

New Nonfiction by I.S. Berry: “Math and Other Things I Learned from War”



Numbers don't lie, they say. $2 + 2 = 4$. No matter how you rearrange it; no matter how you solve it. Turn it into subtraction ($4 - 2 = 2$), and it still works. Math's rules are inviolable, unyielding. Particular inputs yield fixed outputs. Even, say, in cases of absolute value, where more than one answer is possible, the results are still finite and consistent.

Then again, numbers can be irrational. Complex. The existence of a mean requires that data fall above or below it. There are exceptions to rules (the commutative property doesn't apply to

division); theorems, you realize, rest on assumptions. You start to see that numbers, perhaps, aren't as honest as they appear. Sometimes they trick you. Sometimes they betray you.

Twelve feet was how far the mortar had plunged into the ground of the CIA compound. People said the thud shook every trailer. I was on the other side of the Green Zone and heard about it on my radio. Lucky thing I'd been gone: the mortar had landed behind the Morale, Welfare, and Recreation building, only twenty feet from my trailer, along the path I walked to work every morning. A dud, thankfully: no detonation; no injuries. By the time I returned, workers had buried the unexploded ordnance, blended new soil with the old so thoroughly I could barely see the point of impact. Invisible, as though the thing had never existed—a null set, an imaginary number.

The mortar landing in the neighboring compound a few weeks earlier should've been a warning. But somehow an incursion into our own house seemed different. There were rules, hard-and-fast—of physics, probability—that all but guaranteed something like this wouldn't happen. That assured us the chances were almost nil.

In November 2004, Iraq was many things: the location of my first tour as a CIA counterterrorist case officer; home to the confluence of the Tigris and Euphrates; safe haven for terrorist leader Abu Musab al-Zarqawi; a sweltering, palm-freckled desert; the most dangerous place on earth. By November 2004, more than 800 American soldiers had been killed in Operation Iraqi Freedom.

At the CIA station in Baghdad, we were trying to track down Zarqawi, but the war kept getting in our way. We couldn't conduct source meetings in the Red Zone. Couldn't do the usual things: eavesdrop in cafés, schmooze on cocktail circuits,

dine at strategic restaurants. Couldn't even leave the Green Zone to walk the streets. We were trapped in a fragile green bottle. Five attacks a day. Ten. Twenty. Some in daylight; some in darkness. Some aimed at the center of the Green Zone; some, the fringes. Some victimless; some fatal. An almost infinite number of variables.

Iraq was the place I learned to do math.

Like an alarm, mortar rush hour began most mornings at 0700. I'd open my eyes a fraction, watch the neon green numbers on my small digital clock, guess the seconds before another mortar would launch. Outside, "Big Brother"—the centralized public address system—would broadcast unintelligible instructions from the neighboring U.S. embassy compound. Sometimes—depending on my ratio of fear to exhaustion—I'd drag myself out of bed and run to the bunker outside my trailer. I knew by heart the graffiti inside its concrete slab walls: slogans and drawings that laughed at war, taunted war, ran from war, tried to make sense of war.

We'd heard stories—of the State Department officer reading in his trailer when an inert rocket pierced the wall; of the Gurkhas, huddled inside a building, killed by a mortar. One station officer confessed that he slept on the bottom bunk, wore body armor to bed, and drank himself to sleep. Others talked of spending the night at the CIA station, which had a sturdy roof and walls. I was arriving at work earlier and staying later.

But amid the hailstorm, nothing had ever struck our compound—which surely meant that nothing could. After all, what good is data if it can't predict outcomes, offer certainty?

There were rules, I'd learned. Mortar attacks were preceded by audible launches (deceptively gentle, like hiccups). Rockets offered little warning—except a high-pitched whistle on close ones—but produced deafening explosions. Car bombs were deeper, more sonorous, lasted longer. If you could hear but not feel a detonation, it was remote. When the ground shook and pebbles sprinkled down, you ran for cover.

Insurgents launched more attacks in warm weather, some at the station postulated. But others countered that wintry air prompted action. Daylight offered insurgents good target visibility and freedom from curfew, but night provided cover. During the occasional rain shower, U.S. military helos couldn't fly and deter attacks. But insurgents' trucks and grip stocks would get stuck in the mud. Everything boiled down to probabilities.

