

FIRST PERSON

THE KEY TO DECLUTTERING

For *Jessica Stolzberg*, the elephant in the room was actually a piano that no one ever played. She longed to get rid of it—but what would that say about her as the keeper of family legacy?



EIGHTY-EIGHT KEYS of ebony and ivory made no sound in our house for two years, except to quibble in various tones when swiped by the dust cloth. My children’s efforts at the keys had literally played themselves out, and

the piano had become a neglected, obtrusive object in our living room.

One day I asked myself an uncomfortable question. What if I got rid of the piano?

The first answers delighted me. We could finally arrange the living room furniture properly. Less dusting. Then my thoughts tarnished: ending a family legacy, never playing “Heart and Soul” in my home again, the possibility of regret.

The piano, more than any other instrument, I suspect, is passed down generation to generation, its weight pulling on the branches of the family tree. My mother played, and so my brother and I played, and so my children played.

OUR DAUGHTER STARTED lessons first. At the same time, she took her first modern dance class. And then another. Over three years, I witnessed the evolution of a passion I admired in one so young. Her arms were happiest outstretched in the space around her, not in one position at the piano keys.

Her playing? It was OK. In middle school we agreed to let her take a break. She never sat at the piano again.

With our son, the story was similar, only his heart leaped on the soccer field, his legs in perpetual motion, not at 90 degrees on the piano bench. In fourth grade, he joined a drum corps at school and began to march to the beat of his own drum five days a week.

One day our piano teacher pulled me aside. “He seems to have no enthusiasm for the piano anymore.” We decided to take the summer off. He, too, never returned.

We have the fortune of knowing a musical family. An evening at their house always ends with the dad and their eldest daughter in joyful song at the piano, anyone welcome to join in. I adore this ritual. I envy their music-filled house, and it always leaves me a bit wistful that we do not have one.

Did we let our kids stop playing piano too easily? If we had pushed them through their musical malaise, would the other side have included Bartók and Bach? Yet, I argued with myself, each no had opened up space for a yes.

Untouched and unloved, our piano sat, a relic of a path not chosen. And there is no music in that.

I gazed at an instrument that would make music again and felt the warmth of a good decision.

DECIDING TO LET GO of a large and extremely heavy object requires some amount of kismet.

My friend Jillian’s neighbor had recently given away her piano. I soon bumped into her at a school event and, politely, demanded details.

“Getting my kids to practice was torture,” she explained. “I started taking lessons so I could help them and we could play together. But then I never wanted to practice either. So we gave the piano away and nobody misses it.”

She made it sound so simple. What if it was? Obviously, it should stay in the family. I called my brother. His son, then 5, has the same piano lineage as my children. “No, thanks,” he said. “If Max plays an instrument, we’d like it to be portable.”

When a new friend, Kristinn, was over, I mentioned that the piano was on shaky ground. Her daughter had been taking lessons on a keyboard for a year, and they were considering a real piano. We connected dots. Her daughter would visit the following week.

She played beautifully, and our house filled with music. I left them alone and called my friend Jill from the kitchen. “I don’t know if I should give away the piano,” I whispered. “The house sounds so wonderful.”

She replied, “You do know when that child leaves, she will take the music with her.”

The next month, Kristinn and her husband arrived with piano movers. Apprehension and excitement hung over us all, encompassing a collective sense of loss and gain. The piano was wrapped in blankets, slid onto dollies, and rolled out the front door. I watched it disappear into the moving truck.

I walked inside and contemplated the empty space, a ghostly rectangle of dust where the piano had been. I picked up a pencil and a dime and a missing puzzle piece.

An hour later, Kristinn texted me a photo. Her daughter’s piano fit perfectly into an alcove in their living room. A chair was pulled up in front. I gazed at an instrument that would make music again and felt the distinct warmth of a good decision.

That night my husband and I moved the sofa, adjusted the rug, and made more room for our family. ■

ABOUT THE AUTHOR
Jessica Stolzberg lives in New Jersey with her family and an extra 15 square feet where the piano used to be.