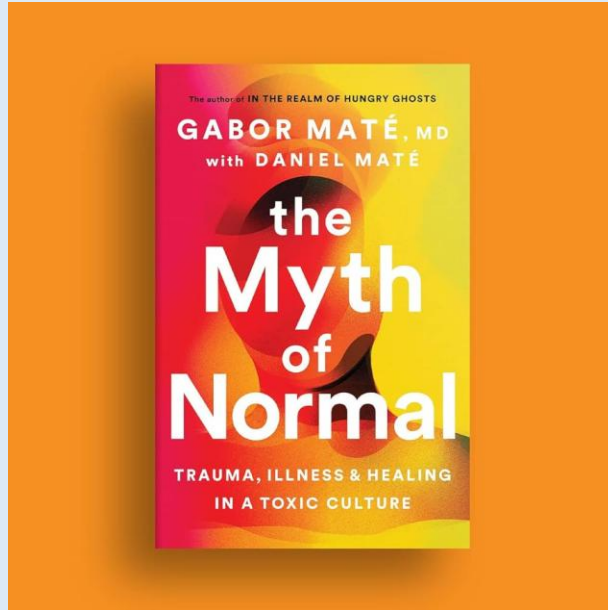




***The Myth of Normal: Trauma, Illness & Healing in a Toxic Culture
by Gabor Maté***

**LBHS GROUP READING QUESTIONS
CO-AUTHORED BY
ANGELA MARIE CARTAGENA & NATHAN LUIS CARTAGENA**

The Myth of Normal: Section One (pp. 1-114)

Facilitated by Angela Marie Cartagena & Nathan Luis Cartagena, PhD

Prayer before Reading

A Cartagena Remix of “A Prayer before Study,” by Thomas Aquinas

Creator of all things and Source of liberating wisdom: Empower this reading group’s healing. Mend our wounds by helping us to gain a better understanding of You, ourselves, and the ecosystems to which we belong. Grant us informed recollection, retentive memories, and the ability to see things in their complexity. Spirit, guide our steps. En el nombre de Jesús, Amén y Amén.

Questions before Reading

1. Why did you decide to join this summer reading group?
2. What do you hope to experience during our summer reading group?

Questions after Reading

1. In Chapter 1, Maté says that “Our woundedness, or how we cope with it, dictates much of our behavior, shapes our social habits, and informs our ways of thinking about the world” (p. 16). If this is true, how might it change how we view ourselves and others? How might it impact our theologies of sin, culpability, and responsibility?
2. What does being “nice” mean? (See Chapter 2, pp. 37-38). How does “niceness” or “being nice” disconnect us from others and ourselves? How could we shift our word use from “niceness” and “being nice” to language that fosters health and rich connectivity? How would this linguistic shift impact our views of others and ourselves? How would it impact our definition/understanding of being “Christian”?

3. What are some ways that individualism and beliefs about an “individualized nature” have affected you and those close to you? (See Chapter 3). What have these beliefs prevented or destroyed? Where have they caused or enforced areas of disconnection from yourself, community, or modes of healing and support?
4. What aspects of your environment do you feel most affected by? (See Chapter 4 for ideas). Are these impacts largely positive or negative? How does Maté’s understanding of interconnectedness relate to how you view the world, the communities to which you belong, and yourself?
5. In Chapter 5, Maté recounts his medical experience of witnessing that “in virtually every case [patients with autoimmune diseases had] childhood patterning that led [them] to be overconscientious, hyper-responsible, and emotionally stoic about their own needs” (p. 81). How does this correlation make you feel? What might it illuminate about our community given the prevalence of autoimmune diseases among us?

6. In Chapter 6, Maté unpacks a simple truth: How we live directly impacts our health. How might your life change if you regularly evaluated (a) what you're doing, (b) why we're doing it, and (c) how these rhythms and choices impact your health, your family, and your communities?

