

The New Normal?

An online talk for Lucy Cavendish College, University of Cambridge

There has been a bit of a communications breakdown in the run-up to this talk, insofar as the advertising suggests that I am going to offer you both 'wisdom' and 'insight' as we think about what we might mean in a post-lockdown context of living which has been dubbed, for good or ill, 'The New Normal'. I'm not sure I have much of either. Indeed, as I've given thought to what I would say to you today over the last week or so, I think whatever wisdom and insight I might have had have become mired in a morass of facts and figures, opposing beliefs about science – or, perhaps I should say, *the* science, as it seems to be taking the definite article in these pandemical days – views about politics, economics, schools, public transport, what we can and can't do, masks or no masks, one metre, two metres, or more – wisdom and insight are struggling a bit down our way right now.

I pointed out in a blog piece for college a few weeks ago that 'the new normal' is a phrase which originates in the United States, coined by economists in the context of the financial crisis at the end of the last decade. In broad terms it refers to the previously abnormal becoming commonplace. But it is a little more nuanced - and one key lecture given at the time has really struck a chord with me. The distinguished economist (and Queens' alumnus) Mohamed A. El-Erian gave the Per Jacobsson Lecture in Washington DC on October 10th 2010. The lecture was called 'Navigating the New Normal in Industrial Countries', and in that lecture El-Erian defined the twin characteristics of 'the new-normal' (it had a hyphen originally) as *an uneven journey* and *a new destination*.

And he went on to say

Our use of the term [the new-normal] was an attempt to move the discussion beyond the notion that the crisis was a mere flesh wound, easily healed with time. Instead, the crisis cut to the bone. It was the inevitable result of an extraordinary period which was anything but normal.¹

So right now we're in the anything-but-normal phase. The *uneven journey* bit. And part of the bumpiness of the journey is how we even manage the concept of a new normal. In *The Times* last week Giles Coren was on typically sarcastic and acerbic form: his piece began

Okay, you know what, the next person who says, "the new normal", I'm going to find you and I'm going to kill you. I don't care if you're doing some boring report from a northern care home on *Channel 4 News* or writing a jolly newspaper feature about lockdown cocktails or just talking to some other loser in the socially distanced queue at the yeast counter of your local organic self-congratulatory bread-making hub, I am going to find you and I am going to eradicate you. Because "the new normal" doesn't mean anything. The world changes every second of every day and always has and "normal" is always relative.²

Of course he's right – not the bit about homicide at the yeast counter, obviously, but the stuff about the word 'normal'. Normal is just not a good word, is it? The *Cambridge English Dictionary* fails to make the definition even remotely exciting, and I guess that's the point. You can almost hear the bored, nasal tone of the lexicographer:

ordinary or usual; the same as would be expected³

¹ Mohamed A. El-Erian, 'Navigating the New Normal in Industrial Countries', the Per Jacobsson Lecture given in Washington DC on October 10th 2010

² <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/past-six-days/2020-05-12/comment/dont-keep-calm-and-stop-saying-new-normal-vrdfjvkkcr> cited 200520

³ <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/normal>

But I was struck by the examples of usage they provide beneath the definition, one or two of which seems alarmingly relevant for our times:

- It's *normal* for couples to argue now and then.
- They were selling the goods at half the *normal* cost.
- His temperature was above *normal*.

And one I fear is going to prove more challenging

- Things are back to *normal* now that we've paid off all our debts.

Yeah, right.

I think the important thing is not to confuse the essence of who we are as human beings with the practice of what we do from day to day. Many of my days are quite normal, in the dictionary definition of the word.

Ordinary things happen, the usual things take place. But the person who is living this normal is not even remotely normal. Which is not to say that I am abnormal! What it says is that I am unique. And so are you. What's normal about me, or you? And who is to say what is normal, or not? I'm not a great one for internet memes, and this is just a little bit cheesy perhaps, but even so, I was moved. It says

The day you were born was the day God decided that the world could not exist without you.

I would have been helped in my thinking had the very next one I saw not have been the neo-metaphysical

You come from dust.

You will return to dust.

That's why I don't dust. It could be someone I know.

