

## My Days Are Numbered

All is Numbered.  
-Pythagoras

I have an unhealthy relationship with numbers, garden variety numbers; Numerophobia, maybe you'd call it. I place enormous importance on the information they contain, their overt and covert messages. And despite the fact that numbers inevitably let me down, like friends who betray me, still I return to them, looking for validation like a spurned lover, trying to interpret and reinterpret their lines and curves and sequences, so benign looking to the unsuspecting person.

How can something so small carry so much weight when, uncoupled, it carries so little meaning? If I walk up to you and merely say, "five," what does that mean to you? Nothing. On the other hand, if I join it to one or two other words, it generates multiple meanings. For instance, if I tell you I've been married five times, that might create a specific thought bubble for you (e.g. hard to get along with, makes bad life choices, should have stayed single, what happened here?). But if I tell you that I've run the Boston Marathon five times, that produces completely different emotions (e.g. what an athlete, persistent, amazing, strong, I'm envious), or that I graduated from grade school at the age of five, still other emotions arise (e.g. genius, precocious, what were her parents thinking, what about her childhood?) It's the context that gives the number the power, yet all I see is the dreaded — or hoped for — number; my vision telescopes to it and I often extract my own meaning.

From the moment my first grade teacher, Mrs. Everhart, introduced grades into my life, I've been both obsessed with and repelled by them. Numbers were a way for others to judge my behavior, my intelligence, my physical appearance, my athletic ability, my likability, my place in the

world, in short, my ranking. They were the holy grail, reliable...solid. I could always count on them — literally and figuratively — at least, that's what I thought.

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At Pitman Elementary School in Kirkwood, Missouri, we were given a number for our effort, a tandem number to accompany the grade we received. An overall number from one (good) to five (bad) was recorded for "Attitudes and Behavior," and another for "Work and Study Habits." Effort scores were also given in each subject: reading, language, spelling, arithmetic, social studies, science, handwriting, physical education, music, and art. So, if your handwriting was horrible, but you did your best, you might receive a "C-1" to reflect that.

Under the rubric "Attitudes and Behavior" such things as general school conduct, observance of rules, cooperation with others, care of property, acceptance of constructive criticism, and growth in self-discipline were factored in. "Work and Study Habits" included sub-topics such as following directions, attentiveness, completion of work, independent work habits, proof-reading, constructive use of time, and neatness.

I imagine Mrs. Duncan having to deal with effort grades, consulting with the other third grade teacher when I started learning how to write cursively in earnest, debating on how to assign my effort grades.

“I’ve tried to help Linda write capitol Qs, but I’m just not getting through. She’s working hard, so I hate to mark her “handwriting” grade down for it, but what can I do? Her Ps are fine, and her Rs, but the Qs look more like giant, misshapen 2s.”

Maybe a high effort number was a compromise for those of us who had hit a wall — with Qs and other matters — a nod to our persistence. The effort grade was also a way to tamp down a student’s expectations or to build them up, an equalizer or reality check, if you will.

In the case of Mrs. Duncan, though, she broke from school protocol by handing out peppermints to students who, in her opinion, had done their best to complete a task, no numbers involved. I remember feeling a sense of relief whenever she walked down the aisle, dropping a quarter-sized peppermint on my desk, smiling and offering encouraging words to go with the candy. As I unwrapped the small red and white sweet, I was temporarily lifted out of that army of numbers. Not surprisingly, all these years later, it is still a happy memory and, whenever I pass a bowl of peppermints, or suck on one, I am taken back to Mrs. Duncan’s third grade class and the gift of those candies.

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Growing up in the 1960s, we had to take standardized intelligence tests at school, aptitude tests, as they liked to refer to them. Based on my mediocre results, my mother would not-so-subtly tell me that my scores showed that I had more than enough potential to perform better.