7. How should we think about the connection between Type C personality and malignancy in light of church teachings that encourage us to be "meek," "humble," take up our cross, be a helpmate etc.? (See Chapter 7 for ideas). What things in your life, if any, have caused you to develop any of the traits associated with chronic illness?

Prayer after Reading

"For Embodied Healing," by Cole Arthur Riley

God of every ache,

Help us to befriend our bodies. We confess that it is easy to turn against them as the source of our struggle. Awaken a compassion, a tenderness, toward the parts of us that are changing, hurting—remembering that our bodies are doing everything they can to protect us, to hold back the pain and exhaustion. With every ailing and unseen thing, guide us toward those capable of listening and perceiving when we are not okay, that we wouldn't feel pressure to pretend or apologize or explain. Remind us that we are not a burden but a beacon to those who are so poorly attuned to their own bodies and needs that they have forgotten what self-compassion looks like. Help us exist in the truth of what we need. Hold us in love as we resist the demands of this world. Amen.

The Myth of Normal: Section Two (pp. 115-210)

Facilitated by Angela Marie Cartagena & Nathan Luis Cartagena, PhD

Prayer before Reading

“A Prayer for Development,” by Nathan Luis Cartagena

Creator of life: In your great wisdom, you made human beings dependent, developmental creatures. We depend upon you and all our created relations for laughter and love, nutrition and nourishment, safety and security, instruction and insight. We need you and all our creaturely relations to grow from fetus to newborn, newborn to toddler, toddler to young child, young child to adolescent, adolescent to young adult, young adult to middle-age, middle-age to elder, and elder to ancestor. Creator Sets Free, reminder us that you became incarnate to walk this dependent, developmental journey. From Mary's womb to your time at Temple to your ministry among Palestine's marginalized and oppressed, you grew in human wisdom and stature. And like us, you did so in the world's leading empire, a death-dealing legion permeating with toxic cultures that degraded human life and denigrated its early stages. By your Spirit, empower us to heal from our imperial toxicity. Grant us the graces required to cherish human development and dependency and to pursue the well-being of all our creaturely relations. Spirit, guide our steps. En el nombre de Jesús, Amén.

Questions before Reading

1. The Mohawk Nation emphasizes that because every human being's first environment is a mother's womb, *every* environmental factor that impacts the mother impacts the child she carries. This theology of interconnectedness motivates the Mohawk Nation's belief that being pro-life requires promoting ecological well-being and resisting every source of ecological destruction.¹ How does this pro-life theology compare to those you've encountered or inherited?
2. What do you know about your *in-utero* life circumstances? How has this knowledge shaped the way that you live?

Questions after Reading

1. In Chapter 8, Maté highlights that *reciprocity*— “to be attuned with”—is an inherent, life-long human need (p.120). Have you experienced reciprocity in churches? If so, what did this look like? Relatedly, have you experienced the *absence* of reciprocity in churches? If so, what did this absence feel like?

¹ For more on this theology, see Chapter 1 of Winona LaDuke's must-read book *All Our Relations: Native Struggles for Land and Life*.

2. Chapter 8 accentuates the centrality of emotions and relationships for healthy human living. As Maté writes: “If emotion is the ground of cognition, then relationships are the tectonic plates that shape that ground” (p. 125). Which of these two vital parts of human living do you feel most comfortable discussing with self-identified Christians? What factors have molded this sense of security?
3. Review the four inherent needs that Maté discusses at the end of Chapter 9 (pp. 132-135). How have you experienced these needs? How is our community fostering these needs among our children?
4. Maté emphasizes that “Before we develop the capacity to take part in constructing our universe, the world fashions us” (p. 138). How have you experienced this truth? What life-giving *and* harmful things has the world fashioned in you that you bring to our community’s “construction” projects?
5. What stands out to you from Dr. Sarah Buckley’s insights about how societies pit technology against female bodies, deeming the former “superior” and the latter “inherently defective” (p. 150)? How have you paired this insight with Maté’s acknowledgement that “nothing in my [medical] training encouraged me to *align with Nature*” (p. 151)? How have the communities to which you belong manifested Dr. Buckley’s insight? How have they been complicit in failing to “align with Nature”?

