

# A Truth Learned Early

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It was in high school that I decided to be a mathematician. The credit (or, perhaps, blame!) for this can be laid squarely on mathematical competitions and Martin Gardner. The competitions led me to believe I had a talent, and for an adolescent unsure of himself and his place in the world, this was no small thing. But Martin Gardner, through his books and columns, led me to the more important lesson that, above all else, mathematics is fun. The contrast with my teachers in school was striking. In fact, there seemed to be two completely different kinds of mathematics: the kind you learned in school and the kind you learned from Martin Gardner. The former was filled with one dreary numerical problem after another, while the latter was filled with flights of fancy and wonderment. From Martin Gardner I learned of logical and language paradoxes, such as the condemned prisoner who wasn't supposed to know the day of his execution (I don't think I understand this even now!), I learned sneaky ways of doing difficult computations (a round bullet shot through the center of a sphere comes to mind), I learned of hexaflexagons (I still have somewhere in my cluttered office a model of a rotating ring I made while in high school), and I learned of islands populated only by truth tellers and liars, both groups being beer lovers. This colorful world stood in stark contrast to school mathematics. I figured that if I could just stick it out long enough, sooner or later I would get to the fun stuff.

It was true; I did get to the fun stuff.

A good part of my job now is being a teacher. Do I duplicate the school experiences I had with my students? Well, I surely try not to, but now I see another side of the story. Technical proficiency is a worthy goal, and when my students need to know, say, the techniques of integration for a later course, I would be remiss if I didn't cover the topic. But I know also that the driving engine behind mathematics is the underlying beauty and power of the subject and that this indeed is the reason it is a subject worth studying. This fundamental truth was learned from Martin Gardner when I was young and impressionable, and it is a truth I carry in my heart. Today, with the national mood for education reform, it seems the rest of the country is finally learning this truth too. Welcome aboard.