

Long Division, Remainder 1

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It is another gray day in Boston in April. The morning sun pierces through the fog, and through my bedroom windows, landing on my laptop. I tilt the screen ever so slightly, to see the 7 other 2-dimensional faces on this particular Zoom call. It is one of 8 such meetings on my calendar today. This call is with an affable bunch: my leadership team consisting of 2 chief residents, 2 rising chief residents, an associate program director, an assistant program director, and our program coordinator. The subject is the same that it has been every day for weeks: hospital census, ward and ICU staffing, and current resident issues. We meet like this daily, regardless of weekday or weekend. I can hardly remember what day of the week it is most days, as it has all become so rote even as each day brings several new crises we have never encountered before. It is COVID-19 time, the daily soundtrack is the same, and we keep pressing repeat. The days, hours, and boundaries blur. There is so much work to do every day and there never seems to be enough time, yet time also ticks by so slowly in this pandemic life.

I am in my bedroom upstairs, where necessity has forced me to carve out a new home office space. Work-life balance has been redefined in my home, where I work simultaneously as physician, program director, and a single mother to 2 elementary school-aged children during all hours of the day, every single day of the week. All of the boundaries and definitions are blurred, melting into each other in a messy and uncomfortable way for all of us. Today, while in my room Zooming with my team, I hear some heavy footsteps, a door shut loudly, and then the wailing of my 10-year-old daughter in the room next door. I continue to listen to my colleague talking, proposing yet another schedule change for the residents to accommodate our urgent staffing needs, but I am distracted by the muffled crying. My mother mind continues to wander to my daughter, while my program director mind wonders if I can interrupt my colleague and the call to attend to my child. Do the rules of this new workday and new work style allow that? Are there actually any rules right now? Should I care? I am conscious of the forces pulling me in opposite directions, magnets painfully pulling apart

tightly glued pieces of me that lived more separated in the pre-COVID-19 world but are now heavily intertwined. I interrupt my colleague, explain that I need to briefly leave the meeting, and ask them to continue. I put Zoom on mute, leave the laptop open, and softly shuffle into my daughter's room.

I find her on her bed, lying on her stomach, thrashing her feet in anger with crocodile tears making trails from her glistening blue eyes down her sweaty face and neck. She is frustrated by her math "homework" and trying desperately to solve a long division math problem that she has not been taught how to do. School was suddenly shuttered 6 weeks ago by COVID-19, and my daughter was thrust into asynchronous learning as a fourth grader. She has not had a proper math lesson about division, let alone any experience in learning from a computer. I guide her in taking a few deep breaths and force myself to do the same. The tears dry up after a minute. She points me toward a piece of scrap paper on which she's written out her logical understanding of how to divide 5335 by 7. I feel my age, in that sudden out-of-touch moment when as a parent one begins to understand that math is being taught differently than the way it was taught 35 years ago. I listen to her talk it through, and she has the concept, but is struggling because 7 does not divide "easily." We talk it through a moment more, my own anxieties bubbling within. There is urgency to return to my call, and my work. It is hard to contemplate long division at this particular moment when ICU capacity is at 200% and my residents are tired and struggling. My daughter is also tired and struggling. I am tired and struggling. I am painfully pulled in so many directions, and now suddenly and unexpectedly confronted with long division. I feel myself inextricably divided.

I sit quietly with my daughter, feeling my own impatience but working hard not to show it outwardly, as she picks up her pencil and begins to work through the problem. She is slow and iterative, deliberate and engaged, but frustrated. She looks up and says, "Is this it? 762, remainder 1?" She throws down her pencil and it softly bounces off her bed. It's correct, I think. I grab my iPhone and quickly punch the numbers into my calculator. I can't remember the last time I contemplated the concept of "remainders" in long division. She breathes deep, writes the answer on her worksheet. "Thanks, Mom." I walk the few

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steps back to my room, listening to the chatter as I approach, colleagues still on the call. I unmute. We resume. I missed the meaty part of the conversation, and sense my reentry was unnatural. They had gone on necessarily without me, but paused to summarize and catch me up. I feel twisted and pulled again, now polarized back to residency program work, still thinking about my daughter and simultaneously wondering if the short summary was all I really needed to know about the issue at hand for the residents.

I am conscious that I am being watched all the time. My children watch how long I am “at work” in my upstairs office, how often home life is interrupted by another urgent call or text message, and how many times I walk away from family time to do an unexpected work task. They also gauge my level of worry about COVID-19 and translate it to their own childlike formulation of the disaster going on around them—I need to be steady and reassuring. My colleagues need to see me stand steady through the stress and steer the ship with careful guidance as we collectively take the unexpected twists and turns of

emergency response. Even though it feels unnatural, they also need to see me be a mother, even during work hours. I feel urgency for them to see me mother as a form of implicit permission to be parents themselves during this complicated time. These weeks have brought me keen awareness of the collective gaze, the nagging discomfort in the merging of my identities, and a simultaneous sense of restless inadequacy as I stretch in all directions.

Long division math is something I did not think would find its way to my conscious experience during the pandemic. It wanders into my mind again as I lie down to sleep at the end of this particularly long day. At night, alone with my thoughts, I am the remainder 1, divided over and over throughout the day and for the many days ahead.



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