

THE TYRANNY OF NORMAL

REV. DANA WORSNOP
ATKINSON MEMORIAL CHURCH
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As once the winged energy of delight
carried you over childhood's dark abysses,
now beyond your own life build the great
arch of unimagined bridges.

Wonders happen if we can succeed
in passing through the harshest danger;
but only in a bright and purely granted
achievement can we realize the wonder.

To work *with* Things in the indescribable
relationship is not too hard for us;
the pattern grows more intricate and subtle,
and being swept along is not enough.

Take your practiced powers and stretch them out
until they span the chasm between two
contradictions...For the god
wants to know himself in you.

Rainer Maria Rilke

The leader of a class I was taking once asked, would you rather be wise or happy. I objected strenuously to such a forced choice. For I do not consider wisdom and goodness as mutually exclusive. I hope one day to be both wise and good. That my wisdom will lead to goodness and my goodness will lead to wisdom.

The question I think he was really trying to ask was, would you rather be right or be happy. Now there's a tougher one. To elucidate this dichotomy further, let me share with you a couple of psychological studies.

"A number of philosophers have suggested that the best way to distinguish between psychiatric disorders and types of behavior not worthy of psychiatric attention is to determine whether the behavior is rational.... There is excellent experimental evidence that happy people are irrational.... It has been shown that happy people, in comparison with people who are miserable or depressed, are impaired when retrieving negative events from long-term memory. Happy people have also been shown to exhibit various biases of judgment that prevent them from acquiring a realistic understanding of their physical and social environment. There is consistent evidence that happy people over-estimate their control over environmental events (often to the point of perceiving completely random events as subject to their will)... Although the lack of these biases in depressed people has led many psychiatric researchers to focus their attention on what has come to be known as depressive realism, it is the unrealism of happy people that is more noteworthy, and surely clear evidence that such people should be regarded as psychiatrically disordered.

That is from *A Proposal to Classify Happiness as a Psychiatric Disorder*, in the Journal of Medical Ethics, reprinted in

And this from the Harvard Health Letter:

“Researchers who have developed way to measure optimism conclude that optimists tend to cope better with life and have better health habits. A Dutch study, which for nine years followed people age 65 to 85, concluded that the most optimistic group had a 55 percent lower risk of death compared with the most pessimistic group, and that their risk of heart disease and stroke was 23 percent less. Researchers couldn't determine whether good health led to optimism, or whether the sunnier disposition created better health or the inclination to do things that contributed to better health.”

Depressive realism does often seem to be a rational response to the present state of affairs in the culture, the nation and the world. Yet optimism is clearly better for your health. Which would you rather be, right or happy?

Yet today I want to talk with you about this dilemma from a slightly different angle. We often talk about happiness as the goal of life. Parents naturally want their children to be happy. The pursuit of happiness is enshrined in our nation's foundational document. (Although it seems that Jefferson changed a common saying of his day that listed three inalienable as rights “life, liberty and property.” That phrase may have been closer to what the colonists believed, but property does not have the same emotional resonance as the pursuit of happiness. And it's interesting to note that the Declaration does not talk about happiness as a right itself. Only the freedom to pursue our own happiness.)

What if the goal of life is not happiness? Happiness is so very elusive. We live in spaces somewhere between our fondest hopes and the reality of our experience. Jungian James Hollis writes in his book *Swamplands of the Soul*:

“The litany arising from the gap between hope and experience is endless. Whether to suffer it stoically, react heroically or whine about one's condition seems an onerous yet unavoidable choice. But Jungian psychology, and the disciplined practice of personal growth it promotes offers another perspective based on the assumption that *the goal of life is not happiness but meaning.*”

So, what if the goal of life is not happiness but meaning? What if the point of being alive is not that we are happy per se, but that our lives have meaning and purpose? Now the truth is that for most happiness is a side effect of meaning and purpose, but the two are not necessarily connected.

Part of the trouble is that we have created an image of what a happy, normal life should look like. We have created this image and it has been created for us. None of our lives lives up to this image all the time. In fact, life rarely ever fully measures up.

Modern psychology is one of the great gifts to humanity from the 20th century. It has taught us so much about our inner lives – even as it sometimes goes to ridiculous extremes. Yet it has also helped create an image of what is normal. Not that psychology created the concept of normality. Societies have always had norms that guide and prescribe behavior. But somehow, we have acquired the notion that there is such a thing as normal. And most of us know that we don't live up to it – although we're often convinced that everyone else does.

