
THE DEMON

Solving the Problem of Puncturing a Deflated Balloon

Ron Robinson

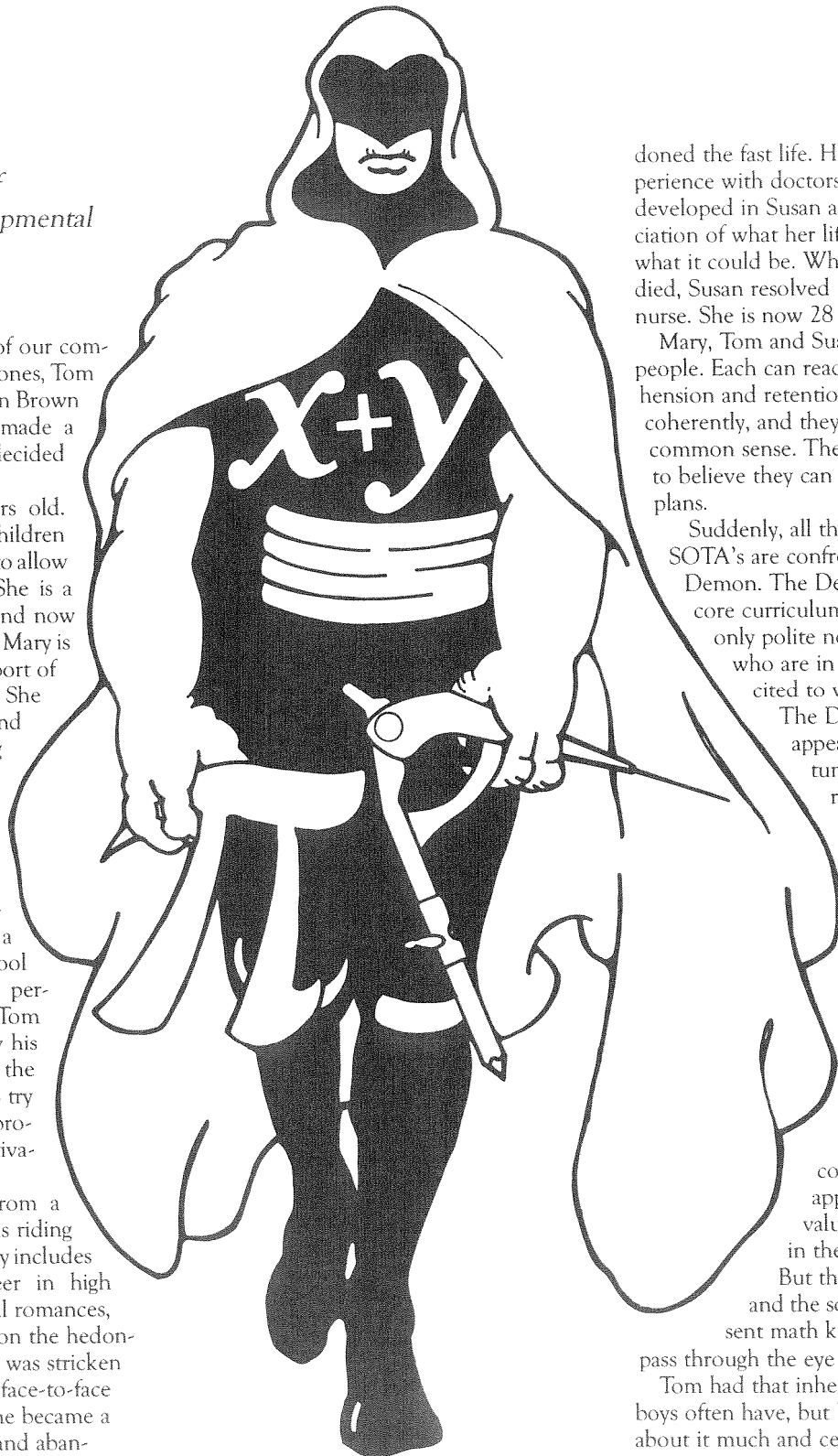
*Assistant Professor of
Mathematics, Developmental
Studies*

Three members of our community - Mary Jones, Tom Smith and Susan Brown — have independently made a major decision. Each has decided to go to college.

Mary Jones is 37 years old. She is married with two children who are now old enough to allow Mary to attend school. She is a licensed practical nurse and now wants a degree in nursing. Mary is nervous, but has the support of her husband and family. She has taken a deep breath and is excited about her big step.

Tom Smith has served in the Armed Forces where he received training as a corpsman. By his own admission, he was something of a ne'er-do-well in high school and now wishes he had performed up to his ability. Tom was deeply influenced by his medical experience in the Army and has decided to try his hand at a nursing program. He is mature, motivated and confident.

