

Don't Overlook the Obvious!

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The long winter of 2003 was a rough one for we inhabitants of the Northeastern United States. Even my rugged alley cat, a relentless hunter and fearless outdoor guy, developed a wimp-like attitude towards the out-of-doors after December. Still, the cold produced a pleasant rhythm within our household. Anyone dealing with machinery maintenance knows how important it is to maintain harmonious rhythms on a regular basis within a plant.

During the winter I normally arise around six with a little coaxing from *Mischief*, who is a real animal until he has had his first bowl of milk. We leave the warmth of the bedroom together and descend to the first floor in darkness. Per ritual, he lets me lead, then passes me on the left halfway down the stairs. (We've been doing this traffic routine for many years with neither a tripped homo sapien nor a mashed feline to show for it!) I enter the kitchen and turn on some lights; *Mischief* immediately inspects his bowl. He wails in protest while I light the gas log in the adjacent family room and turn on the paddle fan. His cries are relentless until he gets his morning fix; I always attend to this before starting a pot of "navy strength" coffee.

I wait impatiently for that dark and bitter life-reviving elixir. Snatching an early mug from the interminably slow process, I settle before the fire in a well-worn leather chair and prop my feet upon the ottoman just as sunrise starts to happen. A few laps later, I am joined by 13 pounds of black fur with milky whiskers; we're both in a better mood and enjoy the silence and the warmth together. Our reverie is momentarily disturbed by sounds from the kitchen as Joan stumbles in for a cup of coffee, mumbles a greeting and retreats back to bed. We both know we *must leave her alone*.

A particularly cold January Thursday brought a change to these gentle rhythms. The cat favored sleeping in and I was of similar mind-set. We barely stirred as a caffeine-starved woman awoke in desperate search of morning life fluids. I thought I heard a low growl and some muttering celebrating the occasion, but this was probably just my imagination or some misplaced purring from my furry sleeper.

A few moments later, our tranquility was shattered. Joan returned, added a little electric light to our lives and announced that the gas log would not stay lit. She did this using that gentle voice women reserve for those "I want your response to this situation, NOW" occa-



Figure 1. What gives here? The gauge indicates nearly 80% liquid charge remaining.

sions that plague all men from time-to-time. We dutifully arose, forthwith.

Now I should make it clear that our gas log is *not* a decorative affectation. It is an essential source of heat that makes up for several design shortcomings of my home. The house is basically a "colonial box" with the floor plan vastly improved by a 16 ft x 20 ft family room that is basically the back half of the garage 'box.' This room is on a slab, rather than over the warm basement. It's floor is a foot below the rest of the house and it has a nearly 12 ft ceiling. It has three cold walls and is open to the kitchen space from which it steals heat. While the hot-air heating system has three ducts serving this space, two run through the (damned cold!) slab, nothing short of a blast furnace on the input end would encourage a warm breeze at the heat registers! In short, it was designed to be the coldest room in the house and it meets that objective admirably.

A prior owner had added electric baseboards, but using these is somewhat akin to paying your income tax *twice*. My Scottish nature will not let me call upon them for any but the direst emergency. (Some utilities, like some governments, should simply be abolished!) The liquid propane (LPN) fueled 'ventless' log sitting in my fireplace (with the damper closed) has proven to be a cost effective source of heat with excellent recovery time in transient use. We light it whenever we occupy the kitchen and family room areas in extremely cold weather.

However, this trusted appliance was now a recalcitrant piece of useless household baggage. My most manly attempts to

produce heat were unsuccessful. (I strongly suspect most women actually enjoy such happenings, despite the corresponding suffering they may endure.) The piezoelectric igniter would light a pilot flame, but I could not get the low-power row to light. The safety valve simply shut down with a resounding *ping-click*. Donning boots, reading glasses and a coat, I went outside to read the tank gauge . . . 76% liquid charge remaining (as shown in Figure 1). Clearly, the valve had a problem. I declared an emergency and turned on the accursed electric heaters. Joan declared a quiet epithet and took her cup of coffee to the upper deck to prepare for another day of commerce.

Now that gauge was a new thing in my life and it gave me a sense of ease to know that I had fuel aplenty, though a fouled piece of equipment. That single reading directed the actions I would need to take to get affordable heat restored to my abode. How is it I so simply dismissed a fundamental dictum of machinery maintenance? *I was about to take action based upon a single sensor reading without confirming evidence*. I am old and experienced enough to know this is imprudent!

A few words about that gauge seem appropriate to this epistle. One of the few drawbacks to my gas log is dependence upon a local fuel supplier, identified here simply as IBPG (standing for *Idiotic Bastards Passing Gas* in Kulpville, PA), in an effort to remain politically correct. Unlike other local energy suppliers, IBPG is unable to track the needs and uses of their customers over varying climatic conditions. They proved this to me during our prior frosty winter.

