

Pi

It was an atypically cloudy and drizzly Friday in May in Jamaica when I calculated more digits of Pi than I ever had before. I was at the beach in the morning in Negril, working in my usual cadence. I stood just about ankle-deep in the warm ocean water, my left foot forward a little from my right, my knees slightly bent. I bobbed to and fro, lifted my left foot just a bit, then stomped it down gently when I found another digit. I kneaded the knuckles of my left hand onto the right side of my forehead to help me with my concentration and swung my right arm back and forth to keep my balance while I crunched the numbers.

Once, I heard people say I looked like a giraffe leaning over a wave. They said I could have been seventeen or forty-four because they couldn't tell if I'd started shaving yet and my bleached crew cut didn't help them figure out my age. Actually, I'm thirty-five, I have been for some time. They were correct when they said I was skinny. I weigh just one hundred and twenty-nine pounds in my wet red neon bathing shorts, not counting the purple rubber surf socks I wear to keep my feet from getting too waterlogged. When it rained or was a bit cool, I draped a beach towel over my shoulders and I always daubed yellow zinc oxide on my nose. If the Caribbean sun was really hot, I'd wear my lime green cotton beachcomber's hat, tighten the drawstring under my chin against the breeze, and work on.

Why did I spend my days on such a seemingly impossible task? Is there not a final digit to Pi, only a continual flurry of non-repeating numbers? Why not take up some interesting hobby, like counting the seashells along the coast of Negril, something I could really accomplish? You must think I'm crazy.

My answer might surprise you. I began because I thought it important to generate a purpose for my life; we all need to accomplish something with our talent, whether it's tatting lace or stocking grocery shelves. The trick is to find something we enjoy doing, to struggle like Sisyphus uphill, but with a smile on our faces. For me, numbers waltz in my head and when I work with them I know I'm fulfilling my destiny. I know it sounds corny, but finding out what our dance is in this world

and directing our lives to perform it well makes our lives meaningful. Otherwise, we're just consuming the planet as we trudge through our existence.

So, I worked on Pi. I took my stance on the beach in front of the Cool Runnings Cafe early every morning. Mr. Duncan, the rotund owner of the establishment, had painted years ago on the clapboard wall of his restaurant the hours of its operation, "Hopefully and Gratefully, Morning 'Til Night". When he opened up, I'd take a short break, sit at one of his tables under the palm trees and sip some fresh mango juice.

"Every lickle mek a muckle," Mr. Duncan said to me. He smiled at the fresh day, the sun sparkling off the gold in his left upper canine.

"Yes, indeed, Mr. Duncan. 'Every little makes much,'" I replied. I didn't tarry for long, for I always had much work to do and Mr. Duncan needed to cook eggs and plantains for the tourists who would soon amble in for breakfast.

There usually were no swimmers or sunbathers in front of Mr. Duncan's place, the tourists lounged in beach chairs in front of their hotels, and I had a stretch of beach to myself.

Occasionally, somebody walked up to me while I was working, stared at me wagging back and forth for a minute, then asked me what I was doing. I ignored them. If I let some snippet of conversation get through my concentration, past my ciphering, my numbers would fly out of my head and I'd have to start all over again. Most of the time the people just walked away from me and I stayed in stride. Sometimes, though, some of the Americans talked loudly enough to disturb me, as if I were a foreigner, in slow, simple, declarative sentences. I just bobbed my head faster when they spoke and uttered some unintelligible phrase, clicked my throat like a Swahili, maybe even drew a little spittle to the corners of my mouth, and they left me alone. I watched them pass, sporting the latest fashions in beach apparel, wide mesh shirts on stout hairy men and bamboo hats with bouncing straw hummingbirds atop the heads of women.

I like the people here in Jamaica. I like that the water temperature is eighty degrees, and I like that the amount of daylight is fairly constant throughout the year. The sunrise and sunset times don't change by three hours each from winter to summer like it does in northern

Michigan, where I once lived. I used to enjoy watching the pink of the sunset disappear in the northwest sky after eleven o'clock on warm summer evenings, while I calculated possible winning lottery number combinations. It was simple, really, the lottery only uses forty-nine numbers. So, I only needed to compute a set of numbers comprising the digits of forty-nine to the forty-ninth power, a relatively easy calculation. From there it was child's play to find the logarithmic function for the probabilities of selection for a random set of numbers. But, if I had publicized my winning lists, everybody would have won the lottery and pretty soon everyone would have been a millionaire. If that happened, I figured, super inflation would run rampant, devaluing everybody's millions to a pittance and the ills the winning of the lottery was supposed to cure would continue to fester and people would become despondent.

