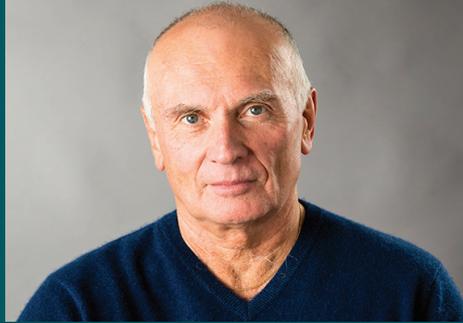


# The Hazards of Being Special

by Dr. Paul Dunion, Transformational Faculty Member



In my counseling practice, I have heard endless strivings to be “special” or regrets over not being so. A soulful path to elderhood calls for relinquishing the desire to be special. I first noticed that the vision of being special included a rejection of being ordinary. I began to wonder: How does someone become special? Does it serve us to see ourselves or be seen by others as special? What’s wrong with being ordinary?

My second understanding was that special had been separated from unique. Uniqueness pertains to the incomparable nature of how a person grieves, loves, suffers, longs, holds power, and experiences victory, defeat, and desperation. It is how we own and develop our particular strengths and talents. Our uniqueness lives comfortably with our ordinariness as depicted by our vulnerability, hunger, needs for comfort and acceptance, and our inevitable experiences of failure, loss, illness, and death. In the depth of our ordinariness, we find our place in the human community.

However, the more special we decide we are, the more we delude ourselves into believing we can outdistance our ordinariness. If an achievement possesses some unusual lofty status such as that acquired by some entertainers, Hollywood stars, professional athletes, and successful entrepreneurs, then such folks run the risk of believing that their specialness makes them impervious to ordinary frailties. Such distortion makes them exceedingly vulnerable.

The third and most unfortunate take was the belief that becoming special somehow makes us deserving of

love. I was beginning to understand the striving and the pain involved with attaining some special status. It may be worthwhile to look at some of the distinguishing features between special, unique, and ordinary and the implications of these differences:

- We may have liberated ourselves from King George III in 1776, but we never lost our love affair with hierarchy. The status of special relies upon hierarchy: “Somebody is up, and somebody is down.” Acknowledging uniqueness is not exempt from comparing lifestyles but doesn’t do it within a hierarchal framework. We can simultaneously appreciate the uniqueness of others as accentuating the distinctive features of our characters.
- Special means attempting to transcend the more disagreeable aspects of the human condition, such as envy, lethargy, fear, desperation, confusion, self-loathing, and defeat. While unique and ordinary welcome a fuller picture of our character, we should be willing to appreciate the not-so-celebrated qualities as a more honest depiction of humanity.
- Special is typically laced with strong threads of perfectionism, preventing us from truly appreciating who we are now. On the other hand, unique and ordinary are expressed by acceptance, allowing us to settle into ourselves with less of the angst of striving.

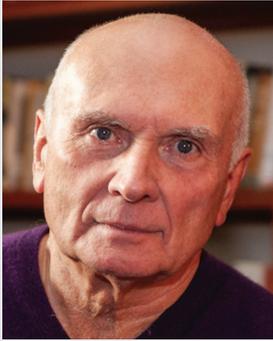
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- Special typically relies upon external standards for verification, placing a great deal of power outside of ourselves, while unique and ordinary are confirmed by living a self-examined life, leaving the power to substantiate our uniqueness with us. (I recently worked with a mother who wanted to be a “special” mom, driven by perfectionism, which placed the confirmation of her specialness in the hands of her ten-year-old son, who appeared to know exactly what to do with the offering. “My son seems to be unusually demanding, while I find myself feeling increasingly inadequate as a parent,” explained the mom. “He may be aware that he has control of how you’re going to feel about yourself as a parent and he’s cashing in,” I suggested. “Are you saying that he somehow knows I am invested in his approval?” “Yes, I am. Try defining yourself as a wonderfully unique and ordinary mom and see what happens.” Several weeks later, she reported that harmony had returned to the home.
- Special runs the risk of getting caught in endless undertakings of attempting to be impressive at the sacrifice of authenticity; unique and ordinary remain devoted to increased expressions of being genuine.
- Special can easily become obsessed with achieving for the sake of attaining a lofty status. Such laboring can also suggest that achievements have become temporary inoculations against the infection of self-loathing. Meanwhile, unique and ordinary experience achieving as an opportunity to grow, learn, and serve.
- Special by being hierarchal tends to separate us from others. In our comparisons, we either elevate others, leaving us prone to envy and jealousy, or we diminish ourselves for not being special enough. Unique and ordinary unite us with others as we hold our distinctive features within the framework of our common humanity.
- Special tends to breed arrogance and hubris. Failed attempts at achieving some special status can easily move us into an inflationary pattern. That is, if we don’t feel special, we can generate an inflated persona, pretending to be special, which is also known as arrogance.

It is impossible to avoid getting caught up by the seductions of “special” as our society bombards us with infusions of the importance of hierarchy: the best, the biggest, the loudest, the strongest, the winningest, the smartest, and the fastest. We do well to remember the role of the horseman assigned to approach a Roman General riding into Rome following a victorious campaign, whispering, “Glory is but fleeting.” And so it is with special, allegedly attained by some promotion, recognition, or achievement—“Special is but fleeting”—unlike our experiences of unique and ordinary, which are enduring and sustainable.

Unique and ordinary can be endlessly understood in new ways, welcomed, appreciated, and developed. However, it may be important to allow our most fervent attempts to be special to run their course until we either discover that even when temporarily attaining some special status, we have merely postponed the responsibility to create and sustain genuine self-love.

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**PAUL DUNION**, Mobius Transformational Faculty, Senior Expert, and track leader at the Next Practice Institute, earned his Doctoral degree in Counseling and Consulting Psychology from the University of Massachusetts at Amherst and his M.A. in Philosophy from the University of Connecticut. He taught Philosophy for thirteen years at the University of Connecticut and Three Rivers Community College.

He has been in private practice for the past thirty-seven years. As a holistic psychological healer, employing an existential modality as well as a somatic approach to treating trauma, Paul is trained in EMDR and is a graduate of the Somatic Experiencing Institute.

From its early beginnings, Paul represented the State of Connecticut at the national gatherings of the mytho-poetic men's movement, sponsored by Wingspan. As the founder of Boys to Men, he created a mentoring community for teenage boys. He is the co-founder of COMEGA (Connecticut Gathering of Men), having served over 6,000 men since 1992, which continues to offer biannual retreats. In 2013, Paul established the Croton Mystery School and designed its curriculum with a focus on teaching students how to make peace with life's mystery and unpredictability. He has offered over 200 workshops on topics related to Human Potential. Currently, Paul offers supervision for younger psychotherapists.

Paul has published six books: *Seekers – Finding Our Way Home* (2016); *Dare to Grow-Up – Become Who You Are Meant to Be* (2016); *Path of the Novice Mystic – Maintaining a Beginner's Heart and Mind* (2013); *Shadow Marriage – A Descent into Intimacy* (2006); *Temptation in the House of the Lord* (2004); and his latest offering *Wisdom – Apprenticing to the Unknown and Befriending Fate* (2021).



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