

Finding the Window, Breaking the Block, then Connecting the World

Yuanyuan Zhang

Abstract: A girl lives in a room with a window through which she wants to see the beauty of the outside world. The window is large, taking up half a wall, and has shutters as well as curtains. Every day, she opens the window to let in the breeze. This gets the air moving in the room and helps to refresh her mind. What does she see through this window, and what does she want to see? In this narrative, Yuanyuan Zhang draws from her personal experiences to express different emotions and ideas and hopefully give encouragement to people who have had similar experiences. She knows how vital windows are.

What windows have you seen, and what windows have you had?

Windows can be transparent, and they can come in many colours like those found in churches; they can be floor to ceiling, can be sliding windows, can have curtains; they can face a door, on a wall, or can be on the roof of a house, called skylights. I think of the skylight in the film *Room*. There is a small room with a table, chairs, wardrobe, sink, potted plants, and a skylight, which made up almost the entirety of Jack's childhood up to the age of seven. You can't possibly know what the window's role meant to her, but in fact, you can imagine that the only light that comes from there, even though there is nothing else to show, gives brightness to the room and to those who live in it, and likewise becomes a signal of courage to live and hope to get out (to escape).

Many things serve the same function as the windows in our lives. When I was running this morning, I saw so many beautiful views, accompanied by the sounds of different birds, different coloured flowers, plants, trees, and different smells, which were refreshing and uplifting. These lovely sights were almost invisible to me before as I was immersed in my own life and my own struggles.

It's been a busy time for us, the first-year PhD students in my department. Yesterday, I gave a presentation in the department with other first-year PhD students and afterwards we went for lunch together. While we were eating, one of my colleagues showed me a photo he had taken yesterday morning of the Durham sky at 4 am. He was busy with his presentation for the next day and stayed up until dawn. There were such colourful views, vast pink skies, dreamy dawns, and clouds you can seem to see the sun behind. I told him, "I woke up at 4 am too." He said, "so you should have seen the sky then." I replied, "I didn't."

I can't see the sky from where I live now. I have a window in my room, but outside is the road and then the buildings. It was at that moment when all the colours, smells, and sounds came to me and surrounded me. I realised the significance of the window—it lets in the light, it lets in the fresh air, and it lets in new ideas. As I emerged from the anxious, struggling days of my past, I learned that it would be very helpful if a window would allow me to look outside, especially during times of struggle.

The view from the window is so beautiful. However, you need to look for it or you can't see it. My window is like a blind person's eye, it's just there. Moreover, sometimes, my eye is a window, through which I cannot see sights, just as the window is blocked. At the same time, the view outside the window is not always there; you need to realise that sometimes it may require you to change direction. Sometimes you need to go out because the view may be obscured before

you can see its beauty. Sometimes you need the help of others, although the window is open and something new is in front of you. Only after that can you see the extraordinary view.

Breaking barriers, seeing out of windows, connecting the disrupted and disconnected world

Sometimes we should help others to open their windows. Some people are similar to us, and some are not, but they are not unwilling to open their windows. When you suggest there are many possibilities, they will accept the view you see. Just yesterday, after my presentation, one of my colleagues asked me about the system of governance that I highlighted in my presentation. He is also from China; however, he did not know how this system creates barriers for others. You cannot believe that people from the same country have different views on such a common and essential thing, let alone people from other countries and other cultures. From this point of view, I feel more confident in my research, and maybe I can try to put it into perspective and show others what my research subjects encounter. Maybe I can help people to understand that this group of people are currently growing old and still need to migrate between rural and urban areas to work for a better life in the future because they lack sufficient support. These problems may be difficult to solve quickly, but knowing them and understanding them may be the first thing we can do.

I am working hard on my research, but at the moment, I do not feel myself to be strong. I have little ability to help others who are suffering, and sometimes even myself. I need to be helped and supported. I am a first-generation university student, the first in my family to finish a Master's degree and pursue a PhD, and the first international student in my own family and extended family. This gave my parents a good reputation, but I, myself, didn't always enjoy it because it also set a greater expectation in a way, although sometimes not directly from the family. As a first-generation student, there is a natural pressure on you. You don't want to disappoint your family. You want to prove that you are worth it, that the education you have received for so long is worth it, and that your efforts are worth it. However, these things don't always seem to be clear, and your future remains uncertain. At the same time, you are alone in many ways. You are in a different cultural background, educational environment, and system of social values. You encounter many challenges, many difficulties, and struggles that you need to deal with on your own, and you are unable to find other people who are there for you.