Here in Jamaica, there is no daylight saving time to worry about and I can get more work done.

A couple months ago I regretfully allowed myself to be interrupted by two teen-aged boys while I worked on Pi. They were perhaps eighteen or nineteen.

"Like, dude, what's with the def hip-hop step? Are you, like, at one with Buddha?" This convoluted talk was spoken to me by the boy with long blond braided hair who wore denim shorts with innumerable zippered pockets and which reached nearly to his ankles. The top third of his underwear, teal plaid boxer shorts, was visible above the unbelted loops of his jeans, which rode, uncomfortably, it seemed to me, well below his hips, nearly to the bottom of his buttocks. He wore a Bob Marley tee shirt, the shoulders of which approached his elbows and clunky Air Jordan basketball shoes, untied, without socks. His companion's black hair erupted in spiked tufts dyed orange at the ends. His shorts were khaki and his shirt was silk-screened with the slogan, "Cool Runnings." They both wore identical black, Wayfarer sunglasses. Between them I counted seventeen nose, ear and eyebrow piercings, several of which were marijuana leaf replicas.

"Are you doing 'zrooms, dude?", the blond boy asked me.

"Zrooms rule," the other boy said. He lit a spliff and began smoking it, trying to imitate the Rastas by inhaling repeated lungfuls of smoke and exhaling through his nose. He coughed harshly and passed the

spliff to his companion. I tried to ignore their brazen public smoking on the beach, but it was no use. They encircled me in the water and tried to pass the spliff to me, which I of course refused. I feared Mr. Duncan might become upset with this display of rudeness in front of his establishment, but I also spotted two policemen up the beach who were walking towards us. So I stopped working and talked to the boys. All my numbers erased themselves.

“Babylon a cum’, gentlemen. Have you noticed the policemen up the beach walking this way? Perhaps it would be better if you indulged in your pastime in a more private location.” The blond boy spotted the policemen.

“Incoming, dude,” he said to his companion, “like, let’s split. Cops, dude.”

The other boy doused the glowing end of the spliff in the water and tucked it in one of the hair spikes atop his head. “Cool, dude, let’s rock ‘n roll.” They gave me the peace sign and left.

Before I resumed working I thought about what I might have said to the young men, had we the time to converse more leisurely. I probably would have told them the Rastafarians, whom the boys erroneously thought they were emulating, believed ganja was a gift from Jah, the Rastafarian God. Smoking ganja meant being at one with Jah, and, therefore, was a holy act. Rastas smoked not just to get high, but to celebrate the nature of Jah within themselves. Besides, while marijuana is illegal in Jamaica, the private consumption of it is generally tolerated by Babylon, but even the Rastas knew better than to smoke publicly. But, the boys probably would have assumed I was a straight-laced curmudgeon who was just lecturing them about the dangers of drugs.

The boys turned around several times to look at the cops as they walked away from me. Finally, they strolled off the beach, perhaps to sit at some bar and drink Red Stripe beer and tap their fists together in a declaration of stoned solidarity. The policemen nodded and smiled at me as usual as they ambled past me. I returned their nod out of respect and resumed crunching my numbers.

I always worked on Pi for about six hours at a stretch, then I needed to rest my brain. If I hadn’t been interrupted, I memorized where I left off before I quit for the day. I committed the numbers

I'd computed to my memory by assigning them to blocks of digits, visualized them in reverse order, then forwards again. After work, for relaxation, I enjoyed taking a long swim in the ocean before I walked to my little house in the hills. Once home I took a short nap and then walked to the Pickled Parrot bar where I indulged in my hobby. I sat outside the thatched beachside bar and wove hammocks out of colored nylon twine. I crossed my left leg over my right, dug my left foot in the sand and bent my head forward. I held my yellow, green and red twine close to my nose, so I could peer at the fibers and align them all correctly. I hummed Peter Tosh music while I amused myself, not letting any numbers creep into my brain. I just tied my knots and snipped the ends cleanly with my machete, then I singed the frayed threads by focusing the sun onto them with my magnifying glass.

I usually finished about five hammocks a week, although Mr. Whitehall, the owner of the Pickled Parrot, always admonished me to work slowly.

"Tek yuh time," he would say to me.

"Yes, Mr. Whitehall. I will try to take my time. 'If you want good, your nose has to run': Nothing that is good comes without some sacrifice." I tried to remember to slow down, to "sacrifice" my impatience so I could produce a perfect hammock.

"Yes. Yes. If yuh waan gud, yuh nose ha-fe run," Mr. Whitehall said.

