

ACCIDENTAL WITNESS TO SURPRISES

I mentioned before that I sometimes notice stuff going on around me that is out of the ordinary. Here are a few quirky things stick in my memory that I'd like to pass on.

As a grandpa myself now, I can understand some occasional memory lapses. At a pleasant home in the suburbs, a grandpa and two of his hyper and noisy grandsons, ages 7 and 5, I'm guessing, were planning a fun day out of the city at the lake cabin, an hour away. Among other things, the most anticipated activity apparently was going to be *fishing* from the rowboat at a placid lake far out into the natural world, and away from the city noise, commotion, and traffic. The two kids were good at generating their own racket, and they were clearly wound up about this special day. Grandma was staying home, but she had prepared a healthy lunch for them to take along, including several premade cheese sandwiches, and PBJs too, drinks, and variety of treats. Grandpa had already picked up the minnows and worms for bait.

The fishing poles for each eager angler were carefully loaded into the back of the SUV, and soon after I had gotten under way with the tuning, the unbridled cloud of noise gravitated out the door. They all piled into the van and hit the road; the resulting silence was heavenly for me.

Grandma and I were home alone, and she seemed to be happy with the quiet too. We said a few words about the boys, and I continued with the methodical tuning process while she pattered in the garden for a while. After about thirty minutes, she came in again to get an additional tool, and she stopped short near the back door, and as wholesome grandmas do (I am married to one), she exclaimed loudly using no swear words whatsoever. "Oh, my goodness! How dumb can he be!" This must have meant grandpa. "They've left their *lunch* behind!" All those great sandwiches, snacks, treats, and drinks, no longer available for the outing. "So. What is there to eat?" I asked. "Oh, there's a fast food three miles from the cabin, and the kids like that just as much as this grandma food. They'll be stopping there for sure, once they discover their missing lunch, maybe both going and coming back, knowing grandpa."

A slice of life. Something gets forgotten, and the kids end up with an improved menu. They probably thought of this as a lucky break in an already exciting day.

For fifty years I had a piano shop in our garage, behind the house by the alley. The easy access to the garage for the piano movers was a real plus for everyone. I would buy used pianos at moving sales, auctions, estate sales or from people who called me offering their old instruments. I sometimes had as many as seven pianos at once in the garage, where I would recondition them for resale, sometimes getting quite deeply into replacing worn out parts and refurbishing the original piano innards. When the pianos were done, I'd tune them again, and to test them out; sometimes I would get carried away with my piano music improvisations. If I liked the sound a piano produced, always different than the pianos I had in the house, I'd enjoy rewarding myself with a few minutes of noodling on

the keys. Occasionally I would come across some new ideas that I would save for later, for possible use in a composition somewhere.

The neighbors were tolerant of this, nobody complained, and one even said she really enjoyed listening to my piano playing because it was a treat that other blocks never could boast of. "It's fun to hear you work. You start experimenting with the piano, and pretty soon you get into something and take off for fifteen minutes." I've always thought of that part of my work as a real perk. I never felt like I was wasting time when I could freely mess around on the keys, with no thought of 'the Boss' looking over my shoulder. I have always been my own boss and that has led to a freedom that I appreciated every day.

People would be drawn to the garage sometimes, and I was able to tell them about the pianos available for sale at the time. Sometimes that led to a sale, but not often. Most of the time, sales happened when people would come over to visit a specific piano I was advertising somewhere. Usually there was only one person or a couple, but occasionally a whole family would be visiting my garage.

One time a couple of guys in their 30s came together to see the old upright I was offering, but they soon started talking about the NFL football schedule and who was playing whom the next day (Sunday). Their focus suddenly switched from talking about my piano to hashing over the chances for their favorite teams.

Then one said, "Hey, can we use your phone?" It was sitting right there nearby, unused, so I said sure. It seemed innocent enough.

Soon they were both on the phone with what must have been their bookie, placing high stakes (to me) bets on the next day's games. So, maybe, the FBI has my phone number now as one used for placing illegal bets, I was thinking. Too late to stop them. One guy placed a \$300 bet on the Kansas City Chiefs to win, then changed it to \$500. Strange high-finance risk-takers, these guys were. I was about to mention that the piano I was selling was a better bet, and also cost \$500. And it certainly would be longer-lasting. The other guy, also personally known by the bookie, placed a couple of several-hundred-dollar bets, too.

