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The Piano Recital

What happens when we see nurture and nature side-by-side? Are we trained to see nurture or nature first? If we see nurture first, how does that impact our ability to see nature? And vice versa?

Piano recitals are the perfect venue for seeing the two together—through practice, children become competent at even the most complex pieces. Through performance, we see their nature. So it was in a piano recital that my children participated in.

But first, I had to enjoy the setup. Kids in new clothes, dressed for the formal occasion of performing in front of an audience inside a local church. A reception table spread out with congratulatory cake, ready to be eaten after the last note was played. And our hostess, the mistress of Suzuki piano education, thanking the parents for setting a good example of being on time. She was preaching to the choir as the latecomers had not yet arrived. I was beginning to think I was in church when I realized I *was* in a church. Hmmm, funny how life works.

Our hostess also acknowledged the hard work of the young performers before starting and the role that parents had in helping the students get to this point in their musical education. One point for nurture. I think my younger son rolled his eyes at this point. (Yes, youth is wasted on the young.)

Now here's the fun part. Seeing the performers, ranging from age 5 through 12, show both nurture and nature, at such a young age.

- There was the lanky Asian boy, his entire body moving with the lyrics of his piece, playing the dynamics like a skateboard moving into a curve. He had the gift of feeling the music with his body. No one could change how he responded to the music in this way. This was nature.
- A young girl stumbles through a rough section of the music and continues on, struggling every note of the way. She breathes a sigh of relief when she plays the last note. Head bowed, she leaves the stage. Her persistence was her gift. And pride is what we can all nurture in her. The hostess does it on cue by commenting that what matters is to keep going when you come across the rough spots.
- The girl's older brother, straight, tall, and confident, steps up to the stage next. His hands pound up and down on the keyboard, purposeful and disciplined. He shows both nature and nurture in his performance.
- One of the latecomers shows up just as her name comes up in the program. Oblivious to her lateness, she declines the hostess's offer to catch her breath and play later in the program. She saunters up to the stage, looks around, sits down, and goes on to play perfectly. Only after leaving the stage does the hostess point out that she's played a different piece from what was

noted on the program. Her father confirms the error. With a shrug, the girl gives the “but life is okay” signal. Her gift is to be carefree. This could only be nature.

- My son steps up to the stage, intent, nervous, and knowing the piece down pat. His tension is only broken by his younger brother, making clucking sounds with his tongue and the automatic rewind of my camera. I have poorly timed the end of my roll of film. My only thought was “What would Jesus do?” My son plays perfectly the song that he has practiced, which the program has erroneously listed as another piece. He is undeterred by the mistake in the program. This too is nature.
- The highlight for my study in nature vs. nurture comes with the next participant. He steps up to the stage with smirk on his face, lingers in the spotlight of the initial bow before sitting down at the piano bench. His tennis shoes and tie seem to fit him perfectly. I realize that I have just seen Liberace reincarnated. This boy relishes being on stage. This can only be nature.
- Liberace, Jr. is followed by a studious, serious 7 year old girl in a velvet dress. Her demeanor literally shouts, “This is hard work, not to be enjoyed one single bit!” Could this be nurture? Or nature?
- And finally, the finale of the program is a 12 year old boy who has been playing since he was three years old. He has reached Book 5 of the Suzuki series in record time. Before starting his beautiful Bach piece, he pauses at the piano, almost in prayer. He is oblivious to the audience as he plays, entranced by the music, in the flow of the experience. We enjoy the product of both nature and nurture.

Before I know it, the experience is over. Except for the awarding of certificates and medals. And a flash of cameras to capture the moment on stage. I find out that Liberace, Jr. is the product of both nature and nurture. His father has a camera lens the size of a small torpedo and insists on several pictures on stage.

As always, I learn. I learn that nature is apparent at an early age. By complete strangers. In the heat of a performance. I learn that nurture gets us to a place in life, but nature shows us what our place is in life. I learn that to see nature first is a lot more enjoyable than seeing nurture first. I am less aware of the flaws and more aware of the gifts. Could we ask for anything more in life?

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