

A World Needing a Map

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Where is hope for the destination-challenged?

by Charles Strohmer

When I first moved to a hilly rural area in the Midwest, I became destination-challenged. Gone was the familiar big city with its predictable grid system of streets with names, where you'd need to be pretty thick to get lost even if you were lost. Now I didn't know how to get anywhere. And those years there were no maps that I could find of the countless back roads that wandered the hills like lost souls.

Maps wouldn't have helped, anyway. Most of these back roads had no street signs. And when the locals would offer directions (I frequently asked) I first thought they were pulling my leg. Me, a newbie. But, no. To reach one destination, I got the following directions: Take the highway to Chamber's Market, turn left, go about 3 miles and make a sharp U-turn at the Gator Point sign, follow along aways and turn left where you see a white paper pie plate stuck to a tree. We're at the end of that narrow road." True story. I found that pie plate, nailed to an old scrub pine. We have an amusing little system that no one from anywhere else can understand

I shouldn't complain. In my files I've got a World Press Review story from July, 2002, in which journalist Oakland Ross described what it was like trying to get around in the Central American capitol of Managua. On December 23, 1972 a massive earthquake had pretty much reduced the city to rubble. Twenty thousand people had died. Also gone was the city's old grid pattern of streets, giving a whole new meaning to locating things for the remaining two million Managuans. To get around proficiently they devised their own cartographical substitute. They use landmarks: a certain tree, a pharmacy, a plaza, a soft-drink bottling plant, a child welfare agency. In the words of the Chamber of Commerce vice-president: "We have an amusing little system that no one from anywhere else can understand."

Ross writes that one visitor to the lakeside city found the woman to whom she'd been sending letters (from Canada) at the following address, which went on the envelopes: "From where the Chinese restaurant used to be, two blocks down, half a block toward the lake, next door to the house where the yellow car is parked, Managua, Nicaragua." Strangely, this made for efficient mail delivery, but it opened up whole new worlds of imponderables for visitors.

How would you know where the Chinese "used to be," or which way was "down" as opposed to "up"? Since the terrain often precludes seeing the lake, how would you know that direction, and what if the yellow car happened to be out for a spin? It drives people nuts who first arrive there, say residents, because they don't know what we're talking about. Somehow, Ross notes, the people who live there have managed, with practice, to figure it out.

I'm not sure the same can be said of us when it comes to navigating the most important road, life and its meaning. Here, we seem to be increasingly destination-challenged with each passing year, as familiar old grids of established -ologies and -isms are losing their durability. Amusing little systems, big systems, too, of meaning are going, going, gone, as the avenues of their construction are buckling and bowing out of shape from the violent underground energy of sources too numerous to mention here. Why are we still fooling ourselves? Crumpling signs are everywhere.

At the heart of things, seems to me, we are losing faith in ourselves. When that happens, we always turn to other sources, to the stars, perhaps, or the biotic soup, or Nietzsche. You get the picture. But all these fail, too. Where, then, does a human being find the map of meaning and hope? We not very good at figuring that out. A pie plate nailed to a tree? No. It's Wisdom quite other than that.

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