I think that, dusting aside, these last two months have been profoundly difficult for us, because we are just not made to be like this.⁴ We're not virtual. We're physical. We relate to one another, to our world, physically. *Zoom* is fine, and *Microsoft Teams* is fine, and isn't it fun to go the Louvre website and look at the *Mona Lisa* without having to queue for two hours. Except it's not the *Mona Lisa*. It's an electronic pixillated simulacrum of the *Mona Lisa* – and it's not real. And while I am real, honest, sitting here at my desk just over a mile away from college, what you are seeing of me, hearing of me, noting of me, isn't real. It's a simulation, a virtual image of the person who is truly real. Human beings can do virtual, of course – we're doing it now. But let's not dare to call this virtual reality. The reality is that we are created for relationship: and Christians like me will want to talk about the doctrine of the Holy Trinity, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. This doctrine asserts that God IS relationship, within his very self. If we are made in his image, then it's no wonder that social-distancing is getting us down.⁵ If we choose to be alone, that's one thing. If we are forced to be alone, that's something else entirely.⁶ One of my distinguished predecessors at the University Church, Michael Mayne, was struck by myalgic encephalomyelitis (ME) in his last year in Cambridge. Quoting Donne, he writes

As sickness is the greatest misery, so the greatest misery of sickness is solitude . . . solitude is a torment which is not threatened in Hell itself.⁷

Michael then comments about being ill and alone:

You do feel cut off, and you do need reassuring. And the best and most effective way of achieving both is by touch and by prayer . . .

⁴ 'It is not good for man to be alone'. See Sacks, *Faith in the Future* (London: DLT 1995), 108-9

⁵ Perichoresis: see Fiddes, *Participating in God* (London: DLT 2000), 71-81

⁶ See a fascinating consideration of defining solitude in Kull, *Solitude: Seeking Wisdom in Extremes* (San Francisco : New World Press 2009), 205-6

⁷ Donne, 'Devotions V', *Complete Poetry and Selected Prose* (London: Nonesuch 1978), 513

I believe that most of us, when we are sick, need physical contact and the spoken assurance of God's love.⁸

As I read those words again recently, I found my heart missing a beat as I remembered the cruel stories of Covid-related deaths where physical touch was prohibited.

A friend of mine had to watch her father die without being able to hold his hand, unable to kiss him one last time, her face shielded by a plastic visor, not even able to share her loving smile behind her surgical mask. This isn't how it's meant to be. And on a lesser scale than the cruelty of these deaths, repeated tens of thousands of times, are the smaller, daily deaths which affect us through what we have all come to know, in a neologism that would no doubt set Giles Coren off again on his murderous course. I speak, inevitably, of *social-distancing*.

I don't here want to get into the debate about social-distancing in so far as the science of preventing the spread of Covid-19 is concerned, and, besides, Dr Greatorex is better qualified than me on that one (and you can sign up for her lecture in this slot on June 17th). In terms of social-distancing, however, I want to argue that the phrase itself is wrong. We discovered early on that the phrase which gives this talk its title, 'the New Normal' was given birth by economists. This phrase, social-distancing, has its origins with politicians and civil servants, and I want to suggest that it is the very worst kind of euphemism. For what we are doing at the moment is not social-distancing, if at all. It is physical-distancing. In fact, physical distancing is the phrase that the World Health Organization wishes we were using.

⁸ Mayne, *A Year Lost and Found* (London: DLT 1987), 15

Martin W Bauer, professor of social psychology and research methodology at the LSE, says

It occurred to me from the beginning that this was an unfortunate choice of language to talk about 'social distance', when actually what was meant was 'physical distance'. Physical distance is measured in metric metres or centimetres. It is the geographical distance from person A to person B while 'social distance' is a measure of distance across social boundaries.

In these strange times of the virus, we want clear physical distance (minimum two metres), but at the same time, we want people to remain close to each other 'socially'.⁹

I would argue that social-distancing has been all too real in our society for a long time. I don't just mean that we've depended too much on social media – that would be another talk for another day. Rather, I mean that we've forgotten, as a society, how to truly relate to one another. We have been too ready to collude with a socio-political agenda which disregarded groups of society perceived to have nothing worth saying, and nothing worth offering. Some would want to aver that the referendum result was a consequence of this. (Remember Brexit? You should, you'll be hearing a lot more about it again very soon). And it not as simple as a north-south divide. It is real and up close. According to the *Centre for Cities* think tank, Cambridge is the most unequal city in the UK.¹⁰ It's a complicated picture, but, simply put, in this city the gap between the richest and the poorest is the bigger than in any other city in Britain. There are more graduates and post-graduates in Cambridge than anywhere else in Britain – we beat Oxford by miles! And yet we have one of the largest number of people without any qualifications whatsoever, especially those aged between 50 and 64.

