

## Why I Like Math

My mom is a non-practicing Jew and my dad is an economist, which means I grew up without organized religion. Religious people seemed to me a pretty stupid lot. Why did these people need God to be happy and healthy? I had no personal relationship with God and I was happy and healthy. Why did they need stupid little parables to live their life right? And church was on Sunday when football was on! Religion, I thought, who needed it?!

Then, like most smart little middle-class white boys, I went to college. Sex and drugs and rock and roll made my head reel with nauseous pleasure. But the lifestyle was not without a downside. Questions of faith started creeping into my head. Why are we here? Why does any of this matter? For the first time in my life, I was jealous, yes *jealous*, of religious people. For most people, college is a place where one questions the foundations of society. For me, the moral relativism of American university life sent me in the opposite direction. If there is no "correct" answer, if there is no objective point-of-view, if nobody really does know anything, then simply pick the answer you like best and stick with it. And so my pity for religious people had transformed into full-blown envy. To believe that you're going to heaven after you die is comforting in a world chock full of rattlesnakes, great white sharks, and Alaska Airlines. Suddenly, I understood the genius of religion.

But as hard as I tried, I just didn't believe in my heart that Jesus died for my sins, or that he was the Son of God, or even that I had sinned to start with. The Old Testament didn't hold much appeal either, so I couldn't be a religious Jew. Islam was out because that's not for white people. Buddhism was the next logical choice. Why not? Rich white people who don't have the balls for a real god always find peace in Buddhism. But try as I might (and I did), I never quite *got* it. I could talk to you all day about Zen koans and Herman Hesse, but I never really *felt* it. That is the whole idea with religion. You actually have to believe it with all your heart. Then and only then will you wear the enraptured smile of Evander Holyfield. Whereas my agnostic upbringing had always been a source of pride to me, in college it seemed like the ultimate liability. I had a stop payment on my soul. My eternal happiness was being garnered.

But good fortune had it in for me and came in the most unlikely of packages: mathematics. I had always excelled in math. I breezed through every honors math class, tested out of Calculus I and II in college, and scored a perfect 800 on the math section of the SAT. In college, I pursued a math degree. I had never given it much thought. I was just so damn good at it, it seemed silly not to pursue it. Math didn't fulfill any fundamental need in me, except maybe the need to be good at something and be reminded that you are good at it on a regular basis. But there was no extracurricular reason for me to study math. Or so I thought.

As I worked my way through exciting subjects such as non-linear algebra, combinatorics and advanced calculus, mathematics suddenly took on a new meaning for me. Growing up, I had viewed math as a sort of cerebral Olympiad. It was like a sport that I was exceptionally good at. But in college, math's different disciplines (geometry, calculus,

trigonometry, etc.) started to ring in harmony. I became aware of an underlying superstructure that tied all my math knowledge together. Although I had no idea how to define that superstructure, just being aware of it was a big step.

And then, every once in a while, came a revelation, a moment of clarity, an epiphany of religious proportions. Like spending twenty minutes straining your eyeballs trying to see that dumb little sailboat in a book of Magic-Eye 3D computer-generated deely-bobs. You don't see, you don't see, you don't see, you know its there, you don't see, and then you *SEE*. Without warning, you see. And like a kid with his dad's Playboy, you greedily and giddily try to lap up all you can before your dad gets home. You know the party can't last forever, that you'll lose your concentration for just a second, and then it will be gone. But you gaze anyway, curious and numb, dumbfounded and enrapt. You finally see.

So what is the prize? What is the dumb little sailboat on the other side? When the rays of mathematical structure do puncture the clouds of one's monkey brain, one sees, or rather feels, the interconnectedness of totality. All these different formulas and graphs and infinite series that you have learned and mastered your whole life all actually describe different parts of the same thing. You've been the blind man tugging at an elephant's tail thinking it's a twig *and* the blind man feeling his foot thinking it a tree *and* the one feeling it's trunk thinking it a snake.

So what is the elephant that is the mathematical superstructure? I don't know. What I'm talking about is that feeling. One suddenly feels, completely and without reservation, that everything has purpose. The revelation instills calm. No beginning, no end, no ego, no id, no mother, no father. It is the Tao. It is Zen enlightenment. It is revelation. It is nirvana.

Although in ten years of studying math I only had this feeling a half dozen times, these Magic-Eye moments single-handedly define faith for me. I know the cheesy little dinosaurs and stupid little palm trees are there. Like a faithful Baptist, I don't need proof. Like a devout Muslim, I've seen the beauty. Even so, I can claim no seniority within the walls of my temple. I only studied math as an undergrad at a state college. But math's golden chalice has given me so much more than just a degree or some useless knowledge about prime numbers. It has given me the spiritual comfort of a religious person.

Sometimes I lay awake at night and wonder... Is the universe just a big computer? Did life emerge to help prove an important theorem? Or to feel revelation, whether religiously inspired or not? Is that feeling what keeps us wondering, keeps us exploring? Is the meaning of life to aid the big computer on its quest to prove the BIG theorem? And if I drink eight Budweisers tonight, am I going to screw up the whole thing? Oh my god, what if I screw it all up?

Total and complete enlightenment does not come without responsibility.

*-When not pondering mathematics and theology, Matt Stone drinks Budweiser on his porch and argues with his drunkard friends.*