

There is an ever-increasing trend afoot, new to some, standard for others, and still non-existent for the majority of folks, and that is the everyday use of GPS – global positioning systems.



I believe my first encounter with the tool was about six years ago. I was traveling with my general manager in a Hertz rental car, and we were offered the courtesy feature of the new-fangled black box installed in the car like its predecessor, the mobile phone, before both became smaller and handheld. We monkeyed around with the thing trying to figure it out, adding our destination address, listening to and laughing at the strange female voice directing us over unknown terrain, and we marveled at this new technology. I was the back-up navigator, co-piloting with my trusty paper road map in hand, ensuring that we stayed on course – a real person versus the talking head whose voice seemed to come out of nowhere.

When I first moved to Beaufort, I signed up for the Coast Guard's safe boating class because I was inexperienced at navigating tidal waters – still am – and the class's skipper highly recommended portable GPS systems for nautical navigation. I bought a marine radio and researched GPS systems, but decided against investing in the techno-compass because my realm of exploration has not deviated from launching my small boat at Brickyard Point Landing, running up to the Beaufort Marina, and returning to my starting point.

I traveled to NYC this past August and one of my best friends whipped out her Garmin nüvi, a small, square, handheld GPS. She asked me to locate the Longacre Theater as she weaved her BMW convertible in and out of complex roadway grids like a professional taxicab driver on steroids. I didn't know how to work the thing but by the end of the weekend, I had mastered the contraption.

Recently, I accepted a position selling polymer chemistries to hair and skin care manufacturers. My first sales trip was to Dallas, and as I witnessed two colleagues navigate from the airport to restaurants and hotels via GPS, I decided this was a tool I would need in cities like Phoenix, New York, Atlanta and Newark – even Charleston – and I bought a Garmin for myself as an anniversary present.

My first full-blown use of GPS was a trip I made with my husband Mac to Hard Labor Creek State Park in Rutledge Georgia. After listening to the knowledgeable female voice mysteriously emitting from unit, Mac suggested we give her a name. I had been calling her something that rhymes with “witch” but begins with a “B” because I was becoming irritated with another woman in the car telling me what to do. We named her Betty and she has become a traveling companion ever since.

Because Betty is multi-lingual and knows her way anywhere in the world where a satellite signal can be detected, I imagined what other problems she might be able to solve. Could she provide direction in navigating the tumultuous stock market? Was she adept in battle zones and what was her position on the Iraq war? Did she have a moral compass? Could she find her way to the nearest polling place and how would she vote in the upcoming election?

It seemed to me that dialogue with Betty Garmin-nüvi could have unlimited possibilities in the realm of personal and political pathways. But according to the Smithsonian National Air and

Space Museum (NASM), “GPS receivers passively receive satellite signals; they do not transmit. GPS receivers require an unobstructed view of the sky, so they are used only outdoors and they often do not perform well within forested areas or near tall buildings.” These operating problems would present difficulties if we tried to devise a GPS for moral guidance or Dear Abby type advice. The NASM goes further to explain that GPS is operated by the U.S. Air Force, that satellite signals travel at the speed of light, and have an accuracy of about 10-20 meters. That means that Betty is militarily controlled, that she makes decisions in a split second without pondering philosophical implications, and the future impact of her directions are limited.

My Garmin will help me when I am lost in a spider web of side street confusion as I was in Los Angeles this past week. She can tell me what the current time is and an estimated time of arrival for any address I care to make my destination. But Betty nüvi is not my priest; she is not a parent or a teacher, a wise sage or confidant. Betty will never be able to make my toughest decisions for me. Instead, in these times of turmoil and frustration, fear and uncertainty, change and adjustment, I still have to make my own way, find my own direction, and position myself in my global community in a way that serves me and my fellow human beings.

With that in mind, I think I will leave my GPS to the everyday task of keeping me from getting lost, but I will follow the advice of Robert Frost, who in his timeless poem “The Road Not Taken,” shared this literary guidance:

□ *Two roads diverged in a wood, and I—*
□□□ *I took the one less traveled by,*
□□□ *And that has made all the difference.*

Good luck always in finding your way, and be sure to vote on Tuesday November 4th to have your voice heard in setting the course of our country, our state, our county and town.