

3-22-99

Directions

My interest in directions began long ago. Our house on Morningside Drive was oriented to the points of the compass, and with the typical self-centered nature of a child, I was sure that houses should face north, with the east sun entering bedroom windows, and south-located backyards holding the warmth of the sun during winter days and becoming cool for evening pleasures in summer. I don't believe I was unpleasantly affected when I discovered that houses could be oriented in an endless variety of ways, each location having its own attractions. I had surely expanded my knowledge of and interest in direction.

Our backyard was cool on late summer afternoons and evenings. The neighborhood kids liked to gather in our playground-equipped yard to swing, have athletic contests on the trapeze and stationary bar, and play games on the soft green grass. After dinner, our family and sometimes friends, too, generally gathered in the yard, with adults occupying lawn chairs and we children sitting on the ground, usually on a quilt to protect us from the prickles of the grass. I enjoyed hearing the adults talk, especially when they began reminiscing about their earlier days. I always got a laugh from hearing about Daddy's Uncle Rufus fleeing from a sudden noise, running unheeding through a campfire. My early ambition to learn to ice skate came from hearing Mother talk about skating on the river when her family lived in the faraway "north" in Lynchburg, Virginia. Of course, now, I have a difficult time picturing that frozen river, but perhaps it did freeze once or twice while she lived there in the early part of this century. But "north" surely became a different reality as a result of her tales.



Little did I realize that years later I would regret not paying sufficient attention to those tales so that I could recall them more accurately for my children, but, alas, customs change so that we spent our evenings with the kids in our air-conditioned family room taking much less time to recall the "old days." I wonder where my children learned about directions. Of course, they must have.

Those early outside evenings did even more for me. I became interested in locating the various constellations and in order to do so, I learned more about directions. While I probably couldn't have accurately "boxed" the compass, I was able to think in terms of southeast, east southeast, as well as northwest, north northwest, and other variations of directions.

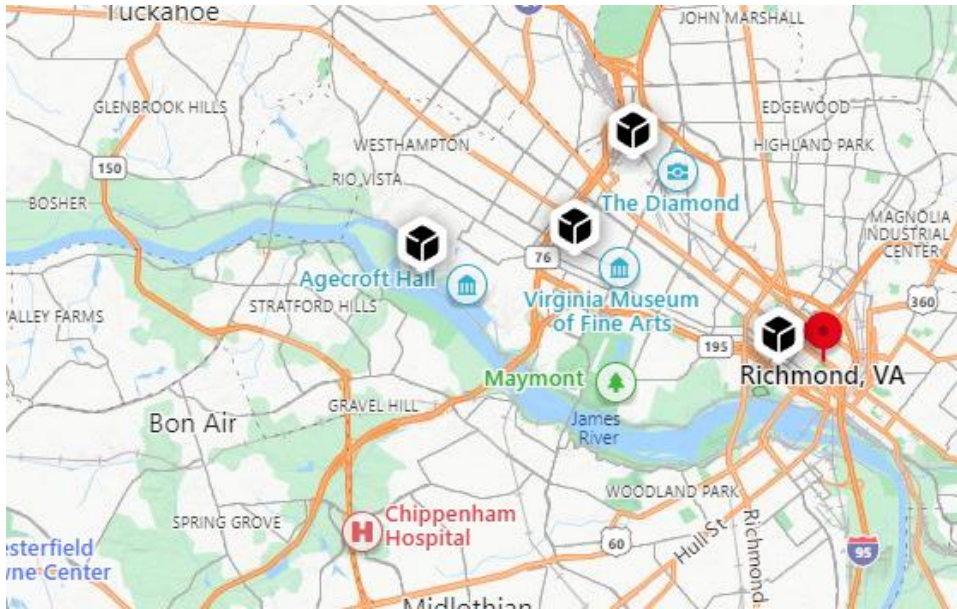
Another aid to my sense of direction came from the fact that Dallas was largely laid out on a grid: Main and Elm Streets ran straight from east to west, a potential source of danger once when a tornado hit Dallas during the evening rush hour. The funnel came from the west and was heading straight down Elm Street when it suddenly veered directly north, doing a great deal of damage but not anywhere near the destruction it could have achieved going down Elm with its heavy traffic of pedestrians and near-gridlocked cars. In fact, from our front yard in University Park, a northern suburb of Dallas, we were able to watch the tornado's awesome path through the relatively uninhabited industrial district of Dallas. I had also become aware that to get from south Dallas to east Dallas, we had to turn onto east streets for a time, back to north streets, and finally onto the desired east street.

As I reached adulthood, I discovered that I had a fairly accurate sense of direction, seldom being disoriented or confused on whether a left turn would take us west or south. Paul and I lived in a variety of cities not all of which were built on a grid. The Willamette and Columbia Rivers in Portland dictated the course of many streets, and I generally felt good about which direction I needed to go in order to reach any particular destination. I usually gave directions to our home by referring to turns from north to east, or some such. When we lived in Washington, D.C., the state-named streets, all diagonals, took a bit of getting used to, but I was able to adjust to the diagonals and soon felt at home.

