CHANGE IN LATITUDE; CHANGE IN ATTITUDE: OP-ED

Last year was the year I became an old fart, in the best sense of the term. I learned that the adage "you're as young as you feel" is mere gloss on the more important realization that people my age are incorrigibly hard-wired to an earlier era. Yes, some of our brain is flexible as plastic. But at its psychological core, it's as hard as iron ore.

My realization arrived when a mental spark flew across the voltage gap between two teaching moments.

The first occurred when I was supervising a three-hour lab for Earth Surface Processes, an upper division, hands-on course required of all environmental science majors at UConn. I was guiding students through their first use of a surveying transit of the sort that contractors have long used to lay out their foundations and archaeologists to map their excavations. The basic idea is to look through a telescope at some point and then locate it by keeping track of distance, elevation and direction.

Their genuine enthusiasm took me by surprise. What I saw as a familiar expedient tool, they saw as a curious novelty manifesting the idea that one could map the world using trigonometry -- as did George Washington in his surveying work and Henry Thoreau to fathom Walden Pond. Their delight brought me back to my earliest surveying experience when I was a pre-teen kid with time on his hands during summer. Having read in an encyclopedia how a transit worked, I built one myself using three protractors and towel rack stolen from the back bathroom, cut a survey rod from a patch of willow and mapped our city lot from brick street to back alley.

During the second teaching moment, my son did the teaching and I did learning. He had just returned from a 5-mile run over very familiar territory for which I had a pretty good mental map: our Storrs neighborhood, my pedestrian commute through its emerging "downtown" and the Horsebarn Hill area.

"Dad," he said. "Let me show you something." As I rolled off the couch he took off the "Dick Tracy" watch his girlfriend had given him as a Christmas present and cabled it to a laptop. Within a few seconds, he had downloaded a full-color digital map of his run, complete with graphs and charts showing his pace at all times, and how that pace changed as a function of elevation and run duration. He then zoomed in closely, showing me where -- to test his new equipment -- he ran back and forth in single steps. Each was visible, accurately calculated by a GPS receiver the size of a silver dollar

Now it was my turn to be enthused and surprised. What my son did all by himself with his "new-school" toy would have taken several students at least a week to accomplish with my "old-school" transit.

That's when I learned I had had become, at age 60, old. The spark struck me that my students would probably never use the tool I showed them. Rather, they saw it as an out-of-date curiosity akin to a vintage record player. Conversely, it struck me that I had no desire to use a new-fangled watch like my son's. It's not that I can't imagine its use, or imagine a 90-year-old runner using it as a tool. It's just that using it wouldn't feel right inside my personal neural network.

For many years I've mapped the things of this world from the datum point of my transit the way I experience them psychologically, as outward rays from my consciousness. In contrast, my son's watch and my student's "phones" are the things being mapped by a triumvirate of satellites whose
positions are constantly changing. Each is a point in virtual space, a node in a communication network lacking a central datum. What this means is that where I am and where they are do not mean the same thing.

We live in different worlds now. And I'm okay with that.