Outlier, Or A Statistical Explanation of Fear

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OR
A Statistical Explanation of Fear

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Fear decreases confidence levels such that nothing is inside the normal distribution of certainty. A rare virus can possibly kill you. Somebody may reject you. Variables abound. That 5% exists. It matters not what the variable is, really–death, pain, insecurity. The slight possibility of losing control–the chance you may have to inhabit a chasm out of which you know not whether you will ascend–that uncertainty strikes such fear that you grasp at anything: washing your hands, puking up the contents of your gut, again and again, over and over.

Probability inhabits the realm of uncertainty, and measuring the bounds of certainty requires ever larger samples and smaller standard deviations each day. If the standard deviation of a routine is zero, then the confidence level edges closer to 1. Soon, there is no time for anything but washing and purging, checking the lights, the stove, the locks, and all plugged in appliances. Fear narrows and heightens the normal distribution of our lives. The tolerable margin of error grows ever smaller, such that any possibility of a normal life becomes an outlier.

Postscript

As a seventh grader, I would sit in algebra class thinking I understood what my teacher had explained—the order of operations or how to factor a polynomial—but I would get home, try to do my homework, and my "knowledge" was gone. I had a vague idea that these formulas were about complicated relationships: the division and commonalities of beings. But just as I didn't have the experience to allow me to discern the true nature of the human relationships these abstract concepts could represent, I didn't know how to apply these new calculations to anything practical so they would make sense. I'd go home and cry over my homework each evening as if it were a lover with whom I couldn't communicate. And, in a way, it was.

Many years later, after beginning to overcome my subsequent math fear and having had the privilege of receiving a copy of a math poem by a Nobel Laureate economist, I felt that my instinct was vindicated. Indeed, I was on the track for deeper understanding, and it's good to see that math instruction these days may be heading toward helping students understand "why," not just "what."

In the back of my mind, all these years, math-inspired poems of various sorts have been forming. Though most are based in calculus, this particular poem related more to statistics. I'm slowly working on creating an online, hyperlinked math-inspired chapbook in which the hyperlinked words come together to make up, ultimately, an "equation" that holds the whole work together and can be read as a piece unto themselves. – *Erika Dyquisto*