⁹ https://twitter.com/LSE_PBS cited 200520

¹⁰ <https://www.centreforcities.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/01/18-01-12-Final-Full-Cities-Outlook-2018.pdf>

If we're looking for a definition of social distancing, I think this one has more authenticity for me than whether I'm running six feet away from the nice lady walking her dog along the river. In Cambridge last year, 4,500 people used the Foodbank. That's 4,500 out of 124,000. How can it be that in a city that has grown so big, so rich, so splendid, so many thousands need a Foodbank? It is thought that 20% of people in our country live in poverty. 1 in 5. And our beautiful city is the most unequal of them all.

I've got the latest newsletter from *Wintercomfort* here on my desk. Do you know about *Wintercomfort*? It's about half a mile from Lucy. Last Saturday and Sunday they fed 105 of the homeless in our city. 105 fellow human beings. Here in Cambridge, alongside *Wintercomfort*, there is *Jimmy's*, the *Cambridge Churches Homelessness Project*, and the student-led *Cambridge Homeless Outreach Programme*. These are great organizations. But why, in Cambridge, in 2021, are they necessary? Are they not indicative of the consequences of a truly socially-distanced society? This is reality for too many: and if it was real before the pandemic, what will it be as we continue to live as we are, which may be many months, many years, to come? Alienation and estrangement between individuals and their environment has been widely identified and interpreted by philosophers and sociologists for two centuries now.¹¹ Few who know me would have me down for a Marxist, but unless and until we recognize that many today experience an economic and political system that is working against them, and not for them, then social-distancing – *real* social-distancing – is going to be a scourge of our society long after Covid-19 has completed its hideous work.

¹¹ I'm grateful to Miroslav Wolf for pointing me in the direction of Hartmut Rosa's, *Resonanz: Eine Soziologie der Weltbeziehung* (Berlin: Suhrkamp, 2016), 144-328. Miroslav comments: 'Note that estrangement from the world is a distinct phenomenon from the dystopian cultural mood in whose grip we currently find ourselves. Cultural moods come and go; lack of resonance with the world and alienation from the world remain.'

An uneven road for sure. But what of a new destination for our new normal? What would make our hearts rejoice to find in a new ordinary, a new usual, a new same-as-would-be-expected?¹²

Being a priest, you won't be surprised – at least, I hope you won't be surprised – that God is involved in a new normal. This is not a credal address, and certainly not a sermon, but no follower of Jesus could ignore his teaching – a Gospel that is the very opposite of social-distancing.

We are told that Jesus touched people, and healed them. But more than that – his Gospel offers a wholeness, a healing, which is societally transformative. The Croatian theologian Miroslav Wolf once summarized it like this

All humans, and all life on the planet, are interdependent, an interconnected ecology of relatedness. For one person to truly flourish, the entire world must flourish; for the world to truly flourish, every person in it must flourish; and for every person and the entire world to truly flourish, each in their own way and all together must live and see themselves as living in the presence of the life-giving God. ¹³

Whether you are a person of faith, or not, I hope that you can say the creed of a new destination – a way of being that can be usual, and ordinary, not because it is the exception, but because it is the rule. A human society that is not physically-distanced, because it need not be; a human society that is not socially-distanced because it knows it must not be.

¹² <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/normal>

¹³ Wolf, *What Matters Most*, an address given at the launch at Lambeth Palace of Justin Welby's book *Reimagining Britain* (Bloomsbury 2018), quoted with permission. The Archbishop's book is worth reading afresh in the present context, especially his five concluding policy proposals, 279-283

For we can never live virtually. We can only live together. To do that, we cannot live for ourselves alone – we can only live for one another.¹⁴

That last bit sounds a little like a sermon. Sorry. But I'll live with that, if it can help to point the way to a new destination. It may take a while to get there. But when we do, we might even dare to call it 'the new normal'.

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¹⁴ There is not time here to explore the element which lies beyond this question, which concerns what Rowan Williams calls 'an "other" for humanity itself, an other *innocent of human history*'; see Williams, *Lost Icons: Reflections on Cultural Bereavement* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark 2000), 168-171