"Places Your GPS Can't Take You"

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Thank you for having me with you today. I am honored to be here and grateful to the members of the organizing committee for the invitation. I also want to welcome you all to Southwest Virginia. This is my home, the source and focus of my work as teacher and scholar, the place where I give expression to my citizenship and my creativity. There is not much in my life, if anything, that Southwest Virginia has not shaped or influenced. This is a good place to be, and as we say in Southwest Virginia, we are proud to have you.

The planners for the 2011 Gulf-South Summit have called us to be in conversation focused on finding ways to engage with communities in solutions to some very difficult issues: changing demographics and diversified communities; economic, financial, and workplace instability; environmental distress and sustainability; need for our communities to meet food, shelter, and healthcare disparities. These are issues with which we in Southwest Virginia struggle on a daily basis. They define our world—we know all too well their lived effect, their dangers, the costs they exact from us—our neighbors, our places, and our shared public life.

In Southwest Virginia, we know, as many of you also know, that to deal with these issues, to be focused on engaging our communities in finding solutions to these issues will raise even more questions—questions that could prove more difficult than these first ones, and, probably more troubling. They are more troubling because these questions will necessarily lead to issues and questions we cannot anticipate, in directions we may not want to go, challenging

long and dearly held values and comfortable assumptions. In Southwest Virginia, we are learning that to follow these uncharted and challenging questions will mean confronting the brambles of our biases and the thickets of the categories and mixed intentions through which we order the world. We in Southwest Virginia are learning the hard lesson that an honest struggle with these issues involves acknowledging our own deep complicity in the systems that have caused the issues in the first place. We are also learning that to deal with these issues introduces us to places we could never have suspected or for which we have been poorly prepared. And as if all that were not trouble and difficulty enough, on this journey there are few markers and no directions.

But first, a story.

I grew up about fifty miles west of here, across Christiansburg Mountain and the New River, in Pulaski County, in the town of Dublin; my family has been in that area for ten or eleven generations. In the 1960s, for us in Dublin, coming to Roanoke was coming to the **very** big city. So important was the trip, we could not come to Roanoke dressed in anything but our Sunday best. Just over the tracks from here, there was Thalhimer’s and Heironimous, J. C. Penney, and Sears, the S&W cafeteria, and the city market. On this side of the tracks were the palatial Hotel Roanoke, and the headquarters of the N&W railroad. Verily, Roanoke was the height of western civilization.

When I was young, before the days of the Interstate, the trip from Dublin to Roanoke followed U.S. Route 11. Approaching Roanoke from the west on Route 11 usually meant a circuitous path through the town of Salem, passage among industrial, business, and residential neighborhoods. To avoid the traffic, there was a well-known and much-used shortcut, but to

follow it, the traveler needed to turn right at a particular corner. The corner was recognizable well before the traveler got to it, because at the corner sat the Salem Catholic Church, with its tower rising above the treetops. With the coming of the Interstate in the late 1960s and early 1970s, travel to Roanoke became much less circuitous and time-consuming and more commonplace. We did not need the Catholic Church or any other landmarks to tell us where to turn. Still, the old paths had their appeal.

Once, my grandmother, Aldah, her sister Emma, and another sister Thelma, and Thelma's husband, Pat, determined they would travel to see their other two sisters. The trip required them to go through Roanoke, but because none of them liked the Interstate, too noisy, too fast, too many threats to life and limb, they determined to travel Route 11. At the time, my grandmother drove a 1963 fire engine-red Plymouth with rocket lights and enough chrome to sink one battleship and outfit another. Early one summer morning they loaded that glorious car with their suitcases and set off. They even had a picnic lunch of pimento cheese sandwiches and potato salad to eat at one of the concrete picnic tables that at one time were at frequent intervals along the road, under wide shade trees; "waysides" we called them. Knowing the way, confident, the old road speaking to deep memories and well-known paths, they were as pilgrims in that Plymouth.

Mid-afternoon, having not heard from the pilgrims, my mother called her aunts, wanting to know if the others had arrived. They had not. Late afternoon, a call from the watchful aunts. Nary a sight, nor a sound from the pilgrims. With evening coming on and still no word, and calls back and forth to confirm that no one had heard anything, the whole connection of kin was on the verge of panic. Then, in the gloaming, the phone rang, and in a voice tinged with relief but

also clearly aggrieved and affronted, without so much as a "hello," or "how do you do," my grandmother said, as if bringing news that augured doom, "They've moved the Catholic Church."

