Map-reading skills

by Barbara Brown Taylor in the March 21, 2001 issue

Two friends were driving to a conference at Kirkridge Retreat Center in Bangor, Pennsylvania. Since this is not the easiest place in the world to find, they had rented a car with a global positioning system. From the Philadelphia airport to the Kirkridge driveway, they were under the watchful eye of a satellite that tracked their every move.

The "Never Lost" computer screen was mounted between the front seats of the car. When my friends turned it on, they followed the directions on the menu. First they typed in their destination. Then they chose between four options: most expressways, shortest distance, shortest time or most scenic. They clicked on "most expressways" and a pleasant female voice announced, "Calculating route." Then they heard a "bong" that reminded them of the sound an elevator makes when the doors close. A street grid of Philadelphia appeared on the screen and the voice said, "Turn left out of parking lot."

The friends, who happen to be men, report that for the next three hours they did whatever the pleasant woman told them to do. At one point they made a wrong turn into a shopping center parking lot. "Return to designated route," the voice said. While they looked for a place to turn around, the elevator doors closed repeatedly. "Bong. Bong. Bong. Return to designated route," the voice insisted, until they did. While they were embarrassed to have goofed, they were also relieved to discover that they truly could not get lost.

As they neared Bangor, the voice alerted them, "Approaching left turn nine miles." She repeated the alert every mile, but when she said, "Approaching left turn .5 miles," the exit was clearly visible on the *right* side of the road. "There's your exit!" the passenger cried. "But she says it's on the left!" the driver said, caught in the grip of an existential crisis. Should he trust the voice that spoke to him from the eye in the sky, or should he believe his own eyes? The solid concrete wall on his left finally convinced him to risk autonomy. He swerved across two empty lanes and squeaked onto the exit ramp.

Both driver and passenger braced themselves for the bongs, but the bongs never came. Nor did the voice tell them to return to their designated route. By the time they had completed the 360-degree cloverleaf, they realized that they were turning in the direction the voice had told them to. The satellite had simply overlooked the exit ramp. Quite by accident, my friends seem to have starred in a parable about practicing faith in a postmodern age.

To belong to a religion is to receive a vision of the world that is embedded in sacred stories about how to get around in such a world. These narrative maps constitute a moral positioning system, as they link human life on earth to "the eye in the sky." In Christianity we call these maps scripture and tradition. Reason is our map-reading skill, but because we are busy people and studying the maps takes time, plenty of us have been happy to subscribe to "Never Lost" systems that will read the maps for us. All we have to do is follow the instructions of those who have volunteered to show us the way, turning wherever they tell us to turn. Eventually, we trust, we will reach our destination.

But then one day the voice says, "Approaching left turn" while the exit is clearly visible on the right, and we do not know what to do. Do we trust the interpreter or do we trust our own eyes? Some of us pull over to consult the maps for ourselves, and are stunned by what we find in the glove compartment. In some cases, we may have different versions of the same map. Other maps have been revised so many times that the vellum has holes in it, and parts of them are so old that we cannot unfold them without destroying them. In one postmodern moment, our faith in the positioning system fails. Meanwhile, there is a real road ahead with at least two ways to turn, and not a service station in sight. What is a traveler to do?

The parable is too rich to yield to any one understanding of it, but it does challenge me to focus on how I find my way around between worldviews. I am still hanging on to my ancient Christian maps, although the world I encounter every day is far more complicated than they led me to believe. Most of the mountains are still there, but some of the vast green patches are deserts now, and there are new roads all over the place. Some of them connect Bethlehem to Mecca or Bodh Gaya. Others lead to towns called Darwin and Los Alamos. Since these roads are not on any of the old maps, my religious community is divided about whether they should be traveled. Some members have gotten together to post signs that warn, "Beyond here lie dragons," while others have organized explorers' clubs.

I like to explore, only I know that I really can get lost. I learned that from my maps, which do not offer me options such as "most expressways" or "shortest route." Instead, they have backtracks, dead-ends and loop-the-loops all over them. Just check the map of Sinai in the back of your study Bible. It took people a long time to find the Promised Land, even with God in the lead.

This is my sacred story, and what it tells me is that the eye in the sky has entrusted me to the earth. My moral positioning system is not about making all the right turns based on the view from above. Instead, it is about making the journey with others who see things from the ground, and trusting the journey to teach us what we need to know.