The New Not-Normal after the pandemic

a manifesto

In Defense of Neurodiversity

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This book is dedicated to my children and to all those who are derogated and demeaned every day by chronic misreadings simply by dint of their non-normative temperaments.

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Preface

1.

Trauma is when we are not seen and known.

Bessel van der Kolk

My daughter, who shares my neurodiversity, and I were having a conversation the other day, one we've had before (though this time it took on a particular poignancy) about the very specific way in which we are often unseen and unknown by socially "normal" colleagues (i.e., extroverts, the default temperament in our society). We have both had countless experiences where such others have formed images of us in their heads that are so contrary to our own—our vision, our intentions, our values, our goals, etc.—that there is no possibility, none, to arbitrate the difference. Those two images seem not to have even one pixel in common with which to open negotiations. A deep frustration, a weariness really (one I hear in her voice when she talks about it and assume is in mine when I do), arises when someone you work with, maybe even admire, misreads you so completely and so persistently that you are simply not present for them any longer, even when you're sitting right in front of them.

This can be quite painful in social relationships, too, though in those cases there is always the option, when all else fails, simply to leave. It is much more consequential in the workplace, where such misperceptions can lead to very material negative consequences. And when they don't, they make one's daily experience of the workplace painful, exhausting, often intolerable. That is the true cost to people like us when you don't "see and know" us. It drains off our vitality, our confidence, our joy, turns us into weird chimeras in your imagination, or just cogs in the one-size-fits-all mechanical wheel that all culturally normative "majorities" rely on to assert privilege even when they are not statistical majorities in the larger population.

Trauma is a pretty big term to apply to this "cost," I can hear you saying. What's the big deal? Everyone is made to feel invisible from time to time." I'm sure you can remember instances when you felt ignored or overlooked in a meeting, a store, a restaurant. Not pleasant. Maybe you resisted or complained, maybe not. Then you moved on. And everyone, I also hear you saying, needs to mask in some ways to survive in workplace cultures, if only to navigate the internal "politics" of the organization. I'm sure you've had experiences of that sort, too. Maybe you enjoyed them, maybe not. Now imagine that is all happening to you routinely, every day, all day long. When you add up these many thousands of micro-traumas of not being seen or known, the cumulative effect is significant.

Bessel van der Kolk spent his professional lifetime working with the most trauma-damaged people the postmodernist era has left littered in the wake of its unbridled

violence: soldiers returning from Vietnam, Afghanistan, and Iraq, wars that were unspeakably brutal, without clear moral purpose, the longstanding distinction between combatants and "collateral damage" (an expressly dehumanizing trope) completely effaced, and either ineffectual or failed; children who experienced egregious physical, sexual or verbal abuse, some of it inflicted routinely and without consequence by their parents, priests, and pillars of society, all overseen by a legal system that has historically deprived children of full human rights and accorded to parents and surrogate authority figures if not "free rein" then at least "the benefit of the doubt" when it came to assigning accountability for these damages; women raped, often repeatedly, by men conditioned in myriad ways by a toxically patriarchal culture to perceive them as objects whose express purpose is to fulfill their darkest fantasies, a dehumanizing habit of mind (embraced on a smaller scale by both men and women in positions of authority) that similarly infected schools and workplaces in the most routine ways, even when there was no physical component to the violation.

When I read the sentence I use as my epigraph, I was stunned. How, I wondered at first, could all of this violence and those left wounded in its wake be summed up that way? But within seconds, I could see its brilliance: Every one of the extreme forms of trauma van der Kolk documents depended on a tacit social contract that denied the victims status as a fully-fledged human beings, "disappeared" them beforehand, creating a free pass for victimization in the moment and then, quite often, after the fact, via secondary biases built into the enforcement and juridical systems that are supposed to deter this kind of violence

in our society. Every one of his clients was "someone" who was neither "seen nor known" by their victimizer, from a nationalistic war machine gone off the rails, to a parent reenacting generationally his or her own abuse, to a predator in a dorm room or a dark alley, to a priest in a sacristy, all of whom could say, with authority: I matter and "they" don't; I am better than "they" are, not just in degree but in kind, whatever rubric you prefer for defining who "they" are. If you think you're not doing that routinely with some assortment of "theys," you have work to do.

What I'm writing about here may, as I said, seem trivial, even inconsequential, by comparison to these affronts to humanity. But my point is this: If you unknowingly practice bigotry in relation to temperament, you are fostering a habit of mind that will make it more rather than less likely that you'll approve of, or at least tolerate, the others. And one of the ways you can "recover" (a la Chellis Glendinning) from the deleterious effects of "Western civilization" is to start with small things: Figure out for yourself which classes of people you encounter routinely whom you are choosing (and it is a choice, even if you are not making it consciously in the moment) not to see and know. Then learn how to see and know them. I can tell you from my own experience that doing so is difficult and takes time; because "seeing" depends on preconceptions induced in us by clan, church and country long before we are conscious enough to arbitrate them. In other words, most of the modes of othering we are inured to are founded not on personal experience or rooted in ideologies we intentionally adopt for ourselves, but in habits of mind so indigenous to our identity that we assume they are

natural, "normal." We say that "seeing is believing," but it is more accurate to say that believing comes first, seeing second.

This means that to change those deep-seated beliefs you must first change your ways of seeing, a process that can foment significant internal dissonance and discomfort. These transactional adjustments, when effected carefully and persistently, promote a tectonic shift in one's ethical, even moral paradigm. That term—moral—may like trauma seem like overkill in relation to a human attribute as seemingly benign as temperament. But only because "eyes" that "see" others in dehumanizing ways often have no idea they're even doing it, which, for me, makes the matter moral.

Most of the books on neurodivergence—and there are tons of them in the current marketplace—are written by authors who are themselves atypical temperamentally and proffer mostly positive vibes to their own kind about how to cope with, even revel in, their difference. They tend to "talk nice." Mine is not one of them. I am not writing for or on behalf of those of us who are "introverted," on the "autism spectrum," "socially anxious, "ADHD" or any of the many other psychometric categories that have been invented to parse out people who happen not to share the primary characteristics of social normativity. We already know all about the one(s) that apply to us, thank you very much. If you're interested, you can find everything you need to know about any of these "disorders" in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, which you can buy "used" for less than $10, a book that institutionalizes the inequities I'm concerned with via a plethora of medical-sounding names, most of which

have been invented in my lifetime. I qualify certainly (according to the DSM) as "neurodivergent" and "socially anxious." Were I born 60 years later I would likely have been at least tested to see if I was "on the autism spectrum." To me, I'm just me, and just fine, as are my kind. I am writing to those of you who, for whatever reason, simply do not, cannot, or refuse to see or know us. My goal is not to inform you. It is to wake you up. This is not a handshake. It is a slap in the face. If you prefer to be cossetted in matters of this sort, flaunting your "majority" status, stop reading right now. If you are open to hearing some tough talk from one of your "victims," and to the possibility for change, then welcome in.

Let me be clear: I am not even remotely expert in the medical aspects of this matter. I spent my professional life teaching literature and writing in university classrooms. That may appear to be disqualifying for what I proffer here. I would argue the opposite: Western medicine is itself so complicit with the inbuilt, invisible power dynamic pertinent to neurodiversity (beginning with the metaphysical mind/body schism we Westerners inherit historically as part of our whole cloth, which then warrants invisibly the material schism between physical and mental health in the marketplace, as if the brain, like teeth, is not an integral part of the human body worthy of "full coverage," which then generates that vast vocabulary for "disorders" founded on "scientific research" ensconced now in the DSM.) What I do know a lot about, based on my professional experience and credentials, is discourse, how and why it operates covertly, via figures of speech that often masquerade as facts to shape perception, the believing that comes before seeing.

Let me be clear as well that I am not saying that there are no such things as mental illnesses, the term I prefer to disorders. Clearly there are, in much the same way as there are physical illnesses, some of which can be attributed to electro-chemical or hormonal malfunctions. And any just society needs to find ways to attend humanely to those who suffer their effects. Relief from these conditions, even cures, if there are to be any, may well be discovered by chemists in a Big Pharma lab. Whether and how to name those disorders is an important part of that process. But to presume that even these are entirely personal aberrations (which is what "disorder" connotes) rather than conditions facilitated, even produced by society is simply wrongheaded. And, further, to stigmatize large swaths of the social universe as "disordered" when they are perfectly functional, while valorizing the normative majority when many of them are not, well, that is morally offensive, at least to me.

As to my method: I've read a lot of books about neurodivergence, have been binge-reading more of them as I wrote this book. I have no interest in repeating or summarizing their data or technical information or findings. This is not a research project. It is a manifesto. You can find out everything I know now on your own in a few weeks if you want: what specifically each of the major named disorders is and does, how the brain and body operate in their wash of a complex chemical and hormonal soup, what the statistics are for this or that social temperament. There are tons of health professionals who know all of this and know how to render it in everyday language. I mention a few such sources on the Works Cited page. My argument is founded on my own experience as a neurodivergent

and my own witness of the many hundreds of other people like me, students, colleagues, acquaintances, whom I encountered and tried my best to "see and know" during my career as a university professor. What I proffer is testimony. If you accord little or no status to that kind of knowledge, again, stop reading right now. The time you invest here will be wasted.

My angle into this problem is, as I said, via discourse. In "The Tyranny of Normalcy" for example I call into question subcutaneous figures of speech like "on the spectrum" and "divergence" (as in "neuro-), both of which tend to be used as cudgels against those of us who display (a word I prefer over "identify") as outside the established paradigm of social normalcy. It is that last term, normalcy, that seems to me to be the one that oversees all of the other misguided tropes that serve as its "troops" in the field. That campaign may be going on surreptitiously, even unintentionally, neither of which makes it any the less toxic. Tyranny may seem like another over-the-top word. But only to those who have not been afflicted by the inbuilt bigotry of the allegedly benign discursive categories normalcy supervises.

In "A New Kind of SAD" I turn to one of the staple forms of neurodiversity, Social Anxiety Disorder, one I display and know a lot about. The pandemic turned this one topsy turvy, demonstrating that under certain circumstances, like mandated "self-isolation," what typically displays as a disorder becomes profoundly healthy. In other words, social normalcy itself is so obviously an artificial cultural construction, vulnerable to the vicissitudes of history, that any sense of privilege deriving from it

is specious, transitory, and should simply be conceded in favor of equity and tolerance, the new not-normal my book's title announces. An upheaval of that magnitude may, again, seem extreme. But that does not make it unwarranted, given the now available evidence. One might counterargue that the pandemic was a fluke, a one-off, a once-in-a-blue-moon aberration, which seems to me to be the equivalent of denying climate change while the water is rising up past your waist.

This little book may taste like strong medicine, for which I make no apologies. Whether or not it will encourage you to "see and know" people like me and my daughter, well, honestly, based on my experience, I doubt it. The sense of privilege intrinsic to normalcy, like all other taken-for-granted privileges, is a tough addiction to kick. But I personally feel you are foolish if you don't. I'd even go so far as to say—and I said this to my daughter just this morning—that, yes, we experience a deep sense of loss in situations of this sort. But the losses you are enduring via ignorance and inattention are, as is the case with all losses due to ignorance and inattention, incalculably higher.

The Tyranny of Normalcy

1.

