

INTERVIEW WITH DARCIA NARVAEZ, PROFESSOR EMERITA AT THE UNIVERSITY OF NOTRE DAME

*Interview conducted by Quentin Wodon
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EXCERPTS:

- “Humans are so immature at birth that to develop in a healthy manner, reaching their full potential, they need to experience humanity’s evolved nest. This helps structure well-functioning brain and body, preparing the individual for cooperative behavior and compassionate morality.”
- “The western education system emphasizes a detached orientation to relationships and the natural world, using cognitive models that are limited and underperform but are taken as images of reality. You have to have some outside experience to realize this.”

Would you describe where you work, and some of the particularities of your university?

I just retired from the University of Notre Dame in Indiana, USA, so I am now professor of psychology emerita. Notre Dame is a noted Catholic undergraduate university that is also famous for its American football team – it is on national television every week during the fall football season with fans all over the country. Notre Dame has been increasingly drawing respect for its graduate programs and faculty scholarship too. For example, in a recent analysis of the eight million scientists worldwide who have published five or more papers, further examining the top 100,000 across all disciplines, the top 2% of scientists in each of 174 different subfields included 137 Notre Dame faculty members. I was gratified to be one of the 137.

Could you share how you ended up in your current position, what was your personal journey?

My academic career is my seventh career. In college I started out as a world languages major but through several flukes took up playing pipe organ and becoming a music major—I was crazy about J.S. Bach and would practice for hours each day. I also majored in Spanish.

Box 1: Interview Series

What is the mission of the Global Catholic Education website? The site informs and connects Catholic educators globally. It provides them with data, analysis, opportunities to learn, and other resources to help them fulfill their mission with a focus on the preferential option for the poor.

Why a series of interviews? Interviews are a great way to share experiences in an accessible and personal way. This series will feature interviews with practitioners as well as researchers working in Catholic education, whether in a classroom, at a university, or with other organizations aiming to strengthen Catholic schools and universities.

What is the focus of this interview? In this interview, Darcia Narvaez, Professor emerita at the University of Notre Dame, shares insights about the work that she received an Expanded Reason Award for and about life in academia, with a particular emphasis on her research on neurobiology and the development of human morality.

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After college, I worked as a church musician off and on for years while at the same time teaching classroom music (one year in the Philippines). But then I felt called to study the bigger questions through theology and earned a masters of divinity (which got me interested in graduate school). I started my own business and also worked in the Hispanic services community until I was invited to become a middle school Spanish teacher. In the middle of four years as a Spanish teacher, I was excited to discover the field of moral development. I started the first two years of my doctoral program when I was still teaching full time.

What is your main field of research, and why did you choose that field?

I had been interested in issues of ethics/morality since I was a young child. Half my childhood was spent in Spanish-speaking countries, most of which had high rates of poverty. I remember seeing children my age in rags on street corners selling Chiclet gum to earn money for the family. And then at the end of each year away, I would return to the USA and see the excessive materialism and waste. I could not understand how the world could be designed to be so unjust.

When I was a middle school teacher, I became involved in a Lutheran World Ministries study group on the common good. There, I discovered the work of the late Professor James Rest who explained that moral behavior entailed more than moral reasoning. It also requires moral sensitivity, motivation and action capacities. I was excited to work with his theory to figure out what was wrong with the world. I went on to earn a PhD in educational psychology from the University of Minnesota with a minor in cognitive science.

In my early career at the University of Minnesota, I performed laboratory studies. To earn tenure, however, I was told I had to work in curriculum and instruction. Fortunately, I helped obtain a million-dollar character education grant from the federal government. It allowed me to work with primary and secondary school educators to integrate into regular academic instruction skills of ethical sensitivity, reasoning, motivation and action (the materials we created are free online at <https://cee.nd.edu/curriculum/>). Around that time, I was invited to give a talk at Notre Dame and then offered a faculty position. How could I refuse! Shortly after moving to Notre Dame, public schools became focused on testing and had no more time for moral character education.

In my continuous puzzling about morality, I started reading more widely and discovered the importance of neurobiology and early life for the structuring of the individual's brain and personality. Early life experience is engraved on the brain! I concluded that it must also influence moral functioning. I discovered evolutionary systems theory that did not emphasize genes but a host

of inheritances we receive from our ancestors through the tree of life, including what I now study and call the Evolved Nest (EvolvedNest.Org). Societies who raise their children with the Evolved Nest demonstrate a different human nature than people in my country. I was shocked by all these discoveries and have been trying to inform the world ever since.

You are a recipient of the Expanded Reason Awards. What was your contribution for receiving the Award?

The book I wrote that won the award was an attempt to put all my discoveries together (though it was getting long and the publisher wanted it before I could add everything!). The book, *Neurobiology and the Development of Human Morality: Evolution, Culture and Wisdom*, is an interdisciplinary integration of multiple fields to explain moral development and functioning. It incorporates neuro-, clinical, development, evolutionary, ethological and anthropological science addressing the questions of human nature, human development and human optimization.

