What's Normal?

Bellingham Unitarian Fellowship
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WELCOME

What's normal? I tried to preach on this topic a couple of weeks ago, but I got so wigged out by the growing misalignment between political reality and what I had long understood to be normality...that I veered off into a rant.

Well, there are times to rant, and there are times to step back, for perspective. Don't misunderstand: stepping back for perspective is not the same as retreat. I'm not shrugging my shoulders and saying, "Well, I guess this is the new normal." Nor am I naively expecting that as of today things will find a new equilibrium. No, madness abounds far and wide: earlier this week (I kid you not...and I'm getting really tired of saying I kid you not...) earlier this week Romania *decriminalized corruption*. The abuse of elected office, and the exploitation of conflicts of interest as long as these led to damages of less than about $50,000... these were suddenly made ok. And then: five days of protests with hundreds of thousands of people across the country led yesterday to a rescinding of the decriminalization order.

Life gives us times of extraordinary stress, and times of reprieve. Somewhere in there, we do well to reflect, to wonder, to breathe. To calmly envision a healthy future for the generations to come, and to be grateful for the spirits of the ancestors.

And thus we light the chalice today in loving memory of **Kay Witter**, who died yesterday morning. Kay was a long-time member of BUF who worked very hard behind the scenes in so many areas. From providing support for initiatives on social justice, to making beautiful quilts... to making sure that BUF ran smoothly (up till just a couple of months ago she was folding the Sunday orders of service). Mostly Kay was a loving presence, a voice of both reason and compassion. She was a questioner, a realist, an embodiment of our covenant, which we say now together....

CHILDREN'S FOCUS   *A Bad Case of Stripes*   by David Shannon

Summary: Camilla loves lima beans but doesn't eat them because she thinks other kids will think she's weird. Result: she begins to morph into all kinds of shapes and colors in response to what the other kids like.

READING   from the novel, *The Deep End of the Ocean,* Jacqueline Mitchard

When Ben was a baby, [his mother] Beth had actually taken him to a doctor because he smiled and slept with such uninterrupted content. She asked the doctor if Ben could be retarded. The young man, a Russian immigrant, had not mocked her; he had told her, gently, that he supposed the baby could be impaired—anyone could be—but was there a reason for her fears? Did Ben

rock, or bang his head against his crib bars—did he seem to be able to hear her, did he look into her eyes?

Beth told the doctor that, no, Ben didn't rock or avoid her eyes. She tried to avoid the doctor's eyes as she told him, "But Ben's so…so quiet, and so content," sounding like the ninny she was. "He doesn't scream, even when he's got a dirty diaper, even when he's hungry. He's so patient."

"And your older boy?"

"He was more…present." Vincent had been a thin, wakeful, watchful baby, walking at nine months, talking at ten, telling Beth "Me angry" at a year. The doctor smiled at her. Beth still kept a copy of the bill on which the doctor had scrawled his diagnosis: Good baby. Normal.

SERMON

What is normal? Do we want to be normal? I will argue today that within some definitions, "normal" is something to shoot for. Within other definitions, and depending on the situation, being normal is not so great.

Eventually I will get around to proposing something better to aim for than normalcy as a fixed target. And that is: flexibility and responsiveness to a changing social environment. I will begin with a story in which the hero is a telemarketer. Imagine that. OK not exactly a hero, and by no means perfect, but definitely flexible and responsive to a changing social environment. The story comes from V. Langston-Kingsley, the wife of my colleague Pamela Langston-Daley. She writes:

> It was about 20 years ago — back in New England — there was a blizzard. We were pretty bored so when a telemarketer called and asked, 'Mrs. Langston, may I have a few minutes of your time?' I sat myself down with a cup of cocoa and said, 'Why of course!' She was selling magazines. She was trying to get out of me what my interests were.... She asked my profession and I told her that I was primarily a homemaker. She launched into the Redbook and the Good Housekeeping and the Women's World.
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> I told her that most of the articles represented heterosexuals and that I just couldn't relate and even when I could, well, it just irked me that there were no people who looked like my family. She was silent. So I helped her. 'You see, I'm a lesbian.' I could hear the stunned blink over the phone wires but, bless her, she didn't miss a beat. She said, 'Oh. Well, then. May I suggest Field and Stream or Popular Mechanics?'