Like all concepts, mental illness is a construct—a particular frame we have developed to understand a phenomenon and explain what we observe. . . [I]t most definitely isn't objective. . . . Such a way of seeing can say as much about the biases and values of the culture that gives rise to it as about the phenomenon being seen. (239)

Gabor Mate

I am not normal. Neither are you. Let's start there. The problem with "normal" is that, given how the Western mind operates, it inevitably generates its counterpart "abnormal." And that inevitably leads to a pattern of "othering" that becomes entrenched as a way of seeing, becoming more and more granular on the latter side of the equation (via those names I mentioned), in this case with the eager and purportedly well-meaning cooperation of the burgeoning medical/pharma complex, while the former side of the equation remains homogenous, creating the illusion of a "majority" that then feels entitled to discriminate against all those "others," sometimes by marginalizing "them," sometimes to "help" or "cure" them, often at considerable expense both to their pocketbooks and their dignity. That's how benignity turns into tyranny.

Further, in Western culture, the favored organizational principle for sorting binary differences is oppositional, with one side of the pair typically privileged over the other. In the simplest terms, you can't have "one" without "the other." And ne'er the

twain shall meet. In the most extreme examples of this dynamic, relatively trivial visible features are used to separate large cohorts of people into two primary categories, with very little overlap or continuum between them. At such extremes, this becomes a simplistic map to define which cohort will be deemed fully human and which will not. Once a template like that is in place, it is no easy matter to displace it.

If you think my jump to "fully human or not" here is as problematic as my use of "trauma" and "moral," think again. Race provides a good template for exploring this conundrum. In our daily practice we tend to discriminate race (as in differentiate it typologically) on purely visual cues: the amount of melanin (a UV protectant) in the skin. But that process is preconstructed in the American sensibility by a systemic form of discrimination (as a mode of oppression) that justified slavery for over 200 years and then, when that became illegal, invented all the subsequent dehumanizing stand-ins for enforcing segregation based on skin color that followed. In other words, we are conditioned to "see color" first and humanness second instead of vice-versa. To say, in such a culture, that one doesn't "see color" is delusional, no matter what "color" one identifies as. The only way out of this dead-end is to somehow recover a universal notion of "fully human" by changing how one sees. That's really hard to do. Think of one of the most obvious ways you operate with an intractable tribal bias based on a cultural stereotype and try that one on for size. Yes, change means discomfort and dissonance. Sometimes times ten.

We have done the same thing since time immemorial with the primary gender binary, creating a world in which superficial physical markers are exaggerated cartoonishly—via hair, clothing, personal grooming, etc.—to create the power dynamic we now refer to as patriarchy, i.e., men on top, in control, women subordinate (i.e. not fully human by comparison), which warrants an endless array of discriminatory practices that seem from that perspective perfectly normal. For millennia, women were deprived of the "unalienable" rights with which "*men* . . . were endowed by their Creator" based simply on a biological difference. When it became awkward or impossible to do that categorically, a similar subset of less direct but often equally virulent systems were invented to maintain the privileges of patriarchy.

While the systemic race- and gender-based inequities I describe may be more ghastly in their effects, my argument here is founded on the same assumption about the hidden costs of social normativity. As is always the case in matters of this sort, those costs are "hidden" only from the perspective of the "normal." They are not so for those of us whose full humanity is chronically abridged by prejudices so endemic they find their way into the workplace, often via the vocabulary of medical professionals.

I'm not saying anything new about this deeply destructive dynamic. Cultural critics both documented and excoriated it for the two generations of my career as an academic. Nor am I trying to argue that all modes of discrimination are equal. The consequences of othering groups of human beings via their skin

color or genitalia have been horrific on scales that are almost unimaginable. What we do now in relation to the LGBTQ+ spectrum is equally egregious, through "culture wars" that tend either to medicalize non-binary gender categories as treatable abnormalities, or to justify all kinds of exclusionary practices, some of which cost lives, those that are lived less than fully and those that are snuffed out violently. Discrimination by temperament may seem relatively innocuous by comparison. But discrimination it is.

Further, binary modes for dividing up natural human differences inevitably lead to conceptual categories like majority/minority that are based less on numbers and more on power. Statistically, for example, there are more biologically-marked women than men in our society. While White as a self-identified racial type comprises the majority (about 60%) of the current population in the US, at least according to the 2020 census, there are any number of ways to disaggregate that data to demonstrate the illusory nature of that majority. Some time soon, given demographics and birth rates, such disaggregation will no longer be necessary. And current research indicates that at least on the broadest level of distinction pertinent to temperament—introversion vs. extroversion—the latter, the presumed norm, is actually the minority numerically.

All of this is to say that normalcy is, as Gabor Mate points out, a social construct, one founded on false methods of accounting—statistically, logically, and ethically—created to conserve privilege for empowered elites. One might argue then that the established power relations in relation to race,

gender/identity, and temperament ought simply to be inverted. As in, let the real majority set the terms. I have zero interest in that argument for many reasons, including that it is a futile fantasy given how power actually operates in human systems: Those enjoying the privileges that power accords them rarely give them up based on a statistical, logical, or ethical arguments. I understand as well that my own argument—that we override the simplistic modes of binary thinking that are designed more to produce privilege groups than majority rule—is equally delusory, given how deeply ingrained this mode of thinking is in Western *habits* of mind. The decades of "deconstructive" analysis that my generation specialized in had little impact on these "standard models" for cultural partition. You can't change a system simply by demonstrating that the embedded values sustaining it are arbitrarily discriminatory. Or you can, via hard-won piecemeal changes staggered over decades or centuries. The kind of change I'm talking about is, as I said, waking up, a sudden realization that changes everything at once: Everyone gets to be fully human; everyone is different, i.e., neither normal nor abnormal. Easy to say, hard to do.

2.

The colors of the rainbow

so pretty in the sky,

and also on the faces

of people going by.

Those lines are from "What a Wonderful World," such a lovely song, written by Bob Thiele and George David Weiss and performed first by Louis Armstrong in 1968, my "coming of age" year. It's one I've covered myself multiple times on various albums, accompanied by my guitar or ukulele. It gets right to the heart of the matter with the first trope I want to examine here: the "spectrum," (as in who's "on it") a commonplace for marking off some of the more extreme forms of neurodivergence. The expression "on the spectrum" is used these days primarily in relation to autism, as a way to differentiate its various types, which can range from a few to a dozen depending on your source. The primary medicalized versions these days seem to be Classic Autism Disorder, sometimes called low functioning autism, or Kanner's Disorder; ASC (previously Asperger's syndrome); Pervasive Developmental Disorder; and Childhood Disintegrative Disorder. Any number of additional "disorders" hover at the fringes of that spectrum, like Rett Syndrome and Tourette's syndrome, among others. I have no interest in arguing what should be on or off the spectrum. My argument is with the term spectrum itself, a concept I'd like to reclaim so that it applies to all human brain-based variants across the board, from one extreme to the other, which is what a spectrum actually is and means.

One commonplace use of that term (the one most of us defer to analogically) is the prismatic dispersion of light such that the various colors it comprises become visible separately. So let me start there: In this case we first have a synthetic whole, light, what we call "white" for some reason, within which all the visible

colors are both essential and fully equal partners such that we don't even "see" them, i.e., discriminate among them. It takes a special set of conditions to separate those various components, "the colors of the rainbow so pretty in the sky." We then apply names to the ones our eyes differentiate most easily (red, orange, yellow, green, blue, indigo, violet), though we understand intuitively that there are actually an infinite number of other colors betwixt and among them. I assume very few people, when witnessing a rainbow, would instinctively argue that one of the colors was inherently better than the others and was justified in dominating the rest in some way.

The song goes on to note the same effect "also on the faces of people passing by," a not-so-subtle reminder on behalf of looking in the same open-frame way at skin color. Its imperative is that we all share a common humanity. We may note the differences among our various "colors," but there is no essential hierarchy (political, social, economic, ethical, intellectual, moral, etc.) that grades out those hues in terms of relative value. I think you can see some of the radical, salutary effects this might have in relation to race-based biases. Light in its natural state is the sum of colors integrated wholistically. In other words, light comes first. Colors come second. The spectrum includes all of them equitably, requires all of them, in fact, to allow us to see. Translate that into the human universe, such that human comes first and color (or gender or whatever "other" you want to name) comes second. That's what I mean by waking up.

The way we now use "on the spectrum" to parse out temperament bears no relationship with this one. It has inequity

built into it endemically. This trope generally applies to the Autism Spectrum, used to define some non-normative mental conditions (the ones I mention above) as “disorders.” That spectrum is at one extreme of the full spectrum of possible expressions of temperament in the human condition. The rest of the spectrum is, then, right from the outset, not even on it! It would be as if we used the term spectrum to name one or two colors at the edge of the rainbow and presumed all the rest were the same, or not there at all, which is nonsense.

Likewise, a spectrum is not a polar binary, with everything normal aggregated together on one side, and everything aberrant parsed into tiny pieces at the other. A spectrum is by definition a continuum. And every human person on the revised spectrum I’m talking about here is a blend of aspects and qualities from across its range. Again, in this scenario, I am not normal and neither are you.

At least minimally, my hope here is to make my case to people who operate on the assumption that their social normalcy is endowed in some biological, genetic, or worse, moral sense. If you live on that side of the spectrum, finding out more about those who circulate at its fringes will lead to one of two effects: You will see them as abnormal, and therefore not “know” them as your fully human kin; or you will see them as functionally akin to you and become more generous, compassionate, and tolerant toward all those “others,” know them in other words, recognizing and respecting both commonality and variation simultaneously.

The same dysfunctional dynamic also applies to neurodivergence as a conceptual category, which devolves into

the same kind of structural binary I've called out in relation to normalcy and the spectrum. Neurodivergence can only exist as a concept if there is a "norm" that is being diverged from, what we now call neurotypical. Guess which one is "better" in our cultural matrix. There is an extensive array of options for naming all the neuro-conditions that are divergent. There is no such array of options for naming all the kinds of behavioral constructions, some of them at least as arbitrary if not aberrant, that fall under the rubric of neurotypical, from bullies like Donald Trump and Elon Musk, to self-renovation gurus like Tony Robbins, to the standard shill manufactured by the Harvard School of Business, to your average guy at a bar trying to pick up women while he gets drunk (or the equivalent when you shift gender.) To assume that all of these are similar enough to warrant belonging in the same basket is inane, once you start to think through the implications of considering those variants as categorical equivalents.

There are any number of other tropes, and subsets of conditions housed under them, that I could examine. The same dynamic applies to all of them: If you assume you are normal, then all the "others" so marked will not be. If you assume there is no such thing as normal, only diversity, you will see both yourself and all those others in a different, and more equitable, way. That's the advantage of waking up. It's a one stop shop, instant, instead of a years-long grind, inhibited at every step by the privilege-related blindnesses Western culture tends to cherish, building them into discourses that keep us from seeing and knowing one another.

While the immediate motivation for this book was that conversation with my daughter, I started thinking toward a project of this sort during the pandemic when, under the guidance of "self-isolation" or "sheltering in place," I felt for the first time in my life I was inhabiting a social universe well-suited to my temperament, a world that rewarded my preferences for quiet, care, and solitude. I realized almost immediately that this must be how socially "normal" people get to feel all the time, a state of affairs they had become so accustomed to that they took its advantages for granted. Now those who for so long clearly (to me) felt no particular obligation to "see and know" my kind were flailing around in panic and pain like addicts being forced into rehab against their will. And, more importantly, I realized that social normalcy has nothing whatsoever to do with brain chemistry or personality type. It is a cultural construction that privileges one way of being in the world over all the others for largely incidental reasons. I took to saying that if pandemic-like conditions continued for a couple of generations, my kind would be the norm. And extroversion would be an evolutionary disadvantage.

