

The year an ice storm canceled my calculus exam

It was January 1994. I was a senior in high school, and I was failing calculus. I had to be. I hadn't understood a word the teacher had said for months, and I couldn't recall passing a single quiz.

On a lark, I went to my teacher to ask him what my grade was. He told me I was just barely passing. Hurrah!

"That's great," I told him happily. "I was going to ask to drop your class, but now I want to drop it before I fail the midterm exam next week and get a failing grade for the class."

He said I could drop the class, but not without taking the midterm. That calculus midterm suddenly became essential to my high school success.

I, on the other hand, was heading to college that fall. I felt sure that it would look better to have a passing grade on my transcript than a failing one. I begged my school to let me drop the class before the exam, but the answer was a hard no.

My parents came to meet with the head of the high school—the first and only time I remember that happening. She insisted that I needed to take the midterm for "closure."

I was baffled. I had all the closure I needed. I was finished with calculus. I was never planning to use it again, and I was completely content. As far as I was concerned, the math book was closed, and it was going to stay closed.

I had won many other battles—including persuading the school to add a friendly black lab to the campus community. But this was apparently not a battle I could win.

I resigned myself to my fate.

That was on Friday. Three days later, on Martin Luther King Day, BWI Airport recorded a temperature of 18 degrees and nine hours of freezing rain. That week

remains one of the coldest in local history. I remember our street was frozen solid in snow and ice that couldn't be moved by any plow.

School was closed—even our school that never closed for bad weather. But it *had* to be closed. No one could get anywhere. Every day a mother on our school's snow-closing phone tree would call to tell us that exams were delayed another day.

Then finally on Friday, the school announced that midterm exams were canceled. The head of our high school called to tell me personally that I wouldn't have to take my calculus midterm.

When the ice finally melted enough for school to reopen, I returned to school to find my friends waiting to congratulate me. I'm not sure they personally credit my calculus battle with canceling midterms that year, but...well...let's just say we were all very happy.

I didn't really care why or how it happened, but I felt vindicated.

Today, when our children root for snow to cancel school, I often think of that time we lost a whole week of school—our midterms—and I got out of taking my calculus exam. Did I get closure? You bet I did—a week of closed schools and no midterms.

So...just how many inches of snow and ice does it take to cancel a calculus exam?

I'll let you do the math. And I bet you'll get an A+.