

Ellen Fowler Hummel

THE Math of Resolution

I WALKED DOWN THE wood-paneled staircase and into the Weight Watchers meeting at 8:30 a.m. on Labor Day morning, determined to drop 20 pounds before January 1. My logic went something like this: Most people make a new year's resolution to lose weight, but how cool would it be to wake up on New Year's Day without having to worry about it? If I could lose weight, then that would free me up to make more meaningful resolutions, like be a better friend, learn a new vocabulary word each day, or get at least eight hours of sleep a night. Maybe start a charity or run a marathon - being thin, the world would be my oyster.

The irony of my first Weight Watchers meeting taking place in a church basement wasn't lost on me, in fact the person who suggested the program was herself, as she joked to me, a veteran of church basements. While I didn't get the feeling that the people in line with me bottomed out (no pun intended) in a strictly pharmacological sense, I understood that most of us felt low in ways that for this group were measured in pounds.

Our members fit every demographic, some men but mostly women - college age, retired, young mothers, a 40-something man who worked from home, women with kids in high school and college. Given the day and time we were mostly home-based citizens whose vices included frequent trips to the refrigerator and well-concealed potato chip habits.



I myself was just a scoop of ice cream away from defeat.

The regulars said hello to each other and shrugged their shoulders when asked how the previous week went. We stood single-file, in our socks, waiting to be called to the scale. Two long folding tables displayed Weight Watchers products - measuring spoons and handheld counters for tracking food points, cookbooks, copies of the official Weight Watchers magazine, and boxes of Weight Watchers brand snacks and smoothie mixes.

The package labels shouted points values and

serving sizes, the numbers printed in 16-point type and circled in white at the bottom of every box. I picked up the stainless steel food ladle that measured exactly one cup, and right away I knew I was in trouble. While my determination to get healthier was strong, I wasn't sure this was the right path.

"I didn't know there'd be so much math," I said to the woman behind me.

The math of resolutions is interesting. Each year, the most popular ones include losing weight, exercising more, eating healthier, as well as quitting smoking and saving more money, or giving more to charity.

You can measure all of these in exact, minute ways: lose 15 pounds; exercise 35 minutes, seven days a week; run a 5K or a 26.2 mile marathon. If you skip that mid-morning latte one day a week and instead put that \$5 into a jar, you'll have \$260 at the end of the year. Think what you could do with the \$260 you'd

save! Do one kind thing for someone each day, and you'll have 365 good deeds for the year. Who wouldn't want that in their moral bank account?

I stepped on the scale and waited to hear my starting weight. As the meeting leader calculated how many points I could eat each week to lose 5 percent of my total weight, then 7 percent, and then told me when I could expect to reach my goal, I read through the starting guide and realized that tracking points would be the biggest challenge. Specific goals only work if you're the kind of person who likes to keep track of things. And I'm just not that person.

“The numbers weren't whole anymore, and I couldn't get past it.”

Resolve to read more? Absolutely. It too ranks high on the list of perennial popular resolutions. Say you decide to read one book a month; that's 12 books a year, and you can even brag about it in public on GoodReads and a host of other apps and websites for bibliophiles with the same resolve.

But if you're like me, you revel in the ambiguity of a resolution like that. Read more what? *People* magazine, or maybe *Time*? Does reading count if it's done on a monitor or a screen, rather than with a book with real pages or an actual printed newspaper that covers your fingers with ink? What about *Twitter*, *Pinterest* and *Facebook*, do they count? (My answer is no, but yours may differ.)

Conventional wisdom says it takes at least 21 days for a new habit to take hold. My Weight Watchers journey lasted a bit longer - 89 days to be exact (not that I was counting). During that time, I measured food and tracked points with

precision. When I couldn't find exact points values in the 10,000-food online database, I guesstimated how much fiber was in 10 Oatmeal Squares and how many total fat grams were in one cup of stir-fried vegetables. Each week I weighed in, and each week I lost nine-tenths of a pound, or 2.1 pounds, or 1.2. I asked the meeting leader why Weight Watchers didn't round up or down and gritted my teeth when I was told "because every little bit and bite counts."

It was those tenths that would be my undoing.

I sailed through Halloween eating just one bite-sized Butterfinger, and felt great. As Thanksgiving approached we

talked about emotional eating triggers and vowed to replace pumpkin pie with two-points-a-serving pumpkin mousse made with pureed pumpkin and Cool Whip Lite. I measured and weighed everything I ate. I drank water, and I hit the gym five days a week.

The Monday after Thanksgiving, I weighed in to find out I'd gained .8 pounds. The lovely woman who recorded my weight looked up.

"Oohh, it looks like you are up a bit," she said. "What do you think you could do better this week?"

And that was it for me. If she'd told me I'd gained one whole pound I'd have been okay with it. But eight-tenths of a pound? I couldn't get my head around the unfairness of it. It wasn't actually even a pound, but I felt like a total failure. The numbers weren't whole anymore, and I couldn't get past it.

Right then and there I resolved to turn in my Points calculator for a more holistic approach.

Please understand that I'm not knocking Weight Watchers - it's a safe, healthy and successful program for millions of people. In my case however I felt like the numbers were cheating, because I sure wasn't. I had all sorts of conspiracy theories - the scales were rigged to keep you coming back, the low daily points values weren't realistic for healthy eaters.

That's the other side of a resolution, which is the psychology of it all. Most parents know that to introduce a new food to a picky eater, they need to serve it at least 15 times before the child will take a bite. Ninety percent of alcoholics have at least one relapse within four years of treatment. And be honest: How many of us really hit the gym for 45 minutes six days a week, and do two to three days of strength training, like the fitness experts recommend?

Small steps, people. With most resolutions that's all we should expect of each other, and

of ourselves. Resolve to swim 10 laps twice a week, buy *Streetwise* once in awhile, or hold the door open for the person behind you. Don't try to shoulder the entire responsibility yourself, but do what you can. The effort is still there, as is the underlying wish to make a change whether it's for you or the world at large. That's what counts.

I make a lot of resolutions, the majority of which I don't keep. Writing this essay is one, so I can cross that off my list. Losing 20 pounds, well, I'm still working on it. Others include reading a book a week, exercising six days a week (50 percent success rate so far) and writing every day (done).

Most of all, I resolve not to beat myself up when I look back and honestly evaluate my progress. Numbers don't lie, but in most cases I believe they are open to interpretation. I've never really been that good at math.

