Opinion
NCR Voices



Pedestrians cross the street in the Bay Ridge neighborhood of Brooklyn, New York, June 5, 2025. (AP/Andres Kudacki)



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It's been a good week for natural law. People are talking about it even if they do not mention it by name.

David Brooks, at the Aspen Ideas Festival, spoke about the pattern of "rupture and repair" that has characterized our society. Brooks said that we are in a moment of rupture now, and offered some ideas about how we commence the work of repair.

Near the start of his talk, which I watched this past weekend after three friends sent me a link, Brooks quoted two of my favorites, the evangelical historian George Marsden and columnist and thinker Walter Lippmann.

Marsden wrote, "What gave such widely compelling force to [Martin Luther] King's leadership and oratory was his bedrock conviction that the moral law was built into the universe." Brooks commented that, in the past 60 years, "we've become a much more individualistic country. ... The moral order has frayed."

The problem is not just individualism, however, but our conception of freedom. Lippmann wrote in 1955, "If what is good, what is right, what is true, is only what the individual chooses to invent based on his feelings, we have left the ground of civilization."

America's core understanding of freedom has always been a negative freedom, a "freedom from." Our revolution aimed to free us from British control. American liberalism through the 19th century and first half of the 20th century sought freedom from the overly large influence of the business interest. Our involvement in two world wars was about making the world free from tyranny. Throughout, freedom of religion and speech and assembly were understood as freedoms from government control.

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This conception of freedom was essentially political and it could be because Americans held to a widely shared conception of the moral order. The one time we could not agree on what that moral order required, we fought a great and terrible civil war to resolve the difference.

In the years after World War II, that shared conception of the moral order evaporated as the personal became political. There was a shift in our conception of freedom to something not just more individualistic but more volitional. We believed we could "choose" and "invent" the morality that worked for us.

This is libertarianism, and it is found on the left in social issues and on the right in economic ones. Both versions paved the way for Trumpian authoritarianism. Both.

How do we recover a shared sense of the moral order that is built into the universe? I am not sure, but dusting off the idea of a natural law might allow us to at least find a shared moral vocabulary again. That might lead to the discovery of shared moral ideals, without which any project at renewal and repair after Donald Trump will be stillborn.

The second item about the natural law was in the Summer 2025 print edition of Cracks in Pomo: The Zine. In his introduction to the pages, editor Stephen Adubato writes about the Bay Ridge neighborhood of Brooklyn, New York, contrasting it with the tonier, more gentrified neighborhoods like Williamsburg and Bushwick. He writes:

> The rootedness, the lack of polish and pretension in the depths of the boroughs dispose their residents to being able to forge a community that is as raunchy and caustic as it is organic and spontaneous. There exists an air of originality, conviviality, diversity, and countercultural energy — precisely because they do not *try* to make it so. Their culture is much greater than anything they could have fabricated by their own individual effort: It is the fruit of something passed down through generations by people with a real commitment to the place, and to the people and institutions it is home to. [Emphasis in original.]

Adubato is seconding the point Lippmann made, despite their obvious differences. Apart from the difference in time — Lippmann was an in-house critic of modernity, and did not conceive a postmodern intellectual landscape — there is an aroma of

romanticism about the Cracks in Pomo crowd that is utterly absent from Lippmann's more pristine liberalism.

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Adubato discerns that culture is at its most creative when it starts with a recognition of all that has been given to it, that there is something boring and unnatural about strivers. When applied to politics, this outlook almost necessarily warms to conceptions of a natural law.

Finally, on Sunday, we had that magnificent passage from Deuteronomy:

> For this command that I enjoin on you today is not too mysterious and remote for you. It is not up in the sky, that you should say, "Who will go up in the sky to get it for us and tell us of it, that we may carry it out?" Nor is it across the sea, that you should say, "Who will cross the sea to get it for us and tell us of it, that we may carry it out?" No, it is something very near to you, already in your mouths and in your hearts; you have only to carry it out.

For Catholics, natural law has its origin in divine law. We believe this because we are told so in last Sunday's second reading, Paul's Letter to the Colossians: "Christ Jesus is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation. For in him were created all things in heaven and on earth, the visible and the invisible."

This gets to the heart of discussions — inescapable for Christians, filled with creative tension, sometimes with great difficulties and often spilling into outright heresy — about the relationship of grace and nature. Such questions quickly go above my paygrade, but you can sense that they are always present.

We moderns think very well of ourselves. We have not only committed Adam's sin of wanting to be like God, we go a step further and want God to be a lot like us. Certainly, we do not want his laws to be constricting.

Can any singular ethic give us the shared societal ideals we so obviously need? In our pluralistic society, that is an open question. Even an ethic like natural law, which displays diversity within its framework, may be too restrictive for a society with such powerful centrifugal forces. At least now, in different cultural outposts, we are seeing

the question posed. I do not fear we lack the intelligence to find creative answers. I fear we lack the humility.