



*"The only 'Normal' I know . . .*

*. . . is a cycle on a washing machine,"* remarked a psychologist at the conference I attended last week. It was in response to the question folks often ask after unburdening their problems to a therapist. His point, of course, is that there really--among humans--is no such thing as "normal". What is "normal" childhood? What is a "normal" marriage? We used to speak of a "mom, dad, 2 kids, a dog and a station-wagon" as the "typical" (or "normal") family. But was it? Ever? Really? And it certainly isn't NOW.

I thought about this again today as I went to a workshop at the Provost's Conference on Mental Health. Lo and behold, the first workshop for which I'd registered (and I'd forgotten this) was: "What's Normal, What's Not . . ." And, of course, much of the entire conference, while addressing issues of health and non-health, had, as an underlying assumption, that there was some kind of mental "normal" against which to measure mental "illness".

And that's okay, I believe. We do need standards of measurement. The problem, however, is our societal (maybe human) predilection to turn those who don't measure up to that standard into some kind of "other" that needs institutionalization, or exile, or confinement or worse -- or simply "fixing". And, while I'm hoping that in a week or so, the doctor will say I'm "fixed", or at least closer to approaching "normal" regarding my hip, I'll always know that there are other areas of my life that are not "normal."

This message, I think, is found in most major religious traditions. The religions that revere the Bible recognize that we ALL have been exiled from Paradise. The Christian author Paul writes that "all have sinned". The first of the Four Noble Truths of Buddhism is that "Life means suffering"-- not just for some, but for ALL. Each religious tradition has a methodology for dealing with that reality, but none deny it. And all equally recognize that compassion for all is required by our common condition.

So, unless you ARE a washing machine cycle, you are probably NOT normal. And that's okay. Neither is your neighbor. We're all in the same boat. So compassion is commended to all -- compassion towards enemies, neighbors and, equally important, ourselves.

"Be kind, for everyone you meet is fighting a great battle." (attributed both to Plato, and to Jewish first-century philosopher Philo of Alexandria).

Blessings,

Gary