

The Map is NOT the Territory
by Bruce Johns, Ph.D.

As a techno savvy guy, I am completely capable of using technologically sophisticated equipment to get myself completely lost. This was once proven during a family vacation. Being unfamiliar with the area, I relied on our GPS to tell us how to get there. I followed every direction—turn, merge, proceed. Which is why it was incomprehensible when we suddenly ran out of paved road and were staring into an open field, which looked more like a bog than a destination. I felt betrayed. I had trusted my GPS and she had let me down. Ultimately, rescued by the Atlas, my wife's navigational skills, some old fashioned signposts, and directions from a stranger, we found the place.

The problem was not GPS satellites. They were reliably beaming all the needed information so our device could deduce its location. Apparently the map in our unit was simply outdated.

We all create mental maps—compilations of experiences, ideas, and teachings that combine to create our worldview. Such maps help us survive by making the world more comprehensible and predictable. They are largely formed during childhood and answer such questions as, “Are people trustworthy?” “Am I likable?” “What can I do to be good enough?” “Is the world a safe place?”

But once drawn, mental maps are not easily challenged or changed. Instead, they're usually reinforced. If early experiences taught me that people are undependable, I'll be vigilant for signs of untrustworthiness and I may construe others' benign actions as rejection or animosity. If I've rarely experienced family warmth or acceptance, I'll likely assume that classmates, neighbors or coworkers, will find me uninteresting, unimportant, inferior, or otherwise insufficient. If I was overly protected or my adolescent tantrums given into, I'll probably view people, who don't play by my rules, as unfair and cruel. If aggressiveness was rewarded on the playground I'll probably use heavy-handedness in my job or in my marriage to get my way.

Even painful events in adulthood can etch engravings onto our maps. Deep wounds from an affair, death of a child, getting fired, being skewered by someone we trusted can redraw maps in firm dark lines that are hard to erase. Such distress can distort our perceptions of new people, our world, our God, or ourselves.

Our maps tend to get superimposed onto new circumstances and people. Richard Paul Evans says it's as though, having become quite familiar and comfortable with a map of Chicago, it gets used when visiting Beijing. Spouses may repent, a new job may come our way, but we hang onto our old maps thinking it will help us avoid being blindsided again. It's as Shakespeare said, “The arrow seen before cometh less rudely.”

Why don't we update our maps more regularly? First, our maps were created to help us avoid pain and we're reluctant to cast those aside. Secondly, our maps are easily, almost imperceptibly overlaid onto the present. There are no signposts shouting to us, "This is not Chicago!"

Keeping maps accurate requires constant self-examination. We have to be tractable enough to accept that our map is not the territory—it contains discrepancies and fallacies. To identify our errors requires honest, sometimes painful, introspection. It's a task without an end. But more accurate maps are more likely to help us find desirable destinations.