

The New Normal by Paula Puolakka

Life is what it is. People are reading novels. They are watching movies. They are lost in the virtual world to find some meaning to the everlasting boredom the new normal is all about. Just yesterday, I went through the old public archives of the local Delurk Gallery I used to visit frequently. The October archives and the pictures (which had been on public display) in which the "marbles were rolling in and out," made me think about those artists who had lost their marbles over nothing since life had been good even for the biggest moaners before the notorious spring of 2020. People who had for years told the others to "eat shit" had been scolded by karma.

To me, the old normal had been all about touching, seeing, tasting, hearing, and sniffing. Nothing had been more fulfilling to me than to put my hand on someone's shoulder and to feel their gratefulness and joy: to exchange the energies of caring, compassion, and strength. It would be so important to me now: to be acknowledged as an individual in the virtual melting pot of cultural, religious, and political agendas of approximately 7.7 billion people. We all need the feeling that we are not just numbers in the Covid-19 statistics.

I tend to observe closely. I was told – when I was a kid – that I'm autistic, but I'm perfectly normal. Is it abnormal to observe? Is it strange to be able to tell the difference between the scent of the leaves of *Acer rubrum* and *Betula nigra*? I feel like a scientist, and, to me, many people are spiritually blind. They are living in a constant stream of shallow images and sounds. If someone is dressed up in a smart suit and his or her hair is cut perfectly, it doesn't mean that what he or she is saying has any importance and deep meaning. Why waste time on pure nonsense? How does it cultivate your spirit or increase your wisdom if you get an info blast that something bad is happening in China? How can I – a tiny individual living in Winston-Salem, North Carolina – help those living on the other side of the world? It's almost impossible.

Still, people are going on about foreign affairs like going on about them would change a thing. The only thing it creates is anxiety. At the same time, people are ignoring the needs of those geographically close to them. You could do something positive to your friends and family members and increase love around you. It doesn't take a lot to go to the shop on behalf of somebody else.

I wish I had some ginger ale. I love the way how it makes my tongue sizzle. But I have to drink either water or milk. Well, at least I have something to drink, unlike the children of the poorest of the African countries. Right?

There is a section of old railroad tracks near where I live. Before the pandemic and the notorious spring of 2020, I had the habit of walking on the steely path. The Dize Company was there. So was Carolane Propane and Universal Auto Care. I loved that place! At a certain hour of the day, I was the only soul around. No cars driving by. No pedestrians. Nothing. I felt like I was the "only living boy in North Carolina" (like Simon & Garfunkel should have sung instead of New York) while "owning the place" in my black jeans, white Converse, Led Zeppelin t-shirt, and a baseball cap. Because of my lousy immune system, I can't go there either since every place could be corrupted by the virus and turn out to be deadly to "poor Teddy."

I wish that someday I could sit on the railing of the bridge that's near the junction of S Main St and Waughtown St. The place looked like from the movie "Apocalypse Now." The way how the vegetation had taken over the man-made structures, it made me think about Earth without human beings. Today, I understand that the vision I once had could soon be the reality. Before that happens, I continue to pet my fluffy robot seal: it's an artificial pet the Japanese invented a few years back to cheer up the men and the women inside the nursing homes and hospitals. My "insanely Jewish mother" sent it to me a month ago, so I would not snap because of the lack of physical closeness.