

## Kids Are Always Entertaining

Years ago, I arrived at a family home in a northern Twin Cities suburb to tune for the first time the family's newly-acquired old upright piano. After the mom of the house invited me inside, I was shown the piano and left alone to do my work. A seven-year-old girl appeared in the doorway. I noticed a small violin case nearby in the corner and asked if she was the violinist of the house. She smiled sweetly, nervously, and answered, "I take piano lessons now." I asked why she had stopped taking violin lessons, and she kind of shrugged and frowned a little, then told me, as if no further explanation was needed, "My dad is trying to quit smoking."

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A bright four-year-old boy was watching me take off the piano's music rack when he exclaimed "Wow" quietly, as the row of hammers appeared. Kids often have never thought about what might be inside a piano that makes the music happen. He was pleased to be able to get the hammers to hit the strings when he pressed the keys. I noticed he was wearing some summer shorts that were army-camouflage colored. I complimented him on his great pants and asked if he knew anything about that pattern. He shook his head. When I mentioned 'camouflage' he recognized the word immediately, and excitedly went into a well-memorized text from a picture book about how the snow-shoe rabbit in winter is able to hide because of his white fur coat. "Same kind of thing." I told him. "Soldiers want to hide in the woods sometimes, and so they wear clothes that look from a distance like dirt and branches." The light of understanding flashed across his face as he got the connection instantly. "So the enemy guys can't find them!" "Exactly," I told him.

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At an elegant older home near Lake of the Isles in Minneapolis, decades ago, when the winter snow was melting everywhere, I visited a home that was run by a couple of teen-age boys. Their parents were off on a probably month-long tour of Europe and their planned return was only two days away. The boys had been instructed to be sure to call me to tune the piano before Mom and Dad got back, and a check had even been left for me. The house was in a lot of disarray due to the boys being the sole maintenance people during these last weeks, probably no longer kept anywhere near the standards of order and cleanliness that the parents themselves would have observed. There were piles of things everywhere, some of it mail for the adults to go through, surrounded by newspapers, magazines and varied litter. Much of the rest of the clutter turned out to be dirty plates and fast-food containers arranged on and near the couch by the TV. The rules about only eating in the kitchen must have been hugely relaxed. It looked like adult oversight had disappeared altogether.

The biggest surprise waiting for the return of the travelers was a sort of crisis in the sun porch area off the living room where a large old dining room table was located. There was a leak in the ceiling (apparently this porch was single-story) which was dripping every ten seconds, and the boys had found something big to catch the water. It was a giant hand-hammered copper tray, at least two feet on diameter which likely could have been a couple of centuries old, rimmed with lovely engravings, exotic writing and artistic scenes from the orient. My guess was that it was a

valuable museum piece. At least the kids had done *something* to catch the flow of melting snow. A turkey baster sat nearby to suck up the water into a pot when the tray got too full. When I asked the older boy whether he'd called someone about this leak, he shrugged it off. "Dad'll do that when they get back. No biggy." Right. I decided just to do the tuning, which went well, far away in the music room at the other end of the first floor. I picked up my check and hit the road. The boys' parents were going to have a few things to take care of when they got back. Never a dull moment in some people's lives. Surprises in store.

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I have visited the Kenwood neighborhood in Minneapolis many times during my piano tuning career. I recall vividly my childhood nexus of experience, which extended about three blocks in all directions from Humboldt Ave. South and Summit Avenue, the limit of where I dared to explore on my own as a four and five-year-old. My scope of familiarity gradually expanded to include Douglas grade school, at Dupont Avenue and Franklin Avenue, which I attended for seven years. My early childhood friendships, the places we played and all the things that happened during the time our family lived there, are well-imbedded. My main childhood memories are focused on that early-1900s house on Humboldt, where I lived from 1950-1962. It seems odd now that my home of only twelve years became so important in my up-bringing, but they were crucial developmental years for me (ages 4-16), so a great deal of change happened to me during that era. I still dream of the streets and hidden short-cuts, and the old familiar houses that remain there. This was a neighborhood that was built mainly during the late nineteenth and first ten years of the twentieth century, where professional people and their families resided in comfort and security. I once tuned a piano in a place almost directly across Humboldt from my old house, where I could gaze out the window as I worked and see the very window towards the back of the house which had been my own room.