6. In Chapter 12, Maté discusses how prominent public intellectuals such as Jordan Peterson regularly depict human beings between infancy and early childhood as intentionally difficult tyrants. (In the words of Reformed theologian Michael Horton, “They’re vipers in diapers.”) What’s Maté’s alternative understanding to this pernicious understanding of young human beings? How are you experiencing Maté’s alternative?
7. Maté introduces readers to the concept of “proximate separation” (p. 172). What is *proximate separation*? How have you experienced versions of this harmful reality?
8. Maté concludes Section 2 by discussing societal features that sabotage childhood (Chapter 13) and inculcate distressing “character” (Chapter 14). What do you wish everyone in our community knew from these two chapters?

Prayer after Reading

“For Wounded Children,” by Angela Marie Cartagena

God of the unsupported,

Remind us that you never left us alone. You were present with our pregnant mothers who were stressed, unprotected, and alone. You were present during our births when agency and natural instinct were ignored in favor of medical ‘knowledge.’ You grieved the harm done to our development by the lack of safe, consistent connection—when we were required to earn love and security, when we were forced to stifle and hide away our emotions, and were prevented from engaging in free, joyful play. Call our scared, angry, grieving young parts to yourself so they can experience deep, safe connection, the ability to rest in being fully accepted, including those emotions labelled unsavory; and help us to reclaim the ability to play and learn the way you intended. Thank you for shielding us during our less-than-ideal births and childhoods, and for bringing us to a place where we can grieve and heal. Amen.

The Myth of Normal: Section Three (pp. 211-276)

Facilitated by Angela Marie Cartagena & Nathan Luis Cartagena, PhD

Prayer before Reading

“A Prayer for Recovery,” by Nathan Luis Cartagena

God of the Afflicted: You see our afflictions better than we do, and, by your Spirit, you hear the cries that we muffle and repress, the cries that we drown out with substances like alcohol and behaviors like workaholicism. Creator, in your mercy, receive these mangled cries as prayers for liberation, as requests to make good on your Messianic promise that, like you, Messiah cares for the afflicted, for bruised reeds. As Isaiah declares, “A bruised reed Messiah will not break, and a smoldering wick he will not snuff out.” This, Isaiah says, is part of Messiah’s commitment, in faithfulness, to bring forth justice. Creator Sets Free, make this so. Fulfill this promise in our lives. Lovingly treat our bruised and smoldering bodies. Renew our inner selves. Manifest your already-not-yet Kingdom in our depths, in the places our bodily systems conceal to protect us. And, Spirit, guide us to communities that foster and participate in this Kingdom work. Aho! May it be so.

Questions before Reading

1. Section 3 is primarily about trauma and addiction. What theologies of addiction did you receive before today’s reading? Where did you receive them and who offered them to you? Have you ever been in a Christian community that conspicuously loved and supported people healing from the causes of their addictions?
2. What roles have addictions, either yours or those of people close to you, played in your life? How have you coped with these impacts?

Questions after Reading

1. In Chapter 15, Maté rejects the bad-choices and disease models of addiction. Why does he reject these models? If Maté’s right, what bearing should his double rejection have upon our theologies of sin and salvation?

2. Maté dedicates Chapter 16 to offering an alternative view of addiction. What is this view? How does it relate to the understanding of trauma developed in the previous chapters?
3. In Chapter 17, Maté critiques common understandings of “mental illness.” What resonates with you from these critiques? What troubles you from these critiques?
4. In Chapter 17, Maté rejects the widespread “diagnostic approach” to naming and healing from illness “Because diagnoses reveal nothing about *the underlying events and dynamics that animate the perceptions and experiences in question*. They keep our gaze trained on effects and not their myriad causes” (p. 242). In contrast, Maté’s diagnostic focus “goes to the specific challenges the person is facing in their life and the traumas animating those challenges. As for ‘prescriptions,’ I am primarily interested in what will promote the healing of the psychic wounds the ongoing traumatic patterns represent” (p. 245). Have you ever had a doctor or medical provider offer you something like Maté’s alternative to the common diagnostic approach? What about a pastor or priest?
5. In Chapter 18, Maté argues that depression isn’t an inherited pathology; it’s a “coping mechanism to alleviate grief and rage and to inhibit behaviors that would invite danger” (p. 256). Have you previously encountered this understanding of depression? How might Maté’s understanding of depression inform how our community discusses depression and cares for the depressed?

