

BROWN: In life, it's all work

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This past month continued to be a busy one. I've been running from one thing to the next, and right now a number of related things come to mind — origami, counting, opening doors and Ben Affleck.

But perhaps I should explain.

The Canadian Mathematical Society had its summer meeting in Halifax two weeks ago, and last week I went off to St. John's for another conference, one in my particular field.

Both had more than 250 participants, and I imagine that both cities prepared for the kind of ruckus only mathematicians can create (yes, I am joking).

I didn't have a chance to get a haircut before St. John's, where I would be speaking, and my wife lamented that my hair was so wild that I looked like one of the Three Stooges. I added "the good looking one," to which she concurred, so I felt good about that.

As well, I don't like standing out from the herd at these conferences.

At both conferences, I was overwhelmed by the wealth of great ideas. Here in Halifax, an old student of mine, Erik Demaine, gave a public lecture. I have to laugh at the "old" part, as Erik was only 14 when he got his bachelor's degree at Dahousie in '95 and was the youngest professor ever hired at MIT.

His talk covered a lot of interesting mathematics, including his primary interest in origami, that art of folding paper. Who would have guessed that there'd be so much math in that? But there is. And you can't help but be impressed by the sheer amount of work Erik has done over the years. Talent is worth a lot, but it is nothing without effort.

And the conference in St. John's drove home the value of sweat in mathematics. To be sure, there were clever people there, but in every talk, I could see how the most fascinating finds were the result of months and years of devotion to solving problems.

One talk described the work of a mathematician, Philippe Flajolet, who developed ways of counting using algebra and calculus — a surprising method, with applications to engineering, computing and even biochemistry. But it was his life's work, spread out over decades.

At the conference, I concentrated hard and picked up a number of nice new ideas for my trouble.

Someone mentioned the problem of opening a door by randomly pulling keys out of your pocket, and I sat down to figure out how many keys I'd expect to use to open the door. So, for example, if I pulled out a key, checked it in the lock, and then, if it didn't work, put it into the other pocket, I would expect to take about $1 + 1/2 + 1/3 + \dots + 1/30 \sim 4$ tries to open the door, on average. On the other hand, had I spent a few hours on George Street first, I might be forgetful and put the keys back into the same pocket, in which case I would take about 30 tries to get it right, on average — a good case for staying sober.

Math is good work — if you can get it — which brings me round to Affleck. He took a fair bit of heat from the media for saying at the Academy Awards that his marriage is "work." My wife and I will be married for 20 years this July, and I couldn't agree more. Anything worthwhile, including math and marriage, requires work. If you aren't putting in a lot of effort, you aren't reaping the greatest benefits.

So roll up your sleeves and dive in. The best things in life are worth it.

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