Later, we learned that once they had missed the turn and were off the familiar route, their journey took them to places, through neighborhoods, by businesses, into conversations from which convention and custom had long shielded them—virtuous, white, middle class, church women, whose identities were shaped in the first years of the twentieth century. When her grandchildren asked her about her trip through Roanoke that summer's day, my grandmother only said, "Law, honey, you don't want to know. We got all turned around."

Now, quite apart from the rather profound yet entirely unconscious theological and cultural implications of that long-ago statement that someone had moved the Catholic Church, I would suggest to you that my grandmother's statement has its echoes in tone and meaning these forty years later. The pilgrims in that Plymouth that day were in a world in which their global positioning systems were gone. The world was changing, they were all turned around, and they saw a world they otherwise would not have seen. A cautionary tale perhaps, because if we are to struggle honestly with the issues this Summit's planners have laid before us, if we are to consider what it means to educate our students for effective citizenship in a changing world, and for meaningful engagement with the many subsequent questions those issues raise, we are going to be all turned around. We will arrive in places for which we have no directions and no maps, and we must allow those new-found places to teach us the way of education, service, and citizenship. And that, interestingly enough, is about as good a way to describe the work of higher education, and particularly the work of civic engagement, as anything of which I can think.

So, I invite you this afternoon to turn off the main road, to go left instead of right or right instead of left, to bear north instead of east, to take a route for which your professional, political, academic GPS is not directing you. As we begin, there is something you need to know. While we may have turned off the GPS, there **are** directional tools for us. You may have heard of them. We call them maps. This map is one of definitions. What do we mean when we speak and think of place? For what are we looking? How will we know it when we arrive?

Our map suggests that place is the result of a three-part interaction between the natural environment, the built environment, and human culture and history. The natural environment, encompasses the geology, the climate, the terrain, the water table, the ecosystems—the whole of it, from the foundations of the earth to the present, to the unseen and unknowable future, in all of its ecological and geological complexity, simplicity, and diversity. The built environment—how human beings have interacted with, made accommodations to, sought to bring sustenance and shelter for themselves from the natural environment, from the earliest human habitation to the present. I am speaking here of the elegancies that human creativity has produced in response to the natural environment of the place. I also mean the tragedies, misuses, grave mistakes, and downright ugliness humans have produced as they have exploited a place. The third component of this three-part interaction is human culture and history. More than the time of recorded history, I want us to call to mind the long, long span of human interaction and struggle in a place, the great cavalcade of ideas and tragedies and hopes and longings and triumphs, of grace and vengeance, of pettiness and courage, of times of peace and plenty, and times of trouble and doubt. Because it is part of the natural history of the place and set in its geologic time, even in its broadest and most sweeping perspective, human history is very, very short, really just a brief

flash. Although the presence of humans in any place is necessarily short, it has been crucial, formative, which gives rise to the insight that place is fundamentally a social process. Our map further suggests that if the three-part interaction of these elements is also a social process, then woven into the fibers and sinews of every place is the basic reality of all human relationships: conflict. Any place is the result of social conflict. In any place there is engraved on the landscape, in its institutions, in its memories and stories, the reality of conflict; sometimes explicit, many times not. Therefore, rather than an aberration or something to be stepped around, conflict in a place is part of its nature, part of what makes that place.

No doubt, now that the GPS is off and we have reviewed this map, the astute among us have already detected the first question, sensed the first problem, felt the thorns and pricks of the first thicket. I have not spoken once of community. So I need to be clear: I am not speaking here of or about community. Your GPS will quite frequently speak to you of community—the legal community, the community of faith, the arts community, the social network community, the face book community, the academic community, covenant communities, community-based research, community service learning…. Not once in any of this is the community understood with the same historical, material, environmental, and conflicted particularity and complexity that our map suggests about places.

What is more, place increasingly has become the new academic fad, the new term. I would suggest that the positioning systems often at work in the academy render many of these other uses of place almost synonymous with community and devoid of conflict. Guided by those positioning systems, some have replaced community with the "cutting edge" understanding of place, little noticing that the meaning and the interactions have not changed. But your GPS is

turned off; remember? This map invites you into places defined in millennia—long interrelationships of the natural and built environments and human culture and history, conflicted and troubled though it may be. There is your map. I wish I had some others to offer you, but it is all I have. I can fairly well guarantee you that it will take you to places that your GPS cannot.

