

A STORMING OF OUR PYTHAGOREAN ARISTOCRACY

Stan Hartzler

Northwest Missouri State University

John Dossey, the current Past President of the National Council of Teachers of Mathematics (NCTM), reports [1] that those who demonstrate mathematics proficiency by profession still have groveling worshippers among the non-proficient. Many people still tend to fall to their knees and decry their own poor mathematics ability when making the acquaintance of a mathematics teacher, mathematician, engineer, programmer, or dollar-bill change machine. This worship, or the effort to cultivate such worship, began at least as far back as the Pythagoreans, who, as even Donald Duck heard in Mathmagic Land [2], met secretly and did not share their discoveries with outsiders. Reports hold that members of the society were dispersed and their buildings demolished in a pro-democracy uprising; some angry outsiders, it seems, didn't like Pythagorean elitism [3].

I don't recall exactly when I was first bitten by Pythagorean false pride, but my high school classmates gleefully recall one particular outward manifestation. By the time I needed a slide rule for high school chemistry, I was aware that math ability implied status. So I purchased the biggest slide rule available — a dual-base vector log log Picket & Eckel monstrosity with 34 lines of scales — and wore it in school on my hip. Whenever my adolescent insecurity felt the need for a Pythagorean ego fix, I calculated something, like a grade average, the time, or a dollar's change, and imagined an aura of superiority.

Pythagorean separatism was thus established by apparel and the existing tendency of classmates to believe the American Mathematics Mystique. (“He’s on a higher intellectual plane” was the lie I coveted.) The Mystique lived on in college, despite my discarding the outward status symbol. I began to get invited to parties, and, I would naively reveal my major upon request. The reaction to “My major? Why, uh, math”, was an invariant “Oh.” Which was all the conversation and social acceptance I had with most such inquirers. Honor and loneliness. The Majestic Mystique. To the better-looking inquirers I began to want to lie about my major.