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WE HAVE WITH US THIS

AFTERNOON...



Illustrations by Marguerite Dorian

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Happy 2011!
P & H.



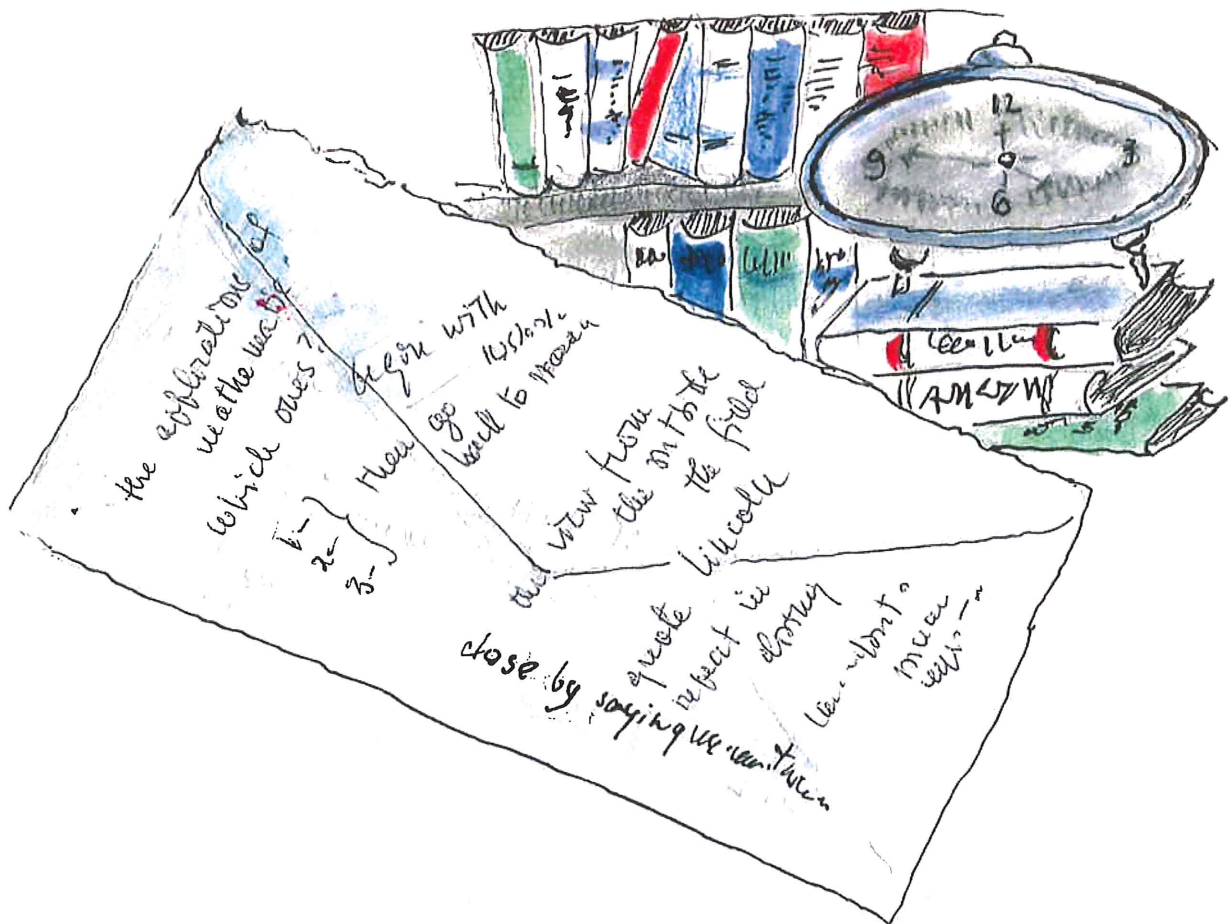
Some years ago I found myself teaching a quarter term course in the philosophy of mathematics at Mimosa State University. This was a mistake. My class consisted almost entirely of beautiful girls every one of whom could very well have been a Miss America. As for what I had to say, it was a failure. Nonetheless, I carried with me from northern climes the reputation and the aura of being a splendid lecturer. I have heard, and it may be true, that people go to lectures, not to learn anything, but to bask in the shadow of the Great.

My hostess at Mimosa, Professor Miz Lucy, was a long time friend. She was asked by a colleague whether she thought I would do as an after lunch speaker at one of regular meetings of the local chapter of the International Alligator Club. These were held in the Mimosaland Motel very close to the campus.