The Chiefs-follower, after he was off the phone, asked what I thought of his placing that money on them, and I told him what I thought: the Redskins were going to win that game. They were the rising team of the moment. Sure enough, the next day, the Chiefs lost. So I had to sell my piano to somebody else later. That reckless gambler no longer had the \$500 he needed to buy mine.

I get called to all types of places to do piano work, and a common scene where a performance piano is present is a posh restaurant, especially one that is upscale enough to feature dinner music for background entertainment. One place in particular, downtown in a high rise office/commercial-use building, called me in for a tuning just before a scheduled evening appearance by a local singer-pianist. I was required to schedule the tuning in the morning, just before lunch so that my work could be done in advance of

their busy time for diners. I was given an hour, at my request, in an expansive space that was already hopping with preparations for the big day and evening ahead.

I tuned the grand piano as carefully as possible amidst the commotion around me, with moderate success. The piano was situated pretty much in the middle of the room, near the entry, which had tables arrayed in artful ways in different directions from there. It was a beautiful setting for up to, possibly, 200+ diners at a time, with many booths and tables. Each had the feeling of comfortable removal from their neighbors. I was struggling with the top range of notes, which are always tricky to hear properly (and prone to some slipping on-the-spot because of the *slack* to take up between the tuning pins and the bridge, sometimes some inches away; if I'm not careful, the strings tend to drift flat several seconds after I tune them, which calls for retuning those strings).

Then, out of the blue, my concentration was shattered by the sudden awakening of the music sound system, playing a light jazz recording. "But, I'm not done yet!" I cried out in my thoughts. "Doesn't my presence here mean anything to this establishment?"

Apparently not. The clock had struck 11:30 already, my allotted hour was up and it was time for the waiting lunch crowd to be let in. At least someone could have thought about the hapless piano tuner still struggling away, slowed by impossible surroundings and clatter from dishes and silverware. No dice. I appealed to the woman serving as hostess to please turn off the music for a little while, but she only shook her head, shrugged and gestured toward the restaurant's manager, who had insisted that nothing should be different today from any other day. "Greet the people with pleasant background music for their lunching pleasure" was his philosophy. The crowd appeared to mostly be high-powered business types in suits and colorful, expensive dresses, so they had to be given higher respect in this situation. Lowly contractors like me had to take a back seat.

I panicked and went into the fastest of hurry-up modes I could muster. I fought with the music and the chatter, as people ignored me and my pathetic, high, thin tones from the piano. I wound up my work in five minutes, and the piano sounded very presentable in spite of everything. I guess I shouldn't have been taking my time quite so much, back a half hour ago. Oh, well, all in a day's work. The smiling manager was happy he could get me out of there, and I was just as happy to pack up and leave. I'm sure the performing pianist was satisfied with the piano's sound, since he always garnered more attention for his *singing* than anything on the keys. I tuned that piano another three times that year, after which time that manager was fired and the new one had his own ideas about who to hire for piano maintenance. Sigh.

Halloween is a special time in many people's homes. Inevitably, lots of kids of various ages are involved. Costumes are created, and a myriad of clever decorations come into play. I've seen a lot of variations in the area of spiders and webs, skeletons, scary ghosts, jack-o-lanterns with amazing original faces, graveyards in the front lawn, and so on. They are always entertaining to see, and worth at least ten minutes of excited and proud showing-me-around by the small residents. Often candy is involved ahead of the actual date, and I'm generally amenable to accepting small samples offered me, as the honored

visitor to their home. Moms are surprisingly cooperative with the samples. I get the idea that my presence tends to make the candy treats more accessible to the kids than when no outsider is there.

The pets get into the act too. Dogs and cats are frequently seen sniffing around the new decorations, wondering “what’s up with this stuff?” Cats sometimes tentatively touch the spider *webery*, but shrink back when it sticks to their paws. Upon first sight, *skeletons* usually elicit a dog bark or three, especially the big 3-D ones, or if the bones are hanging in a really odd place, like from the ceiling in the corner of the outdoor porch.

