

## One of the nicer things about having a house with no neighbors on the other side of the wall—and no children sleeping in their beds—

is that at five o'clock in the morning, when I can't sleep but can't drag myself out into the darkness for a walk, I can sit down at the piano and play. I've been doing that almost every morning for the past few months, and it has entirely changed the tone of my days. I have a new passion for Bach, which I used to loathe playing as a child; his music just felt too constricted for my (adolescent) romantic soul. One of the good things about age is an appreciation for more refined passions. There is nothing like a little Bach for setting up my mood; the music will play through my mind for hours after I leave the keyboard, offering a counterpoint to whatever stress I encounter, soothing me.

My earliest memories involve piano. By the time I was 3 I was begging to be allowed to play; by the time I was 15 I was practicing up to four or five hours a day. In between those times there were countless fights about practicing, of course. I was being forced to do it, I hated music, I hated living under a tyrant. But there was no getting out of it—and despite whatever scars I may bear, I'm thankful for the mark left on my soul by music.

Every year, my sisters and I were dragged around a regional circuit of piano competitions; this also was a form of torture. One sister would be vomiting with stage fright; waiting in the wings, I would be nearly blind, paralyzed with fear that I was going to stumble over something, because my mother didn't want me going onstage with my eyeglasses, as that somehow detracted from the performance. I am still sick with anxiety when I have to appear in public.

After I decided that I would not and could not have a musical career, I cut down on the amount of time I spent practicing. Naturally, the less I played, the worse I sounded, until finally I could no longer bear the noise that my fingers produced. It was painful. Where once I could slip through intricate passages of Beethoven sonatas, now I was clumsy, hesitant. I felt disappointed in myself every time I sat down at the keyboard. I kept thinking, what was the use of all those hours, all those years, of practicing? What was the point of all that hard work, when I had achieved such an elusive mastery? I was angry that I had lost the ability to play. I was now cursed with a new

form of tyranny—the tyranny of living up to past performance. For many years, I stopped trying altogether. Playing piano had become an activity of the ego—all and only about how good I was, or wasn't. And who cared, besides me? I was so hard on myself that I fell silent. The piano became a handsome piece of furniture.

In the last few years, I have come to understand that lost in the emphasis on performance was the pleasure of playing. In fact, I had probably lost the pleasure of playing very early on, without even realizing it. I began, in my quiet house, to creep back to the piano, but this time with absolutely no sense of rigor. Whatever I wanted to play, I played. Gone were the scales, the Czerny, the finger exercises. Gone, too, were the speed, and the agility, and the authority. But somehow, once I accepted how limited my abilities had become, I began to have fun.

Now when I'm at the piano, the little voice that I had internalized for my competition programs has a rather droll tone. "I will now perform selections from Bach's Goldberg Variations," I will say to my imaginary judges (and, sadly, I cannot shake those judges no matter what I do, but at least now I can make light of them). My selections are, of course, the slow ones. "I will now play the first two movements of Bach's Italian Concerto," and off I go at an easy trot, happy just to stop at the edge of the cliff presented by the third movement. If I need to listen to someone else fly over it, there are

plenty of recordings. The one thing I am much better at is the color—the tone, interpretation. I get it, finally.

I imagine that my new approach to playing the piano is the one most people adopt when they take up an activity at which they were formerly proficient. People who could once run swiftly, for miles, now walk. People who could recite reams of poetry now enjoy reading poems aloud to their loved ones. The point is, finally, the pleasure—the sheer joy of engagement, of movement, and of learning, again. Whatever it is that you once were good at doing, find it again, and this time, love it enough not to let it go.



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