

THE NUMBERS (PART 2)

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This story deals with attempts to decode a message from outer space and their effects on one man's life.

Published on
Booksie

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Charles Schwenk

The discipline of Exocryptography has been built, researchers trained, and a massive research edifice erected on the belief that more information would come. Indeed, the disarray of the field at the present time may be entirely due to an excess of speculation based on too few facts.

As explanations failed to emerge and as no new communicating civilizations were discovered, an increasing pessimism could be seen in the journals of the time. Smith's paper in Psychoastronomy using frequency counts of high pessimism words (Smith, 2000) documented this trend.

This pessimism was reflected in two papers in the July, 2004 issue of Exocryptography. The first, by the radio astronomer Shawn, documented the massive effort (and failure) to locate other communicating civilizations and ended with the frightening speculation that, "There may be only two civilizations in this entire mechanical, lifeless galaxy; one babbling psychotically into space, and the other listening desperately, trying vainly to make sense of the noise" (Shawn, 2004, p. 417).

The second paper by a deeply respected member of the research community, Costanzo, dealt with the impossibility of fathoming alien psychology. Costanzo concluded with the speculation that, out of some incomprehensible malice or some alien sense of humor, the Beta Centaurans were actually broadcasting a repeating pattern of random numbers into space.

Smith drew his face into a frown. "That was the article that set Mallard off. This piece is really an attempt to reply to Costanzo. Not too successful. Must have seen the futility of his own position while he was writing it."

Three months after he wrote the article, Mallard and John Cochran, a former proponent of the Surak school, published the creed of their newly formed Voice from the Void Church. The creed was described by one critic as "a diseased form of numerology." Cochran, who exercised a "strong and malignant influence" on Mallard, had developed an algorithm for assigning one of the fifty-two Numbers to each week of the year. An individual could (for a fee) submit his or her date and hour of birth to Cochran and receive a personal "chart" with specific advice linking his or her life to the wisdom behind the numbers. There was also the unfortunate book written by Mallard. This book contained cryptic aphorisms similar to those connected with each of the hexagrams in the I Ching each associated with one of the 52 Numbers.

Here, for example, is the "advice" connected with the number 43 in the first position of the second group:

Caution is indicated. Forego action and withdraw within.

Give yourself up to reflection but do not avoid your

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real responsibilities. Find peace within action.

According to Mallard, these pearls were given to him by the Beta Centaurans over a period of several years through what he called "psychic transmissions." When pressed by reporters, he refused to explain further.

"Mallard was a complete nut case by that time," Smith thought. "Of course the Beta Centaurans might be sending a religious message. People have been saying that since the Numbers were first received. But the fortune cookie religion in Mallard's book had no other source than his own twisted brain. Driven mad by his own terracentrism."

The publicity created by this new "church" has been directly responsible for the recent funding cuts in this country and the declining interest of the scientific community in exocryptography. In the absence of new information or a breakthrough, further funding cuts are expected. In response, schools of exocryptography were seeking private funding. This meant that research in exocryptography was being increasingly directed by the agendas of the private funding sources. To Smith and others, this seemed like an abandonment of research. He even wrote a satirical memo, mostly stolen from Jonathan Swift, decrying the abandonment of research as the goal of the Institute of Exocryptography. (See the Appendix at the end of this piece for the full text of the memo).

"Might as well finish the damned thing. Have to get ready for the 11:00 class," Smith thought as he forced his eyes back onto the page.

In conclusion, the search continues for additional signals from the Beta Centaurans that will help us to choose among the competing interpretations which remain plausible. The search also continues for transmissions from other stellar intelligences. As yet, these efforts have been unsuccessful. This indicates only that perseverance is needed. It is hoped that continued efforts will allow us to narrow the range of possible explanations and to detect further information which will finally make interpretation possible.

Smith felt sure he could compose a more truthful conclusion if he put his mind to it.

Things are worse now than they were before the Numbers were received. I can walk over to my office terminal, tie into the Center's radio telescope, and listen to that damned pattern of noise repeat itself over and over as it has for God knows how many years or centuries. We have received transmissions from one life form and they are not sending us anything else.

