

A World of Ones and Zeros
By
Robert Rietschel, June 29, 2023

The sociology professor wanted to conduct an experiment and he needed people who were very traditional in their thinking to be his subjects. So, he went to Peoria and asked for folks who considered themselves salt of the earth, middle-of-the-road, solid citizens to volunteer for an afternoon experiment that would assess numbers and how we might simplify all of arithmetic. There would be substantial financial compensation. He needed two hundred volunteers. It only took a little word-of-mouth advertising for him to fill the auditorium he had rented for this exercise.

The socialist introduced himself as a college math teacher who had pondered the difficulties so many students had with math and decided that perhaps having 10 integers was too much for most purposes and made life needlessly difficult. After all, binary code used only zero and one and was able to produce everything modern society needed on the internet. Vivid images, infinite choices of things to do or read or see. Why should we trouble ourselves with the numbers 2 through 9 when one and zero got the job done? In order to test the hypothesis that all we needed was a binary number system, the audience would be divided into two groups of 100 each. The professor pointed out that only one and zero were needed to do this. There was murmuring among the audience members. It seemed there was genuine intrigue at the professor's suggestion that we'd over complicated things.

Thus, separated into two groups of 100 townsfolk each, the professor went on to tell the people on his left that they would be the zeros and those on his right the ones. He quickly pointed out that there should be no stigma associated with either number, they were just numbers and both were needed in a binary world to create all the possibilities we associated with the internet. The zeros still seemed uncomfortable as it seems the social stigma of being a zero had carried over from societal norms. Those others got to call themselves number one. Eventually, one of the zeros actually said this out loud. It was what everyone was thinking. The professor smiled and said that he remembered a certain song that claimed that one was the loneliest number. That brought on laughter.

The professor said that he hoped everyone was satisfied with a world that excluded the numbers two through nine. There seemed to be general head nodding that it was good riddance to those numbers. The professor said that we could move on now with life in a mere binary world. Much simpler, right? Still able to produce the variety we always had, right? We are all content that we haven't lost anything, right? A show of hands, please. Hands went up as the audience perceived that nothing had been lost in their being only ones and zeros. The professor said he wanted to make things a bit more interesting. He told the zeros that the zeros were happy. In fact, they couldn't be anything but happy. No matter how much or how little they had in life, they were happy. It wasn't a happiness that envied others as it was a perfect happiness. He wanted the zeros to put smiles on their faces and just contemplate a world of perfect happiness.

He then turned to the ones. In your world of oneness, you have money and lots of it. In fact, anytime you find something you want, you find you have plenty of money to buy it. You have unlimited wealth. You can buy that yacht or mansion. Absolutely no limits. The professor saw the smiles on the ones faces. He said there was one thing that money could not buy and that was happiness. The smiles faded. The professor continued. Your needs will always be met. Just as the zeros needs will be met, but their world will only provide what would be sufficient and no more. Your world will have abundance beyond your needs. And you will be able to acquire as much as you wish, but it will not bring happiness.

The professor then said that he wanted the two groups to talk among themselves about their new world and offer an evaluation of what was good, bad, or perhaps what they would most like to change. He would give them an hour to discuss this, and they were to only hold those discussions within their own group. After an hour the professor reconvened the session and asked one of the zeros what their group wanted to change if anything. They had identified a spokesman for the group, and he had a list of ideas. It boiled down to the

zeros wanting some of what the ones had. And, as you might expect, the ones similarly wanted some of what the zeros had.

The professor said that it sounded like his proposed binary system of a world of just zeros and ones wasn't as popular as he'd hoped. He said it sounded like the zeros wanted something more like 0.5 or 0.25 or 0.33 and that the ones wanted 1.05 or 1.25 or 1.33. It sounded like a binary system wouldn't meet everyone's needs. Were there any people in either the zero group or ones group who were perfectly happy with having just happiness or just infinite wealth? One or two hands went up and were slowly pulled back down. The professor said it looked like he would have to keep teaching fractions. There was laughter. Heads did nod. The professor said that another word for fraction would be a hybrid number. One that incorporated the elements of two different properties. Heads nodded. So, he went on, hybrids would be a good thing? A show of hands, please. Hands went up. The professor then said that he wanted to know if any of the audience would choose to live in a binary world if they had a choice of living in a hybrid world. A show of hands, please, who wants only a binary world? No hands went up.

The professor said that he was not really a math teacher, but a socialist and this wasn't a math exercise, but a social experiment. The numbers zero and one were stand-ins for male and female genders. The hybrids were people who didn't find having one trait assigned to them adequate. Happiness and wealth had been stand-ins for male and female traditional behavior. The point was that humans value variety when freed of a learned expectation. Absent the social mores that we were taught, would we wish to have only one sexual option or a fraction of something more? It need not be a total reversal, although that would be an option, it might just be a behavior traditionally associated with the opposite role. Maybe some of you would have preferred to have been in the zeros group instead of the ones, or vice versa. More commonly you would likely find that you just wanted a bit of what the other group had. Like during World War II when Rosie the Riveter became an acceptable role for women. Or women athletes competing in mixed doubles tennis. Or women's soccer teams winning more medals than the men. Or when men decide to use moisturizer and pierce their ears. Or women take up bodybuilding. Some sexual mores are incrementally or fractionally broken or bent. Offering hybrid options to those who find the traditional role confining. Many will be happy just being happy and many will be okay with just being rich even if they are miserable. You have chosen a pathway today when given a strict binary choice. That pathway offered fractional choices.

There was grumbling. You tricked us. You manipulated us. You're just another elite snob rubbing our noses in your social cesspool.

The professor said that he had just reframed the conversation to try to get the audience to see things from a different perspective. A perspective that was simmering under the surface of many in their midst. He said he wouldn't ask for a show of hands, but he knew that at least ten percent of those present would go home wishing they lived in that hybrid world rather than a binary one. But he also said that he didn't expect to change anyone's worldview in one afternoon. He only hoped that they would discuss this experiment with their friends, no matter what view they took home.

No minds were changed that day. Not openly. Talk of the experiment spread throughout Peoria and the local newspaper ran a story about it. The general tone of the story was that people were being manipulated and the professor was trying to recruit deviant behavior in the fine, upstanding citizens of Peoria. Oddly, car dealerships noted an increased interest in hybrid cars and sales zoomed. It seemed that some folks wanted a car that had the word "hybrid" on the back. It wasn't about gas mileage. Just an inside joke among a certain segment of the population.

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