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Unit 3, Option 1

Noah Adams’ novel, *Piano Lessons: Music, Love & True Adventures*, was captivating. As a former piano player myself, it was mystifying and inspirational to read of Adams’ plunge into the world of piano as an adult learner. His experiences, varied and vast, arc over many aspects of learning how to play piano: from researching piano production, to famous pianists, to left-handed compositions, to electronic lessons, to “cocktail piano” lessons, to not playing at all, to submerging himself in a week-long intensive… Adams articulates his story in a way that shows the breadth and depth (and chronological timeframe) put forth in his self-directed learning.

The inquiry of whether self-directed learning is a predisposed nature, versus a series of choices made by an individual in regards to learning, comes to a crossroads in *Piano Lessons*. Adams seemingly makes countless choices in regards to playing piano, all stemming from his long present love of the piano. First in his tale, and potentially most expensively, Adams purchased a Steinway upright piano. This was a large step, a self-directed step—a financial shove onto the path of learning how to play. Yet it sat…and sat… so Adams made another choice (following his experience with an electronic lesson package called the “Miracle System”). Adams utilized his complimentary piano tune, and found out that the humidity was *far* too high for his instrument. He had procrastinated that experience, certainly, but took matters seriously once the diagnosis was given. Although somewhat reluctantly, Adams made the self-directed decision to preserve that expensive instrument, for the main reason that he wanted to play it—someday.

Adams, in the midst of his myriad piano-playing decisions, seems not terribly self-directed as a learner himself (in regards to the active motivation needed to learn in a continuous and fluid fashion). Certainly, his lifestyle as detailed in the book is overwhelming: long day, long commute; and home late, exhausted from the fast-paced daily grind. When faced with the chore of practicing piano (a feeling I can commiserate with), finding motivation can be daunting.

As articulated by Richard Boyatzis, “The potency of focusing our thoughts on the desired end-state condition is driven by the emotional components of the brain.” Adams, before making the thoughtful and impassioned decision to master Träumerie, seemed to be moving along his piano lesson journey with neither joy nor ease. Perhaps this is in part because he felt no connection to the electronic “Miracle” keyboard and had no true endpoint to commit to. Goal setting, for Adams, appears to have been his salvation in regards to this experience in self-directed learning. Once his mind was made up and his Vermont getaway booked, his drive was amplified (with an air of overwhelming nerves) and the goal, eventually, reached.

What I find curious about the story Noah Adams presents to readers is that he lives a life *filled* with self-direction. As the host of NPR’s *All Things Considered*, he dreams up and articulates innumerable stories rooted in fact and brimming with interviews. His own curiosity, combined with professional prowess and interview know-how, leads him to uncover stories and tell millions of listeners nationwide about his findings; often, through the words of his guests themselves. This makes me wonder if Adams, prior to finding the spark to learn (and perform) Träumerie, was using up all of his self-direction at work.

In any case, Adams utilizes various forms of self-direction when he *is* committed to learning how to play piano. The aforementioned “Miracle System,” which provided electronic accompaniment and howling dogs; the Sudnow memorization method, suited primarily for cocktail parties; the Sudnow intensive, which Adams missed after it slipped his mind; and finally, the Vermont intensive. The paths that Adams takes towards learning how to play the piano—from independent learning to a teacher-led intensive—gradually increase in level of external assistance. Ultimately it was his own internal drive, paired with layered skills and lessons learned in Vermont, that led him to his personal success of a Träumerie performance for Neenah, his wife.

Self-direction allows Noah Adams the freedom to explore his long-awaited love, piano. He approaches this new learning experience from numerous angles and ultimately finds a way that works for him. Although his self-directed efforts may not have always shone with strong follow-through, his goal was reached and his desire to create beauty, attained.