

Drafting our Lenten road map



My son, who will be 4 years old in May, has developed a new love of maps. At first, it didn't matter if it was an actual map. Acceptable alternatives included book dust jackets, books themselves or pieces of colored construction paper with scribbles of lost baby dinosaurs on them. As his interest has evolved, so has his need for specificity. Current in-favor maps now include a placemat of the world, a print-out of a cemetery plan, a depiction of U.S. ecclesiastical provinces, a giant road map of the state of Illinois and a photo of the bat cave.

Now, this development doesn't exactly surprise me, as Joseph comes from a long line of map lovers. My dad, a retired climate scientist, hung topographical maps in our home and always kept an atlas handy. For our family's 750-mile semi-annual drive from North Carolina to visit grandparents in upstate New York, he would order AAA's TripTik Travel Planners for good old-fashioned flip-as-you-go reference.

When I moved to Northern Virginia after college, I bought a ridiculously large wall map of the Washington, D.C., metro area that I actually sat *on* while examining how the multitude of cities and hundreds of roads interconnected. It was my main companion as I drove – GPS stubbornly turned off – determined to learn my way around the area without “cheating.”

Hanging on the walls of our home now are framed maps of France, Paris and Hilton Head Island that the kids and I periodically stop to examine. We find great delight in finding the Eiffel Tower, Sacre-Coeur, Mont-Saint-Michel and – naturally, for all who know and love HHI – Coligny Plaza.

So, yeah, it's not a surprise my kid likes maps. But, hoping to learn more behind his new obsession, I asked him a few

questions. Me: What do you like about maps? Him: "I like the roads, and I like the way the colors are and how they kind of look like spider webs." Me: Why do you like them so much? Him: "Because they have a lot of places to go, and I use them as adventure maps." Me: What kinds of adventures? Him: "I'm trying to find specific things that are lost, like baby dinos, toys, books."

After this very earnest conversation with my son, I started to reflect on the reasons for my own interest in cartography. I like the big picture and the context. I like knowing how things fit together. I like the adventure of identifying a tangible goal and physically working my way toward it. I like how there is always something to learn and to explore. I like the endless possibilities, even the challenges, that they contain.

It's similar to how I feel about Lent. We have from Ash Wednesday to Easter Sunday to arrive at our goal. We have fasting, prayer and the giving of alms as the roads that guide us to our destination. We have countless resources to mine and endless possibilities for spiritual growth, if we maintain our discipline. The challenge is a big one, but so can be the payoff. If we avoid detours and dead ends, it can turn into one big road map to heaven.

I'm going to keep all of this in mind this year as I plan out what a successful Lenten season could look like. Maybe I'll grab a piece of colored construction paper and a crayon and draw out my plan, creating one big adventure for the spiritual life for the next six weeks. I'm sure my little man will be at my side ready to go, his own map in hand – provided that we first find all of the baby dinos.

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