

Dear friends,

Hope you are all well. I am writing this as a hurricane is churning along the east coast of the US. Hope all of you are safe.

Quite a lot of time has passed since the last “random thoughts” was written in January. Time marches on and day after day washes in and out of our life. Life has no “Undo” or “Rewind” button. Only yesterday we were all young and carefree, spending our days in hopeful excitement and anticipation with no inkling of the challenges and responsibility that lay ahead of us. Now most of us are grayer, some with children and all with more burdens on our shoulders.

The past two years in my life have been so different, so dream-like and blissful. Being in a relationship and marriage has required more growing up and understanding but it has all been worthwhile. We have been blessed with much joy at the same time as we face all that life throws at us. My single days feel like a distant memory, almost a different lifetime, albeit happy in their own way.

We had a good summer, highlighted by trips to San Francisco and New Orleans. Pictures are at <http://flickr.com/sankarx> Nicole has started a blog on women jazz musicians: <http://jazzvirtuosa.blogspot.com> You might also find Chris’ blog on nuclear safety interesting and informative: <http://quakerad.blogspot.com>

I have also been drawn deeper into environmental activism. Next to teaching and meditation I feel that this is my life’s calling. Doing my bit to mitigate global warming also allows me to do my part to India, because the effects of climate change will be felt disproportionately in developing nations like India. I am lucky that Nicole also feels this way and we can walk together on this journey.

I am also concerned about unemployment and its consequences. I continue to root fervently for the success of President Obama, but I am learning to do it with a bit of detachment. Meditation and mindfulness are helping me to stay rooted in what is real and what is important in life. Although politics matters, what we as individuals do matters more.

So in what follows not only do I write down my random thoughts, I also describe some of the actions that I have taken to do my part, such as installing solar panels [this helps the environment AND reduces unemployment!]. I hope you will find them interesting and useful. In particular I hope you will enjoy reading the section titled “Adventures of a Nature Lover.” I would also be very happy to hear about any suggestions you might have and any actions that you might have taken.

No matter what happens in life, friends are always friends and I hope we will get the chance to meet again, soon. Friendship is like a rope that keeps us from being washed away by the tides of time. So I hope you will hold on to it and keep in touch, wherever you are.

Yours,
Sankar

Random Thoughts (84)

28 August 2011

1. People connected by marriage also must have strong ties as people connected by blood. Marriage happens because we subconsciously see a connection with the other person, and this connection is stronger than one formed of mere friendship or affinity. Therefore I think you may have more in common with your in-laws than you might think.

2. Why so many 3 letter acronyms? Starting with USA, we have NFL, NBC, UPS, ... Do three letter acronyms sound better and are more comfortable to say?

3. Sunset is probably my favorite time of the day. I was running in Rock Creek Park on the western ridge trail one evening this winter. The beauty of the bare trees against sun and the soft light reflecting against the buildings of northwest Washington, DC made for a truly enchanting scene.

4. Obama being the President simply by itself is such a momentous change in American history, perhaps all of Western history. It marks the departure from tribal allegiance to allegiance to certain ideals. Clearly a good part of America is still not prepared for this change. This despite the fact that he is half European by descent. So he has had to emphasize the European part of his ancestry. But I think that, with the increasing dehomogenization of the U.S, the time was ripe. It is to the credit of all Americans that this country is ahead of others in this regard.

5. The right wing plutocrats' main strategy these days is to foment divisions, demonize liberals, and make people think that somehow they have to band together with the plutocrats to protect themselves. They try to provoke Obama. His great achievement is keeping it all together, staying calm, not giving in to hate. Liberals need to realize that he is not being weak and that one of the good things he can do now is to keep country together. The plutocrats want to divide people, and if we continue to try to fight back against all conservatives or Republicans we are only falling in to their trap. We have to fight back against their propaganda without fighting with fellow Americans.

