

Dear friends,

Hope you are all well. It has been about three months since the last "random thoughts" but it feels like so long ago. We have bought and moved into a new home, started work on the old one so that it could be rented, a busy semester just ended and Nicole is starting her own law practice. Life is changing fast and the changes are exhilarating but also overwhelming at times. I write a little bit about that but the rest of this message is truly random.

Due to the aforementioned busy-ness I don't pay that much attention to politics these days. It is not worth paying anyway. I do listen to the speeches of Obama and read the writings of Paul Krugman regularly. Now and then I get some news from John Stewart or Jay Leno.

But one thing I do miss is the company of friends. I have been remiss in keeping in touch and for various reasons most of my friends and family have not been keeping in touch either. So it will be wonderful if you can take a few minutes to let me know how YOU are doing!

Yours,
Sankar

1. All progress started with algebra, I think. Here is a quick, lazy thesis. Algebra helped us to think of quantitative problems in symbols. Add that to logic and we got symbolic logic. When symbolic logic met machines we got computers. I think in the next stage computers will become as powerful as humans in terms of coming up with questions as well as the answers.

2. (3/13/12) I am always fascinated by the intelligence of birds as well as their amazing ability to fly. Today we are on spring break and I came to my office to do some research. Ended up watching a pair of Canada geese in the lawn in front of my window. I see this pair all the time (suspect it is the same pair, and that they are male and female). They walk around the grounds, looking through the glass walls of the cafeteria, poking in the grass. Even their walk, with the upright posture with their long necks held straight, shows a certain intelligence. One of them got on to the bed with a cherry tree planted in the middle, with daffodils around it. The cherry blooms have all fallen to the ground, but the daffodils are in bloom. He or she went around poking (smelling?) around the daffodil flowers and the ground around them. After a while this goose started cackling at his / her mate (or honking? squawking? the word cackle seemed to be reserved for a specific subspecies of Canada geese, smaller in size than these). Once the mate flew up to the daffodil bed it got quiet. It seemed to be saying "Get your butt over here. I am tired of sitting here by myself." Sounds familiar.

3. (3/14/12) Looking at the various people of Indian origin in the US I am fascinated by how we are spread along such a wide spectrum in terms of politics, culture, economic class, etc., There are ultra-conservative right wingers and ultra-liberal left wingers and

everything in between. I consider myself a progressive overall, although I believe in building bridges rather than being uncompromising. For instance I am a vegetarian, in fact mostly vegan, but don't look down on non-vegetarians. The same outlook applies to my political views, although there are a few approaches that I find hard to understand or accept. My central philosophy in life is the oneness of all creation and the need for compassion to all and I think that is the foundation of most, if not all religions. But in my own family I have people who are more conservative. My mother has told me that the Brahmin elders in her hometown in Kerala were not enthusiastic about Gandhi because he was trying to bring about a change in the social order. I know I have some of those conservative tendencies but they are dominated by the more progressive tendencies. I think ultimately it is a matter of opening up one's heart and mind to different viewpoints and people, and it is a continuous never ending process. I am grateful to my more progressive ancestors as well as all the people that I have met and learned from in my life for helping me to open up my heart and mind.

4. (3/23) Why are most of the top college football and basketball teams from the red and more rural states? Like Kansas, Nebraska, Oklahoma, Indiana, Kentucky.....

5. (3/29) Many non-westerners wonder if they have the same capabilities as westerners. This is a doubt lingering from the colonial days. I am convinced that all humans have the same potential. It is the application of that potential and the circumstances that demanded that potential that caused westerners to forge ahead in some areas of life. In the East and in Africa life became more about community and spirituality. In the west, while there was community life and spirituality, mercantile ambition combined with curiosity turned them more towards the understanding and the domination of nature and earth. This is explored more in detail in "Guns, germs and steel" I think.

6. (4/8) Attended Easter service. Dawned on me that the Christian prayer is very similar in spirit to Krishna's message in the Gita: Surrender yourself to God, do not worry about the results, he will take care of them.

7. (4/22) Earth day! Every day is earth day for me. I saw this great quote from a Japanese poet Santoka Taneda. It captures succinctly my relationship with nature. Thought I'd share it with you:

"Westerners like to conquer mountains;
Orientals like to contemplate them.
As for me, I like to taste the mountains."

Although I want to add, I like to climb and contemplate as well as taste the mountains!

8.(4/30) Thinking about all the silly political and other conflicts we have going on, I had a rather depressing thought about what an alien intelligent creature would think of us. We would appear to be silly, ignorant and trifling creatures who mistake intelligence for wisdom, information for knowledge and fight each other constantly for no reason. Someone has written a book of which the central theme is that we are like computers with software from the twentieth century and hardware from a million years ago. In fact, the process of evolution is such that we still carry in our genes, our body and in our

brains the instincts and character traits of our simian, mammalian, even reptilian ancestors... Of course this was one of my more negative thoughts, and in general I am more positive about humanity as well as life on this planet.

9. (4/30) This is in counterpoint to the previous paragraph. Our new home is a bit farther from work but it means I get to bike about 4 miles each way. I was biking home the other day. My bike route to work these days is a great pleasure. I bike through quiet tree lined streets, past parks, by the soldiers' retirement complex with its golf course, ponds and woods, and by the Macmillan reservoir. For a moment I lost all awareness of my worries, lost in the beauty of the sky and the trees, this life itself. When we detach ourselves from our mundane worries, and see the world from the eyes of a bird or an animal, the world is indeed magnificently beautiful and life is full of bliss.

