Advice

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Certain numbers stick and others don't. Sometimes I can't remember my mother's birthday, and though my father died at 56, I sometimes remember it as 53. There are seven stars in the Big Dipper. I know that as a pure and stand-alone number. On the other hand, Cassiopeia, which lies just across Polaris from the Big Dipper has. . . how many? It's a *W;* five, then. But that's a thinking-through or a counting-in-the-mind, not the number as a just-known fact. And though I've looked it up countless times, and bake five loaves of bread every couple of weeks, I cannot remember whether there are three or four teaspoons in a tablespoon. I know an old elite typewriter struck twelve characters per inch and a pica ten—but what a waste of mind space that is. There are 5280 feet in a mile, but without multiplication my mind won't hold the yards, just as I know there are 640 acres in a square mile, but I can't tell you how many square feet are in an acre. A kilometer is .6 of a mile, and there are 2.4 centimeters in an inch, though I can't force my mind to produce even the first digit of the reverse ratios.

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My parents weren't advice-givers. With nine children born within a dozen years, they didn't have time to give advice, or it got so thinned out I can't remember it. But also, it just wasn't their style. Let's admit it—giving advice is for blowhards. The most famous advice-giver in literature is Polonius, and he ends up a dead rat. My parents, of sound and wintry Northern European stock, were not only far from blowhards, they had work to do. Even had they been inclined to it, dispensing advice was not something they had time for. Even meals—there was eating to be done and fights to stop and salt to pass. Praying before the meal, sure. But preaching during it? Once the activity of eating started, advice became limited to "eat your peas they're good for you." There were broad guidelines, of course, backed up by the church and parochial school and Notre Dame nuns. But advice? Specific suggestions on *what to do*? Father—and Mother—Knew Best, but they were inclined to let their children figure it out for themselves.

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Five-hundred-and-forty: It's a number I remember without effort, as automatic as the seven days of the week or the 365 of the year, a number that comes back with the ease of a mantra or an old prayer, a hail-Mary-full-of-grace or a bless-me-father-for-I-have-sinned. Even though I've been away from farm tractors longer than I've been away from confession, I still remember that a power-take-off shaft on tractors in the sixties and seventies spun at 540 revolutions-per-minute.

A power-take-off: The contained image is apt—power stored, and the PTO bleeding it off and sending it somewhere else, the tractor roaring, but all event—corn being picked or chopped or ground or shelled, hay being mowed or raked, soybeans being combined—all occurring behind the tractor, in the machine borrowing the power through the spinning PTO. Five-hundred-and-forty RPMs: That's (I have to think—540 divided by 60) nine revolutions per second.

A PTO shaft is about (imprecisely; a guess, a look at a ruler, matching memory to lines) two inches square, which, times four, gives eight inches of outside diameter, which means that if a rope, say, or a piece of cloth got caught by the square edge of the shaft, it would be pulled (8 X 9 = 72 inches) = 6 feet per second. An International 560 tractor, tiny by today's standards, nevertheless created and stored and lent to the PTO 65 horsepower.

The 65 horsepower, like the 540 RPMs, is, for me, a sticky and specific number, but horsepower itself began in extreme vagueness. Sure, it's the power of a single horse—but what kind of horse? Height, weight, speed, breed (Percheron or Pinto? Arabian or Appaloosa?). An International 560 tractor working southern Minnesota's Clarion Webster silt-clay-loam pulled a moldboard plow with four-fourteen inch shares (a sticky number: 4-14s). Such a plow, 56 inches wide, would not, I suspect, be even noticed by a magnificent parade of 65 Belgian workhorses pulling it. (But how

long would it take to turn such a team at the end of the round? You'd have to start the turn halfway down the field.) Still, even if 65 horsepower in a tractor engine is not equal to 65 actual workhorses, it is still a goodly chunk of power.