- LBHS Shalom
6. In Chapter 18, Maté discusses the “multifaceted sufferings” of a woman named Leslie (pp. 257-259). As Maté recounts, Leslie attempted suicide numerous times and was pinned with myriad DSM diagnoses. Yet Leslie is no longer on medication and developed into a grounded and certified therapist. What do Maté and Leslie attribute to this healing journey? How might their understanding of Leslie’s healing shape our community’s corporate confession of sin and prayers of the people?
7. What’s something from Section 3 that we haven’t considered that you’d like us to discuss?
- Prayer after Reading**
- “For Those Driven to Addiction,” by Angela Marie Cartagena
- God of the addicted,*
- Creator Sets Free our wounded parts cry out to you, we are in pain! We have been prevented from learning how to heal. We are trapped in harmful cycles of desperately trying one coping mechanism after the other in order to avoid, numb, drown, obliterate or escape from the pain of what was done to us and from not having what we needed. We cannot handle being present with who we think we are. We are told by the world that it is ‘Our own damn fault’ we are caught up in detrimental addictions. We are made to believe that we have changed and broken our brains and that we are sick but refuse medicine and treatment. You from whom no secrets are hid know that these are lies. Sit with us in our despair and self-harm until we too know it. Speak your truth and unending love to the pain our parts hold. Show us how to heal our wounds, how to witness the causes of our pain and how to no longer permit it to separate us from ourselves and you. Guide us to practices that will speak truth to our parts. We are not alone, we are loved and accepted, we are allowed to have rest and good things, and it wasn’t and isn’t our fault we were wounded. Let us breathe deeply and slowly, knowing we can take up space and set boundaries around our needs and even our wants. As we heal enable us to break free from patterns of addictions that provide us with only hollow relief and warmth and lead us as we work in community to create new patterns that bring us into a life of joy and flourishing. Amen.*
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Prayer after Reading

“For Those Driven to Addiction,” by Angela Marie Cartagena

God of the addicted,

Creator Sets Free our wounded parts cry out to you, we are in pain! We have been prevented from learning how to heal. We are trapped in harmful cycles of desperately trying one coping mechanism after the other in order to avoid, numb, drown, obliterate or escape from the pain of what was done to us and from not having what we needed. We cannot handle being present with who we think we are. We are told by the world that it is 'Our own damn fault' we are caught up in detrimental addictions. We are made to believe that we have changed and broken our brains and that we are sick but refuse medicine and treatment. You from whom no secrets are hid know that these are lies. Sit with us in our despair and self-harm until we too know it. Speak your truth and unending love to the pain our parts hold. Show us how to heal our wounds, how to witness the causes of our pain and how to no longer permit it to separate us from ourselves and you. Guide us to practices that will speak truth to our parts. We are not alone, we are loved and accepted, we are allowed to have rest and good things, and it wasn't and isn't our fault we were wounded. Let us breathe deeply and slowly, knowing we can take up space and set boundaries around our needs and even our wants. As we heal enable us to break free from patterns of addictions that provide us with only hollow relief and warmth and lead us as we work in community to create new patterns that bring us into a life of joy and flourishing. Amen.

