

Promises broken by the light of the TV screen

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By Elliott Warnock

Yes, yes, a thousand times yes; there really is a short, short story contest.

Let's try to get this straight now. I really am sponsoring a writing competition. You really can win a six-pack of beer. You really must limit the story to 75 words or less. (It really must have a beginning, middle and end, with a plot, no less.)

And, oh yes, Friday is the last day to submit your entries.

I always promised myself I would get a contest like this going, but, when I consider the number of things I promised myself, I'm surprised I ever went through with this. Like any normal human being, I try to keep my promises, but it's so easy to break your word to yourself.

There are all the little promises I need to keep, like the one about how little I intend to eat. That's a rich one. That promise has been with me for years and I'm still—well, let's say I'm no candidate for the Olympic track team.

Just consider how much benefit I would derive from keeping my word on that issue. Now consider how I give into temptation, on a regular schedule, at breakfast, lunch and dinner. If I can't keep my word when it would do me so much good, what chance do I have on less significant promises?

I keep telling myself I'm going to cut down on watching television. The *Today*, *Tonight* and *Tomorrow* shows are all right, I say. Nothing like watching the news in the morning, while I attempt to return to civility, or watching Johnny Carson and Tom Snyder while I try to go to sleep. But I'll be watching the *Today* show one second, and the next thing I know I'm watching *Dialing For Dollars*.

Do I get up and turn off the television? No way; I sit there and drift off into comatose-land, staring at something that should only keep the attention of a 9-year-old. While I'm doing this, of course, time for class is creeping up on me.

The same sort of thing goes on at night. I should hit the sack; get some rest for my brain. Watch Johnny Carson or the *Tomorrow* show; I tell myself. Fine, but what am I doing at 2:15 in the morning, flipping the dial for more junk television? Ah well, another promise left in pieces on the floor.

Exercise, I promise myself. Exercise to burn away all that unnecessary, unhealthy me. Play basketball, tennis, jog, lift weights—anything to dispel the marvelous imitation I perform of a fern. What do I do? Besides watching television, I find time to listen to records, read, eat—anything to strengthen my self-image of a fern—a very large, soft fern.

So far, those sorts of broken promises don't seem so bad. Eating and avoiding exercise are normal, natural, almost downright American pastimes. As for television, I believe we all are aware of how it has entered into the pantheon of American deities, right alongside the car, mouthwash and the World Series. Hence, that my devotion to these habits ballooned to vices is understandable.

That doesn't mean I'm happy with my broken promises; it just means I can rationalize my transgressions. I am perfectly aware of the harm these things deliver unto me. I'm even aware of more subtle harm done to myself by less obvious broken promises.

Every semester I begin at Carolina (and I have begun quite a few semesters at Carolina), I tell myself to

keep quiet in class, try not to answer every rhetorical question offered by some unsuspecting instructor. I usually do fine for the first few class periods, especially in the larger classes, but, invariably, after a couple of weeks, up goes my hand, open flies my mouth and out comes some trivial remark.

Trivia delights the instructors early on. Delight shrinks to familiarity after a while, then diminishes to boredom. Soon the instructors learn to be fascinated by some thing on the floor when my hand goes up. It gets to a point that I can't even answer an important question. That's the subtle harm. The obvious harm comes when I get back a final exam essay with "Trivial" scrawled across the bottom of the page.

Fred Emmerson, my lawyer-friend, keeps telling me I should learn habits are unavoidable, so the only way to

keep habit-breaking promises is to adopt new habits. I should jog instead of smoke, type more articles instead of chew my fingernails and eat vegetarian instead of Italian foods.

Okay, fine, but I know I'll go overboard with that sort of stuff, like Fred does. This guy works nine hours or more, goes home and runs (he disdains mere jogging) 11 to 15 miles and then eats concoctions of avocados, rice and all kinds of high-fiber foods. I think I'd rather risk a heart attack than suffer through all that healthy activity.

I promise myself that one of these days I'll tie Fred to a La-Z-Boy recliner, switch on the television to the *Newlywed Game* and force-feed him an 18-inch sausage, pepperoni and anchovy pizza. ■

Elliott Warnock is staff columnist for *Weekender*.

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