

Your Inner World: Not Really Yours

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It is abundantly clear that upon looking at our surroundings, we would probably describe the same picture as someone standing right beside us would. Take a busy avenue, for instance; I am certain that everyone walking or driving down the avenue would describe it in a similar way: a broad street filled with rushing cars, stop lights, pedestrians, huge, illuminated billboards and neon signs, fume-scented air and a cacophony of honks and voices booming in the background. But the perception of the same picture may trigger all kinds of nonsensical thoughts and reactions in our brains, and it is at that moment that our inner world is born. While walking down the same busy avenue, my life may depend on my stepping on every autumn leaf and hearing it crunch under the sole of my shoe, while your life might depend on stepping around the same leaves. In our inner world, we are the emperors and the mighty rulers, and it is in this mysterious place that we organize the monstrous amounts of irrelevant information that we gather from our observations. It is also in the deepest chambers of our inner world that we write our own destiny in all manner of games and self-challenges. One curious fact about this secret place in our minds is that we seem to be very protective of it. After all, it belongs to us and no one else should be let in on the secret. But allow me to break the news: whether we decide to go there to escape our problematic surroundings, to kill some time or just for the sake of entertainment, our inner worlds have much more in common than you may imagine.

You must have heard before now that numbers are everywhere. Apparently, there is a natural order of things that applies to every single element in our universe, and numbers are a crucial part of it. Which is why I am not afraid to come forward as a counter. Being a counter, I know that my staircase has seventeen steps, that the one in my grandma's apartment building has twenty-three steps between each of the landings, and that you need to go up six hundred and seventy-four steps to reach the second level of the Eiffel Tower—which is information you can find on Google but, being a counter, I still felt the need to check its veracity myself. The impulse to count steps feels so automatic to me that I knew I could not be the only one doing it. After describing my concern to my friends and acquaintances I discovered that not only was I not the only one obsessed with step-counting, but that people normally count an assortment of very different things on a daily basis. My friend Mick, for one, counts his footsteps wherever he goes, and my friend Ale counts the number of seconds she spends peeing every time she uses the restroom (which, she says, amount to an average of twenty seconds, give or take). My brother, on the other hand, has made it a part of his routine to count bald men and red cars. It was after chatting with so many people about the matter at hand that I came up with the concept of—and became extremely curious about—the inner world. What else is going on inside people's heads?

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Since this question first cropped up, I have learned that I am surrounded by fellow counters, but also by spotters, phrase finders and people suffering from mild cases of OCD. At the head of the spotters is my friend Ulises who compulsively looks for the number six everywhere he goes. At times, such was his despair at not being able to find the desired number six, that he decided to allow sums, subtractions and any other kind of mathematical operation between the numbers that he could find, and that would result in number six. Thus, if the clock reads 5:51, Ulises can happily move on with the rest of his day. My best friend Melu is hell-bent on spotting stray dogs, and my mum has confessed to be on the lookout for people with their shoelaces undone, or their zippers open. There also appears to be many people who consider themselves “phrase finders”. The fascinating activity of phrase-finding involves locating a sequence of letters—the easiest and most obvious place to find these being car number plates—and turning them into phrases. Consequently, a phrase finder would normally stop at a red light, see that the number plate of the car in front of them reads “LGR 795” and think: Lady Gaga Rocks. Laurie’s Green Rocket. Lamborghini Garage Rental. I can’t say I was a phrase finder before learning about the existence of their ritual, but I must admit that it does sound like a good way to kill time. Among my compulsively disordered close ones, I must mention my friend Oli, who eats everything in halves and alternates between the right and left sides of the mouth to chew each one; Juli, who has to scratch both legs whenever one of them itches; and Sol, who mentally fits right angled triangles on any surface she can find. If you have not felt represented by any of these crazy quirks yet, you must be thinking that I am surrounded by complete psychopaths, but let me warn you: it gets worse.

Up till now, the behaviors I have been recounting might be considered odd or eccentric, but never dangerous. But the matter became more serious as I learned that many people play with an unknown eminence: fate. By engaging in all sorts of games and challenges of which the opponent is none other than the universe itself, it seems that we have some say in our future. My father has admitted to being a street racer. You would think that this means he usually drives over the speed limit, in which case you would be wrong. Street racers operate on foot, and they play silent speed competitions against other pedestrians walking alongside them. They set aims, and most times (and this is the worrying part of the game) they self-inflict punishments that become effective if they are not able to win the race. A common challenge in a speed racer’s mind would be something along the lines of I have to reach the next corner before the woman walking ahead of me or I will never find the love of my life. Another of my friends, Pedro, tries to guess which will be the foot—right or left—with which he walks the last step before arriving at a given place, but his choice of the wrong foot always results unfavorably for his very own sake... If I arrive on my left foot, I will pass the Math test, but if I arrive on my right foot, I won’t. Many of my acquaintances have also admitted to having an ongoing battle with Google Maps: If they don’t beat the estimated arrival time presented by the GPS system, it will mean that something terrible awaits them. It seems quite foolish to challenge the universe this way when none of us know exactly who is the master puppeteer on which our fates depend, yet...can any of us honestly say that we have never partaken in a similar game?

Whether we consciously make use of it or not, we all have our very own inner world, the space inside our minds reserved for trivialities and nonsense, and the place in our heads where we seek refuge from worries, anxieties and rational thoughts. Inside our inner world we do not care about the fact that we are currently on our way to a critical doctor's appointment, but we do care about not stepping on the lines between the tiles on the sidewalk as we tread towards our destination. Our inner world is a safe space where it suddenly does not matter if we are going through a devastating breakup; our only pressing concern is to reach the lamp post before the kid walking one step ahead of us beats us to it, or spotting as many girls wearing blue shirts as possible. In our inner world we make sure we have control over some aspects of our lives that we would not have otherwise, even if that means challenging the universe: if I don't arrive home before 15:03 then I won't get the job I've been interviewed for. The urge we feel to keep the rules of our inner worlds to ourselves is only natural: it feels like a secret worth keeping. It holds our purest essence, and the only thoughts and rituals that feel completely private. But even though they feel exclusive, they are not. It is only a matter of bringing up the subject in conversation for everyone to realize that the items we count on the street, the games we play and our self-inflicted punishments are an inherent part of human nature that no one ever makes us think about, and that very few manage to put into words. I sincerely hope I was able to do both.