He has always been very kind to let me weave outside his establishment and I insisted that he take at least ten dollars for each hammock I sold. I earned enough to keep myself comfortable and I saved my money to buy a bicycle so I could get to work on the beach on time if I didn't feel like walking.

I worked on the hammocks for a couple hours, then packed them carefully away in my Army surplus footlocker Mr. Whitehall let me keep under the bar. I then drank one warm Dragon Stout for which Mr. Whitehall only charged me twenty-five cents, while the tourists paid three dollars. After my refreshment, I left to return home.

"Walk good," Mr. Whitehall always yelled after me.

"Thank you, Mr. Whitehall. Cool runnings."

Once home, I prepared my usual dinner, a vegetable pattie, plantains and johnnie cakes. For dessert, I plucked an orange or papaya from one of the trees in my yard. After I cleaned up, I changed into my

flannel Lone Ranger drawstring pants and wool socks, put on my rickie sweatshirt against the chill and relaxed in my hammock under the stars. I smoked one bowl of herb and gazed at the heavens until I became drowsy. You would not believe how many stars I've counted.

I'm not sure why I got myself involved in a conversation with the child last Monday while I was working. Maybe it was because the six year old asked me so innocently and plainly what I was doing or maybe it was because I had just started crunching and knew I wouldn't have far to backtrack that made me stop and listen to his question.

"Whatcha doin', mister?" the little guy said to me. His face and arms were dotted with sun freckles. He was carrying his red plastic sand bucket and shovel and was following his parents along the shore. I'd seen them up the beach before they neared me. Mom and dad were strolling leisurely, holding hands, and glanced occasionally over their shoulders to keep an eye on Junior as he bent to scoop shells into his bucket. The couple passed by me and three steps later Junior stood by my left side and looked up at me from behind his Batman sunglasses.

"Whatcha doin', mister?"

I stopped working and the numbers dissolved from my brain.

"I'm working on Pi," I answered.

"What kind of pie? I don't see any pie." He looked around on the beach, trying, I suppose, to find my plate and fork.

"Pi. The ratio of the circumference of a circle to its diameter."

"Oh. My teacher says we'll be working on coloring circles next month. But for now, we're just cutting out squares from construction paper."

Junior was going to tell me more about circles and squares but mom called for him to catch up with her and daddy and he scampered off to them without even saying good bye.

Instead of returning to work, I thought about what I may have said to Junior had our conversation continued. I probably would have drawn a circle for him in the sand with a horseshoe crab tail, diagrammed its diameter and circumference. I may have added that to search for the eventual consequence of any philosophy or enterprise was not only our responsibility as literate humans but was a venture of inestimable, if not holy, value. But then I would have got wound up,

loquacious, if not chatty, and mom and dad would have yanked Junior's arm away from the pervert on the beach who was talking intelligently with a young boy. Besides, I had better things to do. I had my work.

I got further with the digits of Pi than I ever had last Friday during the second week in May. A minor cool front had ushered in unsettled weather from the northeast that morning and I began working under a cloudy sky, drizzle dampening the beach towel on my shoulders.

The college coeds and their muscular, grinning boyfriends had finished their Spring Breaks by the middle of March, having recharged themselves with wet tee shirt contests and guzzling Red Stripe beer and went back to school in the States. The last big group of vacationing Americans, the public school teachers, had left by the second week in April, sated with curried lobster and jerk pork, eager to flaunt their tropical tans to their colleagues in the lounge. It was a slow part of the year, before the Italians arrived in June and the Reggae Sun Splash fans came down in July.

I hadn't been interrupted since my conversation with Junior, nearly a whole work week. It was the first time I had kept my concentration for so long and by Wednesday I knew I was getting close. By Thursday I knew that if I could concentrate just a little while longer I could cash my mathematical paycheck the next day. On Friday morning I crunched the digits in a flash that I must admit bordered on brilliance. Somehow I just knew no one had ever calculated so many numbers for Pi. The fingers of my right hand twitched as if I were playing a vertical piano while I rocked back and forth.

A sudden dark cloud loomed over my head just as I finished and a tropical downpour started drenching me. I'm used to working under these conditions, however, and the warm rain didn't really bother me. I tightened the drawstring under my hat, tied my towel securely over my shoulders and began to memorize all the numerals of Pi I'd found backwards out loud. Once I got back to the beginning division and then recited them forward to the end one more time, I would have the numbers permanently etched in my brain. I assigned the numbers to huge blocks and their order occurred to me to have a progression that made it easy for me to connect the blocks. Still, I have my limi-

tations and there were only so many numbers I could assort to each block and, believe me, the number of blocks I needed to string together was almost infinite.

