

When Normal is Not an Option

Unitarian Universalist Church of Olinda

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Normality is a contentious topic...

Already in the last few months, we've seen how fluid a sense of "normal" can be. Things that seemed outlandish in February, can feel ordinary by August... or at least, part of the expectations of what day-to-day life looks like in mid-2020. Normality is not static.

There's even debate among linguists on whether we should talk about "normality" or "normalcy" – one is considered more acceptable and the other is more widely used in some areas. Which one is truly "normal"? It's hard to say.

The question of "normal" – as slippery as it may be – remains a hot topic these days. And as we explore that, we might even see that a deeper, more meaningful question appears, on whether "normal" should even be the main goal.

The explosion in Beirut last week appears to have come about amid dire situations in Lebanon, which had become normal, but not what people in Lebanon aspire to have as their ongoing normal.

And that disaster is also a reminder of the other major explosions 75 years ago in Hiroshima and Nagasaki. To one extent, we might welcome the fact that the use of nuclear weapons in warfare has *not* become a new normal, while we also recognize that the threat of nuclear warfare has remained a normal reality for decades – one which many dedicated people have worked to de-normalize, also for decades.

Sometimes moving beyond normal can be the better option.

So, let us talk about some of the struggles that people can bump into when dealing with what is *seen* as “normal”.

I have sometimes been asked whether I consider myself a person of colour – sometimes, I’ve been asked this by people of colour. And even though I’m an immigrant of mixed racial background, I’ve been inclined to say that I do *not* consider myself a person of colour.

To be sure, there are some aspects of my life that might fall in the category of “racialized” – people sometimes hear a distinct accent when I speak, for instance. And on my job applications, there is what might be called an “ethnic”-sounding name, and I don’t know if that has worked to my disadvantage, as can be the case for people whose names are racialized.

But most of my life experience reflects that of a white person. I don’t live with a fear of being profiled in public spaces, and I usually feel safe dealing with authority figures. Most of my identities intersect in a way that I realistically expect to be taken seriously. When I speak, people usually listen.

In Canadian society, I essentially feel like what is perceived to be the “default” – for lack of a better description, people see me as normal.

For many people of colour in Canada, being seen as normal has often not been an option. And that setup has given way to oppression, violence, and other forms of harm.

Since the killing of George Floyd, that reality has become more visible, not just in the United States, but worldwide. Some of you have participated in giving witness, and offering solidarity, to this struggle for true racial equality. Some of you have been part of recent conversations hosted by the Canadian Unitarian Council, which have included stories by Black Canadians, who offer witness to a reality in

our country that many of us are still working to understand or even acknowledge.

Notably, many people of colour also wish to celebrate their racial heritage, and rather than erase it, or conform to social expectations of what might be perceived as “normal”, the *deeper* goal is a struggle for recognition of basic dignity, for acknowledgment of shared humanity, for celebration of diverse identities.

In the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, “plus” community – the L G B T Q + community – it is not uncommon to see a complicated relationship with the notion of what is seen as “normal”, or around the drive to be considered “normal”. Different personal stories from L G B T Q + folks will witness differently around the desire to be seen as normal by a society that sees a straight lifestyle as the norm, or the expected default, with some wishing their sexual orientation or gender identity didn’t represent a reason for standing out, while others might reject the pressure to conform with the larger expectations from society.

We might see this more concretely in conversations leading to the establishment of equal marriage, by which legal recognition of *all* couples might be seen as a way to be accepted in the mainstream of society. But not all LGBTQ+ folks have felt that way, and even with today’s reality of access to equal marriage, parts of the community might still see it as irrelevant, or perhaps even harmful, to their identity.

I’m not sure it’s for me to say whether being seen as normal should or should not be a goal for folks in the LGBTQ+ community.

And whether or not LGBTQ+ folks want to be seen as part of the norm, the reality is that, for much of history, normal was not option. And that often meant that lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer and questioning, intersex, nonbinary, asexual, polyamorous, Two-Spirit, and other sexual and gender minorities were “othered” by society, resulting in oppression, violence, and many other forms of harm.

So, I *do* wonder if there are more useful questions to ask about how we treat people in our communities and people in our society, beyond whether they are to be considered normal or not, or whether they should be otherwise “normalized” to conformity. When normal is not an option, and even when it is, I wonder if it might be more... dignified, to ask how we can value people in all their humanity, appreciating, even celebrating aspects of their personhood that might be different from our experience, our preferences, or the perceived majority among society.

One such way that communities around the world do that, often in the summer, is during Pride. And the name Pride tells us a lot about what it's about.

Whether or not “normal” is an option, Pride events, commemorations, and celebrations, offer a space where people can give due credit to who they are, to embrace one's personhood and humanity, however we were born, and however we may see fit to identify during our lives.

Often, these celebrations are in June, commemorating the anniversary of the Stonewall riots, when LGBTQ+ folks made it known that they matter.

My friends, many of the lessons that the pandemic has revealed call us to look beyond going back to *normal* – that a rather more meaningful goal would be to move towards *better*.

My friends, when normal seems like a less appealing option, may we strive toward better.

So may it be,
In Solidarity,
Amen.

*Suggested Hymns:***Hymn #299 Make Channels for the Streams of Love**

Words: From Richard Chenevix Trench, 1807-1886

Music: American folk melody, arr. by Annabel Morris Buchanan, 1889-1983, © 1938, renewed 1966 J. Fischer & Bros. Co.,
harmony by Charles H. Webb, 1933- , © 1989 J. Fischer & Bros. Co.

LAND OF REST

Opening Hymn #42 Morning, So Fair to See

Words: Vincent B. Silliman, 1894-1979, recast 1991 © Vincent Silliman Estate

Music: A. H. Hoffmann von Fallersleben's *Schlesische Volkslieder*, 1842, harmony by T. Tertius Noble, 1867-1953

SCHÖNSTER HERR JESU

Closing Hymn #170 We Are a Gentle, Angry People

W & M: Holly Near, 1944- , © 1979 Hereford Music,

arr. by Patrick L. Rickey, 1964- ,

arr. © 1992 UUA

SINGING FOR OUR LIVES