

A uniformity in society

A HYMN TO BEING
DIFFERENT



The doors of the ICE train close behind me as it leaves Leipzig Central Station in a few minutes. It is Tuesday after Whitsun, 21 May 2024, and behind me lies my first Wave-Gotik-Treffen. In the next few stops, the density of black clothing will gradually decrease, up to the border and beyond, we, my husband and I, will hardly recognise anyone as part of the meeting, normality will slowly draw us back again. And yet we will not return completely, because just two days ago we were musically urged not to be persuaded to be ordinary, but encouraged to follow the extraordinary: 'You can be the star of anti-ordinary!' (Ashbury Heights)

Soon, everyday life will return and with it the ordinary. I read during the long journey south, because this way everyday life remains a little further away. I read about a person who is certainly far removed from the norm, although perhaps that is exactly what they want. A person who leaves the boundaries of gender behind and holds up a mirror to our society: How pointless it is to have clear affiliations and roles. How little it serves a society when the boundaries of one's own body and gender are so tight that breathing is barely possible. Unlike in that great novel, other norms are the ones that suffocate me.

"We won't be normalized,
We have dreams to realize!
We won't be traumatized,
We have dreams to realize!"

I cannot get the song out of my mind, and reading the Blood Book does not help either. The subject is so omnipresent in my mind that I decide to put the novel down for a moment. The images of the concert manifest themselves again in my mind's eye: the energy of the band, the Progress flag in the centre of the stage, the community of people in the Westbad celebrating themselves and the music on this Sunday evening.

All of them - all of us - who celebrated there would probably be considered unusual at best, strange and alienating at worst in the outside world. Very few concert-goers, however, would want to describe themselves as 'normal' or part of the norm. The self-confident verses about not allowing ourselves to be traumatised by this may seem a little too optimistic. After all, being outside the norm is not something that can simply be endured without suffering minor or major scars. Not even with music, even though it can make an important contribution to dealing with the world in a more conciliatory way. We stood at this concert, danced and let ourselves be carried along by the sounds and the lyrics and were certain at that moment that normality is something that we do not embody, that we reject.

In the midst of this feeling, however, we are reminded that there is an easier way that leaves no traces in the soul or the body: 'Life is so much simpler when you're ordinary.' I think about it and inwardly agree with this verse.

At first glance, life seems easier if you let yourself drift in the warm current of the norm. Then you can take advantage of the flow of the ordinary, skilfully crawling through the crowds without ever touching the bodies of others. Swim, merge with the crowd, just do not stand out. A tip that was always given to me as a girl. Just do not stand out, just do not step out of line, then everyday life, career, life will succeed. But then: Dancing would not have happened, because it is not so easy to dance in a crowd.

It is also by no means a desirable thing to join the majority of people who follow the general opinion, because there is something unreflective about it. One's very own dreams gradually fade, one's own being becomes a mere imitation of others. It is easier to live, but the ego then becomes an id - and not an untameable and wild animal, but something alien to oneself. A person you no longer recognise in the mirror of your soul. And without self-knowledge, self-worth and self-reflection, you remain ordinary, mute and mouldable from the outside. However, shaking this off and stepping out of line takes its toll.

The song "Anti-Ordinary" also calls on us to 'Stay deranged!' One should therefore remain mentally deranged. In the conscious decision to be anti-ordinary, however, lies another meaning of the word, namely the French meaning of 'déranger', to disturb the (usual) order. Anyone who consciously decides against the ordinary disrupts a social order and is perhaps also able to change it.

I am startled out of my thoughts by the voice of a train attendant. "Ladies and gentlemen, we will be arriving in Mannheim in a few minutes. There you have a connection to..." I think about going to the on-board bistro to buy something and get up. I have to cross two carriages, and on the way I cast sideways glances at the people staring at me unabashedly. What was normality for a weekend now seems abnormal again here. A mother pulls her child a little closer to her as I walk past them. One of them stares at me and I notice that he turns round as I walk past him. Some of them, perhaps wearing a band shirt or platform shoes from a well-known brand, look up from what they are doing, a flicker of recognition in their eyes. Arriving at the bistro, I order two coffees, one with oat milk. The person preparing the drinks looks grumpy, tired. I engage him in a little conversation and add a euro to the amount - a gesture that also results in a small piece of cake landing on the table. 'You know, this is from this morning and I can't sell it anymore.' It is still hot when I touch it.

