

## The Power of One (or, A Skinny Digit)

Just looking at it, you can't help but feel a little sorry for the digit "1." There it is, skinny, scrawny, and naked, a vulnerable wisp of a character made with a quick and thoughtless stroke of a pencil; a waif of a number left to hold its own against the robust remaining numerals, like a minnow in a school of jumbo catfish.

If formed with too faint a line or squashed against its neighbor, "1" can easily be overlooked, a mere crumb hidden on a plate of giant cookies. Oh, oops, didn't see that "one" there. Sorry. On those old green and white ledger sheets, the emaciated figure often seamlessly blends into the page's regimented lines, virtually disappearing from sight, a figure camouflaged against its will.

This skeletal numeral has none of the heft of a "4," which can be as wide and squatty as a sumo wrestler. An "8" has curves and bounce, a roly-poly clown of a number that begs to have two eyes and a smile inserted into at least one of its beach ball halves. "Two" is probably the most versatile of the digit family: it can be tall and regal with an elegant profile, plain and simple as a Shaker table, or dolled up with curlicues and squiggles like a burlesque dancer. While "7" is simple in stature, it has a haughtiness that the meager "1" can only hope to imitate, "one" being a bony mutt in a pack of regal greyhounds.

Even when speaking the various numerals aloud, poor "1" just sort of apologetically plops from the lips, eager to get lost in the anonymity of the words that follow. Or else it rolls out of the mouth and lands with a gentle thud, like a potato on a soft piece of ground. There is no command, no presence to it; certainly not the punch as when you vocalize a hearty "six" that reverberates from the diaphragm. Slicing through the air with a rapier edge that would make a drill sergeant smile, "5" can be as acerbic as battery acid. "Three," though technically only one syllable in length, is so flexible and whimsical it can be drawn out to two or more when allowed to stretch to its full playfulness (think of rhyming with "Whheeeee!!"). But not so "one," droning, dull "one."

And when mulling over the digits, consider the mathematical woes of this mere stick: it is virtually powerless, impotent in so many arithmetic exercises. "Two" has the clout to cut a number in half when division by it is performed. And a "4" has the muscle to dissect another into quarters! But division by lowly "1" isn't even cause for a blink of an eye: the numerator retains its full identity, un-

daunted and unadulterated by this twiggy denominator. If applying division's more generous opposite, multiplication, it doesn't take much contemplation to reach the conclusion that if given a choice of all the digits to multiply, say, the number of squash you'll harvest this season by, "1" would be your *last* choice—other than the bloated "0," which has the supremacy of reducing any digit to a clone of itself. Hmmm. Paltry "1."

So why don't we just exile "1" and its anorectic cousin, the lower case "L," from our tablets and keyboards? It certainly would save us the confusion of mixing these two beanpole characters up, avoiding embarrassing mistakes. Let's face it, "9" has no close kin in the alphabet to baffle us. And when was the last time "5" flummoxed you by masquerading as a letter? If "4" and "H" should befuddle you, don't blame it on the innocent number; seek justice, instead, from the author with the poor penmanship! But "1" and "l" are a twosome of pesky tricksters just waiting to trip you up, a pair of devilish twins.

But before we banish the sorry "1" to be buried along with such outdated detritus as rotary telephones and quill pens, I must rush to its defense. Because while "1" alone might not always be as impressive as a thirty-pound watermelon on a ninety-degree day, every so often it bucks the trend and stands tall, a ponderosa pine in the prairie of digits. And put a couple or a few together, and they can vibrate, come alive, take on a life of their own. Wait! The "ones" are no longer the whimpy kids on the block at the mercy of the other bullying hieroglyphs. Rally that 1 plus 1 plus 1 plus 1 plus..... And suddenly there's a vitality and strength heretofore unrecognized. "One" has brawn; "one" has sway; it's no longer a withered leaf swept along in the frenzied current of a spring stream.

Each of us, on our own and in teaming up, can make a difference in the lives of others—be that through volunteer work, raising money for a cause or organization we believe in, becoming involved in our community, or by supporting our local farms, farmers, and regional economy.

At times being a slumpy, inconspicuous "1"—that symbolic, unassuming digit—is appropriate. On the other hand, there are occasions when applying the metaphorical "bold" key is in order, and we alone—or in concert with others who have adopted this font—can hold our own and stand strong amidst the characters in the text of our lives.