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by Christopher Peterson

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Getting Lost in Buildings ... and Life

How can we avoid getting lost in life?

Published on November 12, 2010 by Christopher Peterson, Ph.D. in The Good Life

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I love it when research psychologists study real people in real settings doing real things, as opposed to proxy "variables" among proxy research participants (e.g., college students pretending to be someone else) and how these are related to other proxy "variables." Mind you, I have had a solid career doing the proxy thing as a researcher, which perhaps makes me appreciate the non-proxy thing even more.

I recently read a great article that exemplifies the approach I admire. The title of the article, by Laura Carlson, Christoph Hölscher, Thomas Shipley, and Ruth Dalton, was "Getting Lost in Buildings," and after seeing the title in the journal table of contents, I instantly turned to it and read it straight through in one sitting. Why? Because I get lost in buildings myself.



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I have been teaching in East Hall at the University of Michigan for a decade. My office is also in this building, as are 95% of the meetings I attend. But when I am inside East Hall, especially its windowless classrooms, I have no idea where I am in relationship to the outside world. In a lecture, I will refer to Ypsilanti or Detroit, and then wave my hand in the direction where I believe these cities to be located. Many students snicker, and tell me I am pointing toward Marquette, or Lansing, or Jackson, or - horrors - Columbus, Ohio.

When in East Hall, I also have no ideas where I am in relationship to other rooms and areas of the building. Sometimes students will stick their head in my office and ask where Room whatever happens to be. I invariably take them out in the hallway and help them consult a nearby map - the location of which I do know. I am thanked profusely, as if I were a helpful person. But the fact of the matter is that I have no idea where Room whatever might be, so I must consult the map. Helpfulness has little to do with it, just the desire not to appear foolish. But even that secret motive is sometimes frustrated. Just the other day, I helped a student consult the map to find a room that happens to share a common wall with my own office!

Anyway, I read the article by Carlson and colleagues with obvious interest. Summarized were studies showing that getting lost in buildings has several determinants. First, some buildings have a spatial structure that makes them difficult to navigate. Parts of the building may be visually hidden from other parts. Unique features may be minimized. Or the building may be laid out in an overly complex way, apparently common for aesthetically attractive buildings. East Hall has all of these features, although I am dubious about its attractiveness.

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A second determinant of getting lost in a building is the cognitive map one forms of it. If the map does not correspond to the actual building, then problems will obviously ensue. I grew up in Chicago, which has numbered streets and a really big lake to the east. The cognitive map I have of Chicago readily fits the actual city. So maybe I got lazy. Or for an even better example, think Lincoln, Nebraska, a checker-board of streets if ever there were one. It is impossible to get lost in Lincoln, because the cognitive map is so easy to form.

A third contributor to getting lost is the strategy one uses to navigate a place. Two strategies are common: a route-based strategy (remembering the specific path one follows) and a reasoning-based strategy that entails an overall representation in one's mind of the building that allows inferences about one's location. Apparently people differ in terms of how many right turns and left turns they can remember before getting overwhelmed, as well as in terms of their ability to represent the big picture of the building. Oops. I lack both of these abilities, which explains why I get lost not only in East Hall but also in Ann Arbor's only large shopping mall as well as on the streets of the town where I have lived for 25 years.

If you have stayed with me throughout this essay, I hope you see that it is a head fake. I don't care all that much about getting lost in a building (unless I am late to a meeting). This essay can and should be read as a metaphor for life that provides insights about losing our metaphorical way, which most of us do some of the time, and some of us do most of the time. Unhappiness ensues. How can we find ourselves and give ourselves a fighting chance for the good life?

Three strategies follow from the article on getting lost in buildings. First, lead a life that is simple as opposed to complex. Simple lives are easier to navigate. The critic might say that a simple life is boring. I beg to differ, at least when a complex life leaves one lost.

Second, regardless of the simplicity or complexity of your chosen life, have a realistic - i.e., accurate - depiction of it that you can wrap your head around. Understand the rules and the contingencies. This does not mean you have to like them, but you are well served by understanding them. A definition of "insanity" that I frequently quote is "doing the same thing over and over and expecting a different result." So, insanity results from a bad map of life. And fulfillment results from a good map.

Third, find a useful strategy for navigating life. It can be route-based or reasoning-based or most likely a combination. But make sure it is useful. And how can you tell? Pay attention to how satisfied you are with where you think you happen to be.

Too bad AAA does not provide maps for life. But regardless, we can all stop and ask other people for directions when we are lost, even if we are guys.

Reference

Carlson, L. A., Hölsher, C., Shipley, T. F., & Dalton, R. C. (2010). Getting lost in buildings. *Current Directions in Psychological Science*, 19, 284-289.



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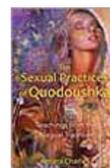
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