We continue to seek others and we find nothing. Daily it becomes harder to resist Shawn's notion that in all this galaxy, there are two civilizations, one babbling in an autistic, repetitive, psychotic monologue and the other listening desperately, lacking the empathy to glean even a grain of meaning from it.

Smith closed the journal, laid it on his desk, and sat with his small hands folded over his stomach, staring at the star chart on the wall with Compton's stars marked on it, none of them emitting anything at all but random electromagnetic noise. He felt a kind of deadness which was quite a lot like relaxation. For ten minutes he sat this way, thinking nothing. Then he opened a file drawer, pulled out a file containing his lecture notes, and began to prepare for his 11:00 class.

3. GLOSSOLALIA: THE LECTURE

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Riding the initial wave of excitement after the discovery of the Numbers, the Astronomy Department at the University of Winnemac quickly became much more powerful. Department members formed alliances with many of the other units on campus, established the interdisciplinary Institute for Exocryptography, and succeeded, through Machiavellian political maneuvering, in making astronomy a required senior-level course for all undergraduates majoring in the physical and biological sciences as well as related professional disciplines. This, in turn, led to the hiring of a number of newly-minted astronomy Ph.D.s to teach these courses. Students viewed this course as simply one more hurdle. Smith had performed well enough at this task to receive tenure. Still, he was not the sort of instructor you remember for the jokes he told. He seemed a bit tense to his students. If they could have read his thoughts in his office before class, they would have understood why.

Time? Time? Twelve minutes to eleven. Leave in a couple minutes. Stomach's knotted up. Palms are slippery. Heart rate? One, two, three . . . nine, in five seconds. Nine times twelve. 108. Damn! How many times have I taught this? Two sections a semester. Four a year. Seven years. Twenty-eight times. About thirty meetings with each class. Eight hundred and forty class meetings. Why do I still get nervous? Understandable I guess, going to do battle with the Trolls in their lair. Confidence. Need confidence. Have to have a fix. Where's that book? Ah, here. Dust jacket.

The study of astronomy is an important part of the education of today's undergraduate. In *Fundamentals of Astronomy*, Dr. Smith has provided a broad and clearly written overview of this important topic. ABOUT THE AUTHOR: Newman Smith is currently Associate Professor of Astronomy at the University of Winnemac, where he has received the Outstanding Teacher Award for the past two years.

Ahhh... That's better. Bald-faced lies though. Worse. Convenient truths. A little nervousness is good. Sharpens the wits. Brings out the jokes. They like that. It will go well. Almost always does anyway. Remember the teaching awards. Newman Smith, "Wizard of the overhead projector". Got them completely snowed . . . Christ! Eight minutes to eleven. Damned early morning class. Go for it! Room 250. Astronomy 425, Introduction to Astronomy. One of me against sixty of them. Uneven odds. They don't stand a chance. Veteran of 840 combat missions Damned elevator. What time is it? Five to eleven. Late on the first day. So what? Half of them won't be conscious anyway. Uh-oh. There's Johnson. That irritating smile on his face. He actually asks for these hideous eleven o'clock classes. May have a point. Students are pretty good at this hour, provided you don't wake them up. Amazing how long he can hold that smile. Better try to grimace back. Make it convincing. Hmmm. He isn't reacting. Smile faltering. Must have sneered instead of smiling, scared him. Betrayed by my body again. Could have gotten here faster by taking the stairs. Tiered room; three levels of rows, twenty seats each. Brings out the actor; I love to do a Shakespeare play on the first day. Great fantasy... "I should like to begin this morning by reciting Mark Antony's funeral oration from Julius Caesar: 'Friends, Romans, countrymen...'

