

Surviving Technology

by Craig Bouquin



I choose to rearrange furniture on occasion, a completely random decision that is oddly coincident with my wife's instructions to do so. I recently "chose" to remove my small collection of old record albums from the living room to store them in the attic. I slipped a few out of their covers to read the old titles. The memories made me smile. My youngest looked in amazement. "Wow! Look how huge CD's used to be"!

I understood her logic, and began one of my usual "riveting" technical explanations, discussing the differences between the old vinyl albums, and their new magnetic counterpart. She listened with intense interest as I wowed her with scientific knowledge of the history and evolution of data recording technology. But, after about eight seconds said she had to make an important call, and was off discussing boyfriends and clothes with a friend.

I dutifully took the box to the attic, dwelling on my own reciprocal ignorance of some modern technology. I get badgered constantly about my cell phone, for example. It rings, I answer. I can make a call from it if I know your number. I don't know how to get custom ring-tones, or send text messages. The thing has a camera in it. I tried to figure that out, squinting at the instructions on the tiny screen, but I kept taking pictures of my own nostrils. I can only take so much technology, but it's becoming more difficult to ignore.

Even the men's room is no longer a safe place. First they took off all the sink faucets. You need to wiggle your hands in front of some sort of electric eye, and the water turns on. I get my hands washed and there's no handle on the paper towel dispenser. I stand there dripping while I read the instructions. On other occasions, I've found that the flush handles are missing on some toilets. I suppose this rig has some sort of electric eye as well. I don't want to know what it's looking for.

I did find a likable new high-tech gadget when I rented a car while vacationing out of state with my family. My girls sort of came up with the idea. It started with the inexpensive compact rental car I had picked out. I thought it would be just fine until my wife and daughters all gave me a look. You know, "that look." I thought over the potential hazards of driving around for five days with "that look" burning a hole in my skull and quickly chose an upgrade to their largest SUV with the best stereo available.

The happy counter person told me that the next "logical" upgrade would be a high-tech GPS system to help us navigate in unfamiliar areas. I tried telling him how fond I was of reading road maps and the exciting fun of folding them open and closed while driving. I just barely got started when I smelled the odor of burning hair. I was getting "that look" again. I was starting to get a little miffed that my family seemed to think I could be so easily intimidated. I told them this GPS widget was an unnecessary and expensive novelty. A map would suffice, and they might learn some valuable lessons about map reading and cartography in general. Sometimes you just have to be firm.

The GPS navigation system worked out very well. I sat in the rental car and got started reading the safety warnings and operating instructions for this new toy. The girls explored the SUV for make-up mirrors and programmed the stereo to play their favorite music. I was

on page two of the manual when I had to ask the girls to turn down the music so I could concentrate on these highly technical operating instructions.

My 16 year old handed me the GPS unit, all plugged in, and mounted in its attractive, weighted, non-slip base (another optional item I couldn't do without). "Here Dad," she said, "I programmed in the route from here to the hotel; and from the hotel to Disney, Universal, two Malls, and a restaurant I saw that looks really cool. I also put in Aunt Jeanie's, and Cousin Patty's addresses. I made categories and stored them all in favorites. It's all set Dad."

I mumbled something like "Thank you", and put the instructions back in the container. I started up the car and tipped my head back to see the tiny screen through my bifocals. There on the display was a simple green square with the word "GO." I hesitated, not sure if that meant I should just drive, and await further instructions or what. My wife rolled her eyes, and touched the green square. A woman's voice said, "drive two hundred feet and keep right." I thought this was great! No nonsense and straightforward instructions. Sure enough, a couple hundred feet ahead of us was an intersection, where I turned right. The car filled with noise as everyone hollered "No! Don't TURN right, KEEP right!" I had turned too early, before the entrance to the thruway.

"No problem." I said. "I'll just turn around and go back." I zipped into a nearby parking lot, and quickly headed back the way we came. I slammed on the brakes and screeched to a stop—just in time to avoid a head on collision with a Florida State Police car. I looked in the rear view mirror to see if there was anyone coming up behind me. No cars, thank goodness. But I could read the mirror image of a sign that read "ONE WAY." The lady's voice on the GPS said "Recalculating."

The Police Officer approached, and everyone (except me) started babbling explanations—all at once. He listened to this loud four-piece cacophony for a few seconds, unable to make out what anyone was saying. Then he looked at me with the pity only a father could understand, and said "Turn around, and watch what your doing next time." He patted me on the shoulder, as if to console me.

The GPS lady said "Do a U-turn as soon as possible. You are traveling illegally." The Officer chuckled and shook his head as he walked away to stop traffic for me.

The rest of the trip went much better, and I got along with the GPS lady quite well. She would tell me the turns to take, and even which lane I should be in. I found the route might even vary when taking the same trip at different times of day. It became clear that this was to avoid traffic. We made our way around Florida without getting lost. My friend the GPS lady saw to that. She was a new technology that I liked. She was actually comforting and somehow, even familiar. Everything went very nicely, as long as I listened very carefully, and did exactly what I was told. It was like she was family.