

THE FRUGAL HOUSEKEEPER

“Big AI and The Case of Two Fingers: Familiarity breeds contempt when it comes to issues of safety”

by

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The U. S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (<http://www.bls.gov>) and The National Center of Injury Prevention and Control (a part of the Centers for Disease Control) at <http://www.cdc.gov> , are full of information and statistics about injuries. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics there were over 5.6 million injuries and illnesses in private industry in 2000, and over 5,000 fatalities. However those statistics pale in comparison to statistics maintained by the C.D.C. According to the C.D.C. unintentional injures caused by motor vehicle accidents (42,000 deaths and 3.5 million injuries), drowning, residential fires (3,360 deaths), fireworks (8,500 injuries), bicycles (758 deaths and over 600,000 injuries), poisons (over 2.5 million calls to poison control centers), falls (leading cause of injury deaths in people 65 years and older), playground injuries (over 200,000), over 5,000 pedestrians were killed while walking, and people bitten by dogs (a person is bitten by a dog every 40 seconds), all combined are in the millions. Over 90,000 people died in the current year on record from unintentional injuries a figure vastly higher than the number of fatalities in private industry. Work may be a potentially dangerous place to be, however, many more accidents happen away from the work place. Thus forward looking employers and employees should look at safety programs and educational efforts that will instill safe behaviors both on and off the job. The following is a painful case that illustrates the need for safety, 24 hours a day no matter where one is.

It was freezing outside with temperatures in the low teens, the wind was howling like a banshee and the snow was falling so hard and fast that it was as thick as confetti at a large wedding. Big Al sat in the comfort of his home peering out the window. It was so warm inside, the fire was roaring, he was cozy, warm and sleepy in his favorite chair and he could hear the window screaming outside. It sent chills to the cockles of his heart to think that he might have to go outside and take care of the increasing amounts of snow on the ground. At the moment the snow advisory on the television was stating that twelve inches of snow had fallen, with more to come. He looked sleepily at the clock on the mantle, it was after 10:00 p.m. Through his stupor Big Al began to realize that someone would have to move the snow otherwise how would he get to work? He thought about the kids, however, they were four years old and in bed. Then he thought about his wife, what would she think if he asked her to go out and shovel snow? Then he thought about the dog, a good option but the dog was less than four inches off the ground, a veritable leprechaun of a dog, so he would get lost in the foot or more of snow on the ground. Sadly, as he looked out the window the realization dawned on him that he would have to do it. He shuddered as a tremor of anticipated cold coursed down his arthritic spine.

Slowly, he lifted his dirigible girth out of the chair and wobbled like a bowl of Jell-O over to the closet which contained the cold weather gear. Ever so slowly he put on his shoes, coat and gloves and plodded towards the door to the garage. Once in the garage he turned on the light. It was cold in the garage, like a freezer actually, and momentarily he thought of forgetting the whole idea, running back in the house and calling in the next morning stating that he was sick. However, he knew that was a real snow job and people would think him a flake for not making it to work. When he snapped on the lights his spirit soared, at least a wee bit, staring him right in his face was the snow blower. Bright and red and ready to go. It had been serviced and had a new electric assist starter! Through the clouds in his demented mind a ray of sunshine broke through. He could start up the machine as fast as possible, rush through the job and be back in the shake of a lambs tail, and lambs do not take long to shake their tails,

otherwise someone would pull the wool over their eyes.

So sheepishly he went over to the snow blower, it looked like Big Red (even though it was not from Nebraska), and he removed all the junk so that he could start it up. He rolled it towards the garage door, opened the door, ran the extension cord to the machine, pumped the gas and pressed the start button.

“Cough, cough, splutter, splutter, roar” went the machine. In a cloud of smoke and fumes the machine roared to life. Big Al adjusted his gloves, grabbed the control handles, pressed the levers and machine and Al took off at a high rate of speed. The falling snow blew, the snow blower tossed the snow in its path into the air, and before long Big Al looked like the Abominable Snowman - indeed not much differentiated Big Al from a snow bank, other than he had legs. Snow was caked all over his gloves, eyebrows, hair, coat and legs. Big Al looked like the iceberg that sunk the Titanic. Big Al reflected, the machine is running well, so lets make it go as fast as possible and we will be done in less time. So Big Al was dragged along behind the fast moving snow blower. Thump! It went into the snow drift and made short work of it. Al was delighted, he was really able to give the snow a “snow job” and get rid of it fast. One more rush at the next bank of snow should open the drive to the road and Big Al would be half done. In his mind’s eye he could see the fire inside the house and a hot cup of steaming tea awaiting him when he was done. He was motivated, he was fast and he knew his job. “Clunk”! The snow blower stopped. Knowing all there is to know about things mechanical like Goober in Mayberry, he took a look at the machine. The exhaust chute of the snow blower was all bunged up. Since the machine had stopped, Al cleared out the chute, pulled the starting cord and the blower coughed to life. Again, snow blower and Big Al attacked the drifts at the end of the drive, with the same result, the machine stopped. This exercise in folly was repeated several times and Al got impatient to finish. Sometimes the machine would actually run but the chute was full, so Big Al let go of the safety release that stops the ejection paddles, pushed the snow in the chute downwards and “Splat” his fingers got hit by the slowing paddles.

