



# Easy as Pi

BY JONAS MOODY

Daniel Tammet is a number lover. The British autistic savant's unique knack for mental calculations is the result of a rare condition called *synesthesia*, in which he experiences numbers as colors, sensations and even landscapes. For Tammet, the number pi holds untold beauty. Well, almost untold. Unlike many autistics, Tammet, 28, retains the ability to converse, and you might be surprised to learn that English and arithmetic aren't the only languages he speaks fluently.

**Jonas Moody:** *People develop affinities for some strange things nowadays... computers, minke whales, peanut butter and pickle sandwiches. But numbers?*

**Daniel Tammet:** I have a very emotional relationship with numbers. For most people, numbers are just squiggles on a page. For me they're much more dynamic and visual. So when I think about numbers it's immediately an emotional experience, and a visual one that involves me and interests me. It has always been that way. Since I was very small.

**JM:** *I'm not saying that there aren't mathematicians and accountants out there who share your passion, but you go a step further. You have an actual emotional response to digits. From zero to 10,000 you claim that each number has a distinctive shape and feel.*

**DT:** It's difficult for me to understand when people say, "Oh! I hate numbers. I can't do any calculations at all. I have to use a calculator for everything." I think, wow, you're missing out on a lot. Numbers are everywhere. Barcodes and telephones. If you don't

have any connection with them whatsoever then it's a big part of the world you're missing.

**JM:** *Are you the only one in your family with a penchant for numbers?*

**DT:** My brother also has synesthesia. When he plays guitar and plays a note he will see the color orange, for example. He associates happiness with the color orange. It's your ability to associate emotions with things you wouldn't normally associate emotions

with. I don't have this with music, but I do have this with words and numbers.

**JM:** *Your ability isn't just limited to arithmetic. You also have a predilection for collecting languages. How many do you speak now?*

**DT:** Ten.

**JM:** *Ten?!*

**DT:** But my exposure to them varies and also how I get to use them. My French is good because I learned it in school. My German is okay, but it doesn't seem to help me with Icelandic. Icelandic stands out. It's like Old English, like the English we would have spoken before the Normans invaded.

**JM:** *Two years ago you were challenged to learn*

*Icelandic in one week. After working with a private instructor you dazzled Icelanders with a television interview where you spoke the language quite proficiently. What's your strategy for learning a language?*

**DT:** I learned it visually. I was reading as much as I could, and reading out loud to have my pronunciation checked. All my Icelandic is actually based on a couple of books, and my ability to extrapolate the rules of grammar—even make up my own words in some cases. Not only was I learning words but creating my own words. I just don't worry about looking stupid when I'm learning.

**JM:** *Is there a link between your aptitude for numbers and language?*

**DT:** I have a very deep relationship with numbers

because of the way I experience them. The same can be said of words and languages. I like learning languages, and it's partly because it helps me connect with people in a way I find difficult otherwise because of my Asperger's. [Asperger's syndrome is Tammet's form of autism.]

**JM:** *Autism is often accompanied by a certain difficulty in communicating with other people, but you are quite a phenom among autistics because you can express yourself so effortlessly. Have you always been such a social animal?*

**DT:** I've become much less scared of people. As this has happened I've been spending more time with people and less time with numbers. Therefore my relationship with numbers has changed as my relationship with people has changed. In a sense, language has become more important for me, as I



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