â Better yet, "I should like to begin by reciting a few lines from Kipling's immortal poem, â The White Man's Burden:â â

Take up the White Man's burden--

And reap his old reward:

The blame of those ye better,

The hate of those ye guard--

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The cry of hosts ye humor

(Ah. slowly!) toward the light:--

"Why brought ye us from bondage,

Our loved Egyptian night?" Can't do that of course. Might wake some of them. Too bad Deep breath. Walk in with determination. Wait three or four minutes. Worst part of the semester. No one talks. Look at them stare, sixty vacant faces, one hundred and twenty lifeless eyes. Now scan the room with no expression. Class is over-enrolled again. Seats filled up and they're oozing onto the floor. Must find a bigger room. God, they look bad this semester! Mean house for the first show. No point smiling at them. Just get depressed when they stare back like corpses..... Lot of tired, belligerent faces. First sign of weakness, they'll make a quick breakfast of me.

â Looks like a couple football players over to the right. Amazing creatures. They charge at speeds up to thirty miles an hour. Uproot small trees. Either of them could take a swipe at my head and crush it like an overripe cantaloupe. Generally docile in the classroom, though. Just don't irritate them. Wonder how I look to them. What do they think of me? Don't really have to guess. They've all got friends from previous courses. They know all about me. Past teaching evaluations, perceptive and pithy:

"Professor Smith is very friendly and helpful. Very concerned about students." "Dry, kind of weird sense of humor."

"Very knowledgeable about the subject. Relates theoretical stuff to the real world with practical examples."

"Really interested in the subject. Communicates that interest to students. Inspired and inspiring teacher."

Really love the few hostile ones:

â Expects too much from us, especially since this is the last semester for most of us. (Yes, I suppose human intelligence is too much to expect from a chimpanzee)

"Professor Smith should lose weight, get a hair transplant, and wear elevator shoes."(Perhaps I should get a lobotomy as well so I can relate better to students like you)

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"Too straight. Professor Smith should smoke some dope and relax more. It would make him more sympathetic toward students."(Has nothing to do with relaxation. Different species will always have problems understanding each other).

Two minutes past eleven. Two more minutes for stragglers. Another blank scan.. Oh, there's a mean one. The stare which kills. Frat rat. Cunning, clean-shaven, babyish face. Resents having to take the course. Hates me already. Maybe not. May be his natural expression. Disease of the facial muscles. Effects of a life totally devoid of restraint, wisdom, and sobriety.

Brain-damaged from loud music, alcohol, drugs, perverse lusts, and brutish greed. Better not turn my back on him. Last mistake I ever make. Four minutes past eleven. Better start:

â Good morning. My name is Professor Lionel Smith. This is Astronomy 425, your final required course for satisfying your university core requirements. What I'm handing out to you now is a syllabus for the course.â

Perhaps by some miracle of God you will read the syllabus this semester before the final exam. Perhaps just once in my life I won't have to recite the entire syllabus to each of you a piece at a time. Perhaps I will also sprout wings and flit about the room like a moth.

â Be sure to read this carefully. It contains useful information on grade determination, exam dates, and so on. I'll pause a moment and let you scan the syllabus.â

Just like talking to sixty cabbages. Vegetable matter. Cabbages? No, worse. Some form of tubers.. Potatoes. Albino radishes with eyes. Hmm, another dissatisfied customer. She doesn't even bother to hide it--the head nodding sideways slightly, eyes rolling upward, mouth hanging open. Imitation of a carp. Damn fine one too. What am I doing up here-standing in front of these Neanderthals? Shoats, vermin, insects, God-abandoned wretched lumps of life. Loathsome sea of undifferentiated protoplasm.. . . Stop this! Have to discourage this type of thinking. It's harmful to me, not them. Zeros, ciphers, nonentities. Their criticism (and praise) means nothing. Chatter of monkeys, the wind howling. Still want them to be interested in the subject Smith? Want to inspire them don't you? Idiot! Grow up, eh? How many times have I gone through this course? Twenty-eight? Should've lost that desire a long time ago. Still possible to do a good job. Give them one or two insights. Keep the jokes coming so they don't nod off. Professing as pandering. Assembly line work. Astronomy 425, final assembly station for the new 2007 model Winnemac Undergraduate. More like quality control really. Each unit passed by Inspector Smith, inspection station 425. Meets minimum standards.

â Now then, are there any questions about the syllabus before I continue? Of course not. Wait a decent interval.

â All right. This course deals with the most important subject you will ever study, humanityâ s place in this universe.â

At least I can do that now. Give them what they want at least. Not like the first time. Remember that? Seven years ago. Scared dumb. They could sense it too, smell the fear.