During that idyllic (for me) interim, I was filled with hope that this would be a wake-up call for "normal" folks to realize that what they took for granted as a naturally endowed "unalienable" right was in fact simply another form of cultural privilege that those with power presumed was sacrosanct. I engaged in many conversations with family and friends about this, making an impassioned plea to use the suffering they were enduring to motivate them to work harder to "see and know" those of us who have been suffering their demeaning misreadings

simply because we did not share their temperaments. And I wrote the essay "A New Kind of SAD," which follows here, and shared it widely.

I was hopeful that some of this message would take, and once the world went back to "normal," as it now has, things would be different. Very little, of course, changed, because, as is always the case with a threatened "privilege," once the crisis has passed there is no motivation to change much of anything. George Floyd: Need I say more. Okay, a few passing gestures, more niceties than restorations, that's fine. But why change the system itself when you're once again happy with how well it serves your interests? When the "powers that be" are challenged or threatened by the "costs" of their "doing business," they may dodge or feint for a while, creating the illusion of change. But as soon as it is safe to go back to business as usual, they will. If you are of a mind to do otherwise, bless you! And keep reading.

3.

True healing simply means opening ourselves to the truth of our lives, past and present, as plainly and objectively as possible. We acknowledge where we were wounded and, as we are able, perform an honest audit of the impacts of those injuries as they have touched both our lives and those of others around us.

> *. . . Many of us will be ready to seek the truth only once we have concluded that the cost of not doing so is too high, or once we become sufficiently acquainted with our own ache of longing for the real. (363)*
>
> Gabor Mate

I realized as far back as I can remember, at least first grade if not before (as I'll illustrate below), how my temperament was a misfit in the normative culture, and I worked hard both to stay true to myself on the inside and to learn how "pass" on the outside. The fact that I had to do all that work, which took many years of intensive observation and emulation, both aggravated and excited me, as all hard learning does. I document how and why I did it in "A New Kind of SAD." But to see the same thing happening with my daughter makes me sad and mad. Every time I think about it. Which is a lot, now that she is out there in the real world trying to survive in professional contexts that are expressly designed not "to see or know" her.

The sad part is akin to grief, an emotional complex I know intimately. The foundational ground for grief is a longing for what is not there. When it arises in response to a specific loss, a death say, it is a longing for what was there but is gone. The human organism has an array of built-in physiological mechanisms expressly suited to processing this kind of grief: crying (and, at least in my experience, a sort of laughing that is a crying-equivalent) and intense vocalizations that are not words but sounds are the two most familiar. They are sufficiently

palliative most often to promote healing, which, over time, transforms open wounds into scars. The sort of grief that arises in the situations I'm talking about is different in that the "loss" is of something that was never there in the first place. One knows in every fiber of one's being that it should have been, could have been, and in a more human universe would have been. But there is nothing in the commonly agreed upon cultural matrix to promote it. Just the opposite. It is discouraged in every possible way by habits of mind based on unacknowledged privileges. And that makes me mad.

This dynamic is easy to see in relation to the toxic effects of race and gender biases. The cultural defaults to White and male and straight can be devastating for the "others" not included under those rubrics. They create an almost impenetrable aura of privilege for those who happen to have these accidental traits built into their identities. Well, exactly the same dynamic applies to the privilege that inheres to temperamental "normalcy," and its effects are equally pernicious. The valorized temperament—in the American culture it is a hale-fellow-well-met form of extroversion—is presumed to be intrinsically better than the alternatives. And if you're not good at it, there are deleterious consequences.

When I was a sophomore in college, circa 1968, I volunteered as a tutor for elementary school children who were struggling to keep up with their cohorts. We all met once a week in big auditorium at a local community center, metal folding chairs scattered around the room for us to arrange as we saw fit. The young man I was assigned to work with was called Tommy.

He was in the second grade. The referral that came to me from his teacher claimed "he was unable to read." I spent some time talking with him. He was a ball of fire, happy, energetic, squirming in his seat, like his whole body was a bundle of compressed springs waiting to be sprung. I happened to have a newspaper with me that day, so I thought I'd ask him if he could read any of the words. He could and did, slowly, with some struggle. So I was a relieved to find out that "unable to read" was an exaggeration. At one point, he asked me if he could get up and run around for a minute, which he did, round the room once or twice. There were numerous tutor/student pairs scattered around the room and none of them complained, or even seemed to mind, which surprised me. Everyone just went on working. Then he came back and read a bit more. Then he ran around and read a bit more. With each turn his reading abilities improved noticeably. And this was, remember, not a Dick and Jane story book but a newspaper. And this was in one single session, from "unable to read" to pretty literate in about an hour.

He was I could see actually quite intelligent, could process textual material age-level competently (I'd ask him about it), just a delight to work with. But only as long as he could run around every now and then. Which is how we spent our time together once a week until the end of the semester, when the program terminated. When I said goodbye to him that day, he clung to me like I was the only available bit of flotsam in the middle of an ocean. It was heartbreaking. I knew he was headed back into a setting where running around every now and then was not an option and where he would likely be marked again as "unable to read," a simple "difference" amplified into a "disability" once

again. I've thought about him often over the years. He's nearing retirement age now. I hope he survived "school" and had a great life.

While the sort of hyperactivity that Tommy expressed had been noted in children for 100s of years and in extreme cases treated with medications for decades, it was not until 1968 (by coincidence) that it made its first appearance in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, escalating from a behavior "problem" to a full blown disorder: Attention Deficit Disorder (ADD), listed then with two variations, with or without hyperactivity. About 20 years later, when Tommy was in his twenties, these were combined into a single type: Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD). The CDC estimates that "7 million (11.4%) U.S. children aged 3–17 years have . . . been diagnosed with ADHD, according to a national survey of parents using data from 2022," so they represent a significant cohort.

There are a variety of medications that are prescribed to treat this condition, all of which purport to de-hyper activity and increase focus and attention. So what's the problem you might fairly ask? Well, let me hypothesize, based on my limited experience, that this "disorder" may for many children be less a factor of their biology and temperament, and more a factor of the way schools function in our culture: large groups of young people (and what used to be about 20 when I was in school is now much more often 30, sometimes 40, which I know for a fact from my daughter's decade of experience as middle school teacher) sorted simply by age, as if everyone is somehow identical

via that marker, and then made to sit still for hours on end in (often fixed to the floor) rows of seats staring ahead at the authority figure in front of the room, who may be a captivating and inspiring presence. Or, more likely, not. Think back to all the teachers you have had and count the ones who could hold you mesmerized for full class periods. You likely won't need all the fingers. And you might be more inclined to raise the middle one more often than not as you navigate that roster.

When I was in kindergarten I was quiet, shy we used to say. One day during what must have been some sort of inside recess, I was walking around the room with a new friend of mine. One of our classmates was quite rambunctious and sometimes volatile. I'll call him Sam. For reasons never clear to me, he became either frustrated or angry and threw a wooden block (one of the white-wood toys so common back then) across the room. It hit my friend just above his right eye. Lots of bleeding, off for stitches, that sort of thing. It left a scar that I continued to notice for years thereafter, the micro-trauma of the event still visible on his skin. The young man who threw the block had the same sort of pent-up energy in his presence that Tommy did, but a less joyful demeanor.

Fast forward to my first day in first grade. I remember the whole scene of this event vividly, like it happened today. I was sitting in the last row on the right side of the room, toward the back. This block-thrower, Sam, was sitting on the far left toward the front. The teacher opened class that day by asking him to stand up. Then she both berated and warned him about his "reputation" for misbehaviors, which would not be tolerated in

her classroom. It was a public humiliation of staggering proportions. Or at least it would have been to someone like me, for whom public embarrassment was terrifying. The first actual nightmare I remember, when I was maybe three or four, was a detached hand wielding a large paint brush being dipped into a can of red paint that it spread across my face. That may not seem to qualify as a nightmare for you. But it was for me.

Sam may or may not have cared about this public excoriation. My reaction was revulsion, which prompted a sudden revelation, as in "OMG, now I understand how things work in these institutional spaces: Toe the line or you will be subjected to a humiliating tirade of this sort." I decided right then, with deep conviction, that no one, and I mean no one, was ever going to do that to me. I knew I needed a strategy that would insulate me from any possibility for such an outburst. And I calculated that being a "good" student was the best option. This "goodness" may have had a behavior-related component, but I wanted more of a guarantee than that. My definition of "goodness" in that moment was more academic: demonstrate, via the inane grade-based system that evaluated performance in this culture, that you are so "smart" no one can even imagine disrespecting you. I set my mind fiercely toward that goal. All of this happened in a matter of seconds. And it determined the trajectory of my life in fundamental ways that are only now becoming clear to me, 70 years later.

What I figured out in that moment was that becoming the "best" student, on the terms of that defined "value" in this space, was the way to go. I wanted not just to protect myself from

embarrassment, I wanted to be so good at school that teachers would not ever feel inclined even to notice me let alone be tempted to chastise me. I would lift myself out of harm's way by "winning" that game on its own terms. Which is what I did for the next twelve years. After a while I acquired a reputation as a sort of "genius." Which is what I wanted. Even as I knew that my innate intelligence was likely little different from my block-throwing colleague, who struggled to pass. I became "abnormal" on the opposite of the "spectrum" from him, "gifted" instead of "special." The two medical categories that now at least vaguely describe us are autism (me) and ADHD (him.) My approach led to ample rewards, his to chronic punishments. I was lucky. Like Tommy I found the enforced physical constraints of the classroom frustrating, sometimes almost intolerable. But I had a gift both for daydreaming my way into a different dimension and for somehow appearing (to an outside observer) to be fully and attentively there. That was my much more socially acceptable (in that it was invisible) version of "running around the room."

The only reason for those outcome-differences was the arbitrary way the space of school was conceptualized—one that enforced long-term immobility in the same spot—and the equally arbitrary memory- and test-based system of letter-grading that hierarchized human value. Neither of these are well-adapted to what most children are and need as they develop. Animals, which is what we are, literally, learn best by play, especially when they are young. Theorist after theorist—psychologists, sociologists, anthropologists, all kinds of -ologists seem to agree on that. Tommy was far more normal than I was in that respect. The spaces we were compelled to inhabit were designed

expressly not to promote play and creativity and agency, but to train a work force docile enough to be controlled and manipulated in the service of a capitalistic industrial economy, one that operates on the assumption that rewards—like grades, which are akin to the ultimate currency, money—can be used to buy and control human bodies both spatially and temporally: as in you have to be positioned all day in this specific place doing this specific task, a set of externally imposed conditions that are as inimical to human adults as they are for human children. This system says in every fiber of its being: "I have bought/own your embodied presence for this pre-assigned duration of time and have every right to impose an array of expectations that serve my agenda even it they are deleterious to yours." My "disorder" allowed me to play inside my head, much to my advantage. Tommy's didn't, much to his disadvantage.