I have been in this same residence since 1998. We have never suffered an oil deficit since moving in. While winters varied in intensity, our oil supplier faithfully tracked degree-days and always topped our tank before our need was critical, even though they were delivering "cheap oil" at a rate contracted during the prior summer.

The aged gas log has served with the integrity of an *eternal flame* until January 25th of 2002; I thought IBPG used a similar degree-day tracking algorithm. I was absolutely wrong; they simply fly as an unguided missile. When we ran out of LPN, I called for a refill and was told, "Ya gotta wait . . . we got emergencies to deal with . . . ya should'a called us when your gauge read 30 to 33% full." I found myself without a good response since the tank (theirs) *did not have a gauge*.

This fact was unappreciated by the

bright IBPG ears answering their phones. We were in the cold until February 5 when a delivery was made. The delivery crew-chief recognized the measurement deficiency on his own and called for a new tank with a gauge; *Langslair* had belatedly entered the 21st Century as viewed by IBPG, thanks to the insight of the guy at the end of their hose.

Now that experience rubbed me a little 'raw.' In my many years on the *sales trail*, I've encountered many telephonic and physical "gate-keepers," both skilled and rude. Those at IBPG outdistanced the worst of my memory (Westinghouse's Bettis facility) by a far piece . . . and they're not protecting the power plants of our nuclear submarine fleet! But in this past year, they have found a way to redouble their insolence – they simply don't answer their phones.

But this year I knew I had no controversy with IBPG; I had 76% of a full tank. I had been watching that gauge periodically since Christmas and saw it fall slowly from 85% (the maximum reading) as we went through a brutal January. I needed a valve repair technician. Since the IBPG facility is a short drive from my lair, I went there and inquired if they serviced gas logs as well as fueling them. As expected, they said not, but gave me a repair reference. Prophetically, this was *George's Gas Logs*, a small business 30 miles away. My call gave me a chance to converse with an answering machine; a human response was nearly 12 hours away.

In the interim, *Maintenance Engineer* instincts reawakened (or that early morning liquid finally kicked in). I played with the errant log a bit. With a now cool system, the piezo starter would ignite the pilot flame. In turn, this would ignite the low-power burner, but the normal blue flame was interrupted by jumping yellow 'pops' and burning would cease with a ping of the valve shutting down. I could get this sequence to repeat . . . but any attempt to ignite the 'high' burner resulted in an immediate shutdown. *If I didn't know I had a 76% charge, I would have sworn the tank was dry.*

And then the obvious came back to me. The only evidence I had that that fuel was present was the reading of a new gauge provided by a supplier of questionable integrity and competence! All other symptoms suggested the system was simply fuel starved. I raced to the only other sensor that monitors this system . . . *my checkbook.*

There, in barely legible left-handed black and white scrawl, was the answer! IBPG *had never made two deliveries in any year*, including the current heating season. Unless my log was currently able to service me at 5 times the efficiency it

had shown in prior years, *the tank was empty* despite the boastful current gauge reading.

I took a few minutes to make the digital photograph of Figure 1 before returning to the IBPG offices to order fuel. It was almost fun to encounter the same, "Ya gotta wait . . . we got emergencies to deal with . . . ya should'a called us when your gauge read 30 to 33% full," litany before proffering the printed image and the receipts for prior deliveries. Actually, shutting down the arguments of the terminally stupid bears little reward. They simply fail to recognize the depth of their idiocy.

Those of us of normal intellect react differently. While house, cat and girlfriend are warm again, I feel rather humbled by the experience. This would not have happened if I had taken a more professional approach to private life, specifically:

1. Don't trust a single sensor's input – insist on confirming data from another source or technology.
2. A new (untested or uncalibrated) sensor merely offers an opinion, not information.
3. Information from a previously unreliable source is, at best, suspect.
4. When an obvious answer to all of the symptoms is refuted by a single source, consider that the source is possibly flawed!

The elections of 2004 are now astern, bringing a great sense of relief and renewed optimism that our voting process can be conducted without need for teams of lawyers 'validating' our ability to count. For a few short hours, it seemed another diatribe about the changing electoral process might be required for our November issue. I'm very happy those words were not needed and feel the nation is stronger for the gracious conclusion to the matter.

However, I may not be out of the cold for '04. I called IBPG on September 1st and ordered a refill and replacement of the faulty gauge. When no action had occurred by October 19th, I called again. I received an apology for the delay and was told the delivery would be made on November 2nd. When I reminded the gate-keeper that the 2nd was Election Day, she simply replied, "That's OK we'll be working." When I called on the 5th to inform her that the delivery had not been made, she came back with, "We're in our busy season . . . we'll get gas to you in two weeks . . . the gauge will have to wait . . . ya should'a ordered earlier!" She is quite right. I should have ordered earlier anywhere else! **SV**

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