6. The problem in US today is hubris, more so than greed. Hubris drove Cheney and his cohorts to mess up Iraq, hubris is what drove the wall street guys to destroy the economy, hubris is what makes corporations and their minions in Congress continue to destroy the middle class. The men in positions of power and men who have accomplished much in various arenas, be it industry, finance, sports or entertainment think they have some special place in God's order of things, that they are entitled to making billions more than the ordinary person. This is the result of a generation spoilt, brought up to think they are entitled to everything. We have had great men before who did not behave as if they were a separate divine class by themselves. Humility is what makes true greatness. Hubris blinds one to his flaws and causes one to make one mistake after another without ever realizing it.

7. I found a little more clarity about the symptoms that I have talked about in previous random thoughts -- sleepiness, shortness of breath, brain fading out -- that I had been experiencing for the past two years or more. At first I wrote that it may be due to hypoglycemia. Later I wrote that they were side effects of a cholesterol medication that I was taking. Definitely both of them have been contributing factors, I think. But recently I hit upon a website discussing chronic hyperventilation syndrome and suddenly it was like all the pieces of the jigsaw puzzle fit together perfectly. Of course, there could be something else which is at the root cause of everything, including the hyperventilation, but so far all my bodily responses seem to confirm this thesis. Here is what I think is happening. When I am exerting myself beyond a certain limit, the breathing becomes constrained, almost as if I were holding my breath until the task is finished. If this were combined with fatigue or lack of sleep or food the effects get exaggerated. Such abnormal breathing lowers levels of carbon dioxide in the blood which results in lower oxygen levels for all parts of the body. The list of effects of low blood oxygen basically reads like a printout of all my symptoms. I found that if I just normally (or mindfully!) breathe through my abdomen as opposed to just the chest then slowly everything returns to normal.

8. (3/6/2011) I was reading "The middle length discourses of the Buddha" or the "Majjhima Nikaya" as part of my assignment for a reading group of the Washington Mindfulness Community. It shook me out of my Sunday stupor and felt like the Buddha was holding me up by my ears and shaking all the mindlessness out of me. Such was the power of his words. In mathematics it is well known that if you really want to understand a subject, you should learn from the masters. Read the books written by the masters directly. Well, the Buddha was a true master! Apart from the analogy there is a certain mathematical approach that I see in the Buddha's teachings. He starts by defining the problem very clearly, and then proceeds to derive the solution step by step, building one result on top of the other, often considering various cases and repeating the derivations for each case separately. He also has a certain absolute certainty about his solutions, much the same way that a mathematician knows that his proof is correct. Other things that struck me were his attention to details and rigor. He seems to have observed and recorded all the minutiae of daily life. He must have had a very lively curiosity in order to be able to learn so much about so many things. Also he must have been quite a stern teacher! Yet he must also have been overflowing with love and kindness (lovingkindness) because his disciples not only accepted all his teachings and trainings but also propagated them to their own disciples in turn.

9. (3/24/2011) All countries are following the example of the U.S but they will each do it their own way. I have been watching a lot of cricket lately, as the world cup of cricket is being played in India. It has been particularly interesting to see the commercials. While they show that American culture has definitely had a major influence on India it is also clear that India will always place family life, marriage and children at the forefront. The Hindu fundamentalists are trying to enforce family values by force but these efforts apart from being counterproductive are completely unnecessary. I cannot envision an Indian society, in any century, looking anywhere like American society when it comes to things like family and religious life. Maybe I don't know enough but that is my feeling.

10. From a distance, I can see more clearly what makes India a great country. It has withstood so much over the millennia and keeps chugging along like a mighty river. Its spirit is eternal and thriving beneath

all the chaos and confusion. Every country has its engine that keeps it going. In America it is commerce and work and play. In India it is its spirituality. [Nicole disagrees with me vehemently. She says that Americans are also driven mostly by individualistic aspirations and religious freedom]. You can put an Indian in any godforsaken corner in the world and he or she will dust it up, put a little idol and make it sacred, and carry on with life with all the energy and enthusiasm as if he were at the Pushkar festival.

11. Got a confession to make. Watched the Royal wedding with Nicole and actually enjoyed it. Also watched coverage of Obama visit. The British treated him with so much respect and admiration. I must say I am beginning to like England. Perhaps it is time to forgive past transgressions?

