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There's nothing wrong with being weird; St. Louis should try it

 By **Maria Rodgers O'Rourke**

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Sitting in rush hour traffic the other day, I heard a radio host mention that the staff of Fast Company magazine had labeled St. Louis one of the world's slowest cities. In one section of the magazine's "Fast Cities" special report, St. Louis was described as "too normal for its own good."

The magazine grouped cities in broad categories: fast cities, too-fast cities, slow cities and cities on the verge. The staff's obviously subjective judgments were drawn from raw statistics and information from such groups as the Institute for the Future, Sustain Lane and CEOs for Cities.

That last group produces something called a CityVitals survey, in which St. Louis ranked, as the magazine put it, "dead last on [the] 'Weirdness Index,' a measure of passion and engagement."

I was disappointed. I know St. Louis tends to be considered socially conservative, but I wondered how weird we're supposed to be.

So I took a closer look at the CityVitals report. It compares the performance of 50 American metropolitan areas in what it calls "four key areas: talent, innovation, connections and distinctiveness." In the Distinctive City category, St. Louis was 50th out of 50 on the Weirdness Index. The index, in turn, is drawn from market research data on 75 different activities and the degree to which a metro area exceeds or falls short of the national norm. (There's a "norm" for weirdness?)

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But I was drawn back to the way Fast Company had described the Weirdness Index as a measure of "passion and engagement."

Passion and engagement relate to our work as well as to our personal lives. Passion is a key to developing one's talents and skills for work that is energizing and satisfying. Engagement is the level at which one plays. How accurate these words are in describing us says a lot about whether we are making life happen or letting it happen.

Abraham Maslow, the psychologist and creator of the Hierarchy of Needs, argued that life consists of a series of choices. "You will either step forward into growth or step backward into safety," he wrote. To live to our fullest potential, he maintained, we must be willing to risk making choices based on who we might become, rather than staying safe in who we are.

Haven't we all dreamed of a fuller life, only to be restrained by comfort and security when the time came to actually do something about it? Every day we make choices that can contribute to our personal growth, but making such choices often means accepting the risk that others might label us weird for doing so. A lot of us retreat to safety instead.

Maybe saying that St. Louis is too normal or that it lacks passion and engagement describes at a collective level the same thing we do as individuals. As a region, maybe we've chosen safety a few too many times.

There are other cities on Fast Company's list of slow cities: Budapest, Havana, Detroit, New Orleans. It wouldn't be too difficult to point to ways in which St. Louis isn't so bad — compared to them.

But that isn't the point. As a region and as individuals, do we really aspire to be "not so bad" as something or someone else, or do we want to be the most passionate and engaged people and community we can be?

Maybe we need to stop being afraid of being weird and think of weirdness as a passionate engagement in life.

Maria Rodgers O'Rourke of Creve Coeur has worked in the advertising and not-for-profit fields and now juggles marriage, raising two daughters and creative pursuits that include music, theater and writing.

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