



Signals Even GPS Cannot Detect, by Aylie Baker

Returning to the US was always hard for me, in part because I began to notice how GPS technology was eroding what was left of our wayfinding capabilities. In the spring of 2013, I flew from Palau back to New York City, and I remember walking out of the subway on a starry night and struggling to break free of the shuffling crowd, because everyone was looking down at the maps on their phones. I started to read more about celestial navigation and the maritime history of the Atlantic, wanting to understand how we had come to abandon the stars and choose

such a different way of moving through the world. My partner Miano often says that before modern technology, we were all moved by nature. And heâ€™s right. I think we forget that. [...]

Technologies themselves did not lead us astray, but our impulse to develop, adopt, and rely on them mirrors a slow wandering away from the receptive centers of ourselves.

Hundreds of years of observing the planets, of striving to understand our place in the universe, of equations scribbled down and passed on to be elaborated over generationsâ€”all of that now gets compressed into the instruments that we use every day without a second thought. And part of what feels so scary to me about witnessing the rise and application of GPS in my lifetime is that all those generations of learning are obscured; theyâ€™re hidden in code, recorded on SIM cards

and giant hard drives off in the desert. We can drive to the restaurant with the four-star Yelp review or fly thirteen hours across the Pacific Ocean without any appreciation for the incredible majesty behind these gestures.

It would be easier, more efficient, far faster to continue moving through the world along the grids that weâ€™ve created, following the routes we are presented. But what is the impact on us? Recent studies are revealing the effects GPS is having on our brains and on the way we relate to the world. Our daily journeys are now riddled with refrains of Turn right, Turn left, Slow down, Stop. When these directional prompts come from outside of us, we donâ€™t lay down memories in the same way we would navigating through the world without

instruments. The mental maps that we construct of the places we inhabit are slowly being shredded, rendered into strip maps that lead to isolated, meandering points. The restaurant, the mountain, the grocery store, even Grandmaâ€™s house, begin to float around without any clear interrelationship or tether to the wider landscape. As our dependence on GPS technology increases, we are in danger of no

longer
integrating our journeys into a larger sense of home.

Even a map of home is a representation, a slice of space captured by the mind at a discrete point in time. It is always a fragment of the fabric of the universe. It doesn't matter whether this map is updated every few years or every few seconds: it is flat. It will never be fully present or capture the rippling dynamism of the natural world. It will never be truly alive.

It's scary to think about stepping back from these instruments, scary because stepping back might mean admitting that we never really learned where we are. For most of human history, this question has run like an umbilical cord to the core of who we are—and anyone who has been lost knows the waves of discomfort, fear, shame, guilt, loneliness, and longing that rise up in the face of not knowing.

Wayfinders are always reminding their students that each of us is capable of picking up signals that even the most powerful GPS could never detect. And we do, all of us, moment by passing moment. How ironic that we've designed wayfinding instruments and climate-controlled environments that shut out the many forces that are there, waiting to guide us. Humidity, vibration, shadows, birdsong—they reach out to us in every moment, silently imploring us to remember that we are—all of us, always—life responding to life.