

Well, here we are, living in the new normal. Not that we had a choice, but that's the way it is with normal.

I look back almost twenty years ago to when I got my first cell phone. It was a flip phone with a tiny black and white screen and a tiny 10 key pad for dialing and typing out messages. I think my plan had 60 voice minutes and 10 texts a month. At the time it was a big deal, and it was ok that it only worked in town.

Now I carry a smart phone that has vastly more memory and processing power than the desktop computer I owned at the time. I'm connected to search and maps and weather and email from almost anywhere I go. I can communicate with people all over the planet and I find things out in a matter of seconds. I have a high resolution camera and voice recorder in my pocket. I can stream video conference calls and cat videos to my heart's content.

But no one ever asked me if I wanted any of that. Quite honestly, had the technology stopped advancing in 2002 when I got that first flip phone, I probably wouldn't have noticed or cared. That phone did what I needed it to do. For the rest, I had maps and cameras, and email could wait until I got home. Checking the weather once a day was plenty, and I could tell if it was going to rain by looking up at the sky, not down at a screen.

Don't get me wrong. I'm not a Luddite. Some of what my smart phone can do is very useful. Some of it is just distraction. Some of it is probably dangerous.

But smartphones are the new normal, and they made their way incrementally into our lives over a couple of decades without us really noticing.

I suppose you could say that normal is that which we take for granted, that which we do not notice until it changes suddenly.

I take it for granted that I have clean water and electric power. I take it for granted that my local stores have decent food and affordable goods in them. I take it for granted that I can

access medical care. I take it for granted that I can walk the streets with thinking about being arrested.

But what's normal for me probably isn't normal for thee.

Other folks take it for granted that they'll harassed by police when they go out, and may not make it home from the grocery store. They take it for granted that clean water isn't coming out of their taps anytime soon. They take it for granted that all the things I take for granted aren't accessible to them, like medical care and work that pays a decent wage.

Looks like the new normal isn't all that new for a lot of us. Yeah, a couple of things have changed – most of us wear masks, and we distance ourselves from other people in public. Some of us are lucky enough to be able to work from home, but that's an impossibility for many. They have to work or go homeless and hungry. They don't have the luxury to stay home and stay safe, and they never did. People of color and the poor still have bad medical care, if they have it all.

So much for the new normal.

Normal. The earliest English use of the word meant "perpendicular; forming a right angle" like something made according to a carpenter's square – called a *norma* in Latin. The Latin word *normālis* also came to mean "according to a rule", from which modern English meanings of the word derive. So in the 1800s, as people began to quantitatively study things like height and weight and blood pressure, typical values came to be referred to as "normal", and by extension values regarded as healthy or desirable came to be called "normal" regardless of how common they were.

We all have assumptions and cultural conditioning about what is normal. What is normal is usually unexamined. There is a sense in which normal is what happens when we aren't paying attention, like going from flip phones to smart phones. Like having an exploitive globalism imposed on the world so we can have those smart phones at the cost of other lives and ecologies. Neither of which we asked for.

Do we really want things to go “back to normal”?

'Normal' is not working for most people – here in America and around the world - so why go back to it? Or rather, why continue it?

In fact, we should probably do away with the idea of normal all together.

When all those 19th century scientists and mathematicians began to gather data and apply statistics to humans, they came up with all these lovely bell curves for height and weight and blood pressure and the like. Some believed that the peak of the bell curve – the center of the distribution – represented the ideal human that nature sought to realize. And while such a person might not actually exist, the curve was seen as the true standard by which deviations were defined. To quote Aarhus University professor Jonathan Sholl, “The individual was synonymous with error, while the average person represented the true human being.”

So much for our uniqueness.

The word normal has many uses: it can mean frequent or average in the population as represented in a typical bell curve. It can also mean adequate as in free from deficiency or defect, or optimal in the sense of being physically fit or mentally sharp. It can mean what is usually done in a society or group, or a culture. It can define an ideal – the perfect tomato or Nietzsche's *Übermensch*. All these meanings tend to elide into each other, from the scientific to the traditional to what is expected and what is seen as correct behavior.

Normal is a phantom, a ghost, a sometimes useful abstraction. Yet when we privilege the idea of normal, and define something as being abnormal, we pathologize it, see it as deviant or deficient – when it may be true and real and necessary for survival.

Or just simply unique and valuable in and of itself.

This applies not just to individuals, but to communities as well. There is no such thing as a ‘normal’ community. Each one is a unique expression of people and place, biology and history, conflict and resolution, and the intervention of random events.

Each one is precious and vital.

The virus has disrupted our “normal”, and this gives us the opportunity to pay attention to all those things we haven’t paid attention to, all the things we’ve taken for granted, because all those things are in flux.

They’re in flux in a way that we haven’t seen in generations. Even before Covid, our institutions and customs were no longer serving like they used to. Our social contract – such as it is – is unravelling. Things hiding under the thin veil of normalcy – like racism and inequality – are now more visible than ever.

The bigger picture is that our culture and economy and organizing principles are undergoing a chaotic transition. That which we’ve ignored or repressed is erupting back into our consciousness, and will ultimately need to be reintegrated into our psyche and culture.

There will be a new normal, but this isn’t it. Yet.

The old normal has to disintegrate first. We imagine this is a painful and uncomfortable process, and so it can be. But it is also a necessary and positive step for progress to be made.

One that cannot be avoided.

Why? Let me briefly describe the medicine wheel teaching as I learned it from my elders – both white and red. It will be a pretty basic explanation of something that’s pretty complex in practice.

There are the four directions – East, South, West, North. Here in the northern hemisphere, those correspond to the four seasons – Spring, Summer, Autumn, Winter. And those correspond to the human lifecycle – birth/death/rebirth in the East, childhood in the South, adolescence in the West, adulthood in the North. Overlaid are the four aspects of a person – Body, Soul, Mind, Spirit.

Human psychology and culture map onto those four directions of space – and onto time. From a lifecycle perspective, we are born from the East. Our childhood is in the South, and then we move into the West for our adolescence. If we successfully pass through the West – and some don't - we arrive in the North, the place of adulthood and community. And then time takes us through elderhood and back into the East, returning to spirit. Time will take us on this journey – we have no choice in the matter. The wheel turns for all of us, and we pass through these cycles in similar ways at different times in our lives.

Here's the thing. There are no shortcuts. You can't jump from childhood to adulthood. You have to go through the West, the place where the sun sets, the place of darkness and examining the soul, the underworld. You have to deal with your mortality, your shadows, your grief, your self-worth, your reasons for being, and make a place for them so that you can become an adult, caring for self and community and working with others so that the people may live.

This is the process of initiation, of disintegration and being put back together again in a new way. You can't avoid it, and if you try, you'll end up right back in the underworld.

We are poised on the threshold of the underworld, and we can make that descent with intention and purpose, or we can just go along for the ride so to speak. I don't recommend the latter.

To do it with purpose means dealing with the shadows of our cultural collective. We all know what they are – the violent history, the racism, the inequality, sexism, class, exploitation – the list goes on. It means coming to terms with our grief and loss and failures. It means making amends for past wrongs. It means rediscovering our purpose and reasons for being on this earth.

And maybe – just maybe - on the other side of all that is wholeness and community, a normal worth living in for all of us.

But first, we have to journey through the West.

Just What is Normal, Anyway?
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Unitarian Congregation of Taos
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May it be so.