

Not Normal

by
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*This play is dedicated to Seattle Repertory Theatre's Public Works,
who first launched Coyote and Crow into the world.*

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Characters

Savannah, human female, age 11, city-dweller

Midori, ancient forest deity

Orrin, ancient forest deity

Voices of the Trees (off-stage)

Council of All Beings:

Coyote

Crow

Orca

Polar Bear

Goldenrod

Coastal Redwood

Lichen

Time and Place: Spring 2020. A street in a newly quiet city neighborhood, abutting a few acres of forested land.

Note on Casting: Except for the role of Savannah, any gender can play any character. Actors of any race may be cast in any role. The trees should be voiced by at least four actors.

Setting: I suggest indicating the city street with light and sound, showing houses or apartment buildings, and a forest of huge native conifers backing the street. The trees should dominate the set. The street and houses look small in comparison. Props can be few and easily moved. The mood is magical and mysterious. Strange things are about to happen.

Council of All Beings: The actors in the Council wear masks and/or costumes denoting who they are. Information about the Council of All Beings is here: <https://www.rainforestinfo.org.au/deep-eco/Joanna%20Macy.htm>. I encourage involving children in

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making their masks and costumes, and in learning about the beings they play.

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Scene One

Mid-afternoon, a sunny day. The first warm day of spring. The trees' branches move gently in the breeze, and as they move their voices, both resonant and ethereal, float and swirl throughout the theatre. Four Tree voices alternate.

TREES. They've been quiet these last few months.

What's going on?

Hardly any cars on the roads.

Just a few planes.

Shhh.....

A relief.

A taste of what it was like before they came.

They wrecked a lot in the short time they've been here.

An eagle told me they're dying.

We won't miss them.

Neither will the birds.

Or the fish.

Or the bears.

Shhh...

They never figured it out.

Didn't know or didn't care.

Ah well.

Ah well.

Shhh.... *(Silence. The treetops move in the breeze. Birdsong.*

Insect hum. On a porch, SAVANNAH sits alone, absorbed in her laptop. She looks around to make sure no one is looking, then sets up her laptop to take a video of herself as she speaks and reads her

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haiku. She opens a sketchbook and begins to read her haiku aloud while holding up her sketches illustrating the poems to the camera. The sketches and the words project behind her as she speaks.)

SAVANNAH. I was thinking today about how my mother used to take me walking in the forest. This forest, right here. Almost every day. And we'd talk to the trees. I didn't know then how crazy it was. It seemed...right to talk to the trees. Well, the forest is toxic now. The gas station on the corner leaked gasoline for decades and poisoned the forest. Nobody wants to clean it up. Our part of town doesn't have much power, I guess. And even if somebody did clean it up, what's the use? Anyway, I don't know why I'm writing poems. Maybe just to remember things before it all goes up in flames. So here goes:

One cedar waxwing
Proclaims his strength all day long
Hopeful in the spruce.

Japanese maple leafs out overnight
A wild burst of joy
Curbside.

Dogwood petals gleam
Cool white in the evening sky
Last light before dark.

Yellow-green tips
Newly spangle
The old spruce's uplifted branches.

(Sighs) It's not very good. I just thought...maybe one day, when there aren't many trees, people could read this, and remember. But poetry... doesn't change anything, does it? *(beat)* I'll be right

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back. (*Savannah exits. The trees begin to whisper and their branches sway. The four voices alternate.*)

TREES. The girl.
She's writing poetry.
About our kind.
She's the one.
Isn't she?
Who talked to us.
Some time ago it was with her mother.
The girl is still here.
And Orrin.
Midori.
Where are they?
Hidden. Defeated.
Our gods abandoned us.
God of the forest.
Goddess of all that's verdant.
When they married
At the beginning of the world.
They were strong.
What can they do now?
Our defeated gods.
Hmmm....
There are some humans.
Not enough.
But some.
Hopeful.
Hopeless.
Hopeful.
Hopeless. (*Savannah enters and sets up her laptop to record again. She speaks directly to the audience, as if in a TED talk, but it's clear to the audience she's online. Troll comments project during her talk, as Savannah's live image and slides projects on flats behind her.*)

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SAVANNAH. Hello everybody. This is Savannah. This is the first of the *We Can't Go Back to Normal* call to action episodes. Thank you, friends of the Earth, for watching. So, here's the *Not Normal*, I guess you could call it a platform. Ta Da! *(She reads from index cards in her hands, which she fumbles and gets mixed up. She clears her throat, coughs, plays with her hair, tugs at her clothes and in general is a nervous wreck. When she sees the troll comments, they rattle her profoundly.)* During this coronavirus pandemic, when the whole world is slowing down and dramatically reducing our consumption of the earth's resources, we are calling upon all governments and all people to *not* return to normal. Our call is for a general strike of all kids and teens, and everybody under twenty-one everywhere, but especially in countries with a very high use of fossil fuels, like the United States and China, and many European countries. So, what we are saying is we refuse to participate in the rape of the Earth. And why kids and teens and the under twenty-one? Because it's our future! *(Troll comments, noted in all caps, begin to appear on the projected screen, and pop up throughout the rest of SAVANNAH's talk.)*

NOBODY NEEDS YOU OR ANYONE TELLING US WHAT TO DO.

