

# What Is “Normal”?

**Purpose:** Identify ways in which communities define membership, and consider how membership in a particular group can influence how people view those outside the group. Examine how people learn what is considered “normal” and “beautiful” in society.

**APPROXIMATE TIME:**  
30 minutes

**MATERIALS:**

**READING**

“Eye of the Beholder” Script

Butcher paper (or long whiteboard) and markers

## ADVISOR NOTES:

### 1. Dig Deeper into Group Membership and Ideas about “Normal”

This activity can be used instead of *The Sneetches* or as a follow-up activity if you want to spend two days exploring the ways in which communities define membership and the benefits and privileges that can come with belonging.

### 2. Watch “Eye of the Beholder”

You may prefer to show students the *Twilight Zone* episode “Eye of the Beholder” rather than read the synopsis. This episode is available to borrow as a DVD from Facing History’s library.

### 3. Use a Different Version of the Reading

If you don’t want to use the script version of the reading for this activity, you can find the standard reading, **The Eye of the Beholder**, at [facinghistory.org/advisory-media](http://facinghistory.org/advisory-media).

## PROCEDURE:

### 1. Reflect on Notions of “Normal”

- On a whiteboard or large piece of paper that the whole group can write on at the same time, write or paste the following questions in the center, and then explain the **Graffiti Boards** strategy (visit [facinghistory.org/advisory-media](http://facinghistory.org/advisory-media) to learn about this teaching strategy).
- Have advisees respond to the first question on the graffiti board. After they have had time to write, have them move on to the second question.
  - Where do we get our ideas about what is “normal” in our society?
  - How do we learn what is “normal” in our society?
- Then discuss as a group what you notice about their responses. Where are there places of agreement and disagreement?

## 2. Read and Discuss a Synopsis of a *Twilight Zone* Episode

- Sit in a circle and explain to the group that today they will be exploring the idea of “normal” in society, specifically in relation to the idea of beauty.
- Pass out copies of the reading **“Eye of the Beholder” Script** and explain that advisees will be taking roles to read it out loud. Ask for five volunteers and assign the following roles: Narrator, Janet, Nurse, Doctor, and Walter Smith. You might change readers halfway through for the Narrator, Janet, and the Doctor to give more advisees a chance to participate.
- Then divide the advisory into small groups and discuss the questions at the end of the reading.
- Move back into a circle and have each group report on their ideas.

## 3. Reflect on Ideas about “Normal” in your School Community

To help advisees connect the text to their own experiences, choose one or more of the following questions to discuss as a group:

- What does *Twilight Zone* producer and writer Rod Serling challenge his audience to think about as a result of watching this episode of the program?
- What is a lesson from this text that you could apply to your school in order to strengthen the community? What ideas do you have about how you could apply the lesson, both as an individual and as an advisory group?



## "Eye of the Beholder" Script

**Directions:** "Eye of the Beholder" is an episode of a popular television show called *The Twilight Zone* that ran from 1959 to 1965. For this reading, a synopsis of the episode, you will take roles and deliver the characters' lines. While you don't need to read phrases like "Janet asks urgently," the person playing Janet can try to deliver the line in an urgent way.

**Narrator:** Meet the patient in room 307, Janet Tyler. A rigid mask of gauze bandages covers her face. Only her voice and her hands seem alive as she pleads with a nurse to describe the weather, the sky, the daylight, clouds—none of which she can see. The nurse, visible only by her hands, answers kindly but briefly.

**Janet:** "When will they take the bandages off?" Janet asks urgently. "How much longer?"

**Nurse:** "When they decide they can fix your face," the nurse replies.

**Janet:** "It's pretty bad, isn't it? Ever since I was little, people have turned away when they looked at me. . . . The very first thing I can remember is another little child screaming when she saw me. I never wanted to be beautiful, to look like a painting. I just wanted people not to turn away."

**Narrator:** With a consoling pat, the nurse moves away. A doctor enters Janet Tyler's room. We see only his hands, his shadow, his back as he looks out a window. Janet questions him with a mixture of fear and hope. When will he remove the bandages? Will her face be normal? The doctor tries to comfort her. His voice is gentle. Perhaps this time the treatment will be successful. But he also issues a warning. He reminds her that she has had treatment after treatment—eleven in all. That is the limit. If this effort fails, she can have no more.

