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The One

By Julia Markut

I once heard a math teacher say that what comes naturally to one should not be wasted. I suppose I should clarify by explaining that I had overheard this. It was directed toward another student, expressed in whispers as the teacher called him over to the front of the room. He absolutely deserved the praise. I've never seen someone so good at math. I don't remember what I was doing at that moment. But that was once and I write now. Part of the pursuit of perfection means seeking to please. Yet I was reassured by the fact that math does not come naturally to me, that I didn't have to please or conquer a subject so flawlessly as the other student. I don't write this reflection now because writing is what comes naturally to me. There are many accounts of authors explaining why they choose to write, and here is mine now: I write as reassurance that something can come naturally if you just sit down. I have to write so that I, too, can find meaning in the overheard warning that something that comes naturally shouldn't be wasted. I want to be made recipient of that warning, I want to hear the whispers repeated in the back of my head as I move forward. Work, persistent, challenge yourself, don't waste what comes naturally. Don't reject your nature, don't neglect it. Carry the calculator. Solve the math problems. Learn the language of variables. You have to, because it comes naturally to you. It's comforting to know that nature points to a given purpose. Things become a bit more clear. You have something to depend on.

Until you don't. We're bound to reach a point when we begin to feel that what "comes naturally" no longer represents an assurance that the particular means by which we have decided to lead our lives is not only justifiable, but also the right way. I've recently experienced a sensation where I'm surprised to find that I remember the contents of book pages I feel I will never remember based on my high level of exhaustion in the moment that I read. For this reason, I'm presently not surprised to find myself writing down the contents of a memory that is in contrast to the notion that there exists that one subject, area, etc that is "the one" for us. My 6th grade math teacher's method of striving to encourage the students that were screens away made a bit more sense to me during a counseling lesson in school a couple of years later. During a time when motivation was seemingly abandoned in the schools that we vacated during the Covid lockdown, the multitude of bright colored circles characterized by initials and images of long-expired memes replaced the faces of students who, knowingly or unknowingly, heard a metaphor that was later explained: "just because your mom doesn't like going to the dentist doesn't mean you have to hate it too." The 6th grade math teacher urged those who were and were not listening that our disposition to find ourselves and succeed in a world of infinite possibilities is not limited by who we are made out to be. During that counseling lesson a couple of years later, I learned that there is no such thing as a math or English or science- or whatever other subject the world of

academia tends to bestow upon us- person. This isn't to say that we are nothing more than a cycle of people who come into this world with the purpose of reaching a state where our minimal prints of discarded rain water ultimately evaporate. With our leaving a certain world, whether that's the world of childhood, high school, employment, or the world itself, means coming to terms with some level of evaporation. Yet when we refuse to cover the concrete of more than just one side of the street, we never know how many drains we could have ended up flowing through and which big bodies of water we could have eventually flowed into. There is no one side of the street that the rain ever touches. There shouldn't be one person that we choose to be. There is no one thing that comes naturally.

There is no one thing that comes naturally yet I still write to compensate for not being the student warned not to risk the loss of what they are at disposition to perform. Perhaps I write to prove something to myself, that I could have been the rain drop that flooded the mind of, say, an English teacher. I face the necessity to remind myself that I must allow the tide of my talents to pull me into a large body of water that will never truly evaporate. If this be the case, then why do so many writers as myself feel robbed of something they never had? Of the ideas, experiences, interactions, etc, that completely justify the fact that writing does really come naturally to those who are acclaimed for their work. I remember being particularly interested in the idea that Harper Lee never produced a second novel after *To Kill a Mockingbird* at the same time that I was told that even if one thing comes more naturally, we shouldn't neglect the rest. I think I had read this fact somewhere in a different book, and I continuously used it as an explanation that a writer can, at times, be their worst enemy. I know this is not to be a new revelation, but looking at it now, it can't hurt to ask whether nature has a given timeline? An expiration date? Does what comes naturally stop coming naturally when we've received the degree, obtained the dream job, or produced a best-selling novel? In terms of writing, specifically, we're faced with the continuous threat that writing will never come as naturally when we have produced *the one* novel, short story, or even blog post. In terms of "the one" what I mean to say is that piece of writing that bestows us with a moment where someone can finally assure us that what came naturally to us was not wasted, that it's right in front of you with the manuscript that you clench onto. I so often reveled at Harper Lee's inability to put out a second book into the world, yet I never made an effort to find out whether she at least tried. I can imagine the author typing and discarding the paper lined with ideas that emphasize that writing comes naturally to her nearby trash can. I say this because it was only today that I created my first Google doc titled "Scarps." I cut the second paragraph I drafted for this piece and inserted it into something that seems to resemble a waste bin in itself. The paragraph didn't seem like something that would classify this piece as "the one" for me, as "good" and "perfect" enough as a sense of false nostalgia frames my previous pieces as.

And so I write to restore the notion that something comes naturally, that something can continue to come naturally despite my production of pieces that have taught me about my writing style,

and pieces that I can't say I'm not proud of. I write to uphold the notion that there is no such thing as a signature piece, that a bookstore shouldn't only order *Pride and Prejudice* seeing that the book is Austen's own "the one." I write to produce a certain sense of hope for my future self to remember that writing is not bound to an external or even personal classification of perfection. Writing can continue to come naturally if we choose not to approach it as an act that justifies the height of one skill over another. I say "continue" because we were all sat down in an elementary school classroom at some point in our lives and told to write a few sentences, journal, produce a short story, to simply write in one way or another. We were young so we didn't yet have a sense of what comes naturally, and still we wrote. Now that some of us feel that writing, in particular, comes naturally, we can do just the same: sit and write as if writing is something independent of the world of nature. We so often hear that there is no such thing as "good writing" yet it's an ideal that we long for each time we sit down to write. It seems as if "good writing" or the "perfect paper," meaning the ability to produce writing according to a given model, was the very justification that allowed us to feel that we have found the field and practice that comes naturally.

