

## Superlative

“Be the best,” John’s father told him on his tenth birthday. But then his father injected a correction that would burrow like a parasite into John’s memory. “What I mean is, John, be the best that you can be.” John ripped open his father’s gift and gushed, “Wow, Dad.” The 1970 edition of the Guinness Book of Records.

John gobbled every page. He pictured himself winning Olympic decathlon gold, awarded superlative marks at Oxford, displacing J Paul Getty as the world’s richest man, receiving the Nobel Prize in chemistry, serving as Britain’s most beloved prime minister. The Guinness Book became a sacred text, lifting John to destinations beyond imagining. And beyond it was, beyond the fog of childhood, beyond the boundaries of John, and he knew it and he cried over that, that life would never bestow upon him a world record, not upon this most average boy of the Midlands, of the stockades of England.

The Book held its grip. After two lackluster years at Middlesex University London, John answered a post for a job at the publishing empire. He regaled the interviewer with intimate knowledge of how Guinness Breweries’ Managing Director conceived the concept. In 1951 Sir Hugh Beaver was in a shooting party in North Slob by the River Stanley in County Wexford, Ireland and missed a shot at a golden plover. Sir Hugh got into a tiff over what European game bird was the fastest. Was it the golden plover or the red grouse? No Google then. He hired researchers to ferret out the answer - the plover. In 1954 Sir Hugh’s idea became an annual compendium of documented superlatives of human achievement and the natural world. In time the Guinness Book earned a record of its own – the world’s best-selling copyrighted book.

John began as a spell checker. By thirty he'd snailed upward to lead sports researcher. By the century's turn he was chief of the Eating and Drinking section of Human Achievements, earning a middling salary, married to Alwina, she of the arboriform waistline that grew an annual ring. They inhabited a 3-bedroom Twickenham townhouse with their astonishingly normal daughter and son.

Sales of the empire from Guinness Breweries to Diageo the spirits maker, to Gullane Entertainment in 2001, jolted John with a question – what are we doing? The mission had changed from celebrating greatness to spruiking titillation. World records had gone freak:

The world's most tattooed man – Lucky Diamond Rich, tattooed over 100% of his skin  
Most straws stuffed into a human mouth (400)

Fastest time to squash three watermelons with one's thighs – Olga Liashchuk of Milan  
did it in 14.56 seconds

The longest male fingernails - 32 feet 3.8 inches clipped by a Michigan man after 25  
years of growth

Takeru Kobayashi, who held eight records for ingesting in stopwatch time the most hot  
dogs, meatballs, tacos, hamburgers, pizza, ice cream, pasta and twinkies – 14 cream  
twinkies in one minute

Steven Petrosino, who chugged one liter of beer in 1.3 seconds

Wrestlers Billy and Benny McCrary, the world's heaviest twins at 743 and 723  
pounds

The world's wealthiest cat, bequeathed \$12.5 million

Most toilet seats broken by one's head in a minute (46).

What had become of superlatives that lift spirits, drive progress, challenge us to go where no one has gone before?

John despaired when as head of Animals he was directed to find the champion of a newly conceived record – the world's loudest penis. The *Micronecta scholtzi* won that one. This two-millimeter-long pond insect's mating call emanates from stridulations over an abdomen the thickness of a human hair. BestLifeOnline describes the male bug's mating call, measured at 105 decibels, as having the volume of a pounding jackhammer.

John had become a barker of the bizarre. He dreamt he was crowned with a peppermint banded straw hat outside a carnival tent, waving a cane – Come see the bearded fat lady, the magnificent midget, Siamese triplets, the world's greatest politician, and .... He awoke and that morning risked the security of career to ask for a new position at the empire that had just been acquired by the Jim Pattison Group, parent of Ripley's Believe it or Not. Response was swift. He was promoted to chief of Body Parts, his first assignment to locate, measure and record the world's deepest human vagina. He quit that afternoon, leaving a more compliant successor to announce a year later the record winner and centimeter depth.

Clutching the overhead strap on the tube to home, John beheld his fellow riders. No records here. Bodies swayed and lurched, mired in muddledom, eyes glaring at tabloids or glazed in meditationless trance. A dowdy woman waddled off at Tottenham Court in her 1960's length gingham dress, pinned hair and sneakers. She was ordinary.

And she was superb! Inspiration strikes like that. In that instant John grasped what Guinness was missing – this woman minding her gap, and everyone’s gap. She was quite simply normal.