Susan Brown came from a well-to-do family and was riding atop the world. Her history includes an undistinguished career in high school, a long list of serial romances, and a lifestyle bordering on the hedonistic. Suddenly her father was stricken with cancer. Susan came face-to-face with reality in a hurry. She became a care-giver for her father and aban-



doned the fast life. Her constant experience with doctors and hospitals developed in Susan a profound appreciation of what her life had been and what it could be. When her father died, Susan resolved to become a nurse. She is now 28 years old.

Mary, Tom and Susan are all bright people. Each can read with comprehension and retention, they can write coherently, and they possess good common sense. There is every reason to believe they can succeed in their plans.

Suddenly, all three of our new SOTA's are confronted by the Demon. The Demon lurks in the core curriculum where it receives only polite notice by those who are in initially too excited to worry about him.

The Demon makes his appearance in a costume covered with radical signs, formulas, exponents, variables, equations, graphs, and grouping symbols. The Demon is Mathematics.

In high school, Mary conscientiously trundled through her math courses, never fully appreciating their value, but succeeding in them nonetheless.

But that was 20 years ago and the scope of Mary's present math knowledge would pass through the eye of a needle.

Tom had that inherent math ability boys often have, but he never cared about it much and certainly never

nurtured it. He got by on insight and preferred tuning his car. He is ready now to tackle math in a meaningful way, but he also knows he has nothing to build on.

Susan found that she fared better in high school by playing the bimbo than by appearing to be a good student. She was so charming and personable that teachers just passed her along. She is algebraically illiterate and she knows it.

For these three decent people, the Demon stands menacingly in the middle of their road to success. Even after being away from the academic life for a long time, reasonably intelligent people can manage most of their course work. But the Demon is a different kind of threat. Most folks can't just pick up in mathematics where they left off years ago. Too much has been lost — the concepts, the structure, the skills. If the liberal arts mentality must insist on college mathematics for everyone, then the non-traditional student is often faced with starting over.

A sensible approach would be to observe the obvious and to assist our SOTA's with a strategy for defeating the Demon. But this is not to be.

Clearly, the judgement of the professionals and the honest appraisal of the students themselves is insufficient — perhaps even untrustworthy. Mary, Tom and Susan must **prove** their case. They are about to become acquainted with that infamous validation instrument, the College Placement Examination (CPE).

The CPE is a semi-confused array of questions purportedly having something to do with one's ability to withstand the rigors of college-level mathematics. It is used as both an entrance test and an exit test. Since it is a standardized test, there is no necessary correlation with an individual school's expectations. Many of the test questions have absolutely no bearing whatsoever on the mathematics which students will be studying in their credit courses.

But, never mind. Mary, Tom and Susan have arrived at the appointed hour and are ready to proceed with a 40-question, 45-minute entrance test which literally could make or break their futures. They spend nearly as long filling in bubbles as they have for the test itself. They are prohibited from using calculators, possibly because such technology is as yet unproven.

They sit in a room with a hundred others with only the sound of scratch-

ing pencils and the ticking clock. Mary, Tom and Susan are having no difficulty restraining their enthusiasm. They are already beginning to question the wisdom of their decisions.

The Demon watches intently as a machine "grades" their tests and spews out means and standard deviations and all other varieties of statistical debris. The computer produces great lists with raw scores, scaled scores, and other numbers no one has ever been found to decipher.

An now the grand moment arrives. "Howjadoo?"

Mary, as always, was too conscientious. She really wanted to do well and pored over each problem like it was life and death. When the proctor signalled the end of the test, poor Mary was on question 28.

Tom, perhaps more test-wise, roared through the CPE. He got to the end, but left several undone and guessed at quite a few.

Susan simply lost it. She had a bad case of butterflies anyway, and, when the test booklets were opened, she went nonlinear and that was that.

It appears the Demon has claimed three more victims. But even the Demon knows the jury is still out. What, after all, does it take to "pass" the CPE and "clear" a developmental studies obligation?

Because of a "norming" process which defies explanation, a "scale score" of 70 (the "passing" grade) translates backwards into a raw score of about 55%!

And so it is that a student who can answer slightly more than half the questions on a meaningless standardized test is deemed ready for college-level mathematics. Everyone, faculty and students alike, knows how close to a hoax the entire exercise is, but there we have it.

Guess what? Mary, who never even got to the last 12 questions, answered 23 of the 28 she *did* get to correctly. That's 58%. The CPE has spoken: Mary is ready for College Algebra.

Tom just tried to do too much. Still, he did get 21 correct, even with all the guesswork. But that's only 53%. The CPE has spoken: Tom is *not* ready for College Algebra.

We need not embarrass Susan any further. The Demon's sneering smile tells the story.

If that were the end of the escapade, it would be pitiful enough. But there's more.

“The Demon makes his appearance in a costume covered with radical signs, formulas, exponents, variables, equations, graphs, and grouping symbols.”

The CPE not only has the ability to sort out who is ready for College Algebra from those who are not, it even has the ability to discern the *level* of remediation the student needs, thereby rescuing us from having to make anything resembling a professional judgement.