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Another time, I tuned a piano for a family in a house that was right next door to an old friend's residence, about a block from my childhood home. The people there reminded me of our own family many years later. A nine-year-old boy lived there, which brought me back to the time a vacant lot once stood right across the street where my friends and I played baseball nearly every day in the summertime. This boy had a very interesting toy helicopter that I wish I had owned at his age. It magically flew across the room! A remote radio control sent it zipping around the place, and the boy was proud to show me some tricks. This was before the days when actual drones had been invented for outdoor feats and wonderful live camera recordings. "Can you make it hover?" I asked him. "Sure!" he exclaimed. "Does it fly into the kitchen from here?" "Yeah, easy!" he told me. "Does it crash?" "Yeah," he laughed, as his voice dropped in pitch. The voice of experience.

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Children are often present in the homes I visit, and frequently I surprise them as I do my work. As I removed the front of the piano, one four-year-old boy sternly warned me, "You better not do that." He had never seen anyone take apart his piano. At a different place, a toddler no more

than two heard me playing a few notes, and raced around the corner into the room, calling out in remarkably clear speech, “Whatcha doin’, Mommy?” His gleeful look suddenly turned to horror when he saw me there, and he started to wail. Mom came running, and made the tears stop just as abruptly, as she explained that I was *supposed* to be there to fix the piano. He accepted me with curiosity after that.

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At an apartment in west Minneapolis, after I got started on the piano, a lovely little blond-haired 3-year-old girl appeared, wide-eyed and curious, and full of smiles. She, too, liked getting the hammers to bobble by pressing the keys. Before long, a friend of her mom arrived for a casual visit, and lots of chatter and laughter ensued, including, “My, Wendy has sure grown!” After the traditional cup of coffee at the dining table, the three of them gravitated to a couch in a small sitting room adjacent to where the old upright piano stood. A very fat photo album was produced for show and tell, with stories told about the woman’s family, including an older son who was already in Kindergarten. Lots of admiration and exclamations were brought forth by the visitor, while the mom prattled on about the occasions captured in the pictures, including descriptions of where they were at the time (the wading pool, Uncle Jacob’s backyard, whatever). The little girl, sitting between the two women with the album opened on the couch in front of her, suddenly pointed and exclaimed, “Aaaww, there’s *Wendy!*” Of course she’d be the first to spot her own photo. The women laughed and complemented her, and exclaimed about what fancy clothes she had on. Well, it made sense for Wendy to use the same inflection as the big people. That’s the sort of vocalization they had already used about others in the album. No need to think about whether exclaiming and admiring yourself was a little vain. That’s perfectly acceptable in any three-year-old’s mind.

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At a house out in the countryside a while later, another three-year-old girl wanted to sit with me and help with what I was doing. I was in the process of making some adjustments to the keys, which did not include listening at all, just repetitive things like pulling each key out one at a time, and putting little colored pieces of paper of differing thicknesses onto the silver posts the keys used. This was the way the keys were leveled so they would feel the same height to the player’s fingers. This little girl was very talkative and used her words remarkably well for someone so small. She wanted to count things, like the number of pink paper punchings I had in front of me for sticking under the keys. She was good at counting too, up to the teens. She must have felt that this was a rare opportunity to play with someone new, and she was continually charming and engaging. She watched with fascination the removal of each key, how the big gap looked, and how the key slipped so neatly back into its place when it was time. I was entertained while doing some pretty dull tasks on the piano, so it all worked out. Her mom asked a couple of times whether her little girl was bothering me, and I told her, “No, I like the company. When I start to do the tuning, then I’ll need to listen much more carefully.” Eventually I wound up that stage of the repairs, and went on with the tuning itself. After sitting beside me for probably 45 minutes, the curious chatterbox moved on to her familiar toys in the next room. Her mom

thanked me for the child-tending while she got some stuff done in the kitchen. It was a win-win-win situation. The best kind.

