The idiot flight of butterflies

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Think back two and half years ago to the day before you heard of Coronavirus breaking out in Wuhan, China. Whatever that was like for you, that was normal. For me, I was a newlywed. I had not even learned what *that* new normal meant for me yet. I certainly hadn't anticipated that we would spend most of two and a half years sheltering in place, just the two of us with Waldo for company, discovering what our normal was. So when I hear someone longing for life to return to normal, I'm not sure what their normal is. Perhaps, I should focus on knowing the future instead. Irony, apparently, is my forte.

In my preparation for this musing, I found myself on the Merriam-Webster website where I found a reflection on normalcy:

> In the perpetually uncertain times in which we (and everyone else who has ever existed) live, it can be reassuring to feel that you have some tiny bit of knowledge about which you are sure. "I may not know if I'll have a job at this point next month, but at least I know that [US President of the 1920s] Warren Harding coined the word *normalcy*."
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> With a deep and abiding sense of regret, we at Merriam-Webster must inform you that your sense of order in the world is misplaced. No, we do not know whether you will have a job next month, but we can state with certainty that Warren Harding did not coin the word *normalcy*.
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> Warren G. Harding [who was America's most corrupt President until Nixon and Trump came along] adopted this mathematical term for describing the distribution of a bell curve in the presidential election of 1920. In his stump speech, he stated that he was for "normal times and a return to normalcy." "A return to normalcy" soon became the slogan most identified with his campaign, to the considerable chagrin of many who felt that *normalcy* was either a corruption of *normality*, or simply a

non-existent word. A columnist spoke for many when he wrote, "The friends of Senator Harding are defending his language now by saying that "normalcy" is a perfectly good word. Well, so is jackasstical, when applied to fantastic verbiage."

Did Warren Harding Coin 'Normalcy'?

So what is normal anyway? When will things "return to normal," and what will a "new normal" look like? [Tom Frieden at the beginning of the pandemic suggested](), "*It's tempting to wonder when things will return to normal, but the fact is that they won't — not the old normal anyway. But we can achieve a new kind of normality, even if this brave new world differs in fundamental ways.*"

By this standard, the old normal is the one in which our healthcare systems and governments are not prepared to deal with things like Covid-19; the new normal, in contrast, is mostly like the old normal, except in this one, we are ready for global pandemics.

The new normal, in other words, changes what was wrong but keeps what was right with the old normal. But why did we call it normal if the old normal was wrong? Similarly, if the new normal differs from the old one, how can we pretend we're still dealing with "normal"?

The word "normal" appears straightforward enough. But like many of our words, as soon as we begin thinking about it, it starts to fall apart at the seams.

As sociologist [Allan Horwitz points out in his journal article "Normality,"]() the dilemma that "normality" forces upon us is that "*in most cases, no formal rules or standards indicate what conditions are normal.*" In the absence of such rules, those who wish to identify normality will typically turn to one of three different definitions.

The first is the statistical view, "where 'the normal' is whatever trait most people in a group display." Normal is what is typical, what most people do — which means it is impossible for any individual to be normal. The trouble with seeing normal statistically is that it may trick us into accepting widespread phenomena as good. A majority of Nazi Germany's citizens, Horwitz notes, supported policies of racism and genocide in the 1930s and 1940s. Was Nazism, then, a "normal" philosophy for humans to hold?

The second way of defining "normal," says Horwitz, is some sort of ideal, and this definition comes through in the word's etymology. In Latin, *norma* referred to a carpenter's square, which assisted tradies in establishing a perfect right angle. The norm provided a concrete standard that, if followed, allowed the user to reproduce a specific pattern. Nazism may have been widespread in Germany, but it was not normal because it did not live up to the ideal society we wish to achieve. On the other hand, random acts of kindness, even when they are in short supply, might be seen as normal in an aspirational sense: we want compassion to be a guiding norm in our societies.

The third definition looks to evolutionary science and defines normality "in terms of how humans are biologically designed by natural selection to function." What is normal for a human being, then, is all those behaviours that make it fit to thrive in its particular niche. The capacity to feel shame when betraying a loved one is normal in this scheme, as is the desire for one's offspring to survive.

The three definitions of normality — statistical, aspirational, and functional — often end up sliding into each other during everyday conversation. This collapse is evident in many of our discussions about what "the new normal" will look like once Covid-19 is under control. The new normal will mean that, statistically, most of us will go back to most of what we were doing before the pandemic struck, but with the aspiration that our societies will make changes for the better, which will end up functionally being good for the survival of our communities.

So we kind of want to return to where we were, but we also don't. We want things to be the same, but we also want them to be different. We want to return to normal, but we know deep down that our journey won't be a return so much as a departure.

The definition of "normal" might be hard to pin down, but its function is pretty straightforward: normal is safe. It's familiar. In the aftermath of the devastation of World War One, Warren Harding's US presidential campaign promise was simple: "America's present need is not heroics, but healing; not nostrums, but normalcy." Harding knew Americans wanted to get back to life as they knew it before war disrupted the flows and rhythms of their daily lives. He understood that in the face of fear, people long to return to a time before the fear set in.

Harding and his supporters were, we might say, nostalgic for the normal just like we are.

Nostalgia comes from two Greek words: *nostos*, meaning homecoming, and *algia*, meaning longing. To be nostalgic is to long for home. Swiss doctor Johannes Hofer first coined the term in his dissertation in 1688 "to define the sad mood originating from the desire to return to one's native land." Hofer believed his patients' malady was that they longed for their homes. Nostalgia was originally a longing for a different place. Eventually, it became a longing for a different time, specifically for a time that never existed. Nostalgia, writes Svetlana Boym, "is a romance with one's own fantasy."

In <u>Longing For Paradise,</u> <u>Jungian analyst Mario Jacoby</u> explores the human propensity to idolise a past normality that never existed: "*We project backward into the Golden Twenties, the Belle Epoch in Paris, or life 'before the Fall.' The world of wholeness exists mostly in retrospect, as a compensation for the threatened, fragmented world in which we live now.*"

It is my position that there is no such thing as normal except in maths. There is only our present reality which is different from the one we exited and different from the one that comes next. We are like Graves' cabbage butterfly as we leave one only to enter a new one. We do so erratically. We have exhibited little grace or aptitude, but still we flutter on.

Look at how we worship together now as opposed to how we did when first entering lockdown. I remember struggling to find ways to make it feel like what we had done for years. Slowly, I began experimenting with first the available technology and later with new approaches in the order of service, music, and what I used to call sermons, introducing opportunities to reflect on the topic in small groups. We began having meetings, circle groups, and classes online. New ways to stay in touch with each other were offered. At first, we hung on to in-person worship and distance worship until new rules for gatherings were issued. While many of us are Zoomed out by our work life, many still find the will to join us. And something unpredictable has happened. We have become a national, and then international congregation, bringing new voices into our common life.

I don't think our new reality is fully formed yet. We have certainly not normalised it, but we will keep fluttering on, for the journey is what worship is about, not the destination.

Meditation / Conversation Starter:

- What normality do you miss in your life?
- How have you coped with impermanence?