

My Life in Maps

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OBSERVER

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LATE MARCH in western New York: Currents of snow drift from a gray sky, eddy around the edge of Lennon Hall, drift across the soggy, salt-edged campus lawns. A hard wind spills out of the west, throws the hesitant spring into open retreat. The first flowers of the year—a coltsfoot at the edge of the local woodlot, a dwarf alpine mustard in my garden—seem like lost souls. The wind and snow push me, too, deeper into winter and the academic year.

I am restless and find it difficult to focus on the papers that I should be grading. After reading the same incoherent sentence three times, and finding little meaning in the student's words, I drop my pen and walk down the hall to my lab. I open a file-cabinet drawer, search through the alphabetized "California" file, and pull out a 15-minute topographical map of Mount Whitney. I unfold the map on the lab bench, note the thick blue scatter of crystalline lakes, the deep, scimitar-shaped bowls of alpine cirques, the passes and peaks of promise, the names that drew me deep into the high country, so many years ago, as they still do today: Lake South America, Crabtree Meadow, Milestone Basin, Chagoopa Plateau, Bubbs Creek, Milly's Foot Pass. The names flow on and on, like the mountains themselves, and all of those names, all of that promise, all of those mountains, come flowing back to me, and once again it is spring.

But the map has an edge. The contour lines, streams, and trails run their course and then disappear into the frame of the map. They vanish into blankness as the world of information abruptly gives way to terra incognita. Beyond knowledge there is uncertainty, even if the antidote to this uncertainty may be held by adjacent maps. Or perhaps the map's border is not the edge of the known world; instead it is the mat upon

which the map is mounted, the canvas against which I read and imagine it. Perhaps the wash of white that surrounds the map also serves as the setting for my desire; this potent mix of history and inclination, possibility and promise, action and reaction, is the context for my love of maps, and what they represent for me.

With its own spare aesthetic and utilitarian purpose, the Mount Whitney map is, to my eye, beautiful—not, as the aviatrix Beryl Markham wrote about maps, "cold ... humourless and dull." It depicts space with the sinuous flow of contour lines, an amalgam of signs representing lake and stream, peak and valley, road and trail, and anchors this geography to lines of latitude and longitude. The map also is a potent symbol—not in the sense of those postmodernist geographers who view maps as "texts" to be deconstructed, but as triggers of memory, representations of a life spent exploring the wild lands of the West and North.

But there is more to it than this. I understand enough about my life to believe that while maps have promised me access to a world of wonders, to the burnt and hardscrabble desert ranges of the Mojave Desert, the clean and empty alpine cirques of the Sierra—to situations and experiences that were, in the fullness of the word's meaning, good—there sometimes was an edge to this promise, a hint of other, more complicated agendas. For maps also may represent a way out of one's current situation, a currency that involves the exchange of one life, with its failures and undertones of anguish and anxiety, for the seductive possibilities of another, more transient and distracting existence.

Maps, and the movement they promise, may take you toward someplace that pleases and heals, while simultaneously spiriting you away from family and those who need you,

and perhaps from the fears you need to face. Of course, when we trace some imagined and tempting route on the map before us, and then fall into movement, we also may become, briefly, less burdened, and more open to the world. It may be as Richard Hugo has it: "When we drove down that hill / and flared out on that empty prairie, home seemed / less ashamed of us"—or perhaps, we of home.

MAPS ARE SOLID THINGS. They depict particular pieces of geography, suggest where to travel, position us in space. But they may also tell us much more—sometimes with a deafening shout, sometimes with the softest of whispers. They are conduits to, and expressions of, memory.

When I look at a Chevron road map of California, circa 1966, or a 15-minute topographical map of Cedar Mesa, Utah, I am pulled into another time and place. I can sense the excitement of a fragile, 14-year-old boy as he crossed the smog-laden San Joaquin Valley, headed for his first hike in the Sierra, or, 30 years later, feel the warm grit of sandstone beneath my sunburned leg as I sprawled on an outcrop of rough rock somewhere deep in the slickrock country, the Bear's Ears standing on the horizon, etching that wonderful sweep of distance.

Maps rise out of my past like the fault-block ranges that thrust from the great basins of the Intermountain West, maps that carry their own, solid presence as well as the enigmas of the past, maps that, as the cartographer Dennis Wood has written, "point toward a world we might know," as well as toward another world, the one we once knew.

I believe—desire to believe—that the air is full of maps, the very earth alive with them. I sense their presence everywhere, in the wash of my own history, in the lives of others.

I hear them in the thin songs of migrating blackpoll warblers that drift through the late May maples, songs given out on some glorious morning by birds on their way north from Central America to their boreal breeding grounds. I touch them when I run my hand over a piece of water-smoothed Redwall limestone somewhere deep in the Grand Canyon, and feel the faint impression of a 340-million-year-old nautiloid, suspended in the deepest well of time. I smell them in the rich and acrid odor of buckbrush and laurel, chinquapin and manzanita, which rises from the sun-pounded California chaparral, and in the memory of how the scent of baby shampoo lingered in the hair of my young son and daughter after their evening baths. I taste them in a spoonful of curried rice and lentils, taken somewhere deep within the Barrenlands of northern Canada, at the edge of some arctic lake, wind-driven surf slapping against the shore. I see them in the 48-year-old scar that slices across the veins on the back of my right hand, a relic of an intersection between a young boy and a shovel along a sycamore-lined creek in the Santa Clara Valley.

These maps are with me always. They trace the path of my days, point toward possible futures, carry me out of the past and into the present. They are as much a matter of neuron and neurotransmitter as ink and paper. And so I unfold the maps of my life and plot my meandering course: a cartography of memory and intellect, dream and desire. It's what I have, this way through the world. ■

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