

Why It's OK to Live Your Way

Arithmetic, anomalies, and the Nobel Peace Prize.

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Jean Henry Dunant was an ordinary man who witnessed the misery of soldiers during wartime and decided:

This is bad. Let's do things differently in the future.

He devised a plan, wrote a book and, in 1863, the International Committee of the Red Cross was created. But, that's not all. One year later, Dunant's other good idea, the Geneva Convention, was also launched. This agreement allows doctors and nurses onto the battlefield to care for suffering soldiers. A simple idea, the Geneva Convention is held together by a piece of cloth with a red cross printed on it, and the universal understanding that sick or wounded soldiers are human beings who have people at home who love them. In 1901, Dunant received the Nobel Prize for Peace.

Dunant's achievements make me want to do bigger, more important, things with my life but I accept that's probably not going to happen. I am not a numbers person. I'm a word person. I can't play poker, am paralyzed by Sudoku, and struggle to convert my height from inches into centimeters. However, despite my stunted grasp of mathematics and my super-optimistic worldview, even I understand that I am unlikely to win a Nobel Prize for Peace. Not ever. And, before you sneer from behind your more evolved, *arithmetic* self, I'd like to remind you that, statistically, you're probably not getting one either.

This is true, in large part, because most of us are not actively working towards world peace on a daily basis. Mostly, we are hanging out socks, or picking up skinless chicken thighs at the shops, or emptying our wallets to keep the pool from turning green. We're really busy and just don't have time for world peace stuff. Which kind of sucks because everywhere we look we are reminded of the incredibly meaningful, world-changing, worthwhile achievements of people who are not us.

There's that video of the guy who quit his job in I.T. and now runs a billion-dollar shrimp farm. Then, there's the story about the woman who willed herself from the brink of obesity, diabetes, and death and now runs marathons to raise awareness for homelessness.

Then, there's the interview with a grad student so young it pains you to gaze at her earnest, radiant face, who explains her work on gene splicing, as you dwell on how funny the word "splice" sounds, then cry yourself to sleep.

Spend enough time gazing into the Moby Dick-sized (insert infantile chuckle here) mouth of the media and it seems like the whole world is better than you are in every conceivable way.

It's here that numbers can be super helpful.

Recently, Google told me that there are around seven billion people living on the planet. Don't laugh. There may be more than that or less. I don't really care. Let's just say there are an awful lot of us here at the moment and some of those people are splicing genes, and some are not. Agreed? Good. Quiet now. In the last 116 years, 585 Nobel prizes were awarded. That's for everything—Peace, Physics, Chemistry, Literature—the whole lot.

Aiming for some version of accuracy here, it's worth noting that some of those prizes were shared. In total, there have been 892 individual recipients. Are you still with me? Great. So, can we agree that the number of non-Nobel Prize-winners is always going to be way bigger than the small number who get one? I think so.

Now, I get that a Nobel Prize is not the only measure of success but, even if we added in all those achievers we think are worthy of a place in our greatness equation—the prawn farmer, the marathon runner, Melania's stoicism—the number is still tiny. Some might even call that number an anomaly—a small, but an interesting occurrence that deviates from what is usual.

The good news is that anomalies are, by definition, not normal.

Numerically, it's more *normal* to be plugging away at our own, entirely bespoke, life-projects—not aspiring to be anomalies—while pondering the coolness of the word 'bespoke'. For most of us, life will unfold as a series of things we must do to remain alive, dotted with distractions. See? You're distracted already. Together, we represent the big, burly bookends of greatness. Without us, exceptional cannot exist. You're welcome, Nobel Prize-winners.