

Words and Numbers; Truth and Lies

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Life may be possible without words, but the human experience is not. Words allow us to express love and loss. They allow us to discuss and to debate. They allow us to tell stories and share experiences. Words are our method of conveying meaning, and are therefore essential to our pursuit of truth. Yet meaning can be manipulated. Words may be essential to the pursuit of truth, but they are equally capable of producing lies.

I once thought numbers couldn't lie, even if words could. Anorexia showed me this was just another untruth. I came to see numbers have a level of meaning comparable to the words alongside which they coexist. But my eating disorder gave those numbers a meaning which was distinct from the meaning understood by those around me. Developing anorexia was like learning a language I alone could understand.

My eating disorder was obsessed with numbers, but it was also caught amongst a barrage of words. The words came from within and without, combining to create a cacophony without clarity. The words from within didn't fill my mind so much as engulfed it. I gulped the words in like they were oxygen, blind to the fact they were drowning me. The words from without were just as intense, albeit ones of love and fear rather than hate and anger. I wanted to trust those words as true, but it's hard to have faith in things that come to feel like weapons. My loved ones were trying desperately to break down the walls of my disorder, but succeeded only in making me hide from their bombardment. Ignoring words from within is far harder when you close your eyes and ears to the world outside of yourself.

I looked to numbers for truth amongst the conflict of words. I told myself numbers were recognisable, reliable, objectively knowable. Words attacked me and competed for me, whereas numbers merely described me. Words were a source of contention, but numbers simply were. This may have been true for anyone else, but I was viewing those numbers through the opaque glass of anorexia. This made their true meaning blurred and abstract, forcing me to construct new meanings of my own. My weight didn't measure mass, it measured worth. A kilojoule didn't measure energy, it measured failure. A meal became demoted from food to a plate of failures. My futile attempts to bring the numbers into focus only further fuelled my obsession. One mouthful could be as difficult as one hundred. Only star-jumps in sets of 1000 would keep me safe.

I came to trust the numbers not because their argument was convincing, but because their message was united. I told myself that words are lies, but numbers can't. However, just because something isn't an outright lie does not mean that it reveals the whole truth. We are not lines of computer code. It is the conflict of words which illuminates the complexities of life. In looking solely to numbers for facts, we foolishly prioritise expedience over those essential subtleties. Take, for example, the use of BMI to categorise severity of anorexia. It is ridiculous to suggest the severity of one's mental illness could be conclusively determined by a physical measurement. On this metric, my time in hospital was enough to transform my anorexia from severe to mild. It is true my weight became stable, but the same could not be said for my mind. The words were just as loud, just as sharp, just as cruel. They were anything but mild, even if the numbers said it should be otherwise.

The words of my mind did eventually come to reflect the numbers of my body. When it did, I started to see numbers had meanings beyond the narrow language I had

constructed. The glass began to crack. I started to eat food again, rather than kilojoules. I came to realise meals needn't be spaced equal hours apart. A day without exercise wasn't dangerous. The number on the scale rose, but that did not make me worthless. Recovery required me to realise truth does not lie in numbers alone.

I have now claimed victory in the battle against my eating disorder. I have rebuilt my body and mind, but I'm still repairing my relationship with words and numbers. I no longer believe in the language of anorexia, but I'm struggling to unlearn it entirely. I could tell you the calorie-kilojoule conversion without thinking, but forget my parents wedding anniversary. Just as I can't look at most objects without knowing their name, I can't look at a packet of chips without knowing their precise nutritional value. I try to sleep-in, even though it compresses the number of hours between breakfast and lunch. I still remind myself berries can be eaten in more than multiples of four. Perhaps I'll eventually realise I've unlearned this disordered language, like a twenty-something backpacker who failed to maintain their High School proficiency in French. In the meantime, I'm bi-lingual in a language that I certainly can't put on a resume.

It doesn't help that my first language has an incomplete vocabulary for describing my present reality. There are words for anorexia and recovery, but no word for having emerged from the forest of recovery without yet escaping its shadow. How should you describe yourself when you no longer have a cold, but a running nose lingers? You are neither sick or entirely well; neither completely broken or entirely healed. The English language can tell me it is both capable of inadequacy and incapable of adequacy, but does not address either articulation of this fundamental failing.

The reality is neither numbers or words can ever truly capture truth. Even where our intentions are good, there are complexities to our existence which defy qualification or

quantification. Words and numbers can help us to understand our world, but they cannot define it. Numbers may be just as essential to language as words, but I am learning to find meaning in other ways.