Ouch, did that hurt! Big Al did his best imitation of a jig in the driveway, and if one looked closely he was waving his hands as if that would shake away the pain, or passers by might have thought he was doing the Macarena. After much inward groaning Big Al took off his gloves, he was nearly afraid to do this since he was concerned that his fingers would be hamburger meat. Gingerly he took off his gloves.

All the fingers were there (he shook his glove to make sure no bits had stayed behind in the glove) and two of the fingers were rapidly turning purple and swelling. Blood was already oozing under the nails and it felt like someone was hammering metal spikes into his finger ends. Cautiously he returned the snow blower to the garage, closed the doors and went inside. That night his hand and fingers ached so next day he went to the emergency room. When he got there he saw a doctor, who knew Big Al from some previous incidents. Big Al was earning “frequent flier miles” in the E.R. The doctor asked Al what he had done, and with a sheepish grin on his face he told the doctor the story. The doctor initially said nothing, inspected the fingers and gave his diagnosis. “Idiot” he said, “You broke two fingers and you are blessed that you did not lose your fingers or hand.” The initial bill for that diagnosis, of idiot and broken fingers, arrived at Big Al’s house yesterday, it was nearly \$500, with more to come. The sad thing is that the accident need not have occurred if Big Al did at home what he preached to the employees at work. His employer has an active safety program but Al had it in his head, but not in his heart; the result of his pigheadedness ended up in his being injured unnecessarily.

There are some simple lessons that can be learned from Big Al and The Case of Two Fingers, that can save injuries at both work and home. By following some simple principles you could save yourself or a loved one from being injured or killed.

1. **Read the operator’s instructions:** Big Al had read the instructions before and thought that “he knew it all.” Obviously he did not. If only he had read the book this season as he had last season, the injury might not have happened. Follow the

manufacturer's instructions for operation and service.

2. **Turn the power source off to the equipment before working on the equipment:**

The manual clearly stated this, as did labels all over the machine. But Big Al, he thought that just disengaging the drive shaft would stop the snow ejection paddles, it did, but not soon enough. In an industrial setting, power equipment should be locked and tagged out so that no one can get hurt or turn the power on by accident while someone is repairing a piece of machinery.

3. **Read and heed all safety labels:** The snow blower that Big Al was using had safety labels all over it, on the control panel, on the clutch handle, on the engine casing. It had so many labels that it looked a little like a cigarette pack covered with warnings from the Surgeon General. Even if a label had stated "The Surgeon General has determined that this snow blower could be hazardous to your health" Big Al would not have paid any attention. Now he will, two broken fingers later.

4. **Train, train and train again:** The employer and employee - or a person at home - need to refresh themselves on the safe operation of equipment. Wherever possible skilled persons should do this training. If at home, check with the place where you bought the equipment - a video or additional safety information may be available. Ask the person in the store to demonstrate the safe operation of the equipment. At work, remember to document such training.

5. **Haste makes waste:** Big Al was in a hurry, he was cold, tired and wanted to go to bed. It was getting late, the longer he was out in the cold, the colder he got, and the faster he tried to go. The faster he went the more often, eventually, that the machine

stalled. He became frustrated and tried to go even faster. Time and the use of time is important both at work and at home and a justifiable speed is necessary to get things done. However, by becoming a fanatic to speed, Big Al became captive to a painful injury.

6. **Familiarity breeds contempt:** Big Al was at home, he felt comfortable with his environment. He was using equipment that he had used before and doing a task that was relatively routine during the winter. He was on his own turf and “Whap” in the fall of a snowflake he had two broken fingers. It is a painful fact that most injuries happen at home and most of these injuries would not happen if the people involved paid attention to simple safety instructions on a daily basis.

Sadly, Big Al should have applied these lessons of safety that he had learned from both his employer and his Dad, Big Steve. During most of his life Big Steve had been a printing press operator and manager of a printing plant. He operated and worked around heavy equipment daily and even serviced some of the machines. He would lubricate the cogs and gears after each shift so that the machines were ready the next morning. After doing this operation for several years he decided that it was easier to leave the safety guards off that covered the gears. Nothing happened, he was able to speed up the greasing of the machines and get out of work on time. Until one day, he was actually running the press and decided, based on a habit, to lean against the safety guard - it was no longer there - “Crunch” in a split second he lost two fingers. That injury haunted Big Steve for the rest of his life since he lost the two fingers on his writing hand with which he held a pen. Big Steve had told Big Al about this and had even showed Big Al the types of presses involved. However, the presses and paper cutters now had all safety guards installed. Big Steve had pointed

the way for Big Al to be safe, but Big Al had let good advice fall on deaf ears.

Ironically, it is March 24, 2002 and it is snowing outside. Maybe there will be an accumulation of snow and Big Al will have to go out and move snow. However, this time he will not do it with a snow blower. Ever since The Case of The Two Fingers the snow blower has ceased to work and wheezes like a punctured bagpipe. He will have to slowly and painfully move the snow using a shovel, and batteries are not included. Even as this article is being typed Big Al's fingers are hurting because Big Al is The Frugal Housekeeper. A good safety program must go beyond talking and training, it must impact behavior and move from the head (theory) to the heart (application). Safety does not start at work, it starts in the home and in the heart and should be relayed to the kids at the hearth so that safety becomes a habit formed for a lifetime, at home, at school, at play or at work.

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