

Sermon - 'What is Normal?'
September 13th, 2020
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Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Durham

'Hug?', she asked.

Words from a long time friend of Curtis', now ours.

A normal request.

Except not these days, asked in July 2020 in the midst of pandemic lockdowns.

She is 81.

Masks.

Social distancing.

Limited gatherings.

Small circles.

Months for many without human touch.

It is the "new normal."

Over and over we hear, "new normal."

'Hug,' she asked?

What is normal?

Is normal what we are told?

What we agree on together?

Is normal desirable?

Is it good?

Is it who and what we want to be?

What is normal?

Normal development?

Normal behaviour?

Normal social skills?

Normal interactions?

Is healthy normal?

Are you normal?

Am I?

I remember UU church, in my childhood, as a safe haven from “normal.”

A place where I didn't have to fit in.

A place where I could be me.

And others could be them.

With, at our best, radical acceptance and inclusion.

I have been learning a lot about movement

As a yoga teacher

Then delving into yoga therapy, for myself and others

Even more so while seeking healing from a difficult labour

Eager to get back to my old normal.

And have learned how 'common' stealthily becomes 'normal'...

In our world,
Hunching forward for computers, for cooking, for cellphones, driving,
screens,
Bad posture is common.
Is it normal?

In our fast paced, busy, and chaotic lives
Burnout and addiction and anxiety and stress are common.
Are they normal?

In our disconnected lives,
We often don't know our neighbours,
Beyond a casual hello,
Not well enough to know when they could use a helping hand.
It's common.
But normal?

It is also all too common for
A disproportionate weight to fall
On the already marginalized
The people who were already struggling economically
The small businesses that already faced overbearing competition from big
corporations
Indigenous people and people of colour who already faced hardship and
injustice.
This, too, is common.
But is it normal?

There is a difference between common and normal.
We often normalize the common,
Missing out on what could be, should be, for each of us, for all of us, for the
world.

I can't hear the phrase "the new normal" without feeling like it is taking the
commonly true and making it normal.

Is it normal to go without touch?

Is it normal to spend hours on screens?

Is it normal for grandparents to refrain from hugging their grandchildren?

For children to stay away from one another on the playground?

For adults to back away from toddlers who are running, laughing, toward them?

For neighbours to give a wide berth when passing by on a sidewalk?

For friends to go months without sharing a meal?

Is it normal not to play sports, not to sing, not to dance at weddings?

Is it normal for people to be alone most of their days in a nursing home bed?

Is it normal for people to spend their final days alone?

To die alone?

The new common may be masks and social distancing,

But this is far from normal.

‘Hug,’ she asked?

Whether you think these measures are good and necessary, our role to model and reinforce,

Whether you find them stifling and fear that they do more harm than the protection they may offer,

Or whether you feel unsafe amidst these measures, and don't see them as sufficient for your own protection or for your loved ones',

This time is far from normal.

Yet it is our time,
those of us here, living.
It is our common time. Our common experience.

How we respond matters:

We can rant and rage and grieve
At the losses in our lives,
And all around us.
Worrying for what is and what may yet be for us all.
God knows I have had my moments these last several months.

The response to this virus has heightened my worry for many situations:
People struggling economically
People who were already isolated and now even more so
People who are struggling with addictions and mental wellness, an ever-growing number, especially now,
People who are vulnerable and fearful of what this virus and our response might mean for themselves or their loved ones,
People who are afraid for their lives,
People who are dying,
People who are dying alone, of COVID and any number of other causes.

And I have struggled to understand why the risks of other things to our lives and wellbeing don't inspire economic and social action anywhere near this degree... do people dying of poor air quality, estimated at 4.5 million every year, deserve less of our care?

Do the 3 million children under five who die each year due to poor nutrition not deserve assistance even if it has a major impact on the world's economy?

Do the over 70,000 Canadians dying of cancer each year, and millions more around the world, not deserve better efforts to reduce the known carcinogens we use in day-to-day operations and products?

Yes, I have had my ranting and raging and grieving moments.

Alternatively, we can focus on the positive,
Smile behind our masks,
Be grateful for what we have,
And click login to Zoom yet again,
With as much energy as we can muster.

I've had many of these times, too.

Gratitude for health and wellbeing,
Gratitude for family and friends,
Gratitude for my work and our continuing income,
Gratitude for a safe and beautiful place to live.

I have much to be thankful for in the midst of this time.

Both are true: the grief and the gratitude.
And so perhaps the best we can do is
Ride out the storm
With as much of our humanity intact as possible
Grateful for what we have
Without losing ourselves in the process
Or our perspective on what has meaning in our lives and in our world
Nurturing the flame
Keeping alive the memory of what needs tending now and rebuilding later.

Because if this is truly our new normal,
And not just our temporary common,
Then much has been lost.

Far too much.
And far too much remains unjust,
Grows more unjust, each day.

Martin Luther King reminded us that in the face of the inhuman to remain
creatively maladjusted.

'Hug?', she asked.

Elders need hugs as much as infants do, she said.

She is eminently wise and her words rang true.

I believe it is our sacred calling in this time
To ride out the storm
The best we can
In creative maladjustment
To remember that
There are things worth reclaiming
No - essential to reclaim
For our now and future wellbeing that is physical, yes,
AND emotional and social and economic and spiritual.

Hug, she asked?

Yes, rebuilding.
Yes, reclaiming,
Yes, renewing,
Yes, transforming.

Yes.