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Circled like sharks while I thrashed around. Cunning as doves and harmless as serpents. They bit too. U.G. sarcasm. Blunt and brutal. Infinitely funny to the rest of the class.

"Professor Smith, is English your second language?"

"Professor Smith, will we have to study for the next exam or can we just use common sense?"

Still I remember that attractive face in the second row. That expression. Equal parts amusement and contempt as I stood motionless up there and muttered, face shining with sweat.

They did no work at all. Not surprising a fourth of them failed. Half of those came into the office in a group. Flattering and fawning at first.

"I feel I got a lot out of the course and I don't think my grade really reflects that. Is there anything I can do to improve it?"

Then bristling, baring their fangs.

"You can't fail us all. We can't all be stupid. It must be your fault. Your lectures were confusing and boring."

"If you don't pass us, we'll go to the Dean!"

Those four terrible words. They would have, too. Wasn't necessary though. Smith caved in. No Fs that semester. Too much guilt. Maybe they were right. Insomnia, depression,

ulcer, etc. Teaching evaluations a disaster:

"Professor Smith is definitely not suited to teaching, at least not at the college level."

Quit? Not likely. Let those microbes infect me with their poison? No. Exposed myself to them the next semester, and the next . . . Slow, painful improvement year by year. Still feel a fist clench in my stomach when I think about it.

â The Book of Ecclesiastes says . . . You remember, in the Bible? We will have an occasional quote from the Bible in this class just to provide a different perspective. Ecclesiastes says, "In much wisdom there is much sorrow". I intend to cause you just a little bit of sorrow this semester.â

Few polite smiles. Good sign. Proves some of them are alive. Lecture of the Living Dead.

â To understand this subject, you have to understand the motivations of those who study it.. Probably the most insightful treatment of this subject is found in a work called *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* by a German sociologist named Max Weber. Iâ ve put several

chapters of this book on reserve in the library and I'd like you to read them before the next class meeting. This is rather unusual reading for an Astronomy course and some of you will

not like what Weber has to say. But it never fails to generate discussion.â

"None of you are burdened by the Protestant Ethic, of course. No evidence of it in your work anyway. Be glad you're not. Leads to a misguided search for perfection. Last year wasn't it? Had one of those snarling

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apes in the office. Incessant, tedious, interminable debate about a richly merited grade. Finally spit the word at me like a curse--â Perfectionist!" . . . "Damned perfectionist" was the phrase I think. Good insight. Damned futile activity. Damned

perfectionism. Damned perfectionist.

Why even bother to read Weber? Full of absurd quotes. Stupid, meaningless words.

"If I seek perfection in my worldly duties, it is a surer path to salvation than the sanctity of monks." "The idea of duty in one's calling prowls about in our lives like the ghost of dead religious beliefs." Gobbledegook, right? Fossilized mumblings of old dead men, Ghosts. They warp your thinking. Iâ m an example. Trying for the 'perfect' semester. Aspiring to the Socratic ideal. The phrase 'snowball's chance in Hell' comes to mind.

â We will not actually begin with the study of the stars. During the first part of the semester, we will examine the psychological literature on human cognitive processes, biases, and limitations. We will try to develop an understanding of how we organize and process information as a basis for discussing how we understand the universe."

Hope none of you are young Platos. No anxiety on that score. Bleeding Jesus! Do you have to put your fingernail polish on right now? You'll never demand wisdom. You fear it. Spent your lives slinking away from it, trying to make yourselves even more stupid. What do you want? Different things I suppose. Liquor, lots of money you don't have to earn, sex, oblivion.

Totally deprived by nature. As John Calvin said,

â Man (meaning the undergraduate), by his fall into a state of sin, hath wholly lost all ability of will to any spiritual good accompanying salvation.â

â It is important to remember that our mental abilities are quite limited and the universe is amazingly complex and contradictory. A guy named Eddington once said that the universe is not only stranger than we imagine but it may be stranger than we CAN imagine. The universe is mysterious, but the syllabus of this course should not be. I will now spend some time covering it.â

Still, Iâ ve tried. Teaching awards are the proof. By the end of the semester, even that reptile in the back row (Christ! Look at those teeth!) will say he â got something out of the course". Still don't understand why. Gulf between me and them gets wider all the time. How is that I communicate to them? Hardly hear the words I say in lectures anymore. Automatic speech. Glossolalia . .

