

THE NUMBERS (PART 3)

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

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Charles Schwenk

5. CONCLUSION: THE STUDENT

Smith entered his office about two minutes before 3:00, just in time for his office hours. At exactly 3:00, he heard a knock on the door. The student who entered looked familiar, and after he smiled, Smith recognized him as the one who had smiled at the end of his lecture, the one who had been paying attention.

"I'm afraid I can't let you into this semester's class," Smith said. "The class is already so large I'm going to have to find another room." He actually regretted the loss of a potentially interesting student.

"Actually, Professor, I was just sitting in on your class. I'm sort of a writer and I wanted to ask you some questions about a project I'm working on. I'm writing a short story based on the Numbers and I hoped I could get your help in verifying some of the story's details."

"I will help you if I can," said Smith with some self-importance.

"I think I have a good idea for a short story. The basic premise is that a race of intelligent beings wants to communicate their curiosity and love of inquiry to all life in the universe. They decide to do this by transmitting messages into space. They try to communicate what they see as the fundamental fact of life; that life involves both unity and diversity."

"Young man," Smith said, assuming his Professor identity. "Corwin and others have already suggested that the numbers represent separate messages from different classes in the Beta Centauran society. I disagree with that point of view because I believe we must assume the Numbers are a unitary, coherent message. Otherwise, we could assume each separate number represented a different message."

"I'm sorry, sir. I have not made my meaning clear." Said the student. "The assumption that the Numbers must represent a single unitary message is connected with the common misconception that any intelligent alien species must be composed of individual beings, each with his own set of values, assumptions, and goals. I think this assumption is wrong. Maybe we can test the assumption by asking if you, for example, are a single unitary being."

"This morning when you entered your office and began to read Mallard's article assumed one identity, the identity of a researcher. In your mind, you reproached Mallard for abandoning his identity as a researcher to take on the identity of a religious zealot. When you stepped into the classroom, you assumed the identity of a teacher. After the lecture, to shake off this identity, you entered the shop where you purchased the kaleidoscope. Here, you assumed the identity you had abandoned as a young man. In the space of a single morning, you were several different people."

"Young man, am I to understand that you have been stalking me?" Smith asked, thinking that the young man might be one of the crazies who become obsessed with the Numbers. Later, he would wish that

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the explanation for the student's behavior was so simple.

"No sir, I have not been stalking you. Even if I had, how would I know about your reactions to the Mallard article or about your thoughts as you looked through the kaleidoscope? You must see there is only one possible explanation, that I made a lucky guess."

Smith began to feel the strange creeping sensation that came with the intrusion of the Strange into ordinary reality. For a rare moment, his old identity as a drugged youth merged with his identity as a researcher and teacher. He listened with an open, empty mind as the student went on.

"You are a collection of multiple social identities. Your self is a cognitive structure that allows you to manage your identities, determining when it is appropriate to express them. I agree with Martin Sokefeld's 1999 assertion that this self is a universal attribute. All humans have it. I would go farther and say that all social beings must have selves, including the beings who sent the Numbers. The self is a necessary part of the cognitive apparatus of any social being. But what is it?"

"The fact that they sent the Numbers proves that the Beta Centaurans understand the concept of other beings, which implies that they are social beings. Thus, they must have a concept of self. Once a being recognizes that it has a self, and that this self is limited, it is motivated to extend the self. This can be done in one of two ways; either by conquering or absorbing things in the world around it, or by attempting to understand them. We can either conquer or inquire."

"Our desire to travel to other planets is a mix of inquiry and conquest. Fortunately, the distances in space are so vast we will never actually make physical contact with beings from other planets but we will continue to inquire and become ever more sensitive to signals from these beings. The Beta Centaurans, recognizing this, have transmitted the Numbers as an expression of support and solidarity with other races they will never physically contact."

"Let me tell you about the short story I am writing. In this story, sentient beings on another world decide to transmit a message into space. When they attempt to decide what to say, they discover that every individual has a slightly different message that they feel is essential. This is a society that values diversity so the issue is discussed and debated. Eventually, they decide that they want to encourage curiosity, inquiry, and diversity of views in any species that receives the message."

Initially, they might simply transmit a series of random numbers and wait for other species to receive them. When a new group of sentient beings does receive the numbers, the senders learn of it and contact a representative who collects information and tells them how the new species interprets or responds to the numbers. They are especially interested in the diversity of interpretations. The original transmitters have no message but wait for contact and interpretation from others. When they contact another planet or race, they modify the transmission, not to change the message but to make the numbers more interesting and to stimulate more inquiry. Now that they know earth is aware of them they will alter the message in ways suggested by their earth contact."

