

My Story

When I was asked to teach a class as part of Made I thought I might not be the only one who has struggled with the naturally occurring things that happen in life and so developed 'Redefining Normal'. I'm not going to deal with areas such as the death of a child or dealing with a severe illness. I don't feel qualified to deal with these and whilst I realise that for people who have these things happen to them they also need to discover a new normal, they are not the things we know to expect in life.

Here we're going to look at those things that we expect to happen in our lives such as our children leaving home and our parents dying. I am going to tell you my story. Your story won't be the same as mine but I hope it will help you.

In October and November 2013 I did an online class with Brené Brown based on her book: The Gifts of Imperfection. In the book she talks about 'numbing'. She talks about it here too. http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ht5dDInnTzM

One of the things that she says about numbing is that you can't choose which emotions you numb so in attempting to numb the negative things you also numb the joy and the happy things.

She writes:
'In another very unexpected discovery, my research also taught me that there's no such thing as selective emotional numbing. There is a full spectrum of human emotions and when we numb the dark, we numb the light. While I was 'taking the edge off' of the pain and vulnerability, I was also unintentionally dulling my experiences of good feelings, like joy.'

And also:
'We can't make a list of all the 'bad' emotions and say, 'I'm going to numb these' and then make a list of the positive emotions and say, 'I'm going to fully engage in these!' you can imagine the vicious cycle this creates: I don't experience much joy so I have no reservoir to draw from when hard things happen. They feel even more painful, so I numb. I numb so I don't experience joy. And so on.'

It was as I was working through this that I realised that my way of numbing was to spend inordinate amounts of time on Facebook and to sign up for online classes most of which don't get completed.

I suspect that part of my problems over the years have been to do with who I am. So much of who I am was wrapped up in what I did. Bernice the administrator, Bernice the organiser, Bernice the book keeper, etc. And now I'm not any of those things and I didn't know who I was. In the past few years I have tried various online courses designed to help me discover who I am. Going off on a tangent on one of these courses I delved into some books on personality types and discovered I was a Perfect Melancholy with Powerful Choleric tendencies in one book and an Introvert in another. It took a while to accept the Introvert label but then used it as an excuse to not fully engage with friends, church and my life.

But why was it that I had chosen to numb?

One of the things that Brené Brown said in the course was 'grief is the absence of normal' and this really struck a chord with me. (Apparently she is discussing this in her next book which she is currently writing!) And I wondered what my normal was!

I looked back over the last few years and realised that something major has changed most years since 2006 – some good, some great, some not so good. And that's the point about redefining normal. Some things that change can be good. It isn't just the sad or the bad that changes our normal.

So what did my normal look like in 2005?

My husband, Roger, went to work every day. Our son, Andy, went to school every day. I took our son to school and then went to work every day. We spent Easter, a week in May, 10 days in August and Christmas at my parents house. This had been the pattern 12+ years, apart from times when I didn't work. Although I still did the school run!

So what changed? Andy left school. Something really simple and naturally occurring. But it led to so many other changes. And from then on my 'normal' changed every year without me acknowledging it and this led to the state I was in by the end of 2013. Dried up, miserable and depressed.

So what were these changes?

2006: Andy left home.

2007: My mother died.

2008: I resigned as church administrator. Rob became leader of the church. Andy got engaged to Naomi.

2009: Andy & Naomi got married. I was 60.

2010: I started working as an administrator again. King's Church ended acrimoniously. Jubilee started.

2011: I stopped working as an administrator. Made the decision to retire properly.

2012: Roger retired. Dad became ill and we lived half at home and half 200 miles away.

2013: My Dad died. Sorting out all his stuff. Going to Madeira for Christmas

What is normal?

Do we have a picture of what normal should be? Is it based on truth or on some stereotypical concoction made up by advertising agencies? Have we taken on a lie?

Is that why when things happen to change the 'normal' we're living, we don't acknowledge that we need to learn how to live with the new version because neither the previous version nor the new version fit the picture in our heads?

I don't have an answer to these questions. These are just the thoughts scrambling around my head trying to make sense of what is going on.

During all the years of new normals I kept going to church, kept riding the roller coaster of highs and lows, cried out to God occasionally but often felt he had deserted me.

