

On the Edge Timely, Thoughtful and Always Candid

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Putting First Things First: The Tale of the Squeaking Bed

During a recent keynote presentation in Ohio, I took my audience to a place I bet they never thought a speaker would take them...my bedroom! And while it was pretty funny to see just how quickly I was able to get their undivided attention, they soon found that the subject matter was actually quite tame. Funny, but tame. I now share the same story with you.

Earlier this year, my wife and I decided to have our second floor recarpeted. While the old, builders-grade beige stuff had held up admirably, the combination of baby formula puke, dirty shoes, potty training accidents and miscellaneous other spills of long-forgotten origins finally took their toll. After picking out the new color, texture, padding, etc., we thought we were all set. Just one catch...the carpet dealer (a friend of a friend) didn't move furniture. Figures. So I single-handedly disassembled our entire king-sized bedroom set and move it into the hallway one morning...and then moved it back and reassembled it later that evening. In retrospect, it seems like a lot of work to save a few hundred bucks, but I'm genetically predisposed to being a "value shopper" (AKA cheap), so that's the price I pay on occasion.

Anyway, all was well and good until my wife and I climbed into bed later that night. While my wife's side of the bed let out a surprising little chirp, my side let out a loud, agonizing squeak that I was certain would lead to immediate frame collapse. Only it didn't. It was just loud and annoying. But I was heading out of town the next day, so I told Kim I'd fix it when I got back. Only I didn't. There was a family event that weekend and another trip out of town the following Monday...you know the routine. Pretty soon a week turned into a month and I just got used to the squeak. But my wife didn't.

After being threatened with an end to all "extra-curricular" sources of squeaking, I pulled out my tool kit one Saturday afternoon and went to work. I pulled off the mattress and box springs, expertly assessed the situation, and made a trip to the local hardware store. A couple of L-brackets would certainly do the trick. Only they didn't. Hmm. Maybe if I switched the rails, that would do it? Nope. Wooden shims? No go.

Okay, Mr. Fixit I wasn't. I was stumped. And impatient. So I reassembled the bed and told Kim I'd try something else the following weekend. Hopefully I would get brownie points for trying at least. Wrong again.

Finally in July, we met a bonafide furniture repairman at our community's "Home Days" festival. Phil was his name. He seemed to know furniture and didn't look the type to steal undergarments, so we hired him. Within a week, he was standing in our bedroom with us, listening to our tales of woe and me explaining all the things I had already tried. He stroked his chin, walked around the bed, sighed and shook his head. "I'm not sure how long this is going to take, but I think I can at least improve the situation", he said. There was hope. "The first thing we'll have to do, though, is straighten out your bed." With that, he lifted the lower left corner of the bed and slid it to the left exactly four inches. Then he sat down on my side of the bed and scootched his butt around a few times. Complete silence. The squeak was gone!

Sensing that Kim was glaring at me, I couldn't bring myself to make eye contact with her. The very best I could do was to put my hands on my hips, say, "Hmmm, go figure", and wonder out loud to Phil how moving the bed four inches could completely eliminate the squeak. Sensing that my ego had just taken a blow, Phil quickly came to the rescue. "Hey", he said, "I'm a pro. I do this for a living and just have an eye for these sorts of things." He went on to explain how even a little misalignment could cause the rail and

headboard/footboard surfaces to rub in a way they weren't intended to...and make all kinds of unholy noises in the process. He charged us \$75.00 for his five minutes of work (standard house call charge) and said, "Call me if you need anything else. The next one's on me." Now I REALLY felt stupid!

That night as I laid (squeaklessly) in bed, I thought about the day's events. Besides the obvious, there was a broader lesson that Phil had helped illuminate. The whole episode was a perfect analogy for the importance of alignment in life. That same squeak - cause by misalignment - that I found so annoying with our bed can be found peppered throughout life when we get caught up in activities that are not in alignment with what's really important to us. Only it sounds different. It might be the sound of a son or daughter who says, "Daddy, please don't go out of town again this week." Or a spouse who says, "Don't worry about it. I'm used to it." It might be a friend who declines your invitation to golf or for a "girls' night out" so they can do something with their family instead. It might even be that silent, internal angst we feel when we've gotten off track. This I know for sure: ignoring these kinds of friction can do far more damage than the kind in my bed.

I'd like to offer three ideas to minimize your need for Phil the repairman (and Dr. Phil too, I suppose):

1. Figure out what's really important to you. Values are life's cornerstones - or at least they should be. Every once in while, we can benefit from sitting down with a pen and pad and really thinking about what's important to us. Is it family or service to community? Physical health, financial security or job success? Maybe it's wisdom, fairness or a sense of adventure. Whatever is truly most important to you, write it down.

2. Prioritize. My suggestion is to create a "Top 5" list. While all of our values are important, they can't all be #1. In fact, most people find that there is a fair amount of competition between their values, and conflict usually results. Professional success vs. family. Physical health vs. adventure. Financial security vs. service to society. That's just part of life. But you can't stop yet. The next step is to write down the behaviors, actions and decision patterns that go with these top values. This is the hard part and often where we discover whether or not our current behavior patterns actually reflect our top values. I know we'll probably never end up with perfect alignment, but I also know this: If you don't decide what's most important for you, someone else will.

3. Don't ignore the squeaks. Over the years, I've met dozens of people who, in retrospect, decided to live with the "squeaks". Maybe they hoped that by ignoring them, they would just go away. Unfortunately, unlike my bed, when life's "squeaks" stop on their own, it's usually not a good thing. In fact, it's usually a sign that some damage has been done, possibly even permanent damage. A fractured or compromised relationship, a lost opportunity or a decision made for us by someone else due to our inaction.

Squeaks in life are good things. They're reminders that we need to take a time out and put first things truly first.

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