So, I started connecting the blocks out loud in the pouring rain, bobbing back and forth in a fast cadence. I was swinging my right arm furiously in balance of my left leg arching from heel to toe, my right fingers fluttering. I kneaded my left hand deep into my brow for concentration. I knew by quitting time I would have all my numbers locked immutably in my head.

I had finished my reverse order memorization and was canting the last few blocks forwards to the end. The rain poured as I raised my voice in anticipation of finishing my task. I could see my gold medal number starting to come back into focus.

“Six, three, seven, four, two, nine, five...”

The rain ended as suddenly as it had begun and bright sunshine replaced the clouds. Typical tropical weather. I was on the very last block of numbers, shouting their progression to affix them in my brain.

“FOUR, ONE, EIGHT, THREE, TWO, SIX.”

A rainbow suddenly appeared over the horizon above the ocean. Finally, after years of coming so close, I saw my award-winning digit of it in my head as clear as could be. All my hard work had paid off. I arched my left foot for the last time and I began to scream my ultimate number. It was a...

“Whatcha doin’, mister?”

I heard a crack of thunder far up in the hills where it was still raining.

I took the weekend off.

Mr. Duncan fixed me some jerk chicken and cornbread for lunch and I told him how Junior had interrupted me just as I was about to achieve my goal.

“Kiss mi neck,” he exclaimed.

“Yes, Mr. Duncan, I’m incredulous as well.”

I took a long nap after lunch in the shade of one of Mr. Duncan’s palm trees. The ocean breeze wafted gently onto me. After my nap, I swam for an hour and then went home. At cocktail time I went to

see Mr. Whitehall at the Pickled Parrot. I didn't feel like working on my hammocks, nor did I want to resume my work on Pi.

"I don't think I have the strength to start all over again, Mr. Whitehall ."

"Soon come, soon come," he said. I knew he was trying to console me, but I was discouraged. I tried to think of what I could do to summon the strength to begin my task anew.

I was sipping my usual Dragon Stout while I sat on one of Mr. Whitehall's wooden benches near the thatched beach bar. The daily drink special on Saturdays was always two-for-one rum punches. Two-for-one in Jamaica means you pay for two drinks at their regular price at one time, then are served two drinks, one at a time. I never drank more than one stout. Tourists started to drift in for cocktails, priming themselves for another fabulous sunset, and Mr. Whitehall put some slow Reggae music on the CD player.

Two Rastas, each with tightly woven dreadlocks, which reached nearly to their knees, strolled along the beach talking patois. All I caught of their conversation was a Jamaican proverb one of the men proclaimed to his companion, perhaps as some pronouncement which illustrated the point he was making.

"You boasy like a cock chicken," the Rasta said. Roughly translated, he said, "You are as boastful as a young rooster." In other words, you are behaving as if the world belongs to you.

I drank more of my stout and thought about what I'd heard the man say. Indeed, I concluded, I had been too full of myself when it came to the business with Pi. I had forgotten my true purpose with working on my numbers was not to find a final number, nor to set some world record of extrapolated digits. My task was to crunch my numbers each day, commit them to memory, and start a new day where I had left off before. I felt refreshed.

"Hase mek wase', Mr. Whitehall," I said. I finished my stout and placed the empty on the bar.

"Long run, shaat ketch," Mr. Whitehall said. I went around the bar and got my hammocks out of my footlocker.

"Yes, Mr. Whitehall. 'Long run, short catch.' Sooner or later."

I finished one hammock and sold it. I insisted Mr. Whitehall take ten dollars. On my way home I stopped at a restaurant and treated

myself to some fresh curried Red Snapper fish, black peas and rice and pimento cookies. I rested on Sunday, only fashioning some ear plugs out of my nylon hammock twine, which I coated with lime leaves. I smoked my bowl after dinner and slept very peacefully.

In my excitement about resuming my job, I actually got to work fifteen minutes before starting time on Monday. I positioned myself as usual in front of Mr. Duncan's cafe, inserted my new ear plugs, daubed a little yellow zinc oxide on my nose and put on my lime green hat. I began rocking off my forward left foot and back again, swinging my right arm to and fro. I kneaded my left hand into my brow. Soon, I was apace.

It was a glorious day, sunshine and a gentle onshore breeze soothed me as I started to work on Pi again, started to crunch my numbers. I looked up to see Junior walking down the beach with mommy and daddy.

No problem, I said to myself.