“You could do so much better, if you would just apply yourself, Linda,” she would sigh as she slipped the sheet with the dreaded scores back in the envelope I’d brought home from school, putting it in safekeeping to show to my father later over their nightly cocktail. I had no idea what that meant, applying myself, that was too sophisticated a concept for a seven-year old. I was already overwhelmed by the often divergent expectations of school, of teachers, of students, of parents, so this seemed an impossible demand to make of me.

Truthfully, I always marveled at this phrase. How could she — or anyone else — conclude that I was supposed to be doing better based on some random numbers spit out by an indifferent machine? Maybe this was the most anyone could expect from me. After all, someone had to be average; why not me? What was in those magical numbers that I was missing, that led her to believe I needed to try harder? I felt like I was already trying.

There were consequences because of my performance on these tests. The number determined which group of classmates I would be put with: the “gifted and talented” group, the average group, or the “slow” group, as it was unkindly referred to in private. And there was no hiding your ranking from anyone; we all knew which group we were in. Suffice it to say, I was never grouped with Susie Beckman, the smartest girl in my grade school. I was put in the average group, the could-be-doing-better group, the we-expect-more-from-you group, the were-you-asleep-when-you-took-the-test group, the your-brother-is-so-smart-what-happened-to-you group.

The scores for these early intelligence tests were charted on a graph, so we could see how we had done compared to our classmates, determine if they were smarter or dumber, or similar.

I was stuck at the top of the bell curve, the middle of the pack. The numbers might change, but my place in the middle never did. This meant there were always people ahead of me, smarter, or maybe just working harder. Who knew. Doing something better than me. And I took no comfort in the people behind me; they could easily catch up.

In addition to intelligence tests, grades followed you throughout school, of course, and though they were given in letter form, not number, your grade point average/GPA was calculated by simply converting these letters to numbers and then averaging them. An "A" equaled four points, a "B" three, and so on. To be on the honor roll you had to get a 3.0 average, a "B" average.

By the time you got to high school, your GPA determined where you could apply to college and if you could apply for a scholarship, so it was an all-important number. If your GPA was a 2.3, for instance, you had far fewer choices than if it was a 3.2, a seemingly simple transposition of the two digits with major repercussions.

Even when you were ready to graduate from high school, thinking you were leaving this number-laden stage of your life behind, your helpful guidance counselor gave you two additional numbers to chew on. There was your class rank and, just to ensure that you realized where you stood, you were placed in a larger grouping: upper third of your class, middle third, or lower third. I was in the middle of the middle third. Surprise.

I remember when my guidance counselor called me into his office, catching a glimpse at his watch periodically, no doubt eager to give better news to gifted Susie Beckman. He looked more like a basketball player than a guidance counselor, stretching his long legs out from under his chair and addressing me with his hands folded in his lap.

“Your rank is #195 out of 550, so you’re at the high end of the middle third,” he reported, trying to sound hopeful but not succeeding, looking at me to gauge my reaction, and pausing to ensure that I had understood what he was saying. I might not have had a good ranking, but I was smart enough to know what this particular number meant. Average. Again. In fairness, his job was probably thankless, except for the handful of stellar students he was giving good news to.

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Beginning in grade school, in addition to the standardized test graphs, there were other ways that numbers figured into my life. Specifically, there were charts that showed your height and weight. Several times a year, we were all marched into the nurse’s office, where we stood in our stocking feet on the giant, metallic doctor’s scale, waiting for the arm of the weight to balance on a number. And then the nurse would pull out the metal bar to see how tall we were. These numbers were recorded in a little pink and white pamphlet — “My Growth Record” —so we could see our progress. For example, I was 47 inches tall and weighed 47 pounds at the beginning of first grade, and 51 1/2 inches and 59 pounds in fifth grade, and so on.

There were also the compulsory national physical tests in grade school to plot your speed on the fifty-yard dash, how far you could throw a softball, how many pull-ups and sit-ups you could do, and others. You were tagged with still more numbers to mull over, to measure your worth, to compare yourself with others' scores.