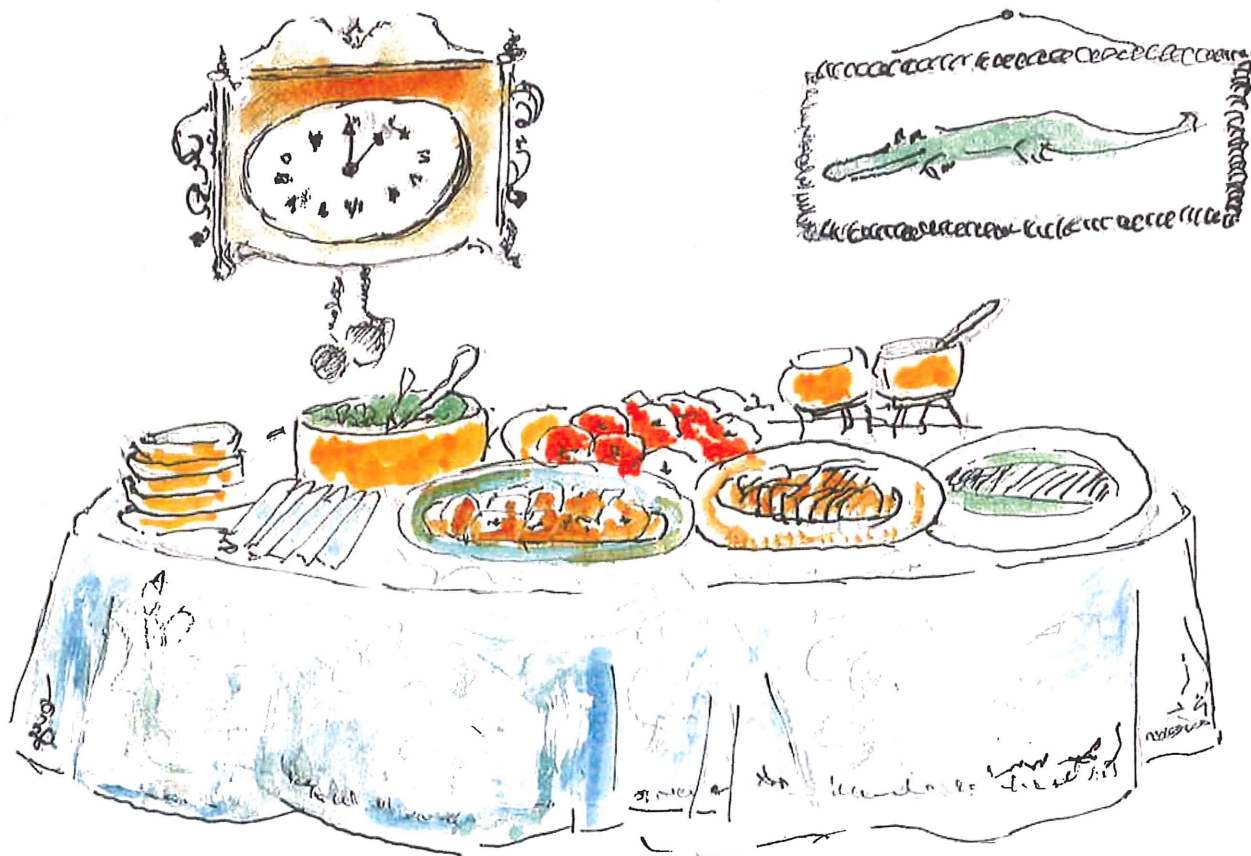
"He showly would," Miz Lucy replied without consulting me.

I hit the ceiling when I found out, but I realized I was hooked. Miz Lucy excused herself from my presentation; it turned out she had to bring her Ford (which she usually drove on empty) to the garage.

What on earth was I going to say about mathematics to a pack of professional Alligators? Well, I thought I would say that the applications of mathematics underlie our civilization and following in the footsteps of Abe Lincoln, I sketched out a half hour talk on the back of an envelope



