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Excerpts from Ivan's Commandments to Himself

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the algorithm still work? In other words, is the algorithm, for which existence is proved above, unique?

- Which familiar divisibility rules can be seen as special cases of the general algorithm?

A COMMENT ON USEFULNESS

There is a common trend in mathematics education to focus on “applicable” mathematics, on mathematics that is related to “real life situations.” From this perspective, there is a danger of labeling divisibility rules as “unuseful.”

I believe that usefulness, together with mathematical beauty, is in the eye of the beholder. For me, a problem that attracts students’ interest and curiosity, that generates an engaging investigation, that invites stu-

dents to make conjectures and test conjecture--is most useful. I believe that an engaging mathematical investigation is useful for all learners, and the excitement of mathematical investigation is especially useful for individuals planning for a teaching career. I hope that my students feel the same.

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Excerpts from Ivan’s Commandments for Himself

Ivan Niven

Ivan Niven of the University of Oregon, author of Mathematics of Choice and several texts on number theory, died on May 9, 1999, at age 83. At a memorial service in his honor, the program included the item below, which was found among his personal papers.

Thou shalt make an unceasing effort to see the world as it truly is, not as a product of your desires, not as a work of your imagination, not as a matrix of your special interests, but as an external reality that is no respecter of persons.

Thou shalt not deliberately misstate or misrepresent another’s position by exaggeration, by quotation out of context or by confusing a statement and its converse. Neither shall thou attempt to destroy another’s position by harping on some error or minor defect that in no way affects his principal contention.

Thou shalt not claim to know more than thou knowest. Thou shalt judge the merits of a proposal in terms of its own worth, irrespective of the proponents thereof.

Thou shalt not exalt trivial matters, nor claim as primary what is at best secondary. For who but a foolish person will resign from his church, his political party or his club because of one or two speeches or occurrences not to his liking.

Thou shalt have the grace to concede a point without going into a huff, without claiming that wasn’t what you said, or meant to say, and without saying, “Didn’t you know I was only kidding?”

*contributed by Kenneth Ross
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