So what's the alternative? Well, first of all, don't privilege the brain chemistry of young people who happen to be adapted to the dysfunctional spaces we are culturally addicted to. Change physical the spaces so the ones who aren't won't have to become addicted to mood-altering meds. How? I'm sure I could come up with some suggestions, but I am not an architect or designer. Hire smart people who know how to create humane spaces that young people enjoy being in. Let them design some schools, or redesign some classrooms. Find out what sort of models work for the full spectrum, not just the rarities like me who learn early how to leave dysfunctional spaces imaginatively. Forget normal and abnormal. Children are human, too, though Western history seems all too often to have thought otherwise.

4.

We live in a country in which words are mostly used to cover the sleeper, not to wake him up. . . . The trouble is deeper than we wished to think: the trouble is in us. And we will never . . . conquer our cruel and unbearable human isolation—we will never establish human communities—until we stare our ghastly failure in the face. . . . Not everything that is faced can be changed; but nothing can be changed until it is faced.

James Baldwin ("As Much Truth as One Can Bear." *NYT*, January 14, 1962.)

Capitalism is "far more than just an economic doctrine," Juval Noah Harari observes in his influential bestseller Sapiens: A Brief History of Humankind, [Toronto, McClelland and Stewart, 2014, p. 314] "It encompasses an ethic—a set of teachings about how people should behave, educate their children, and even think. Its principal tenet is that economic growth is the supreme good, or at least a proxy for the supreme good, because justice, freedom and even happiness all depend on economic growth." . . . The hegemony of that materialist culture is now total, its discontents universal. (277)

Gabor Mate

The dysfunction I'm describing here, as many psychologists and cultural critics have aptly noted, is an inevitable byproduct of capitalism, when that ideology is recognized as not simply a neutral economic system but as a power dynamic to advance the interests of one class at the expense of "others." Like all such ideologies, it is possible to at least become conscious of it if not escape from its consequences via what I have described more as a sudden "waking up" than the outcome of an extended process of education. The latter may help toward that end, but it certainly is no guarantee for producing it. In some ways, it is only after the former that the latter can proceed in any profoundly changeful way.

If you want to understand what capitalism has done and is doing to our culture and to you, there are tons of books you can read. Or you can simply stop and think about it for 10 minutes. Here's my *Spark Notes* take on it: The foundational premise of capitalism is the control of human bodies to generate wealth for someone else. The primary mechanism for that control is to buy time for money. The expression "time is money" encapsulates this ideology perfectly, as long as you understand that the money/time equation is unbalanced in this way: I will give you the minimum amount of money to buy the maximum amount of your time so that your work will give me the maximum amount of money for the minimum amount of my time. In the case of the extremes, like slavery, say, that min/max will be food and shelter for all of your time.

Thus the obsession with time as an instrument of control. My daughter, for example, is much happier and more

productive, given her "disability," working from home and managing her own schedule. This approach was ideal during the pandemic. She flourished work-wise while her socially normative colleagues floundered. There is now, in her workplace as in so many others, a groundswell of voices beckoning everyone to "return to the office in person." Elon Musk is a particularly noxious example of a "boss" imposing such a mandate. In my daughter's case there are now more and more mandated in-office days and a general reproval of "remote" work. It has not yet reached the "return to office or leave" point that Amazon has, but the trajectory is clear. She does while in-office exactly the same work she had been doing from home, less efficiently and well given the sorts of distractions that the workplace imposes on a sensory system not especially well-adapted to coping with them. And for the rest of "the day" she sits at a desk appearing to work without accomplishing anything. Instead of, say, practicing self-care and doing other kinds of work that are equally important, many of them supportive toward the work she is being paid for, and more enjoyable.

In my darker moments, I see this as the revenge of the socially normal for the pain they were forced to endure during the pandemic, which on a subconscious level they blame on those of us who coped well with it, as if we caused the event that precipitated it, the sort of confusion between "causes and conditions" that the Western sensibility is particularly vulnerable to. Now, they want to reestablish their supremacy in relation to those who prospered while they suffered. Their concern seems to have less to do with productivity or "the bottom line" than with reasserting control over the human bodies who, from their point

of view, evaded it during the pandemic. And the only way to know for sure that those bodies are being controlled is to see them there in whatever specific space the system has designated to contain them, office, factory, school, whatever, all designed to make oversight easy, even with those for whom it is not only unnecessary but counterproductive.

Not every culture, thankfully, operates this way. In fact, the vast majority don't, and haven't historically. The anthropologist Marshall Sahlins, who studied societies across the Pacific basin, writes:

> *For the greater part of humanity, self-interest as we know it is unnatural … it is considered madness . . . Rather than expressing human nature, such avarice is taken for a loss of humanity*. (117)

Sahlins traces the toxic dysfunction of Western culture—one we presume is "normal" but is almost uniquely weird in the pantheon of societal paradigms—as it snakes its way through our history, beginning with the actual snake in Genesis, whose figurative presence is then amplified along two tracks. One is Christian, with Augustine (4th century) and Aquinas (12th century) two giants with a moral dark streak; one is Greek, with Anaximander (6th century BCE) and Aristotle (4th century BCE) two comparably significant giants with mechanistic habits of mind. A toxic brew. More lately, it has slithered its way through all the disciplines that inform Western systems of thought, from philosophy (see Kant, Hume and Descartes, e.g.); to economics (Adam Smith's view of "wealth" leads directly to the brand of neoliberal capitalism that is now valorized to the extreme as the

foundation for economic life in the US); to Age of Enlightenment politics (John Adams, one of our founding fathers, proposes that the best way to rein in the naturally agonistic conflicts between rich and poor, industry and agriculture, etc. is a system that relies on the "balance of powers" to promote a tense stasis more so than progressive change, a staple of American politics).

Sahlins, interestingly, orchestrates all of these forces under the general aegis of Thomas Hobbes famous trope, that the "natural" human state, if left unbridled, leads to lives that are "solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short." Most often that quote is rendered with only the last three words highlighted. What I want to call attention to here, and what ultimately makes this applicable to my argument, are the first two words, that implied relationship between solitary and poor. In the most practical sense, Hobbes is suggesting that human identity is by nature solitary and that this tendency lends itself to all the other catastrophic consequences he enumerates, including the economic one, poor. He says:

> *I set down for a Principle by experience known to all men, and denied by none, to wit that the dispositions of men are naturally such, that except they be restrained through fear of some coercive power, every man will distrust and dread every other and as by natural right he may, so by necessity he will be forced to make use of the strength he has toward the preservation of himself. (quoted in Sahlins, 41-2)*

In other words, unless the innate selfishness of "all men," one rooted in their solitary nature, is countered early and always by "fear of some coercive power," no effective social system can

ever arise. As it pertains to the ongoing strife I have highlighted between extroversion and introversion, the Hobbesian "Principle" attaches not just a negative but a dangerous valence to our "natural" tendency toward solitude, or even toward something like what Emerson calls "self-reliance," which must be countered and suppressed by the application of external "power." The logic of this complex suggests that a social sensibility (what we now call extroversion) is so unnatural that it must be indoctrinated into "men" by fear and force, those essential prophylactics against the inclination to introversion built into the human character. Which is to say that what we presume in the West to be socially normative is in fact, at least from Hobbes' harrowing point of view, an entirely artificial cultural construction.

When it comes to the relationship between the solitary and social sides of human nature, the West has chosen the darkest path imaginable, a sort of "war of the worlds" that needs to be prosecuted on all fronts, birth to death, to avoid disaster. Christian and Greco-Roman ideologies collaborate quite handily toward that end, mechanism and morality tag-teaming seamlessly. In capitalistic systems minorities, often very tiny ones, assert control over less organized majorities of "others." And one of the ways they do that, as I've said, is by dividing those "others" into a variety of subsets that, at best, will not then tend toward consensus and, at worst, will be put at odds with one another, allowing what Adam Smith calls "the invisible hand" (a term, by the way, he uses only once, and passingly, in *The Wealth of Nations,* though it has been turned into the mantra of neoliberal capitalism) of "the economy" to do its magical work. And it's all

premised on the assumption that the "natural" state of the human temperament, which on balance, tends toward solitude, is so dangerous it must be tamed by coercion into something it is not by the tyranny of normalcy.

The alternative to this is simple: presuming that the "natural" state of the human temperament, one that was crafted by tens of thousands of years of evolutionary elegance to suit it more and more perfectly for the environment it must survive in here, is not dark but light, not dangerous but good, warrants expression not repression. And that "solitary" and "social" are collaborative rather than contrary aspects of that state. As Sahlins and most anthropologists make clear, this is the animating principle of Indigenous cultures, which assume that the process of "socialization" is more a way to harness that foundational goodness toward the good of the collective than to constrain it in the service of material gain, a misreading of our fundamental nature that produces the "loss of humanity," the "universal discontents," and the "ghastly failure," that Sahlins, Mate and Baldwin lament.

5.

Most countries' legal systems, health care systems, and educational institutions approach disability using what is called the medical model of disability. The medical model understands disability as a condition that exists inside an individual person's body or mind. If you're disabled, you

personally have a problem that must be identified, diagnosed and then either treated or cured. . . .

Where the medical model of disability fails is in making sense of disabilities that come from social exclusion or oppression. Sometimes what society (and the psychiatric establishment) considers to be an individual defect is in fact a perfectly benign difference that needs accommodation and acceptance instead. (229-30)

Devon Price

If you only have time to read one book on neurodivergence, Price's book *Unmasking Autism: Discovering the New Faces of Neurodiversity* would be a pretty good choice. If you think you're neurodivergent, you'll find out a lot of useful information about your condition and how to live well with it. If you think you're not, you'll find out a lot of useful information about those "others" you simply now don't take notice of, have compassionate understanding for, afford accommodations to, or often even tolerate. In both cases, ignorance is not bliss. It is the opposite, a chronic suffering induced either from the inside out by confusion or the outside in by intolerance.