When John’s wife greeted him with a startled “You’re awfully early” and turned back to conjuring shepherd’s pie from yesterday’s dregs, he grabbed her full throttle, kissed her like a teenager and glowed, “I love you, dear. You’re normal.”

She blushed and a bit offended said, “Well, that was extraordinary.”

“I quit today,” he grinned.

She dropped her ladle.

“And I know just what we’ll do.”

John crowdfunded a start-up about the average, a journal he named *Normal*. Sales soared after *Normal* launched a contest to find the world’s most average woman and man. King’s College statisticians devised the metrics. Match.com sponsored *Normal*’s search for the most ordinary looking human beings. 23andMe certified the winners as having DNA blends of African, Asian, Pacific, European, and 20,000-year American percentages that matched the weightings of earth’s population, with a trace of Aussie/Kiwi aboriginal and 2% Neanderthal. He was 5’ 8 ½” tall. She measured 5’ 3”. They weighed the world average of 137 pounds, well below the 180-pound American average. Aged 24 and 26, the chosen became overnight celebrity endorsers and global mega-stars.

*Normal's* superlatives were not about what humbles or humiliates us but what we share – the achievability of being normal. Half the world could see average as reachable. The other half could see it as affirming success. Lake Wobegon was enraptured to know that all its children actually were above average.

John headquartered the journal in the country with the lowest income inequality - Denmark, settling in Aarhus near Legoland. Bhutan, the country pioneering the measurement of gross national happiness, hosted the Asian branch. American operations were in Ohio, mother of seven quite ordinary presidents including Warren Harding, whose 1920 front porch campaign enthralled the nation with the call *Return to Normalcy!*

For income levels *Normal* used the median, a more astute statistic advised the King's College experts, as median is the midpoint of world population. Median annual household income in 2016 – about 10,000 U.S. dollars. Median annual per capita income – about USD 3,000. The poorest people in developed countries began to feel far above average.

*Normal* became a wave. Public sentiment shifted away from exalting the richest and most glamorous and most outrageous. Fashion magazines turned from frou-frou to clothes people could afford and actually wear. Populism turned from putting tribe first to what benefits common people worldwide. Refugees were comforted instead of shunned. At first concerned their incomes would suffer, psychiatrists were flooded with new patients seeking help in overcoming 60-hour work weeks and subduing the compulsion to compete in iron mans or to scale sheer rock faces without ropes. Dictators and misogynist bigots were thrown from power in favor of leaders who embraced shared values and carried their own luggage. The House of

Commons began to recall why it was called that rather than the House of Eton. Diversity consultants changed their patter, discarding lectures that shamed audiences about how “we” must learn to accept “them” – because *we* are *them*.

John knew that to be true *Normal* could not stand for rigid conformism. He shaped the journal to confirm that being normal included being different, because it is normal to be different. *Normal* embraced eccentricity in reasonable measure. Normal people have extraordinary passions, quirks, hobbies, and pursuits.

The journal’s reporters celebrated average people doing the extraordinary - Athenian citizens at Marathon, Nebraska boys at Omaha Beach, the blue and the gray and the stove-pipe-top-hatted orator of Gettysburg, the whites and the reds and the greens and all the other colors of privates and lieutenants who did what they did because of who they were, called to do what they were called to be. Video clips featured an 80-year-old Niger woman who shook her fist at Boko Haram until they released a dozen schoolgirls, a scrawny Albanian nun who started a hospice for Calcutta’s poorest and became a saint, retirees who mentor school kids and serve soup and commit daily kindness.

When *Normal* surpassed Guinness as the world’s best-selling copyrighted e-book – *The Normal Book of Superlatives*, John’s 90-year-old father phoned from an assisted living center near Birmingham. John asked how Mama was doing with her memory, but his father would not be detoured. “John,” he said in a voice streaked with age and crackling with affection, “I called to say ... want you to know ... meant to say so many times before ... you’re the best.”

John felt release from what had festered within him as a fungal guilt that he could never be his father's hopes and would certainly never achieve a Guinness World Record. He had traversed between a tempest and a zephyr – one howling that he surpass all others, the other caressing him to be normal. It was his journey to be buffeted between the two. Now he knew that both were but winds of his imagining. And when John arrived where he began, he knew that being the best meant being a superlative ordinary. And that was extraordinary.

Joseph J Dehner, For The Literary Club, Budget – September 24, 2018