Technology, Like Mossy Trees, Helps Us Find True North

From generation to generation, certain constructs, items and methodologies disappear from our collective memory. We live in an era where so many methods of connecting with our environment – as well as each other – have changed rapidly and radically.

LET ME TAKE YOU TO ANOTHER time not so long ago. One summer, my dad decided our family would spend a week in the wilds of Michigan. He grew up on the South Side of Chicago, so anything outside of "da city" was the wilderness to him. So we packed up the Buick along with his *paper maps* and set out around the southern tip of Lake Michigan into the unknown. I can still see the terrified look on the faces of my younger brother and sister as we departed. My mom, always the calm co-pilot, probably figured we would return in a day or two.

Younger readers will need to use a little imagination here. In those days, if one wanted to get from point A to point B, you needed to know three things: First, from where are you starting (point A). Second, where are you going (point B). And third, which way is north. Not too difficult, except for someone like my dad, whose sense of direction was about as good as the skipper from "Gilligan's Island," famous for his "three-hour tour."

An hour or two out of Chicago we were seriously lost. As it was getting dark, we entered into what, for a 10-year-old boy, seemed like an endless forest filled with "lions and tigers and bears! Oh, my!"

We still knew our destination (point B), but where we were and which way was north were total mysteries. One might think that with the darkness comes the stars, hence the North Star, so we should have been able to determine in which direction we needed to go. True, but for humans who grew up in "da lights of da city," stars were not exactly familiar to us. Never fear: my dad had read somewhere that moss only grows on the north side of trees. Parking our trusted Buick on the edge of the road with the rest of the family secured inside, Dad and I trudged off into the spooky woods to find mossy trees.

Groping along in the darkness, always within 20 yards of each other, we would periodically call back and forth to report the absence of moss on any of the trees. Finally, I found an old growth of trees covered in moss. I yelled to my dad, who came running with renewed hope. On his way, he *yelped* to me, "Which side is the moss on?" I circled the tree, perplexed. The moss was everywhere. I guess nature had not told the soft green spores they should only grow on the north side of the tree.
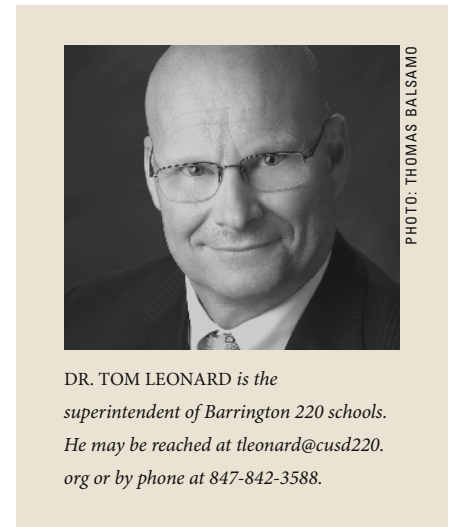
To make a long story short, we survived. Of course, my mom saved the day (which was always the case). We pulled into a gas station and she asked for directions.

This childhood memory would be about as unlikely to occur today as having a summer in Chicago with multiple days above 100-degrees. (Okay, bad analogy given the heat wave we just experienced.) With Global Positioning Systems (GPS), map apps on smartphones, and other forms of instant communication, our five-hour family expedition to Michigan would have taken five hours, not 23.

New technologies have changed how we access data, how we do our work, and our expectation of instantaneous information. In Barrington 220, we embrace new technologies to improve networks and build better relationships with our community. In this wired world, the connections can be immediate.

Brian Battle, our board of education president, tells the story of a snowy night one winter in a Barrington restaurant when he was enjoying a post-game dinner with several student athletes and parents from an area sports team. With the flakes falling fast and furious outside, everyone's cell phones began ringing simultaneously. As the words, "Hello, this is Tom Leonard, Superintendent of …," greeted everyone at the same time, a shriek of joy rang out across the room. New technologies have taken us a long way from families waking up at 5 a.m. hoping to hear the announcement of a snow day by radio or television.

Today, Barrington 220 offers an array of tools to keep residents linked with their schools – even if they no longer have students at home. These include a re-designed *barrington220.org* website (available in 11 languages), frequent updates via Twitter, Facebook and YouTube, and mobile apps for Android and iPhone users – complete with interactive maps to each of our 12 schools (no more looking for moss on a tree to find where you want to be in Barrington 220). Those without school-age children can even subscribe to our regular series of free e-newsletters (just visit the front page of *barrington220.org* for easy instructions).

Finally, for parents, students and staff, our new online information system, *Infinite Campus*, allows families to track grades and schedules, pay lunch accounts and other fees, and update household information for all children at the same time through one convenient portal. No more logging in separately for each child to replenish a lunch tab or to add a new contact number in five different places. The ease and efficiency of communication is daily priority for our staff, who work hard using the latest technologies to provide constant contact with Barrington 220 stakeholders.

In the "old days," maps and mossy trees guided us to true north; now we have technology to connect us and to help us navigate the way. However, just in case the Internet and all its features become obsolete someday, take time to learn a little about the constellations before you need them. The stars are more dependable than mossy trees, at least on a clear night in the backwoods of Michigan.