

Tuner to the Rescue

I have never needed to put a stop to an act of violence happening in the space around me. I've heard a few arguments, but no attacks, no home invasions with armed strangers, no bullets whizzing by my head, and for that, after over 50 years of piano tunings, I am forever grateful. I had to help break up a dogfight once, but it was only a temporary dispute about who got the couch at that moment. Those dogs probably lived together in harmony much of the time. I have been present when scary windstorms have arisen to shake the house a little too much, to the alarm of the children present, but never has any damage been inflicted upon a home while I was there, thank goodness. I once turned up at a place that had a lot of branches down in the yard, and where the neighbor's tree had landed on a fence next door a couple of days earlier, with clean up still underway. There have been no terrorists, no accidentally-freed zoo animals, no fugitive escapees from prison, no arrests within my sight. Etc. Minor traffic accidents occasionally, with no injuries. Once in a while, a child will come inside in tears and need a band aid from mom. Thus, I feel somewhat fortunate to have tuned thousands of pianos without major incident.

However, one time 25 years ago my presence was sorely needed, and it was lucky that I was around. The home was very well-organized and attractively decorated, attuned with the standards of the fairly upscale neighborhood in southwest Minneapolis it was a part of. The piano was situated in a family room just a couple of steps down from the kitchen, where the sole resident of the place, a sweet woman in her mid-to-upper 80's, was in the process of baking something for family visitors who were coming for supper. The lady's husband had passed on already, but over my few visits thus far, she always seemed cheerful and accepting of her recent change-of-life situation.

Just the two of us were there on this day. I was working peacefully through the bass section of the black studio upright, when some commotion in the kitchen seized my attention. Some thudding, an electrical appliance unnaturally interrupted, and a stifled exclamation from the elderly cook. "Oh! Mr. Rogers!" Who was Mr. Rogers, the children's PBS show host? Or was she talking on the phone with someone?

The now agitated woman appeared in the doorway of the kitchen, literally gasping to get the words out. She had one arm around a very old, unplugged, heavy counter-top Mix-Master, almost identical to one I grew up with, decades earlier. Her other hand was wrapped in the beaters somehow, with three fingers somewhat intertwined with the blades, and set at slightly odd angles. They appeared to have been twisted in ways that her finger joints had not intended.

I jumped up and came to her immediately, explaining, "But I'm Mr. Park—I thought you were on the telephone, talking with somebody. Are you hurt?"

"Oh, yes, Mr. Park, sorry. My tuner 20 years ago was Mr. Rogers," she breathlessly explained. "You need to help me get my fingers out of this thing."

She had already set aside the big bowl of dough, so the two beaters were suspended in mid-air along with her hand. "You'd think somebody 98 years old would

have more sense than to try this kind of trick!” she scolded herself. She was exaggerating by at least ten years, I think. I wasn’t about to ask for an account from her re how this all came about, although I did wonder.

We put the base of the mixer back on the counter, and I looked over the design of this machine, which turned out to be an even older model than what my mother had used. “So, how do you get the beaters to come out of their holes?” She told me about the screwdriver she used to tighten the set screw before she started. I found the screwdriver and loosened the screw, but the beaters remained solidly in place. There was no eject button. “What do I do now, pull down on the beaters or something?” Her fingers all this time remained in strange positions, a bit like some pipe-cleaner sculptures I had made with my kids long ago. “Yes! Just try wiggling them down,” she implored.

I grabbed a beater in each hand and tried to get them to move downward out of their slots. Each wiggle made her flinch with pain, but she did not make any discourteous sounds or mention any impolite terms. I applied, daringly, a little more pressure, and after a few seconds the beaters did start to move downward slightly. Suddenly, released from the lateral pressure that was keeping them stuck, they jumped down and freed themselves. Her face lit up. “You *did* it!” She carefully disengaged her fingers from within the beaters, and luckily they naturally returned to their usual configuration. She shook her hand and slowly tried moving each finger, massaging them individually as she flexed them back to full functionality. They all worked! The escaped digits appeared to be elated by their new emancipation, and so was she.

“Thank you so much!” Her relief was obvious.

I asked, “Are you sure they are not cracked? Do any of them seem to be painful when you move them?”

