



Believe in Normal Distributions!

It's been a month of John Candying with planes, trains, and automobiles. Four weeks ago, I left Hong Kong – probably for good – landed in Toronto, and after a few days left for Savannah to surprise my parents. A few days after that, I returned to Toronto to look for work. These months of clawing back from the pandemic have been hard, but let's not forget we still live in incredible, amazing times. I didn't leave Hong Kong to sightsee but to finally find work after months of struggle. Hugging my parents with an *au revoir* at the Savannah airport, I returned to Toronto. This relentless desire to move came after breaking free from Hong Kong's suffocating COVID restrictions. Over continents, across highways, and rail. So now, at this exact moment, while I write this sentence, I'm on a ViaRail train going back to Montreal.

I want to share a principle from statistics – the Normal Distribution – and how it can totally change your life. It's an insight that can lead you from despair to oodles of hope if you need it.

What if Life Really is a Gift?

A the start of the pandemic, I launched *Shooting it RAW*, a podcast that asks if life really is a gift, how do we make every second count? Yesterday, for example, I spoke with Randi-Lee Bowslaught. She's written several books connected to mental health. COVID has put many people through the wringer and she wants to support those who struggle.

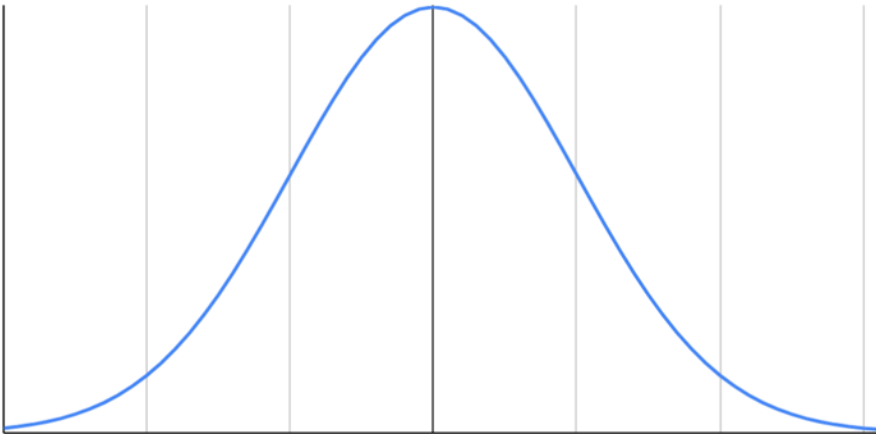
She used a phrase I instantly loved: *Follow your dopamine*. Live your life by aligning with how and where you get floods of good feeling as a way to keep your motivation high. Know what sparks the reward center in your brain and you can keep your energy purring. Follow your dopamine.

I asked Randi-Lee if the insight is only available to those who've suffered? Maybe.

Like Randi-Lee, I also have a motto. If you've taken statistics, it will be familiar. Yet why haven't we heard people scream this lesson from the rooftops?

Believe in Normal Distributions.

Two common words: *Normal*, which is normal, and *Distribution*, which is the order that things settle into when they fall.



The graph above shows a Normal Distribution. Pretty plain, but it applies to everything that matters. Especially when it comes to life's cycles of success and failure.

Expect the Good and Bad, Equally

Imagine 100 random people. Like the crowd in a comedy club or passengers on a plane. Just a crowd of 100 people. For any given situation, you can safely bet these people will fall in a Normal Distribution.

How attractive people are.
Their height or weight.
Whether they use lotion or not.
How old they were the first time they lost their virginity.
Or got a credit card.
Or age at death.

Although individuals shift their spot on the graph, as a group we typically fall in a Normal Distribution.

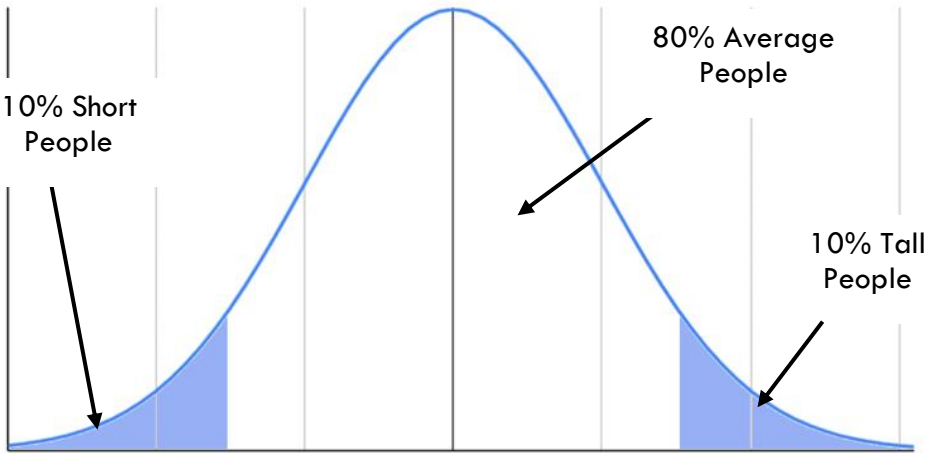
When we look, about 80 of our 100 are average. About eighty have an IQ of 100. Or 80 will be average looking. Not bad and not good – just average. The list goes on and covers everything.

This is not a criticism or a complaint. Instead, it's a comment on *variability* and why 'average' looks so... Average.

Put another way, this is how you come to understand what's 'normal' in a group of people. Every day, we all fall as average in various ways, because on the average, we're all about average – and this is normal.

This isn't to say that we don't occupy places that are above or below average. Some days, we can have below-average body odor. We smell great... Or maybe we stink. Some days, we can park illegally like we own this town, but other days we get three tickets in a row.