WHO'S THIS 'WE' SHE'S TALKING ABOUT?

SAVANNAH. We are in a climate emergency. We are putting so much carbon in the air we are choking ourselves to death. In fifty years, much of the southern half of our planet will be too hot for people to live in. That's our only Earth we are talking about. Most people under twenty-one now will still be alive in fifty years. Nobody knows if it's too late or not, but we have to try.

IT'S TOO LATE! WHY BOTHER?

NOBODY'S GOING TO DO WHAT SHE SAYS.

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SAVANNAH. So here's the thing we're calling for, in this general strike of the young. It's really specific what we can do, right now. And if all of us are doing it, everyone their small part, we can change direction! We can save ourselves. *(she stops reading)* I've got some slides, here. Okay, here's the thing that might make the most difference, especially in the United States where we have almost as many gas-powered cars as people.

(Slide projects: DON'T DRIVE OR RIDE IN GASOLINE-POWERED VEHICLES, then other slides project as she speaks, showing environmental degradation due to carbon emissions.)

Don't drive or ride in gasoline-powered vehicles. This is first because it's the biggest source of carbon emissions, at twenty-nine percent of the total US carbon footprint. A gallon of gasoline burned in cars and trucks makes a total of twenty pounds of carbon dioxide in the air. And that is the greenhouse gas that is cooking our planet.

PEOPLE NEED CARS!

EVERYTHING SHE SAYS IS JUST GOING TO MAKE THINGS WORSE.

YEAH. MAKING BATTERIES IS WORSE THAN DRILLING FOR OIL.

SAVANNAH. Lifetime costs for many electric cars are already cheaper than for gas-powered cars, and electric car engines last four hundred thousand miles or more right now. So what's stopping us? It's our lives we're talking about saving.

WHAT DIFFERENCE WILL IT MAKE IF I DON'T GET INTO A CAR?

YOU'LL BE LATE FOR EVERYTHING.

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HAHAHAHAHAHA!

SAVANNAH. I know this won't be easy for us. But this is how all change starts. I'm going to post all the strike stuff right after this, so you can share with everybody you know. Doesn't matter if we start with just two or three people striking. It will grow!

THIS IS ALL ABOUT HER GETTING FAMOUS.

FAMOUS! HAHAHAHAHAHA!

SHE WANTS TO KILL THE ECONOMY!

(Savannah, flustered and crying, slams down her laptop cover. She slumps and hides her face in her hands. She looks up in time to see POLAR BEAR enter, walking fast, then exiting. She's astounded and leans out over her porch to look after the bear. ORRIN and MIDORI enter, dressed as forest royalty. They walk from one side of the stage to the other, down one side of the street, and back on the other, as they talk. Savannah listens; they don't seem to see her.

ORRIN. I don't see how we can call the Council. I mean, we could call it, but... We've lost our power, Midori. You're living in a world that no longer exists. Back then/

MIDORI. Back then, we had hope, Orrin! Admit it! None of this 'we lost our power.' We let it happen. We were blind to the threat. Blind!

ORRIN. Now that's harsh. We weren't blind. People lost their connection to the land. They couldn't see us anymore, and if they did, they didn't believe we were real.

MIDORI. I think we could have tried harder to make them listen. We're the forest deities, after all. We could have, I don't know, done something to make people see us again, hear us/ *(As they talk,*

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POLAR BEAR enters again, walking rapidly across the stage, holding a sundial.)

POLAR BEAR. *(to the deities)* Hurry up, please, it's time! *(Polar Bear exits.)*

ORRIN. It is time. Past time. It hurts me to see the entire Earth calling out to us to help, Midori! But without humans, it's hopeless. You know that. We can't call the Council without them. Their presence is vital to the Council.

MIDORI. The humans don't see us. They don't hear us anymore. They think we don't exist. Imagine. As if they could even breathe without the trees. *(They walk in silence for a few beats. Savannah opens her mouth to speak, but doesn't. Polar Bear enters.)*

POLAR BEAR. *(in a hurry)* Deities, the beings are ready. We await your call.