I've brought light to my criticism of writing these blog posts over the span of a few days in previous pieces. I considered it a sort of indication that what comes naturally is similar to the tea cup to my left. Once you finish the liquid, you have nothing left to drink. Once I used up my day's share of what I feel comes naturally to me, I would have to simply wait for the water to reboil, the tea to steep the next day. I think I've been so critical of this means of writing as I've been continuously fearful of the possibility that there might not be a cup of tea waiting for me as I approach writing tomorrow. The thoughts would run out, there wouldn't be any more anecdotes or metaphors to hinder my ideas upon. There would be minimal glimpse into the nature that sustains me. I would attempt to write, but once completed, that piece would no longer be "the one." The "right" piece seems to cling onto a favorable time and conditions where we're especially at disposition to do what comes naturally. What I know that I've failed to consider is that while the tea does eventually run out, the stories, encounters, and seemingly insignificant experiences we face as we wait for it to boil and steep once again can represent the reason why writing comes naturally. I think that it's its most natural form, writing can be almost sporadic, or rather, the idea for producing what one constitutes as their signature piece should be something that is long awaited. As we wait for the next cup of tea, we may go through an entire day of school or work full of situations that hold potential for being retold, or at least serve as inspiration for continuing to write. Writing seems to only come naturally when we're naturally embedded into the world around us, when we're able to see a broader purpose to it. There is no such thing as "the one," the one book that characterizes one as a good writer, the one school we must attend, or the one career we must attain, even the one person whom we simply must be with. The prospect of fulfilling what we know to come naturally shouldn't be measured by our most perfect paper. Similar to how we move away from judging someone based on their worst moments, our dispositions shouldn't be attributed to our greatest achievements.

I write as a means of making peace with the fact that despite my greatest efforts, the perfection that I so aimlessly strive for will not always be bestowed upon me in the front of a classroom. I write because calculus does not come naturally to me. I write to remind myself of the struggle that will endlessly accompany my efforts of striving for that perfection, of being unable to understand that not everything comes naturally. I write to remind myself that even what does seemingly come naturally will not be without its own challenges, without the struggle to come up with an idea, to put a sentence together, and to pick up from what I started writing. I write now to remember where the strain of doubt that what once came naturally no longer does comes from in itself: the classroom. Regardless of the number of personally satisfying blog posts that I produce, I will continue to feel that I've wandered off the pursuit of perfection when I fail to properly answer *The Portrait of a Lady* MCQ questions on my AP Lit final, for example. I will see my inability to perform as I intended to on my math final as an inability to conquer what does not come naturally. We must write and do what we can. We're unable to produce the perfect paper time and time again because we're not perfect. Because one subject- whether academic or literary- appeals to one person more than another. My writing started off as an indication that something can come naturally to me if I just sit down and think. I started this piece off with the intention of writing that perfect blog post, "the one" that, in plain language, would make me feel better about myself. Consequently, this piece has grown to represent an example of what does not come naturally as it's rooted in the instance of self-punishment.

Self-punishment can come in many forms. I considered forcing myself to read *The Portrait of a Lady* over winter break to make up for my inability to comprehend the infamous College Board MCQ questions. I'm not sure if I can classify Joan Didion's inability to write short stories for a period of ten years following her negative experience with a college class as an example of punishing one's self for being unable to partake in a subsector of the field we believe comes naturally to us. I do know, though, that similar to the writer who felt defeated in a setting where others' experiences and interactions appeared to be the perfect material for the class's required writing of five short stories, I, too, neglected the subject matter that challenged my belief that English, writing, or the larger kaleidoscope of inserting and comprehending words from paper did not come naturally to me. I failed to read the Henry James novel just as Didion failed to produce the taunting subject matter until 10 years passed of her taking the Berkeley English class. In "Telling Stories" she explains the source of the doubts that stalled her from meeting the course's requirements of writing five short stories,

"I had spent seventeen of my nineteen years in Sacramento, and the other two in the Tri Delt house on Warring Street in Berkeley. I had never read Paul or Jane Bowles, let alone met them, and when, some fifteen years later at a friend's house in Santa Monica Canyon, I did meet Paul Bowles, I was immediately rendered as dumb and awestruck as I had been when I was nineteen and taking English 106A."

Yet in the end, the three short stories that Didion only ever wrote were published. In those ten years, Didion appeared to have done everything to prove that writing did come naturally to her; she worked for Vogue, she published her first novel, etc. She goes on to later reveal that the primary reason why she chose to address the source of what instilled a sense of self-doubt within her back in California was to know that she can still write after producing the first novel. Didion wrote as a means of remembering how to write, as a reminder that writing would continue to agree with her nature despite the draining of her own tea cup. I find it ironic that the very matter that urged the nineteen-year-old to feel less than those who appeared to be significantly more experienced than her was the source of her reassurance, reassurance that writing would still come naturally to her after writing her first book, her “the one” at the time of its publication. She wrote to remember that she can still write despite draining her ability to write about the experiences that characterized her childhood and early years. She may have written to show that writing can come naturally, that one’s nature of being able to do something fluctuates with a willingness to exceed it. What comes naturally can only be sustained if we allow it to. One gets called up to the front of the math classroom when they choose to take two math classes their senior year. One is able to publish three short stories after putting a book out into the world if they tell themselves that they want writing to come naturally to them. An individual experience that convinces our adolescent minds that something doesn’t come naturally shouldn’t stall one from pursuing a life in a field that they wish to pursue. Similarly, that that one warning, confirmation of success, or virgin novel shouldn’t prevent us from fulfilling what we term as our nature.