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WSMA Competition

Painting by Numbers

As a young girl, I will admit that math was not one of my most dire concerns; I was much more willing to focus my attentions on the usual enjoyments of a pre-adolescent child then spend my time figuring out the answers to basic arithmetic. What seemed vastly more important to me was the discovery of far off planets in the regions of my imagination, a place where I felt like I could travel greater distances than numbers and mathematics could ever take me. I suppose that I thought that somewhere in this world there was a boring man who was willing to waste away in the confines of some office writing down equations, but to me this was not the kind of life that I found important, let alone interesting. I learned math only because it was required of me; but for the life of me, I truly couldn't see the use of parabolas in my everyday life.

That is, until I met a boy who didn't understand a single word I said.

The summer after I graduated from the 8th grade, my family had provided me with one of the most wonderful opportunities have ever known in my young life; the chance to travel half way around the world to the place of my choosing. As I sat at a computer, deciding on whether or not the location was to be Costa Rica or France, I happened upon a travel program entitled *The Moroccan Wonderer*. Interested, I clicked on the link and began to read about what was included in the travel package. As I peered through the pages containing information on a country of exotic spices and mystical Arabian Nights, I decided then and there that this was the

closest I would ever come to the ‘far off planets’ of my childhood dreams. The plane ticket was booked the following week.

The voyage was an absolutely breathtaking one; indeed I will never forget riding camels in the Sahara Desert or tasting the refreshing flavor of mint tea brewed by the hands of people who had been making the same recipe for generations. These memories, all of which I will never forget, made fascinating stories when I returned home; however, none of these events entirely changed my way of thinking, as one little child had done in the final hours of my journey.

It had been a busy day on the streets of Marrakesh, and the sun was just beginning to set over the horizon as my traveling companions and I made our way through the city streets looking at little shops and venders in the market place. While searching for gifts to thank my family for generously providing me with the trip, I saw a small boy, no older than 8 years old, sitting alone tending to a small collection of paintings. The artwork that surrounded him was beautiful; all kinds of natural scenery from Morocco was depicted on small pieces of canvas. I, eager to find out how I might acquire some of his artwork, asked him how much he was selling his paintings for. He responded to my question with a look of confusion. I quickly realized that he didn’t speak English, and, to my disappointment, I couldn’t find our group translator to help me communicate my wishes. I set off to make my sentiments known on my own without our guide’s assistance.

It must have been some sight to see, for the only way I could think of expressing my thoughts was through a game of charades. The boy, who responded to my attempts at communication with a fit of laughter, looked up at me with brown eyes filled with as much

confusion as before. Frustrated, I finally took out a piece of paper and wrote down a single number in an attempt to hackle out a price.

Immediately, he understood.

We then began debating over the cost of the paintings, eventually settled on 25 dirhams per each object bought. I smiled as I showed him how to add up the total price of the artwork, without being able to communicate at all with our usual linguistically methods.

So this was the great real-life application of mathematics that my teachers had promised me existed! It is because I understood the magic of numbers that I was able to understand another human being, even if it only was in the simplest of terms. It was as if I had discovered a new language, one that was not confined to cultures or geographic locations, but a language that was as vast as the universe itself. That night, I looked at the stars as more than just beautiful balls of light in the sky, but as ambassadors who were whispering, no, shouting their secrets in a language we humans did not yet understand. Mathematicians are the ultimate translators.

Today, as our fluency in the language of math grows, so too does the demand for speakers of math and science also increase. Brilliant minds such as Albert Einstein, Sir Isaac Newton, Galileo Galilee, and countless others have transliterated only a portion of the words of the universe; information that is so vital to our world today that without it our modern technology and way of life would not exist. Everyone who wants to be an educated citizen must learn (at least) the fundamentals of the language that govern our world, for it is math and science that will lead the human race into a higher understanding of our existence. It will be through the knowledge obtained by math and science that I may one day realize my childhood fantasy of visiting a planet for off in the regions of space.

All of this knowledge I gained when I bought those four paintings from that little boy in Morocco. I feel now as if I have underpaid him.