At Emory & Henry College, our work is grounded in three particular places: Meadowview, in Washington County, Virginia, Fries, on the New River in Grayson County, Virginia, and Caretta, in McDowell County, West Virginia, just across the Virginia-West Virginia border. In his novel, *Jayber Crow*, Wendell Berry describes the town of Port William. "You would need to draw a very big map of the world in order to make Port William visible upon it. In actual scale of a state highway map, Port William would be smaller than the dot that locates it. In the eyes of the powers that be, we Port Williamites live and move and have our being within a black period about the size of the one that ends a sentence. It would be a considerable overstatement to say that before making their decisions the leaders of the world do not consult the citizens of Port William. Thousands of leaders of our state and nation, entire administrations, corporate board meetings, university sessions, synods and councils of the church have come and gone without hearing or pronouncing the name of Port William." The same can be said, in fact is said, of Fries, Caretta, and Meadowview. Formed in the three-part interaction that constitutes any place, these three places offer a way of seeing much of what has transpired in Southwest Virginia and Appalachia over the last century and a half.

These are places "from which capital has moved on," taking with it power, prestige, and the attention of American culture. Until the 1960s, Meadowview, in Washington County, was the commercial center of a great agricultural region—producing dairy products, beef, pork, wool,

poultry and eggs, apples, wheat and small grains, corn, and burley tobacco. A shipping center, the town of Meadowview was economically vibrant with stores, restaurants, craft artisans, services. By the turn of the new century, all of that was gone and the Meadowview Town Square was lined with abandoned and collapsing buildings. Today, 67 percent of households qualify as low or moderate income, and over 50 percent of the children in the Meadowview Elementary School qualify for free and reduced price lunches.

In 1948, McDowell County, West Virginia, had a population of over 100,000 people; today its population is less than 20,000. At the mid-point of the twentieth century, McDowell was one of the wealthiest counties in the United States, its wealth built on its coal resources. Even in the 1930s, boosters described McDowell as the billion-dollar coalfield. Today, when measured by median household income, McDowell ranks as the eighth poorest county in the United States; 46 percent of its children live below the poverty line. Caretta is located in the southern-most portion of the county, in the area most economically distressed. Fries, on the New River, came into being as a cotton mill town. From 1903 through 1988, the Washington Mills was the largest employer in Fries, providing jobs for generations of families. The mill closed in 1988, and today there are 542 people living in Fries. With an aging population, Fries counts 20 percent of its total population living below the poverty line, but 30 percent of its children.

Both Fries and Caretta were company towns, towns in which the industrialists that built them controlled them lock, stock, and barrel until they were sold to another company. When profits declined, when the American economy yet again restructured itself, capital moved on, leaving behind the place and its people. Meadowview was not a company town, but the same

economic shifts and forces that made Fries and Caretta redundant and lessened their importance and value, did the same work here.

Each of these places, in their own ways, must daily confront the difficult issues of changing demographics, economic, financial, and workplace instability, environmental distress and sustainability, and the need to meet food, shelter, and healthcare disparities. They do so in a society more and more indifferent and hostile to those struggles. Marsha Timpson, a good friend of mine, a life-long resident of McDowell, once said, "America would rather not have to deal with us." She was speaking of McDowell County, but her thoughts have their echoes in Meadowview and Fries, and in many other places throughout Southwest Virginia and southern West Virginia.

Now, at this point you probably expect me to point to the dozens of intractable issues and systemic forces resulting in these conditions in these places. You expect to outline ways that we can work to address those larger issues and forces. Then, together we can rise up, congratulate ourselves on how smart we are, how just, how liberal, how unlike others, and then in righteous indignation go forth to change the world. If we were to do this, we would participate in and extend the processes that have encouraged the academy to produce a wandering, nomadic professoriate, and administrative class that often devalues or dismisses a citizenship of place, preferring and valuing instead appointments in elite colleges and universities, located far away, both geographically and emotionally from places like Fries or Caretta or Meadowview—where schools are better, there are more cultural opportunities, where good coffee and good music go hand in hand. A citizenship of place requires us to leave the vacuum tube of the Interstate that runs between the fashionable places and their universities and colleges and make the ethical