Okay, so let's assume you now agree that our current concept of normalcy is a cultural construction, which means it is historically contingent, based on values so broadly indoctrinated into the collective that they appear to be truths rather than assented-to assumptions, what I call "beliefs" above. What are some next steps? Well one of them is to stop using words in ways

that "cover the sleeper" rather than "wak[ing her] up." And that, as I have been saying, starts with seeing things in a new way, a process of defamiliarization like the one I document in *First, Summer,* the book I wrote just after I moved to Washington six years ago. In a chapter called "Looking for Bigger Words" I try to describe the discombobulation I felt perceptually, trying to fathom a landscape scaled outside my customary habits of perception:

> *[M]y eyes are not yet acclimated to the scale of the spaces they have to take in here, everything so much larger than they are accustomed to looking at. Here I walk by trees—Douglas firs, red cedars—eight feet wide at the base, twenty-five feet around, maybe twenty stories tall, I can't even see the tops, forest floors adorned with frond-fountains of fern after fern, "lawns" of them, some as tall as I am, each one gushing up and over like Sideshow Bob's hairdo. Even when I glue my eyes to these green things, they don't stay stuck there, just slide off, trying to find something more manageable.*
>
> *And the words my eyes have customarily turned to, in the syntaxes they know, to say what they see, simply don't work now. I am, over and over, stunned into silence. I remember having the same sense of discombobulation for the first weeks I spent in the Rockies in Colorado, as if that sort of scenery had no symbolic equivalent in my head, at least none I could easily translate into language. When I finally was able to write poems there, they resembled the mountains, large, perambulating, craggy things, many edges, full of twists and turns, neverendingly open-wide. And when I got back to Pittsburgh, those poems stopped, their out-of-placeness,*

> *literally, evident in the tighter, hill-embraced spaces I made my way through there. I had that same feeling when I went to see the redwood forests north of San Francisco. I was only there for a few hours, so no words had time to rise up behind my eyes and speak what I was trying to see, only a slack-jawed awe, bordering on incredulity, like, really, these things could not have grown this way, must have been created here out of concrete by Walt Disney.*
>
> *. . . So I walk, often very slowly now, around, through and among those things, trying to re-train my eyes to see them as normal, translatable. I keep looking for the words I need, but they are not there. Some days, it seems like what I need is not new words, but bigger words, like TREE instead of tree or WATER instead of water. But all that would do, I guess, is add empty space to what I write, like an inexperienced freshman turning to a bigger font to meet the page requirement. Silly.(39-40)*

I did, in time, reconnect the synapses between what I was seeing and the words I needed to say it. It took months of work to do that, even for something as simple as walking in the woods. I'm sure you've done something similar somewhere along the way, encountering a "change of scenery" that was similarly outside your customary frame of reference. You can start there by remembering both how hard it was it was to adapt to it and how fruitful it was when you did. The real value of such an experience only arises though if, after you return to more familiar landscapes, you suddenly realize that the habitual ways you saw them were learned, largely unconsciously, and relied on discourses that are not "natural" at all but contingent. An insight

of that magnitude doesn't just install something new in place of something old, it instills a critical sensibility that is applicable, as a template, intentionally, not just as a one-and-done but as a habit of mind, which is what waking up is and means.

There are two different kinds of "vision" at play here: The former involves learning how to see what's already there but is beyond the range of one's available discourse, which requires what S.T. Coleridge describes in his *Biographia Literaria* as a "transfer from our inward nature a human interest and a semblance of truth sufficient to procure for these shadows of imagination that *willing* suspension of *disbelief* for the moment, which constitutes poetic faith." The latter involves learning how to see what could be there but isn't yet, which requires *a willful* suspension of *belief* for the moment, which is a different kind of "poetic faith" altogether (italics mine).

Mahatma Ghandi says "You must be the change you wish to see in the world," which is that next step, once you've found a way to see what's really there instead of what you've been preconditioned to see. From this new vantage point systemic inequities begin to reveal themselves like a streaming Times Square light scroll. Having changed yourself, you will be inspired to change systems instead of "moments," enabled finally to envision what a better world, including a better human universe, might look and feel like, not just for you but for all those "others" you have not been "seeing and knowing."

This kind of envisioning is by nature aesthetic, a desire for something not-there imagined so intensely that you feel inspired to make or build it. In other words, seeing and saying what's

there engender a "wishing" for better versions of it, which puts it in the province art, not business. As this pertains to social temperament, my tiny topic here, forget the BIG WORDS you know too well and find some small ones, words better adapted to individuals than to groups, words you generate for yourself simply by paying attention mindfully, lovingly, over and over, to whoever is right in front of you until they become fully-fledged human beings on their terms rather than yours.

I think I'll conclude quietly with a few aphorisms from Marcus Aurelius' *Meditations*, one of my go-to sources for sane advice, that seem (to me) to be pertinent. Here's a simple one:

Practice really hearing what people say.

Do your best to get inside their minds. (*Book Six, #53)*

One of the things introverts tend to be good at is listening. Part of that derives from the frustrations we've experienced at not being listened to along the way. I've had plenty of instances where I've repeatedly told someone who is misreading me exactly what I want and prefer. And for some reason, they go on doing exactly what they've always done. I've written about listening practices specifically in many of my books, so I'm not going to go into a long disquisition about it. The main thing I want to say is that most people listen only with their ears, and even then in a way that is impoverished by a preoccupation with how the heard words connect up with the ongoing narrative, "the world," always ongoing in their own heads rather than adapting their ears, and inner world, to the voices speaking them. This sort of inattention is, in my opinion, exactly what Jesus is getting at in

his oft-repeated "those with ears to hear" trope. Unless, from his point of view, you're translating what *he* has to say into embodied mandates that will change *your* behaviors, you're not getting it. I actually believe that the human body is endowed with "listening" receptors everywhere, arms, legs, eyes, hands, heart, stomach, and, of course, ears. And it can "hear" many more wavelengths than the one inscribed by the language we natively speak. I listen to trees, for example, who don't speak English. And they listen back to me. Back and forth, body to body. If that's sounds preposterous to you, you haven't yet learned all there is to know about listening.

And this one:

The best revenge is not to be like that. (Book Six, #6)

When it comes to the most important matters in my ethical/moral/spiritual life, I tend to learn more from negative models, the ways I do not want to be, than from positive models. Part of that may derive from my belief that no one is enough smarter or better than I am to warrant my indenturing myself to them or their belief systems, an artifact of my first grade revelation. This may, and often does, register as arrogance to "normal" people. I prefer to call it self-trust, in the Emersonian sense. Negative learning requires having keen (in)sight and a good memory. Most of what I used to construct my professorial identity in the classroom for example was based on recollections, deeply felt as wounds, of the bad teaching that was inflicted on me. The mandate in my head was "don't be like that, Paul." A similar ethic animates the way I now react to people who are grieving. My memory, based on negative experiences, tells me:

"don't be like that, Paul." It may take some experimentation for me to figure out a truly better way to be. But at least, in the meanwhile, I will not be replicating a model I know doesn't work. These are good first steps for promoting self-change.

And finally:

> *You can hold your breath until you turn blue, but they'll still go on doing it. (Book Eight, #4)*

Which gets me back to my initial skepticism that what I'm writing about here will have a meaningful impact on most of my neurotypical readers. This essay has been written in the shadow of a global pandemic that has now retreated past the horizon. Like all shadows it both reveals and hides, in two dimensions, a three-dimensional reality. During all such cultural crises, certain truths, both bright and dark, are suddenly exposed for all to see, at least potentially. And once the crises pass, those truths are all too often muted, modified, and mollified to allow a return to "normalcy," a soothing amnesia that ameliorates the remembered trauma. This one is no exception.

During the pandemic when, as I said, I felt fully normalized to the social conditions for the first time in my life, I worked very hard to persuade my socially normative circle—who were floundering, some quite painfully—that they could use their discombobulation as a learning experience to see, really see, perhaps for the first time that, yes, of course, the advantages afforded to the normative "majority" were entirely arbitrary, as was the invisible sense of privilege they created. Change the

conditions of the social contract, as the pandemic did, and it all flips. So obvious. Specifically, I hoped that going forward it would open their eyes and ears more fully to people like me and my daughter, to see how, under these altered conditions, we were not just surviving but flourishing, as we always had been, that going forward they would see and know us differently on that basis.

As I explain in the next essay, I spent many years learning everything I could about social normativity, as a survival strategy. It was hard. But I came to know what makes extroverted people tick at a very deep level, how to see and know them humanly. The pandemic offered a perfect opportunity for "them" (at least the ones I knew) to do likewise with me and my kind. Sadly, when the pandemic ended, the social dynamic reverted almost immediately to its prior equilibrium. So I have had to come to terms with the likely futility of my work in that respect. If our social and professional cultures were unable to acknowledge those truths while they were right in front of them, they will be (and clearly are now) unlikely to make any significant changes on their basis.

In some ways, I tell myself consolingly, what I'm writing here calls to future generations, those that will emerge once the current culture, clearly coming apart at its own seams, is tattered enough for a transformative ecdysis to begin, revealing a kinder and gentler snake, its wrinkled, ill-fitting skin now shed, one that is not the cause of our fall into the darkness of civilization, but a font of knowledge—of both good and evil, yes, but above all of knowledge—that may guide us back to someplace more Edenic,

our differences at peace rather than at war with one another, both internally and socially. My hope is premised on a faith that change, fundamental change, change down to the ground is not only possible but inevitable. It begins with our waking up, one at a time if that's what it takes. If only one reader of this book does so, my work will not have been in vain. The fact that I won't be around to see it on a large scale is of no consequence to me. The thought that my children and all the young people I've had the privilege to meet and teach along the way may be fills me with joy. If nothing else, in a variation on what Barak Obama said, "[they] are the change [I] seek." If you're willing to do some work of your own to create the groundwork for that, all the better. You can be the change they will seek when their time comes.

A New Kind of SAD

1.

SAD: Those three simple letters convey many and various meanings when we see them. At the most basic level they name an emotional state so foundational to the human experience that AI programs and robots must "learn" to simulate it if they are to have any prospect of either relationship or communication with naturally embodied people. Every human being knows what "sad" feels like, looks like (facially) and means to them, with an inventory of experiences to back it all up. So I'll leave that there.

The fact that I've capitalized all three letters suggests, of course, that I'm interested here not in what they "spell," but in their acronymic functions in the current culture, a couple of which have entered both the standard discourse and, more technically, are now listed as official "disorders" in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, (DSM.) The most common condition this "word" indexes is something called Seasonal Affective Disorder, a state of temporary and conditional depression, first identified in the 1980s, that many suffer during the light-deprived winter months (though there is a summer version as well). There are a variety of antidotes to this affliction, including light therapy (primarily), talk therapy, and certain kinds of supplements or anti-depressants.

But the version of SAD I want to expand on here is Social Anxiety Disorder, a term that came into currency during the

1960s and that I became aware of a generation or so later when I was in my 40s. The DSM defines its general features this way:

> *Marked fear or anxiety about one or more social situations in which the individual is exposed to possible scrutiny by others. Examples include social interactions (e.g., having a conversation, meeting unfamiliar people), being observed (e.g., eating or drinking), and performing in front of others (e.g., giving a speech). (DSM-5)*

A more detailed description, with common symptoms, is this:

> *Social anxiety disorder, also known as social phobia, is an anxiety disorder involving discomfort around social interaction, and concern about being embarrassed and judged by others (NIH, 2014). This discomfort will be experienced as fear and anxiety, and will be accompanied by autonomic arousal, including diaphoreses [sweating], apnea, tremors, tachycardia, and nausea (ADAA, 2014). It can range in severity to a discomfort which can be circumvented and adapted to, to a virtually disabling fear with infiltration into multiple areas of life (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). The discomfort that people with Social Anxiety Disorder experience can generalize to routine activities such as eating in front of others or using a public bathroom. People with social phobia desire social contacts and want to participate in social situations, but their anxiety can become unbearable (NIMH, 2014). Social anxiety can lead to isolation, and either absence of development or stagnation of social skills, which can intensify existing social anxiety. [https://www.theravive.com/therapedia/social-anxiety-disorder-(social-phobia)-dsm--5-300.23-(f40.10)]*

I intend (as my title promises) to propose a new use for the SAD acronym, what I call Solitude Anxiety Disorder, the complementary sibling of Social Anxiety Disorder, a condition that, among the socially normative majority, expresses as an aversion to being alone with oneself, one that became much more visible and problematic (via many forms of unusual disruption) under the duress of the pandemic which enforced solitude even for those who don't savor it. I came up with this concept the other day while I was taking a bath, after wandering down a long speculative path that opened with some thoughts about boredom as a mode of fear. And I'll get to it soon. But, as is my practice, I want first lay the foundation for my innovation, one based on a lifetime of personal experiences with the original version of SAD.