When I go back, I ask myself whether even that - treating other people as people, a basic kindness towards others - has become exceptional. Secretly, I already know the answer. Our society has become an egomaniacal and intolerant society. Being there for each other is no longer normal behaviour; people scowl at you. If you expect tolerance or solidarity, you are looked at the same way. I longingly wish I was back in Leipzig. The train leaves Mannheim heading south.

I treat myself to a few pages from the Blood Book with my coffee. The narrator, who stands outside of society, simply wants their existence to be accepted and perhaps even recognised. They experience violence and eventually internalise it. Almost a bit like the creature that Doctor Frankenstein once created: a loving and cautious being whose appearance did not fulfil the norm and who was scary to people. "People like you better when you are ordinary", which is why Frankenstein's creature is repeatedly rejected. The unusual is scary, but is it not the ordinary?

When Stanley Cavell writes that it is the ordinary that becomes 'uncanny', I agree with him wholeheartedly. It is not the unusual that I find uncanny, but the bluntly ordinary. Kim and Frankenstein's creature would probably see it the same way. There are probably endless examples of this in the world of literature: Saint-Exupéry's Little Prince also agreed with this. Or Momo. Or Tom Bombadil. Ibsen's Nora or Shiriki from the novel Wolfsaga, which - although a children's book - I always enjoy reading and which has become a mirror of resistance as well as solidarity and love for me.

Of course, it is not just the unusual that connects them all. They are also lonely. So why do they not follow the verses of the last verse: 'So why don't you surrender and be ordinary?' Life is much easier if you live it in an ordinary way. It is just a little less colourful, a little less clearly defined, a little less real life. Because away from the norm, life is less comfortable, but more real. Giving up on being different also means giving up your own principles (at least partially). Being different also means acquiring strength, because this is essential if you want to stay away from the ordinary and the norm.

Many people, including some of those around me, cannot stand the world outside of the ordinary, they adapt, conform to the norm in terms of what they can and want. They don't dare to be different: be it in their appearance, their words or attitudes, their sexuality. Under certain circumstances, they would like to dare to do so, but they do not have the courage - perhaps not yet. Some people would accuse these people of being conformist herd animals who blindly follow the crowd. From the perspective of the person who has already broken away from the crowd, this may appear to be the case and may also arouse anger at having to bear a heavier burden of non-conformity than those who still carry the norm with them. However, non-conformity is almost a bit like new shoes: at the beginning they cause blisters and are uncomfortable, it is not easy to walk long distances. Being unusual (i.e. 'anti-ordinary' in the sense of the song) requires good shoes, plasters and perhaps also someone to massage your feet after walking.

Sitting opposite me is the person to whom I owe the fact that my shoes neither pinch nor cause injury. I smile, watching this person who is more important to me than anyone else in the world. It is a bit more comfortable when you have someone around you who is uncomfortable and unusual. In my case, we have nineteen years of travelling behind us, which is unusual in this day and age. People like the one sitting opposite me, who is probably wishing he was back in Leipzig while looking through his pictures, also carry you along a little. This makes the margins of society a little more bearable, you can even dance a little there, a little outside of what can still be interpreted as the norm.

It would be wrong to allow external influences to push you to follow the centre of society however, just to serve a purpose that is neither known nor shared. Instead, a new centre can be found, which may also be able to change society. Real values and more authenticity could be the result, and the possibility of reinventing ourselves as a society would be within reach. People outside the centre of society would now have the chance to show solidarity for themselves and thus for society, too. And in this way to become the 'star[s] of anti-ordinary'.

The mechanical voice of the train attendant announces our arrival at Basel station - for once we even reach the Swiss side. I pack my things, heave my suitcase onto the floor and join the queue. We all leave the train and the last core of visitors travelling to the meeting stream off in different directions, dispersing back into society: Until we meet again, back in Leipzig, where the unusual becomes the norm and arrival becomes possible.