Columns
Horizons
Spirituality



Sr. Kathryn Press stands at a trailhead in New York's Sterling Forest State Park in the Ramapo Mountains (Courtesy of Kathryn Press)



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May 6, 2022

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I have an on-again, off-again relationship with GPS (Global Positioning System). For the three years I lived in Manhattan, it was nonnegotiable. I always used Waze satellite navigation software to get the most up-to-date information about traffic and construction. Even if I knew exactly where I was going, GPS became a combination security blanket and news bulletin. Now, living in Ireland, the satnav (satellite navigation) isn't as helpful. Frequently, I'll type in a destination and it simply doesn't appear on the map. Thankfully, I can read maps; between that and road signs, I can get to most places.

Map reading is a childhood skill that's taken on new meaning in my adult life. My family did a lot of outdoor activities, including hiking and camping. Our annual adventures became known as FFF: Forced Family Fun. Aside from wonderful memories and the beauty of nature, FFF taught me a lot of practical skills. With the patience of Job, my dad would take out the map, help us locate where we were on the trail, and make sure we could read the topography and the key signs along the way.

When I first learned to drive, I only drove to places I knew. I had a pretty good sense of direction and was familiar with everywhere I needed to go. But when I moved away for college, I went online to MapQuest and printed directions to favorite destinations, which I kept in a file folder! I honed my inner compass, quickly learned new surroundings and later could find my way without the directions; I used my *50 States Atlas* only for major road trips.

After I entered the convent, I had to learn new cities and states very quickly. One of our vans had a TomTom navigation system. When I got a smartphone, I regularly reached for Google Maps. Let me set the record straight: Using GPS is often necessary, but it's left a mark on my spiritual life.



A trail blaze on the Sleeping Giant trail in Sleeping Giant State Park, Connecticut (Courtesy of Kathryn Press)

A few years ago, I went on a retreat in upstate New York. Escaping New York City, I longed for trees and wildlife (not the kind you find scurrying across subway tracks!) to refresh and renew my spirit. I looked up some nearby trails and made plans for adventures that week.

The weather was fabulous. As I hiked, I kept feeling an urgent need to check the GPS on my phone against my paper map. I shook it off and thought I was simply out of practice with map reading. The next hike, I challenged myself to read the trail blazes (signs that mark the trail's direction) and remain aware of my surroundings. Still, I had trouble entering into the moment and kept wondering how far along I was on the trail. On all my hikes I practiced trail safety: signing the trail log, doing weather checks, wearing appropriate clothing and staying aware of my surroundings. I went

on well-blazed and public trails, and I considered myself a confident and well-seasoned hiker. But long after my retreat, these experiences and my lack of self-confidence stayed with me.

I can't pinpoint when I started trusting myself less and needing more assurance. As I hiked, I heard myself say things like: "You're doing it wrong. Are you sure this is right? Is that really what you remember? Why is this taking so long? There might be something dangerous up ahead!" But it didn't stop with hiking. I began to realize I was trusting God less, too. St. Ignatius of Loyola would be quick to name these doubts as coming from the evil spirit. The second-guessing, need for immediate feedback and the preoccupation with the past/future are all classic tactics of the enemy.

This season of doubt and mistrust (in myself and in God) lasted the better part of two years. Thankfully. I had a wise spiritual director who accompanied me for part of that journey, who sat with me patiently while I sat with the questions, and listened to me discern these spirits.

Whatever you call it, GPS is a helpful tool. It tells us where we are going, but it doesn't make the journey any easier or any quicker. I applied the instant gratification of Google Maps to where I thought I "needed" to be in my spiritual life. I lived from a place of anxiety, needing to know every next step so I could be prepared for any/everything. My desire to check the GPS to see if was on the "right path" left me crippled when I compared my spiritual journey to those around me.

Last summer, I again was on retreat (this time in the backwoods of Connecticut). The image of a trail blaze came to me in prayer. Sometimes the blazes are fancy logos that mark out a path; other times they're simple painted rectangles on tree trunks. I brought this image to my retreat director who gently helped me unwrap this image as a gift. It is a challenge, from God, to trust my own sense of direction and to trust the path marked out in front of me. It's a challenge to trust in His plan for my life.

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When I'm rooted in trusting Him, I live with a spirit of discovery, adventure, and wonder —characteristics of my childhood. The skills I learned on family hiking trips took on new meaning. They taught me to:

- Review the map before, during and after the hike. I need to consult the map to know where I'm going, but I can't let that get in the way of enjoying the hike.
- Trust your innate sense of direction and check in with it. And be OK with making a wrong turn now and again.
- Look both ways on the trail (forward and back). A well-blazed trail means you can see at least one blaze in either direction from every point on the journey.
- Enjoy the view here and now (instead of worrying about what might be up ahead). Live in the present moment.

Life isn't a Google Map. We can't always pick the fastest route or avoid highways and tolls. My spiritual journey can't be plotted out on Google Maps. Detours and diversions, construction and congestion are part of the deal. So, too, are discovery and delight, adventure and awe. Thankfully I'm not traveling alone. Jesus promises to be with me and to send His Spirit to guide me. When I'm rooted and grounded in Trust, I live with a spirit of discovery, adventure and wonder. I'm free to explore the mystery of God and the mystery of myself without checking to see if I'm on the "right" spot on the map.

A week after the trail blaze image came to me in prayer, I was walking in a state park with a friend. There were multiple trails we could take, and I chose the main route. Shortly into our walk, I felt the wave of "check your phone" come over me. I stopped dead in my tracks and looked around. I couldn't see a single trail blaze ahead of me. (The path was wide and we could hardly have wandered off.) But as I turned around, I could see the yellow blaze on a tree nearby. With a deep breath, I leaned into trust and resumed our hike.