choices to dwell and abide in place with less significance than the dot that ends a sentence. But remember—your GPS is turned off, we are now in places your GPS cannot take you, we must step onto muddy ground, into some very thorny thickets. Yet here these places have taught me, continue to teach me, and can begin to teach us all a way through. These places teach us about ourselves, teach us about what it means to teach, teach us what is necessary in order to enter into the work of building alliances and coalitions to address these critical issues. From these places, I am learning what it means to be a citizen of a place, to have my mind and my teaching shaped in that place, to see better what it means to link meaningfully service and learning, and why it is so urgent that we do.

They teach us that the defining characteristic of a citizenship of place is attentiveness to the totality of the place—its natural history and life, its built environment, the complexities and conflicts of his human history and culture. Our places need people who are prepared to see and to understand the world from the perspective of a place, to have a deep attentiveness to all the realities of a place. I have been involved in work in McDowell County, West Virginia for almost twenty years. Sometimes at night, I can close my eyes and see serrated bluffs and cliffs along the ridge tops. Sometimes, when I close my eyes, I can see coal slurry impoundments, with millions of tons of rock and dirt, and billions of gallons of tarry and smoking sludge, collecting behind earthen dams, looming over towns and neighborhoods. Sometimes, I see the former company towns, and hear in the dialects that are so familiar to me, the stories of those places. Some of those towns were washed away in the floods of July 2001 and May 2002, and the towns and places I can see are gone forever, the dialects are of people that can no longer live in McDowell. This is part of what it means to be a citizen of a place. This is what attentiveness

means, and what makes place-based work so elusive and never fixed, always evolving and deepening, always maturing, because places are so. Nothing in my graduate studies and even less in academic culture has taught me this. It was bred into me by people who lost their way when they moved the Catholic Church, and I have learned it from the places in which I live and work. This attentiveness is a value and a way of being that only our places can teach us over a very long time. Our responsibility as teachers, therefore, is to create opportunities for students to see and understand the values and acquire the skills that lead to such attentiveness.

The three places in which our work is grounded tell me over and over, in ways subtle and opaque, and in ways direct and pellucid, that a citizenship of place is a citizenship of deep questions. People in Fries, in Caretta, in Meadowview will say we do not need your answers, we need citizens who can struggle with tough questions, we need citizens and partners with the capacities to put down roots, to understand, and take the long, long view. Do not send us answers, send us people, young people, who have the capacity to hear our stories, endure the conflicts, keep silence when silence is called for, and understand the questions. These places teach us that the academy's power and assumptions lead its people to think and to live as if they will change the place, serve it, perhaps, but be the final and authoritative answer to the issues faced in that place. The academy often appears on the scene with all the answers, never having heard the questions. The painful truth is, there is very little difference between that approach and the power mill owners and mine owners exerted in Fires or in Caretta, they grow from the same consciousness.

Our places teach us that our relationships in a place must be reciprocal. My Meadowview neighbor plows my garden. When his wife's brother died, we took a pound cake

by the house. What **<u>you</u>** may call reciprocal relationships, is usually called by others, neighborliness. In the process by which we work to address these central issues, we must be changed; our power must be challenged, in the relationships we forge in a place. My friends in Caretta, Meadowview, and Fries tell me that one of the means that educators and bureaucrats alike work to maintain their power and to deny a mutual neighborliness is the use of jargon. I have seen this. We are masters of jargon—CBR, action research, place-based work, service learning, academic service learning, participatory evaluation—take your pick. However, our places teach us that such language, such jargon is both pretentious and dishonest; we must find a language that speaks less of our power and more of the place. If what we want to say, if what we want to undertake is important enough to be heard, to be joined, it is important enough to be put in a language that the people of a place can know our meanings. It is a question of accessibility and relationship, of fairness and justice—of neighborliness

Meadowview, Caretta, and Fries are teaching me that a citizenship defined in its rootedness in a place grapples with the difference between the right answers and the honest responses. The academy is about the right answer—give the right answer, you will pass the quiz, give the right answer you will get tenure, give the right answer, you will fix the problem and then can move on and we teach our students so. Sometimes, we must give the right answer, as when state or federal authorities hold block grant funds until we firmly outline in prescribed language and terms what our vision is for our place. More often, however, what is most needed in a place is the honest response.

