

Upfront

database for everyday tasks seems lame and kind of creepy. Maybe I'm just a dinosaur, forcing archaic skills on my children. But for two weeks they were going to interface with paper.

Our family flew to California in late June, and day one was easy going, map-wise. Following our LA Metro map, we crawled out of the city on I-405, then shot straight up the Central Valley on CA-99, sun baking down on miles of almond orchards, vineyards, and feedlots.

That day, our chief map reader for the trip, 9-year-old Finn, learned about divided highways, mile markers, and run-away truck ramps, and he even managed to fold a map correctly (once). Finn guided us to a hotel in Tulare; it was early evening when we made the final turn. "Turn left on Cherry Street, and your destination will be on your left," he intoned, in a pitch-perfect imitation of a GPS voice. We erupted in giggles as he finished: "You have arrived at your destination."

The next morning, Finn and I sat on the edge of the hotel bed and planned our route to Kings Canyon. "Hey," said Finn, peering at the map, "there's a town called Woody!" We spent a few minutes delighting at the names scattered across the creased paper: Ben Hur, Dairyland, Tranquillity, Raisin.

That morning we hit our first snag: A detour sign steered us from our planned route, then abandoned us, lost, near an orange grove. We used the map, and the telephone pole shadows angling west, to wend our way eastward. We landed on CA-63 at Orosi instead of Cutler—the original target—but it was all good.

We spent the next four nights in Kings Canyon National Park. The park newspaper offered this advice: "GPS often misdirects travelers in this area. Follow signs, use maps, or ask." Score! One step ahead of you, National Park Service.

On a Saturday morning we left the

park for San Francisco. The day began without incident, but we finally did get lost. It was in Gilroy—my younger son got a bloody nose, and we missed a turn while scrabbling around the car for tissues. ("Hugh! Don't use your shirt!" my elder son shouted.) We found ourselves looping back though the small center of town, past the Garlic City Mercantile and the Old City Hall, again and again.

I felt a moment of panic. My California maps showed no detail of Gilroy. We discussed options: Should we just keep driving in circles, hoping to hit CA-152? Should we ask for directions? Or break down and consult the iPhone? Then I saw—miracle of miracles—a map posted

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on the main drag, Monterey Road. I hopped out of the car, took a look; we backtracked and found our way. When we finally hit the coast and headed north, my younger son asked, "Mom, are we in San Francisco now?" "No," I answered, pointing at the map, "we're in Freedom."

My mind wandered back to our last night in Kings Canyon. On a stargazing walk,

the ranger asked the group when they had first seen the night sky. Hugh raised his hand and shouted: "Yesterday!" The ranger pointed out the Summer Triangle, which pilots steer by, and Polaris, which has guided explorers and sailors for thousands of years.

I wondered: What if we still followed stars and shadows, paper maps and our sense of place? Yes, GPS is useful, but we employ it mostly to find our next turn. Older, cruder methods of navigation open our minds to bigger things: the sky, the moon, the great smudge of the Milky Way, and our place within it all. Maybe the old ways leave us a little more lost, but better off for it.

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