I was doing my own calculations. I didn't condition my hair in the morning: five fewer minutes in the shower meant five fewer minutes under my flimsy trailer roof. Didn't hit the snooze button. It was, we all knew, just a question of out-calculating the enemy: Master the math and you'd be fine.

Sometimes I chatted about the mortars and rockets with the Military Police on our compound. A few shrapnel-resistant guard booths offered shelter, but the MPs spent most of their time outside, unprotected.

"Shoots," my favorite MP dismissed the threat. "We been noticin' them mortars always go over our compound. Comin' from the other side of Haifa Street. We ain't in their trajectory. Ain't got nuthin' to worry about."

Everyone had a rule. A failsafe equation. Until the dud mortar landed in our compound.

Some four months into my tour, and the sky was gem-blue,

translucent. Usually, the air was choked with dust, char, and smoke from explosions and burn pits; at night, stars pulsated through the thick haze like small dying hearts. You never got a sky so rich, so blue.

I'd gone for a long jog. Stripped off my running clothes and turned on the shower. Iraq's first democratic elections had triggered a fleeting and tenuous peace, and the mortars and rockets had temporarily receded, a bully nursing his wounds. The sky was quiet. I didn't know how long it would last, but for now I could condition my hair.

I dropped the bar of soap. My left hand returned to my right breast. A lump. Hard, palpable, so close to the skin it was almost visible.

Naked, dripping wet, I walked to my bed, probed the small mass. The statistics, the calculations, began. I was too young. No one in my family had ever had breast cancer. I didn't smoke. Most lumps were nothing. Worst case scenario, breast cancer had a high cure rate. The odds were all in my favor. Math, trusty friend: don't fail me this time. Like you did with the mortar.

I palpated my breast and stared at my trailer's thin ceiling. Pairs of Blackhawks descended toward Landing Zone Washington. I wondered if I'd miss their sound when I left. They'd keep coming and going long after a new tenant occupied my small trailer, after I was gone.

On my next home leave, I had a biopsy. The lump was benign. The math hadn't failed me. But I knew the law of averages: eventually, you're bound to land above or below the mean.

1,900? 1,950? How many soldiers had been killed? My yearlong tour was drawing to a close, and the number plagued me. More than double the count when I'd arrived. It couldn't break

2,000 before I left Iraq, I decided: this was my hard-and-fast rule. Every day, like a fanatical horoscope reader, I checked the death count.

One month left in Baghdad and days slowed down, passed in paralyzed motion, as though they were slogging through mud. The math wasn't adding up; 24 hours was longer than 24 hours. Thirty days became sixty, became a hundred, became infinity.

October 25, 2005. Number of American soldiers killed in Iraq: 2,000.

I left a few weeks later.

A week? A month gone by? Writer Graham Greene said, "When you escape to a desert, the silence shouts in your ear." So it was for me. When I escaped Baghdad, the silence was deafening. Leaving war didn't necessarily mean that war had left me, I found.

These days, it's almost clichéd to recite the litany of stumbling blocks upon a return to civilian life—traffic jams, loud noises, big crowds. Some days, just getting out of bed. (Does anyone, in fact, come back from war without these stories?) Often, I stared out the window for hours at a time. Days fell through holes, disappeared like the mortar under the ground, as though they'd never existed.

I moved from my cramped condo in Washington, D.C. to a more spacious, quieter house in the suburbs. It was near Reagan National Airport. At night, sleeping on a mattress on the floor, I could hear airplanes descending. I thanked God they weren't Blackhawks and at the same time wished they were.

It was a degree of luck, I knew, that I'd survived. For others, the math hadn't worked out so well.

I volunteered at Walter Reed Hospital. I delivered care packages to injured and ailing soldiers. My fellow volunteers and I roamed the sterile halls around every major holiday like tooth fairies. The psych ward—the largest in the hospital—was off-limits. Nurses warned us not to put sharp objects in care packages. Even mentally healthy soldiers weren't allowed to have access to instruments of suicide. War had reached every bedpost.

One evening, our charity organized a casino night for the recuperating soldiers: card games and raffles bearing prizes like stereos and computers. My job was to talk to the veterans while they played cards, divine what they wanted in care packages. Every soldier had ideas. They were unflappable, oblivious to their missing arms and legs, the bandages around their heads, the wheelchairs to which they were confined for life. *Shot glasses, robes, candy*, they suggested. Small things made them happy.