Two or three years ago, we suffered in Meadowview a severe drought. With little rain, nothing much grew over the summer, not gardens and certainly not hay. My neighbor runs a

dairy farm, one of the five or six left in Washington County. Any dairy farmer will tell you that it is a marginal undertaking, never quite making as much as it costs to run it, never seeming to break free of economic difficulty. For this neighbor, the making of hay over the summer was absolutely essential to maintaining the farm over the winter. But this summer, there was little hay. What hay he made, was in the large round bales, and collected along fencerows in his boundaries scattered throughout Meadowview. He did not have a surplus of hay, but with luck and care, it might have been enough. Late in August, the sun and the heat beating down, the group of bales that had been harvested the first of the season, was discovered on fire. A slow, smoldering fire, and nothing could be done to extinguish it. The thin smoke covered Meadowview for days, rising like a mist, stinging our eyes, lingering in our homes. The fire department used an accelerant to speed the process and get it over with. They suspected arson. Two weeks later, in another of the same neighbor's fields, other bales were noticed to be smoking, and the same scenario followed. Arson was again suspected. And then, in another week, the same events. Three times in less than two months.

By this time, students had returned to Emory & Henry for another academic year, and began their service learning, their civic engagements. One of those students was working in the local high school, tutoring young people who were in disciplinary trouble and had been taken out of classes. As I do with my classes, I asked students to think carefully and to struggle with the issues and questions they identify in their service sites. My student told me of a young man who was bitterly silent, unresponsive, seemingly a seething, smoldering blister of anger. She wondered about it, nearly afraid of him, blaming him or his parents for his trouble.

In October, the drought had not let up and all the world seemed a tinderbox. The last bit of hay my neighbor had out was piled against a fencerow in a field adjacent to the college, just across the hill from my home. Late on a Sunday night, carried on the fall breeze, we smelled smoke.

I saw my neighbor on Wednesday, and knew immediately that he was distraught—fearful for his livelihood, even more fearful and angry that someone had targeted him for all this. He told me the sheriff had launched a full scale search to identify the culprit and stop the madness. My neighbor also told me that he was thinking of sleeping in his hay barn, with a gun, to protect what little hay he had left, to safeguard his future. Desperate times. That same week, my student came to class very disturbed—the young man who seemed a oozing boil of anger was gone and no one knew of his whereabouts. We learned later that the sheriff had arrested the young man, for arson.

It seems that this young man's mother had been arrested for trafficking in methamphetamines; it was for her a way of making some money. When she was arrested, the boy's father was at home, and the authorities believed it would be all right for the boy to remain with his father. Shortly thereafter, the father left and was not heard from again. Without income, there was no money to pay the power company, with past-due payments, the power company cut off all electricity to the house where they boy was living. In Washington County, when the lights go out, so too does the water, there being no electricity to run the well pump. You can imagine what soon the state of things in that house became. Off the main road, in the far reaches of the county, removed from people, the young man soon slipped through what remains of the safety net. Rather than remain by himself in a house at the end of a dirt road, with

no lights, no heat, no water, and potato chips and Mountain Dew for every meal, he would cruise with his buddies over the roads around Meadowview. Boredom, anger, loneliness, and fear is a potent mixture. With a cigarette and a small can of gasoline, a stack of hay becomes very tempting and dangerously inconsequential.

So there it was in my classroom, the questions of that place, the questions we were all asking. I asked my student, who is the victim here, who is right here, who is wrong here? Who suffers here? What is justice here? What is the right answer here? Who are we to blame here? Who are we to hold accountable?

In her novel, *Strange as this Weather Has Been,* Ann Pancake writes that "in times like these, you have to grow big enough inside to hold both the loss and the hope." That is what it means to be a citizen of a place, to work everyday to know the difference between the right answers and the honest responses. Our places are asking of us to struggle in our teaching, in our classrooms, in our civic engagement to teach our students, to learn for ourselves, what it means to hold the loss and the hope in our places together.

