

## There's No App for That, or What I Learned from a Chimpanzee

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If I don't drink a cup of coffee within an hour after I get out of bed in the morning, it's going to be a bad day -- and not just for me. Out of respect for others, when I get up I start my automatic coffee maker.

Two days ago, shortly after I started a brew I heard the appliance hissing and sputtering like it had finished. I also noticed that the water level in the machine's intake reservoir was not dropping. Something was obviously wrong and getting wronger.

I unplugged the machine, removed the grounds basket, and emptied the water from the intake reservoir. I then shined a flashlight on the bottom of the reservoir. There, recessed deep in a narrow molding, lay a bright white fibrous mass, roughly 1/4" across. Even without my first cuppa, I was fairly sure it was not part of the appliance.

As my parents once told me, when all else fails, think. I imagined four possible courses of action. I could:

1. Surf the web for an app that told me what I should do.
2. Take the machine to a repair shop.
3. Replace the appliance.
4. Fix the problem myself.

I'm old enough to assume (1) is almost always pointless unless you sell apps for a living. Taking the machine to a repair shop would almost surely cost more than replacing it, so I immediately eliminated (2). I was reluctant to replace the appliance (3) because, like many men, I suffer from delusions of self-reliance.

That left (4). Try as I might, I could not find a way to disassemble the appliance with tools I owned. I did find three screws on the bottom that might have been relevant, but their heads fit no tool I owned or had ever seen. And the recess in which the fibrous mass was lodged was too narrow even for tweezers.

What would Plato do in a jam like this?

Without warning, the image of a chimpanzee using a stick to fish termites out of a mound flashed before me. The flash wasn't as blinding as Saul's was on the road to Tarsus, but it was bright enough for home use. I didn't have a stick, but knew I had a roll of 20-gauge wire, which, if you're desperate enough, looks like a stick. I cut a foot-long piece from the roll, then bent one end of it to form a small hook. As crude as it was, it allowed me to fish the fibrous mass out of the bottom of the intake reservoir.

The coffee maker worked perfectly after that.

As the philosopher Mediocre (or maybe it was Stokely Carmichael) said, “If you don’t like the rules, change your tools.”