The Myth of Normal: Section Four (pp. 275-360)

Facilitated by Angela Marie Cartagena & Nathan Luis Cartagena, PhD

Prayer before Reading

“A Cry from the Plundered,” by Nathan Luis Cartagena

God of the ransacked and pillaged: How long will you delay? How long must you wait to set things right? How long must you watch greedy elites loot poor and working-class communities? How long will you allow billionaires and soon-to-be trillionaires profit from global misery? When will you act? When will you show yourself to be on the side of the poor and oppressed? When will you thunderously declare that you hear creation's groans and have had enough? When will you say, “¡Basta! Silencio, you capitalist death-dealers—you who pillage the young, manipulate the elderly, and bury Christ under the rubble! I have heard the cries of the exploited and oppressed and because I'm YHWY I shall act on their behalf!” When? When will you break the oppressors' rods? When will you dismantle dehumanizing institutions, marketing schemes, and the hierarchy that deploy militaries to defend them? Indeed, when will you avenge and restore the plundered, oh LORD? When?

Question before Reading

1. In her landmark book *Bible of the Oppressed*, Mexican theologian Elsa Támez notes that, biblically speaking, “the underlying cause of oppression is the desire to pile up riches” (pp. 9, 41, 46). Támez adds that, in most biblical cases, “oppressors do not oppress because they are cruel or enjoy it. They do not act violently because they have an aggressive temperament; they do not rob for the sake of robbing. Their primary purpose is to accumulate wealth, and it is possible to accumulate wealth only by robbing one's neighbor and committing acts of violence and injustice” (p. 24). Hence, Scripture often depicts oppressors thus: “[Oppressors] are rich and strive to increase their wealth...oppressors have power and mastery because they belong to the governing class or are allied with it...[and] are idolaters” (pp.32-34). What strikes you about Támez's theology of oppression? How does it compare to your own?

Questions after Reading

1. In Chapter 19, Maté introduces the term *allostatic load*, the wear and tear on the body of having to maintain its internal equilibrium in the face of changing and challenging circumstances. What are some of the things contributing to your allostatic load? How might our community help to reduce and/or manage your allostatic load?

2. On pages 287-288, Maté lists several core needs that are essential to our individual flourishing. Have you ever experienced having all these met? What was that like? What happens in your mind, body, when these needs are lacking, denied, or withdrawn? How is our community helping to meet these needs? How could we do better?
3. In Chapter 21, Maté details a large list of groups, corporations, and products intentionally designed to override our ability to regulate our consumption. Each thing listed is meant to cause dependency and addiction, with the full knowledge they are unhealthy and/or toxic/deadly. Amidst this onslaught, how can we maintain living for Christ and His Kingdom?
4. How would you compare the analysis in Chapter 22 to the previous chapters' analyses? What differences/similarities do you notice? What do you wish Maté had addressed or spent more time on?

- Chapter 23 describes numerous things that overlay additional stresses, burdens, and responsibilities on women *and* characterize women as inferior and subservient to men. How have you and those close to you experienced this reality? How is our community contributing or countering this trend within and without the church? What things would you like to see our community do or stop doing regarding this multidimensional oppression?
- Does knowing that most of us vote to elect people (or put people in positions of power/leadership) *out of* our trauma cause you to reevaluate current or past leaders'—their abilities, effectiveness, and shortcomings? Ideally what attributes/giftings should leaders be required to have?

Prayer after Reading

“A Prayer for The Disenfranchised,” by Angela Marie Cartagena

Creator God,

We and the rest of Your creation are groaning under an onslaught of abuse including marginalization, commodification, and destruction. We have had our agency diminished or obliterated; and we have had little to no choice but to be complicit in our AND the world's maiming. The struggle to discern how to live for You and Your Kingdom increases every day. Guide us to places and practices of rest and renewal so that we do not despair. Remind us how to live en conjunto y con all our relations. Open our eyes to where we are and are not called to enact life-giving change. And equip us to promote flourishing in our lives and the lives of others. Aho! May it be so!

The Myth of Normal: Section Five (pp. 361-499)

Facilitated by Angela Marie Cartagena & Nathan Luis Cartagena, PhD

Note: This handout focuses on Chapters 25-30 to facilitate conversations that our group's previous meetings suggest are most relevant for us.

