

They congratulated me on my prize, and asked whether it had actually been delivered since they thought I might have fallen for a hoax. When I assured them it had, they said they wanted to help me with any expenses I might have related to the piano. They proceeded to give me a check for \$450—enough for the tithe on the piano as well as the tithe on their gift, with \$5 to spare!

I was ecstatic. But that night I reminded God, “You still have to find me the funds for the second tithe.” And He did! Starting that January, I received a pay raise of \$50 per month, which I used to pay off my pledge.

The Greatest Life Lesson

More than 30 years have passed, but I still draw from that mountaintop experience.

I learned that the prayers the Holy Spirit inspires us to pray are always answered. They strengthen our faith and give us a testimony to share.

But above all, I learned that God is a personal God. My prayers are not compared with the needs of the world: “The relations between God and each soul are as distinct and full as though there were not another soul upon the earth to share His watchcare, not another soul for whom He gave His beloved Son” (*Steps to Christ*, p. 100).

There have been other times in my life when I’ve prayed fervently for far more important things than a piano and God said no, but my faith from that early experience has carried me through, because when God says, “Test Me in this,” He’s saying, “Trust Me.” He invites us into a personal relationship with Him. If we delight in His presence, He will fulfill His promise and not only supply our needs, but give us the “desires of our heart.”

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Nancy Costa works at the General Conference Headquarters for Adventist World Radio as donor communication coordinator and executive assistant to the president.

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The STEWPOT

A POTPOURRI OF PRACTICAL IDEAS to help you become a better steward

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THE EXPERIENCE THAT SHAPED MY FAITH

BY NANCY COSTA

I was a teenager when I first discovered Psalm 37:4: “Delight in the Lord, and He will give you the desires of your heart.” This appealed to my younger self, and I immediately adopted it as my favorite text.

Then a few years later, I noticed a text I’d ignored until I began earning a living: Malachi 3:10, which says, “Bring all the tithe into the storehouse . . . ‘Test me in this,’ says the Lord . . . ‘and see if I don’t pour out so much blessing that there will not be room enough to store it.’”

I loved the idea that I could test God, and enjoyed hearing how others had done so, but my own life experience was limited, and my faith was more theoretical than experiential.

But it was in my early 20s as a newly-married pastor’s wife, and at the very start of our ministry, when God chose to teach me a lesson on stewardship that shaped our ministry—and my faith—for years to come.

Where It All Began

Our first year in ministry was a tough one. Through a set of incredible circumstances, we were



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STEWARDSHIP is a total lifestyle. It involves our health, time, talents, environment, relationships, spirituality, and finances.

newly arrived in the United States from Argentina and pastoring on a stipend salary. Money was tight, so I got a job as a receptionist at a local car dealership, but we were still barely making ends meet.

Christmas was approaching, and one day I heard that a local radio station would be giving away a brand new \$4,000 Baldwin piano. All I had to do to qualify was write my name and address on a 3" x 5" index card, and send it in to the station.

Immediately, I wanted that piano with a fierce longing. From that day forward, that's all I could think about.

I sent in my entry, and every morning and evening, I prayed, asking God for that piano. I argued with Him: Who would make better use of a piano than me, a pastor's wife? Imagine what this could do for our ministry—for your work, God! There was an anxiety in my soul, as if the outcome depended on me presenting a good case before God.

Then one night as I prayed, the thought came to me, almost as if someone had spoken it out loud: How would you return your tithe on such a gift?

I stopped cold in my begging—astonished that I hadn't thought of that before, and also deflated, knowing it would be impossible. This was 30 years ago, and our meager budget wouldn't be able to bear it. Then there was the matter of offerings. Our little church had many needs, and we had pledged to help with a second tithe.

A calm descended on my soul as I realized this was out of my hands. It didn't depend on me. God would have to do this—all of it. I finally said, "God, if you want me to have the piano, you'll have to provide the funds for the tithes as well."

After that, my anxiety lifted and I was at peace. I still prayed every day, but I now left it up to God.

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Prayer Answered?

The day of the drawing arrived, and I brought a small radio to work. You had to listen to win, and I explained this to my puzzled coworkers. They smiled indulgently and set me straight on sweepstakes, explaining that I was a newbie and didn't understand, but they had been playing for years without results. Still, I was not discouraged—confident that God would work on my behalf.

Many smaller prizes would be given throughout the day. The odds my name would be drawn were slim, and even more so for the grand prize—my coveted piano. Every time a name was called for a lesser prize, I held my breath, hoping it wasn't me.

Finally, around noon, the radio show host announced that the mayor of the city had arrived. He would personally draw the name for the grand prize. There was a pause, and then he said, "We have a winner!" He read the name ... but it wasn't my name.

I sat stunned, deflated and ashamed. I had been so sure, but what right did I really have to ask God for such a gift? Weren't there more pressing needs in the world? Hunger, disease, wars and suffering ... who was I to ask for a piano?

"Lord, forgive my presumption," I whispered as I reached over to turn off the radio. But then I stopped. What was the announcer saying? "The winner hasn't called in, so we'll draw another name."

After a brief pause, he said, "If you live at this address, you're the new winner!" He read my address! Irrationally, I thought, "Could someone else have my address?"

Then he said, "Nancy Costa, you have five minutes to call the radio station!"

My hand shook as I punched in the number. I couldn't seem to make my finger land on the right keys. Finally, I got through and was able to confirm my win.

A few days later, a brand new, shiny piano arrived at our tiny apartment. Everyone was amazed—my coworkers, our church family, and even our family overseas. I was filled with an overwhelming sense of awe and gratitude at what God had done for me.

A Matter of Tithe

There was still the not-so-small matter of the tithe. But I wasn't worried. I just reminded God of our deal: "Lord, remember the condition: I still don't have the funds for your tithe."

A few days later, the owner of the dealership called me into his office. He was a kind, older man, but he valued his money, and people wouldn't describe him as generous. Every year, as a Christmas bonus, he gave each employee a frozen turkey.

When I entered his office, his wife was there, and they both looked pleased.

The odds my name would be drawn were slim, and even more so for the grand prize—my coveted piano.