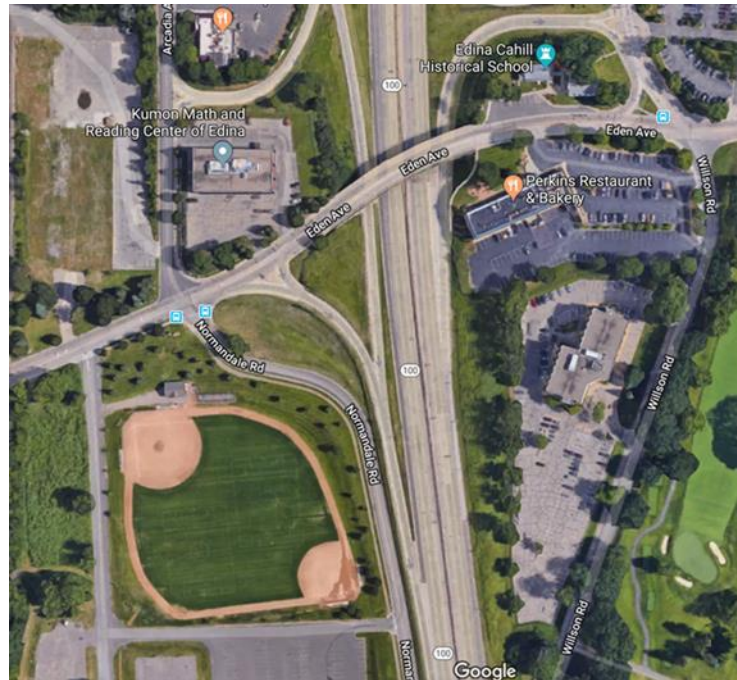


Merge and Flow

by Ajay Rawal



Along a stretch of Minnesota State Highway 100 in Edina, an inner ring Minneapolis suburb, stands a plain, brown office building. The building's second floor houses a franchise operation of Kumon, a supplemental educational network. Its immigrant-preponderant clientele is pretty typical of many Kumon franchises. There are kids and parents of South and East Asian origins. Many residents of Somali and other African origins are also heavily represented. You can catch half a dozen languages in the waiting area as parents peer down on their phones, read, knit, or talk with their old friends or new acquaintances. It is a shared experience where the common goal of empowering kids through education bonds parents and kids from different continents in their new home.

On the drive back home from this Kumon classroom, traffic on a smaller road yields to the traffic on frontage road of Highway 100. Once on the entry ramp, of course, all traffic yields to the incoming traffic traveling south on the highway. Every other week or so, I find myself on this frontage road. It takes me back to my days growing up in India, where as a college-educated, male member of the Hindu majority, I always had privileges naturally bestowed upon me by my very existence. I had the right of way. If there were ever a collision, it would have to have been the fault of a less-privileged driver on the smaller road. A driver who chose to not show enough deference, who did not put brakes on her quest to join the big leagues, who did not fall in line.

As the frontage road becomes the entry ramp, however, soon enough it is my turn to join the main highway. And join it I do, with utmost care, yielding to those already on the highway before me, going fast in their dedicated lanes, at speeds that demand respect. Knowing full well that brash bravado at this juncture could be lethal, I defer to my saner impulses, and safely squeeze into the right lane.

Immigration and assimilation are knotty issues, intimately tied to the sense of identity, and to the individual longing for belonging in a larger social milieu. I was always cognizant of my privileged status in India. However, after immigrating to America, I have developed a sharpened understanding of the insecurities people of minority or under-represented groups can feel. As a corollary, I have a renewed appreciation of the angst the majority can perceive if they feel their way of life diluted or diminished by the newly-arrived.

For me, a happy middle path runs somewhere through this frontage road-highway ramp analogy. Members of the majority in a multi-ethnic, heterogenous society have to give space and time to folks who do not have the right of way. Exerting hegemony or a brute show of power can only result in conflict. Similarly, when one enters a society as an immigrant, humility would go a long way in joining the big, fast highway. We are completely entitled to celebrate our existing identities, but it is best to ease slowly into our adopted homeland, as we gain speed, assimilate, and weave new colors into the fabric of our evolving identities. However clichéd it may sound, for me life boils down to a few simple tenets: change is certain, peaceful co-existence requires empathy and compromise, and there is no greater truth than live and let live.

So when I find myself at that Kumon office again, I now look beyond the abaya, the yamaka, the tattoo of a cross, or that Ganesha pendant. I look beneath the colors of the skin, listen past the mix of languages. And it is there that I find similar angst and struggles, discover the very same dreams, hopes and aspirations. So I merge, and I flow, in this surging stream, reaffirming my kinship to the most basic elements of humanity that bind us all.