Amazing.. My mind was a complete blank all through the whole syllabus review.

God Almighty! Look at that face. Cauliflower in a field of cabbages. Cro-magnon among the Neanderthals. Now that's an intense face. Eyes almost make me uncomfortable. Squint of focused attention. Soaking up each sentence. Dear Lord, must be some new drug the U.G.s have. Produces pathological concentration rather than withdrawal and hallucinations. No . . . Maybe it's real interest. Yeah, it's real interest. No way they can mimic that. Every few semesters I get one like this. Oddball, outlier, yes. Totally inconsistent with my understanding of the undergraduate mind. Sees the importance of the subject. Wisdom seeking wisdom. Frightening. Wonder if I'm up to it. We'll see. Anyway, I've got someone to teach this semester. This is going to be fun. Mustn't lose him. Hope he likes this next bit.

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â I know you would all like to stay for the full period today, fascinated as you are by the subject. However, by one iron-clad rule is that I do not lecture for a full period on the first day of class. Iâ m going to dismiss you now and let you go home and get some sleep. Read the material on reserve for next session and we will discuss it then. Before you go, let me tell you that I am honestly looking forward to spending this semester with you.â

Ah, a smile.

4. GOD'S GREEN HERBS

Smithâ s hands trembled slightly as he stood at the podium and methodically rearranged his notes. As he watched the class slowly drain out of the lecture hall, he felt the fatigue and depression that signaled the beginning of the hallucinations. With controlled calm steps, he returned to his office, laid his notes and text on the desk, opened his journal, and began to write in his neat, even hand:

â Sweet Bleeding Jesus, I know the answer! It came to me during the lecture. It lies in the cells. Consider the following:

FACT: We are made of billions of cells which periodically die and replace themselves. Our damned, deceiving eyes and our furrowed, incomprehensibly complex brains are nothing more than differentiated, highly organized groups of cells. It's obvious! Even a child knows this!

FACT: The new cells that replace the old dead ones are made up of the food, water, and air we take into our bodies. Thus, the things we take into ourselves determine character of our cells; which in turn determines our very nature. The implication of this fact is as inescapable as it is terrible. The environment in which we live determines our nature. Changes in our environment produce changes in our nature!

Now the two most horrible facts.

FACT: The cells in the human body replace themselves completely with new cells every seven years.

FACT: I have been living in the Midwest for just over six years. At the present time I am 6/7 Midwestern and only 1/7 Oregonian. After I have spent one more year in this environment, the transformation will be complete and the last trace of Oregon will be eradicated from my body. This is not fantasy; this is not paranoia; this is simple scientific fact.

Simple though this conclusion is, it explains much. For instance, I have noticed the winters getting milder every year. Seven years ago when I first came here, I knew only the Oregon winters. The clouds would get a bit more leaden, the landscape would darken a bit earlier, the light, frequent rains would become a little colder. Occasionally there would be a thin, crumbly sheet of ice that would coat the streets and silver the tree branches, only to drop off and be reduced to slush in a few days. I was nearly chilled to death by my first winter in the Midwest; now the arctic cold seems normal to me.

My hypothesis also accounts for my changing views on the rain. I used to love a rainy day in Oregon. On my last vacation there, I observed with a kind of terror that the rain now seems damp and dismal to me. The rain has not changed. I have.â

The moment he placed the period after the word "have," there was a knock on his door. He shuddered with the knowledge that this could not be the result of mere chance.

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"Come in!" he said. His own voice sounded too loud to him. It had an edge of hysteria. The person who came into the office was unquestionably a complete stranger, probably a new book salesman or a student wanting to add his class.

"Professor," this person said, "I just wanted to come by and thank you for your recommendation. I really like my new job."

He scrutinized the face. He was sure he had never seen this person before in his life.