12. I have always been a lover of nature but I became an environmental activist thanks to George Bush.

13. (6-12-11) Saw "Of Gods and Men" A truly soul-stirring, inspiring movie. If you want to understand how to stay strong in the midst of adversity, how to find the God that is within you, how to lose the fear of death, then you MUST see this movie. It is about a group of Christian monks trying to save their monastery during the civil war in Algeria as Muslim fundamentalists threaten to kill them. This movie is also about understanding Islam better. Finally, it is a beautiful piece of film-making. Very much a meditation in itself, as it is a meditation on the deeper questions of life.

14. Adventures of a Nature Lover

Much that has been good in my life has come out of my relationship with nature. Whenever I have been faced with deep rooted questions or difficulties in life I have sought refuge in nature, and always emerged with a good answer, feeling rejuvenated and recharged. The woods, the mountains, the oceans and the rivers have been truly my teachers and my inspiration.

We are now at a very difficult cross-road. Population increase, industrialization and widespread development have resulted in much pollution and environmental degradation, chief among them being the increase in greenhouse gases. Perhaps in time we will reach a happy equilibrium, where the development is sustainable. But it is also very likely that if we do not do anything now, such a future will not happen all by itself.

Each one of us has our own worries and struggles. Our daily life is busy as it is, and we don't have much more energy or time or the resources to devote to protecting the environment, besides what we do every day such as recycling or reducing our energy consumption. But given the seriousness of the situation, I feel that I have no choice. I feel that I simply cannot afford to not do more. This is not just about making the environment pristine or being more green. And this is definitely not about feeling good about myself or showing people that I am a better person. This is literally about making our planet livable for our children and grandchildren. At the rate things are going, the earth may not be a comfortable place to live in the future.

Yet I don't want to be a pain in anybody's neck or get all tied up in knots myself worrying about the world's problems. So I thought the best way, the non-violent, non-confrontational, the non-schoolteacher-disciplinarian way is to just do those things that I can do myself, but also goes beyond just the things that I can do in my own home. In the process, I found that it gave me a lot of joy and sometimes even a rebellious kid's satisfaction at getting away with something sneaky. Of course, the downside is that people may think I am a little out of my mind but so far I have found that more people seem to appreciate it rather than send weird looks my way.

The first thing I started doing is picking up recyclables whenever I can. When I go running or walking to work I pick up the few cans or bottles that I find along the way. Almost always I also find a plastic bag that I can use to carry the items. It gives me such pleasure to pick up the things lying along the road, especially near the drainage openings because I know these things won't end up on our rivers. I have taken part in clean-ups along the Anacostia river and it is not a pretty sight to see all those bottles and cans floating along the river or wash up on the shores. Not to mention all that plastic and metal getting wasted.

The reaction of people, as I said before, has been mostly positive. The young Hispanic boy who came up to me on my street and asked where he can put the recyclables, the lady who thanked me for doing it while I was running along rock creek bike trail and picking up recyclables at the same time, one of the barbers from the shop where I get my haircut telling me it was a good thing...Doing this gives me much satisfaction whereas if I were not doing it I would be just fuming at the way people throw away all the stuff. Every week I manage to fill a whole 33 gallon bin just picking up a few cans or bottles here and there, now and then. I do make sure I wash my hands each time or else Nicole will give me a hard time 😊

The other thing that I started doing, and gives me a sneaky satisfaction, is compacting paper towel bins. You might have noticed how in restrooms often the paper towels pile up. So I just push them down with my booted leg and compact the bin so that fewer plastic bags will be used in transporting them. So far I haven't been caught doing it and it gives me much sneaky satisfaction, not to mention feeling good about saving a plastic bag from being used.

Now for the serious stuff. This summer we have signed a contract with Solar City to install solar panels on our roof. It was easy. They do almost all the work. We got a lease contract so the finance part was also easy. We put down only 1500 up front and our total monthly electricity bill will be less than before. Not only that, we will save over 4000 over the life of the panels. All I had to do was to tell them my address and give them a readout from my electricity bill.

We have also painted our back wall with an environmentally friendly insulating paint and are replacing one broken window with an energy efficient window and also to put insulation in our attic along with a solar fan to ventilate it.