

Math Reflection

I had a little trouble with multiplication. I still don't remember my multiplication tables. However, the more abstract the math became, the better I seemed to do with it. I can't say that I really thought much about math until I was in high school. When I entered Algebra 2 Honors in 10th grade—by no means accelerated, mind you—I thought math was just something one did to get it done. My Algebra 2 teacher changed that. Her name was Mrs. Ayres. She had emigrated to the U.S. from Taiwan. And although many students made fun of her for her accent (kids are mean), she and I got along swimmingly.

Mrs. Ayres noticed that I had knack for mathematics, and she wasn't about to let me get away without really delving into my talent. One of my best friends at the time was also a very skilled mathematician, and we found ourselves competing for Mrs. Ayres's praise. We would descend upon Mrs. Ayres during lunch to find out which of us did better on that morning's quiz or test. Mrs. Ayres encouraged the competition. She didn't exactly pit us against each other, but she did push each of us to do better.

Mrs. Ayres was the first teacher I ever had who claimed unflinchingly that I would major in math in college and go on to do a job that required mathematics. I protested. Even though I tried hard to excel in Mrs. Ayres's class, I still didn't consider myself a mathematician. I wanted to be a writer! English was my favorite subject, and even though I wasn't the very best writer in my class, I fancied myself to be quite a gifted author. I told Mrs. Ayres that there was no way I'd major in math. But she insisted that I belonged in mathematics above all other things.

I stayed in touch with Mrs. Ayres throughout my high school years, and she wouldn't let me off the hook. Then during my senior year, I enrolled in AP Calculus BC, and something changed. Math suddenly became beautiful to me. Calculus tells a story, and I was enthralled.

Nevertheless, I went ahead with my original plan and applied to college as an intended English major. Then over winter break that year, I watched a documentary on TV about comets, and I was suddenly sure I wanted to major in astrophysics. That's a story for the science unit. Suffice it to say, math was now a major part of my future.

So I jumped into Multivariable Calculus my first year of college because it was a requirement for the astrophysics major. Then I took the last required math class for the major: Linear Algebra & Differential Equations. I was done with math if I wanted to be. But I found I didn't want to be. So I thought, what the heck, why not go for a math minor? Several math courses later, I thought, why not go for a double major in math and astrophysics. And that's what I did.

Like many things I said I'd never do that I ended up doing after all (enrolling at UC Berkeley, living in Los Angeles), I became a math major just like Mrs. Ayres said I would. I still insisted that it was just for fun. I couldn't imagine doing a job in which math featured a prominent role. Hah. Little did I know!

I started my first job out of college at a publishing house, returning to my writer roots. Then I ended up coaching a cross-country team part time at a high school. And next thing I knew, I was interviewing to be a math teacher at the high school. And that's what I've been doing ever since. Funny how things work out. One day, after I had gotten the teaching job, I returned to my high school in my little hometown and found Mrs. Ayres.

She still remembered me. And I told her with great excitement that I had in fact majored in math and had just been hired to be an Algebra 2 and AP Calculus AB teacher. Not only had Mrs. Ayres been right all along, but I also ended up teaching the exact same class that I had had

with her. Mrs. Ayres saw something in me that I didn't see. She was truly one of those influential teachers that change a life.