Once when a huge new placard was uncovered for display on the outside of the front porch, the resident cat became truly alarmed. This four-foot tall display board was carefully constructed to allow some light through the cardboard to present a dramatic silhouette of a Halloween cat, looking sinister, on the prowl. It was effective enough to send the live house cat into a panic, with a huge, long, deep-throated snarl, and a long-lasting bristling of the fur on his back. Everyone in the house (the kids especially) laughed their heads off at this behavior, but the family feline was acutely frightened by this strange visage. There must be something in their wild set of instincts that automatically recognizes a rival, especially one in such a threatening pose, even just a shadow. Unaffected by the kids’ reassurances, he could not be convinced that the shadow was not real, even though it was frozen and had no cat scent to it at all. Luckily for the scaredy cat, the display board soon got removed to the exterior of the porch where it no longer seemed as worrisome. Ironically, the live cat looked a lot like the Halloween version when he bristled his fur. Maybe he turned into a great addition to the scene on Halloween night.

No matter where I go, I need to be ready to perform repairs for problems that no one knows about until I uncover them. People often assume that if a malfunction of any sort is going on, they might as well ditch the piano because the cost to repair it will be too prohibitive. No so! Often all that’s needed is a tweak or a basic adjustment that makes everything go back to normal, magically. If I can get a piano back on track for \$25 or so, when the owners thought that it could cost them hundreds, it makes everyone including me a lot happier. I am not at all interested in taking advantage of anyone in situations like that. I have their trust and I want to keep it; I want their faith in me to be justified. That’s how reputations grow, even if the individual piano owners don’t exactly know what happened to the piano.

I frequently deal with people who have no choice in the piano they have ended up with. Some are quite poor and cannot afford to even consider a new, or better, used piano. They have the only piano available to them already sitting in the living room. If that one fails, then they will have no piano at all. I want to do my best to keep music happening in people’s lives because I understand first hand how valuable the power of music is, for everyone, no matter who they are. If I can keep a 120-year-old piano limping along for the kids in the house to take lessons on, then I feel like I’ve done my job, if that’s the only piano they’ll ever be granted. Sometimes I find things that need to be fixed that I

don't need to bring up to them. I don't have to collect for every last repair detail in a humble home. In a \$2 million mansion, different story.

I remember a time I visited a charter high school that specialized in performing arts. The kids were sincere and hard-working, and the teachers were practical and dedicated. I was shown into a little auditorium in the school where to my surprise I found an old upright piano, just like the ones I've worked in hundreds of homes across the Twin Cities. This was not the best performance piano for singers and pianists, but this was what they had (apparently a donated piano from an estate), and this piano was their lifeline to producing the sound of music in this space.

The piano had not been worked on for some years and there were a lot of small things that had added up to one large mess within the piano action. It took some extra effort, but I donated some time to enable this piano to be saved from the scrap heap. When I was done a couple of hours later, the piano had revived remarkably, played more smoothly, and it even seemed to love being freed from its burdens. The piano came alive again in the hands of the young students who really wanted their spring musical to sound good and be an inspiration to the crew of aspiring professional performers who were given no choice but to use *this* instrument.

As I worked on the insides of the piano during that two-hour span, I did find some humor within those hidden regions where piano tuners go, something that only other tuners would ever see. One of the previous technicians must have been working on something that required all the keys to be taken out and placed on a table nearby while other stuff got done. To make sure that the order of the keys was maintained (the exact order is crucial, keys are in no way interchangeable), each one was carefully numbered from left to right with black felt-tip marker. (The keys already had the faint, stamped numbers the manufacturer had imprinted.)

As I did some adjustments myself to those keys, I was surprised to notice that the tech before me had skipped a number: #55, I think it was. So #54 jumped accidentally to #56, and he/she had continued on to the far right end carefully numbering each key until the last key was reached, to which #89 was applied (and everyone knows all keyboards always have only 88 keys). The worker must have recognized too late that something had gone wrong, and nothing could be done about it anymore, so he/she added to that last key the word '*poo*' next to the #89. A number of other, more colorful swear words could have been chosen, but this time a milder term was applied. This was only an annoyance, not a calamity.

'Oh, well,' he/she must have thought, 'weird stuff happens, I tried my best, messed up a bit, and we all have to live with the crazy numbering from here on.' It was a casual message to me from a previous worker within the piano's insides, 'don't worry about little things, just get the important work right and we'll all be okay.' I agree with you, sir or madam. We're a team of specialists who are working for a larger good, the over-arching noble cause. So, carry on, everyone. We are proud to be a part of a web of dedicated pros, the Guardians of the Piano Universe. We are Groot!

Sometimes I become witness to family interactions that fall into the category of ‘the drama of everyday life.’ I visited a home in north Minneapolis where lived a father and two teen-aged boys. They were both interested in the piano and I wanted to make sure it was working well for them all, since the father occasionally did some jazz performances with friends.

