Life is like a mathematical function, simple but flexible. Since childhood, I have loved solving math problems. Math encourages searching for the unknown. Over time, mathematical thinking has become a part of who I am, a part of my background.

Consider the function: y = a^x + b.

Assume both “a” and “b” are greater than 1.

This simple function has become a metaphor for life that has helped me understand the value of taking calculated risks and challenging myself.

**1. “a” does not affect the shape of the graph**

“a” is our background or identity, something we cannot change.

Small for my age, fear kept me from taking risks. My height, or my “a,” affected my personality: for example, although I loved basketball, my height limited my physical confrontation. I became introverted and fearful, worried about others’ comments and attitudes.

**2. Point (0,1)**

In the function y=a^x, if “a” is greater than 1, the graph will always pass the point (0,1). This absolute accuracy, a sense that outcomes are predetermined, may cause people to become lazy; they refuse to try anything new since they think they know the outcome.

“Rex is a really good swimmer;” I was used to hearing accolades for my swimming ability. In China, people learn the breaststroke first. I learned the breaststroke at eight and fancied myself an expert because I could beat most of my friends. However, Americans learn the freestyle stoke - the fastest stroke - first.

Therefore, when I joined the Culver Swim Team, expecting to show off this talent, I came in last. I quit after the first week because I did not have the courage to compete, believing the results would always be the same.

**3. “b” only affects the value of the function**

“b” is a variable number. We cannot predict it. If life is unpredictable, why not challenge ourselves to enrich our lives with new experiences?

Wind rushed past me. I squinted but kept looking at the ball in front of me. It was getting closer. Everyone was behind me; no one would have the chance to hook my mallet. Virginia, my horse, seemed to follow my thoughts and began galloping. However, as a novice equine polo player, I began losing control. When I came to a spot, three meters from the ball, I hesitated.

On the one hand, I was afraid of falling. On the other hand, I hoped to make a shot. I was in right place, with a high probability of scoring. Was I a coward? Could I try something challenging, something at which I might fail? I felt a rush of courage and forgot where I was, thinking only of hitting the ball.

I began to stand, wielding the mallet above my shoulder. Time slowed and I could feel the whole process of the shot, just as I had practiced. The mallet went through a perfect arc; I hit the center of the ball!

Suddenly, Virginia bucked; the saddle hit my butt and I fell. However, I was not disappointed; I was proud for attempting a new challenge.

This experience taught me about taking risks: a good risk is not simply trying something hard without thinking; in a good risk, evaluation and analysis are significant. With a good risk, even failing or falling can be valuable.

No matter how “a” changes, we are still ourselves; rather than worrying about others’ reactions, we should develop a confident attitude. And while point (0,1) is a restriction, “b” varies.

We must take risks because we do not know the value of our function or the results of taking carefully calculated risks. Like the equation y = a^x + b, I now have a guideline of experience to handle the “math” life. I have learned careful risks - whether I succeed or fail - can only make me better in the end.