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Being normal is an important part of the myth of American identity. Here, we say, everyone has a chance to succeed if they just give up or at least tone-down their individuating characteristics and assimilate within the melting pot. Speak English, dress for success, blend in.

Of course an equally important part of American identity is the exact opposite: our great myth of independence and self-reliance. "We conquered the wilderness by the sweat of our brow, dependent on no one, and certainly never relying on government handouts...." So, in contrast to

the melting pot, the myth of self-reliance teaches that the American norm is to not even care about fitting-in, but simply to go our own way.

Of course American identity is also caught up in nostalgic images of the *normal* American family: either the 1850's multigenerational family, or the 1950's nuclear family. Social historian Stephanie Coontz, a professor at the Evergreen State College, critiques these false images in a couple of her books entitled: *The Way We Never Were*, and *The Way We Really Are*. She describes historical reality to be at odds with such romantic dreams.

She describes how children raised in the pre-industrial household may have had 3 generations living under one roof, but these were highly unlikely to be "intact" families. Parents often died young, or fathers headed West on their own, and children became apprentices or farmhands to other families. Divorce may have been less common, perhaps because few couples faced the prospect of 60+ years together. And unplanned pregnancy was very common and largely uncontrollable.

So while nostalgia for the multigenerational family fantasy is based in sentiment; the real pre-industrial family was based upon survival. Children were economic assets — members of the workforce. Sweet images of mothers spending time with their children do not jibe with the realities of grueling daily labors.

Yes there were qualities of life that we could appreciate from that period, not the least of which is the adaptability and the willingness to re-align into countless varieties of family forms in

response to life's unpredictability. But it's hardly a picture of normal as in timeless and unchanging.

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So what is normal? Am I normal?

What do we mean, and what do we imply with the word, "normal?" How do we use it to assess ourselves and others...how do we use it to include... to separate... and to justify?

Consider 5 common ways we use the word:
[source: *Normal Family Processes*, by Froma Walsh]

First, "normal" can mean, in a clinical sense, "not sick." Unimpaired. As in the example from our reading earlier: "Good baby. Normal."

Second, "normal" means typical; statistically average; with the majority.

Third, "normal" means the standard to strive for; functioning optimally; the ideal.

Fourth, when we say "normal" we mean "natural." Something is normal if it came to be within the ordinary unfolding of laws of nature, or God's plan.

And finally, and perhaps most frequently, we use "normal" to mean, "acceptable." It is a *judgment* of character, moral fiber, and even personal worth.

There are, of course, drawbacks to each of these approaches to defining what is normal.

First, defining "normal" as not-sick, or without-symptoms: The trouble with this definition is that everyone has problems; and problems should not always be interpreted as pathology.

This definition of normal suggests that when I admit I have a problem, or when I seek help for a problem, that I'm not normal...when in fact acknowledging problems and seeking help are signs of good health.

Second: normal-as-average: This view leads to defining anything outside the statistical norm as "deviant." Within this definition, a highly dysfunctional family might be as statistically normal as a healthy one. Do we really want to think of very common, but socially destructive trends as "normal"? Drunk driving, school violence? Is this what we want to mean by normal?

Third: "normal-as-standard, or ideal." Each society regards its own practices as normal in this sense. The trouble with normal-as-ideal is that ideals reflect the dominant social group's values about how everyone else ought to be. This definition fails to recognize that the practices that work for one person or family-structure may not work in another time, place, or social setting.

Fourth: "normal-as-natural." If normal were natural, why did most of us spend at least a few minutes in front of the mirror this morning, not to mention in the shower? And still we argue that certain behaviors are "not natural," thereby implying that "natural" is the standard to live by.

Would we argue as vocally for the natural human ability to act fearfully, or selfishly? I assume you'd like your minister to be normal. But if you wanted me to do what comes naturally, I'd still be in bed.

And finally, "normal-as-acceptable." The problem here is when we judge behavior, find it lacking, and immediately translate that into a personal label. Abnormal behavior means morally unfit person. The normal-as-acceptable approach derives from conventional behavioral expectations (an emphasis upon conforming to established moral rules rather than intelligently weighing ethical principles in a given situation). This definition is often perpetrated by those looking for someone to blame for society's problems.