As I tuned the family piano in the living room, the younger of the two boys, probably about 13, came home from school. He was an inquisitive sort who wanted to know more about what I did in my work to make the piano sound better. I explained it as best I could without getting too detailed. Soon he was talking with his dad in the kitchen about the fact that this was the day that his mom (now living separately) was coming over for a short visit, something that happened regularly every week or so, I gathered. She was scheduled to arrive in about a half hour.

The boy disappeared in a different direction, and the dad started to tidy up the kitchen so his ex-wife would not think he was getting too casual in his house-keeping. Time went by and, on schedule, the boy’s mom arrived through the back door. They chatted for a minute and then started looking around for the son she had come to visit. The father noticed a pair of shoes sitting on the kitchen floor, which apparently implied that the boy may have gone out again somewhere. “Why would he do that? He knew you were coming,” the dad wondered.

They looked in his bedroom and around the place but there was no sign of the boy who had been there a little while ago making plans to meet with his mom. They asked me if I had seen the boy leave and I said no. After about ten more minutes, waiting for him to turn up, they both disappointedly gave up and the mom took off again, until next time, I gathered.

The last I had seen the 13-year-old was when he went past my door towards the left, about a half hour earlier. Mystery. Before long, the older teen who lived there, maybe 17, came home from school too, but he had not been planning to meet with the visitor at all, since she was not the older boy’s mom. They knew and liked each other, and he said he was sorry not to cross paths with her, but that was no big deal with him.

No more than five minutes later, both boys reappeared in the kitchen. The older one had discovered his brother asleep in the basement on the couch. Why no one had thought to look there was really puzzling to the boys. It was a natural place for them to gravitate sometimes.

The 13-year-old was really upset that he had missed his mom’s visit and he cried bitter tears about how unfair it was that she left without seeing him.

“How could you do that?” It was not a yell but an exasperated higher-pitched exclamation. “You should have looked around more!”

His dad was deeply apologetic, and tried feebly to explain how the left-behind shoes gave the dad the impression that his son may have stepped out somewhere for a while, unexpectedly.

“That makes no sense!” he cried.

As I finished up the work and was passing through the room that led to my car, I found the two together. In a touching gesture, he had crawled into his dad’s lap for comfort, even though he was too large to fit there very well anymore. Disappointment filled the room.

“We’ll make it up to you,” the dad promised him, comforting him as best as he would accept. “Sorry, sorry.”

And I was sorry not to have told them that the last I had seen him was when he went past the living room door heading left; it had become apparent that was the way towards the basement. I had wondered if he was still in the house, but I had no way to know. Sad things happen without any real reason sometimes. I assume that his mom made it back there again before too long.

I mulled the situation over for weeks after that. Should I have said more? I didn’t see him leave. Maybe I could have opened up more search possibilities.Sigh.

Church basements are often very busy places. In a smallish church in our neighborhood (Powderhorn Park in south Minneapolis), I was invited in to tune the clunker old upright piano used for general purposes within the Sunday School, various meetings and rehearsals, and something for the kids to mess around on. The social hall it was in, next to the kitchen, as expected, was filled with church basement folding tables and a crowd of people doing various tasks independently. There were three staff offices down there and a milling small crowd of folks waiting to meet with those individuals, for whatever reasons. Small activities were under way at some tables, posters getting made, art projects for some purposeful displays about important causes the church wanted to push, work on the decorations for this week’s service upstairs in the sanctuary. Volunteers everywhere. Dedicated church members each doing their thing—important work which added together makes for a church that hums along happily.

This particular church is very socially active and involved with protecting the environment, helping those in need, working with social service organizations and doing good in the world. Many of the church members were leaning toward the ‘counter-culture’ *hippy* category of the times (late 1970s). My piano work was just background noise to most of the people present. It was kind of a chaotic atmosphere to work in but I managed well enough in spite of the general din of mixed sounds from everywhere. The kitchen right next door also had some food prep going on which added to the action.

