I sit next to Neen Neen, my grandma, eager to impress her. I breathe deeply, fix my posture, and start playing: Claire de Lune. It's one of her favorites. My fingers come to life, striking keys of their own accord as memory and practice take over. Time and space recede. I become lost in a flow state, alone on another plane with the ineffable mysteries of the song.

"Keep your wrists up."

Neen Neen's words snap me out of my trance. I continue awkwardly, having lost my place. I move on to the Beatles' "In My Life", a more upbeat song, but I'm still smarting from my careless mistake; "Keep your wrists up," was the first thing Neen Neen ever taught me.

Each keystroke of the piano is at once unique and embedded in a longer story — only when combined perfectly, the notes arranged and played just so, does the melody emerge. These facets of the piano are quite comparable to coding. Each key I strike must be carefully plucked, calculated, and play its part in the whole. Whether building a Discord bot, website, or Python application, or mastering Debussy and Brahms, only a solid foundation and a constant process of trial and error can help me improve.

"Without proper preparation—respect—you can't play your best," Neen Neen tells me. I know she's not simply talking about piano. The enthusiasm and total commitment she demands of my music is one I apply throughout my life. Examining all aspects of a piece—the key and time signatures, the most technical measures—is analogous to writing code; carefully planning projects, forecasting difficulties, smoothing the process. Much as music is composed of constituent elements—chords, patterns, and tones—computer science is built upon a structure of algorithms and syntax. Playing the last chord is similarly satisfying as finishing that last line of code.

But still, I'm left wanting. There is always room for improvement. Every coding project I start from scratch is trial and error. Sometimes I dig for hours through Stack Overflow or clear my calendar for heated work sessions with colleagues just to get an answer on one measly line of code. Clients expect perfection, but don't realize that the product is always growing and changing; this process is what makes the product work. Each time I play a piece, I play it differently. The freedom this allows encourages me to learn new technologies and frameworks. Even the familiar becomes foreign, fresh, in the flow state of creative production.

This work is worth it because of the unbounded human connections made possible in the pursuit of improvement. Piano has helped me understand Neen Neen and my family, and connect with concertgoers and fellow students. Coding has expanded the reach of my communities, making lives easier when possible. While building a website for New York Doctors for Equal Opportunity, an NGO elevating Asian-American concerns, I listened to members of my community recount the harassment and violence they faced during COVID and amplify their stories. By programming an indigenous donation platform, I harnessed coding to raise money for those attacked because of their race. I trudge through error messages and make mistakes alongside an international crew, but I know we will come together to find the most elegant solutions. We have practiced diligently together, plucking the same notes and repeating the same line of code; we have made something greater than ourselves. Coding is my way of designing a more equal future.

Life is best lived for others. To give someone else a moment of joy is worth hundreds of hours of practicing under Neen Neen’s diligent watch. To ease someone’s life even a little because I spent an extra week perfecting my code is time well spent. Always striving to be better in hopes of bringing people together is, I believe, a life well-lived. The kind of life I want to live.