“Actually, they feel okay. Sore, yeah, but not ‘broken’ hurt.” She shook her head in dismay. “I can’t believe I was so dumb.” She looked me in the eye with gratitude. “I don’t know what I would have done if you hadn’t been here.” She still was a little breathless as her panic subsided.

“Well, you maybe would have called a neighbor. Or the fire department,” I offered.

“But what a lot of trouble that would have been. I hate to be a nuisance. Firemen have better things to do than rescue my fingers from the beaters.” Luckily, she was able to laugh again.

I gradually finished my work with no other crisis jumping into the fray. She wrote me my check with the very same hand that had been assaulted by the Mix-Master. And the interrupted baking project was back on track, with more methodical and carefully planned moves the rest of the way.

“At least now I have a great story to tell my kids and grandkids when they arrive,” she chuckled. And flexed her sore fingers.

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Once, just as winter was setting in, I was at a home alone when something very odd happened that called for my intervention. The arrangements had been made for me to use a special key to get into the house, and a check had been carefully left for me on the piano top. It was early afternoon and the home owner was not expected home for a couple of hours after I finished. It was a pleasant house, tidy and nicely decorated, with a few hints around that probably school-aged kids also lived there. Toys and stuffed animals were apparent, but all in their proper places, it seemed.

Everything was going well with the piano when I heard a strange sound fill the air just outside a window nearby. I noticed the sound of rushing water in pipes beneath the floor, definitely different than a moment before, certainly a bit worrisome. I thought I'd better investigate. I found my way to the basement and located the pipe that was making the new noise. It led outside to the wall tap for the outdoor hose. After I returned to the living room where the piano enjoyed a prominent position, I looked out the window where the water sound was coming from. There, outside, was a spray fountain of gushing water. The yard was already starting to coat with a layer of freezing ice, and the driveway was forming a kind of slippery glaze. A closer examination, out the window, revealed that the spraying water was coming from an attachment installed *on* the outside tap, not the tap itself. It was a type of diverter that allowed two hoses to be hooked up with the tap at the same time.

I considered running outside to try turning the handle on the tap, but I knew that I would be in danger of getting very wet with the geyser of water filling the air. Also, the already-freezing array covering the entire area with wet ice was waiting deviously to sweep me off my feet. Apparently, the tap had been left on while the diverter's little turn handle had been called upon to arrest the whole pressure of the water main all by itself. It must have leaked a little over time, then became frozen, and the expanding ice had forced its way past the weak stopper. I happened to be there at the moment that the burst exploded. Had no one been home, the whole yard and driveway would have been covered in layers of slick ice by the time someone came home. I had to act fast, just like characters in the comic books I read when I was 8-12-years old. I returned to the basement, and looked over the pipe that was gushing water. Tucked into the supports for the basement ceiling I found the shut-off valve for that outdoor tap. Standing on a handy chair, I reached up into that dark region of cobwebs and danger and got the handle turned off. The fountain immediately ceased its geysering, the noise was silenced, the crisis averted.

This was yet another instance where the heroic piano tuner was able to prevent disaster, being at the right place at the right time. Thoughtful and resourceful, ever-vigilant, the super-hero in disguise was able to save the day again. Presence-of-mind is one of my best assets. Just ask my wife, Patty. Various other household crises have been neutralized by yours truly over the many years of our happy marriage.

I left a conspicuous note for the family so they could take care of what was left of the emergency. I also told them the piano tuning had gone just fine.

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When I visit people's houses I always take seriously my responsibility to the place if something goes wrong while I'm the only human around. If the cat knocks over the clothes iron from the ironing board and breaks a drinking glass sitting on the floor, I try to pick up the pieces before someone walks there. If a giant storm whips up outside and rain starts to pour into an open window, right next to a beautiful hand-made quilt that's almost complete after weeks of solid effort, then I get the window closed. If the power goes out while I'm there alone, I make the best of it, working with window light. If the power pops back on again after 45 minutes, I leave a note for the home owners, explaining why all the electric clocks are off. All those things (and more) have happened to me while on duty.

This feeling of responsibility extends to the house pets who are there without their owners, and I'm the suspicious interloper. If they inquire as to who I am, I try to reassure each cat and dog with a couple of gentle words and a non-threatening head stroke. This does not apply to gerbils, iguanas, hamsters, snakes, goldfish, rabbits, doves, parakeets and so on, if they are in their cages or boxes—I've been home alone with them all. Most dogs sniff at me (once it is established that I am not going to entertain them) and lie back down on the couch to continue their miserable moping as they wait for the magic moment when their owners reappear.