Looking closer, 10% or 10 people from our 100 will be on one end of the average. Let's say people who are short on one side, or tall on the other. Whereas 80 are of average height for the group, one set of 10 will be on one side – the shorts – and one set will be on the other side – the tall.



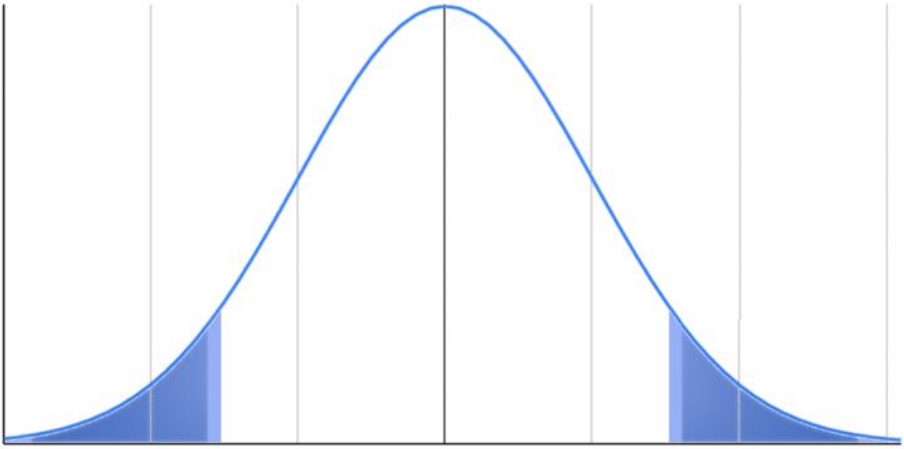
Where things get interesting is that for the groups on both ends – the 10% on opposite ends of the average – they also fall according to their own Normal Distributions!

In the group of smarty-pants, not all are equal. Of those, 80% are average in their above-average intelligence. Which means one will be a bit below average, and one will be above the average. So one from our original 100 will be undeniably tops. Top brains. Top wealth. Top heavyweight. But remember that one will also be top not-so-smart, top not wealthy, top lightweight.

Let that sink in.

The two extreme ends of the Normal Distribution are where the biggest differences live. One side has the thinnest and the other extreme side has the fattest. One extreme end is where the person who retires at

30, and the other side is where the person who works until his or her last breath.



Harsh. Brutal even. But also mathematically sound. None of this is specifically about one individual. It isn't an attack but a way to understand and reinterpret how things happen.

Hang in There – Things Will Get Better

For the last six months, I struggled to get work. Clients, as an employee, doing remote work, anything. Hong Kong's not the place to be in if you're jobless.

A few months ago, again for my podcast I recorded an episode with Monica Borschel. She helps people deal with trauma and grieving. She explained why unemployment activates people's fight-or-flight reflex.

"Thousands of years ago," she said, "humans lived on a savannah where actual predators were trying to kill them." Today, the threats to our survival aren't stalking us on four legs. Instead, the fight-or-flight reflex comes from escaping recessions, downturns, layoffs, and persisting unemployment. The stress of not working and struggling to make ends meet define our struggle to survive. If this is where you are in your struggle, then you too can find the strength to hang in there because of the strange faith in the principle of Normal Distributions.

On average, I've had my average salary, but sometimes, like now, it's been months of zero income.

On the other extreme, I've had clients suddenly hand me an envelope with thousands of dollars in it. Relative to my average, there were moments when I hit the jackpot. These are the extremes that live at the highest-income end of the curve.

On average, my luck has been normal – normal for me. On one extreme, I've had shockingly shitty luck. Like being run over by a car. Or taking a surfing lesson when a tsunami suddenly hits. Sometimes, my luck has been spectacularly bad.

But on the other extreme, I've also had unbelievable good luck. Like meeting and apprenticing with Po Chung, one of the most inspiring leaders I've ever met. Or the luck of having the smartest and most beautiful family I could ever want.

For so many of us, the pandemic has been a huge ladle of bad luck and fight-or-flight reflexing. Thankfully, we can remember that the math's on our side. As long as we persist – doing what makes us ride through the lows and keep engaging with the world around us – the math says things *will* turn around.

Try Going With No Plan B

I was home in Hong Kong for six months when I announced to D, "I think I'm just going to head back to Canada and look for work over there."

"You think that's a good idea," she asked. "Will it make a difference?"

I shrugged and explained my faith in the Normal Distribution. "I'll head out and see what the universe offers." If I get to Canada and nothing happens, then that's the same as me staying in Hong Kong where nothing has been happening for months. The math predicts that things will turn around.

So I booked a flight and two days later landed at Toronto's Pearson Airport. Stepping off the plane, I was excited by the prospect of launching a new chapter driven by statistical success.

A week later, my brother sent me a text: *What will you do if you don't find a job?* I replied that there's no Plan B. My only plan involves the Normal Distribution and the prediction that after months of failure, a new peak of success will happen. I explained that although conditions change from one person to the next, for each of us we can expect success and failure to scatter according to the rules of the Normal Distribution. It's how the world works, whether we see it or not.

If you've hit a low, remember that things will get better. Just keep pushing forward, stick to the numbers game of experiencing highs and lows. Keep your eyes open to possibilities and engage with the world around you.

If you read this from an unbearable low, try to have a little faith. Not faith in a higher power or something out of this world. Instead, have faith in the stuff of this world. That everything in your life falls according to its own Normal Distribution. That for every low you feel today, you will probably get an equal but opposite high tomorrow. And vice versa in an endless cycle of win-some, lose-some.

So hang in there. It gets better.

Postscript:

Two days after writing this, I sealed the deal on work in Vancouver. I now live in an amazing house in North Vancouver – one of the most beautiful cities in the world.

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