The Norfolk & Western Railroad built the Hotel Roanoke, maintained it for most of its history until the last fifteen years or so. It was the grandest, most beautiful hotel in Southwest Virginia or in southern West Virginia. In the first decades of the twentieth century, because the railroad offered good steady jobs for people like the members of my family who came from hard circumstances, members of my grandmother's generation found work with the N&W. Although on our trips to Roanoke we never came to the Hotel Roanoke, it was far too fancy, I thought somehow we were connected to it, had a stake in it.

Your GPS will tell you that Fries, Caretta, and Meadowview are not far from here. Each of them is within 120 miles of this place, but your GPS cannot tell you that these places are linked to this room, to this very building, to the mortar that holds together the bricks, to the murals on the walls, in ways not measured in miles.

Meadowview was originally located some two miles south of its present site, but the citizens moved the town in the late 1800s, in order to take advantage of the economic potentials the railroad offered. Adjacent to the railroad, Meadowview centered its life on the station and took its life and vitality as a shipping center. The N&W shipped hundreds of tons of agricultural products to national and world markets, and brought to the people of Meadowview goods and merchandise from all over the world.

The electric power for the cotton mill in Fries was derived from the New River, but were it not for the Norfolk and Western that connected Fries to the wider markets, the mill could never have been. For the better part of its life, every cotton bale to be processed and every bolt of cloth produced in the Washington Mills, came over the N&W.

In Caretta, and in McDowell County, nearly every ounce of coal produced since 1880, has left that place on N&W and then Norfolk-Southern trains. Today, 80 percent of the surface area of McDowell County is owned by corporations outside of McDowell and regional activists and local leaders will tell you that one of the most difficult obstacles to sustainable economic development in McDowell is the lack of local ownership of land. The largest portion of land is owned by the Norfolk-Southern, the successor to the N&W. Lest you think yourself free from all this, innocent of any involvement, somehow above it all, I encourage you to examine your TIAA-CREF pension fund. I would encourage you to look closely at your pay check, and your

institution's endowment or the endowments of those foundations that support your work with grants, endowments from which part of your pay comes and part of the support comes for the programs and the educational work you envision and plan and of which you are justifiably proud,. In ways both real and metaphorical, our map has brought us where no GPS could, to Fries, Caretta, and Meadowview, to places whose life and wealth helped make possible this place in which we sit.

When the primeval forests covered what would become Southwest Virginia and southern West Virginia, the tree canopy was high and dense, the trees widely spaced and very, very large; the undergrowth was minimal and the sight lines long and clear. Chestnut, oak, hemlock, popular, maple, hickory, covered the region. Because the canopy was so thick and dense, there were few brambles and thickets of vines and undergrowth. However, that was then and this is now. Today, in Fries, where once the Washington Mills stood overlooking the New River, the mill building is gone. The site awaits new investors and developers; around its edges grow the brambles and thickets of blackberry and honeysuckle.

In Caretta, where as late as 1900 the old forest stood, where for the better part of the twentieth century there were homes and neighborhoods, where children played and citizens practiced the art of neighborliness, brambles and thickets now cover the place, reclaiming the land.

In Meadowview, thickets of briars, cedar, and honeysuckle cover the ground that one or two generations ago was productive in agriculture. These places teach us that many of those thickets are of our own making, we are complicit in them just as surely as we sit in a hotel that the wealth of these places helped to build. And by their very nature, by definition, no GPS, none

of our positioning systems or assumptions can help us much in them; we are all turned around. We must allow these places to teach us, to show us the way—how to rename those thickets, to address those issues at the core of this conversation—and they will.

Dan Leidig was one of my neighbors; when I had been a student at Emory & Henry, he was one of my teachers. Throughout his life, Dan was a poet with a deep and abiding attentiveness to place. Toward the end of his life, Dan wrote a poem in which he described what it means to be a teacher committed to working in and with and for a place. The poem closes with the image of blue birds in a January thicket; a thicket sharp and thorny, inhospitable and unwelcoming. The poet suggests that by their delicate coloration and tender presence, by their gently persistent song, those blue birds, stark and clear in a January thicket, help to rename the world.

The renaming of the world, the remapping of the world is the work of education, of civic engagement; it is your work and it is mine, it is the work of our neighbors both inside and outside the academy; it is our shared work. In this work, this hard, hard work, this work that will require of us our lifetimes, and of which we will never see the completion, our places are our teachers, pointing us to new understandings, new ways of citizenship in places where no GPS can take us.