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Forks in the road . . .

I must have come across a million forks in the road since I left Japan in the mid-1960s to come to the States. I like to think that my turning right or left at the fork was based on conscious decisions, but—sometimes—I feel, maybe, someone else was behind it. Maybe.

Why did I end up at Yale in 1965 instead of enjoying the Southern California sun at Pomona College to study premed? Why did I study international relations and econ and end up at the World Bank fixing economies and governments, instead of fixing noses and gall bladders? It couldn’t just be the discouraging climb up Prospect to Kline Tower to do biochemistry. It couldn’t be the alternative—singing at Mory’s with the Augmented Seven of Yale and spending spring vacations in Puerto Rico or Florida. Naw.

After Yale how did I end up in sunny California after all, doing an M.B.A. in finance in Palo Alto instead of a J.D. at Cornell? I’ve always preferred the construction of the legal framework over the construction of a corporate bal- ance sheet—but! I met Kay at Stanford, and I’ve always had a soft spot for smart nurses who were cute to boot (after all, I’m not going to nurse the babies to health... they’re contagious!). Instead of going—as planned—to Singapore with a shiny new M.B.A., something shoved me to Washington, D.C., and the World Bank, where Kay and I could get to know each other. After all, what’s three years? And Singapore wasn’t going to disappear. One cycle of three years, and another cycle of three years, and another. And another. Over twenty years later, Singapore’s just another city-state I read about. The reality is Falls Church, Virginia.

What’s in Falls Church? There’s a tree-lined street called Bent Branch Court. It’s where the decision to have children turned out to be a nondecision. When you’re a lusty teenager, the warning is: keep a condom in your pocket. You might get the girl pregnant. When you’re an aspiring father-to-be, you realize that you never had to have a condom. Why, you’re probably sterile and harmless to womenkind. But then, perseverance strikes pay dirt (or a little angel named “Emma”), and the fork in the road turns us to parenthood. The little sperm had a tail, after all. Two other tykes follow—David and Will. Can’t stop having kids—it’s Rabbit Tsui on the warpath!

Life goes on. The Wonder Years (note. Bob Brush!). Serendipity in the Suburbs. Neighbors become good friends. Neighbors become best friends. Neighbors become godparents. To all three kids. Life is hard to beat. Yes, too much work and too little time with the kids and leisure. But how can you beat trying to save the world and being paid for it? In Kenya, in Turkey, in Sri Lanka, and now in Nepal? The whirl of the workaday world. Deadlines, rushed overseas business trips, careers (up and down), friends getting divorced, friends’ kids getting married. The hairline is receding; Rogaine works only on one-third of the victims. Too bad I’m part of the two-thirds. Retirement? Not me.

One day, you get a letter in the mail. It reminds you that your two little boys each took a critical fork in the road when they were born and had to be rushed to ICU at the Children’s Hospital. One was born three months premature at two pounds. The other one had a hole in his heart wall and had to have open-heart surgery at nine months. Tough kids. Tougher parents. But the right choice was made at that fork in the road, and the two boys made it through. Was it prayers? Was it not walking under the ladder or beating the black cat to the punch before he crossed you? Maybe it was that extra loot you put in the tray at church?

But that letter stares at you. It reminds you that, when the boys took their fork—they also took some transfusions. Blood transfusions. At a time before blood tests were thoroughly tested for HIV-positive characteristics. What does it mean? Is the letter saying that David and Will weren’t meant to be? Those funny guys that look like me? Are you kidding? I’m ready for the heroic stuff—throwing myself in front of trucks to save the kids. Punching out the childnapper or abuser. Even paying for the increased car insurance premia for traffic tickets to kids under twenty-five. But AIDS?!

It’s weeks. Only weeks. But the blood test results for the boys don’t come back. It’s just old-fashioned torture. The days don’t drag—they drip like the old Chinese water torture. But one day, one day Children’s Hospital calls. The boys took a turn at the fork in the road. And it was the right turn!

So, the boys are still here. And we’re not making those endless trips to the Children’s Hospital again. Not like when they were first born. And we’re not going for AZT treatments and reading about alternative therapies. Instead, they get up at 4 a.m. to go to swim practices. They flex their beautifully tanned muscles (reflections of their primary sperm-donor) and slide into the pool to set another club record in butterfly, breast, free-style. And they want junk food instead of gourmet Chinese cuisine. And they want to see Jurassic Park instead of a rerun of Wuthering Heights. Why not? They’ve earned it.

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