Professor Coontz writes about European missionaries who immigrated to the so-called new world a few hundred years ago: "[They] set out to institutionalize the married-couple nuclear family based upon the 'correct' roles for husband and wife. They could not understand why Indian men were so reluctant to assume their authority as 'heads of family.' After many frustrating attempts to convince them, one...recorded in his journal that he pulled out his strongest argument against allowing wives so much liberty. If you do not keep your women at home, he explained to one Indian, you will never know for certain which of the children your wife bears actually belongs to you. But the man was horrified rather than impressed with the [missionary's] logic. 'Thou hast no sense,' the Naskapi replied, 'You French people love only your own children; but we love all the children of our tribe.'"

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Notice how easily we slip from one definition of normal to another as it seems convenient, even within a single argument. We might start with a statistical norm and then slip into assumptions about the way things have always been, or the way things ought to be. When you find others doing this, and especially when you find yourself doing it, I suggest you confront this hoax. Ask, "What do I/you mean by normal? Average, optimal, natural, unimpaired, or acceptable?"

Average, optimal, natural, unimpaired, or acceptable?

We might use any and all of these definitions. Each has its purpose. But if the definitions switch mid-sentence, then we are being deceived, or we are deceiving.

I think we'll discover—if we pay better attention to the ways we use (or misuse) the word—I think we'll discover that "What IS Normal?" is the wrong question. Instead, our focus should be on normal PROCESS. Rather than what we've always been, what we are, or what we ought to be, it might be better to tune in to our trajectory: how we are becoming.

The weakness of the definitions we've considered so far is that they presume fixed traits. So rather than normal for all of humanity for all time it may be more useful to consider this: given our individual strengths and weaknesses, circumstances, needs, and the larger social structure within which we find ourselves, is there a FIT?

Are we adjusting ourselves and adapting our habits to cope with the unfolding process in which we find ourselves: financial limits, changing technology and demographics, higher average temperatures. Are we adjusting to be in synch with the strengths and weaknesses of the people

around us? (Are we adjusting to be in synch with the strengths and weaknesses not just of the people we want around us, but the people who are actually around us?)

This approach to understanding normalcy-as-a-process, and normalcy-in-context rejects the *forms* of normalcy and looks instead to what is *functional*.

Don't misunderstand: this perspective does not imply that everything is normal, everything is ok. But the form, the composition, the outward presentation of something or somebody is usually beside the point.

So what is normal—in the sense of functional? Both for individuals and for families, functional means: achieving goals, solving problems, having a sense of well-being and connectedness, and maintaining continuity even as we flow with change.

When we say in this context that "relationships matter," [our theme for this year] I think we're saying something more than simply that "relationships are important." I think we're saying that we value relationships enough to envision and strive for *better* relationships. That is: more "normal" relationships in the sense that we envision and strive not for relationships that look ok, or fit predetermined categories, but for relationships that, within the limits of reality, are progressing toward our ideals.

> *By the way, the New York Times last week reported on a study offering very similar observations to what I've said today, using experimental data:* > https://www.nytimes.com/2017/01/28/opinion/sunday/the-normalization-trap.html?_r=0

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Several years ago, after a minor surgery, my wife, Jane, had a strange experience as she was coming out of general anesthesia. She said that for the first five minutes as she was waking up, she had a clear sense that she was watching our son, a preschooler at the time, waking up from surgery. In this vision she didn't know why he had had surgery but she could tell he was very uncomfortable, and she felt sad. Only gradually did it dawn on her that she was the one who had had surgery!

Now is this normal? It was certainly not an ordinary experience for her, and she was certainly not in an ideal state of health at that moment. And yet, taken in context, her experience tells me something about who she is, and it evokes a spiritual ideal that many of us may have in common: the desire to know that we are one with something larger than ourselves. This sense of connection, I believe, is natural, healthy, ideal, acceptable...and yes even *average* in the sense that it is there for every one of us in equal proportions.

To know that we are one with something larger than ourselves... not just to know this intellectually, but *to directly experience ourselves indistinguishable from this unfolding process:* the flow of a greater love.