As casino night drew to a close, the volunteers assembled on the stage to announce the grand prize. The soldiers gathered below, excitedly comparing numbers of tickets won and lost. Two men—not more than forty years combined—boasted only one ticket between them, intending to split any prize they won. One had lost his legs and was lying on his stomach, leaning over the stage to grasp half of the precious ticket, while his buddy, in a wheelchair on the floor below, held the other half. They clutched the scrap gleefully like it was a ticket to another world. The odds, I knew, were overwhelmingly against them.

The announcer called the winning number. They'd lost.

I have a complicated relationship with math. Sometimes it's my friend, sometimes my enemy; sometimes reassuring, sometimes brutal and uncaring. Either way, it's here to stay, like a

childhood memory or a scar. I still find myself crunching the numbers, often on a daily basis. Anytime I feel death might win.

During the pandemic, I computed the chances of getting COVID from passing someone on my morning jog. How likely was I to die if I got sick? (I was middle-aged, healthy, didn't smoke...my numbers were good.) After getting vaccinated, I calculated the necessity of a mask, the risk of transmission at a restaurant, a concert. How long would it take for my inoculation to wear off? For a booster to kick in?

As I grow older, I get increasingly nervous at doctor appointments. I wonder if the smog of burning trash, ordnance smoke, and other toxins we breathed daily in Baghdad will eventually defeat my body's defenses, warp my cells. If the math will tell me it's my turn. Statistically, I know, I'm at higher risk.

Now I'm a parent, and every time there's a school shooting, the numbers start forming columns on the page. Chances are small, I tell myself, that it will ever happen to my son. That a school in our district will be the next target. Miniscule probability that it will be my son's school. Half a percent? Quarter percent? His classroom. Surely less than an eighth of a percent. (Right? Don't fail me, math. Please don't fail me on this one.)

Math is my memento from Baghdad. Adding, subtracting, multiplying, dividing chances of death, looking for answers and rules and reassurances, something to hold onto in a world that feels every day, in a million ways, like a war. All I can do is hope the numbers are on my side.

New Nonfiction by James Wells: "Signs"



June 27, 2008

I count between my mother's breaths: *one-thousand one, one-thousand two.*

Thirty minutes ago, her breaths were one second apart, and an hour ago, they were less than half a second apart. In the next few minutes, I know the interval between her breaths will become even longer, and soon, they will cease altogether.

My mother's big, beautiful, brown eyes are now glazed over, her eyelids almost closed. Her mouth is half-open, and her

teeth, teeth that had been pearly white for nearly her entire life, have yellowed, most likely because the care staff at the nursing home had not brushed them as often as she once had herself. My brown eyes, which many have said remind them of my mother's, stay fixated on her mouth and chest as I watch the gap between her shallow breaths grow longer.

As I put my face closer to my mother's and kiss her forehead, I recognize her smell. It's Pond's Moisturizing Cream, mixed with the scent of her hair and skin. The only sounds in the hospital room are my mother's shallow breathing, the clicking of the I.V. machine pumping antibiotics into her bloodstream, and the occasional whispered conversation between myself and our oldest daughter, Millicent, who was able to meet me here about a half-hour ago.

My mother lived a remarkable yet tragic life. Today is no different.

Despite the attentive care of a nurse and the monitoring of all of the medical equipment, I knew my mother gave up her struggle fifteen minutes before any machine or medical professional did. I was able to detect the very slight change in her breathing before the monitors or staff. As soon as I noticed the difference from what I felt were struggled breaths to more relaxed breaths, I called the nurse. After checking my mother and the monitors, she told me there was nothing different about my mother's condition. To me, the change in her breathing occurred as clearly as the transfer in sound and rhythm of a muscle car shifting from a lower gear into overdrive. Her breathing, which seems more relaxed now, tells me that she has resigned herself to her death and is coasting on overdrive to eternity.

But this wasn't the first strange thing to happen today. About five hours ago, I was at a Delta Airlines gate at Bluegrass Airport in Lexington, Kentucky, waiting to board a flight to Fort Lauderdale, Florida. I planned to meet my wife, Brenda,

who was at a conference near there, and for us to embark on a thirtieth wedding anniversary cruise. We'd already canceled our trip once before when Brenda's mother became very ill, and this was our second try.

