

Lost no more

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I suck at finding my way. This has not always been the case though. I used to be pretty good, actually. Possibly one of the best delivery boy of the small Pizza Hut restaurant I was working in around 2010, in the city of Lyon, France. At this time, all the digital mapping apps we now daily use weren't as widely spread. Not everyone had a cell phone, and data was scarce and expensive. Ten years ago. Ten years only. In fact, the main shift happened over nothing more than about two years. The delivery world I left wasn't the same as the one I came in.

August 2011. Hot as hell. Four guys chilling in front of a Pizza Hut, swimming in their grease-stained stinking work clothes, smoking cigarettes, waiting for orders. “It's gonna rain,” one of them says, “you should pass by the tunnel, then take the little René Leynaud street. It's so narrow the rain hardly pours in.” At this time, we were talking non-stop about the city, sharing tips and secrets. The city... A kind of deep riddle we all tried to solve, gathering as much knowledge as possible about it. A dark book full of freaky things, and freaky people. It scared the new ones, naturally. The city seemed to enjoy losing them in its guts. The old ones bragged. They deserved to be proud, and we respected them. They did help the new ones a lot. At this time, a delivery was close to a small urban adventure. Hearts beat fast, filled by fear and excitement, encompassing the one big risk: getting lost. We got lost every week, everyday for the new ones. Our way was inherently unsure, inherently frail. Our way wasn't exactly known to us before it was made. At any time, the city could change it, scramble it, make it a maze.

Our supply included giant maps, crumpled and dirty, roughly stuffed in our pockets. The city sometimes helped us, with its signs, with its landmarks. And with its own maps, the bus stop maps. God bless the bus stop maps back in 2011. To be mastered, the right way required all of our strengths, plus a solid background. We gave each other advice. Not only about the fastest way, but also about the nicest, the safest, the chillest. Or the most beautiful. We were always in search for the perfect, ideal way. I finally got to know the city. Not entirely, for sure, it shall remain deep and endless. But well enough. So I finally got to helping the other delivery boys, and to sharing my urban secrets with them.

Getting lost was the fundamental risk that structured our organization. Managers were aware of it, accepted it, respected it. Whenever it happened, we would call them for help, and they would become partners, co-pilots. Although we, the delivery boys, also happened to take advantage of it. Sometimes, we would fake it to pick up something from our homes, or to meet with a friend, or just to take our time, to have a stop at some beautiful spot in the city. Everyone knew that. Even the managers. And everyone was OK.

Change came in a form of a little machine, full of the promises. It was a car GPS, called Tom-Tom. I bought it to avoid the fear, the fear of not finding the way, the fear of getting lost. I bought it to avoid planing the way, memorizing the way, staying focused on the way. I bought it not to work anymore, not to feel anymore.

And unfortunately, it, not me, worked perfectly. No need to speak with each others, no need to collect frail pieces of our collective experience. No need to think. No need to fear. Nothing to do, except comply to the metallic voice of the machine, the Tom-Tom voice, and soon, the Google voice. Along with the necessity to think and to feel, I lost the knowledge of the city itself. Gradually, we all did. And with mapping apps in our pockets, how could getting lost remain an option?

“Lost? Aha. Stop cheating me, that’s not possible!” managers said.

The work naturally, or rather logically, started to accelerate. Time, like us, was no longer authorized to get lost. The knowledge of space, the thickness of time, the taste of the way, basically all what made our constant uncertainty exciting and challenging, disappeared. And so did a right we didn’t know we have: to get lost.