Now consider the number 45 and its relationship to 100. Forty-five is the amount of weight, in pounds, the adult human elbow tendon can withstand before rupturing. When the best fastballers accelerate a baseball to about 100 miles per hour, the ball's inertia exerts just under 45 pounds of force on that tendon. Since tendons cannot be trained and grown like muscles, this explains why 100 mph is the upper limit of a fastball's speed. Forty-five pounds, then, marks the strength, or frailty, of the human elbow joint. Against that put a single horse. Now, put sixty-five horses, larger than Pintos, maybe, but probably not Percherons. Between the 45 pounds and the 65 horsepower is a really, really—I mean really—big difference.

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I find it difficult to give advice. Whether or not I learned such reticence from my parents, advice-giving in and of itself has certain inherent problems. Even in the rare cases when I'm asked for advice, I find myself caught between the rock of the obvious and the hard place of the not-obvious-at-all. It's obvious as Dr. Johnson's rock, for instance, that when it's ten degrees outside, a coat should be worn, along with hat and gloves. But my teenage children consistently walked to school in such weather wearing little more than beachwear. Although my wife found advice-giving possible in such cases, I always simply watched them out the door. The school was blocks away, not miles, so their lives weren't endangered, and they knew what cold was and that clothes were designed to help against it.

But the even-harder place of advice-giving is when it isn't obvious at all, when there are degrees of gray involved: Uncertainties, questions, ambiguities, hidden factors, unknowns, mists and fogs and—people, with all their idiosyncrasies. And time. The future. If a student asks me whether he should go to graduate school, how am I supposed to know? Even if the student is bright and I know he'll be successful, how can I possibly know what the job market will be like when he graduates, or whether there isn't some other thing (travel to Malaysia, for instance) that would be better for his life than grad school? I can talk about the options, sure. I can advise. I just can't give advice. There is that crucial, distinct difference. When my own son was debating whether to go to graduate school in English or Political Science, we spent one afternoon coming down a mountainside in the Bighorns discussing it. I could talk about the field of English and my own experiences, and I could listen to him as he tried to sort it out—but that was all. Giving advice comes too close to making the decision *for* someone else. And it raises the possibility of emotional factors—the worry in the advice-hearer that not taking the advice will disappoint the giver. And if that weighs in, how would anyone ever know the real decision, or who made it?

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45: An adult ligament. For a child the number is quite a bit less, I imagine.

I currently stand 5′ 8″. In grade school, only two boys in my class were shorter than I was. Not to get too intimate here, but the inseam on my pants is 29 inches. I don't know how tall I was at twelve, nor how high the inseam on my pants. Just as fuzzy is the specific height of the PTO shaft taking off the 560's 65 HPs and spinning them at 540 RPMs (6′ per-second linear pull) into the ancient hammermill we used to grind feed for the cattle. But I can hold my hand off the floor and say, *about that high,* and it looks like 1.5 feet, or 18 inches. < 29 (my current inseam: so maybe 27? 26? when I was 12?) minus 18 (the height of the PTO shaft) = < 11. Inches. Between the shaft and groin.

< 45 pounds before the elbow's ligament is ruptured.

Of course, that's an elbow ligament. Knee ligaments are surely more. Who knows—maybe twice that, 90 or 100. And hip joints, why they must be—well, who can guess? And what must it take to break bones? How many pounds? Surely quite a few.

But still, pounds.

I watched a baseball player this past summer,

frustrated at his weak ground ball, break his bat over his knee as he ran to first base, break it as casually and easily as if it were a wishbone.

Six feet each second. Not all that fast, really. But factor in human reaction time—for some reason not sticky numbers at all, though I know in driver's ed I learned them: The time it takes for a driver to lift his foot to the brake and how far a car can travel in that time. I was in a science museum once where they had a machine to measure museum-goers' reaction times. I put my hand on a button, and when a light flashed, I pushed the button, and a number, in fractions of seconds, appeared, telling me how fast I was. A scientific version of Bop-a-Mole. I was proud of myself in the silly way we are when our bodies outperform a meaningless average. I pushed the button several times, pleasing myself. But I can't remember the numbers—neither my superior ones nor the poor, pathetic mean.

