

# Let's Talk About Normal

*"Let's Talk About..." is a column in our monthly newsletter where we will learn one thing at a time about how we can love others the way they want to be loved. We will learn something each month that helps us understand and respect people who are different from us a little more deeply.*

Does a fish know what water is? Probably not. It has always lived in water, so it has no reason to realize there is any way of life that is not immersed in water. Sleepers do not know what sleep is, either. When we do not know any different, sometimes those of us who seem most fully immersed in a culture are least aware of it. It is just "in the air" and we don't know what life would be like without it. So today, let's talk about "normal."

One great benefit of befriending immigrants is learning about someone else's "normal," and in doing so, finding out how strange our own normal may seem to others. Many Europeans find our tradition of having students and attendees at sporting events recite a pledge of allegiance to be creepy and controlling, whereas many Americans take pride in that same pledge. Many of the same people cannot fully grasp what it means to not have a single payer healthcare system, whereas many Americans are concerned about what we might lose in such a system. Even within our own country, different cultural groups have different norms. Driving patterns that would seem incompetent and rude in a city (like two trucks going opposite directions stopping in the middle of a two-lane road to chat about the weather) are the polite thing to do in many rural areas.

A whole lot of what we consider 'normal' in American society today is actually specific to Western cultures. One big example the way we value individuals and groups. The Western world is all about individualism, so even when we're talking about a big corporation, the focus is really on individuals. We automatically focus on the self, our culture encourages expressing emotions to some extent, we value equality and uniqueness, and we expect people to challenge authority. We don't want to be "robots" or "suckers" or "bootlickers." Surely no one does, right?

Many Asian and African cultures take a very different, collectivist approach. Even when looking at one individual, the focus is more on the groups that individual is a part of. Family connections and other affinities are a big deal. Emotional restraint is encouraged, and conformity and obedience to authority are the marks of a good person. Hierarchies are informative and respectable. No one wants to be seen as childish or selfish. Why would someone actively obstruct the common good? Even if an action would benefit oneself, if it comes at the expense of others, then it's not really beneficial, is it?

Some of those values may sound familiar. Maybe that's because the Bible is set in the Middle East, where Eastern collectivist values are dominant. How much more might we be able to learn from the Bible if we could view it without the lens of our culture's individualism? I don't know; I readily admit I am a hardcore individualist. But I can certainly see how collectivism might be a helpful way of engaging with the world. After all, we are far stronger together as a group than separately as individuals.

When we can recognize that our 'normal' is not the only way (or the only right way) to do things, we have an amazing opportunity to learn from other people and cultures. So, how can we learn to see the stuff that's just "in the air" for us?

1. Check for assumptions. Consider all the things you take for granted in interactions with others, maybe at work or in your personal life. Are you operating in an individualist mindset? Are you assuming someone values English as highly as you do? Are you assuming that everybody knows to send a thank-you note after a job interview?
2. When you recognize you're making an assumption, look into it! Ask questions and learn about how different people look at the world. In the examples above: Maybe your conversation partner grew up in a household where the group matters more than any individual, and their family doesn't speak English so why would they, and the proper thing after an interview is to wait for the potential employer to make the first move. Note: Many people appreciate the chance to make themselves more fully understood, but if someone does not want to explain themselves to you, respect that and use other resources for your educational purposes.
3. Another fun way to learn about different cultural norms is by watching media produced for other cultures. Look for the shows and movies that are made *for* other cultures, not the ones *about* other cultures that are marketed primarily to Americans. Children's shows made for other countries are an excellent resource in this regard because part of their objective is to teach children about their own culture.

*Our “Let’s Talk About…” column is one place where we can help one another learn how to be better allies for all our neighbors. If you have a question you’d like answered, or if there are things you wish others in our congregation better understood about your own marginalized identities or those for whom you are already a strong ally, please submit suggestions to <https://forms.gle/E9eRqZJLgVagbDZ9> or email me directly at [virginiag@smokyhillumc.org](mailto:virginiag@smokyhillumc.org).*