MIDORI. Thank you, Polar Bear. Please tell them/ *(she sobs)*

ORRIN. Yes, thank you, Polar Bear. We hope to be there very soon.

POLAR BEAR. *(exiting)* Some beings are losing hope. Some are gone forever. Some are very sick. I will tell them I spoke to you/ *(Polar Bear exits in haste.)*

MIDORI. What are we to do? Only humans can stop the destruction. We can't. *(Savannah half-raises her hand to gesture to the deities, but stops herself.)*

ORRIN. But where can we find one? *(Orrin and Midori exit. Savannah sits back on her porch steps, thoughtfully. She listens as the trees talk.)*

TREES. Orrin and Midori.

Our forest deities.

What can they do?

So much is gone.

So much is gone.

What can they do?

Will the people help?

Sigh.

Sigh.

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The young people are different.
Maybe they think they don't have the power.
Power.
Power.
Will they find it?
Find it?

Orrin.
Midori.
Our forest gods.
They're back.
The Polar Bear called them.
The Polar Bear knows it's time.
Long past time.
But still time?
Are they hopeful?
But it's been so long.
It's too late.
Is it?
Do the humans believe in them?
No. No. No.
But not all humans need to believe.
Just some. Just some. Just some.
Why not this girl?
Why not?
Why not? (*Savannah stands, hesitates, then runs after Orrin and Midori. She falls into a hole and disappears.*)
SAVANNAH. Ohhhhhh/
TREES. Humans! Look up! Look around!
Look up! Look around! Smell the air.
Feel the air.
Hear the birdsong.
The insect buzz.
Our leaves in the breeze.
Walk in the forest today.

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Touch our bark.

Smell the earth.

Yes, now. Now. Now.

Before it's too late.

Too late. Too late. (*Light fades to deep blue. It's night on the street. Streetlights and porch lights glow. COYOTE and CROW enter and walk down the street. They sit on the curb, dejected.*)

COYOTE. It's all temporary. All this quiet. All this fresh air.

CROW. Yeah. We should've known better. They'll never change. Same old stinking gasoline. Same old roar overhead and on the streets. It's coming back.

COYOTE. Yeah. We're all choking again.

CROW. Humans too. Only they don't seem to care. (*Long silence. Coyote howls mournfully. Crow pecks at something shiny.*)

COYOTE. You know, we're some of the few that can survive anywhere, anyway. Us and rats and cockroaches.

CROW. Ants and mosquitos.

COYOTE. Yeah. No matter what humans do, short of complete incineration, coyotes and crows got it covered.

CROW. Murder on everybody else though. And who wants to live in a smoking oven, anyway?

COYOTE. Yeah.

COYOTE. (*Long moody pause.*) The Council! What about the Council?

CROW. Ha. Nobody will come. Most are dead. A bunch are sick. And everybody's given up.

COYOTE. I don't know. I think it might work. Orrin and Midori are back.

CROW. What!?! News to me. They went away, like thirty crow generations ago. Back when it started to get really bad. We pass down the stories of the forest gods, but they're like myths, aren't they?

COYOTE. Myth or real, they're back. I saw them. They're here.

CROW. ...

COYOTE. ...

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CROW. Aw. What's the use? Even the deities can't change anything without humans. (*With color and sound, Savannah tumbles onto the street, sits up, and looks around with great surprise.*)

COYOTE. Wow. Now I take that as a sign. Let's see if she can see and hear us. (*beat*) Good evening, young person.

SAVANNAH. (*jumps up*) Did you just speak? You're a coyote!

COYOTE. Yep, that's me. (*with excitement, to Crow*) A human! Who can hear us.

CROW. (*to Coyote*) Hmm. I've seen this before. Humans are tricky. Just because they can hear us doesn't mean they're good. We don't know anything about this human.

SAVANNAH. Where am I? It looks like my street, but you're here, talking!

COYOTE. Of course, we're talking. We're always talking. But humans can't hear us or won't hear us. It's so exciting that you do!

CROW. (*to Coyote*) I'm not excited. What if she is useless? What if she can hear us, and doesn't care?

SAVANNAH. This is the first time I've heard animals talking. Is this a dream?

COYOTE. We're not in a dream. We're real. You look real too. By the way, I'm Coyote, and this is Crow.

SAVANNAH. Hello. I'm Savannah. A...human.

CROW. You must have done something to get here. It's not usual.

SAVANNAH. I heard these two...they looked like, I don't know, like they weren't...well, ordinary, I guess. They were walking past my house. They didn't see me. They were talking about environmental destruction/

COYOTE. Yes! Orrin and Midori!

