

Traveling Companion

I recently took a trip back east to visit a few old friends who live scattered about the state of Massachusetts. If you passed me on the toll roads or rolling around the rotaries of Boston, you might have thought I was traveling alone. But I wasn't. My companion wasn't human, or even any other species of sentient being, lucky for her, but we had a relationship all the same, if by relationship you mean someone to talk to, feel alternately good about and frustrated with, someone whose intentions you trust or question, someone you're at times happy to be with and at others to be rid of.

What I discovered along this road trip was that my new GPS device became the unwitting recipient of what is called in psychotherapy lingo my traveling transference. That is to say that I wound up have feelings about the GPS device of the kind I always felt were earned by the behavior of the people I often travel with: my husband, children, or friends. And my feelings about my connection with the device followed closely the trajectory of those I've experienced towards many of those above persons during the course of a trip together, not unlike the stages of grief, but starting out a bit cheerier: Infatuation, honeymoon, tolerance, annoyance, irritations and fed up.

First came the fun and excitement of this new companionship, especially in the state and I mean State I was in: Massachusetts, whose roads and drivers are famous for their challenging ways. When I moved west from there almost 30 years ago, the worker at the SF DMV laughed when she looked at my Massachusetts license. "I'm not sure we honor those here," she joked. "We really shouldn't: you're known as bad drivers." Apparently, there's a moral trade afoot. The people of Massachusetts vote liberally. They are peaceful folk who want gun control and are generally tolerant of personal differences.

They allow gay marriage. Whatever intolerance they secretly feel towards others, they don't express at the ballot box, but rather save for the roadway. They are known as the most aggressive and careless of drivers, have the lowest percentage of seat belt usage in the nation, are famous for running red lights and making unpredictable lane changes. Californians, on the other hand, want to legislate personal relationships, make poor children set their own broken bones, and expand gun usage. But let a pedestrian set one foot off the curb and the most macho hummer will stop on a dime, even though the pedestrian in question might just be an anti-gun lesbian with sick child en route to a non government sanctioned wedding.

So my GPS was a godsend on the streets of Boston and Cambridge, full of tiny one way streets and rotaries, those damned rotaries, left over from the days when horses drew their buggies to the center of town from any which way, before anyone even imagined the motor vehicle and its coming needs for logical pathways and parking. My husband had preset the GPS with all my friends' addresses, and listed them alphabetically under an easy-to-find category called Favorites. All I had to do was start typing in the name of a friend and Co became Connie became the address and there I was. Last year, the ride from Connie's Cambridge house to my cousin Doris' in Brookline took about an hour, with the entire missed turns and compensations husband Joel and I had to maneuver. This time, the GPS got me there in 14 minutes, fully parked, during rush hour.

You can choose the voice you want to hear guiding you along your route. Presuming you want to hear English, you can choose among an American accented male or female or a Brit of either gender. I chose the American woman, under the assumption

that I'd have fewer issues with her, would not, for example, be inclined to disagree just so I could prove that my sense of direction was just as good as hers. I intend to try the other voices in time and may report on the difference that makes in my relationship with them/it.

There were signs early on of the problems that were to come just as in any relationship: When the GPS took me through downtown Boston, during the afternoon rush hour on a summer Friday afternoon when I was en route from Brighton to Gloucester Mass up the coast, I went along but suspiciously. I hadn't looked at a map, but suspected that even a few miles out of the way in outlying areas of less congestion might have been wiser than the sticky mess—with an emphasis on sticky—as it was humid when it wasn't outright raining—throughout the ordeal. True, the traffic meter on the GPS had gone from green to red, signaling delays, and the estimated time of arrival in Gloucester kept being pushed back, but at that point I blamed myself for not reading the handbook well enough in advance to know how to handle such conditions. Similarly, when I missed an exit—often because many streets in Massachusetts are just not labeled and well, I do have some trust issues of my own and could use some validation from a street sign when exiting at the suggestion of someone who I hadn't known all that long, really. “Recalculating,” is what she'd say, and, at first I thought “how accommodating of her, how non-judgmental.”

But I wasn't as forgiving or as grateful a few days later while, when returning to the Boston area from the Berkshires, when, again in traffic and the rain that lasted my whole vacation, my companion's “recalculations,” were beginning to sound a bit exasperated—as if it were my fault that there was an accident on the Mass Pike—and I

turn found that she might have come up with some alternatives rather than a persistent effort to get me back on the road I had just intentionally left.

By the time we got to Logan airport, we were both ready for a break. I packed up the GPS and put it/her the suitcase that cost \$15 to ship home with me. It's been a bout a month since I returned and I hadn't really needed to use the GPS until a few days ago to get to a doctor's appt in Santa Rosa where I work half the week. Although I was a bit concerned when I couldn't enter the city Santa Rosa directly into the GPS system (no spacing allowed it seems—a character defect worth working on- if you ask me) We'd had some needed separation and, with guidance, I was able to type in my destination and was grateful again for the supported quickness with which I arrived, despite a late start. My friend and I were reconciled. Traveling takes its toll on relationships. Now that we're home, we're OK.