As I watched the first passengers move toward the gate to board, I received a call from my mother's nursing home in Versailles, Kentucky. One of the staff there told me, "We think your mother's bronchitis has flared up again, and to be on the safe side, we've admitted her to the hospital for tests." She suspected that my mother would be fine and back in her room at the nursing home in a few hours. Despite her reassurance and my eagerness to get on the plane, I still didn't feel right about it. My mother was treated at the same hospital the year before for pneumonia, so I called the hospital and asked for more information. My call was transferred from Reception, to Emergency, and then to my mother's ward. I was reassured when the nurse informed me she knew my mother from her previous visits. She told me my mother might have pneumonia and that a round of antibiotics should knock it out of her, just as it did the year before. When I told her my predicament and pressed her for more information, she informed me that the worst-case scenario was probably an overnight stay in the hospital, and given my mother's present condition, I should not cancel my plans to go out of town. But I still felt uncomfortable about the idea of getting on that plane. I called my daughters Millicent and Emily. I also called my older sister, Kathleen, and my brother, Ora, neither of whom live in the state, and briefed them about the changes with Mother. They all said, "Get on the plane." I even called our Episcopal priest, Father Allen, who visited my mother at the nursing home. He told me the same thing. "Get on the plane. Do the badly needed, over-due cruise with Brenda." I called my wife, waiting in Orlando. Only she recommended forgetting the cruise and be with my mom.

I can't explain it, but as I was about to board the plane

after I heard the last call to board, I changed my mind, convinced the Delta agents to get my already checked luggage off the plane, and rushed to the hospital, only twenty minutes away.

Just a few hours later, I am cradling my mother in my arms and watching her die. I hate to think how I would have felt if I had gotten on that plane and my mother died alone. If that was God's miracle, I know that it was intended more for me than it was for my mother.

One-thousand one, one-thousand two, one-thousand three.

Mother was a very bright woman, the smartest in her high school class, and graduated first in her nursing school class during World War II. Fifty years later, when my siblings and I admitted her against her will to an alcohol detox facility, the mental health professionals there measured her I.Q. to be very high. The medical and mental health staff there could never convince her that she had an alcohol problem. Sometimes I wonder whether she really did, too.

We never heard my mother slur a word, never saw a stagger or stumble. However, the mountains of empty, opaque green and brown sherry and wine bottles in her basement made us wonder. I suspect the alcohol helped numb the pain of her overwhelming grief. Today, when I see the large trashcans full of empty beer and bourbon bottles and crushed beer cans in my garage, I wonder whether the same demons that haunted her might now haunt me.

She was an introvert, an avid reader, and in the last decades of her life, a hoarder and a recluse. She and my father were polar opposites. She was studious. He was not. She was a good writer and speller. He had to struggle with every word and sentence he wrote. She was always calm. He had a bad temper. She took her time and often made him late. He always had a lot of energy and wanted to get things done right away. They were

so opposite that my father often wrote about how he felt he did not deserve to be married to my mother.

My mother was a widow at the age of thirty-eight. After my father's death in Vietnam, she never dated, went out, or even spoke to or about another man. For years after his death, my siblings and I would wake up in the middle of the night and hear her not crying—but wailing like a wounded animal, for my father. I never thought about the difference between crying and wailing, but those nights, I learned. Her crying and shedding tears in silence could have been a private communication to my father that she had not accepted his fate. But the prolonged, high-pitch scream of her wail was a mournful plea designed to convince the heavens to let my father come back from the dead. We would all eventually fall back asleep, wake in the morning, and pretend that everything was normal.

Despite the yoke of grief she could never escape from, my sister, brother, and I agree that she couldn't have done a better job raising us. After my father's death, her only job, her sole motivation in life, was to take the very best care of us and give us the best possible educations. With my father's life insurance funds, she put us in some of the finest private college prep schools in the South. She helped us with our English, French, Spanish, German, algebra, calculus, and trigonometry lessons. She drove us to band, dance, swimming, wrestling, football, and soccer. She put all of her energy and resources into raising us and did nothing for herself. For example, in the forty-three years separating her death from my father's, she only bought three cars, the last one in 1972.

