

## Math is a Home to Come Back to

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MATH 251

My earliest memories of math were of my dad trying to teach me fractions. Right now, Dad is a person: a friend sometimes, sometimes a person in need, sometimes a person to go to for some reassurance or companionship. I've grown up and so has he. But back then, Dad was not a person. He was a vagueness wearing a flannel button-down shirt in the corner of my perceptions. It was just like in some of the old cartoons: legs without a face. He was more of a Presence.

He was not very successful in trying to teach me fractions and I don't think it was entirely his fault. Maybe third grade was too early to learn fractions for me. I don't know how many times he tried, but it seemed to me like he quit after one session.

That's all I really remember from third grade: my parents tried to homeschool my three sisters and me and weren't all that successful.

Fast forward the tape and those blurry, sun-filled and game-filled memories turn into 8th grade. I kind of floated from one thing to the next, never really thinking about why I was doing things or what it was about. I loved my best friend, Jeff, and I loved playing with my sisters and watching cartoons, but that was really all I can recall. There was no pressure or anxiety that so many of the kids that age I know feel. I just was. I didn't have to be anything or please anyone.

In 8th grade, I started to get really interested in Stuff. I remember being in my math class and starting to become inspired by the material: reveling in the concepts and guessing what I was going to learn next. I was able to look at a math problem in a 2-inch deep math textbook, understand it, and learned how to flip to the back to check my answer.

At around that time, all the 8th graders had a choice: they could either stay behind and re-do Algebra material with the 7th graders or take the bus every day at a certain time to Carlmont High School and take Geometry. I decided to stay behind and work independently from the textbook. It was a really fun year because I was pretty much left to do problem sets for the duration of Math class while the teacher taught the rest of the class. I loved doing problem sets. I also loved being independent because that meant I could space out and draw comics all I liked. I'm not sure how I managed to do both (I sure did a lot of drawing) but the teacher seemed to be satisfied so I ended up drawing and problem-setting my way through 8th grade. It was great.

Now the picture had more focus, more definition.

8th grade ended. I started my first year at Gunn High School and woke up entirely to find that the sun-filled days were over. I was at Gunn High School now, ranked (as of today) the number one school in the US for academics. I promptly failed my first test, an Algebra review. I then proceeded to fail two retakes of the same test. The teacher had a talk with me. She said that I needed to move down into the other class. I'm not quite sure why I resisted going to the other class so much, but the prospect made my 13-year-old self break down and cry in front of the teacher. I just had to stay in Algebra 2/Geometry!

The teacher listened to my pleas and I managed to stay in the class. At about this time, I think, I started to make friends. I was on the cross country team and if you were doing sports, you could get a prep period instead of going to PE class. It turns out that several of my teammates had that prep period with me. And what class did I have after that period every day? Math class! So thanks to making these friends I was able to form the good habit of doing my math homework right before math class. As it turns out, doing homework makes a difference. I learned the first of many lessons about how to be a good math student.

At that point I began developing probably the healthiest habit of my high school career: doodling in my notes. This was not just ordinary head-in-the-clouds doodling. This was super doodling. I created a character called Algebra Girl. She was a cute anime girl with big eyes and ponytailed hair going down her shoulders, who wore a circus outfit and had a monkey tail. She was all over my notes, giving me pointers and suggestions in my math work, like a running commentary. She was always helpful: sometimes just standing there looking pretty so I would flip through my notes just to see her, sometimes with little word balloons carrying bits of advice like "don't forget this!" or even puns on the material.

Algebra Girl gave way to Trig Girl the next year. Trig girl had short hair, wore something akin to a jumpsuit with a scarf around her neck like a pilot, and had big hyena ears, fangs, and talons. Where Algebra Girl was cheerful and emphatic, Trig Girl was fun-loving and sporty. After Trig Girl came Calculus Girl, who had tri-colored hair and cute doggy ears and wore whatever I was wearing that day myself, as a rule. She commented on things more sarcastically and took on whatever mood I was in that day, sometimes tired or sick (yes, I went to school even when I was sick) sometimes ecstatic at the fact that the teacher brought donuts to school.

I drew these girls in my notes for three years and started ace-ing my tests, getting A's in my math classes, and ended up getting a 5 on my Calculus AP.

And then, that's it. I thought I was done with Math. Math was just another class I could check off a list of things to be done with so that I could finish high school and move onto college, which was also another checklist so that I could get a bachelor's degree and go get a job in Japan. The fields of math and science should have been options for me, but the prospect just really didn't occur to me. My parents never talked about it, and neither did my friends who were all being pushed into going into the medical field. So, I went to college, studied Japanese, graduated, lived in Japan for a year, came back, and got a job teaching Japanese.

So I'm popping in this DVD hoping that it'll play on my bluray player.

Here I am almost fifteen years later taking a math class and hoping that someday I'll be eligible to become an astronaut. I've since lost my child-like daze that I had all through high school and college. I'm finally fully awake and know all the lessons about how to learn and how to be patient. I've come back to math and science because I've always loved it, but had never considered it before because I was just spacy as a kid.