At a table not 20 feet away from me an odd tableau took place that I could not help but notice. The people involved had thoroughly blocked out any plunking sounds I had to

make on the piano, so their awareness of me was basically zero. One church member had brought with him a rather out-of-place middle-aged guy who appeared to be much more from the 'straight' world, as we called it then, than the activist part of society. He dressed more like an accountant than everyone else, and he seemed a bit nervous to be in the midst of this foreign milieu so different than his familiar environment. The visitor had made some arrangements with his go-between, apparently a regular there (possibly they had met on the phone a week earlier), to talk with a couple of farmers who raised organic food. This guy wanted to know more about the organic produce process and ostensibly was thinking about using his garden to grow some healthy veggies. A husband-wife team then came to the table with some pamphlets, text books, flyers, and a well-used notebook with tattered pages.

An usual exchange unfolded among them. All the while, I continued with my tuning work, which by that stage in my career was well into the *automatic* mode. As I mentioned before, the whole tuning process is a lot like working a 1000-piece jigsaw puzzle pretty much the same way, over and over again. Before the discussion about organic farming ever got started, the visitor had a few questions about these people's lifestyle. Here is a summary of their exchange:

"Do you live on a farm nearby?"

"Yes, outside Orono."

"Are you part of a commune?"

"Yes, that's right."

"How many people live there?"

"Maybe about 20."

"So, do you people live freely?"

"You could say that."

"Do you all have casual relationships?"

"We are all good friends"

"So do you have free love there?"

"Some of us, maybe."

(Looking at the women) "Do you have free love?"

(Frowning, hesitantly) "No. I'm married to Jerry here." (gestures to her husband)

"So, do you share with your group?"

"No. We have a committed relationship. No sharing"

(The guy pauses thoughtfully) "So are there some young women there who are unattached?"

"Are you thinking of joining a commune?"

"Maybe."

"Are you married now?"

"Yeah, you could say. But not happily."

"Are you interested in organic farming at all?" (Jerry starts to fold up his printed materials)

"Yes, but how does someone join in a commune?"

"I think we're done here." (The woman gathers her literature and gets up.)

"But how many rooms does your farmhouse have?"

(Jerry is irritated) “Enough questions about that. We’re out of here.” (the couple leaves quickly)

(Guy looks puzzled and clueless) “But... I have more questions.”

(The church member who brought him to the meeting) “Too late. I guess you asked too much about the commune.” (he leaves as well)

The whole episode lasted no more than five minutes. Raising organic produce never came up. I felt bad for everyone: the couple who generously drove in from Orono, the go-between who did the hook-up with them, and even the strangely out-of-touch visitor, who, like a fish out of water, clumsily asked way over-the-line questions and got nowhere with his plan to find out more about how to join a commune, which apparently was his whole veiled purpose for getting the meeting together. Very odd in every way.

A popular café on the West Bank (not far from the *West Bank School of Music* where I served as executive director for 14 years) was a favorite meeting place for many people in the nearby community, rich with the same ‘counter-culture’ mind-set and rebellious ideas as the church in my neighborhood. This area of the city near the West Bank campus of the University of Minnesota, along the Mississippi River, was also known by the two main streets that meet where this hangout was situated, Cedar and Riverside. *The New Riverside Cafe* was heavily involved with the West Bank music scene where many faculty members of WBSM (and several of their friends) performed often.

Yes, of course there was a piano on stage there, and I was called to tune that piano several times during the 1970s. It was an old battered upright that got played hard and often, especially on weekends. It served the bands and solo singers well over the years. I even performed on it a few times myself. It had a good sound for its age (at least 60) and I managed to keep the innards functional the whole time.

While I was working on the piano during one weekday afternoon in January, a group of teen-age boys, some quite young, arranged themselves around a nearby table with cups of hot cider. Maybe five boys were there and they wore a mix of beat-up clothes that made them look like a disheveled bunch of hippies. One of them, a short kid no more than 15, had called this ‘meeting’ to talk over his special idea. I gathered from the way they bantered that they all were ‘crashing’ at a neighborhood house nearby. They all may have been run-away teens, lost and struggling in their own way with their new and not so comfortable independence.

The 15-year-old announced his earth-shatteringly original idea: “We’re going to get a farm!” This led to a lot of questions that bordered on practical, including ‘do you have a place in mind?’ (‘no’), ‘do you know anyone with money to pay the rent?’ (‘no’), ‘are you getting a job or something?’ (‘no’). Some people there liked the idea in general, but figured out this plan needed a lot of work. Soon competing egos began to rear their heads, and the short kid started to insist that the farm would need to be in *his* name, since he thought of it first. This turned into a crucial detail for him, while the others pushed back with derision and venom. The kid who called the meeting started to feel very insecure and picked on, even to the point of getting a little whimpery. I thought of the *Lord of the*

Flies story and the cast of characters who had been left to fend for themselves in a tough situation.

