



Playing from the Heart



A Note from Author-Illustrator Peter H. Reynolds

photo by Gretje Ferguson



1969. Chelmsford, Massachusetts.

When I was about eight, my teacher asked who wanted to learn an instrument. Most of us said yes, and we were taken to the school cafeteria to choose an instrument from the many tables piled with trumpets, flutes, saxophones, and violins. I can't remember any

preparations given to help us make an intelligent decision.

As I stood pondering, almost all the brass instruments were snatched up. I was left with a violin.

I made a valiant effort with my orphaned string instrument, taking several years of lessons with our school's music teacher, Mr. H. I am certain that I never saw him smile, nor do I remember him ever playing a complete song for his own pleasure. I sensed that the violin might have been a rash decision after all. I decided to do something about it. So, in eighth grade, I switched to cello.

At the spring concert, as the orchestra was warming up and I could hear the audience milling in and muttering behind the lowered curtain, Mr. H came up to me and said,

"If you could do me a favor, keep your bow one inch away from the strings at all times during the concert."

No smile. He was serious. The curtain raised. My parents, in the first row, snapped away on their Kodak Instamatics.

I was devastated. Was I that bad?

After the show, I put my cello away in its case and that was it.

I was done.

Years later, when I was about thirty, I was in San Francisco and staying at a hotel with a piano in the lobby. It was perched on a structure that resembled an Aztec temple. After dinner, as I was walking through the empty lobby, I looked up. The piano. An empty seat. I walked up the steps and sat down. I closed my eyes and my foot found the sustain pedal. I played. I just played what I felt—having never taken a lesson for piano.

As I opened my eyes, I heard applause and then I noticed a small crowd who had gathered on the seats below.

I had—at last—had my concert.

When I returned home, I bought a piano. I skipped the

lessons and just played what I felt. Today, when I need to relax, I sit at my piano and just let it flow. No audience. Just for me.

I think back to Mr. H's style of teaching. By the book. Without joy. I realized that he wasn't very different from many of my teachers. It is a struggle to remember those teachers' names now. The educators I do remember taught with joy; they showed their passion for their subject, for learning in general. They were curious, encouraging, and they were learning alongside me. They also knew how to "wing it." That spontaneity made each day a surprise. It kept it fresh and interesting. Their kind of teaching was more akin to jazz than to classical.

I had a version of this story all mapped out years ago. I knew it was one of my "legacy" stories I wanted to share with the world when the time was right. I felt it would resonate with my audience, who are looking to be reminded to be playful, to channel joy—not perfection. The story, however, took on new meaning to me when my father, Keith, suffered two strokes. The second stroke really knocked him for a loop—this proud, independent Englishman unable to get out of bed without assistance. Seeing him in discomfort, I wanted to give him light and joy. I wanted to see that sparkle in his eyes again. The idea that his light would fade was incomprehensible to me.

On a beautiful spring morning a few weeks later, my brother, Paul, came to my house, and we sat in the garden having tea. He waited for the right time to share the news. "Pete, it's Dad. . . ."

No words.

Just feelings.

Like music—when it's played from the heart.