"May I ask what you are talking about young man?" he said warily.

The stranger looked puzzled and smiled, slowly and weakly.

"I'm uh . . . well, the Walden Company job. I wanted to thank you for talking me out of taking the job at Centrex and giving me the recommendation to Walden."

Was this person insane? Why was he talking this way to a total stranger?

"You said that I would be slowly killed by the work at Centrex and that I should take the job at Walden even though the pay was less. You were right," the person said with a ludicrous smile. It was obvious that there was only one way to rid himself of this obnoxious individual quickly.

"Yes, of course. I remember now," he lied. "Yes, indeed. Well, I'm glad to hear it. Yes, that's just fine. Really fine. Sounds like excellent work. Really excellent. Well, I mustn't keep you standing here all day. It's been a real pleasure talking to you," he said as he rose from the

desk, shook the bewildered stranger's hand warmly, and ushered him out the door.

He resumed his seat at the desk, closed the journal, and stared at the sleeve of his suit jacket, speckled with flecks of chalk dust from the last damned lecture. To his unreliable eyes the particles seemed to glow like tiny futile stars against a dismal, empty, background of gray. Without brushing them off he stood up and moved like a sleepwalker out of his office, toward Campus town and safety.

Like many large Midwestern universities, the University of Winnemac was surrounded by a tiny fringe of student-oriented shops and restaurants that are, in turn, surrounded by the larger fringe of a town. The university was a monster that had swallowed him seven years earlier and had been slowly digesting him like an anaconda since then. He had only one place to go when the horror of this thought oppressed him.

The only route to his salvation lay through the heart of Campus town. As he entered this alien zone he felt choking sooty vapors rising up around him and blackening the sun. With a determination born of desperation, he ignored the hallucination and continued walking toward the calm center of this surreal landscape. Against his will, his eyes were drawn toward the plastic facades of the fast-food franchises he passed, products of the tortured dreams of greed-maddened market researchers. His face assumed a grimness that terrified passing undergraduates as he recalled the marvelous imaginative restaurants and shops which had been razed in order to make room for these synthetic horrors.

He marched past the stamped plastic sign hanging above Taco Bandito," a Mexican franchise which had replaced "Dietrich Bonhoeffer," a student-run restaurant where one could always go for bratwurst sandwiches and discussions of Protestant Theology.

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Half-a-block down the street he passed "Captain Salts' Microwave Fishsticks," that had once been "Cherchez La Vache," a restaurant managed by three doctoral students in French from Winnemac that specialized in French beef dishes. Finally, he paused and stared vacantly at the former site of "The Pipe and Poncho," at which he had purchased all his tobacco products and rain wear. His money had not been enough to save it though, and when it died it was replaced by "The Pizza Trough." Through the windows he could see the undergraduates feeding. One of

them turned its face toward him and bared its teeth, covered with cheese-food and synthetic tomato sauce. He turned away and covered his face with his hands, unable to bear the sight.

Stumbling forward for half-a-block he came to rest beside a telephone pole in front of a noxious new "book distribution outlet" featuring a prominent window display of the worst non-fiction book in existence; Professor Bob's Big Fat Manual for Writers of Theses and Dissertations. Written by a colleague at Winnemac, it was an exhaustive reference work in the "irreverent" style students attempted to copy. The book consisted entirely of material pirated from such sources as The Chicago Manual of Style and The MLA Style Sheet. It was designed to make the task of writing clear prose and developing comprehensible arguments seem silly and irrelevant, so as to reduce students' fear of writing.

Next to it was the novel written by a friend he knew in the drugged days of his youth. He had been with his friend in the living room of the huge house they rented in Southeast Portland on the surreal night when the novel's title had been given to them by the Muses. The two of them had been staring open-mouthed at a crack in the wall for about a half-hour. It had the exact shape of the dome of El Capitan in Yosemite National Park; a fact confirmed through detailed examinations of a photograph of El Capitan. This similarity, and its implications regarding the role of chance in the ordering of the material world, had caused them to sink into silent reverie. Then his friend's voice shattered the silence like a rifle shot:

"Listen to this! The perfect title for a novel: The Technical Ascent of Howdy Doody Rock!â

They were both crippled with laughter. Yet here was the book with the cover photo of a small group of climbers, roped together, clinging to Howdy Doody Rock in Yosemite. Gazing through the glass at the book he had the familiar feeling that he had changed into a different being in the last decade; that he could not possibly be the same person who laughed through a haze of marijuana smoke at those words.