10. (4/30) Buying a new home and preparing to rent the old one has given me a bit of a tiny bit of a taste for this whole shebang called investment and capital. I can see why businessmen sometimes become desperate and try to make money by any means possible. When the stakes are high and you are responsible for a lot of lives and a lot of money, it takes a strong backbone and solid moral foundations not to stoop to unethical practices in the hopes of not getting caught. Whether it is a parent trying to create income for his or her family or a wealthy businessman trying to save his investments, the motivation is the same -- fear and survival instincts. People get into situations where they are used to a standard of life and it becomes a vicious cycle. The need for more money erodes all sense of perspective, and one's moral compass is lost. It takes much strength, toughness, dedication, punishingly hard work and great intelligence to build wealth in a socially responsible, conscientious manner. In India or for that matter anywhere else, businessmen are known to bend the rules and twist arms. They always rationalize it by saying that I need to do this to save jobs or save my family, that this is how everyone does it. Luckily there are some businessmen who are true warriors, who are not afraid to lose everything for the sake of their moral and ethical principles. Unfortunately the Republican party today is controlled by the kind of businessmen who believe that in order to "survive" you just need to do whatever it takes, even if it means manipulating people and wholesale distortion of truth.

11. (5/12) When I got engaged to Nicole I had been teaching at Howard for 16 years. I thought I had a pretty good idea about the way African-Americans are treated. But little did I know what I would encounter! African-Americans in the US exist in a parallel universe. The rest of America is slowly starting to accept them as part of society but there is still a veil of separation. I am not just talking about racism here. It is a veil that allows light on one side so people on one side don't even know it exists. In India we have hundreds of such veils but here it seems to be restricted to African-Americans. It is deep rooted in people's subconscious mind. It is this separation that causes a neighborhood or school or other community institution to suddenly become less desirable once the membership becomes majority black, and then magically revert to desirability once the majority swings the other way.

12. (5/12) This tuesday I was summoned for jury duty. It was a strange day. I ended up

not being called even for panel selection so the five hours I was there were mostly spent just sitting and doing nothing. Perhaps as a result it was one of the most relaxing and peaceful days in the past year. I spent part of that time catching up on sleep, some of it reading and the rest of it just sitting and watching. It was almost like a meditation retreat. I noticed that, although it was supposed to be a random collection of the residents of the district, more than 60% were white and of them most were young professionals, with a majority being female. I guess the disparity comes from the fact that not all answer the summons and that people who have a pending case or are convicted felons and people who do not speak English are automatically excluded. That raises the question of fairness but that is why we have given the lawyers the power to select members of their panel, I guess. The last time I served I actually got selected and sat in a trial. I remember that the initial pool was similar but the panel that did get selected was mostly African-American (even though neither the plaintiffs nor the defendants were).

13. (5/12) [Tribute to Talbot Chubb] Today I attended a memorial service for Dr. Talbot Chubb, father of my friend Connie. He was a long time NRL scientist and worked on cold fusion in his later years. Whenever I visited his home he would greet me with a wide smile. One of the speakers at the service said that his smile was an integral part of his face and that is not an exaggeration. He would talk about cold fusion and other scientific matters of interest to him. Even though I didn't understand everything he said, just being in his company was a great pleasure. He was one of those rare people who were passionate about their work, had no ego whatsoever and were warm and friendly towards everyone. He was full of life even to his last days. Such people are a gift from God. Flesh is weak and our tendency is to mourn the loss but there is no need for that, since like stars in the sky he would always be a guiding light to us and his spirit would always be with us.

14. (5/14) The quietness of the neighborhood is what impressed us the most. I guess we are reaching a stage in our lives where that is important. Sometimes late at night while locking up the house I pause to savor the silence. Silence has its own beauty and charm and tends to accentuate the little sounds, like the rustling of the leaves in the breeze, the humming of the refrigerator, the sound of a train passing in the distance. It makes life a little bit easier and less stressful.

15. (5/14) Although there is more quietness in the neighborhood, that doesn't mean our life has calmed down. Instead, there is more work to do and more responsibilities all around. It is difficult to keep in touch with what is true when caught in the whirl of life. One has to learn to be mindful at all times. If you don't get caught up in the results or worries about where things are going or who is doing what to you, if you can focus on the moment at hand and keep an open mind and stay curious about this wonderful life, then perhaps you can keep your head above the waters. The best way to live is to live like a surfer. Life will always throw a lot of waves at you but if you can learn to ride the waves then not only you enjoy life but it becomes exciting, exhilarating and energizing. Otherwise you will be just plodding along.

16. (5/14) I have always been curious about how they distribute the purse at a Golf tournament amongst the players. Apparently there is a standard formula. The winner gets 18%, second place gets 10.8 %, third place 6.8%, fourth place 4.8%, fifth place 4% and so on. I don't know what mathematical formula is behind it, though. Doesn't seem to be a simple sequence. But I find it interesting because it is a small demonstration of how capitalism works. I guess this is what the plutocrats who run this country think is fair. They encourage a winner take all mentality among the players and take the real money coming from the tournament as fees and salary for themselves. But even here it is worth noting that everyone plays by the same rules on the same course, so all the players have the same opportunity to win, unlike in real life. On a lighter note, if there are ties they divide up the total of the tied places and if the quotient is not a whole number, say it is 4000.33 each for three people sharing 12001 then the leftover penny goes to the one who finishes earliest. I wonder if ever a pro golfer would finish early so he could get that leftover penny!