

2021

## **“Normal”**

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### “Normal” (Revised)

I honestly have no idea how I’m going to feel on the day “Normal” returns. Who does, really? How will any of us even know that “normal” is back clearly enough that we stop and think about it? I know what I want from “Normal”, but I don’t know how realistic these things are. Especially the ones that, in retrospect, didn’t even seem all that sanitary or safe when things were the old standard of “normal”. I think about the connections I’ve made over the pandemic itself, are those connections going to weaken so that older, more geologically close connections can strengthen again? Am I going to be able to strike a balance between the two? I could ask myself these questions all day, but I’m never going to get any kind of answer until this mythical day of “Normal” actually arrives.

Now, all that said, part of me has always thought of the desperate return to normality as a bit funny. I stress that I don’t say this because it’s somehow funny to me how much people are suffering in this situation. I say it because of how relatively little my own situation has changed on a day to day basis. I’m not exactly an isolationist, I do miss being able to see my friends in person, but given the group of people I tend to roll with and the hobbies we all share, the fact we’ve all been cooped up in our houses unable to actually be in physical presence with each other hasn’t exactly changed all that much. Hell, my best friend currently lives in the U.K, not being able to actually hang out with her in any kind of physical space is the norm, not the exception.

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So I spend a lot of time at home. I get a lot of work done at home. I entertain myself primarily at home. I've never had a problem with being alone. In my eyes it's always given me time to recuperate and think, something I have a hard time doing around a lot of other people. To a lot of people this could easily sound sad, and I've certainly had people pity me for this aspect of myself. It's just never bothered me, I suppose I've always understood on some level I was just wired differently than the ultra social people who might think that way. Now I find myself on the other end of this, and it's deeply unpleasant.

I've felt that strange sadness for others over the last year. People who simply cannot cope being told to stay away from other people for their own safety. I could give them a thousand suggestions of ways to fill their time. Writing projects, video games, one hundred years of movies to watch, the endless churn of content that is the internet. People are specific though, and don't want to engage with things that they don't want to engage with, and I get it. As a result I've felt that same pity that I always felt directed at me, and it's a terrible sensation. What I even do with this information is anyone's guess. I still don't know what "Normal" is going to feel like as it's described by officials and on the news. I would have liked their version of Normal over the last year, so I didn't spend my final semester of college, sitting in my room at home typing, even if as explained, that's what I generally like to do anyway.

I've been mulling over the actual date that was recently handed to us as something of a thrown bone to our return to normality, June fifteenth. Evidently, this is when California's economy is going to fully re-open from the alternating stages of lockdown it's been in for a year now. I've been thinking about this a lot because for a long time this has seemed like the goal, but as we draw closer to it feels to me like it's becoming increasingly clear that this goal post is going to be moved even if we reach it. Hypothetically, we reopen as planned, and we all feel a little better,

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but that isn't going to be "normal" will it?

Yes, we will all have a much wider range of things we can do, that much is clear as day. We can go to an amusement park. We can travel all around the state of California. We can even sit comfortably inside a restaurant with loved ones again. What's not going to return is the visual markers of normality. Masked faces, my own included, will continue to be common, if not still outright required by many businesses. We all have this visual idea in our heads of "normal" roaring back and the world suddenly looking like January of 2020 again, but these markers aren't going to just vanish.

A lot of experts don't even think we'll stop living under the assumed danger of pandemic life until well into 2022. This of course, does not fit the agreed narrative of returning to "normal" very easily at all, because realistically there is none. Ask anybody making predictions of what normality will look like when it returns and you'll get more alternative takeaways than you know what to do with. Some have confidence that by June we'll all be acting like we did in the glory days. Others are so cautious in their estimates, that June of 2022 sounds closer to when they expect a movie theatre to start letting people back in. I myself have internalized all of these, and therefore have warped my idea of any kind of effective timescale for good.

In the time since I started work on this piece and revised it for expansion, I've been fully vaccinated. I had Covid near the start of all of this, and didn't even know it was Covid until about a month afterwards. So needless to say I understand the value of the two shots that went into my arm and made me miserably sick for a few days afterwards. Theoretically I am now normal, but like everyone else in my boat, I'm waiting for the rest of the world to catch up to the point that nothing has actually changed in any meaningful way. To make an incredibly bizarre

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reference, I feel like the ghost pirate in Pirates of the Caribbean exclaiming that since his curse was broken, he “Don’t feel any different”. I feel like all of us, one at a time, are having this moment of expectation and realization of nothingness. Where, when the shots go into our arms, we expect something to be different, but all we feel is the sore arm and the funk of the next day. Nothing actually meaningfully changes in the immediate term, not like we expected it to. Not like “normal” has come back.

If it seems like this piece is rambling without any real answers to my original question, I promise you, it’s because it is. Looking deep into myself and trying to come up with observations about what I’m going to look like on the other side of this pandemic, or what our society will look like in turn, sends my brain in too many directions to effectively articulate. I like to think, as I said, that my behavior won’t actually be all that different from the way it is now. I imagine that the dynamics that have cropped up in my mind, and looking on other more “normal” extroverted people with confusion and sadness, is going to be swiftly replaced by the well worn standards we’ll eventually return to.

In the end, I think deep down I think we all came to terms with what our individual “normals” were a long time ago. This pandemic affected us on that individual routine far more palpably than it did the wider idea of “normal”, but we don’t really want to say that because it isn’t easy shorthand. Even typing this piece right now is difficult, because while I may know full well what “Normal” is for me, obviously it was altered and changed by this last year. Even though I long for a shorthand way to describe the way I feel, I don’t really think I can find it. Frankly? It’s Salsa Bars, it’s open salsa bars at a mexican restaurant, that’s the normal I’ve been chasing since early March of 2020. If mine can be that specific, what does that say about what “Normal” actually is to anyone else anyway?

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