While Social Anxiety Disorder (the textbooks say) predominately affects women, with a typical onset in the early-teens, I was, I am certain, born with it; and I experienced all of the specific symptoms listed above throughout my youth. I prefer to name it as a condition and not as a disorder, or even an affliction. It is so foundational to my identity and temperament that I can't imagine a version of myself without it, and, perhaps surprisingly, I actually prefer mine to the more socially normative temperaments I became aware of very early in life and have learned, through assiduous study, not just to simulate but to embody with deep authenticity in my professional and personal life. While I was growing up I thought of my aversion to the social as an extreme form of shyness, what was called back then "morbidly shy," a term that had been in use at least as far back as the late 19th century [see Harry Campbell's article "Morbid

Shyness" in the British Medical Journal, Vol. 2, No. 1865 (Sept. 26, 1896)]. The morbidity part of it is, of course, figurative, in that in this state of mind one experiences a vague "deathly" fear of situations that might be potentially embarrassing, even mildly so, inducing, among other quite visible autonomic reactions, intense blushing. Thus the aversive response to situations of that sort. The first nightmare I remember experiencing, as I say in "The Tyranny of Normalcy," was of an oversized, disembodied hand dipping a very large brush into a can of crimson red paint and then applying it over my face. I can still recall vividly that imagery and feel the overwhelming terror I woke in start with that night.

Wikipedia lists several technical names for various aspects or modes of Social Anxiety Disorder. The one I'll focus on primarily is "ophthalmophobia," which is, basically, a fear not just of being the center of attention, as in, for example, on-stage type performances (quite common); or even of having the spotlight cast on you unexpectedly, as in, for example, being asked a question in class (not unusual); but of being looked at under any circumstances at all, events that instigate a variety of anxiety-related physical responses. I spent my childhood in this state of chronic "fear," a term I put in quotation marks to indicate that I did not experience it as exactly that, in that it was, as I said, simply foundational to my identity, which I liked quite a lot, actually preferred, as I said, over the various more normative alternatives I saw out there in the world. It felt to me more like living inside a very well-insulated house, keeping the outside out and the inside in, which can make for quite a comfortable living space in a world that is often, for those like me, either way too hot or way too cold. All of this had many indirect benefits. For

example, my anxiety about performing publicly in the classroom inspired me to excel in my studies to such a degree that teachers stopped picking me out to answer questions, on the assumption that I was always fully prepared and needed none of the prodding that the potential embarrassment of such moments incited in those less studious than I was. After a certain period of time, maybe by the fourth grade, I acquired such a reputation for academic excellence that I was pretty much left alone entirely to simply work at my own pace and at my own level, typically beyond my grade-level norm, which is kind of idyllic for someone of my temperament. So, in this respect, my condition paid off handsomely: I evaded the ongoing gaze of institutional authority while setting myself up for subsequent success in my academic and professional life.

At some point in my early years (I have specific memories related to this that I visualize in my first-grade classroom, the ones I document in "The Tyranny of Normalcy") I realized that not only would I have to work hard to insulate myself from being "looked at" in all these ways, but that, complementarily, I would also need to learn how to at least appear to behave normally in the process, another kind of self-cloaking. This meant that I would have to hide as best I could the symptoms that revealed my exaggerated self-consciousness. If you have ever tried to keep yourself from blushing, to stop from sweating, or to still fidgeting digits, you know how hard it is to control these essentially autonomic expressions of anxiety. I struggled with all of them, and still do, though over time I made some small progress, able to keep my hands still when I spoke publicly, to forestall sweating to some extent, and to bring blushes back down to "normal"

skin-tone relatively quickly. I realized as well that I would have to develop from the ground up a set of social skills that were more normative (I was naturally endowed with none of those), an insight that took the form of something like this, though I'm sure I wasn't astute enough back then to frame it this precisely: In order for me to function in the world, given the way the power dynamic is presently constituted, with extroversion the standard of social normativity—I mean practical things like getting a job (mine turned out, ironically, to combine teaching, where one is constantly on display to groups of people, and scholarship, which often involves giving talks in front of larger audiences)—I would need to learn how to behave in ways that those dominant others perceived as compatible with theirs, as legible, to "speak their language," as it were.

I set myself that task immediately and worked at it quite diligently. The first thing I had to do was learn how to talk, I mean literally, how to vocalize the words in my head so that they could be heard; and to get familiar with the feeling of words flowing out of my mouth smoothly and naturally. One of the family "legends" about me is that I started to talk way late, concernedly so, past two years old. It was not that I didn't acquire or know how to use language, because (I was told) when I started to speak, it was in full sentences, out of the blue. I have no recollection of any of this, but I assume I just preferred a wordless silence (or my own nonsensical idiom for talking to myself, a lifelong habit) as the background noise in my head.

Once I developed this basic fluency, I started talking more with/in front of other people, at home primarily, or in

familiar settings. I knew, of course, that I would not just have to say things, but also to make what I said sound like authentic expression. So I practiced that, too, the way an actor might practice a script. That happens now to be the same method I use to learn a song I want to record, losing myself in the text and music until they become fully my own, at a deep emotional level. In other words, I never try to simulate how the writer or primary performer of the song presented it; I make every song I sing entirely "mine" before I record it, often revising or rewriting it in significant ways if that's what it takes to make it feel genuine. In some ways, I guess, my early regimen was like learning how to sing a song I was making up myself! This may sound like an unpleasant way to spend one's early childhood, but I didn't experience it that way at all. I actually thought of my temperament then, and still do, as a "gift," and of all the work I was doing as a very worthy investment in my future, which it was. As I said above, I truly enjoyed being who I was and learning all I learned, about myself, about others, and about the structural ways the world works, through these endeavors. And you may think what I describe here is so auto-didactically eccentric that it is by definition rare. But every other person I know who could warrant the SAD designation describes experiences similar to this as they pertain to the invention/creation of a public version of themselves and to their insights into how socially normative habitats operate.

2.

Before the advent of modern psychology with its penchant for technical terminology, people like us tended to be designated as either, on the one hand, off-beat/strange/weird/eccentric; or on the other, depending on what they accomplished, sages/saints/poets/seers, two extremes that seem expressly designed to keep these behaviors cordoned off in "safe" spaces where they can't interfere too much with the normal state of social affairs. While I was growing up, I was determined to avoid that first category of "impressions," so I aspired toward the latter, a commitment that proved to be quite generative. For example, because I spent large chunks of my youth outside the plane of the normative social universe surrounding me (which allowed me to "study" it the way one would another universe) I became astute at seeing how foundational "systems" functioned in that world, what animated them, their purposes and problems; and I learned how to navigate them, even use them to my advantage, which I often did. And because I preferred listening over speaking (paying close attention to words, of course, but even more so the ways in which they were embodied) I became adept at "understanding" other people, not just at a surface level but more deeply, what made them "tick," as it were, which I experienced even back then as a mode of compassion, empathy. I would have made a good psychotherapist, I suppose, a career path I considered along the way; or priest, a "calling" I luckily avoided, my top two "matches" on one of those standardized

“interest” tests I took in my college’s advising office back in the mid-60s when I was sorting through possible career plans. Instead, I turned these skills to my advantage in my professional life as a teacher and my family life as a father, two roles I feel I excelled at in my life, for both of which listening is, without a doubt in my view, way more efficacious than speaking.

During my teenage years, when I started to “come out” a bit, I spent enormous amounts of time at the local hangout, The Sugar Bowl, wandering from table to table talking with friends or pretty much anyone willing to talk, or just sitting by myself with a cigarette and cup of coffee, observing. This was no longer, for me, a mode of practice. It was a way to celebrate and hone my hard-earned skills. In other words, I was not only socially apt, I was quite adept at it. I continued this “wandering” practice at every one of my subsequent workplaces, just popping in for a few minutes with colleagues for a quick hello, a brief chat, or, my favorite, an occasional, spontaneous, deep conversation. The fact that all of these encounters were one-on-one or, at most, one-on-two, and largely under my control, was, I understood even then, what made them not just comfortable to me but quite desirable experiences. From the Sugar Bowl all the way through my time in the English Department at the University of Pittsburgh, where I acquired a reputation as such a happy wanderer, I sought out these encounters eagerly, and in my retirement I miss them. So it’s not only self-aloneness I crave. I also like alone-togetherness, in situations that are relaxed and comfortable for me. This is a crucial element of Social Anxiety Disorder that tends to get underplayed, even ignored.

To get at the subtleties of this distinction, I often think of Greta Garbo's famous incident in New York City, she having retired from acting, living a solitary, private life, wearing dark glasses and big hats when she went out to evade the paparazzi who hounded her. I have a newspaper or magazine photo emblazoned in my mind, which may or may not be accurate, of Garbo walking her dog in Central Park being pursued by a bevy of photographers, almost running to escape their harassment. The caption was her famous alleged quote, "I vant to be alone," a line from the 1932 film *Grand Hotel*. It is a poignant example of the sort of cultural bullying the normative social universe inflicts on those of us who simply prefer to evade their chronic gazes. As Emily Dickinson says in her famous "Nobody" poem:

How dreary – to be – Somebody!
How public – like a Frog –
To tell one's name – the livelong June –
To an admiring Bog!

Exactly, Emily! And that's not in any case exactly what Garbo actually said, as she explained in an interview for *Life* magazine in 1955: "I never said 'I want to be alone.' I only said 'I want to be let alone.' There is all the difference." Anyone with a temperament like hers (or mine or Emily Dickinson's) will understand implicitly what that "difference" is and why it's so monumentally consequential.

In my early adulthood, when I started to teach, I realized I needed to able to speak not just spontaneously and communicatively, but with authority, and to sound "smart" doing so. So I practiced that, too, created in effect a persona that

could quite comfortably stand up in a classroom and conduct its essential business, a "me" that was both me and not-me, which is I assume pretty much the way "normal" people operate in professional cultures, though less intentionally and self-consciously. Those of us less well-endowed with natural social instincts simply have to work harder at it. That my techniques for doing so ended up being somewhat quirky—i.e., "authentic" to my aberrant social nature—made me a unique and quite extraordinary teacher, a claim I can back up with ample documentation and multiple awards.

One mental "trick" I used toward this end was to write out silently in my head exactly what I wanted to say and how I wanted so say it (I always preferred writing as a means of personal communication for the control-related reasons that are obvious to me now, but only became so well into my adulthood.) I would then memorize what I had "written" and say it as if it was spontaneous and "true" to the moment; again, like a good actor reading from a good script, one I had just written myself *for* myself! As you might imagine, it takes some persistence and patience to learn to do this well: first to generate the script more and more quickly, then to move from the script to the speech more and more seamlessly, and then to make it all sound both authentic and spontaneous, belonging to that instant. Fortunately, as time went on, all of these steps gradually collapsed into one so that I could in fact speak spontaneously and authentically and sound "smart" doing so, "off the top of my head," as it were, a great boon for my career in the academy. I was, I will insist, throughout this process, saying exactly and only what I wanted to say; i.e., I had no intentions toward duplicity or

deception. In other words, none of this was even remotely a "con" let alone sociopathic. It was simply my process for making the self I knew inside as accurately visible as possible to the outside, which given the deficits in my naturally endowed skill set, was more a mode of work than behavior: exactly the way anyone with any deficit in "normalcy" overrides its consequences.

