It was 2 days before our son’s wedding in the Sierras near our mountain cabin. My wife was busily baking bread, making blintzes, and finishing the last load of wash before the first guests were due to arrive. When I returned from my mailbox run up the highway, I noticed that the laundry room in the cabin was flooded. After quickly turning the washing machine off, I exhausted the limits of my skills and expertise in home appliance repairs with verification that the external hose was connected and intact. However, the washing machine was still leaking large amounts of water from a source that I could not locate. Forty miles from the nearest town and late on a Friday afternoon, I had little hope that we would have a functioning washing machine for this busy weekend.

After several futile and panicked phone calls, I reached Ralph at his appliance repair store. Ralph assured me that I could diagnose and, most likely, fix the problem without the necessity of his making a house call. Despite my repeated protests that I had little to no mechanical skills, Ralph continued to insist that I could do this. He promised that he would talk me through each step and encouraged me to call him back as often as necessary with any questions or complications. Was this really happening in the “customer service-unfriendly” era of 2003? Was Ralph for real?

After several phone consultations and clarification of washing machine terminology, I was able to take the machine apart, discover that the internal hose was off, replace the hose and clamp it on, and reassemble the machine. Ralph was my hero teacher! When I offered to pay Ralph, he told me that it was not necessary—he had enough business, and he liked helping people through these kinds of problems.

Ralph was a superb “specialist consultant” in this interaction. His constant reassurances that I could do this and that he had made that mistake many times were reassuring. His comments, in response to my statements of appreciation and gratitude, that I had done this myself and that he had
only been my coach, gave me the confidence that I could accomplish similar mechanical tasks in the future without fears of failure or bad outcomes. Isn’t this what we want our learners to experience when we are teaching a new skill?

After my experience with Ralph, I felt empowered with my new skills. I can now disassemble a washing machine and identify problems in a very short time! I hope I can be as effective a teacher with students and residents—and patients—as Ralph was with me.

PS: Please feel free to call me—or Ralph—the next time your washing machine breaks down. I will patiently guide you through this skill with empathy, clarity, patience, reassurance, and enthusiasm that reflects my love of teaching.

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