At one house, I arrived at the unlocked back door, as instructed, and found the following note taped to the window: "Come on in! The piano is in the living room by the bay windows. My check is on the keyboard. Have a cookie (kitchen counter)! I'll be back by 5:00 PM, but you'll probably be gone by then. Thanks. Don't let Bunches out!!" Okay, then, everything is pretty straight ahead here, I thought to myself, and as I put my hand on the doorknob, a rapid-fire high-pitched bark filled the air. I opened the door carefully, and with my foot extended just a little off the floor, I blocked the escape of a little wire-haired terrier-mix of some kind, just one size up from a chihuahua. Since the woman who lived there did not warn me of imminent attack, I assumed that Bunches was noisy but harmless. (If I'm going to be in the place alone, dog owners are always careful to place potentially hostile dogs in a shut-off room somewhere.) The pooch met me at the door and followed me around. As I walked slowly into the living room, I said *hi* to him and touched his nose with one finger. He stopped barking, checked me out for another five seconds, then went off to his favorite cushion-bed nearby.

We got along fine the whole hour I worked on the piano. Luckily he was not one of those canines who howl when I play the high notes. Coexistence is a wonderful thing. I finished my work, pocketed the check, and packed up my tools (which reminds me of a woman with a young pre-schooler in the house: when he wanted to investigate the contents of my tool box, he was admonished gently by mom with "Don't play with Warren's toys. I mean, *tools*"). I casually headed through the kitchen to the back door.

Yes, I had forgotten about Bunches. As I opened the door to leave, I saw a streak of gray zip past me straight out into the great outdoors. Bunches must have been practicing that move over many months. He was truly sly and sneaky about it, giving no indication to me of his devious intent. This led me to a five minute exercise routine that

involved lunging and twisting as *Speedy Gonzales* had his way with me. There were no other pets in the place, so I thought it would be a good idea to leave the back door ajar. Luckily, Bunches only wanted to race around the unfenced back yard, and down the alley and sidewalk a few yards before circling back, chasing by my legs defiantly. A woman with a baby in a stroller was on the sidewalk witnessing this whole tableau. She was the next door neighbor, who had met Bunches several times already. Her sweet baby girl was amused and content, laughing at how fast that critter could move. The woman volunteered to help with the corralling. I was grateful for her assistance since I had another place to get to right then. We managed to get Bunches to narrow the span of his circles to the back yard, when suddenly, just as speedily as he had raced out of the house, the little dog shot back in the open back door. I hurried to shut the door before he changed his mind. Problem solved, this time. I thanked the young mom profusely, and went on my way. I was more careful at every house I visited thereafter. Cats are really stealthy too—you've got to watch them every second whenever you open a door. Some of them love the outdoors, and lay in wait to sneak out whenever the unwary are working the doors. Cats are even harder to catch, I've heard.

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One time long ago, after some skilled hunting on my part through a large labyrinthine warehouse complex to locate a private dance studio in downtown Minneapolis, I finally arrived at what seemed to be the right door. This was a very artsy building, which housed several arts and performance-related studios for practice, classes and brainstorming meetings where dancers, composers, choreographers and writers hung out together. I bring up this occasion because it seemed at the moment that I was needed to save the day yet again, but this time it turned out to be a false alarm.

I entered the studio after a quick knock, but no one at all seemed to be present. I took a couple of steps in and called out, "hello?" From behind me came a friendly female voice, someone hiding, it seemed, behind the open door. "Hello to *you!* Sorry, but I forgot you were coming" (this happens rather frequently). I turned and discovered, to my surprise, a young dancer completely upside down on her head and elbows, leaning back against the wall. After a moment of confusion and disorientation (is she in trouble?, is this an emergency?, is she stuck?, etc.), I figured out that she was doing a sort of stretching exercise on purpose. Thus, this turned out to be a non-event, where no intervention from a piano tuning super hero was called for at all. She tipped herself right side up again and shook my hand. "The piano's right over there." She pointed to the corner where a piano was set diagonally, with the back outward. The pianist could see everything in the room from this position, and the sound board on the piano's back could project the music throughout the huge room. We both chuckled about the surprise positioning we found ourselves in when I arrived. Never a dull moment.

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