

All Together Different

Good morning everyone,

May I introduce you to a switching predator? As happy eating berries as scavenging a carcass or pouncing upon a vole. Working shifts in full sun or by moon light to mimic the waking hours of their prey. A canid, like a wolf or dog, whose canines are not pronounced and who cannot even bare its teeth. In fact, being about 40 cm tall at the shoulder and weighing roughly 5–7 kg the red fox is not too dissimilar from a domestic cat!

I love animal adaptations, but they are not the main focus of my speech today. What I want to talk with you about is differences, and how, just as for the fox, fear or misunderstanding can blind us from the incredible gift we have in our differences.

Now I am not saying being different is all plain sailing. Imagine being back in reception, year two are sitting their all important SATS so you must keep out the way in a different room with a different teacher and a different routine. But what if change is not your strong point and you find it hard to remember auditory commands, you are listening so hard that you cannot remember anything. Then you hear something about going out to break and dutifully go to get your coat, only to be reprimanded in strong terms for doing such a thing in the middle of a lesson. Silently mortified you are distraught for most of the day, but at the time unable to explain exactly what happened or why you feel so terrible. But that is my story and you may hold little in common with my experience. Yet I do not seek your sympathy but instead a willingness to understand. We are all different so why should you pity me?

In fact, I think it should be far more absurd to be normal. The Collins dictionary gives synonyms like 'standard' and 'average'. According to such ideas in the "normal family" of the UK there are 1.86 adults, 1.7 children and 0.5 pets. I have never met a household remotely like it! However, even if we do not go by the synonyms but the dictionary definition by which "normal is usual and ordinary, and is what people expect." Then though a person who fitted this could have no shockingly great weakness they could have no surprising talent either, they could never excel at anything without ceasing to be normal! In fact, if everyone were to be "normal", if everyone were to be relatively similar, we would never be where we are today. For it was not by any one person's strength or weakness that all of history was written. All the successes through time were built on the strengths of multiple people. As Newton said, "If I have seen further than others, it is by standing upon the shoulders of giants."

Why then do we allow our differences to be one of our greatest dividers? I believe it is due to a lack of understanding and this can bring many painful outcomes: fear, mistreatment, dislike, avoidance...

The second largest shark grows up to 8m long, weighs about the same as elephant and has a mouth 1meter wide. So some people in the room may not be all that keen on getting any more closely acquainted. However, being of a placid nature, preferring to swim slower than average walking pace and with teeth half the size of ours, the only real danger you would encounter with a basking shark is if you should try to stroke it, as its skin is extremely rough! Despite their size, relatively little is known about these gentle giants. We fished them intensively, mainly for oil, yet know little beyond how they are of use to us when dead. Nothing evolves without a purpose, everything has advantageous adaptations for a certain niche. Yet, as these great fish struggle to revive their populations, I wonder would it be worse to lose a species before we even understand what vital role it plays? What if we don't seek to understand beyond what immediately interests us? What if by such neglect we disregard another before we even know what we are losing, how to fill their place? It is not necessarily easy to step into another's shoes; it requires time and effort. But if people flourish, if we thrive as a result, is it not time effort well spent?

So, I urge us all, myself included, to reevaluate differences and the ways in which we do and could react and respond to them. Let us embrace being different!