

# Normal

In his book *Going Sane* (2005) the psychoanalyst Adam Phillips observed that sanity is usually “referred to without its meaning ever being spelled out”, arguing that whilst insanity can be subdivided into many different clinical categories, sanity itself is only ever defined as the absence of madness. In other words, the rational mind is viewed only as an abstract concept, a kind of Platonic ideal which remains somehow disconnected from the ‘real’ world.

Just as our mental ‘normality’ can only truly be appreciated as a lack of strange behaviour, so too can our understanding of physical ordinariness only really be grasped as a lack of bodily deformity. In this way we may identify normalcy as existing in the absence of imperfection. ‘Normal’ exists in the same sphere as ‘sane’ and ‘perfect’, they are concepts which act to define the very essence of who we are as people, yet they strangely appear to be ‘beyond human’. Perhaps this is because an absence appears to indicate that something of our being is missing. Yet to sense definitions in terms of theoretical concepts which we can’t see is to place our thinking in the territory of the unreal; to locate it in a world which is beyond our physical touch and in the realm of perfection.

When we look historically we find many examples of how people who suffered with physical disabilities were treated as social outcasts, from the ‘freaks’ who worked as side-show performers in Europe and the USA to the victims of Nazi Germany’s T4 Euthanasia Programme. Isolated, stared at and murdered, individuals who displayed a marked deviation from the ‘norm’ in the past have often been treated as though they themselves were somehow less than human. Yet perhaps when we look more closely at people like Prince Randian or Frieda Pushnik, people who were born without limbs and who both worked as side-show performers, what we find are men and women of strength, courage and determination. Their ability to overcome the immense difficulties which the randomness of life threw their way seems to mark them out as somehow ‘ultra’ human. For despite having been born without arms and legs Prince Randian learnt to speak five languages, was able to paint, write and shave himself. He married and together with his wife had four daughters and a son. Frieda Pushnik was also similarly able, yet her limbs had been severed in the womb as a result of a botched appendectomy. Despite this she never resented her condition and never wished to sue the attending doctor for malpractice, saying “I never said, ‘Why me?’ That would be a wasted emotion. You can ruin your life like that”.

Perhaps a reason for some of the social cruelties and inequalities which have been enacted on those with a physical disability in the past lies in a sense that when we notice a significant deviation from the ‘norm’ in someone else it serves to remind us that ‘normal’, like ‘perfection’ is an abstract concept from which we all fall short. This is a gap the plastic surgery industry seeks to exploit. Yet perhaps we can see that the pursuit of perfection is in itself a kind of insanity, because it represents a goal which

can never be realised. Maybe real sanity is found when we embrace our imperfections and appreciate ourselves for who we really are; all too human, flaws and all.

Robert Priseman, 2015



*Portrait of Frieda Pushnik, Ink on Paper, Robert Priseman, 2015*