

The Truth About Plumbers by Jim LaBate

I had a water leak in my basement recently. Naturally, I called a plumber. Fortunately, in my case, the plumber is my dad, Pete, and he said he'd drive down to take a look at my problem.

As I waited for him to arrive, I thought about my own incompetence regarding plumbing problems and about the general lack of appreciation for plumbers overall. Why do we typically underestimate the importance of plumbing? Why did we laugh when both Senator Obama and Senator McCain discussed Joe the Plumber's situation during their third debate in 2008?

Perhaps the laughter has to do with certain plumber stereotypes that have entered our culture throughout the years. In the 1986 movie "The Money Pit", the actor Carmine Caridi portrayed Brad Shirk, a boozing, money-grubbing plumbing contractor who wanted his cash up front and yet took forever to get the job done.

Or we may remember plumber Ed Norton, played by Art Carney, from the old television show "The Honey-mooners". Though Ed wasn't a plumber in the traditional sense, he did work in the sewer, and he often appeared in the show in his work clothes and carrying a plunger.

Finally, we may even remember the most famous "plumber" of all: Howard Hunt. Hunt was President Nixon's undercover operative whose job it was to "stop the leaks" in the Nixon administration.

None of these characters, however, is a typical plumber. Pete LaBate, not retired at age 83, was a typical plumber. He worked for almost 40 years as a plumber to support his wife and their six children in Amsterdam. But plumbing was never his goal; he really wanted to go to school for photography. After returning from a tour in the Navy during World War II, however, he delivered furniture for a while before he decided he could earn more money as a plumber. He worked for a private company for many years and later became a member of Local 105 in Schenectady.

During those early years, Pete spent his days in private homes fixing plugged toilets, leaky pipes, and failed water heaters. Though he was never embarrassed by the work, he didn't always enjoy crawling through wet, dirty basements and crawl spaces; consequently, he and my mother made it possible for all of their children to receive college degrees.

Fortunately, Pete's working conditions improved when he joined the union. Instead of residential basements, the Union work took him to construction sites where he installed new plumbing fixtures. Some of those jobs, however, took him away from his family, and he was home only on the weekends.

In addition, Pete's plumbing work never really ended. With seven brothers and three sisters, with my mother's five siblings, and with numerous friends and neighbors throughout the city, he was—like a doctor—always on call. The callers usually had too much water or too little water or no hot water, so Pete felt obliged to help. I know, because I accompanied him on many of these house calls; like a surgeon's assistant, I handed him tools and cleaned up afterwards.

Obviously, too, Pete is still on call. When he arrived at my house, he diagnosed the leaky valve quickly, took it apart, inserted a new washer, and then, he took me out to lunch and insisted on paying. Unbelievable.

The whole experience made me realize why plumbers are unappreciated. We take their work for granted. After all, most of the time, our water systems work the way they're supposed to, and if something does malfunction, our plumbers come to the rescue. Wouldn't it be nice if our elected officials were as efficient and as responsive?

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