

Ross' Rave: Fire Starter

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“You really need a fireplace.”

“I don’t need a fireplace, Richard,” I said, tired of having this conversation again.

“You do. Trust me, this room screams for it.”

Richard likes to decorate other people’s houses. He will suggest and shop and take me on exploratory sorties. He’ll price things out, mentally rearrange furniture. While my sister carried swatches of sofa fabric, tape measures and paint chip cards in her purse, Richard carried them in his head. He’d already “helped” three or four friends redo their places. Now his sights were on mine.

“Play in your own house,” I told him.

“You r-e-a-l-l-y need a fireplace,” he said, emphasizing “r-e-a-l-l-y”.

A month later a ridiculously out-of-place truck pulled up to the front of my building. The only thing on it was a 6’ by 5’ electric, mahogany fireplace weighing in at close to 300lbs.

“Got a delivery for a Ross,” the driver said.

“That’s me,” I said. “Bring it in.”

“Curbside, buddy.”

“Would an extra \$50 help?” I grinned.

The two of us wrestled it up a few stairs and down the hall. I moved the small carpets out of the way, and 5 minutes later a surprisingly realistic, log-like pile was glowing quietly in my living room.

Ten minutes after that, Richard happened by.

“Perfect,” he said “Good scale, fine articulation. It has the sensibilities of the space.” He didn’t stay long.

“I’m off to the mall,” he said. “The mantle needs work.”

When he left, I bent down to reposition the carpets, and the next thing I remember, I was lying in agony on the floor.

I was sure I had broken my back. Every breath hurt. “This can’t be good,” I thought as I squirmed toward the phone.

“Richard, hate to interfere with your scouting trip, but would you mind taking me to the ER?”

It turned out not to be broken, but it was a pretty bad sprain. “Take it easy for a few weeks, and it will be fine,” the Doc said. “And here are some pills to ease the pain.” Yum.

The next morning, I sat trussed and hallucinatory at an all day Reference Department retreat about the future of reference services. We had arranged it weeks ago, and there was no way I would miss it. Plus, I figured the Vicodin would take the edge off.

The three of us presenting had circulated among the librarians some pertinent and thought provoking articles on several topics.

This first presentation was about who our users are. It was the usual stuff you hear and read about in the library lit or *Chronicle*. Our students are first generation college students, many live within a hundred miles of where they were born, they work part-time, take five years to get a BA, graduate in debt, etc. Maybe it was the drugs, but I started wondering about some of the other statistics. How many of our students are returning from Iraq or Afghanistan? (From the VA, we know that veteran, suicide is at 27 year high. The rate of domestic violence, divorce and joblessness is increasing by double digits, and one

out of every four vets under the age of 25 has substance abuse issues.) How many of our students are on parole, on probation, awaiting trial or been incarcerated? (The DOJ tells us that a black male born in 1991 has about a 30% chance of spending some time in prison; an Hispanic about a 14%, and a white guy about 4%.) How many are HIV positive? (According to the CDC, 1 in ever 1,500 college students is positive. Across the nation, 2 young people become infected every hour. Rates among minority populations are even higher.) Perhaps, we need to consider these characteristics of our population as well as the others.

Another presentation was about technology and reference. There were some historical chuckles about the fear some early 20th century librarians had about the impact of the telephone. Then, we moved on to faxes and computers, and email, IM, Second Life, Facebook, and texting. The article, "Always on: Libraries in a world of permanent connectivity," by Lorcan Dempsey in *First Monday* served as a conversation starter. I confess that I stopped reading on page 13 at the sentence which suggested that one of the uses of libraries is to "synch with the 'cloud' ". Excuse me? Don't get me wrong, I like new, shiny, electric things as much as the next guy, but when we begin talking like the Borg, it may be time for healthy cup of reality. A library friend of mine works in one of the city branches. It's a storefront between a liquor store and a laundromat. He stopped calling the police to report drug deals in the parking lot, and learned how to dive behind the counter at the sound of gun fire. The "patrons" at his library go there to get warm in the winter, or wait for a dryer. Ain't no synching, and there ain't no cloud.

I was last on the program. By now the librarians had collectively plowed through several dozen doughnuts, cookies, cakes and soda, and were as buzzed as I was. My

topic was facilitating reference interactions. It started with the same drill about open, closed and neutral questions, but I added a twist I had come across while doing some research last year. From Wendy Wilmoth writing about the Texas Association Against Sexual Assault (TAASA) was this definition: "... crisis intervention involves helping a person handle the current crisis effectively by utilizing [their] own strengths and support systems." They identified nine steps in intervention: 1) establish rapport; 2) listen actively; 3) define the problem; 4) assess the situation; 5) explore options; 6) discuss alternatives; 7) refer; 8) close; 9) follow-up. I had found this protocol uncannily similar to the route of a good reference interview and hoped my colleagues would, too. Equating the process of crisis intervention with helping a kid looking for an article on global warming may be a stretch, but it made sense to me. After a few moments of dead air, one of the librarians said, "Coincidentally, I used to volunteer at TAASA, and now that I think about it, there are a lot of parallels." Hallelujah! A spark was lit, and some lively conversation followed. Most everyone chimed in with thoughts and experiences. Maybe my perspectives on reference weren't as farfetched as I had thought.

The afternoon ended about the same time my meds wore off.

"Thanks for coming in," my boss said. "I know your back must really hurt."

"I'm glad I did, too," I said, "but I'm going to go home now, take a hot shower, grab a heating pad and sit by the fire."

"You have a fireplace," she asked?