But here's a picture: The safety advisor visiting my Vocational Agriculture class in high school who dangled a twenty-dollar bill between his thumb and forefinger and invited anyone to step up and put his own thumb and forefinger an inch apart at the bottom edge of the bill. He proposed to give the bill to anyone who could catch it when he released it.

The price of greed was humiliation. Starting with the blowhards and in descending order to the more meek and cautious, student after student stood in front of jeering classmates and watched helplessly as the bill wafted to the floor, while their thumbs and forefingers ridiculously, like inept shadow-puppet makers, snapped against each other, the bill already gone. At the end of the class, the instructor placed his twenty-dollars back in his wallet, and offered some advice.

He offered, in fact, not just the best advice I've ever received, but the only advice that is both obvious and not-obvious, both absolute and modulated—the only advice there really is, when all things are said and the subject of advice is closed:

Take care.

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Although horsepower began in vagueness, it has since been precisely enumerated. One horsepower is the equivalent of 746 watts, or 550 foot-pounds of work per second. 746 watts is a lot of light, but it doesn't tell us much about power. If we divide those watts by 115—standard U.S. household voltage—we get amps: 746/115 = 6.5 amps. Vacuum cleaners have sometimes 9, sometimes 12-amp motors. Few of us would willingly stick our hand into our vacuum cleaner's brush when it's whirling at full tilt. Thus we're working through the numbers to something knowable.

But foot-pounds gets us even closer. The English system, though scientifically clumsy, is a common person's system, close to the body, full of metaphor. 550 foot-pounds of work per second is much more visceral than amps. Imagine yourself holding a rope running over a pulley and down a cliff. At the end of the rope is 550 pounds. Pull the rope forward one foot in a second. That's one horsepower. Now we're beginning to see. An Olympic weightlifter may take 550 pounds and lift it from the ground to over his head—eight feet perhaps—in a second, or less. Eight horsepower, then, or more.

Power—or work—is strength applied over time, a ratio. Therefore, it doesn't matter if you leverage the weight. Put a block and tackle on it with a gearing ratio of 4:1, so that you effectively move 139 pounds 4 feet, and you still have one horsepower. Now I'm starting to think I'm a horse's equivalent. Could I lift 139 pounds to my chest within a second? I weigh between 150 and 160. Could I climb 4 feet straight up a ladder in a second? Or—again, leverage doesn't matter—could I run 8 feet up a 45-degree hill in a second? I believe I could do all these things. I couldn't sustain that horsepower for long, but nevertheless, the proverbial man stronger than a horse turns out to be a college professor who does a little desultory weight lifting in his basement.

Pretty much an average Joe. But let's consider what an average, one-horsepower Joe can do if he's able to sustain maybe a half-horsepower over the long haul. I can lift a 16-pound splitting mall above my head and bring it down on a piece of oak 16 inches in diameter with force enough to split that oak, if the grain is clean, and send its halves flying, and I can

keep this up for hours, turning the pile of wood at the edge of my lawn into neat, stacked cords. In a few hours, with a spade, I can turn over my entire garden to prepare it for planting. If I have to, I can carry two sixty-pound third-squares of shingles up a ladder and onto my carport roof, and in an afternoon I can, with hammer and nails, shingle the entire carport roof. I can run, in my average-Joeish way, a mile in seven minutes and sustain the pace three or four miles.

It's quite amazing, how much work—sustained power—a human being can do. Now, gather sixty-five average Joes and imagine they never wear out. Imagine them as strong at the end of the day as when they first lift that mall over their heads.

You have a 560 tractor.

Put those 65 average Joes on a long crank with 65 handles and tell them start spinning it. Gear it up to 540 revolutions-per-second.

Now put a twelve-year-old, unsupervised, near that spinning shaft.

