Thursday Memo – April 13, 2017

**A Foreign Language** – by Mark Fitzgerald

It was a frosty morning in the middle of January when I awoke to a completely silent house. This is a fairly unusual event as we have a two-year old who has a remarkable talent for impersonating an amplified version of the 1812 Overture at 6am every day. His unfailing wakeup call explains why I was perturbed to have woken up on my own on this particular morning.

After taking a moment to assess the situation, I became aware my wife was pressed against my back shivering and I too felt chilled to the bone. I glanced at the thermostat and saw it reading 58 degrees. While my wife and I often battle over whether the thermostat should be 68 or 72, neither of us desire waking up to a close simulation of Antarctica. My son had buried himself under every blanket and stuffed animal he could reach and seemed quite pleased hidden under his fort.

I got up and fiddled with the thermostat for over an hour, confident that if I tapped the buttons progressively harder, the problem would eventually fix itself. I then put on my ‘heat-blowing-machine-thingy-expert-hat’ and tried to problem-solve with Google and YouTube. I stood on a vent blowing cold air until my feet went numb and paced around the furnace thoughtfully a few times. I even built up the courage to flip that scary red switch that sits up high on a wall and says things like ‘emergency,’ and ‘burner,’ and ‘doom’.

After a number of hours of no progress with a rather unhappy looking wife and toddler in a snowsuit, I called the real experts. A repairman was out within the hour and had the system up and running in 20 minutes. Before leaving, he pulled me aside to explain the problem.
“You got a plugged power vent. I shook it down and blew it out,” he said, pointing to some part of the heat-blower-thing. “I gotta tell you though, while the plugged power vent was a problem, I think the actual issue was a burnt out ignition monitor not communicating with the air shutter. Your draft regulator was out of sync as well.”

He talked for a few more minutes while I nodded appreciatively. I thanked him for fixing the system, and promised I’d make sure we would have the furnace serviced regularly to prevent a similar problem in the future. After he left, my wife came over and asked what the problem had been. I shrugged and regurgitated something about “the DeLorean’s flux capacitor” and “1.21 jigowatts”. She rolled her eyes while I shrugged. I had no idea what language the repairman had just spoken; I probably would have achieved the same level of comprehension if he had spoken Twi instead of English.

In the office the next day, I sat across from ‘John’, a patient whose A1c had jumped up to 11% over the past 2 years despite adding on 3 medications for his diabetes. As I explained my concern for how poorly his diabetes was controlled, I flashed back to my conversation with the repairman and paused.

“John, often I don’t do a good job explaining to people what their medical conditions are... in fact, I think a lot of times doctors forget to talk the basics of a condition like diabetes,” I started, “Have I, or any doctor before me, explained to you what diabetes is?”

He paused and shrugged. “Not really,” he replied. “I know it’s something about sugar and people tell me I’m ‘poorly controlled’. Someone once told me about it, but I didn’t understand a word they said. I’ve had it for 10 years though so I just figured it’s part of me now.”

During that visit, John and I talked about his diabetes from the ground up. He went from asking about the basics of the human body to insightful and thought-provoking questions about the finer points of his medication, bloodwork, and how his other medical problems tie into his diabetes. He came back to follow-up appointments thoroughly engaged and fascinated with his ability to understand and manage his no-longer-mysterious condition.
My firsthand experience as the deer in the headlights reminded me of how our medical gibberish can indecipherable at times, and how a little teaching with de-medicalized lexicon can sometimes be the best treatment we can offer.

I called John tonight to report the results of his recent bloodwork and got to hear his thunderous clapping and belly laugh when he found out his A1c was 6.3%.

As for me, I called Christopher Lloyd and we’re going to see if my furnace can time travel.