

Tipper Discovers Statistics

EDITOR'S NOTE. A friend to all in Philosophy for Children, Berrie Heesen, died on September 6, 2002. He has written many «Tipper» stories for this journal over the last years and we are both pleased and sad to publish this last one.

Berrie Heesen

Tipper, I need to tell you this story. I can't keep it to myself any longer. I need to tell it to someone, and because you just happen to be around, you'll have to be the listening ear. Perhaps you've never been just an ear before, but you'll have to make the best of it. Then you'll know what it's like to be an ear. You do want to listen to Uncle Berrie, don't you?

Tipper nodded.

What do you think it's about? I'll tell you. This time it's not easy to be an ear. It's a complicated subject. It's about something difficult.

It's about people and especially about all the people there are. What do we know about each other? What we know about ourselves, we know mainly because there are also other people around. If there weren't any other people, we wouldn't really know anything about ourselves. We need the other people around us to get to know ourselves. Now you already knew that, because in school you always compare your marks with the others'. Getting top marks is no big thing if all the others get top marks too.

We compare ourselves to others in different ways. One of these ways is hard to do; it has a difficult name: statistics.

D'you think you could explain that a bit, Uncle?

But of course my boy, that's why I started this conversation with you, to explain it to you. Let's start with something that you haven't forgotten. You know what the doctor told me.

This was something Tipper would never forget. «The chances are that you have between 6 months and 2 years left to live.» We all got a great shock. Uncle himself, Tipper, Tipper's friend who was Uncle's son and everybody else.

What did the doctor mean when he said this, Tipper? I'll explain it to you exactly.

The doctor meant: «Sir, when we look at the people who have had the same illness as you have now, then we know what became of them.» What they told me Tipper, was because of all the other people. It was about the group of people who had had the same tumour and who were about my age. Someone who was twice my age when he became ill, is a different case altogether. He doesn't count. It's about the people around my age, who had a tumour in the same place: in the brain, and whose tumour was as nasty as mine (4th degree).

Do you know, Tipper, I could say to myself that they were all different people than I am, and that's absolutely true, too. After all, each of us lives our own life. Does that make it nonsense for the doctor say such a thing to me, and for him to compare me to people who are all different to me?

This is what lots of people think, and they say to me: «Don't let those statistics drive you crazy!» And it's those people I'm mad at. I'd really like to push them into a canal in Amsterdam and to let them swim around for a while before letting them climb out again. Mean of me, isn't it?

We all live with statistics, Tipper. And if that weren't true then no-one would spend their time saving money for their so-called old age, let's say their pension. We all expect that after 65 years, we'll still have years left to enjoy life. Why do people do that, Tipper? Statistics! We all learn that in this world people will live to be about 75, the women a bit older than the men. That's what everyone thinks, that at the end of your life you'll be quite old.

I've always thought that too, Tipper. Of course everybody knows that it can go wrong; that you can have an accident or become fatally ill, but that's not nice to think about, so you leave that part out. You think about getting old. I was about 17, Tipper, and I had a friend of the same age. On Saturdays, we used to play a round of chess and could imagine we were little old men of 70, sitting on a park bench or playing a round of chess together.

Even then we thought about how we wanted to grow old and have a walking stick.

There was nothing wrong with that, Tipper. It was our statistics. We too could grow to be that age. My granddads and grannies grew to be even older than that. And then the doctor comes along and says that in my case, it's all over in 2 years time. Boom! Now my statistics are totally different.

Now I have a life in front of me that has a statistic of 2 years.

And what do people say, Tipper? Oh, I've heard it said a lot. «We'll keep hoping that you too will grow old normally.»

Rubbish, Tipper! The most ridiculous nonsense. They don't mean it either. Oh, sure they'd like to hope for it, but they don't believe it at all.

You see, Tipper, it's like this: sometimes somebody with my illness does escape the statistics. But how many do? 1 out of 400.

Those statistics again, Tipper. I told you I'd explain it to you. So there's a very small chance that I could survive. How big is that chance? If I set my hopes on that, Tipper, then I'll be doing exactly the same as someone who takes part in the National Lottery and who also has a very small chance of winning the first prize. Out of all the people who take part, only one will win the first prize. If you really start hoping that you'll win the first prize when you buy a lottery ticket; if you assume that, then you might as well spend all your money here and now, all of it, because soon you're going to win the first prize anyway.

No Tipper, with my statistics I just need to make sure that I do those things that I definitely want to do within those 2 years (and let's just not think about those 6 months). Because that's all I know right now. And not go hoping for that very small chance that I will survive, but instead make sure that in the time that I have now, I live like I'd like to live now. Think carefully about what I want in this short life and then choose what I want to do. I'm not supposed to say that, Tipper, people don't want to hear that. I'm supposed to go along with their statistics and think that I too will grow to be old. There are people who also want me to hope, or rather to hope along with them (and with what they want).

You see, Tipper, you've known me for a long time. You know perfectly well that I'd like to grow old. I want to see you when you have your first job, or own your first business. I'd really like to be around for that, Tipper, you know that! You will invite me then, won't you? It's just that statistics say there isn't much chance that I'll still be here.

Surely I can't live my life thinking about the first prize. I'm better off living and thinking of what I'd like to do now, as time is running short.

I wanted to tell you this, Tipper, because sometimes those people make me sick; those who keep wanting me to hope that I'll grow to be old. Don't let people around you drive you crazy, Tipper. Think carefully about what you want yourself and follow your own path. People live a statistical life and don't forget it. Although I realize that this is a bit hard to follow, still it's important that you try to understand it.

Berrie Heesen
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