

## *Bean Soup for the Soul*

I met the Bean Counters in preschool.

They introduced me to the Bean Tray.

It was a simple concept. On the Bean Tray were two bowls, one filled with black beans, the other with white. Each day, we took turns at the Bean Tray Table. It was here that we learned to count--we counted beans. I, however, was a bright child. The envy of my peers, I could count to 100 effortlessly at the tender age of three. I thus deemed bean counting tedious and unnecessary.

I clearly articulated this point to my teachers; nevertheless, I was assigned the obligatory fifteen minutes--eternity to a three-year-old--with the Bean Tray. I had no intention of displeasing my teachers, so I counted 100 beans. I then counted the 100 beans backwards as I returned them to their designated bowls. That showed I knew how to count but left me with about ten minutes. I was bored, but I knew I would not be permitted to leave the Bean Tray. So, I decided to amuse myself by pretending to be a cook. I unknowingly proceeded to do the forbidden: I mixed the black and white beans together to make bean soup.

My teacher soon discovered my transgression, and I was duly punished. I had to separate the black and white beans I had mixed, picking each individual bean out of the giant Bean Bowl. I'd broken a cardinal rule: beans were for counting, not making soup.

But, in the end, all was not lost. They never made me count beans again.

*Bean Counter Theorem #1: Beans are that which cannot be divided for any purpose other than existing as beans. The bean is complete unto itself and thus allows for no division or opposition.*

As the years progressed, I encountered several variants of the Bean Counter Theorem, for, as I have found, Bean Counters prevail in every aspect of life.

At my elementary school, there was no institution more intrinsic, more indispensable to daily existence than The Line. If the children were restricted to the rigid confines of a perfectly straight line, teachers reasoned, childlike exuberance would be suppressed, thus minimizing disorder. As a result, everything we did was done in lines.

When the bell rang in the morning and school began, we were not allowed to simply gather at the classroom door; we had to line up before we went inside. Likewise, when the bellrang for recess, we could not just leave; we had to line up first. There was a boys' line and a girls' line, and whichever line was the straightest and quietest got to go outside first. Whenever the class walked anywhere, even if we were just changing classes, we had to be in lines. If the lines were not straight, the class was reprimanded; God help the unfortunate child who fell Out of formation.

The irony of it all was that the submissive obedience mandated by The Line simply made the children want to rebel, which defeated The Line's very purpose. The control the teachers were trying to achieve via The Line was at cross purposes with the natural energy of children.

A common scenario when dealing with Bean Counters.

*Bean Counter Axiom #49: Disorder--marked by the loss of control over one's environment--is not to be tolerated As the natural tendency of order is toward disorder, it is imperative that unleashed energy be corralled and remolded into an orderly state.*

Bean Counters continued to affect my life throughout junior high as well. In seventh grade, I began to become bored with school. My teacher had a tendency to reduce complexities to formulas, making the marvelous into the mundane. I wasn't being encouraged to question, to challenge, to think. And I was a little suspicious.

So I started reading the encyclopedia.

It began unintentionally. I was thumbing through volume 21 of World Book looking for information on West Virginia for a report. Suddenly, I realized there were lots of interesting things that began with W. I read the entire article on Frank Lloyd Wright and immediately had an ardent (albeit short-lived) desire to be an architect. I read about whales (and Wales). Warsaw, Poland. Watergate. Andy Warhol. The Whiskey Rebellion of 1794. I even read the inordinately long (twelve pages) article on wheat. About two hours had passed before I finally found West Virginia and wrote my report. Reading the encyclopedia soon became a daily activity. I was learning interesting things they never taught me in school.

*Bean Counter Postulate #12: The shortest distance between the end and beginning of an essay is a straight line, which means you should ignore all the curious little diversions in between (like the difference between a blue and a humpbacked whale).*

More recently, I've had to deal with yet another type of Bean Counter. As a volunteer for the March of Dimes Birth Defects Foundation, I lobby state legislators for passage of March of Dimes-sponsored bills. I am trying to be a voice for people who are less fortunate than I. Yet, the first time I lobbied, I discovered I faced opposition. A legislator told me that what I was trying to achieve was a good idea, but it would cost far too much money and was therefore impractical. This struck me as incredibly illogical. What's more important, money or the life of a child?

Typical Bean Counter reasoning. He was only thinking of the beans.

*Bean Counter Corollary #63: Do you promise to support the bean, the whole bean, and nothing but the bean, and forswear to use the bean for any purpose other than propagation of the bean?*

As I approach college life, I look back to see the pervasiveness of Bean Counters and their philosophies. They permeate politics, seep into social issues, and clutter up the classroom. And I have tired of them. What I desire, where I aim to spend my college years, is that environment that sees beyond the bottom line of the bean, that is not threatened by the curious and the creative, that understands--as with encyclopedias and soups--that the complexity of our existence is rarely reducible to the bean, or the formulations of the Bean Counters.

Because I am not a bean counter. I make soup.