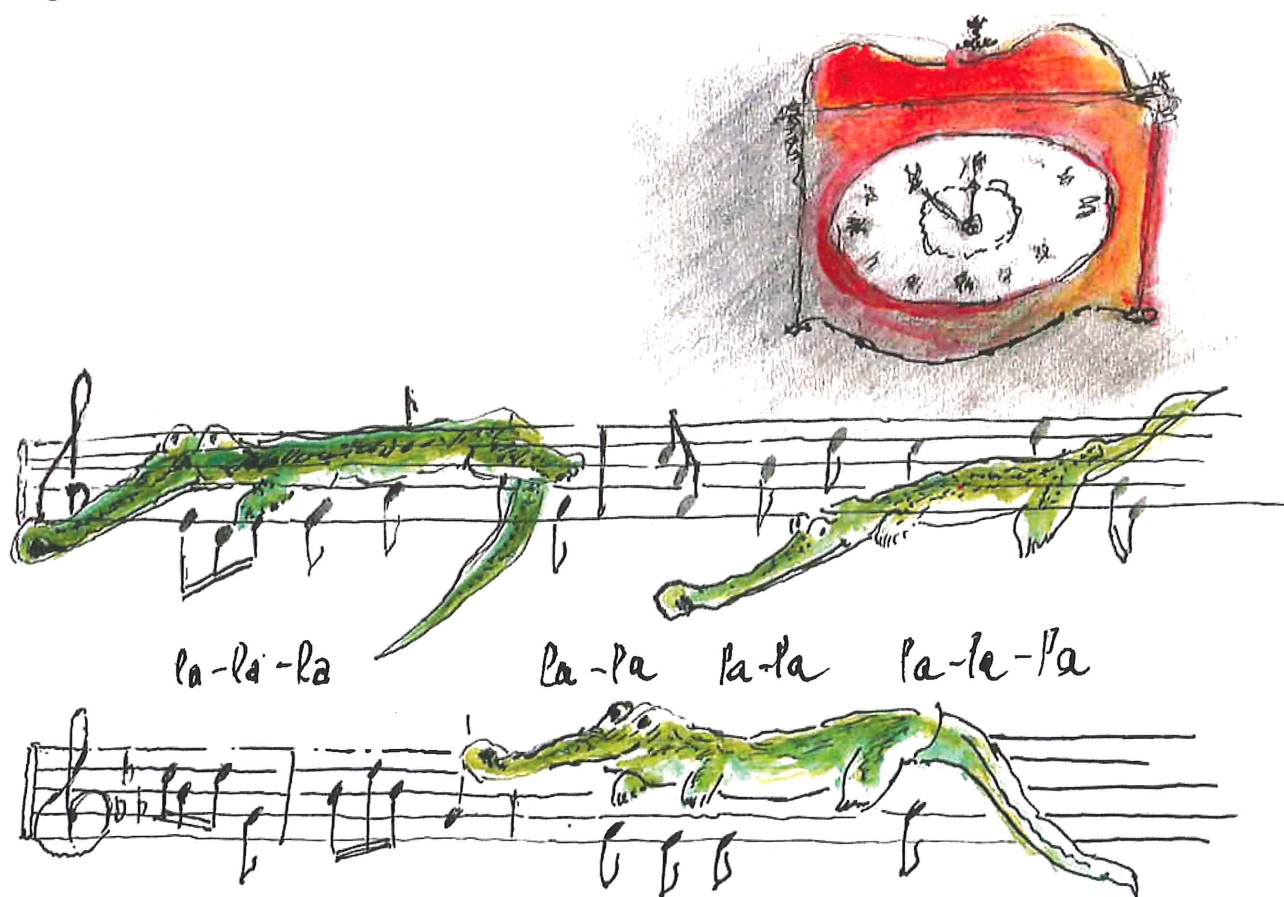
At 12:00 Noon, a group of perhaps thirty Mimosan Alligators, largely men, filed into the one function room of the Mimosaland Motel. I was escorted in by Professor Whitsand, an Alligator of long standing, and we were followed by a flagbearer with the emblem of the local club. I was introduced as the Speaker of the Afternoon by the Chairman of the meeting, who added, facing me directly, that we had to be out by 1:00 P.M. sharp.



The Chairman then passed out copies of the *International Alligator Songbook*. Standing, the group sang what I gathered was the Alligator Anthem, and then, with heads bowed slightly, recited a universalistic and non-denominational Grace. After these preliminaries, we all went over to the hot table where an ample lunch had been laid on. Fried chicken and biscuits, collard greens, apple pie and ice cream.

It was now getting to be 12:35 P.M. I began to fidget. The dishes pushed aside, we were asked to sing the songs numbered 14 and 68 in the *Songbook*. It was now 12:43 P.M. My fidgeting intensified. Internally I was getting furious but to the assembled, I appeared as a Pinnacle of Placidity.

The songs were followed by the Treasurer's Report, which, *Deo gratia*, was brief. It was now 12:46 P.M.



The Treasurer's Report was followed by the induction of two new members with a short bio read aloud by each inductee's sponsor, This was followed by the Oath of Membership. The clock now stood at 12:54 P.M.

I had six minutes in which to say something. As a rule, when giving a talk, it takes professors more than six minutes simply to clear their throats.

I calmed down, I threw away my envelope. I rose and spoke. I told my audience that whether or not they were aware of it, the physical and social worlds were being increasingly mathematized. I added that the relevant mathematics was largely hidden from view. ("Thank God for that," one of the Alligators said audibly under his breath.) I then gave two examples of significant but hidden mathematizations and sat down just as the minute hand of the Function Room clock moved to the hour.

"I heard that your talk at the Alligators was great success," Miz Lucy told me the next day.

"It was a great experience for me. It really was. And a chastening one. I'm glad you set it up for me."

The End

