Dear Colleagues:

It is almost ninety degrees as I write this today, down from a high of 93. We are in the middle of a Philadelphia heat wave. These arrive in the Delaware Valley, it seems, every third or fourth summer. An oppressively hot, almost out of body experience is how I remember moving to Philadelphia in the summer of 1987. It was the third successive year we had loaded a bright yellow Ryder truck and a “royal” blue Ford Aerostar (first model year – big mistake) in the middle of summer’s heat to move to a new home. We were broke, knew no one in Philly other than my new colleagues (with whom I was barely acquainted) and were about to move three small children from northern Indiana to eastern Pennsylvania.

Saint Joseph’s had become my first (and now, apparently, my last) tenure track appointment. My spouse and I had visited Philadelphia once, eight years earlier, ate at a famous, over-priced tourist trap restaurant that is (justly) no longer in business (though like a Hollywood remake of a bad movie or TV show, it may appear again by the time you read this); and the next night, took a “gypsy” cab at 2 AM from Thirtieth Street Station back to our hotel near the airport after an evening in NYC. After nearly a week in town at a professional conference, Philly seemed like the proverbial “good place to be from.” But as you know, a tenure track job in a tight market is not to be rejected, especially if it’s the first position one has been offered in three or more years on the market (and having raised those three children here, it has become a very good place to be – so don’t fear your first impressions if these are negative in this stressful and uncertain time).

I hope your move went better than ours. The first night I nearly took the second floor off of a motel with the Ryder truck. The turn in the parking lot was a wee bit tighter than I had anticipated, and I was not used to driving a vehicle that was twelve feet tall. The next day – before the advent of cell phones – my spouse and I became completely separated while driving on the central stretch of the Pennsylvania Turnpike. I am still not sure how we found each other, but we did, adding time and tolls as well as another level of stress to our journey.

We arrived mid afternoon. We passed King of Prussia (in tight, two vehicle formation this day), and all of a sudden, the sign for City Avenue (our exit) appeared amidst the foliage on I-76, and soon did Conshohocken, Manayunk and City Avenue itself. We drove past the university – which was far more contained, and not nearly as clean or presentable in those days – made our left onto 63rd Street, and found our rental row house on Atwood Road in Overbrook.

We had hired movers to unload our furniture, but they were not due till the next morning. Somehow we managed to get the kids to sleep on bare floors (all of our mattresses were in the front of the truck) and sat down on our porch, ready to weep from exhaustion and stress. Just then Mrs. Keller appeared. Mrs. Keller cut the Platonic ideal of the kindly Presbyterian Grandmother. She offered us ginger ale and cookies, and to
this day I have never had a more graced meal. She would remain a constant presence of joy in our life till we moved two years later, and even after that till she died the next year. Tough times were still ahead, but when Mrs. Keller appeared with her ginger ale and cookies, Joan and I knew that a barrier had been successfully forded and that Philly was going to be alright -- not too bad at all. Eighteen years later, it’s been even better than that.

Welcome to Saint Joseph’s. Hopefully you’ve already found someone to offer you ginger ale and cookies, or their metaphorical equivalent. If not, give me a shout – I know some folks who specialize in such things.

Warm regards,

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