Add a tool—a scoop shovel, say, or a corn rake—lying on the other side of the shaft, that the twelve-year-old required for a job he had to accomplish. Should he take the shortcut over the shaft, with the at-most 11-inch clearance between shaft and groin, or should he take the longer route, all the way around the machine? Picture the twelve-year-old's baggy pants, a bit loose, with a tear, perhaps, in the knee. Picture the squareness of the shaft, those corners blurred to a roundness by their spinning, but glinting in a way round things never glint, hints of abruptness, catchness. Consider loose sheets tangled on a line. Orange plastic surveyor markers twisted around their wooden laths. Maverick plastic grocery bags suffocating twigs. A flag will fly straight out, droop and straighten again, and droop, and then, why is this? lift again but turn into the pole, hug it, cover it, be not-flag but golf-club cover for a few moments, and then be flag again. Breezes, nudges, things unfelt.

Who can say what small winds nudge and shift near a PTO shaft? The square edges must be fan. But pushing air or pulling it? And with the air, the dust within it, and things that float, that drift.

45. 65. 540. 6.

The known numbers.

And all the unknown ones.

And the shovel over there. The corn rake.

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Did I step across that shaft?

I might have.

I'm here. I'm telling it. Like certain numbers that fade, though you know that once you knew them, I can't be sure.

It isn't true that children have better imaginations than adults. They have better fantasies. The difference is that fantasy includes the capacity to ignore reality—or phrased a different way, the inability to see it. Children cannot imagine the breeze a square, spinning shift must—surely must, really must—create. They can only see themselves over it, tender groin cloud-high. But rotted corn on the other side, slippery as grease? < 11 inches, and their foot coming down on it?

They can't imagine that. Or don't.

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Once, running a table saw, I ran my push stick into the blade. The board was narrow, and I wanted to make that last, thin cut. The stick erupted, and I was holding one-third of it. The rest had vanished into air. I cursed myself for a stupid fool, and a greedy one at that, wanting that last small bit of wood. Add pride: I believed I could be that precise. But then I realized: That's why you use a push stick. Because even living the most well-lived life, you sometimes fail to recognize temptations—or shall we call them opportunities?—to the literally deadly sins. They lurk in the most unexpected places, not clearly marked as moral failing, but hushed and hiding in movement, rhythm, absorption, the body's doing its thing, the tool used, work being done. And then a choice almost not-made, the body's choice more than the mind's choice, no discussion or interior argument but just movement going on.

It could have been my finger. But I used a push stick. And so I was forgiven.

Or this: Once I started to cross a busy, four-lane street in my car. I'd been waiting at the stop sign quite a while, and then a gap in traffic appeared. I looked

left, then right, then surged forward, checking left again, then quickly right—and screeched to a stop in better-than-average reaction time as two bicycles, hugging the curb but moving 20 mph, appeared as if by magic in my passenger side window. Again I cursed myself for impatience and my eyes for inattention. But that's why you look twice. Even the Zen master sometimes fails to notice. Look twice, his driving instructor would say. Use a push stick, too. Take care.

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The twenty-dollar bill floating to the ground. Our fingers and thumbs an inch apart. We could not catch it. That spinning shaft. What would be our chances to jerk away should we find ourselves caught up in it? 6 feet per second: 11 inches, then—the distance between groin and shaft in my calculations—in about 1/6 th of a second. Whirling, square edges grinding away, the cloth wrapped around it, tight. And if our foot slips on that rotten corn, if our legs spread wide, if we drop?

How frail we are. How slow. Our grasping digits close around nothing. All things move too fast, flit by, waft away. Leaves falling. Seasons churning. We are not quick enough or observant enough or powerful enough to grasp and hold anything: Bills or most numbers, or the smell of a good wine or the glow of children, or the light coming through the window after the first winter storm this year. Everything is falling before we know it's started falling. We miss the beginning, always, and we're always late. We can stoop down, pick up what's fallen sometimes—but that's salvage, and what we salvage is never what we missed but something else, never what we hoped for.

Take care. Don't step across. It isn't worth the time saved. Don't dare the intimate crush of those square edges pulling, yourself frail as a bird, so tenuous and tender. Around power, watch out. Notice breezes and whirling dust. Know blood. Understand the frailty of joints. Keep your balance. Walk around.