His feet felt like lead as he turned away from the window and forced himself onward. The air around his head filled with blood-red insects who's tiny wings emitted a whining hum like a hundred distant chain saws. The hallucinations were totally beyond control now.

He saw a swarm of his own students ahead of him on the sidewalk. There was no way to avoid them. As they approached, their laughter and conversation ceased, their faces assumed the masks of respect, and they said with hilarious seriousness, "Hello, Professor." He gave them a friendly smile as he walked across the street toward the former site of a restaurant named "Serve the People," run by a group of radical Maoist students. The spot was now occupied by a Haystee-Mart with the sun gleaming on its orange-and-white checkered plastic facade.

As he stepped into the store, congratulating himself on escaping a conversation with his students, he stopped dead. It required all his considerable will-power to stifle a scream. Sitting behind the black digital cash register was a creature with an enormous opossum's head and the body of a man. It was wearing an orange-and-white checkered jacket with the name "Jim" sewn onto the pocket. Mastering all hysteria, he walked calmly to the candy counter and picked up a pack of chewing gum. As he cautiously approached the cash register he glanced out the window only to see a large creature in the parking lot with the same sort of multi-colored jacket and a large snarling badger-face approaching the store. The opossum behind the counter

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opened its mouth to show its teeth and hissed at him:

"That's my area supervisor. Good! Now I can express my monstrous apathy and boredom."

Smith looked straight into its black shining eyes and curled his lips into a polite smile while nodding up and down. Then he walked (a bit too quickly) out of the hellish little store toward the only haven he knew in this poisonous landscape of death.

Tortured by the buzzing of imaginary insects, choked by the imaginary clouds of soot, he staggered on for what seemed like hours until he saw a light glowing through the blackness ahead of him. The unearthly radiance came from a wooden sign which hung above the only surviving business from the era of hip capitalism. The lettering on the sign had been painted by the hands of elves and glowed with Gandalf's secret fire, the Flame of Anor. It read:

God's Green Herbs

Once through the weathered, never-painted wooden door he gazed at the rows of squat round glass jars on shelves lining the rough-hewn plank walls; jars that contained spices of all descriptions, teas, herbs, and dried fruits. The store was also filled with dozens of live potted plants which thrived among the benign and peaceful thoughts of the owners and customers. He noticed the nearest one, an enormous jade tree, pull away from him slightly as he entered; he had been thinking that some of these plants would one day fill the jars on the walls.

Legend had it that in 1967, when the establishment first opened, a large jar of oregano had been labeled "marijuana" by the staff. This label was changed shortly after two storm troopers from campus security goose-stepped into the store emitting huge amounts of negative energy and purchased half-an-ounce of the oregano to take to a lab on campus. The event was front page news in the campus newspaper at the time, the headline reading, "COPS BUY GRASS."

Now the entire center of the shop was taken up with organic beauty products to appeal to the present student population and ensure financial survival. However, the spices and teas still filled the walls and somehow the smells of Ceylon Black Tea and basil and caraway seed and sage combined to produce an exact equivalent to the smell of Douglas Fir on a wet day in the Oregon forests around Mt. Hood.

Once he heard the door close behind him he knew he was safe. Almost immediately his heart rate began to slow. The tiny buzzing figments of his imagination which had followed him into the shop began to disburse. Yes, this was better; much better.

He happened to glance up at a new display of kaleidoscopes. They were made of 6 inch segments of varnished bamboo about 1 ½ inches in diameter and they stood at attention on a shelf beneath a sign that read: "Windows on Another World." The one he selected was filled entirely with fragments of green glass and as he turned the shaft in his hand dozens of different shades seemed to recombine and fan out from the center of his field of vision; olive, chartreuse, aqua, hazel, emerald, jade.