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As a piano tuner and repairman, I need to be ready to cope with anything that might be wrong with the piano. This especially includes a proper diagnosis of what's causing things to not work right. I have seen all sorts of obstructions and foreign objects inside the pianos, as I mentioned elsewhere, including toys that stop the hammers from moving, dead mice on the keys, mouse nests under the keys, and many things that have been inserted between the keys to slow down or completely stick them. One home with an active two-year-old—with a good supply of quarters from a glass jar on mom and dad's dresser—found out that those coins are a perfect size for fitting in the slots between the keys. They sink down out of sight and provide plenty of extra friction when the keys are played. Of course, the piano needs to be partially taken apart and the keys removed to be able to get at the quarters that cause the sticking. This two-year-old had stuck about a dozen quarters in several slots, causing sudden mysterious sluggish behavior when the piano players of the house tried to play tunes.

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When I arrived at a nice place in the far north suburbs of St. Paul years ago, I was met by a very active and friendly four-year-old boy who apparently was quite used to interacting with visitors, even ones he had never met before. I gather that, unless he was told otherwise, he thought he had a right to chat with and entertain anyone who turned up. His mom was used to this and asked me to be sure to let her know if her son ever got too 'pesky.' After instructing her son to show me to the piano room, she took off back to the kitchen to resume a food project that involved a lot of measuring from a whole list of important ingredients.

Seeing her partial preparations on the counter reminded me of another time elsewhere when a four-year-old came close to wrecking a cake by almost adding into the mixing bowl another spoonful of white baking powder. He was on a stool on his knees hovering over the bowl, imitating the same process his mother had just performed. She had left her post and now had her back turned as she welcomed me to her home, and was discussing what special help her piano needed. I spotted the boy with the white powder poised and actually about to dump the rather large spoonful into the mix, so I called out, "I don't think you should do that!" She turned, gasped and ran to him, interrupting his hand in the nick of time. "Stop that! You know you shouldn't do things without me." Her son luckily accepted the reprimand without resistance or complaint. She glanced at me gratefully. "Thanks. Nice catch."

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*Another* four-year-old boy was glad to have a role to play, and gestured grandly, like in the movies, smiled, and intoned the famous line, "This way." He turned and skipped (in a very un-butler-ly manner) ahead of me, then abruptly turned the corner into another room. I followed and soon found a black grand piano I had turned before a couple of times, but in a different house near Macalester College in St. Paul. His mom went back to her work and the four-year-old wanted to stay with me to see what I would be doing with the piano. I went through the usual

steps of clearing the music off the music rack and sliding it off the piano so I could get at the tuning pins. He had never seen that before and was fascinated with this whole new part of the piano that had been hidden all this time. “Whoa,” he commented with wide eyes. He was engaged in the piano tuning process for a while, but before long he started to play around on the old couch that was right next to the piano. He showed me a couple of his toy action figures and told me their names. I was not in a hurry, and shared some interest in the guys and the tricks they could do. Soon, as I worked on, the boy moved to other distractions. He retrieved a light-weight plastic bathtub from the floor, dumped it on the couch and showed me how he could fit right into the it since he was just a little shorter than its length. I had to chuckle while I went on with the tuning, since he was so wrapped up in his attention-grabbing behavior. He lay in the tub and rocked it side-to-side and sang a little rhythmic song he knew.

I turned my head toward the piano to move my tuning hammer to the next pin when I suddenly heard a big thump behind me. I turned and found him, not unexpectedly, on the carpeted floor by the couch entirely *covered* by the plastic tub. It was only a little more than a foot from the saggy couch to the floor, so he was unperturbed. He lifted the edge of the tub, peeked around the edge and came up with the line of the day. He probably felt a little foolish and thought he needed to explain somehow why stuff like this happens. “*I’m so goofy!*” he cried with a giggle. This no doubt had its origin from having been told that many times over the last months. ‘It’s gotta be true, everyone says the same thing to me,’ he must have thought. However, I had never to that point heard someone say that about themselves. “Yes, you are!” I had to agree. He seemed to take it as a compliment.

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