing, touch, smell, taste. But they have 15 other senses, like gauging humidity in soil, sensing gravity or chemical gradients. Though we are told that humans are the species that dominate planet earth, over 99% of the biomass on the earth is made up of highly intelligent plants.

Misguided Ways

What happens when those who missed the early nest, the underdeveloped, grow up? I’m starting to think that the bossy children are showing an underdevelopment of vitality contours. They learned instead to try to control things because they did not learn to go with the micro-social flow. These impulses for control occur so early in processing that it’s hard to realize they were shaped by early social patterns of interaction.

On the personal level, we can see moral shrinkage. Undercare forms wedges between whom a child could become and what they end up becoming. Each aspect of the nest that is missing may form a wedge against trusting the self and others. Undercare and coercion go hand in hand. Undercare leads to a certain lack of intelligence, requiring external rules and coercion to figure out how to get along, since the normal course of development was interrupted and undermined. Morality becomes rooted in self protectionism which emerges from undercare in babyhood (left alone, left crying). The individual is left with a materialistic morality, needing rules and laws to feel safe, with an inability to accept mystery and oneness.

On the societal level, cultural narratives influence which type of moral system is accessed frequently—protectionism or relational attunement? The individual is shaped and guided by living in and practicing the culture’s ways. Misdeveloped people run the world according to enhanced (conditioned up by early experience) primitive survival systems that emphasize fear, greed, territoriality, submission to authority and assume to be normal primitive lust and rage. Extremists tend to emphasize security.

On the political level, Iain McGilchrist (2009) points out how the Western world has suppressed the wisdom of the right hemisphere and instead is governed by the bureaucratic/scientific mode of the left hemisphere (which prefers static dead things and absolute control over others). In societies governed by this Western mindset, individual self-control and grounded sociality are underdeveloped and so must rely on external braces throughout life such as ideologies, many of which endanger other humans and particularly the more-than-human

world.

David Korten identified the dominant narrative as the Sacred Money and Markets story. The emphasis is on monetary wealth (at the expense of every other kind of wealth such as social or ecological; Narvaez, 2016). The economically wealthiest nation in the world, the USA is socially impoverished and has become a self protectionist society, with a glorified control of nature, children, minorities and other nations.

We can go further. Underdevelopment of the RH leads to adults with a “taboo on tenderness,” a brittle, tough-mindedness that pervades the society they create, as in the USA (Suttie, 1935/1988). The result is a macho society that extends across fields and domains (dominator society; Eisler, 2013). What does a macho society look like?

- Parenting is less about tenderness and support than about control (e.g., forcing baby into independence through isolation and sleep training, teaching baby to ignore feelings and needs).
- Schooling uses top down methods of inculcating the highest moral values of obedience and submission, including ‘drill and kill’ and other forms of punishment, especially to those considered to be in lower echelons of society.
- Stories about history emphasize dominance and necessary violence against threatening “others.”
- Science becomes competitive and intellectualized, narrow and limited in focus, and dangerous to Life (See Medin and Bang, 2014). Theories (e.g., evolutionary theory) emphasize competition instead of cooperation as the dominant characteristic of nature (most characteristics are conserved from generation to generation; see Margulis, 1998; Weiss & Buchanan, 2009).
- The society rationalizes and creates environments to support staying apart from others, avoiding intimacy, avoiding the immersion in the interpersonal dance of relationship, which requires heartsense, attention, vulnerability and surrender.
- Avoidantly-attached persons become dominant. They are underdeveloped in interpersonal perception, social interpretation and action skills (which normally make social life fun and relatively easy). For the avoidantly attached, the physical sciences are much easier than psychology.

Cultures oriented to war, though in the past a temporary shift for males, becomes a permanent way of life of shutting down empathy, care, and relational attunement. Unfortunately in the USA today, such people are considered normal and are given vast amounts of power (Derber, 2013). It is considered to be normal to be divorced from earth-care, restless and self-absorbed. Instead of honoring and meeting human basic needs, the power of the few impairs the wellbeing of the many. Social poverty increases because those in charge have limited capacities or concern for egalitarian sociality.

Getting back to Rightliness

Early experience influences which emotion systems are most accessible and sensitive periods can influence how chronically accessible particular emotion systems are. Moral landscapes shift based on the emotion systems that are activated. If we have learned from a young age to be self-protective, as we grow we elaborate on this position and make it into a moral theory (like Ayn Rand did; Weiss, 2012).

Humanity’s recent focus on self-protection and self-promotion are due in part to the lack

of attachment to earth systems. Humans have separated themselves from the earth in the last millennia, considering themselves separate from nature. Our “species isolation” fuels a sense of supremacy and difference (Berry, 1990; Jensen, 2016; Mander, 1991). What do we do to return ourselves to living as earth creatures, as one species among many in community?

Humanity needs to restore lost capacities, specifically those of the right hemisphere. Their loss occurs primarily in cultures dominated by civilized child raising practices and ways of thinking. First, we need to provide the evolved developmental niche to children and help them develop ecological attachment to their landscape. This will take efforts at the policy and institutional levels (see Narvaez, Panksepp, Schore & Gleason, 2013). We return to the child raising practices that fully nurture human capacities. Second, we return to an intuitive grasp of a living earth knitted together with our scientific awareness of living systems. We nurture our ecological attachment to a particular landscape for which we are responsible (*this tree, that river*). We design our lives with the earth in mind, using our whole minds.

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