



ATLAS OF HUMAN IMAGINATION

Measurements in a Quantified World — Experiences in a Qualified World

We increasingly find ourselves living in a world that can be measured. We count, track, rank, weigh, calculate and compare. In fact, many of the pioneers in the *Atlas of Human Imagination* devoted their lives to measurement – such as René Descartes’ XYZ coordinate system for positioning in 1637, or Christiaan Huygens’ invention of the pendulum clock in 1656, or Max Planck’s quantised energy levels in 1900, or Edwin Hubble’s measurement of an expanding universe in 1929.

Numbers are enormously useful, but of course, not everything that matters can be expressed as a number. Perhaps a good life requires a careful balance between the **quantified world** and the **qualified world**: between what can be measured and what can only be experienced. Here are ten examples to think about in our everyday lives.

Measurements in a quantified world	Experiences in a qualified world
1. Step counts per day	Go for a walk because you enjoy the landscape, the fresh air and the movement – not because your watch tells you that you have reached 10,000 steps.
2. Likes on a recent post	Share an idea because it matters to you. If one person reads it and it changes their life, that may be more meaningful than 10,000 people skim-reading and briefly clicking “like”.
3. Hours worked	Try occasionally to forget the clock. It is not simply the hours you put into work, but what you put into those hours: creativity, imagination, impact, concentration, camaraderie and discovery.

Measurements in a quantified world	Experiences in a qualified world
4. Tracking a package	Anticipate something without constantly checking where it is. It will eventually turn up anyway. A little uncertainty and surprise are also part of human experience.
5. Body weight	Health matters, but there is little value in obsessively measuring yourself every day. Pay attention also to how strong, energetic and comfortable you feel.
6. Calories and portion sizes	Enjoy the taste, smell and texture of food. In fact, grow your own food. Share a meal with friends or family without reducing every experience at the table to calorie-counting arithmetic.
7. Bank balance	Money is necessary, but it can never fully replace contentment, love, self-esteem or the enjoyment of time spent with family and friends.
8. Weather apps	Experience the warmth of the sun on your face, the smell of an unexpected rain shower, the colours of a sunset or the surprise of a double rainbow. You do not need a weather app to tell you that these things are beautiful, of course.
9. Geo-location on a map	Walk or cycle somewhere using your own senses. Take a new route, allow yourself an extra half-hour and perhaps even get a little lost. Notice the position of the sun, the streets and the landscape.
10. Citations and h-index	Even academic life has become heavily measured. But the intellectual value of an idea cannot be fully captured by its citations. Enjoy the pleasure of work, the joy of discovery, the team spirit and the possibility of making a genuine difference. An h-index can't measure any of that.

Conclusion

We need measurement. It helps us understand the world, as many of the pioneers in the Atlas have shown us. But we should not confuse what can be counted with what counts. A step counter can measure how far we walk, but not whether we enjoyed the journey. A bank balance can measure wealth, but not contentment. An academic citation index can measure scholarly visibility, but not necessarily the true value of a new idea.

The quantified world gives us precision. The qualified world gives us meaning.

Perhaps wisdom lies in knowing when to measure – and when simply to enjoy the ride.

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