One of the tropes I used to describe to myself the "me" I deployed in the classroom was that "he" was just a more "perfect" version of my basic me, a "me" I aspire toward ideally, ethically speaking, unable to be "him" all the time simply because it takes so much energy to keep "him" persistently intact and afloat in that form. A full-time job of that would so quickly exhaust "him," "he" would have to quit his job to recover! Perhaps the most fundamental skill this "he" could enact in the classroom was intense, active listening, a mode of apparent inaction, transacted in silence, that requires highly focused attention, a brief suspension of one's own inner discursive sound track followed immediately by a response that is uniquely pertinent to that interaction, an overdrive gear I have to engage willfully, one that also takes a considerable input of energy. If you think that is easy to do well, you've never done it well. This was, I see now, among the very first "social" skills I learned in my life, most likely in those first two silent years, and it is not only useful but, I would argue, essential for establishing and maintaining *equitable* relationships with others.

Sometime in my thirties I started to name my temperament as "reclusive," a term I preferred to "shy," which

has a child-ish ring to it, and, especially to "introverted" which, like Social Anxiety Disorder, has the oily fingerprints of the modern psychology machine all over it. Reclusive had a much more noble tenor to it, put me in the company of poets, like Emily Dickinson, whom I so admired. And thinking of my temperament that way actually made me proud of it. Pertinent to this, I recall a conversation in the living room of my family home in Forest City, everyone home for Christmas, sitting together talking. I was unmarried so it was most likely between my marriages, when I was in around 30. As was my customary practice, I was just sitting calmly and happily listening while my parents and siblings shared their various stories about work, friends and travel, etc. When the focus turned to me I simply deflected it as was, again, my customary practice in such situations, which inspired some mild chiding, the gist of which was "you never seem to go out and do things with other people, you never travel to new places, you never have interesting stories to tell," all true of course. I got a bit testy and said: "I truly enjoy my own company and am very happy when I'm alone, an experience that seems endlessly interesting to me. How many of you feel that way?" No one piped up. Then I added, "I truly enjoy being exactly where I am and rarely have any desire to go somewhere else simply to escape where I am. Where I am at the moment seems endlessly new to me, too. How many of you feel that way?" Again, no one piped up. The chiding ceased, of course. But what this suddenly made visible *to me* was that my way of being in the world, i.e., enjoying true happiness with who I am and wherever I happen to be, was not a disability at all. It was in fact a very healthy alternative to the cultural standard for

social normalcy, which seemed (to me) to depend to some extent on doing all kinds of things, no matter how exhausting or unpleasant, simply to have a good story to tell "around the campfire," as it were. That moment was profoundly illuminative for me, my explaining for the first time, not just to others but also to myself, exactly who I was and how I lived with an air of confidence and deep pride rather than embarrassment.

3.

I was, you might be surprised to hear, not much of a reader growing up. I actually never read a whole book, to my best recollection, until I was in the 6th grade, and even then only because I had to write a "book report," for which I chose the shortest book I could find, a little monograph on the life of Babe Ruth, one of my childhood heroes. The teacher accepted it, but also made clear that this was not what she meant by a "book" in the assignment. I avoided reading because it was really hard work for me, and still is. I did what I needed to do to excel in school (for the reasons I describe above), and that was about it. I was particularly adept at math, which has a symbolic simplicity to it that I found quite transparent.

At some point in my academic career I realized that I read things via a much different route than most people, a lot of jumping around, back and forth, up and down, almost in some sense "viewing" a text as if it were a painting, piecing it together that way, eyes darting from point to point, light to dark, etc. For

the vast majority of my life, I just assumed that's how people read normally. Were I going through school now, I might well be diagnosed with some bizarre form of dyslexia. Fortunately, I was just left alone to follow my own lights. It allowed me over time to develop a form of "speed reading," of seeing the whole of a piece almost at once as an organic unit, the way one does with a painting, a skill that made me a very effective reader of other people's work, from students to colleagues, my goal always being to apprehend the overall vision that animated a project before I made any specific commentary on it. And, honestly, one of the things I discovered along the way is that most writers, even novices, can quite capably attend to "corrective" revisions in their work. What they crave is a reading that actually "gets" what they're trying to say, to be not just heard but "seen."

It wasn't until the seventh grade that quite out of the blue and entirely by accident I discovered poetry and fell in love with it, became almost addicted to it. It was then and still is the one sort of verbal discourse that seems to me to reveal its meanings directly and immediately, altogether, all of a piece, transparently, like mathematics. Poems are, as well, short, quite a boon for someone with maze-wandering eyes like mine, which may well be why I preferred them over longer genres. I started out with Edgar Allen Poe, whose "The Raven" I memorized over a period of a week or so, in chunks, right before I went to sleep at night, all of those intoxicating images and evocative words cascading thrillingly through my head and, when I mouthed them, lavishing their sonic sauces on my tongue. The whole process was exotically sensuous to me, and almost immediately I decided that at some point in my life I wanted to write at least one thing that

good, that compelling, that someone else would want to commit to memory and speak to themselves over and over simply because it was outlandishly gorgeous. So I dedicated myself to that mode of creative enterprise, as a set of verbal practices, of course, i.e., writing actual poems, but more so as a way of being in the world, one that witnessed it as rich, beautiful, capable of generating lush sequences of words but also and more often instilling wordless states of mind that felt Poe-scale ecstatic to me. I reveled in those worded and wordless realms, and still do, all of that wonderful sensory and emotional overwhelm burgeoning with meanings that I can, from time to time, with careful attention to detail, at least intimate with well-constructed verbal artifacts. I love making such things even when no one else but me reads them, which was most often the case when I was young, all that adolescent glam, and still is, now that I'm really good at it but don't any longer "publish" conventionally.

In general then, right from the outset and well into my adulthood, I always thought of myself as special, privileged, extraordinary even, to have the temperament I was endowed with from birth, this reclusive nature that so well suited me. I was, therefore, quite crestfallen when I first encountered the term "Social Anxiety Disorder," most likely in the late 80s or early 90s. What had previously seemed to me to be a gift, or set of gifts, was all of a sudden being trafficked as a worrisome aberration, simply another psychological disorder, one the culture at large seemed to believe I needed to be "treated" for, if not "cured" from. As I said above in relation to my reading practices: Were I born now, in the context of current psychological discourses, I would early on quite likely be identified as "on the spectrum," afflicted with

SAD, perhaps even autistic. Fortunately, I evaded such a fate by growing up in the 50s in a small town and a tiny school system and a close-knit family that had likely never heard these terms, or, if they had, could not imagine that they might apply to someone like me in their contexts.

While I realized very quickly, reading about it, that I did indeed display (I avoid the term "suffer from" for all the reasons I've already made clear) all the symptoms and features of SAD, I never fully acceded to the "diagnosis" or the "prognosis" this new terminology proffered. I had, after all, learned how to function quite effectively in the pertinent cultural marketplaces; and had, as a bonus, acquired that other huge reservoir of knowledge I've described: not just of their operative systems but of what the more normative inhabitants of those systems *were* at some "essential" level (having been born that way); and even more valuably, what *I* was at some "essential" level (having not been born that way.) That was where the definitional contest rested, in a kind of tense equipoise, for several decades. Until the Covid pandemic took hold of the culture at large in 2020, which caused me to reevaluate all of this down to the ground, and has led me now to write this essay, in which I propose a new way of reading my title's acronym, what I have decided to call Solitude Anxiety Disorder (a co-equal counterpart to Social Anxiety Disorder) which has been running rampant over the last two-plus years and can account for much of the otherwise inexplicably aberrant behaviors of vast numbers of previously sedate socially normative people: all those fights on airplanes, in stores, and in front of school boards, not to mention the ways in which various "hate" groups and cultures have effloresced and flourished lately in the

dominant social media, sometimes spilling into the streets or chambers of government. It may even account for the popularization of outlandish conspiracy theories and outright cults, systems of belief that were broadly nascent beforehand, to be sure, as potential states of being, but were largely held in check by conventional forms of what I'll call "social etiquette," which ceased to function properly once the normative social universe was so severely disrupted. Thus, while the underlying condition I point toward has always haunted the dominant cultural cohort, it simply evaded detection, in part by defining itself as majority-normal and in part by diverting all the negative attention toward its benign minority-non-normative counterpart.

My first hint that something was up in this regard was the almost preternatural comfort I felt in the grip of the lockdown, or, my favorite of the terms, the sheltering in place. This was home to me, my "natural" state of being. And now, for the first time in my life, I felt fully normal, was actually being rewarded by rather than penalized for my temperament. What I wondered was up with that? The "penalties" I refer to were manifold, but the dominant one was a feeling of shame, induced from the outside in, a sort of chronic, low-grade sense that, smart as I was, this was a test I could never pass even adequately, let alone with my customary flying colors, basically the feeling I had in that living room back home when I was in my 30s. At the occasional extreme, I might even feel as if I was being stigmatized as the herd's "black sheep" in order to make the more normal others around me feel safer and superior. The minute the pandemic started, I no longer felt a shred of shame, and haven't since. On the contrary, I felt strong and capable, the "survivor" in the herd

while the previously dominant majority floundered. It was an awesome feeling. Still is.

4.

So what might the DSM entry look like for this condition I'm calling Solitude Anxiety Disorder? Let me rewrite the existing description of SAD this way:

> *Solitude anxiety disorder, also known as solitude phobia, is an anxiety disorder involving discomfort around being alone with and in enforced intimate contact with oneself, a fear of self-presence that compels one to imagine/realize the degree to which they are on their own in the world, separated from the various kinds of soothing external validation social interactions induce, inciting concern about being embarrassed and judged by themselves. This discomfort will be experienced as fear and anxiety, and may [I have no experimental basis for these, of course, but assume these, or physiological or psychosomatic reactions like them, might be common] be accompanied by autonomic arousal, including diaphoreses, apnea, tremors, tachycardia, and nausea. It can range in severity from a discomfort which can be circumvented and adapted to, to a virtually disabling fear with infiltration into multiple areas of life. The discomfort that people with Solitude Anxiety Disorder experience can generalize to routine activities such as eating alone or simply sitting still. People with solitude phobia do in fact want to better understand and relate to themselves,*

but their anxiety about that can become unbearable, and can only be relieved by entering a distracting social arena.

One of the general implications here is that neither version of SAD is *best* characterized as a disorder. Both simply reside on alternate sides of the wide spectrum of what is humanly normal socially. At their far extremes, either can, I admit, be aberrational and quite deleterious and may warrant their mention in the DSM. But, in sum, I would argue, equally so, as all of those breakdowns in social decorum during the pandemic amply demonstrated. There is no reason, really, why sociability should be privileged over solitude, even in evolutionary terms where the ability to both be alone and act autonomously would be just as valuable to survival (it seems to me) as the desire to be part of a supportive community. While contemporary workplace cultures tend to promote "team"-based approaches and frown on the "lone wolf" syndrome, that was not always the case even in industrial cultures. And in my experience "introverts" tend to be just as productive and valuable in collaborative relationships as their more socially-oriented partners, excelling often at exactly the sorts or organizational or mediating work that their colleagues falter with. The primary reason SAD means what it does and not what I'm suggesting is, I would argue, simply because it represents a majority bias, in much the same way that "winners get to write the history." Except that right now, during this pandemic, those winners are no longer winning.

