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## Word from the 'Wart' 7<sup>th</sup> January 2019

What is “normal”? One description is that which is natural. There’s an instinct feel to it as in what one does without thinking like our five senses, birth, death, puberty, libido. Another is what everyone does or says all the time: if a large-enough group of people does something or says it often enough, it becomes “normal”. It becomes common. Or “normal” could mean whatever one knows at a given point in time – it is what one knows. A human coupling is accepted to be between a man and woman. Procreation is normally and only through the union of a sperm and egg. In Singapore, a “normal” family is father, mother, one or two children

We often tend to think of “normal” as what’s around us, what’s visible. What I find intriguing about Jason Wee’s *Commonplace* is this notion of *invisibility*: that “normal” need not be visible. That there are things around us that have always been there but are not necessarily and not obviously visible. Such as same-gender relationships. This coupling is not new among humans or in the animal world but it’s not the majority of relationships. But it’s there if we open our eyes to see. If something is not of the majority, does it make it “abnormal”?

*Commonplace* is not just a photography project documenting presence of LGBT-Men, whether we are aware or not. It’s also about fear. I go further to say it’s also about our Singapore way of dialoguing and addressing difficult topics. Many opinion-makers don’t want to be known. I have seen the highest number of anonymous viewer entries responding to earlier Exactly projects on LGBT-Transgender and LGBT-Women. Either no response at all or a response with no trace of viewer identity. Those willing to show their names are LGBT themselves or advocates. Even in the courageous output of The New Narratif’s first book, *The First Year*, writer John Lee is a pseudonym for his piece, “How Discrimination Kills Gay Men in Singapore”.<sup>1</sup>

We also fear change. In the high-octane discussions on the repeal of 377A<sup>2</sup> in Singapore, I received unsolicited points of view that Singapore’s social fabric will completely fall apart if this law is repealed. Elaborate videos of “what will happen” especially to our children’s education and minds, if gay relationships are decriminalized. There seems to be this immediate jump that such relationships would be *seen* as normal and importantly, our social policies would consequently change. Even content and routine of our daily lives would change such as books, teachers’ guides, even playground equipment designs. To me, what is disturbing is the pull from “somewhere”/“don’t know where” of this content and the almost mindless sharing via social media. It was nothing short of spreading fear. Many think life will never be the same again but then, since when have things been the same in Singapore? Will our world fall apart? Has THE world fallen apart?

What are we so afraid of? Should we not choose what to be afraid of?

Something I also noticed in some conversations and public talks in Singapore is this doe-eyed preoccupation with sex. We often don’t know how to think about sex, it’s both repulsive and enticing. Especially about same-gender couples: “how do you do it?” There is little consideration that this is a private matter. Would anyone discussing romance fill the conversation with how to have sex? I actually attribute some of this to queer art, where the body is often the motif of representation of LGBTQ love. Surely, there’s so much more to it all.

Can we/Should we get past *tolerance* (“I see him, I don’t know him, I’m not going to bother”) to *acceptance* (“I see him, I know him, I receive him)? Should we not worry that ostracizing can actually bring more harm to society? Should we, therefore, broaden the meaning of “normal”?

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<sup>1</sup> John Lee. “How Discrimination Kills Gay Men in Singapore”. *The First Year*. The New Narratif, 2018, pp23-31.

<sup>2</sup> Section 377A was introduced into the Singapore Penal Code in 1938 to criminalise all other non-penetrative sexual acts between men. Specifically, Section 377A (“Outrages on decency”) states that: Any male person who, in public or private, commits, or abets the commission of, or procures or attempts to procure the commission by any male person of, any act of gross indecency with another male person, shall be punished with imprisonment for a term which may extend to 2 years. (Penal Code - Cap. 224, 2008)