An introductory note: In early May 2013 Harm de Blij presented a “Why Geography Matters” talk before the Oklahoma City Men’s Dinner Club. The preamble touched briefly on mental maps, orientation, and certain species’ ability to navigate seasonally over long distances. Following the Q&A, a member of the Club waited until others had departed and told me that he seemed to have a unique ability to sense direction, about which he had never told anyone except members of his family. We agreed to explore this in a short interview:

You report that you have a “sixth sense” of direction. At what age did you first become conscious of this?

I cannot remember a time when I was not aware of direction, although identifying this in a formal way came later. For me, orientation has been a lifelong obsession. I was an only child, and my dad noticed my interest and helped me understand it by teaching me map reading at a very early age and getting me acquainted with the rectangular grid that we have in our part of the world.

Do you remember any learning experiences, that is, getting disoriented and having to deal with it?

Please understand that by the time I went to junior high school, I had a well-developed mental compass. I knew when I was facing due north whether I was inside or outside. My school building was built in 1937, a WPA building that faced SW toward an intersection. When I walked in the door on my first day, my compass told me that I was facing north, rather than NE. The building’s layout meant that I had to be wrong, but as I walked along the central hallway toward the cafeteria and gym my brain recorded that I was walking due north. Then at a certain point, just past the last classroom, my mental compass switched and told me that I was walking due east (rather than NE). That was disconcerting, to put it mildly. It happened every time I walked that hallway over six years. The building still stands, I walk that hallway now and then and the same thing still happens on the same hallway spot.

So your brain records your orientation not in exact degrees, but in directional terms such as NW, SE, and so on?

Well, yes, but it’s more refined than that. I know the difference between, say, NW and NNW, or NW and WNW. A few degrees, and I’ll be aware of a change.

How does this manifest itself when you’re traveling? Have you experienced it on a ship? On airplanes?

On ships – my wife knows about this from our cruise experience – if we leave port and head out in a certain compass direction, I’ll know what it is; but if, during the night, there is a change, say from east to ESE, I’ll know it when I wake up. In your lecture you talked about your informal survey suggesting that women are quicker to get oriented aboard than men. Well, I have the ship’s layout on my mental map, more or less, from the moment we get on board, including the way the ship “points” while still docked.

On airplanes, I must tell you I really need to know where we’re going. New York to Paris the variants are east, of course. But the great circle route isn’t due east, so I sense the route in segments. Talk about disorientation – it can happen. I remember flying to Europe one time, but the aircraft had sat at the gate facing westward, and it was night and I fell asleep. Apparently my mental compass got stuck on west, and I arrived totally disoriented. I also perceive that there’s a difference between sea and air movement and how those register on my compass, and land “orientation”, a different challenge.

We geographers tend to think we’re pretty good at knowing where we are. Have you ever felt actually “lost”?

As a matter of fact, and I don’t mean to overstate this, but I can’t remember ever having been lost. Yes, I use a map when it comes to remote countrysides where road quality matters, but in terms of “where I am going,” I’m not sure exactly how to put this but my eyes relay directional information to my brain and my mental compass always seems to work.

Mike, you mentioned never having shared this with anyone..

No, I never considered it unusual and in any case it would take too long to explain. I bore my friends enough!

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