



Telephone Transcript:

Operator: Hello, may I speak with a Mr. Mergel Funsky please?

Mergel: Huh? This is me, Mergel! Nobody ever asks for me, but I'm here! Who are you?

Operator: This is operator 31, calling from the U.S. Census Bureau. We received your 2010 census form, and have a few questions. Is this a convenient time to talk?

Mergel: It's always fun to talk. And I have some questions too.

Operator: First, let me thank you for completing your census form and mailing it back promptly. It's a duty and also a privilege that each resident in the United States has, and we appreciate your prompt compliance.

Mergel: I'm real glad that you said to fill it in with blue or black, because blue is my favorite color. I don't know what I would have done if you had asked for a different color.

Operator: Really, no one else has commented on that aspect of our form before. I'm happy it worked out for you.

Mergel: What number am I?

Operator: Pardon me?

Mergel: You know, what's my number? My friend Simon says you're counting all the people in the entire United States, and since my favorite number is six, I was hoping I'd get to be number 6 in your count.

Operator: Well, we don't actually assign a number to each person...

Mergel: So number 6 isn't taken yet? Could you save it for me?

Operator: Well sir, that's not quite how we work. The goal of our census is to just determine in the aggregate the total number of people, and where they reside.

Mergel: But when you start counting, don't you start with number "1"? That's the way I learned counting.

Operator: We don't count the actual people. We count all the responses on the forms that each American fills in, and then we add them all together.

Mergel: That sounds like a dumb way to do it. Who opens all those envelopes?

Operator: The United States has employed approximately 48,000 workers to assist with the 2010 census, so I imagine some of them must be involved in that aspect.

Mergel: That's an awful lot of census workers, just to count people. And then, who counts those census workers? Who's the guy who counted all the way up to 48,000? Do those workers each have to fill out a form, or do they get a "pass" because we already know how many of them there are?

Operator: Sir, those are interesting questions, but I still need to ask you a few things about your response form, if that's OK?

Mergel: Sure, it can be your turn. But I heard on the news how the government is spending way too much money, and if they hired 48,000 people just to open envelopes, and then add up all those little answers, that's a real waste. And what if they make a mistake in adding, and have to start all over again?

Operator: We try to be careful and efficient.

Mergel: Yeah, well I know how they could get the entire country counted with just one worker – me!

Operator: Really? I'll report that on my comments...

Mergel: It's easy. I'd just make everyone in the country line up in one big line, and then have them "count off." The guy at the front calls off "1" and the one behind him calls off "2" and the next person in line then calls off "3" and ...

Operator: Yes, I understand the concept sir, but clearly that's not practical for an entire country!

Mergel: Why not? I know we'd all fit. There's enough room for everyone now, because we already live here, so we'd just be moving around into one straight line for the counting, and then everybody can go back home. They could all line up right in Lincoln Park, but they'd have to be careful of the goose poop.

Operator: But sir, think of the time that would take!

Mergel: Yeah, well how long are your 48,000 people taking? Besides, once I have them lined up, the count off goes real fast, because I wouldn't let them leave their place in line until after they called off their number. When people need to pee, this makes them count faster. That's part of why I want to be number 6. Simon has a real small bladder; I don't know what he would do if he had to wait for 200 million people to count off ahead of him. I guess it's a good thing the line will be in Lincoln Park, because then he can get near the front.

Operator: We appreciate your comments, but I do need to clarify a few of your responses, please. To start, with respect to your birth date, you completed "33" as the age you were as of April 1, 2010. However, in filling out your birth date, you filled in March 4 but left the Year of Birth blank. May we complete that blank space with the year "1977" since that's what it works out to?

Mergel: I don't think that would work right. Next year when I pick a different age, your math would be wrong. See, I told you there might be mistakes in your way of doing it.

Operator: I'm sorry, did you say that next year you're going to pick a different age? Won't you be 34 next year?

