

A Lack of Imagination.

In a large house in Northeast Minneapolis, after the initial *hello* at the front door, I was led to an extremely sunny sitting room at the back of the place, facing the very lively garden that surrounded the whole house. Multiple colors pleasantly assaulted me as I was left to my own devices with the piano. The woman who lived there was a busy professional who needed to ‘get on the phone’ with a list of people who had left messages earlier on that Saturday morning. She disappeared in a flash, with the instruction to call up the front stairs to get her attention when I was finished with the tuning.

About a third of the way through the ‘*reassemble the puzzle the same way*’ process, I was plunking away at the keys when a neighbor came to the back door to talk with the woman who lived there. No one else was home. I could see her from around the edge of the upright piano case but she could not see me from where she was standing. She knocked on the door a few times, then noticed my piano ministrations quietly filling the air. I am not in the habit of answering anyone’s door for them, so I plunked on with my chaotic and repetitive repeated notes, as I always do. It must have sounded very boring and aimless to her outside there, as she tried to get the attention of her friend. As I continued to play my notes and the chords they went with, she suddenly started to call out her name, “Sandy!” and pound the door harder. Who else could have been messing with the piano but the lady who lived there? That must have been the neighbor’s experience to this point. She could hear the piano droning on, ignoring her. *What’s the matter?* she must have thought. *How could she not hear me making all this noise out here?*

“*Sandy! Sandy!*” she yelled, as I continued on a few more seconds. ***Bam, bam!*** went the door. Sandy was probably on the phone upstairs and not about to make an appearance. Finally, I relented (actually only about a minute after her arrival) and headed to the back door. She had heard the piano sounds cease and waited until I could make it to where she was. Utter surprise filled her face as I arrived. Apparently, Sandy had no husband or boyfriend at the time, so my appearance was quite unexpected.

I opened the door for her, smiled and explained, “I’m the piano tuner. I’ll see if I can find her.” As she came in a short way, she looked quite contrite. And speechless. No need to say sorry; her expression and demeanor said it for her. I gestured for her to wait there (as all proper butlers on the PBS Masterpiece Theater series always do) and went to the bottom of stairs as Sandy had instructed me to, and after hearing no sign of a quiet phone voice coming from upstairs at that moment, I called her name. The upstairs of the house was extensive and spread out; apparently the home office must have been down the hall. It was believable to me that if Sandy’s attention was elsewhere, the noise from the back door might not have penetrated. She opened the office door right away and came to the top of the stairs, not in the sight line to the back door.

“You can’t be done already!” she exclaimed.

“No, sorry. But there’s someone here to see you.” I explained.

Sandy tripped athletically down the stairs, and greeted her friend with high-pitched good cheer. I was nodded to in passing as they started yacking at full speed, and I exited left, back to the sun

room and my task at hand. They gravitated to a more removed room where we wouldn't be bothering each other.

I thought back over the whole sequence of events and concluded I had done the right thing. But Sandy's friend probably should have considered other possibilities when she heard the piano making those odd repeated sounds, as she came to the door.

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This brings to mind a similar lack of imagination that happened to me when I returned a phone call to a household that wanted me to tune their piano for the first time. The woman of the house answered my call and seconds later a very young voice started yelling right nearby. "I want to talk to her!" he exclaimed, and insistently grabbed the phone out of his mom's hands. And then as sweet as could be he crooned, "Hi, Grandma." I was surprised for a second, then explained to him smoothly, "Sorry, I'm not Grandma. Sometimes *other* people call." Mom was silently handed the phone back again, and I told her what I had pointed out to her son. Well, I assume that the four-year-old remembered that bit of information from then on. Perhaps it helped to instill a sense of imagination in him that he used well in other settings, like drawing pictures and making up stories.

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Towards the end of my piano tuning career, I took on the task of tuning a nice Yamaha grand piano at a general meeting room in a senior's outreach center in a western suburb. This was a nice social service organization that invited senior citizens to drop by and have some entertainment and company during the day. Some had a few basic needs taken care of there, like advice on how to fill out certain forms to apply for assistance at government agencies, health checks with a nurse and help with daily living issues, especially if the senior still lived alone. Everything was free and a good number of seniors frequently stopped by for a while just to talk with staff and each other to pass the time.

I worked on the piano at this center for about three years before I retired. The outreach agency was affiliated with a seniors care center I also tuned pianos for back near downtown. Once when I came into the big room with all the chairs, I could see that a presentation was just finishing up and I would need to wait until that info session concluded. A friendly staff person came up to me, thinking I must be a new visitor to the center. I could have looked not that different from all the regular oldsters who came by. She quietly asked for my name, and was I just looking into what the place offers folks like me. I smiled back and responded, "I'm just the piano tuner. As soon as he's done, I'll start to work." She chuckled and waved as she went around the room again looking for anyone else who may have snuck in during the last hour of the day.

Soon the meeting broke up and about twenty elderly people, most older than me, slowly gravitated toward the door. I moved over to the piano as the space cleared out. I started to set up for the tuning, which required the removal of the music desk on the grand (the sliding wood part that the music sits on when someone plays the piano). A staff person came by to talk with me about the piano and a possible repair that was needed because of a sluggish key. I checked it out

and found a note that was indeed not acting quite right. I told the staffer that I thought it could be fixed without too much trouble.

Then I noticed a set of keys on a ring sitting by the tuning pins, freshly revealed now that the music rack was off. “Does someone keep their keys here?” I asked the staff guy. He changed his expression immediately to deep surprise and even shock. “Where were those?” he asked in a high-pitched voice. “Right here sitting by the tuning pins.” The man shook his head and launched into a story about a volunteer pianist who had been there in the summer (this was December) who mysteriously could not find his keys after his piano performance. He had looked everywhere for them, all through the room, his bag of sheet music, all around the piano. This was a complete set of keys for the volunteer’s car, house, office and garage, etc. I was a costly mistake, I was told, since he needed to have new copies made of a couple of special car keys with the computer chips installed in them.

Here was another example of ‘lack of imagination,’ although it was understandable. The pianist’s keys obviously had been sitting on the music desk, on the flat part where people stack their music, when the keys had been knocked off somehow. The fall was about four inches, but they landed in an area of the piano that most people never see or even know about: the space where the piano tuning pins and strings live. I told the staffer I felt badly for the pianist who had lost his keys this way. The keys were in plain sight just under the music desk, but that territory had evaded the search. The keys were turned in at the main desk, with an explanation. I hope they were returned eventually to the volunteer pianist when he came again to play.

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