

The Economy in Perspective

by Mark Sniderman

Make yourself comfortable... I ran into Walter Badgett in the frozen food section of the grocery store. I've known Wally nearly all my life—we grew up in the same neighborhood. We were close back then but we'd lost touch over time, like so many friends. I hadn't seen him in a couple of years, and there he was, right in front of me, scrutinizing the labels on a couple of ice cream cartons.

"Wally," I called. "How's my man?"

He looked up and beamed. "Mark," he said, "I'm terrific. It's great running into you."

We quickly swapped information about mutual friends, asked after family members, and caught up on our work and lives. I thought we'd have to cut it short because Wally was still cradling the ice cream containers.

"What's up with the ice cream?" I asked. "How about putting those tubs back in the freezer while we gab."

He smiled a little sheepishly as he did it. "I'm trying to figure out which of these to buy," he said. "The frozen yogurt has 5 grams of fat and 190 calories per serving, and the slow-churned ice cream has 6 grams and 180 calories. Which matters more, the fat or the calories?"

Although the differences seemed pretty small to me, I could tell that Wally really took the choice seriously. He'd never had what you would call an athletic physique, but he had always taken care of himself. Now I noticed that he had a small paunch above his belt and his pants looked a little tight around the middle.

"Worried about putting on weight, Wally?" I ventured.

His eyes met mine. "Let's just say that I'm above my comfort zone."

"How did it happen?" I asked. "You always took such good care of yourself."

"It's amazing how the pounds sneak up on you," he lamented. "I think it all started after I had a bout of intestinal flu a few years ago. I dropped a few pounds below my normal range, and I guess I looked really thin. Everyone I knew told me it was unhealthy—that I looked nearly deflated. They kept after me to bulk up, so I changed my diet. I started snacking between meals, putting cheese on my burgers, that sort of thing. At first, I felt in control, but then some unexpected events got the better of me."

Wally elaborated. "My wife and I won a cruise to Hawaii, and the food—well, I don't have to tell you about the *food*. Then after we got back, I went to a couple of weddings, a few office get-togethers, and a surprise birthday party. At first I thought my pants were shrinking, but the scale doesn't lie, if you know what I mean."

"Wally," I protested, "it's not as if you've blimped out! So your pants are a bit snug; you're a couple of pounds above your normal range—so what? Most guys our age would kill to have your waistline. Take my advice, Wally, and chalk it up to special factors. Just watch yourself a little more closely and you'll work it off eventually. I have confidence in you."

"You know, Mark, I've been thinking that way myself," Wally sighed. "I mean, I've been there before. My weight has crossed the line so many times, and I've always brought it back down. Well, okay—there was one episode in my younger days when I binged out of control and nearly had to be hospitalized. But I learned my lesson and ever since then I've been very reliable. My weight is lower now than it was 20 years ago, and I've never felt better."

"So what's the problem?" I asked.

"Well, I've been gradually restricting my calories for about two years but I'm still above my comfort zone. I think I've got my diet about right now, but I'm not sure. I'm in a wait-and-see mode. I might have to cut back some more but I'm just not sure. Cutting back too much can be risky too, if you know what I mean."

"Wally, this sounds like an awfully intense effort for a couple of pounds," I exclaimed.

"Well," he confided, "I guess I have been more conscious of my weight lately. I have a new doctor—my old one retired. My new doc wants me to consider a more formal approach to managing my weight. He wants me to set a weight target, follow a timetable, and see him more often. His whole approach makes sense, and it has worked for other guys I know—guys I thought would never lose weight and keep it off. I'm just not sure it's the right thing for me, if you know what I mean."

"Wally," I said, "I know what you mean. I know exactly what you mean."