

## **There is No Free Piano**

I am a man of average physical size and strength, and because of this, I have no idea how to explain the phenomenon I am about to discuss. However, I have noticed that sometimes things happen in life in noticeable arrangements and patterns that seem accidental at first, but looking back on them, we cannot help but think that someone is trying to tell us something. It is almost like we have encountered a hidden message struggling to make itself known to us -- but never quite succeeding. Imagine a message somehow written in foggy letters that appear for a moment and start to dissipate slightly faster than you can read them. Sometimes we give up on the interpretation process and refer to these events as "coincidence" or "happenstance" or other such words of random chance -- but I still am not sure in this case. In this case, I am talking about my encounters with pianos.

I do not remember the first time I was called on to help move a piano. I think I was a freshman in college, and our campus minister (who left shortly after I arrived in college) needed some help to move his piano. I do not remember the details -- except that it was a struggle as we moved the whale-sized instrument up and down steps and eventually onto the bed of a pickup truck. We were rewarded with a slice or two of pizza, a pat on the back, and a few memories to laugh about later. I thought my affair with pianos was over -- I was wrong.

Looking back across the years, I have lost track of the number of times someone has ambled up to me and out of the corner of his mouth said: "Uh, we need some help moving a piano. Are you busy Saturday morning?" I have often wondered: "Why me?" More often than not, I have (for some reason) agreed to help -- this, too, is part of the mystery. Do I feel that I am fulfilling some great destiny by not saying, "I can't make it Saturday morning, but how about 17 years from now on a Tuesday evening?" I just don't know.

Along with my quite average physical size and strength, I am quite an average lover of music. I love music; I just do not appreciate it fully. There are musical snobs who insist on the purity and precise pitch of each note and who tolerate no instrument or playback device that is not of the highest fidelity. Me? I can listen to music on an ancient 8-Track tape system and be perfectly content. I just do not have that discerning musical ear -- again, quite average in this area. To me, one piano sounds as good as another. My lack of musical appreciation only adds to the ironic refrain that pianos play in my life.

Naturally, the pianos we have owned have reflected this same lack of musical sensitivity -- they have been average (and large) musical devices that produce average sounds. In fact, the first piano my wife and I had was a 100-year-old upright grand behemoth. I do not remember what we paid for this piano (it wasn't much), but part of the deal was that we would take care of moving it. After some trouble -- you always have trouble when moving a piano -- we put the piano in our living room, and it stayed there for the next 15 years. Occasionally we would rearrange furniture or clean behind the behemoth, and it would always be a back-breaking adventure.

But after 15 years of my wife and children banging joyfully on the behemoth, we had encountered a piano dilemma. My wife had a similar behemoth piano in her growing up years -- in fact, it too was an upright grand close to 100 years old. Her father had recently passed away, and her mother needed to get the piano removed from her house. We would gladly have taken this piano -- it actually had some sentimental value -- but we already had a 100 year old behemoth in our house! We could not have two! What could we do?

One day, with the piano dilemma simmering in the back of my mind, I was walking around the courthouse square of my home town -- something I do not do very often. As I was walking along, I "happened" to run into a friend and his wife who were not from the area. I was surprised to see them, and I asked, "What are you doing here?" He answered, "Oh, we are just looking in some of the antique stores here on the square. We are actually looking for an old piano to put in our new house." In amazement at the "coincidence" I said: "Have I got a deal for you." I went on to explain that I actually have the piano they are looking for sitting in my living room -- and more than that -- it is free! Well, it is free on one little condition -- my friend must agree to first help me move my mother-in-law's piano from her house to my house. And as part of the deal, I will also help him move my old piano to his house. But, hey -- a free piano! (Another thing I have learned through the years. If someone says "free piano," run very fast in the opposite direction. Do not look back over your shoulder. There is no such thing as a free piano.) Since my friend apparently has the same musical sensitivities as I, and since he also is somewhat cheap -- also as I -- we shook hands and agreed to meet the next Saturday morning for perhaps the greatest day of piano moving this world has ever known. How bad could it be?

Moving a piano is always bad. Moving two pianos in a single day is even worse. And these were not regular-sized pianos -- each was the size of an adult hippopotamus (without legs). He arrived early on a Saturday morning in a four-wheel drive pickup truck pulling a good-sized flat-bed trailer. He was well-equipped with ropes and other moving tools, and he seemed to be experienced at such things -- maybe this wouldn't be so bad. Let me just say that it was bad. It could have been much worse, but it was bad. We had various helpers at each of the stops along the way, but it was painful. We drove 45 miles to pick up the first piano (an hour); loaded it on the trailer (another hour); drove it back to my house (another hour); unloaded the first piano from the trailer into my living room -- and loaded my old piano onto his trailer (probably another hour); drove it thirty miles to his house (another hour); and unloaded it (through the mud) into his new house (another hour). It was painful, but we did it -- two free pianos! Somehow our friendship survived the day (barely), and although it has been several years since this adventure, every time I see this friend, with a serious face one of us will say something like, "You wouldn't happen to know where I could find an old piano, would you?" Then we laugh... and perhaps cry a little.

Today, I have two free pianos sitting in my small house -- one is a behemoth, broken beyond reasonable repair; the other is so badly out of tune it is unplayable. The really funny thing is -- after all these run-ins with pianos through the years -- I do not even know how to play a piano! I'm sure that somehow, at some cosmic level, there is a great message of truth I am supposed to be grasping from all these piano encounters. I don't know about all that, but this much I do

David Mills, Fayetteville, Tennessee  
DavidVMills@bellsouth.net

know: (1) There is no such thing as a free piano; and (2) If you need a piano moved, I don't know what you had in mind, but I am busy that day.

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