

New Normal

I have always had a problem with the word 'normal'. As I reflect on my childhood, maybe that is because my home life did not look like that of my peers, and maybe that meant that my family did not fit into the strange category of 'normal.' It was always challenging to explain my brother in a way that people understood. From an early age I felt I had to learn how to explain all the things Jed could not do, why he did not learn how to talk until he was five, why at the age of eighteen he still does not eat orally, why he has the cognitive ability of an eight-year-old, and ultimately, describe how he will never be able to independently work, socialize, eat, and live separate from our family. It is a strange thing for a little girl who is infatuated with her baby brother to constantly answer the question "what is wrong with him?" But after years of confusion and interpersonal struggles I finally have a definite answer and that is: absolutely nothing. Not only is there nothing wrong with him but rather life with Jed has taught me that if the world slowed down and focused on how people like Jed lived and loved, just maybe our busy and distracted lives would become a little bit warmer, more accepting, and safe.

In March of 2020, the global pandemic brought abrupt stillness and a sudden halt of productivity to the world, including myself. After sulking in the loss and solitude that overwhelmed me as I moved back into my childhood home, I began the process of reimagining what I wanted my life to look like after I began to crawl out of the unnatural physical and emotional isolation that seemed to consume my every waking moment. Now, I must note that I understand the privileged position that I hold in the affordance

of time and a safe space that allows me the mental clarity to do this re-imaginative work. Studying from the confines of my family's home meant that my day-to-day life intermingled with the daily endeavours of my mother, father, and most importantly, my not-so-baby brother. Jed is now in grade twelve at a school for teenagers with moderate disabilities, where one-on-one educational and medical supports are guaranteed. Due to the pandemic-related health restrictions, Jed was also home and learning solely online. Little did I know that it would be our involuntary confinement and exposure to one another's educational routines that would expose me to the greatest life lesson I did not know I needed.

Jed met every day with his teacher, educational aides, and about twelve classmates to dive into what their modified curriculum required of them, including basic math, elementary reading, and 'quiet time.' As I made my morning tea and gained the daily courage required of me to tackle whatever research paper or presentation laid ahead, I would stand in our kitchen and listen to the morning greetings of Jed's classmates in the room next to me. As a new face popped up in the grid of Jed's Google Meet, he would give an over-enthusiastic "GOOD MORNING!" that was always reciprocated with the same excitement and vigor. This greeting was the first thing that struck me as different, particularly when I would log in to my classes seconds later, only to be met with a sea of tiny grey boxes and muted microphones. I was faced with this bewilderment that I was the one in the family pursuing the 'Western' standards of a supposedly 'normal' education, only to be forced into such strange and robotic social

situations. These scenarios are not normal to the inherent need of personal connections and relationships that seem to propel the natural course of human life and that vibrantly lived in Jed's classroom. As I grappled with this unique observation, I realized that if I removed myself from the emotional and self-focused demands of my university education and just listened to Jed's enchanting social framework, maybe I could begin the process of reimagining a more human and loving environment within the disconnected world of virtual learning.

It was on Jed's last day of class before the holiday break that I was exposed to the most inspiring way of being I had ever witnessed. Their classroom had their annual talent show where they could perform a talent, show something in their room or house that they loved, or just sit and watch respectfully. Jed had been perseverating on this day for weeks, constantly asking his patient teacher when he could perform and tirelessly practicing a song on his drums that he intended to play. With all the excitement that Jed embodied, I could not help but get wrapped up within the buzz of his anticipation and ensured I cleared my schedule that Friday so I could be there with him. The first performance was by Jed's best friend, who was heavily obsessed with the Disney movie, *Frozen*. It was not a surprise when he announced that he would be performing the movie's lyrical hit "Let It Go" to the enthusiastic audience of his Google Meet classmates. As Jed's friend began his dramatic performance filled with singing and improvised dancing, I could not help but worry for how the other teenage boys would respond to a performance generally reserved for an audience of five-year-old girls with blue dresses

and blonde braids. As he hit his last note and took his final bow, Jed's laptop erupted in applause and pixelated cheers. The teacher then facilitated questions and compliments that the classmates impatiently held their hands up to share. Student after student shared their love for the performance, asking and exclaiming, things such as: "where did you learn that song?", "that was amazing!", "you are so good!".

I could not help but be emotionally caught off guard by the non-judgemental love and kindness exclaimed by Jed's classmates. This amazement was followed by a moment of sadness as I realized that, for an eighteen-year-old boy to perform *Frozen* at a 'normal' high school, like the one I attended, there would no doubt be social backlash and horrific comments rooted within malaise and perhaps homophobia. Even after years outside of the socially conforming halls of high school and my pursuit of an academic field that embodied the encouragement of diversity and acceptance, I had never witnessed a social framework so deeply rooted within a space of unconditional love and unwavering permission to be oneself. This should be the 'normal' and default way people interacted.

The response to Jed's performance was no different; his friends cheered and left him with graceful compliments and well wishes. Even one of his closest friends, who is unable to talk, used her computer as a vocal aid to say the words "cool" and "rockstar." This love and acceptance was not new to me because Jed has always filled my life with these empathetic qualities, but it was this communal support that was built on a foundation of respect and positive affirmations that caught me off guard. I began to

realize that this time at home that engulfed many of the lives of people I knew was an opportunity to question our lives before the pandemic and ask ourselves if those social habits of judgement were really spaces we wanted to go back to once we were able to reconvene. I am still in the process of re-learning from the guidance of Jed and I cannot yet provide a coherent solution to creating more inclusive and safe spaces where authenticity can be fully celebrated. I look forward to following in Jed's footsteps as he leads me down unknown paths away from previous ways of being towards a normal that is precisely not normal; a mode of living where love, compassion, and appreciation is our default.