SAVANNAH. Yes, that's what they called each other.

COYOTE. I've seen them too. Crow, she saw them!

CROW. So you saw them. And?

SAVANNAH. Well, I've been reading about the climate crisis, and trying to talk about it, and I was interested in what they said, so I...followed them. They said they needed humans for the Council/

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CROW. Hmm. (*Crow is skeptical*)

COYOTE. (*to Crow*) Let me handle this, okay? (*to Savannah*) You know we're in desperate times, what with the climate crisis. We need humans if we're gonna stop this race over the cliff. But hardly any humans can hear and see the natural world anymore. You can. And you're talkin' about the emergency, interested in what our forest deities said/

CROW. We need to make sure we don't call the Council for nothin'. Then we'd really be discouraged. Orrin and Midori, all of us. Even more than we already are.

SAVANNAH. You're discouraged too?

CROW. Yeah, of course we are! Look at what we've already lost.

SAVANNAH. (*looks dejectedly at Crow*)

CROW. (*looks dejectedly at Savannah*)

COYOTE. All right you two! Enough of the pity party! There's plenty to do, and you know it. Savannah, the Council is a way for non-human beings to show humans what's happening to the Earth, and what can be done. It's speaking directly from our non-human knowledge. Are you in?

SAVANNAH. Well...yes. I'm in.

COYOTE. We'll call out to the Council.

CROW. All right! Hope this works/ (*Coyote howls and yips. Crow joins in with caws. Long pause. Silently, animals and plants enter, one at a time, and stand: ORCA, GOLDENROD, COASTAL REDWOOD, LICHEN. POLAR BEAR enters last, moving quickly. Savannah stands on the edge of the stage, apart and watchful. As they are gathering, the Trees speak.*)

TREES. The Council.

The Polar Bear, the Coyote, and the Crow have called the deities.

They know it's time.

Long past time.

But still time.

There must be time.

Orrin.

Midori.

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Will they hear? Will they come?

The girl is here too.

Yes. Yes.

A human who can see and hear us.

At last.

ORCA. O ho! A human! Now that's unexpected. It's been so long.

POLAR BEAR. How did that happen, I wonder?

GOLDENROD. Unusual to see a human here. They live so closed in, now.

COYOTE. This is Savannah.

SAVANNAH. Hello.

COASTAL REDWOOD. Now that's a positive sign. She has an Earth name.

LICHEN. *(to Savannah)* Why are you here?

SAVANNAH. I don't know. I just followed Orrin and Midori.

ORCA. You saw them!

POLAR BEAR. People haven't seen or heard the deities in so many seasons.

GOLDENROD. What's different about you, Savannah?

COASTAL REDWOOD. Yes, what's different?

SAVANNAH. I'm just an ordinary person! I don't know what's different.

LICHEN. Do Orrin and Midori know Savannah is here?

CROW. I'll tell them. Caw! Caw! *(Crow exits, flapping. The beings wait expectantly. Crow enters, turns off-stage, and raises wings in salute. Orrin and Midori enter. Orrin and Midori raise their arms in greeting. All the beings raise their arms in greeting.)*

MIDORI. Hello, dear beings!

ORRIN. Hello, friends!

ORCA. Hello, Orrin and Midori! We have missed you.

POLAR BEAR. It's been so long.

GOLDENROD. We've needed you.

COASTAL REDWOOD. Have you seen what has been happening?

CROW. Why did you disappear?

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LICHEN. You left us alone.

COYOTE. It's been so very bad without you.

MIDORI. Dear beings, the truth is...we (*beat*) lost hope. (*The beings groan, sigh, sharply exhale, sob.*)

ORRIN. We were discouraged. You all know humans are the only beings who can slow and stop their destruction of the Earth. And we need their cooperation to restore the Earth.

MIDORI. But we couldn't find humans who could hear and see us anymore. So we...gave up. We went into hiding.

LICHEN. But you are our deities! The forest deities. You abandoned us.

COYOTE. It got worse for the earth when you left.

MIDORI. We know that. Hiding ourselves away...we're done with that.

ORRIN. And even though we're still discouraged/

MIDORI. And even though we don't know what will help/

ORRIN. Or even if anything will help/

MIDORI. We are hopeful. That's why we came to talk with you.

ORRIN. And we will call the Council as soon as we find a human/

ORCA. A human! There is one here. (*All the beings point to Savannah.*)

MIDORI. Ah! Young human, what is your name?

SAVANNAH. Savannah.

ALL BEINGS. Savannah! Her name is Savannah!

ORRIN. How did you find your way here? That's quite unusual.

