

Celestial navigation: We have lost the sky

by [Rodney Clapp](#) in the [December 16, 2008](#) issue

It was Marshall McLuhan, I believe, who first observed that the increased speed of transportation and communication had made the world a global village. That observation has become a commonplace. But we don't usually focus on the aspect of the village metaphor that suggests we have become more, not less, parochial than our predecessors. Instead we emphasize how cosmopolitan we moderns or postmoderns are in comparison to our ancestors, most of whom lived and died within shouting distance of their birthplaces and—before the invention of the steam engine—could be transported no faster than a horse could run or the wind could blow a ship.

But even as we jet over oceans and view live TV transmissions from the other side of the world, we are more parochial than the ancients in one way. We have lost the sky.

I don't mean that the sky has fallen, though something very like that is happening as the ozone layer buffering earth from outer space thins and disintegrates. Nor do I mean it in the sense that urban dwellers, surrounded by electrical lighting, are blinded to most of the stars and planets surrounding us in the night. I mean it mostly in the sense that we have lost our attention to the sky.

This came home to me when I recently read that the U.S. Navy has stopped teaching celestial navigation. Satellites and global positioning systems have rendered the stars obsolete or, as essayist Rebecca Solnit puts it, “unnecessary to knowing where you are.”

Far be it from me, a decidedly directionally challenged traveler, to lament the advent of GPS navigation technology. The TomTom I got last Christmas is one of the most wonderful and useful gifts I've ever received. No longer do I take frustrating and unintended tours of Chicago neighborhoods or the outlying stretches of Grand Rapids freeways. I adore the way my portable GPS counts down the miles to my

destination and can tell me exactly how far I am from arrival. I've downloaded the voice of comedian John Cleese and have yet to tire of his snarkiness ("you have now reached at your destination and are on your own—I will not carry your bags") or his Britishisms ("at the next exit, bear right, beaver left"). When I say this device is wonderful, I mean it is full of wonders. It fascinates me with its gargantuan yet nimble store of information, its neat and accessible gadgetry and its generally excellent direction.

But is this little box of chips and circuits as wonderful, as vast, as laden with information as the night sky? Consider that a global positioning system, fantastic as it may be, is limited to the globe and the mechanical satellites surrounding it. My TomTom reaches across continents, but not across galaxies. And in comparison to the sky, it is fragile. It depends not only upon the human ingenuity of satellite makers but on something as homely as batteries. It's also only as correct as the information loaded into it. So, yes, it did take me by a backdoor route into downtown Memphis that was faster than any route I'd driven before. But it also got me lost in a tangle of new lanes and one-way streets in harborside Miami. And for a long, amusing stretch in rural Texas, it pictured me rocketing at 80 miles per hour through rivers and across wheat fields parallel to the highway on which I was actually traveling (with John Cleese persistently urging me to beaver left at first opportunity).

Then there's all that history linked to the sky and its constellations. My TomTom is barely a year old and already it cries for upgrades. Take the Little Dipper by comparison. For centuries it has told people not only where they are, but who they are. In distant European ages, it was the "dragon's wing." The Greeks viewed it as a "little bear" and as the daughters of Atlas gone stellar. Romanians saw it as the "little wagon." For runaway slaves making their way north, it was companion to the "drinking gourd." The Hopi saw it as a "star thrower," the Western Shoshone as a rabbit net, the Chumash as seven boys who transmuted into flaming wild geese, the Pueblo as a cradle, the Tohono O'odham as a cactus-gathering hook.

These are worlds not contained in my TomTom. Next time you're far enough outside a metropolitan area to see the night sky, look up. Look up and remember. Look up and break free from the bonds of our terrestrial parochialism. Look up and wonder if the Magi could have located the Christ child with a TomTom or a Garmin.

And then, if you have a moment, e-mail the navy and tell it to make sure those new sailors learn how to reckon their way by the stars, too.