We also had a graph showing days of attendance in school and, by the end of the first grade, when I had been extremely sick and even hospitalized at one point, I had missed over forty days of school. It seemed like yet another way numbers were being used against me.

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The advent of the home bathroom scale into my life as a teenager opened up a new Pandora's Box of worries, feeding my obsession with body size — as reflected in the number — a phenomenon that would gain traction in my late teens. Although I was thin growing up, if the scale showed 108 pounds, for example, instead of 107, it cast a cloud over my day. I would step on and off, on and off the scale, over and over, balancing on one leg, sometimes resorting to cheating by adjusting the dial (in pre-digital days) to below "0" before stepping on, anything to make the omnipotent number go down a pound. Similarly, if I was buying clothes and one store had a size six that didn't fit, that was a bad day, since six was the size, the "number" I was supposed to be.

I took my cues from my mother, both with respect to what a "good" weight was, and what a "good" clothes size was; she was very size-conscious and savvy about such things. Double digits



in clothes were bad, single digits were good. But even if I fit comfortably into my size six clothes, she might still tell me I was a “big girl,” depending on her mood on any given day. Consequently, a good number was no guarantee, no cause for celebration. I just never knew what arbitrary measure she would use to assess my size.

When I was in high school my mother and I had weekly weigh-ins to see who had lost the most weight on a diet she proposed, even though neither of us was overweight. I never won these contests because she barely ate anything, and was three inches shorter than me, so she naturally weighed less, although this reasoning escaped me at the time. Each Tuesday morning, we would stand in my bathroom wearing only our underwear and a slip, taking turns stepping on the scale. I did it with the same attitude I approached standardized tests at school: dread.

“110 pounds. Down two pounds,” I remember her announcing smugly one morning, looking over at me to catch my reaction as she smoothed her slip, daintily stepping off the scale to put her A-line skirt and silk blouse back on. It was as though she’d just been awarded an Emmy, and was wondering whom to thank. Eventually, I dropped out of these contests, tired of always losing.

A side effect of my obsession with the numbers on the scale was an equally strong fixation with calories. Beginning in high school, I was able to tick off the calories in virtually any food. If there had been a gameshow for such a skill, I would have been national champion: small baked potato, 150 calories; medium apple, 100 calories; hamburger without a bun, 280

calories, and so on. I was also prone to telling friends and family the calorie count of whatever they happened to be eating at any given moment, not that anyone ever asked me for that information, and not that it endeared me to anyone. “Do you realize how many calories are in that hot fudge sundae you’re eating?” I’d ask a friend at Dairy Queen, aghast as I self-righteously munched on my apple. “At least 330!” And then I’d add insult to injury by telling her how long it would take to work off the calories, on the off chance she wanted to know. She did not.

Standardized tests continued to be a source of frustration throughout high school. I knew, of course, what a good score on the Scholastic Aptitude Test/SAT was; everyone did. I also knew that there were flesh and blood people out there who had achieved perfect scores. For instance, my mother delighted in telling me that Poppy McGrath, the year-older daughter of my parents’ good friends, had gotten a perfect score on the math section of the test. “Rob and Dina are so incredibly proud of Poppy. Why, now she has her pick of colleges, not to mention possible scholarships. It’s just wonderful, isn’t it?” I was forced to respond that, yes, it was truly wonderful. This topic seemed to be worthy of discussion on a regular basis. My scores, of course, hovered at the average mark, attracting absolutely no college recruiters to our door.

I reasoned that the SAT unfairly focused on one area I consistently performed poorly in — would always perform poorly in — math. Math was my Kryptonite, my Achilles’ Heel; it was numbers on steroids. Contrary to aversion therapy in which a person is exposed to a negative stimulus to overcome what they hate or fear, making numbers a separate academic subject had the opposite of the desired effect. Math was a nightmarish army of baffling numbers running

amuck all over the page, sometimes joined by x's and y's, other times by circles, triangles, squares, and other unidentifiable shapes, squiggles, and other symbols, all serving to freeze my brain and produce widespread panic and deafness within me.

