



Reflections

Senseless born

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It is time for me to confess. I am not personally at fault, and I expose my particular handicap in hopes of helping those like me.

I am directionally handicapped. I am oriented to person and time, but not to place. I do not know which way is north or south, and I cannot tell whether I am east or west of anywhere. As you can imagine, this problem wreaks havoc when I drive. If I know the route, all is well. But if I must make a detour, I am totally lost.

We learn a great deal about the five senses in medical school, both basic science and clinical fact. Neuroanatomy and neurophysiology help us understand sight, hearing, touch, smell, and taste. Through the miracle of neuroimaging, we have discovered the various parts of the brain that deal with these senses. The sense of direction, however, has been overlooked.

Cuter qualities

When I first met my wife, an Ottawa, Ont, native, she was amazed at how someone born and bred in Toronto could get lost so easily in the downtown, which is essentially a grid. We would come out of a subway exit onto the street, and I would *always* turn the wrong way. At first, in the throes of early romance, she thought this was one of my cuter qualities.

But as the passion cooled, Ora's observations became a bit more caustic. As we would leave a room and I started to go the wrong way, she would say (with a touch of irritation), "Over *there*!" She never said it explicitly, but I always heard the unspoken word "dummy!" after being directionally corrected or correctionally directed.

After carefully studying our three children, I believe this ailment is hereditary, like one's ability to curl the tongue longitudinally. Two of our children inherited their mother's directional gene. Our

15-year-old son, however, is as lost in space as I am. If we can locate that part of the brain involved in craving for cocaine¹ or that part involved in our "sense" of humour,² surely we can locate that dysfunctional part of my neuroanatomy.

Like all handicaps, this one can be dealt with through appropriate accessories and careful training. I do get back and forth from work each day, and I have not yet wandered off into the Judean Desert (which begins at the eastern reaches of Jerusalem where I live). I even managed to drive *alone* from Haifa to Amsterdam almost two decades ago without getting lost. Unlike most men, I have no problem asking for directions.

If you are still unconvinced that I suffer from a serious malady that requires recognition, further study, and a much improved therapeutic armamentarium, perhaps the following story will help.

"We are going the wrong way"

We used to own a summer cottage a few kilometres outside Newport, a small town in northern Vermont. Given that I had learned the structure of the town well and that it was quite small, I seldom got lost. I knew where the bank and bookstore were, that the post office was located on the left side of Main Street, and that the Pick and Shovel hardware store was across from the post office.

One day we drove out of town to visit friends in another little village about 40 km away. I had phoned for instructions and wrote them down carefully, repeating them to my friend to ensure I had written down every twist and turn correctly.

We started off with me driving and, as usual, my wife navigating. Blissfully ignorant, as always, I drove along, confident that the combination of carefully inscribed directions and my wife's navigational skills would get us to our destination with no problem. After a quarter of an hour, however, I



could see that Ora was becoming mildly agitated, carefully checking my notes and looking out the window for signposts.

"What's wrong?" I asked.

"We are going the wrong way," she answered.

"How could we be? We are following Jill's instructions to the letter," I countered with a smile.

"No, no, I can feel it; we are going in the wrong direction," she insisted.

I laughed. "How can you possibly tell?" I needled her. "All you can see are trees on either side of the road. We haven't passed a cross street, sign, or anything for the last 15 minutes. There's no way you could tell where we're going. Just follow the directions, and we'll get there all right."

Similar little towns

Another 25 minutes went by, this time in silence, except for a few mutterings from Ora: "The sun is on the wrong side of the road. The sun is not supposed to set in the east," and so forth.

Shortly, however, we began to see a few houses and stores and entered another little town. We had arrived! Feeling particularly proud of myself, I went on and on: "You know, you should trust me. Just take and follow directions carefully and

there's *never* a problem. I always get us there, don't I?"

"And look!" I continued. "These little towns are *so* similar and built to such an exact plan. In our town the Pick and Shovel is on the right and the post office is on the left side of Main Street. Here it's exactly the opposite."

And indeed it was. This place was the mirror image of Newport, from whence we'd come. My wife's mouth fell open, and she looked at me as if I had gone completely mad.

"Don't you realize what we've done?"

"Yes," I said confidently. "We've arrived!"

"We've arrived all right," she spluttered. "We're back in Newport. We've gone in a complete circle. You've just driven into town from the other side."

There was no need for her to say "I told you so" or to call me a dummy. Ora did neither, as she is a kind and long-suffering soul. But it was quite obvious that I was one sick man.



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References

1. Wexler BE, Gottschalk CH, Fulbright RK, Prohovnik I, Lacadie CM, Rounsaville BJ, et al. Functional magnetic resonance imaging of cocaine craving. *Am J Psychiatry* 2001;158:86-95.
2. Hodges D. Brain's frontal lobe may hold key to sense of humour. *Med Post* 2001 Jan 16;37(2):47.