What the DSM doesn't attend to in its definition of SAD (no matter whether you take their actual one or my proposed revision) is the underlying emotional dynamic that supports and

attends to it. The one exception to this is the mention of "fear," that instinctive human reaction to perceived threats, whether real or imagined. One might, of course, just as easily fear intimate contact with oneself as with others. They are, in my view, co-equal "threats" to one's security and equilibrium. For example, I actually saw this bit of graffiti scrawled on a railing in Watershed Park today: "My worst enemy is my inner me!" I've written elsewhere on a number of occasions that fear is at the root of any number of other expressions of intense human emotion. The two I'm most interested in here, and pretty much always, really, are grief and rage, which Mia Farrow so brilliantly declares are "savage companions" in the human universe, whose spawn she says is often "despair."

The sort of grief socially normative people feel now in the face of what they have "lost" is somewhat different, perhaps even more vivid and intense, than the grief socially anxious people have always felt, in that the loss that precipitated it has been sudden and dramatic, akin to a tragic death. I have experienced such a loss and have written about it extensively, so I know a lot about that form of grief, how it manifests, what its primary symptoms are, etc. Any number of socially normative friends and family of mine have described similar symptoms in the face of this current loss, from mood disorders, to gestural responses like crying, to literal physical pain. This form of grief is structurally different from the one socially anxious people experience, in that we never *had* what we perceive to have "lost." Ours is more like the sort of grief any "minority" might feel, whether their oppression is intense (as in race and gender identity matters) or vague and amorphous, as is the case with social anxiety disorders

that don't rise to the level of clinical definition (like autism) or mental "illness" (like psychosis), the sorts of "privacy" tendencies that are simply criticized, as mine were in that living room 40-some years ago. It is, of course, both possible and healthy to grieve for things you want but have never had. Just ask anyone who craves a child but can't have one. It is just different from a grief founded on an actual loss of something you did have. Just ask anyone who has lost a child they bore and raised.

So, one way of coping with Solitude Anxiety Disorder would be traditional grief therapy, whether formal, via a psychotherapist, or by following the conventional suggestions always directed toward the anxious: exercise, diet, etc. A third (and my personally preferred) alternative, for those less faint of heart, is self-reflection, deep self-reflection. Which can begin with something as simple as sitting still. I don't mean the more rigorous form of "sitting" that accomplished meditators practice. I mean just sitting in a chair as calmly as possible for as long as possible. At some point in this process, the boredom and agitation it initially provokes will be countered by some attention to what is in one's head at the time, a form of thinking that is not outcome-driven, equivalent to a very basic kind meditation with similarly salutary effects. Walking—I mean walking just to walk, not to get "somewhere" or to shop—is similarly generative of nondirective thinking, inducing it whether you want to or not, maybe because of the rhythm of walking, akin to dancing, so good for "losing" oneself, the body directing the mind rather than vice-versa. Given our foundational temperament, socially non-normative people like me are often quite adept at both of those things—which may resemble doing "nothing" to more

goal-oriented people but are clearly "somethings" when you practice them. Those less accustomed to the self-presence experienced in solitude might need some help along this path, via, for example, mindfulness practices, many of which are cultural commonplaces these days and proffer comfortable starting points.

Of more concern to me is the "rage" side of this "savage" partnership, which has been on full display in so many ways during the pandemic that I am stunned so few have put that two-and-two together. That actual physical violence can ensue from the simple matter of being asked to wear a mask (on behalf of one's own health and, more aggravating I suppose to those most resistant, on behalf of others) is shocking to me. In stores, on planes, in public meetings, in the theater of current politics, you name it, this mindless rage has run rampant, abating a bit only lately as various "mandates" have been lifted or mitigated. How so many could feel so deeply oppressed by this mild assertion of authority—for their own benefit, no less—suggests several things to me. First of all, that the sense of unbridled "freedom" and "self-reliance" the average socially-normative-majority American (specifically, compared to other cultures) takes for granted is almost pathologically toxic, this unwillingness to make even the slightest compromise, let alone sacrifice, on behalf of the collective, as if the social universe should always serve one's own desires and needs without even the slightest vice-versa. And, ironically, all of this while simultaneously indenturing oneself to all sorts of way more transgressive authoritarian groups and practices!

I would add to this array of dysfunctions things like the "Karen" phenomenon and MAGA mania. Then, more appallingly, there is the ongoing obsession with guns, and the inevitable mirror image of that, the explosion of mass-shootings, which now occur at a rate of almost two/day, up from less that one/per week pre-pandemic. More generally, the overall murder rate has increased by almost 50% during the pandemic years. You could argue that this has nothing to do with Solitude Anxiety Disorder but is a separate and peculiarly American aberration. But think about it: Whether it's the "loners" who shoot up schools and nightclubs or the brother- and sister-hoods that constitute the various "militias"—animated by anything from White supremacy to religious zealotry—now roaming the country, you will find at the core of each (I believe) someone who cannot tolerate a life without chronic external validation, a deep need to be "seen" and approved of by others, even if that means becoming famous for atrocious misdeeds. That is the grave toll you pay when you can't stand to be alone with yourself, the path that fear takes when it goes directly to rage, without passing through grief's "go" to collect its two-hundred dollars' worth of alone-time. Social Anxiety Disorder is not at the root of these aberrations, Solitude Anxiety Disorder is.

5.

One of my first reactions to the initial pandemic lockdown was, as I said, a feeling of ease, calm, wellbeing; and it

didn't take me long to figure out why: Here, finally, was a social universe that was adapted to my temperament, suited for what I was really good at: being alone, reading, writing, thinking, walking in the woods, all solitary experiences for me. This was a world for which I was ideally suited, and in which I was fully functional: i.e., normal. For the first time in my life, yes, socially normal. My like-minded friends said essentially the same thing, how happy they were and felt under this new regime. And all of the previously socially normal people I knew began to struggle with reactions that ranged from sadness to frustration to actual physical pain to outright rage. They had, I realized—having suddenly been deprived of a privilege they had always taken for granted, one they never even perceived as a privilege, just a condition of the natural state of human affairs in this world—begun to come apart at the seams. They didn't like it and didn't cope well, some to the extreme, all of that fury and fighting and violence or just the hapless flailing around that I began to witness almost everywhere I turned. That's when I started thinking about the power dynamic that has led to this essay.

At the onset of this seismic shift in the social matrix I made up an illustrative joke that I told over and over to the socially normative people I was in contact with: If the pandemic conditions continued in place for a several generations, people like me and my kind, who were ideally adapted to it, would ultimately become the "fittest" to "survive" and would be if not in the majority, certainly the new normal. And those who depended so heavily on satisfying their social urges with other people or travel would be perceived as ill-suited to the ambient cultural conditions, aberrant, "disordered." I also took every

opportunity to urge socially normative family and friends who were struggling with their sense of deprivation to use that experience to learn some things: First of all, that social normativity was in fact a culturally constructed privilege, not some form of naturally endowed goodness, and, like all such privileges, it was ephemeral, as this interlude demonstrated. In its temporary absence, I hoped they would use the time as an opportunity to look inward, find self-motivated ways to cope with their grief and rage and fear. But especially in that process to learn something important about those of us who don't fit the norm, that we are not aberrant off-beats to be chided or shunted aside, but strong, fierce and free, capable and deeply healthy human beings who enjoy our own company and being right where we are. The best way to do that, I explained, is the same way I had to learn how to understand them: Set your mind to it, pay attention, practice, until you begin to feel the sort of calm contentment that we feel in this current state of deprivation. Then, when it's over, you may for the first time have a clue not just about who and what we are, finding better ways to communicate with and relate to us as equals, but about yourself, a quantum of knowledge that is the inevitable payoff when you realize that you are just as much an "other" as all the others you have "othered" along the way, a privilege founded on the assumption that it is a permanent and naturally endowed advantage instead of the fleeting cultural construct it actually is, one that you haven't "earned" and don't "deserve," which is always the case with taken-for-granted privileges, in that they can evaporate almost instantly under the right circumstances, as this one did in March of 2020.

6.

Those of us on this side of the spectrum have no desire to shame socially normative people for the “weaknesses” they are now displaying. We know full well what it feels like to be undeservedly shamed for one’s temperament. But I do hope the process of inward-looking I’m recommending will create a modicum of temporary, self-induced shame for the way you have at least misunderstood (often quite entirely) if not actively discriminated against those of us who happen to reside on a different part of the social spectrum from you, a spectrum that, except perhaps at its furthest extremes—psychosis and sociopathology—is not differentiating better from worse, good from bad, normal from disordered, but simply measuring variations in the ways selves and others can find a comfortable balance in the communities we create. As I said, after a lifetime spent in my neighborhood on that spectrum, I’m more than happy to highlight and endorse its qualities. Our kind, for the most part, are peaceful, gentle and kind. We don’t want to shoot up the neighborhood or force our most deeply held moral principles on others. We are, almost by definition, tolerant, which is what you have to learn how to be if you want to really like yourself and enjoy your own company, being with that other-in-you, right where you’re sitting, right now.

Despite that reassurance, I’m going to close here with a series of what may seem like harsh assessments and

recommendations, just to bring into focus the importance of coming to terms with oneself in solitude at least from time to time. There are, of course, all the obvious big benefits that pertain thereby, like escaping from toxic relationships you persist in out of a fear of being alone, like depending for self-worth on the shallow approval of others you don't even like much. At the extreme, this tendency takes the form of cult-like attachments to groups and theories that demand complete obeisance from their ranks.

If you're in that latter cohort, you're not likely to be reading this, of course, so what specifically do I have to offer those in the more "normal" range? Well, here's something: You might be wondering why I would prefer to spend time with myself instead of with you? Well, why would I go out of my way to seek out someone who doesn't even want to be with him/herself? Or with someone who doesn't really care to find a clue about who I am or what makes me tick? It is very painful to be present but unseen, to be chronically misread, misunderstood, even chided simply for being one's own good self. I don't like it. Those are not experiences I am keen to repeat. I never treat myself that way and rarely treat you that way when I'm in your company, either. When I do, I always regret it and most often apologize. Think about that. If you'd prefer not to spend the time and energy to actually be with me, to listen to me, to get to know me, I'm quite fine with that. Like Garbo, "I vant to be let alone."

Or think about this: I spent decades learning every little nuance about you and the neighborhoods you inhabit, as a

matter of survival, creating in the process a compendious archive of knowledge and multiple very useful versions of myself. And, by dint of my "disorder," I also know myself inside out. Because I spend tons of my time in there. And I still like myself, by the way! It would be well worth your while to learn something about those of us who do not share *your* disorder. We are not only interesting, we can help you with it. What you're missing by letting us "pass" is of some considerable value, and there's no other way to get it except at the source, which, if you'd just calm down and listen, you will find right in your own self, waiting patiently for you both to wake it up and to wake up to it. And by that means you will start down the road toward understanding and loving yourself in a deep way. When you get there, no amount of solitude will disorder your mind. In fact, in a social universe where the power dynamic remains balanced, in equipoise, across the spectrum of possible temperaments, both of these versions of SAD could be excised from the DSM, replaced by a Calm Social Order even a pandemic would not be able to unravel.

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Paul's other books, available in PDF format at paulkameen.com or in paperback and ebook formats on Amazon.com

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