As a matter of fact, as the years passed and we found ourselves in a variety of locations, for living or exploring, I began to think of myself as being almost infallible so far as directions were concerned. But not always. Once I was navigating our way from Atlanta to the District of Columbia. We missed a turn (mea culpa!) and found ourselves in western North Carolina, when we needed to be in eastern North Carolina. Our day's journey was too long for the boys that day, but we did reach our destination with my face only a little bit red.

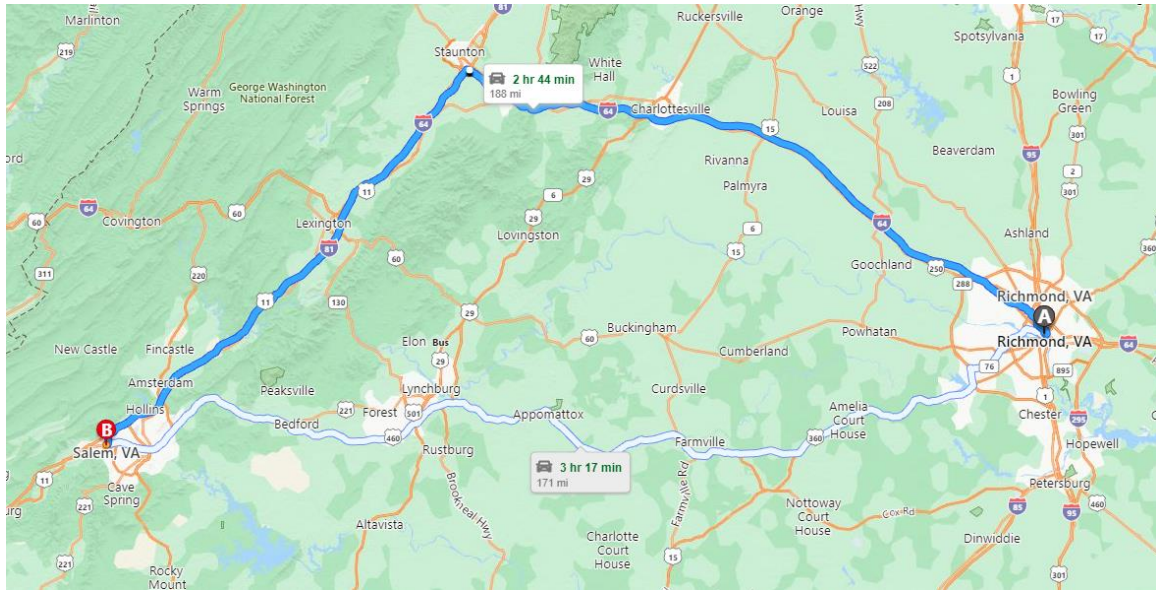
Then, I really got my comeuppance when we moved to Richmond in the early seventies. I understood that the James River divided the city into north and south, but that fact often proved my downfall. Once I got away from Broad Street and Belvedere, I was never sure where I was in relation to the compass. Take the street I live on - Stratford Road. We turn east onto Stratford - but that's impossible for we've been driving down Forest Hill Avenue looking uncomfortably into the setting sun, so we must be turning north. Then Stratford, which is an old country road grown up into a city residential street, wanders left and right, sometimes almost imperceptibly, although at one point it makes a ninety-degree turn to the left, and another street that looks like Stratford veers slightly to the

right. I think our house faces roughly east because the morning sun beams into our front windows, but the evening sun sets more at a diagonal to our corner kitchen windows.



When I direct people to our house, I have to tell them that they should turn west onto Forest Hill Avenue, but the street curves enough that you can easily think you've gotten mixed up. Likewise, Chippenham Parkway is roughly north and south, but not always. And Huguenot Road is a nightmare if I rely on my sense of direction. When we're in strange neighborhoods and have used written directions to reach our destination, I have to watch the handmade map to get us back to our home. Along with my loss of directions, I've also lost which is left and right. I'm about to reach the conclusion that, if I *think* we should turn left, we really should turn right.

I'm sure the James River is the source of my confusion; think about that sweeping curve to the right the river makes as it seeks its beautiful, rocky course through Richmond. Not all of Richmond is to the north or south of the river; some of it is east or west. I regret my loss of a sense of direction, for the confusion which originated in my finding my way around Richmond has now extended to everywhere. The map tells me that my son and family live west of Richmond in Salem, but I feel positive that we go only south in order to reach their home, regardless of that right turn we make to transfer from highway 360 to highway 460. Perhaps if we always went to Salem by way of I 64 and I 81, I would recognize that we go a great deal farther west than we go south. But we always go the 360/460 route and only occasionally return by way of I 81 and I 64.



The truth of the matter is that I probably should relax and blame the loss of my cherished sense of direction on my age - why not? Age is the cause of most of my other woes. But I can't convince myself that such a thing is true. Surely, I'll regain my invulnerability with directions. Someday.

(Ed. Note: I was very surprised to see the 460-360 route between Salem and Richmond looking nearly straight east-west. At this scale, you can't see all the twists and turns.)