

Making Progress: The Possibility of Walking Through a Wall?

excerpted email exchange

> From: Luke Wolcott
> Date: Apr 5, 2007 11:47 AM
> Subject: the wall and stuff
> To: Elizabeth McTernan
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>
> So last night I had an idea. You can tell me this is the wrong
> direction to take it, but I thought your art was sort of a 'let's try
> it and see what happens, and what happens is the art'. There is a
> chance I could solve this problem. There's a chance I could get to
> the other side, and give a number that was close to the right answer.
> But I can't give the exact answer, because there are too many
> variables and at this stage no one knows if there are ways to simplify
> the problem. Even making a lot of (mostly justifiable)
> approximations, there's (triple) integrals like that one to work out.
> There's a metaphor between you banging against the wall, and me
> banging against this (nearly) impossible mathematical barrier. The
> math solution is not going to be elegant or short, it's going to be
> arrived at through a long tedious persistence of approximating and
> smacking theory/formulas against reality. As you continue banging
> against the wall, on and on, your hope and idealism will get
> extinguished even as your chance of getting to the other side is
> steadily improving. As I work along on this problem, my faith in the
> answer I might get being close gets smaller and smaller, even as my
> chance of finally getting some approximate answer is increasing.
>
> In an absolute sense, we think that to all the questions we can ask,
> we can figure out an answer. While that may be true, some questions
> can't be answered in a hundred lifetimes of time, or with all the
> knowledge/techniques us humans have developed. The idea of banging
> against a wall until you teleport through seems hopeless, the idea of
> figuring out the math problem of 'what is the chance of that?' seems a
> little less hopeless, but then there's the idea of searching for the
> questions 'who am I, what should I do next', which are equally
> hopeless. [You and I are both] looking for answers to (nearly)
> impossible questions, and we have no way of knowing if there's a
> realistic chance of getting to the other side. The question is hard,
> but the question 'can I even find an answer?' is also (nearly)
> unsolvable. So we keep going... If I told you unequivocally
> that it'll take 10^{50} years until you have even a decent chance of
> making it through, would you persist? If I knew for sure that by the

> time I worked out an answer to the problem, I could be off by a factor
> of 10^{20} years, would I even bother?
>
> Maybe it's easier for you to teleport through than it is for the
> physicists to figure out the chances of you teleporting through.
> Sometimes I think it's easier to know the answer than it is to figure
> out how you might figure out the answer. Like who am i?
>
> Anyway, I don't know what direction you want to go, but playing the
> video with a little note saying "i'd have to do this for 4.3×10^{50}
> years until I had a 1/10th chance of making it through' doesn't seem
> as interesting as playing the video next to my frustrated scribbles
> and equations and saying 'we have no idea how long we'd have to
> continue until we have a chance of even knowing what are chances are'.
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> Let me know what you think.
> Luke
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From: Elizabeth McTernan
Date: Sun, Apr 8, 2007 at 12:29 PM
Subject: Re: the wall and stuff
To: Luke Wolcott

Hello friend,

...I agree whole-heartedly with your idea that maybe we are both ascending one hill and descending another at the same time... Maybe it's a cheerful nihilism, and I know I'm an idealist and maybe someday I'll crash, but I think all of this figuring out has to happen in its two simplest parts simultaneously - the speculating and the doing. You need to do the lab with the scratchwork, and I like that perhaps these two parts have to face in two different directions, as you would say. The idea of an "answer" doesn't satisfy me really, because answers aren't real. Sure, they're practical, but they're not It. In all of these absurd gestures, I'm trying to make something else matter. What I like about thinking of my hypothetical urban wind trajectories, for example, is that the maps ignore an order of importance. Yeah, there are a million variables that effect the wind, but what happens if I arbitrarily isolate a couple and grant someone's whisper the same power as a building's demolition? Rather than directly disempowering dominant

things, I like giving a voice to small, seemingly negligible things. It's my small way of kicking down hierarchy. So here we are at the other end of the spectrum, not keying in on one variable at a time but trying to effectively include Everything. Yikes. To assume a definitive answer to this is to assume quite a command of Reality - whatever that is! Perhaps the project started as a response to a certain discontentment with assumed reality, assumed limitations, assumed boundaries and separateness, and a desire to enter an occult alternative into the realm of the reasonable. While stubborn and absurd, I do consider myself a practical girl, a poetical pragmatist, if you will. But, oh dear, the closer I get to Reality, the further I am from being sure of anything at all. Now the project is a playful crisis, really. So, we ask, why bother? What else are we to do - wait around for a more agreeable reality?...

'We have no idea how long we'd have to continue until we have a chance of even knowing what are chances are.' Yep, that sounds about right. Except, I want to make clear that there exists a chance. It's important to me that I believe in these things.

yours,
Liz

Luke Wolcott
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www.forthelukeofmath.com