

Analog Days

Born at a hospital, as I was, my Aunt Jean was not allowed to be present for the birth. However, back at home, she held me and sang to me. For decades thereafter she reminded people what had happened. When she sang just one tone, I'd sing it back to her in response, just a day or two after birth, matching wavelength, frequency, in analog communication – no words needed.

At about 7-10 months, I was no longer allowed to breast-feed, so had been provided glass baby bottles with liquids inside that would go either toward or away from me, as I held the bottle either up or down. The fluid in the bottle seemed to give one choice or the other. However, as I tried the up and down exercise, I wondered whether I could make the liquid suspend itself in the middle of the two extremes. Flowing back and forth, little by little, I came to find equilibrium, where the liquid held in a stunning balance. The fluidity of the liquid, coming to a peaceful balance, amazed me. In this world things didn't have to be either this or that. They'd flow, but could suspend, as well!

One summer day, perhaps a year later, I was out in the backyard wearing only a diaper and plastic pants, when I noticed a buzz coming from a wooden pole beyond the yard. The pole had a cross-piece at the top. And that piece held several glass bowls, upside down. I went closer to the back of the yard to hear and see better. The pole was stationed beyond the alley at the end of the yard. The buzz was low and constant. It didn't change. It had energy. It kept going. But the pole didn't move.

This was strange. I wondered whether the pole were an alive thing, an animal of some kind. After all, it had eyes on top, three on each side. Did it see me? I was a little afraid because it didn't tell me whether it was alive when I was staring at it. I couldn't tell what it meant by the buzzing. Suddenly I had an idea.

Running into the house despite the discomfort of plastic pants, I found my dad's T-square. He was an engineer, and this double piece of wood looked like the pole. Suspecting the pole was some kind of animal, but a scary one, I named the T-square, which was not scary and did not buzz or have eyes. I put him in my baby carriage.

Some days later, I was sitting at the kitchen table on one of the adult's chairs. The table was at the level of my head. My parents came toward me. Their heads loomed over me like big balloons. They were saying things, urgently, but I did not understand, so ignored them.

Persisting to ask me something, they made their arms look like the T-square. Of course, I didn't know the name of this thing at the time. But I understood finally their dire question, "Where's Daddy's T-square?"

I said, “Hmm hmm.” They didn’t understand and asked again, so I insisted, “Hmm hmm!” Still confused they asked what I meant. I said in my best language of the time, “YOU know, the DOLL!”

“Hunh?” they said, as I ran toward the baby carriage and pulled down the blanket. I’d turned the strange buzzing pole into Hmm hmm, the Doll. They told the story for decades thereafter, and I did too, still remembering it. I’d tried to make sense of the pole and even make friends with a diminutive version. This may explain why, a year later, my parents had me photographed holding their big black old-fashioned telephone to my ear and mouth.

Once I discovered numbers, I wanted to use them to count everything in the universe. And although I knew few words, I did know that word “universe”. The parents had been taking me to Sunday School at a church in that suburban city, so I’d also learned the word “God”. At ages three and four, when I lacked a word for something, while trying to count everything in the universe, I would bite the inside of my mouth in a particular place to mark that meaning, so I’d be able to remember and come back to it.

Over time I’d realize that I could count things not only by the thing itself, but also by grouping it with one or more other things, and then counting the groups. But I wondered whether the groups should really count. If they did, then I could count by 2s, then 3s in a group, then 4s and ... one and on. This is how I discovered macro infinities.

One day I took a green leaf from the maple tree on the corner lot on our street. The beautiful leaf had veins throughout, allow it to be torn along them. I tried tearing smaller pieces into ever tinier pieces, and realized the pieces could go much tinier yet. This is how I discovered micro infinities. And that numbers were insufficient to hold the entirety of the universe.

In bed at night, I wondered about a blob out in the universe that did not exist except in my imagination. “If I make up something in my mind, does it count?” I asked myself. I specifically put the blob together with my knockers and tricycle in a picture out in space. I came to the decision that, if God did not exist, then my thought of a nonexistent thing should not count. But if God did exist, then even an imaginary thing should count.

And when I was in Sunday School one morning at age 4, I felt the place was not right for me. I made my way down the stairs and out of the building, down the street and into the street. This was Broad Street, the main drag in the City, and traffic was flowing. Just as I was about to escape across the street, and potentially lose my life, my dad came and swooped me up. But I knew I had to be out and free to explore rather than inside the institution.

And that led to my walks, ages 6 to 20, through the woods, endless play where the Earth herself taught me ineffable truths of blending and caring, of watching and knowing, because all was truly alive there, and the sounds were the curvaceous, analog utterances of living beings and their interactions.