

5-14-10 If You See Something Say Something

“If you see something; say something”; so said guy who spotted the New York bomber of May 1, 2010 and reported the parked SUV as suspicious. He was right to do so. If the explosives had been set with more expertise and had not fizzled to its own demise, the man’s observation and report might have been responsible for saving hundreds of lives.

The concept of serving as a set of eyes for the good of all is reinforced with CERT (Community Emergency Response Team) when they help out at events such as Fourth of July. “Keep your eyes open for anything unusual and report it. Don’t try to investigate it yourself. Just report it. The police are there to follow up.” It is teamwork that has proved to be successful. The man in New York who reported what he saw as unusual demonstrates that anyone can learn this and keep it in mind. In fact, someone who called in to a radio talk show on this topic, commented that an expensive security camera system in New York did not help with the bomber case, but the man who was a street vendor did, and concluded somewhat facetiously, (but not really), “Forget the security cameras. Clearly what we need are more street vendors.”

Not any old street vendor will do, though. They need to be curious, alert and conscientious. In fact, they need to be something like a health agent. A health agent must always be alert to sights, smells and sounds; even the sound of dripping water.

While out an inspection recently, I saw something and the people were glad I said something. I was there to observe the filling of the septic tank with water so that when we checked back later, we could see if it was leaking. The need for this used to be unusual but has been on the rise for the last couple years. When a house has gone into foreclosure and it sits empty for a while, this can pose some challenges for the Title V inspector. You see, once a tank is full it stays full. The liquids rise to the pipe exiting the tank and the liquids leave by that pipe, at the rate in which it enters. But the level in the tank remains the same, if all is working properly. With these empty houses, though, I sometimes get a report that says, “Liquid level in tank is low. Tank might be leaking. Bank won’t pay for me to do anything else.”

In this case, the water was only about 18 inches down and the house had been empty for a long time. Maybe some liquid had evaporated. There was a potential buyer interested in continuing this inspection and so I went there to observe and be a witness the work of the Title V inspector. We were going to fill the tank with water and look at it again a week later. And then, if the water level was where we had left it, pump out and clean the tank to further examine its integrity.

Well, since this glamorous aspect of my job was concluding, for we had already chatted all we could about the liquid level and the scum and the fact that there was no run-back and how good the “D” box looked, I was just about to leave. As I turned to go, I heard dripping water. I am usually curious, but not necessarily very aware of it; it’s just habit and my nature. I leaned to look down the driveway toward the source of the dripping sound, when I saw water dripping and splashing at the side of house. The side stairs blocked my vision just enough that I could not see the actual source of the water. I said, “Oh, there’s water dripping” and immediately felt somewhat regretful and even embarrassed that I had commented on it. I added, “Oh, it’s probably just your hose. Oh, wait a minute. I don’t see a hose. That’s not where the hose you’re using goes”, as my eyes went from left to right, from water to men standing at the tank with a garden hose.

Curiouser and curiouser. They now joined me in looking. We took a few steps down the driveway, passed the little side stairs that was blocking our view and then saw that water was “leaking” from the side of the house. There was no faucet there at all. Water was running down the foundation from under the shingles and splashing when it hit the driveway. The splashing was the source of the sound. What the heck? We quickly went inside.

The inspector and buyer were mumbling things like, “They said they winterized it. Maybe they didn’t.” “Didn’t seem to be a problem when we turned on the water today. We checked all the faucets.”

A quick look inside revealed a downstairs bathroom with a very flooded floor. That room had, on the wall behind the door, a laundry hookup. There were two levers; one for cold water and one for hot. The lever for hot water had been left open.

When these two men had arrived a little while earlier, they turned on the water and heard a rush of water running into the pipes. It was the sound of the hot water tank filling. They checked the faucets and tub, and thought no more of it, as they went outside to fill the septic tank.

It took a while for the hot water tank to fill. It took just long enough to stand around and talk about a septic tank and add 18 inches of water to it. The men were very grateful I had been curious and had spoken up. As I left, the buyer said, “Well, I guess I’ll get busy with the wet vac.” I smiled and wondered, “Will I ever stop feeling shy about speaking up?”

I don’t know but I know I’ll always be curious and I know that it is right to say something when we see something.

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