

September 5, 2013

It's been quite a while since I've written. Sunnyside Life is defunct; this is the first installment of Ossining Times.

Our 18-month vacation in New York City has come to an end. Manhattan, which Michele and I explored every opportunity we had, is exciting and impressive; Queens, where we lived, is dreary, run-down and depressing. So Michele and I moved from Queens to Ossining, about 30 miles north of Manhattan, in late December, right after Christmas. We bought a house and have settled back into village life. I still teach science at the Dalton School, commuting by train into Manhattan. Including the time it takes to walk to the station and subway time once I get off the train, I spend about 3 hours each day getting to and from work. I do a lot of reading on the train. This spring I read a lot of biographies, including ones of Catherine the Great, Constantine the Great, and Alexander the Great. Anyone see a theme here?

Ossining is in Westchester County, one of the richest counties in America, but Ossining is a more-or-less middle/working-class village spread along the Hudson River and offering striking views of the Palisades on the opposite shoreline. About half the citizens are white professionals, about a third are Latino immigrants, and most of the rest are Caribbean or Indian immigrants.

Ossining is well known to Hollywood, and many movies have been filmed here. Albeit, most of these movies were filmed in the Sing Sing prison, which was named for the village that hosted it until the local people decided to distance themselves, (or actually their products), from the prison and changed the name of both the town and the village to Ossining, (a village is a subdivision of a town, which is a subdivision of a county, so the village of Ossining is part of the town of Ossining; New York is weird) about a hundred or so years ago. The village, originally named for the Sint Sanct Indians who were chased out of the area (in much the same way that housing developments today, like, say, Dogwood Estates, are named for the trees that get cut down and removed to make room for the development) is celebrating its 200-year anniversary this year. I have no idea how old the town is.

Many of the buildings in the village date from the mid-to-late 19th century. Our house was built in the 1880s. Michele and I have been doing a lot of work on it since moving in. Michele has painted most of the rooms, and she's made some beautiful curtains for most of them, too. Together we've refinished all the wood floors in the downstairs. And I've spent most of my summer break digging ditches. Our house sits in a bowl; water from all four sides drains into our backyard and under our basement. We knew this when we bought the house. What we didn't know until we moved in was that, about six inches underground is a thick layer of fine clay that prevents any of this water from draining—the water pours in, hits that ceramic-like clay, and just sits there. While having French drains installed in our basement we discovered that our basement floor sits directly atop the water table. The sump pumps that we installed wouldn't be just pumping out excess water after heavy rains, they would be running continuously, trying to lower the water table, which is probably not possible. Suddenly, the French drains and sump pumps that we had installed at great expense were worthless.

There is a creek that runs through our neighbor's yard about 20 or so feet from our property line. Turns out, the previous owner buried a drainage pipe from our yard into the creek. Unfortunately, he buried it so that the intake in our yard is only about 6 inches below the surface—not nearly enough to drain the yard or the basement. So I spoke to our neighbor, who turned out to be very nice and helpful, and got his permission to dig up his yard. The first thing I had to do was dig down under the footer of my house, which turned out to be about four feet underground. I got down to about 3 feet before I threw my back out. Not a very auspicious start. I was laid up for almost 2 weeks, but eventually I healed and got back to work, digging a four-foot-deep trench from under my house to the creek and then burying a drainage pipe.

The next step was to dig up the old pipe that the previous owner installed and rebury it about 3 feet lower. I had some help from a friend, so this went pretty quickly, even if we did end up working through a rain storm. The final step was to dig a culvert, starting at about 4 feet deep at the pipe intake and gradually sloping upwards, around the back yard to channel the water to the drainage pipe. I dug the culvert, hauling the dirt to the far side of the yard to create a gentle slope across its formerly flat width, lined the trench with fabric to keep sediment from migrating into the trench, threw down about six inches of gravel, lined the sides of the trench with brick, threw in a little more gravel, covered that with more fabric, and then filled the rest of the trench with decorative gravel so that it looks nice.

I did all this during a heat wave, with the temperatures in the 90s most of the time, but on the last day, within about 30 seconds after I had gotten the last brick into place, there was a sudden, incredible downpour, dropping probably about an inch and a half of rain within 15 minutes. Rather than run for cover, I decided to see what happened to all the water suddenly pouring into the yard from all sides. It worked! All--well, actually most--of the water was channeled into the culvert, and it all drained into the creek within about 20 minutes. I still had to do a little tweaking in a couple of places, but the overall scheme worked, and we no longer had a pond in our back yard after every rain. I was jubilant: my summer spent as a ditch-digger was a success!

So that's my summer vacation story. Michele has also spent much of the summer turning our house into a home. She has also gotten her first doula job in Westchester County. It's been slow getting started, in part because she relies mostly on word-of-mouth advertising and is new to the area, but hopefully she's broken the ice now and this summer's job will lead to recommendations and other jobs. (The other difficulty getting established as a doula in Westchester County is that mothers here seem more empowered and less prone to rely on experts than mothers--actually, people in general--in Manhattan. Having a postpartum doula doesn't seem to be the same imperative up here as it is in Manhattan.

I just got back from Indiana; Michele is still there. Some good friends just got married in Bloomington. Isaac flew in from Thailand for the wedding, and Julius and Corina came out from Washington DC. So we had a little family reunion in Indiana in addition to the wedding. It was great to get the whole family together again—it's been two years since Michele and I have seen Isaac. We stayed with friends (thank you, thank you for putting us all up) and had a good time. The wedding was a lot of fun, and I got to see some old friends, but I wasn't there very long because I had to get back to New York for work, so there were a lot of people that I never had the chance to connect with. But at least I got to spend time with all my kids.

School begins on Monday. I went to school yesterday and will go again tomorrow for meetings and to get my curriculum in order. I guess that makes today my last day of summer. I'm looking forward to seeing Westchester County in the fall—there are many beautiful parks and nature preserves in this area, and, just as we explored Manhattan when we lived in the city, Michele and I have been getting out hiking and exploring the Hudson Valley region since moving up here. The Hudson Valley is beautiful, and I expect the fall colors to be spectacular. I hope this fall brings you many exciting sights and adventures, too.

Warmest regards,
Glenn