Smith took a moment to absorb this. He wanted to offer a few helpful criticisms, however. He said,

"One potential problem with your idea involves the enormous distances between communicating races. It would take 260 years for a single exchange of information between earth and Beta Centauri. A second problem has to do with how they learn another civilization has detected them."

"Excellent. Thank you," said the student, scribbling a few notes. "I have an idea for solving both problems. I got it from an old book called the Mahabarata. Somebody asks an Indian wise man,

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“What is swifter than lightning?” and he answers, “Thought.” I think in my story, the aliens will be able to send and receive thoughts. This will allow them to detect other beings’ thoughts about the numbers and instantly communicate their thoughts to receptive individuals among the beings of other worlds. I think people will buy it. It’s a pretty common idea in science fiction.

“Anyway, the aliens ask their representative to suggest a change in the numbers, a recombination that is aesthetically pleasing and stimulating to the beings, something like what your kaleidoscope does. They then modify the transmission, and this makes the message more interesting to all the beings who receive it. What do you think?”

“Do you mean, then, that the Numbers have no meaning at all?” Smith asked as he realized he was taking the story too seriously.

“Oh, no. I don’t mean that at all. The individual numbers and their combination have no pre-established or universal meaning but there is a message in them, and that message is to inquire.” “Do you think that kind of ending would be satisfactory to a reader?”

“I guess it depends on the reader,” Smith said evasively. “Are you predicting that, after repeating the same sequence of numbers for twenty years, the Beta Centaurans are now going to change it?” he asked as he slowly wrapped his mind around the concept.

“The short answer is, yes.” A new arrangement of the Numbers suggested by their Earth representative will be communicated to the Beta Centaurans and they will begin transmitting it. But, as you know, that transmission won’t reach Earth for another 130 years. Since we will all be long dead by then, we will not see the results of our changes. At this point in the story, I will ask my readers to pause and consider how they would rearrange the Numbers to fit their own personal idea of what a meaningful sequence would be.

“In fact, I was wondering if you had any suggestions for a rearrangement of the numbers that would make them more interesting or beautiful. I’m giving you the chance to change the phenomenon you study. Please think carefully, since your new sequence will be transmitted throughout space to dozens of civilizations.”

The student handed Smith a list of the Numbers with a title that irritated him.

THE

NUMBERS: OLD ARRANGEMENT

1* 2* 3* 4* 5* 6* 7* 8* 9*10*11*12*13***

43*12* 7*38* 3*21* 2* 7*70* 1*15*16* 3***

25*8* 7* 5*18*30* 4*27*11*22*35*0?*13***

9*31*40*10*23* 6*33*69*39*20*26*14*52***

Smith, however, was incapable of giving anything careful thought at that moment. A particularly mean LSD flashback was producing hallucinations incompatible with rational thought. He stared at the numbers for a long time, not looking for meaning, but appreciating them from an aesthetic perspective. Then he said,

“I believe lines two and four should be inverted.” And then stared at the student.

The student stared back for a moment and then began to nod in agreement. He said,

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“Do you know I have been thinking about that question for years and you have given me the best answer I have heard or thought of yet. Rather than trying to rearrange the Numbers into a pattern that makes sense, make one simple, dramatic change. The point is not to develop an arrangement that communicates meaning to us, but simply to play along with the Beta Centaurans’ game and make the sequence more interesting. I will send your changes to them as my recommendation.”

“Then, 130 years from now, Earth’s radio telescopes will receive the arrangement I just suggested,” Smith mused. “I like it as a fictional idea because there is no way we will ever know whether the arrangement has been changed or not. It adds an element of mystery to the ending.”

The student smiled and said, “I’m not sure I can agree 100% with you on that point. I intend to add a final part to the story in which the Beta Centaurans inform their Earth contact that a change they made in the Numbers 130 years ago should just now be reaching the Earth. In other words, we will detect a change in the Numbers very soon. In the story, the new series numbers will begin with the number ‘52’ rather than ‘43’ at the beginning of the second row.”

Saying this, the student stood up, thanked Smith for his help, and said he had to get back to work on the short story immediately. That was the last time Smith or anyone else at Winnemac saw the student. However, a few days later, Smith and everyone else in the community of exocryptographers were stunned by a change in the arrangement of the numbers. After twenty years of transmitting the same series, the Beta Centaurans were now transmitting a series that began with the number ‘52’ in place of ‘43’ at the beginning of the second row.

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