Mergel: I haven't decided yet. I usually wait until my birthday comes to pick.

Operator: But surely you or someone close to you must know the year of your birth?

Mergel: Nope. Simon forgot to imagine that part.

Operator: But you're certain about the March 4 part?

Mergel: Hey, I'm not gonna forget my birthday, and you better not either. We have a big party, and ...

Operator: Fine, let's move on. You didn't fill in any information for Person 1, or Person 2, or for any of the other possible Persons until you got to Person 6, and then you filled out your information in those blanks. So, the census still needs your responses for Persons 1, 2, 3, 4 and 5 in your household.

Mergel: You'll have to ask them. I already told you, I wanted to be number 6, so I filled me in for Person 6. You said earlier that you haven't given that number to anyone else, so that means I got there first.

Operator: But in your household, who are the first five people?

Mergel: Ginny and Simon filled out their own separate form, because they live in the apartment next door. I live in this one, and there aren't any other people here, except when we have company. So the first five people don't live here. I don't know where they live.

Operator: OK, so if Persons 1 through 5 don't really exist, we'll just assume you are actually Person 1...

Mergel: No way! I told you, I'm Person 6, and for me that's close enough to the front of the line that I can hold it until I need to pee, so I'm not changing my number.

Operator: That's perfectly fine, Mr. Funsy. Can we move on to the question about Race? You didn't check any of the boxes we provided, and instead, where we ask for Some Other Race, you filled out "Imaginary."

Mergel: Did I win?

Operator: Win what?

Mergel: The race.

Operator: Sir, it's not that kind of race we're asking about. There is no winner.

Mergel: Then, what's the point of entering?

Operator: Sir, we're just trying to classify our population. The Bureau doesn't have "Imaginary" in our demographic list, so we're trying to understand your background or ancestry. Were your parents of Imaginary persuasion, or some other Race?

Mergel: You'd have to ask Simon, he's the one who imagined me. But he's not too bright, so he might have forgotten that too, just like my birth year. I don't know if I ever had parents.

Operator: What I mean is, are there other Imaginary people in your family?

Mergel: Well, you just got finished saying that Persons 1 through 5 don't really exist, so doesn't that make them imaginary?

Operator: Mr. Funsy, may I move on to my next question, please? In response to our final question, you indicated that you do sometimes live or stay somewhere else, and you checked the boxes "At a second residence" and also "In jail or prison." Can you elaborate?

Mergel: Yeah, most of the time I'm across the hall with Ginny and Simon, especially at meal times. Ginny is a real good cook.

Operator: And when are you in jail?

Mergel: Whenever I roll three doubles in a row. But don't worry, I have my own Get Out of Jail Free Card. Simon made me a giant one for my birthday.

Operator: Er... fine. Well, that concludes our questions for you. Do you have any further questions for us?

Mergel: Would you like me to put you on my mailing list? You'd get my pictures, and dumb things that Simon occasionally writes up.

Operator: Thank you for offering, but I'm sorry, I'm not allowed to divulge any contact or callback information. As our form states, everything about our census is completely confidential.

Mergel: Yeah, I wanted to complain about that! On the back of your little handout it says that all my answers are confidential, and can't be used by the tax man, or in a court, and can't be

obtained by a Freedom of Information Act request. So, if that's the case, how will anybody ever get to know me?

Operator: We're trying to protect your privacy. All individual census data and responses remains private, and will be made public only after the expiration of 72 years.

Mergel: Could you call me back then, to remind me, so I'll be on the lookout for its publication?

Operator: I'm sorry sir, the Census Bureau doesn't provide that kind of reminder service.

Mergel: You'd think that, out of 48,000 workers, one of them could do it. But I guess if they're all temporary, I'll have to put that date in my Outlook calendar.

Operator: Thank you for being so understanding of our limitations.

Mergel: Hey, I'm with Simon a lot, so I'm used to it.

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