These were kids basically trying to make do in a harsh world. They relied on each other to an extent, but being on their own was not as fun as they had imagined. I felt bad for them all. The ‘meeting’ broke up soon afterward, with a couple of the guys declaring it was time to do some pan-handling out on the street corner. I was not that much older than they were, but I felt lucky to have my ‘*act together*.’ I had gotten re-married in 1974 at age 28, and we even had a house we were buying together, the same one we still live in across from Powderhorn Park. Comfortable old age is a great thing we cherish all the time now. A lot of unplanned twists and turns could have tripped us up over that span of time, e.g. we could have failed to make some payments and gotten evicted. Thanks again, lucky stars.

Decades ago, I was called by a church to work on an old console piano, which turned out to be located in the balcony area of the sanctuary. This church was really huge, elegant and old; it must have seen its best era probably at least 60 years earlier. The balcony held more seats than the main floor. The building was built in a way that naturally spread the sound from the stage outward to the whole room. This originally came from the era of loud voices that could travel without the aid of amplification. The church was apparently a revivalist-flavored congregation where enthusiasm and excitement played a large part. But it was not wealthy. Things looked threadbare and well-worn. They did own a very basic sound system with one mic for the minister to use, and one speaker on the edge of the raised stage. There was a decent piano on the stage nearby, and an area that was designated for the small choir. *That* piano was not the one that needed work. Strangely enough, the balcony piano was the only one I was called in to tune, since the better piano had already been taken care of. By someone else, about a month earlier.

The minister of the church was the only one there, and he explained that some of the people of the church wanted to try adding the second piano in the balcony so that people up there could hear better. I gather that about three Sundays had gone by and everyone up and down had complained that the new piano (a creaky old short piano that someone had donated) “sounded *terrible!*” I wondered about the wisdom of having two pianos and two pianists both playing simultaneously during the service. But this solution I gather had mostly to do with not having any money yet to get a decent sound system. I got the piano front off and set up my felt temperament strip among the strings, and asked the minister, a non-musician, to play me some notes on the stage piano so the two instruments could be matched up. It took a few tries to get him to hit closer and closer to the A above middle C. I soon discovered why the upper piano sounded so bad. Finally, as requested, as he struck that A every six seconds or so for a minute, I was faced with a situation where the A on the piano I was tuning was obviously *nearly a half-step* flat! This piano had not been tuned to the *correct* A-440 since 1950, I’m guessing. No wonder everyone complained! The two pianos did not even come close to being in the same pitch. After I got the As to match, I told the minister that I could take it from there. The minister told me where the office was, and headed back that direction to return to work. “Bring me the bill when you’re done.” He waved as he disappeared through the door stage right.

Using that A as the reference point, for the next hour and a half, I struggled to get the notes on the upstairs piano pitched-raised enough to be (sort of) in the right ballpark. Often, when strings are tightened from *way* flat, they need to be pulled up again and again (due to string stretching) to get them to stay in tune. Not an easy proposition, especially with a clunker piano that had not been tuned right since it was made. I charged the church the standard tuning fee, and after mentioning to the minister that the upper piano is not nearly as good a piano as the one on stage, I headed out.

I still wonder how it sounded that next Sunday. I bet people were relieved to be singing in the same key, mostly. Maybe, with the enthusiasm of the moment, the two-piano sound was aligned enough to work. I have no doubt that the two pianists could stay in the same groove, and, after all, it's the inspiring *words* that raise the spirits of the congregants as much as the music itself. I hope everything worked out. And I can only hope that, before long, the fund-raising committee managed to gather the cash to get a good amplification system for the stage piano and choir, so that the extra piano in the upstairs could be forgotten. I never heard back from them, so I don't know how things fared, but I feel optimistic that this solution functioned well enough for a couple of months.

When people make decisions about their home's décor, sometimes constraints apply, usually financial considerations and other practical factors, but occasionally differences in taste and aesthetics enter in too. Most people have some taste but little extra money, and still they do remarkably well in making their living space homey, attractive and unique. Many places have unusual artifacts from around the world; others have colorful touches via flowers, plants and knick-knacks, and some feature artful poster-prints of recognizable works of art.