In that eternal moment, the shifting patterns of green awakened his sleeping mind from its nightmares and showed him once again the One Reality which he had glimpsed first among the hundred shades of green in the misty Oregon forests along the Pacific Crest Trail. The memory came to him with a dreamlike vividness, evoking all seven of his senses. Like most of his memories of Oregon, it involved clouds; soft friendly gray clouds which prevented the sun from exposing the full beauty of the landscape and driving visitors from the Midwest mad with wonder. He had been just 20 and ½ years old on that fateful day when he had hiked south on the Pacific Crest Trail from Wahtum Lake toward Mt. Hood. A light, barely perceptible

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rain was falling and he was wearing a bright orange poncho so as not to be mistaken for an elk and shot by poachers. Just before starting out he had taken a sky-blue pill half the size of an aspirin containing 400 micrograms of LSD.

The few people he met on the trail reflected the beauty of the landscape as did the dozens of small, still lakes in the area. At one point he saw two forms emerge from the mist ahead and move slowly toward him. At first he thought they were two female hikers but as they came closer he saw they were wood sprites granted beauty beyond that of mortal women, who nearly blinded him with their smiles and left no footprints on the soft earth of the trail as they passed him.

At Indian Springs he made camp as best he could and then sat down on a stump to watch the mist slowly creep through the trees which blanketed the valley below him. The unbelievable sight and the bubbling of the crystal water from the spring helped to quiet the running monologue in his mind. He sat still, solid, and immovable like the jagged profile of Mt. Hood for several hours while the afternoon turned to evening. He finally became so absorbed in the beauty around him that he lost all awareness of the distinction between himself and the objects of his view. At this point, the landscape began to emit a light which seemed to grow brighter around him and he realized that this was probably the best LSD he had ever taken. The light became so bright it seemed to shine through everything and he suddenly realized nothing had any real substance; just color, infinite shades of color. Then he watched as the myriad of forms merged into the One Light. Yes, this was definitely the finest and purest LSD he had ever taken.

With his consciousness of himself as separate entity gone, he felt his body vanish and he knew that he was also void of substance and inseparable from the Light. He had no separate self at all! Therefore, he needed nothing, he hoped for nothing, and he feared nothing. The possibility of poison in the LSD ceased to trouble him entirely. He felt a savage joy well up inside him and tears poured down his face. Yes, he would have to try to get some more of this LSD. He would make a note once he could remember how to write again.

As he sat staring at the luminous forest with absolute freedom and calm, a question rose from the last remaining hiding place of his ego; his separate self. The question was, "What then must I do?"

The One Reality provided the answer which his discriminating mind could understand. "Now that you know that you are one with the universe, express the truth you have learned in every action. Seek out those who are blind to this truth. Use wise and subtle means of helping them see it. But you must work slowly and carefully. At first they will fight to retain their blindness."

"Where will I find those who need my help?"

"Wherever men live and labor to serve the deluded passions born of ignorance. Seek them out and help them."

"Where then shall I find these people?"

"Do I have to spell everything out for you? God, you're stupid. Open your eyes; ignorance is all around you. Try to learn something of value and pass it along to others. Just do what you can. Is that asking too much?" In that moment, the meaning of his life and its goal became crystal clear to him.

This recollection, which he had experienced countless times, brought such a flood of joy and freedom that he felt temporarily weightless. The thunder of the words from his memory left his ears ringing. When he had recovered sufficiently to look around, he noticed that everyone in the shop was glowing in a slightly different hue. The beauty, the glory of it maddened him and he felt he might shriek with delight like a small child.

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With a self-control developed through thousands of hours of Zen meditation, he calmed himself, reduced his elation through controlled breathing, and took the Kaleidoscope up to the cash register, walking with carefully measured steps. Behind the counter stood a being who seemed to emit light from every pore. He handed it the kaleidoscope, and saw that his hand was carved of sunlight.

With a voice like the roar of Multnomah Falls the being said, "Ten dollars please."

He handed over the bill and received his prize and a sales receipt in return. Then he stepped out the door and began a leisurely stroll through the Garden of Eden, back to his office.

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