



March 2022

2022-02

*Are we going back to normal?
What is normal?
And why is normal so important?*

There are signs that we are learning, one way or another, to live with COVID. The number of new cases is dropping and the COVID maps are going from dark red to yellow as this pandemic moves into an endemic of a nasty virus, but one that does not kill nearly one million of our citizens.

Does the improving COVID situation mean we are actually going back to normal? Notice the words “back to”.

Seeking a normal, stable comfort zone is embedded in our early development as very young children. If we were fortunate and we had a welcoming lap to clamber onto when we were too scared, tired, and overwhelmed. There we were able to settle into the gentle bliss of rest and safety and recover from the emotional storms. As young ones we are unable to find the ground of calm within ourselves, we need our mother’s attuned presence of comfort to regulate our volatile nervous systems. And so our life got back to normal for a while until the next upset! Over the years we need less of our actual mother’s presence. Over time we internalize this sense of safety and comfort within our own psyche as we move more and more into the world. And we find ways to recreate this normal in our lives by creating homes, stable relationships, and day-to-day routines. In a sense we carry our mother’s comforting lap deep in our ego structures.

Psychologically going “back to normal” is the wish to return to the reassuring safety of our mothers. When we seem to have found normal we are actually seeing a reflection, or more accurately, a projection of this early imprint of our mother’s comforting, warm presence.

Notice that when we fall in love and the universe of our heart opens, how difficult it is to be separated from our beloved and how quickly we want to know, and know repeatedly, that we are loved. How quickly we want some kind of reassuring commitment. It is as though piercing the veil of the heart reactivates that early need for a comforting surety of our childhood. And so the dance of relationship begins.

There is a wonderful story about a Buddhist monk. He had renounced all his worldly possessions. For many years he lived the life of a renunciate without missing the pleasures of the outer world. But one day a monk stole his spot in the Zendo and sat on his meditation cushion. The monk became enraged. He had projected all his needs for some kind of safe comfort zone— his mother’s lap— onto his place in the meditation hall!

Soldiers dying on the battlefield often cry out to their mothers. They desperately need the nurturing balm of their mother’s presence in the midst of their agony. Remember George Floyd’s last words. “I can’t breathe. Mama, Mama, Mama....” This need runs so deep in us.

So what happens when a mother’s lap is not available, or she is too unstable to offer the ongoing comfort that a baby needs? By necessity we will then project this lap onto teddy bears, dolls, blankets, TV characters, far away lands, even onto God. They are called transitional objects and offer us comfort and soothing. And as long as this projection, the fantasy holds we are able to find a facsimile of mother’s lap. So it is no wonder that after two years of the trauma of the pandemic, especially touching the young and their parents, the poor, the vulnerable and the marginalized, that collectively we many want life to *go back to normal*.

The problem is that we humans are facing multiple existential threats. We are heading towards and into a calamity, perhaps even extinction. We are certainly entering an epoch of global chaos. There is nothing normal in any of this. We hope— and I know I do—that the ending of the pandemic and the next cycle of elections will safeguard our future democracy and reestablish some stability. As so satirically portrayed in the movie “*Don’t Look Up*”, we want to be able to sink back into the comfortable denial that everything is ok, all the while heading off an existential cliff.

We are heading into a world much like most of history and for the majority of the world’s population where there was and is no such thing as normal. Life was and is violent, unpredictable and inhospitable. I am not alone in this dire prediction. (Read: [How I Came To Believe That Civilization Is Unsustainable](#) for more information).

What will emerge in the years to come is ever-increasing instability and uncertainty. We will be repeatedly traumatized. The ego will fall apart over and over. The veils will be torn apart. This cracking opens the portal of the heart. Instead of welcoming this inner collapse, will we harden? Will we bury ourselves in distraction? Will we party all the way to the end? Will we disappear into an Internet bubble? Will we arm ourselves? Will we go to sleep?

If we do, we will miss that we are living in *thin* times. Thin times are precious. They allow us to discover the true comfort, blessing and stability of the divine realm. This poured through our mothers more or less when we climbed onto her lap. We just did not know that it was the Presence that we desperately needed and which poured through her in those moments of calm. It is the Presence we want to *get back* to. This grace is available at every moment if we are willing to stay awake when it seems that normal is gone forever. The death of normal is the doorway to life!

~~~ Abbot Alison Hine