Prayer before Reading

"A Prayer for those on the Journey to Wholeness," by Angela Marie Cartagena

God of compassion,

We long for better! We no longer wish to submit to and be limited by practices and internal dialogues formed from trauma and neglect. Teach us to turn compassion, curiosity, and understanding inward to our parts that hold heavy, painful burdens. These parts are stuck, frozen in time, enacting practices and patterns, with little choice, that cause guilt, shame, and self-accusation. Remind us that these parts of us are precious and are helping the only way they know how. We invite you into our inner world to create a space for these parts to share their stories. Enable us to refrain from judging, condemning, or punishing ourselves for the existence of these parts. Be present with us as we do the careful Kingdom work of asking these parts 'Why are you here?', 'What are you trying to do?', 'What burdens are you holding?', 'What do you need us to witness or know?', and 'How can we help you release the burdens you carry?' As we do this difficult work, guide us to reclaim pieces of ourselves that have been shut away for too long. Celebrate with us as we reclaim connection and wholeness. Amen.

Question before Reading

1. To date, what has most surprised you from *Myth of Normal*? What have you found most helpful? What have you found most discouraging? How have your experiences reading and discussing this book compared to what you thought they'd be?

Questions after Reading

1. In Chapter 25, Maté offers us a view of healing and moving towards wholeness that is founded on truth—taking a clear look at how things actually happen to be and aligning the heart and mind together. This requires building trust in your instincts and felt-senses. What in your inner and outer worlds prevents you from trusting and relying upon your intuition of what does or does not resonate? In what areas are you able to sit with the truth and reality of your past and present and move towards wholeness? In what areas do you struggle to do this? Why?

2. Maté lists and defines four principles in Chapter 26 that have proved to be helpful guideposts in healing. Do you agree with his description/explanations of authenticity, agency, anger, and acceptance? Which of these, if any, do you struggle with the most? Do you believe our community teaches, promotes, and supports these principles? How is or isn't our community doing this in your life?
3. In Chapter 27, Maté shares several stories of people who found healing, growth, and wholeness through sickness and disease. What stood out to you from these reflections? Have you had similar experiences in your own life? How does what you have learned parallel/compare with Jesus' Kingdom healing ministry?
4. In Chapter 28, Maté provides us with a list of reflective questions that largely revolve around curiously inquiring about our inability to say no. As you read over these questions, how did they sit with you? What reactions did you have to them? Do you think asking these questions regularly would be beneficial to you? Do you think our community could benefit from this practice as a community? Why or why not?

5. Maté details a 5-step practice, in Chapter 29, designed to facilitate the process of undoing self-limiting beliefs. Did this practice or any of the specific steps resonate or stand out to you? In what ways do you think this practice would change/effect you? Are there any parts of this practice that feel intimidating or inaccessible? In what ways could our community support you in implementing and sustaining this practice?

6. In Chapter 30, Maté makes a case for befriending and seeking to understand common obstacles to healing, such as guilt and self-accusation. Do you agree or disagree with his reframing? In what ways could this reframing be helpful in your own healing journey to wholeness? Does working to understand the origin of these ‘obstacles’ give you a better view of yourself and what did or did not happen in your past?

Prayer after Reading

“For Embodied Healing,” by Cole Arthur Riley

God of every ache,

Help us to befriend our bodies. We confess that it is easy to turn against them as the source of our struggle. Awaken a compassion, a tenderness, toward the parts of us that are changing, hurting—remembering that our bodies are doing everything they can to protect us, to hold back the pain and exhaustion. With every ailing and unseen thing, guide us toward those capable of listening and perceiving when we are not okay, that we wouldn’t feel pressure to pretend or apologize or explain. Remind us that we are not a burden but a beacon to those who are so poorly attuned to their own bodies and needs that they have forgotten what self-compassion looks like. Help us exist in the truth of what we need. Hold us in love as we resist the demands of this world. Amen.