By the time my siblings and I all finished college and got our M.A.'s, M.S.'s, M.D.s, and Ph.D.'s, she knew she had accomplished her mission. Left only to the company of her grief, without us being there, she started to go downhill a little faster. My father's death broke her heart and destroyed her mind; she just kept it all together until we finished our

education and started our own families.

We were kids, and awareness of mental illness was not as prevalent as it is today—and so we never recognized our mother's depression since our father's death. Had we known what we know today, had we been a little bit older, a little more informed, we would have encouraged her to seek help. The years of depression eventually led to her self-medicating with alcohol, which years later probably led to her dementia.

A few years ago, we had to put my mother in a nursing home after the assisted living community's management kept complaining about her behavior. She began acting as if my father was still alive and would do odd things, such as set an extra plate at the dining table and insist it was for Jack. The last straw for the management was when she packed her small suitcase, went down to the lobby, and told everyone she was waiting for Jack to pick her up in his car.

One of the toughest and most memorable days for me occurred when I took her for an eye doctor's visit. She was holding onto my arm as I helped her up some steps. As she lovingly looked at me with her big, brown eyes, she said, "I'm so fortunate to have a husband as good as you." I faked a smile back at her and said to myself, "Shit, she now thinks I'm Dad." My heart broke as I realized that the primary foundation for her existence for over forty years was now cracked and crumbling away right in front of me. After being faithful to his memory, she had forgotten his death and the sacrifices the two of them have made. To this day, I have not made up my mind whether that statement from her was a blessing or a curse, for her, as well as for me.

One-thousand one, one-thousand two, one-thousand three, one-thousand four.

My mother's death did not begin this afternoon. It started in 1965. I knew what killed her and what haunted her for decades.

In addition to her grief and depression, it was not knowing why my father felt he had to do the things he did, as well as the mysterious circumstances behind his death.

It won't be long. It won't be long before my mother and father are together again. After being apart for over four decades, within minutes, she will be with him. And in a few days, her casket will be placed directly on top of his in a national military cemetery.

One-thousand one, one-thousand two, one-thousand three, one-thousand four, one-thousand five.

How is she still holding on? Why doesn't she let go? As my daughter and I hold her and stroke her face, and with tears streaming down both of our faces, we whisper for to her to "Go to Jack, go to Jack."

One-thousand one, one-thousand two, one-thousand three, one-thousand four, one-thousand five, one-thousand six, one thousand sev....

And still no breath. My daughter calls for the nurse. The nurse comes in, bends over, and places her stethoscope on my mother's chest. She says that Mother's heart is still beating. We wait...ten seconds, twenty seconds, thirty seconds. The nurse removes her stethoscope and stands up. Her actions tell us everything. No words are necessary. My mother is gone.

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Three days after leaving my mother's hospital bed, while going through her box of "important papers," I come across a note she had left among her financial records and insurance policies. There is no date on it, but knowing she wrote it on the back of a mimeographed assignment for a class I have not taught in twenty years, I suspect its date was around 1990. At that time, we lived within a half-mile of each other, and she would often babysit our youngest daughter at our house. I

suspect she removed the assignment from the trash can in my home office. She would often leave notes on little scraps of paper all over the house when her memory started to fail.

The note reads:

Jack had written about how furious a certain Vietnamese colonel was at whatever Jack had said to him. I couldn't help but wonder at the time, when Jack was shot down, if that colonel might have had something to do with it; might have had connections with the V.C. – or somehow been involved – yet of course, perhaps not.

I think again of that moment at the eye doctor's visit. I now believe that she was telling me that day to assume my father's role and investigate his death's actual cause, as he would have, being a career military police officer and criminal investigator. The downing of the CIA plane my father was a passenger in may have been a random act by the enemy. It may have been an assassination order by someone in the National Liberation Front, the South Vietnamese government, or God forbid, the U.S. government.

Signs pointing to what really happened could be anywhere.

I thought of the alcohol bottles in the basement. The screaming at night, when she thought we were all asleep. I thought of the mysterious force that told me not to board that plane, to be with Mother, and not go on vacation with my spouse. I thought of my own future, my own children, the way the past does not go away, and how the crimes and sins of the past persist, and haunt the present.

Right there, holding my mother's note, the clue she left hidden in the tragic wreckage of our past, I make a promise to myself that I will do everything I can to uncover the truth. I will learn the truth about what killed my father, and that killed my mother—before it kills me, before it kills my family.