

This I Believe

by Sarah Voss

I'm a Unitarian Universalist minister, but in an earlier career, I was a math teacher. When I felt the call and went to seminary in the late 1980s, I brought math along with me. Sort of like the ancient Pythagoreans, I believe that mathematics can be mined for concepts which inform our spiritual lives and bring greater understanding and even healing into our moral interactions.

For example, at a UNESCO conference recently, I was one of fifteen presenters who spoke briefly on aspects of trustworthiness and justice. On Saturday afternoon, one presenter talked about his experiences growing up in Austria as a survivor of the Holocaust. His comments elicited response from a man whose family had been part of the Austrian resistance movement and who felt that the Jewish presenter's comments had been somewhat one-sided. The conversation took off from there, becoming intense and somewhat painfully emotional. Even one of the professional facilitators of the session was near tears. Then, all of a sudden, I was "on" with my highly cognitive moral math stuff. Boy, I thought, what am I going to do now?

What I did was to talk briefly about my own small effort to contribute something to the dialogue about healing humanity's pain. Then I offered two interactive, experiential exercises, both of which I'd used previously at more extensive workshop offerings on "moral" math. One was the "dollar" auction (from non-zero-sum game theory) and the other was a role play I've developed of the "contact process" (from network theory). I use red and green cards and position people as though they were sitting on a checkerboard in order to "play" this game. The end result seems to be that even those who have little appreciation for mathematics begin to get a feel for how the process of self-emergence works.

Later, the Jewish presenter and others told me what a powerful experience this had been. I also learned that I'd exceeded my allotted ten minutes and that the facilitator was about to stop me when a woman sitting next to her urged her not to because there was "real healing taking place." This was a wonderful affirmation that not only can math be helpful for the intellectual understanding of social behavior, but it can also assist the actual healing process. As a minister, that touched me deeply.

Although I'm definitely a religious liberal, the God I know is very much an "Intelligent Designer," and I'm quite comfortable using those words as a descriptor. For me, God as ID is a nonlinear and chaotic process so complex (and simple) that multi-levels of reality are a given, with the one we experience in ordinary life being only one among many possibilities. I believe that some spiritual part in us can transform from one level to another. What's likely to remain constant under such transformation might be called "love." There is definitely an *intelligent* design in this vision, one that I currently access both mathematically and intuitively.

This essay may also be found on the large data base of entries to the NPR [This I Believe](#) contest.