Humans are so immature at birth that to develop in a healthy manner, reaching their full potential, they need to experience humanity's evolved nest. This helps structure well-functioning brain and body systems like the stress response, immune system and many other systems, preparing the individual for cooperative behavior and compassionate morality, including with the rest of the natural world. With a degraded evolved nest, the individual will have one or more areas of dysregulation, undermining sociality and morality. The evolved nest is an intergenerational, communal responsibility that industrialized societies have largely forgotten, especially the USA.

How easy or difficult is it for you to share your values with students when teaching?

I am rather countercultural. I know too much and care too deeply about the wellbeing of babies, about how human nature is constructed in early life, and the ongoing destruction of Creation. So, I tried to teach courses that would allow me to address those topics. Being concerned for the wellbeing of babies is not a popular position, nor is deep connection with the natural world. When I told students that living a good life is about relationships, virtue self-development and respect for nature, they had a hard time taking it in. Students spend years being told that a good student/person focuses on learning information and getting good grades to obtain a profitable career (even Catholics!).

There is a great deal of misunderstanding of child development and how to raise virtuous children. Many people think that adults have to coerce children into being good, to punish them and deny them pleasure. The

research on the Evolved Nest indicates that this is mistaken. God created children with an inner guidance system that signals what is needed. When caregivers follow this signaling from the very beginning, avoid causing trauma or shock, and meet children's basic needs with tenderness, children grow into cooperative, empathic, conscientious people.

Because of cultural myths about raising young children, many of my students were not raised with tenderness or with Evolved Nestedness, so many arrived with depression, anxiety and other problems. So, in my classes I always helped them learn self-healing techniques like belly breathing. I helped them learn to enjoy playing in the moment (with folk song games) which grows parts of the brain that were neglected in childhood. Then we would play those same games with young children. It's really important for students to develop a deep connection to the natural world so that they take this concern into account in their adult work and family lives. My classes offered various nature immersion experiences, like field trips to forests and building gardens on campus with native plants. These activities, along with self-development exercises and playful encounters with young children, helped break through the intellect-focused mindsets the students had at the beginning of the course.

How do your values affect your research? And what are some challenges you face?

Values are central to my research. The wellbeing of children, adults and the natural world is a central concern in all my work. My students and I have been studying provision of our species' evolved developmental system (evolved nest) and its effects on wellbeing, sociality and moral orientation for the last ten years.

Many people in my country are so emotionally- and relationally- disconnected in their lives that they have a hard time caring about more than getting money and consuming. They are extremely stressed and operate in a crisis mode most of the time. Many believe the tale that humans have made great progress and that there is no other option than this dehumanizing, anti-life, planet-destroying culture. At EvolvedNest.org, we show other options. We help people understand that life does not have to be the way industrialized societies have set it up.

In fact, I am spending my Expanded Reason prize money on films to inform the public about the findings in the book that won the prize. You can watch the first short film we made at <https://breakingthecyclefilm.org/> which contrasts the two basic ways societies can function. The optimal approach which most human societies through time have followed is what I call a cycle of cooperative companionship: children's basic needs are met; they grow into well-functioning, cooperative community members (from neurobiology and on up); as healthy adults, they

maintain the cooperative system. What is apparent in the USA is the opposite pattern: children's basic needs are not met; illbeing and dysregulation ensue; adults who are detached and distracted keep this competitive detachment cycle going.

What is your advice for students who may be Catholic are contemplating doing graduate work or a PhD?

A PhD can offer credentials for getting your voice heard. But it's critically important to develop your heart-sense, your heart-mind, rather than focus only on your intellectual development. This is a combination of personal and spiritual knowledge. It is good to work hard and master something but it does not have to involve a PhD. If you go directly into graduate school from college, it may have the unfortunate side effect of limiting your imagination. It may put you into a blindered silo that you then will defend for many years and perhaps all your life.

Moreover, the western education system emphasizes a detached orientation to relationships and the natural world, using cognitive models that are limited and underperform but are taken as images of reality. You have to have some outside experience to realize this. So, I recommend that before entering a graduate program you take a few years to explore life first, to develop relationships with people very different from you, and build multiple perspectives. In any case, within a graduate program be careful to always stretch yourself, to consider alternatives to the assumptions of the discipline.

Finally, could you share a personal anecdote about yourself, what you are passionate about?

Thomas Aquinas said there were two routes to God, the Bible and Nature. The western world abandoned the latter when the scientific method, colonialism and capitalism took over its dominant culture. The writing of my aforementioned book led me to the realization that our sustainable ancestors, and most of humanity on the planet through time, honored Creation as a sacred partner who keeps us alive. Pope Francis has spoken eloquently about our need to respect Creation. These days I do my best to honor Creation by being conscientious about the usage of water, planting native varieties of plants to feed the native wildlife, even singing to the trees and other plants on our land. Our ancestors used to do this to encourage them, as all living things need encouragement.