**Doctor:** "Each of us is afforded as much opportunity as possible to fit in with society," he says. "In your case, think of the time and effort the state has expended, to make you look—"

**Janet:** "To look like what, doctor?"

**Doctor:** "Well, to look normal, the way you'd like to look. . . . You know, there are many others who share your misfortune, who look much as you do. One of the alternatives, just in case the treatment is not successful, is to allow you to move into a special area in which people of your kind have congregated."

**Narrator:** Janet twists away from the doctor.

**Janet:** "People of my kind? Congregated? You mean segregated! You mean imprisoned! You are talking about a ghetto—a ghetto for freaks!"

**Narrator:** Her voice rises in a crescendo of anger.

**Doctor:** “Miss Tyler!” the doctor remonstrates sharply. “You’re not being rational. You know you couldn’t live any kind of life among normal people.” His words are harsh, but his voice is sad and patient.

**Narrator:** Janet refuses to be mollified.

**Janet:** “Who are these normal people?” she asks accusingly. “Who decides what is normal? Who is this state that makes these rules? The state is not God! The state does not have the right to make ugliness a crime. . . . Please,” she begs. “Please take off the bandages. Please take them off! Please help me.”

**Narrator:** Reluctantly the doctor agrees, and the staff prepares for the removal. Bit by bit, he peels the gauze away. She sees at first only the light, then the shadowy forms of the doctor and nurses. As the last strip of gauze comes off, the doctor and nurses draw back in dismay.

**Doctor:** “No change!” the doctor exclaims. “No change at all!”

**Narrator:** Janet Tyler gasps and raises her face. She has wide-set eyes, delicate brows, fine skin, and regular features, framed by wavy blonde hair. She begins to sob and struggle away from the nurses.

**Doctor:** “Turn on the lights,” the doctor orders. “Needle, please!”

**Narrator:** As the lights come on, the doctor and nurses are clearly visible for the first time. Piglike snouts dominate their lopsided, misshapen features. Their mouths are twisted, their jowls sag. Janet runs through the hospital in a panic, pursued by nurses and orderlies. She passes other staff and patients. Each face is a little different but all share the same basic pattern—snouts, jowls, and all. She flings open a door and freezes in sudden shock. The doctor and another man are in this room. She sinks down by a chair and hides her face in fear.

**Doctor:** “Miss Tyler, Miss Tyler, don’t be afraid,” the doctor urges. “He’s only a representative of the group you are going to live with. He won’t hurt you. . . . Miss Tyler, this is Walter Smith.”

**Narrator:** Walter Smith steps forward, and Janet Tyler cringes away. He too has regular features, lit by a friendly smile. A stray lock of dark hair curls falls over his forehead.

**Walter Smith:** “We have a lovely village and wonderful people,” he tells Janet. “In a little while, a very little while, you’ll feel a sense of great belonging.”

**Janet:** She looks at his face. “Why do we have to look like this?” she murmurs.

**Walter Smith:** “I don’t know, I really don’t,” he replies with sadness. “But there is a very old saying—beauty is in the eye of the beholder. Try to think of that, Miss Tyler. Say it over and over to yourself. Beauty is in the eye of the beholder.”

**Narrator:** He holds out his hand to her. Slowly, hesitantly, she takes it, and they walk away together, through a corridor lined with pig-faced spectators.<sup>1</sup>

1 Marc Scott Zicree, *The Twilight Zone Companion*, 2nd ed. (New York: Bantam Books, 1989), 144–45.

### Discussion Questions:

1. What is the "twist" in this episode of *The Twilight Zone*? What might creator Rod Serling be trying to communicate with this unexpected twist in the story?
2. Where do we get our ideas about beauty? How do we learn what is normal?
3. How would you adapt "Eye of the Beholder" to today's world? What changes would you make in the story?
4. What is a lesson from this text that you could apply to your school in order to strengthen the community? What ideas do you have about how you could apply the lesson, both as an individual and as an advisory group?