

Epic Septic

When your daughter is going through chemotherapy for breast cancer, the worries are constant. It is terrifying territory. Who knew that a septic system story would be a welcomed distraction? Well, it wasn't really welcomed, as the septic news was not good, but it did serve as a temporary distraction and something to talk about besides the side effects of chemo and the sensibility of shaving your head in preparation for losing your hair.

And so, it was with a smile and some eagerness, rather than dread, that I called my daughter in response to a text telling me that she had an epic septic story to tell me.

My daughter, Kate, and my son-in-law, Jim, had been considering purchasing a home as an income producing rental property before her cancer was discovered. Then, the house was to be a place for family and friends to use while visiting and helping. It was right down the street from where they live in Connecticut. It was a perfect solution to the problem of distance, with the whole family living in Massachusetts.

The house needed to be inspected and the well water tested. The septic system had to be inspected also, of course. No, not necessarily. In Massachusetts, this is required upon change of ownership. It is performed by individuals trained and licensed by the state. They answer questions on a form seventeen pages long. In Connecticut, an inspection is only a recommendation. My daughter and son-in-law are experienced at moving and knew enough to get it inspected. Besides needing to protect the health of people and the groundwater, who wants to purchase a failing septic system? They are expensive to replace!

Initially the report consisted of one sentence: "The outlet baffle was replaced." Jim asked for more information. A second sentence was passed along: "In our opinion, this system functions." When asked for a receipt of the work, they discovered it cost seventy-five dollars. You can't even get a tank pumped out for that price! Jim wanted to see for himself what was done and arranged to meet the inspector at ten o'clock the next day.

Ordinarily, Jim would not have been able to go there any earlier, for that was the day he brings my daughter for her chemo treatments. The nurse had an emergency, though, and asked if they could return an hour later. A few minutes

after nine, Jim was looking at the septic tank, while my daughter waited in the car. The car is a police cruiser.

The inspector was shocked to see a police cruiser in the driveway and a uniformed officer looking at the septic tank. (Jim had no choice about being in uniform. Each week, he is ready for work, brings my daughter to chemo and then drives to work, in uniform.)

The “inspector” was not expecting anyone, for he arrived at nine-fifteen for the ten o’clock appointment. By that time, Jim saw the new baffle (In MA we call them tees. It was a four-inch plastic outlet pipe.) He also saw a hole in the top of the tank and roots growing over the old orangeburg pipe on the inlet end. The “inspector” slid his foot over the hole in the top of the tank. My son in law said to the man, “I saw you slide your foot over that hole, where dirt is falling into the tank.” The inspector said, “It’s not a big deal. If you want to be a stickler about it, just stick a rock in it.” When asked if he had looked at the inlet to the tank, his answer was, “No. It was too dark.” Jim, using his officer flashlight, showed him the deteriorated, rooted mess. And then the “inspector” added, as he quickly walked away from the uniformed police officer, “There’s nothing wrong with this system!”

I find myself feeling grateful for the regulations we have in Massachusetts providing oversight of septic systems, protecting people and the environment, and preventing epic septic system stories. Who wants epic stories when we can have sensible solutions, with certainty and scrupulousness?

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