How many of you spend time inside your own head, knowing fully your own insecurities and neuroses, convinced that you must be the strangest person on the planet? Other people are clearly confident and assured. They always know what they are doing; say the right thing at the right moment. They were born into fully functional families – starkly contrasting your own highly dysfunctional family of origin. They love their children well and carry on the great tradition of functionality handed down to them. Our sense of what is normal can become a tyrannical ruler in our lives.

I have a confession. I talk to myself. I sometimes carry on lively dialogues. Right out loud. Walking down the street. I remember as a child watching TV shows – especially sitcoms – that used the dramatic device of having a character talk out

loud to him or herself to reveal some inner motivation that would otherwise not fit into half an hour. Usually the character ends this monologue by saying, “Look, now I’m talking to myself. I must really be crazy.”

This used to freak me out. If I talked to myself, was I crazy? No, I was just a shy and sometimes lonely girl keeping myself company. Now I understand that I am an auditory learner and thinker. I often don’t know what I think until I hear myself say it out loud. Though I still wonder at the continuum of sanity and mental illness – especially when I see a mentally ill person walking down the street talking to someone who is not there.

I’ve lost reference, but when I was in seminary I can remember reading the phrase “normal neurotic” in a textbook. It came to me as such a gift. It’s “normal” to be neurotic. To be human is to be wounded somehow. Neurosis is a defense the ego creates to protect us or even to try to heal those wounds.

In *Swamplands of the Soul* Hollis writes: “Jung suggested that neurosis ‘must be understood, ultimately, as the suffering of a soul which has not yet discovered its meaning.’ Note that he does not rule out suffering, only the meaninglessness of life against which neurosis is a defense.... Jung considered that a neurosis is not only a defense against the wounding of life, but an unconscious effort to heal such wounds.... Symptoms, then, are expressions of a desire for healing.”

The subtitle of Hollis’ book is: *New Life in Dismal Places* and the cover carries a list of such dismal places from guilt, doubt and despair to obsession, addictions and anxiety. Such a cheery book cover. Yet Hollis’ point is that not just that life brings us such states but that it is only in and through them that we can come to new life.

He writes: “To experience some healing within ourselves, and to contribute to the world, we are summoned to wade through the muck from time to time. Where we do not go willingly, sooner or later we will be dragged.”

Rilke tells us:

Wonders happen if we can succeed
in passing through the harshest danger;
but only in a bright and purely granted
achievement can we realize the wonder.

Yet such wonders are not granted in and of themselves. We can only fully realize them in a “bright and purely granted achievement.” The goal of life is not happiness but meaning.

There you have it. We are all normal neurotics in search of healing, in search of meaning. Sometimes, indeed we can all feel like a motherless child, a long way from home. Yet take comfort in knowing that if there is such a thing as normal – this is it. Life is a journey – often painful yet not infrequently joyful – a journey towards meaning. There are times it hurts enough that we need help to find the new life in the dismal places.

Yet even as our neuroses often make us feel desperately alone, the deeper truth is that we are all in the same boat. Recognizing ourselves as “normal neurotics” can help us know each other’s pain. Can help us hold ourselves and one another tenderly.

Finding our way through all of this is not too difficult for us. As we delve into the *Swamplands of the Soul*, we find that “the pattern grows more intricate and subtle.” Being swept along through life is no longer enough. You have the “practiced powers” that can span the contradictions in your soul. The powers that can help the god know himself in you. That can help you see the god in yourself and in others.

There is still another source of comfort and hope – even as we feel like exiles a long way from home. Hollis writes: “While it is true that we can’t go home again, it is also true that in a universe of exiles, when people’s paths intersect, the journey itself may seem like a home, with the Other present for a while. No small thing.”

The journey itself may seem like home. The sojourners we find along the way can bring comfort and joy. That’s a bit part of

why we gather in this community. This Sunday our Coming of Age youth and their mentors have been sharing their credo statements – their journeys. Next Sunday the youth will share them with the congregation. Others have gone before us, still more will follow.

The journey is home. It is not always the most comfortable home. But it is how we seek and find meaning. The meaning that is the ultimate goal of life.