

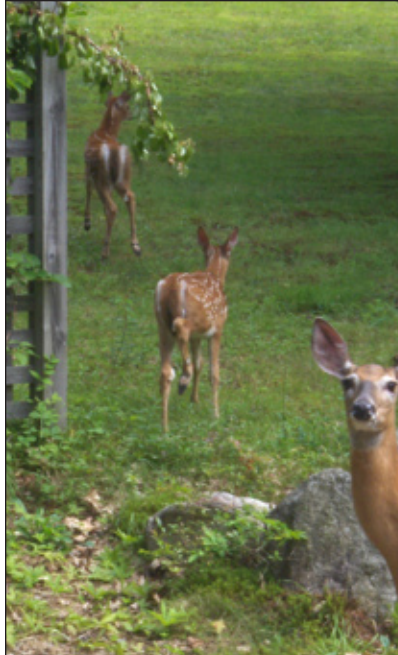
2009: SCENES FROM A BLUR

Yeah, so we moved to Vietnam for the first four months of 2009. You may know that already, and, if you've been at all respectful of our friendship by visiting our trip blog (and fawning over the many images and sterling prose — nearly all of it drafted by Sharon btw), you've surely heard enough. If you never got the spiel straight from us, or the chance to visit the blog (in which case we do in fact forgive you), check it out here: <http://phillipsvietnam2009.blogspot.com>

The expatriate life proved extraordinarily busy. To some extent, we were rarely in Saigon; we traveled at least 10 days out of each month to various garden spots around Vietnam, Southeast and East Asia. It seemed we had never worked and played quite so hard, simultaneously; we made a bunch of great new friends. Yet the entirety of 2009 was a blur of activity; the remaining 8 months were, in their own way, no less eventful.

We were all struck, upon returning home, for example, by just how freakin' busy our "normal" life is. This isn't news to any of you 40somethings with kids. It's not complicated. There's the train. It's leaving. You just get on it. But it was startling nevertheless. Clara stepped off the plane and right onto the softball diamond (her Cubs ultimately won the combined Gray/New Gloucester league title) and into the paddock. She followed up her lessons at the Saigon Pony Club (!) with her third year at Rowenda Farms in Gray, plus a week of riding camp this summer.

Silas went straight from the tarmac to the woods and pool. His butterfly took flight in 2009, meaning he began to



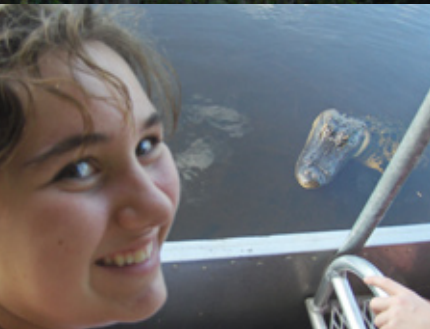


specialize in the 200 Individual Medley (that's 50 yards of fly, back, breast and freestyle). This past summer he went off to the Western Maine mountains for a week of "primitive skills" camp: building fires, sleeping in homemade shelters of leaves & twigs, fishing, hiking, gathering nuts & berries. When the apocalypse comes, he's in charge.

The normalcy resumed very quickly. The kids just went back to school, too. Sharon went back to the School Committee (and has just started work as administrator at our church). Hal just kept on working, only from the barn instead. Both kids got deeper into their brass on Maine soil. Silas went to a week of overnight summer music camp and can't wait to go back. He also earned second chair among trumpeters in the school band. With her trombone, Clara attended the same camp, by day, and this fall made districts (Silas eschewed those tryouts; too busy, he said, and who's to argue?). What's nice is they both really dig the playing and even the practicing, and they often practice together. They even joined their grandmother Lulee and her cello for renditions of *Silent Night* and *Good King Wenceslas* at Christmas.

And here's another thing they do together: Chinese language study (we brag on our kids regardless of geography). We figured we should follow up on their semester of Mandarin, in Saigon. Silas, now 13, is loving it. Clara, 11, isn't. At all. But we expect she may learn to tolerate it.

We got around a bit here in the "homeland", too. (Is one obliged to capitalize that in a country with a high court like ours?) Big family





trip to the Midwest this summer, to Kalamazoo for a week of fun and a killer party celebrating the 50th wedding anniversary of Bill and Joyce, Sharon's parents; then to Madison, Wisconsin, to hang with cousin Kari, her new daughter Sofia, and the polished older sister Audrey. Just to burnish the family theme, cousin Ralph Dickinson drove up from Memphis to join the party. Quick 2009 saga recap: Ralph's dad, Hal's uncle Ralph (Lulee's brother), died before Ralph had been born; his wife went back to Mexico and we knew Ralph was out there, but we didn't know where. He and Kari found each other in 2008 on... (wait for it) Facebook, in what might be the technology's first truly useful

contribution to society.

Big physical changes here at Camp Vanderlips in '09. Hal set about a major clearing campaign, beating back the forest and opening up the long, southerly view through the garden to the field, while Sharon and the kids engineered a sizeable flower-bed-to-lawn conversion.

Even more bracing are the changes set in motion on the house itself: We sat with architects and contractors this fall. In 2010, we're poised to create a proper entrance experience, on the north side, and we're getting an entirely new kitchen.

The travel never stops, and we wouldn't want it to. We did Florida for Xmas. Sharon led Silas and some



friends on a pair of Maine excursions, to the deep woods beyond Millinocket and Acadia. Hal went back to Asia (Malaysia, Thailand) this fall. But the rest of the time we were all quite happy to stay home and lap up all that we miss when we're gone: the friends, the family, the breakfast sandwiches, the fishing, Mt. Washington on a clear day, the music-making, gear bikes, Frisbee golf, bonfires, deer and turkeys foraging in the yard, the skiing, the frozen custard, The Atlantic, craft beer, salt & vinegar chips, the barn, cable, a proper sewing apparatus, potable tap water, chocolate fountains, the privacy, the pets, of course, and our spectacularly long, pot-holed driveway. It's where the heart is, you know.