Tom, with his 53%, is ready for the intermediate level. Susan's disaster landed her in the elementary level.

The quarter begins with Mary sitting in a College Algebra class, wondering how she will explain this to her husband. Tom is in his intermediate math class, staring into space and wondering how he could be so baffled so soon after leaving the Bookstore. Susan, snuggled into her elementary developmental math class, is delighted. She is right where she knows she belongs, and she now looks back with gratitude at her record low score on the CPE.

Two weeks later.

Mary doesn't have the slightest idea what's going on in her College Algebra course. She is a proud woman and tries hard. Her husband tries to help her, but she takes her frustration out on him. The children wonder why she is in tears. The dream collapses, a good nursing prospect is lost, and the Demon swaggers.

Tom lives in the tutoring lab. He views video tapes. Occasionally he remembers seeing things before and sometimes he even understands. But when he gets home, things vanish. Tom knows deep down that he has entered in the middle of the movie. Try as he might, he simply does not have the basic skills. He is frustrated and angry because he *knew* he wasn't prepared. Maybe he should have just stayed in the Army. Another good nursing prospect is lost, and the Demon cuts another notch in his trident.

Could anything have been done? Yes and No.

Apparently it is too much to ask that the CPE be dumped down a dark well. If there is a need for state-wide accountability, then fine. Use it as an exit test. At that point it would be harmless enough, and all manner of people can be kept busy compiling results and promulgating reports. But to use the CPE as a placement tool is absurd and cruel.

Given the inviolability of the CPE, our best second-effort lies in auditing. But here, too, there are rules upon rules.

Since Susan seems to be in the right niche, let's reconstruct the events for Mary and Tom.

Mary knows - everyone knows - she has no business in College Algebra. Still, the CPE says she's ready. Could Mary be mistaken? After all, she's 37 years old and anxious to get on with it. She really doesn't *want* to spend one or two additional quarters on remediation if she doesn't need it. How can she dispute the CPE? Mary will probably confer with her husband who can't help but want to keep his tenure with the children as short as possible.

Mary will probably fall through the cracks, but let's pretend she doesn't. Some kind soul advises her to ignore the CPE and audit the developmental courses. Mary has heard what she wanted to hear and feels relieved to be able to do this.

When she reaches the head of the line at regular registration, she hits a pothole. Sorry, Mary, you can't enroll as an audit student - not at this time. You must wait until the drop/add days, i.e., until the courses are already underway. That way, you will not have received the explanation about the syllabus and course procedures, and you will have missed the very opening material you desperately need.

There is a rationale for this. Audit students can't be filling up classes which developmental students are required to take. But I'm a paying customer, says Mary. Why not just have enough sections available to accommodate all of us? Well, for one thing, we wouldn't want to appear to have too many developmental students. It's embarrassing.

Even so, *if* we can get to Mary on time, we may be able to give her a fighting chance. Realistically speaking, though, our best hunch is that we have lost Mary.

One would think that Tom's rescue potential is far more favorable. After all, he's already in developmental studies, He's just at the wrong level.

The obvious solution for Tom is to audit the elementary level, then return to his required intermediate level and continue on successfully. Obvious, but alas, not possible.

Once classified as a developmental student, one cannot audit a course below what the CPE says he is qualified to take. Oh sure, Tom can elect to take elementary courses, but he must take it as a *developmental* student, not as an *audit* student.

All right, says Tom, so I'll take it as a developmental student.

Just a moment, Tom. You are forgetting the rules. The rules give you three tries to exit developmental math. That's not three tries per course, it's three tries to complete *both* courses.

Tom is bewildered. Why, asks Tom, would I get three tries to exit *one* developmental *English* course, but three tries to exit *two* developmental *math* courses?

Because, Tom those are the rules.

The light goes on for Tom. That means if I *elect* to take the elementary course, even though the CPE says I *don't* need it, but I and everyone else know that I *do* need it, I am penalized for my motivation by now having to pass *two* courses in the time that I *would* have had to pass *one* course!

Those are the rules, Tom.

Tom is approaching the psycho zone. He ventures to ask *why* those are the rules.

He is answered with a chuckle. Don't you see, Tom? A football player could just audit developmental math for his entire playing career. How could we justify paying football players when all they do is audit developmental courses? Jan Kemp and all that.

But I'm *not* a football player, replies Tom, suppressing hysteria. We don't even *have* a football team. I just want to be a nurse. Are you telling me that just because Bruno What's-His-Name needs to knock people around somewhere, I can't engage in a program of study that meets my personal needs? And why are developmental students playing football anyway? A developmental student should be considered *pre-college*. Let them get their remedial work behind them, and, when they become *official* college students, then they can play football.

The peals of laughter echo in Tom's mind as, fed up to the gills, he relieves his disenchantment by dropping a pox on all our houses.



EPILOGUE

Four years later.

Susan accepts congratulations at commencement and begins her nursing career.

Mary and Tom? Whereabouts unknown. Check with the Demon. 🍎