In one palatial home in a suburb south of St. Paul, a beautiful and amazing house was tastefully decorated in a traditional style throughout, with fine, expensive-looking colorful area carpets, attractive lamps, well-matched upholstered furniture. This was the showplace of a wealthy professional and his work-at-home wife who probably helped out with publicity and fund-raising for non-profit groups. But set against this rather conventional appearance were several large and garish paintings that did not fit the environment at all. About a half dozen large and jarring art works were spread around the whole building in prominent locations, like above the fireplace mantel, beside the entry way to the stairway to the lower level, and above the main living room couch on a tall, dramatic wall in front of their picture window, overlooking the serene countryside.

The woman of the house greeted me, and led me toward the piano room, but on the way there I encountered several of these art works of various sizes, sometimes four or five feet across. They were harsh abstracts with arresting (in a negative way) color combinations and ominous shapes, apparently all painted by the same person. She could tell I was noticing the paintings, so she volunteered some info about them. "These are all original, painted by a contemporary artist from Amsterdam." I told her I thought they were very interesting, surprising, and 'cutting edge' in their own way. She explained that her husband had arranged to have these shipped over from Europe, after reading a small

article in an art magazine. This painter was being *noticed* by a couple of critics as possibly a rising star, a real innovator in this sub-genre of abstract painting. The artist was someone I had never heard of before.

Glancing at one abstract and then at me, she asked hesitantly, “What do you think of them?” Why would she want to know my reaction to these works? Maybe she thought I looked like someone who had some appreciation of fine art. She inadvertently conveyed to me a vibe that she was unsure about bringing these into her home and having them so prominently on display. I told her as neutrally as possible that they were ‘not my style.’ Dramatic and bold, yes, but not very appealing, I had to admit. She looked a little disappointed, and in talking with her a bit more, it became apparent that she had been looking for validation for the two of them having spent so much on them (multi-thousands, I suspect) when they made her feel uncomfortable. I could tell that this must be a sore spot between them. I suspect that her husband had picked them up mainly as an investment opportunity, hoping that this new artist might become hugely popular someday, like Matisse or Van Gogh.

We made it into the music room where a smaller abstract with a lot of red mixed with darker blobs hung over the grand piano. This remained a disquieting presence as I did my work over the next hour. I felt empathy toward her in her dilemma. She admitted that the paintings had been mounted in those spots in her home for three years already, but her husband apparently wanted them to remain there in their places indefinitely. I gather she didn’t want to rock the boat. So far, apparently, no indication that they might be more valuable in some distant future time, and even whether they were *presently* valued anywhere close to what he paid for them. I have my doubts. They seemed weirdly amateurish to me.

Quite a while ago, I tuned a small piano in a town quite a way north of the Twin Cities. It was a small and cozy house near a lake, and in the room with the piano, I was surprised to see that this zone was also designated by the family for exercise. In fact, the room had in it only a piano, a chair, and a big and complicated apparatus upon which and with which people could perform many different kinds of exercises to train quite a range of muscle groups and different limbs, etc.

The piano needed to be opened up so I could get at the strings, but the portable TV was on the top. I was on my own at that point (the owners were elsewhere in the home), so I needed to improvise a solution as to where I could move the TV. There were no tables or desks, only floor space, which would have worked if nothing else came to mind. I was holding the TV in my arms, doing my own odd exercises, casting around the room for a place to put it down, when I noticed the *seat* for the exercise machine. That was the only space not on the floor that would work. So, I slowly and carefully placed the TV on the cushioned seat where the exercise subject normally would sit.

Surprise. This presented to me a most interesting mind-bending visual image. It looked like a magazine cover that symbolized something wrong with America, headlining a major article about....what? The beat-up TV was covered in dust and sitting on the

exercise seat surrounded by weird arms and levers and options which I had no idea what their purpose could be. It all presented to my tired mind a veiled symbol of some terrible disaster or deep wrong that cried out for remedy. Is this what this world is coming to somehow? No one takes fitness seriously now? The television programming world really needs some renovation and improvement? People are losing their priorities? Global collapse? The end is near?

That's the trouble with scenes like this. Sometimes the message of the symbols is way too hard to fathom. What are we trying to tell each other? Maybe the world is just too complicated for simple people like me. Of course, it was just random nonsense. But it was that very unique *image* that stayed in my mind all this time, perplexing me. I like to imagine that this array could have represented maybe a Time magazine feature story. What does this convey? What are they saying needs change now? It could be anything.

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