

## AM I NORMAL?

**Steve Matthews**

**“In the Habit” session for use with devozine meditations for January 25–31, 2016.**

### MAKING THE CONNECTION

“For ninety-nine percent of my life I have lived in the southern United States. My skin color, my religious upbringing, my heritage, my accent all helped me to blend in. Eighteen months ago, I moved to New England. I live in New Bedford, Massachusetts, a gateway city that has been a port of entry for immigrants for nearly four hundred years. My accent sticks out, and I am whiter than most of the population here. People of Portuguese decent make up more than fifty percent of New Bedford’s population, and Central American immigrants also make up a sizeable part of the population. In the grocery store are meat coolers filled with sausages like chorizo and linguica. Southern staples like grits and sweet tea are hard to come by. I am different. I am not normal by local standards (maybe I have never been normal!), but I have been welcomed despite my differences.

“Who gets to decide what is normal? Race, gender, age, social class, intelligence, physical abilities, sexual orientation, personality type are all ways that we define normal; but these categories were never meant to form walls between us and others. Jesus invites us into a community that creates a new normal. In this beloved community, we are invited to see how the love of God unites us, and we are encouraged to see the beauty of God’s love reflected uniquely and beautifully in each person. In this community, normal is a sense of belonging for all people.”  
—Steve

### MEET THE WRITER

**Steve Matthews** was a youth minister for more than fifteen years. He lives in New Bedford, Massachusetts, and is the Executive Director of the South Coast Mission Hub (a collaborative of churches sponsored by the Episcopal Diocese of Massachusetts). Steve is also a spiritual director and a consultant working to redevelop parish ministries that are struggling with decline. He was a writer for *The Way of Pilgrimage: An Adventure in Spiritual Formation for the Next Generation*.

### STUFF YOU WILL NEED

- newsprint

- markers
- paper
- index cards
- pens
- art supplies
- copies of “Too Many Daves” (<http://www.poetryfoundation.org/poem/171612>)
- copies of Romans 12:1–2
- copies of the closing prayer from *explorefaith.org* ([http://www.explorefaith.org/prayer/prayer/prayers\\_for\\_living/accepting\\_differences.php](http://www.explorefaith.org/prayer/prayer/prayers_for_living/accepting_differences.php) )

## PLUGGED IN

- + A couple of movies that offer great perspectives on the need to feel normal are *Soul Surfer* (<http://www.wingclips.com/movie-clips/soul-surfer/normal-is-overrated>) and *Cloudy with a Chance of Meatballs* (<http://www.wingclips.com/movie-clips/cloudy-with-a-chance-of-meatballs/real-you>).
- + “All Kinds of Kinds” by Miranda Lambert ([https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=02X8bX\\_EBv4](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=02X8bX_EBv4)) and “Be Yourself” by Audioslave (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WC5FdFlUcl0>) are songs that encourage us to see our gifts as unique expressions of our humanity.

## CHECKING IN

Begin this time with an opening ritual: a moment of silence, a short prayer that the group says together, or a candle lighting to symbolize Christ’s presence. Take a moment to claim the space and time as holy.

Ask one or more group members to read aloud “Too Many Daves,” by Theodor Geisel (<http://www.poetryfoundation.org/poem/171612>). Ask:

- Which one of the names listed stands out as particularly interesting to you?**
- What would this Dave be like based on his alternative name?**

After some conversation, ask each person:

**What would your alternative name be? Why?**

Invite the rest of the group to listen generously and lovingly without comment or feedback.

## EXPLORING THE WORD

**Scripture: Romans 12:1–2**

Popular culture seems always to be shifting. What is defined as normal is a bit of a moving target. Invite group members to brainstorm and to come up with a list of ways they have seen “normal” change in popular culture. Their list might include changes in fashion, technology,

language, habits, and activities. Record their ideas on newsprint. Allow a moment or two of reflection as group members reread the list and consider these questions:

**How much energy does keeping up with what's normal take?**

**What happens to people who can't or don't want to keep up?**

Then invite two people to read aloud Romans 12:1–2. Ask them to allow a few moments of silence between the two readings. Then ask:

**What word or phrase stands out to you in this text? Why?**

Explain that the word *transformed* in Greek is the same word that is used to describe the kind of transformation a caterpillar goes through on its way to becoming a butterfly. Romans 12:1–2 invites us to consider our gifts and unique abilities and asks us to offer them to God in service to the world. It also encourages us to open our thinking, our perceptions about ourselves and others, and our sense of God's presence and activity in the world to being transformed by God's love.

Invite group members to write on an index card one gift they possess that most people in the room would recognize and affirm as normal (for example, they could write “friendly,” “kind,” “helpful,” “good sense of humor,” “athletic”). Ask them to write on the other side of the card some aspect of themselves that makes them feel different or less than normal. Ask them to pray in silence, holding both aspects of their lives in love, compassion, and possibility.

## SHARING IN PRAYER

Ask group members to read in unison the following prayer, “Accepting Those Who Are Different From Me”:

**“Gracious God, it’s sometimes hard for me to understand or accept or love those who are different from me. I find myself wanting to change them so that they fit my accepted patterns. I know that the difference between us need not separate us, but my lack of understanding makes me want to stay within the safety of my own perceptions rather than embrace what seems foreign. Give me curiosity of mind so that I am open to the perspectives that others can offer me. Help me see the similarities that bind us together. Give me the courage to freely enter their experience in order to find you in a surprising new way. I ask this for the sake of your love. Amen.**

([http://www.explorefaith.org/prayer/prayer/prayers\\_for\\_living/accepting\\_differences.php](http://www.explorefaith.org/prayer/prayer/prayers_for_living/accepting_differences.php))

## TAKING IT FURTHER

Invite group members to take a minute to look around the room and to notice the other people in the group. Ask:

**What gifts and abilities do the people in this room have?**

**How can we honor one another's uniqueness?**

**How can we encourage one another to use our differences for the glory of God?**