SAVANNAH. I'm so sorry. I didn't mean to break in/

MIDORI. O, please don't be sorry, Savannah. We are delighted you are here. It's just that...humans don't connect much anymore in the natural world. We are so pleased you did.

ORRIN. And we'd love to know how you did it.

SAVANNAH. I don't know. I just saw you walking on my street and I followed you.

MIDORI. But that is what's so unusual. Most humans don't see us now, or even understand that other beings are on this earth.

ORRIN. We wonder why you did.

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TREES. Here's why.

She writes poetry.

About our kind.

She asks other humans.

To stop using fossil fuels.

She called for a gasoline strike.

That's why.

MIDORI. Ah. Your eyes and ears are open.

ORRIN. And your heart.

POLAR BEAR. She heard you talking about the Council.

MIDORI. O yes! Orrin, Savannah might be...shall we ask her?

ORRIN. Yes! We must tell her what the Council is, first. And then, what a human's role is.

MIDORI. Good. Savannah, would you like to know what the Council is?

SAVANNAH. Um, well, yes. (*beat*) But, I'm only eleven years old. I'm not powerful or anything. I don't have anyone who listens to me. I don't know if I say the right things. I'm not the smartest in my class/

ORRIN. We understand. None of those things are needed, though, to be a part of the Council. You have something more important. You love the beauty of the Earth. You write poetry about it.

MIDORI. And you can see and hear us and non-human beings. It's something that humans often lose as they grow older. You are most definitely not too young.

SAVANNAH. Well, if you think so, then yes, I'd like to hear about the Council.

ORRIN. Lichen, will you begin?

LICHEN. Me? O joy! Most of the time, nobody thinks of me first. But we were the first complex plants on Earth. Ah. Where to begin? The Council is a coming together of all beings, animal, mineral, plant, to support and inform each other as we protect our mutual home.

MIDORI. And now, Orca.

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ORCA. So much to say, such a deep topic. *(beat)* In the Council, all beings work together for what we need to survive and thrive. We build the web of life together.

ORRIN. And now, Crow.

CROW. Many humans have forgotten that we all are connected. When one of us suffers, we all suffer. Each of us is interrelated.

MIDORI. And now, what is the role of the humans we invite to the Council? Goldenrod, will you lead us off? And then, anyone, please add your thoughts.

GOLDENROD. Gladly! Human, your role, if you accept it, is to hold what you learn as a deep trust. We only speak to humans who have ears to hear us.

POLAR BEAR. To tell what you learn to other humans in ways they can understand.

COASTAL REDWOOD. To keep your heart open.

COYOTE. To listen to the beings around you.

LICHEN. To spend time with us

CROW. To teach others to see and hear us.

ORCA. To make room for all Earth's beings in your heart and mind.

POLAR BEAR. To learn about the Earth and its beings throughout your life.

GOLDENROD. To keep telling the story of Earth's beings even when other humans turn away.

ORRIN. Thank you, beings. And now, Savannah, what do you think?

SAVANNAH. I'm...overwhelmed by this responsibility! I feel inadequate. I'm just one person. And I'm very young. I don't have power. No one outside of my school and my family even knows me. And you know that so much of the time, I think it's probably too late to save the Earth. We have caused so much destruction. And governments who must act, haven't acted. Many governments say there is nothing we can do, or it's not our fault, or it's not even happening. I'm afraid.

MIDORI. Of what are you afraid?

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SAVANNAH. People will make fun of me for trying. People won't listen to me. Your faith in me will be shattered. I'm not good enough. I'm not smart enough. I don't speak or write well. I don't know what to say.

ORRIN. Ah. These reasons are all understandable. Almost everyone feels this way at the beginning of a quest, any quest that is worth doing that is.

MIDORI. This is not an easy thing. Very few important quests are.

SAVANNAH. I might fail.

ORRIN. Yes. That's almost certain. Everyone fails at some time. Then we start again. Failure leads to learning.

SAVANNAH. I'm afraid.

MIDORI. Yes. That means you know how important this is. This is a solemn task.

SAVANNAH. No, I can't! I can't! I'm the wrong human. I'm weak. I get discouraged. I'm discouraged most of the time. I can't!
(Savannah exits, running. All the beings wilt. Orrin and Midori exit, followed slowly by all the beings.)

TREES. How sad.

For all of us.

And for Savannah.

She sees and hears us.

She doesn't know how rare that is.

We thought she was the one.

Now what?

More destruction.

When will we see another such human?

How much longer will the forests burn?

And birds die?

How much longer will plastics and acid fill the ocean?

And taint the rain?

We thought she was the one.

Sad. Sad. Sad.

For the Earth.

For all beings. *(Darkness falls.)*

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