Math was a different language. It was the anarchy of numbers in my befuddled mind. What were they doing? What was the point? How was I supposed to know at what time a car would arrive in Omaha from Sioux Falls, leaving at 8:02 a.m., traveling a distance of 183 miles at 54 miles per hour? I had no idea and didn't much care.

Little changed through the rest of grade school and middle school with respect to my math skills, and in high school I had to have a tutor, Mr. Mosby, when my C- in geometry dipped dangerously close to a D. He doubled as the driver's ed teacher and the dramatic arts advisor, and drove over to our house in his mustard-colored, beat-up Chevy impala once a week for hour-long sessions in our formal dining room. Leaning over the problems we were working on, I was painfully aware of his sour breath, and the only math I remember from those sessions was when I silently counted the minutes till the hour was over and he had left my home.

Between my sophomore and junior years in high school, I took a typing class in summer school, and this provided additional evidence of my unhealthy relationship with numbers. In the late 1960s, young women had fewer career options, and knowing how to type was a way to make yourself more marketable. In keeping with my aversion to numbers, though, I decided that knowing how to type numbers — and the symbols above them — would be unnecessary to any of my

future career endeavors, and consequently made no effort to master those keys; it was letters only for me. This was reflected in my final grade.

Although my typing speed was fast by most standards — 65 words per minute — when I had to type something with numbers, I either slowed down noticeably to look up at the keyboard (a no-no), hunting and pecking for the correct number, or I made numerous errors. A three became a four, an eight became a nine, a dollar sign became a pound sign, etc. This was the price I was paying for avoiding the top row of the keyboard.

There were other, more subtle ways that numbers figured prominently in my life. In middle school and high school it was common practice for boys to keep secret lists of girls: the top ten popular ones, the top ten pretty ones, the top ten smartest, and so on. It was against school policy to keep such lists, but everyone knew they existed and somehow managed to get a copy of the crumpled contraband rankings.

One day, trailing behind one of the more approachable popular ninth grade boys, Fred Mason, I caught up with him in the crowded hallway between Chorus and Spanish to timidly ask who was on that week's list of pretty girls. Barely making eye contact with me, and not slowing down as he rushed off to his next class, he rattled off that week's list of the prettiest girls.

“Liz Brown, Karen Smith, Barb Hennessy, Patty Martin, Pam Jasper...” I stopped listening after four or five names - the same ones as every week — confident I was not on the list, would never

be on the list. That was the last time I asked. A decade later, the movie “10” would do nothing to discourage this practice, reinforcing the idea that there was a perfect woman “out there” who met the criteria of being a perfect “10.”

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Who knows how my obsession with numbers became entrenched, my habit of using them as stand-ins for self worth, as tools to rank myself in category after category, to measure my success, my progress, my value as a human being. I’m not alone, of course, we all have a string of numbers attached to us, some avoidable, others, not. They’re swirling around us like the cloud of dust enveloping the “Peanuts” character Pigpen. All kinds of statistics follow in our wake, like it or not. But I try to remind myself that, the older I get, and the longer the parade of numbers trailing behind me grows, the more important it is to concentrate on non-numerical things, on my remaining days on earth, days which are, yes, numbered, although that is one number I don’t want to know.

In that vein, my longterm goal is to create a breach in the wall of numbers that has surrounded me my whole life, to focus on matters with no numbers attached: beautiful sunsets, conversations with my friends and family, walks on the beach, books I’m reading, essays I’m writing, pieces I’m playing on the piano, paintings I’m working on, trips I’m planning, in short, simple pleasures I enjoy, to name a few. At long last, I’m learning that numbers don’t usually add up to happiness, at least in my life.