I admired people who were going through things I considered to be far worse than the problems I had but still seemed to stand firm in God. They still worshipped Him. Still praised Him. Still trusted Him.

And that was the problem! TRUST! Or the lack of it!

I became a Christian when Andy was about 2 years old and I remember driving in the car one day after I had witnessed a baby dedication and I dedicated Andy to God – thanking Him for giving Andy to me and giving him back to God and asking God to lend him back to me. When God got hold of Andy when he was 16 there were many amazing prophetic words spoken over him – and many of them were about going to the nations.

I had no doubt that God had called Andy to go to Hillsong College in Sydney and that it was right for him to go. But the day he left for college, he also left home and he emigrated. I always knew that he had gone for good and would only make fleeting visits home.

And so in January 2006 I fell out with God. I think that when I dedicated Andy to God that time in the car I hoped that God had made Andy a permanent loan to me. At that time I thought as most mothers do I suppose that he would grow up, get married, have children and live in the local area or at least still within the UK. It did not occur to me at that time that he would live 12000 miles away.

Because my tendency is to overthink things and to bottle these things up I really didn't deal well with Andy leaving home. I felt it was unreasonable of me to grieve for what was in essence a natural part of life. After all, most people's kids leave home, lots of people's kids go to college and some people's kids emigrate. It was unfortunate for me that all these three happened at once.

When Andy left home and left the country and I didn't allow myself to cry. Somebody had said to me that him leaving home would be like a bereavement and I thought that this comment was really silly & spent the year saying well everybody's children leave home, lots of children go off to college and lots of people's children emigrate so I didn't allow myself to grieve in that sense.

In 2007 when my mother died I think I cried for about three minutes but really more from the shock of seeing someone die and so I continued on my merry little way.

Then there was the issue of the ending of my church, which I have dealt with in terms of forgiveness and other things like that, but didn't allow myself to grieve about the loss of something that I'd invested 13 or more years in my life into.

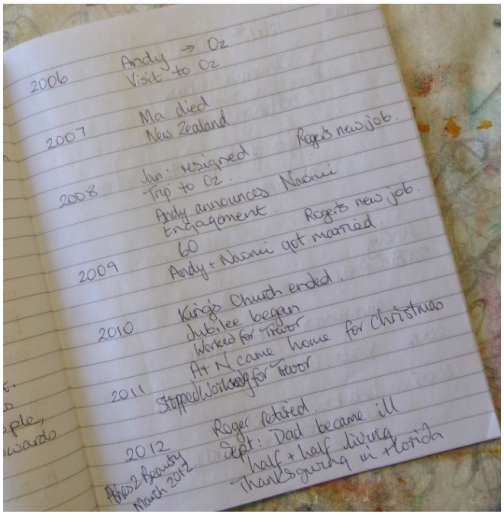
I very much like to be in control of things, to know exactly what's happening and how things going to pan out. In the 6 months before my Father died we lived half the week at home and half the week at his house 200 miles away, and then sat with him for the 3 days he was unconscious until he died. I kept myself really busy by clearing out his house and still living partly at home and partly at Dad's house. We put the house up for sale and that has been very stressful for me as I have no control over the buyers and the legal people and it all takes time. I wanted to be able to start the next phase of life but the sale still hangs over me.

So what does my current normal look like?

I tend to describe it as 6 Saturdays and a Sunday every week. I play with my art, go to workshops, do online classes and still spend too much time on Facebook. I try to go a short walk every day. I like to go for a long walk with Roger every week but that doesn't always happen. I go to church on Sundays and collect a takeaway meal on the way home. I go to my church small group on a regular basis. Roger reads the newspaper, gardens, sails on Sundays and goes on a very long walk most Tuesdays. It's all very peaceful and a quiet time to take stock.

And that's what I'd like you to do for your first exercise this week. Sit quietly and take stock. You may look at your life and feel that everything is fine in which case you may not want to do any more of this class, although the creative exercise could be used for other things.

If, like me you have had ups and downs, make a list of what has happened in your life. Write in a notebook or on scraps of paper. I did mine in a notebook.



In the next video we are going to look at our list and how we can deal with those changes that occur to change our normal.