I still hope and expect to become stronger, to bring more vision to others, to break the barriers and blocks in front of their windows. Education can play such a role. With the research I do, I hope that the people I focus on and their state of being can be seen by others, by administrators. I hope to show that they are not invisible, that they deserve to be noticed. We are a combination of several roles with different identities, and we have many responsibilities. As a person in this world, as a friend of my friends I love, as a child of my parents, as a family member of my sisters and brothers, as a researcher of my interviewees, and especially, here, as a first-generation university student, I hope that my experiences can be passed on to other first-generation university students through the window, showing them that whether they struggle, are challenged or happy, fail or succeed, there is value. Not only for ourselves, but also for others.

How can we open this window? Self-care, caring for others, caring and being cared for

Open the windows, let the light in, and let the ideas, and the thoughts flow. Let the blocks and barriers disappear, let the new break through the old, and let hope break through the anxiety.

In my own experience, sometimes when you change your regular schedule, something new can emerge and although this can lead to a bit of a lack of control, just making a small change can make a difference. For example, when I changed my running route, I noticed some new scenery that I hadn't noticed before.

Sharing this with my friends also meant a lot to me personally. In late March and early April, I realized that I was not sharing my daily life with my friends back home as I usually do, especially after I learned that all the people involved in that plane crash in March died, and there were many people suffering from Covid-19 in China. Under such circumstances, I thought that I should not share my good feelings with others or enjoy my life. Then I didn't feel good. Also, because I have few close friends here to share my thoughts with, in this country, in this city, in this university. I don't think I'm fully settled yet, even though 6 months have passed.

When I feel that my research is not going well, I think these are my personal problems but don't know how to change them. I am anxious and depressed. I am frustrated with myself and think that I've wasted my life. Self-doubt comes up a lot and it nags at me, but how can I share it with anyone else when everyone has their own things, their own projects, and they probably won't understand how I'm feeling?

Burdened by these feelings for a long time, I finally felt some relief when I was talking to a colleague from the U.S. about our educational systems; she shared that, like me, she felt things were not always clearly organised in an orderly and structured manner and that guidelines were often difficult to understand and follow. A similar thing happened later with another peer, and these moments of connection showed me that I was not the only one suffering from this situation and that these problems deserve attention. Our colleagues can be passionate and kind and willing to provide information and help, but if you don't share your story, they cannot know that you need support. Don't isolate yourself. Open the window to your own heart.

Everyone needs and gives care (Tronto, 2020). Caring is related to other people, non-humans, and our environment. We are cared for by others, and we can care for others. Remember that no matter how much you want to help others, you are the master of yourself, and no one can know you better than you. Therefore, it is also essential to take care of yourself. Only then will you free up more time, energy and love for others and keep the process going.

Try opening the window for yourself and, at the same time, do something to help the opening of others' windows.

Opening windows is the first step, as it creates the opportunity to see, to be seen. We can then start to understand each other. Create a community to connect with each other, to connect disrupted and disparate worlds. Don't stop loving, understanding, and thinking differently.

Just like our lives, this journey is opening up, windows are waiting for you, and there are many friends there, so keep going, you can do it. Every step could be meaningful.

I will try to find my windows and try to help others find theirs. Sometimes, it is even possible to create your own windows. I hope I can always make it, following the words of Edward Livingstone Trudeau (Cerletty, 2000): "to cure sometimes, to relieve often, to comfort always." May we be able not only to help those in need, but to be cured, relieved, and comforted ourselves.

We live in a world
A world, disrupted and disconnected, at times
We, are not alone
We can be connected by, can connect

People around, far away
Open the windows
Let the fresh air in
Care for yourself
Let you be seen, be cared for
Care for others
Let them be seen, be cared.

References

Cerletty, J. M. (2000). To cure, sometimes. To comfort, always. *Journal of Palliative Medicine*, 3(4), 483-485.

Tronto, J. C. (2020). *Moral boundaries: A political argument for an ethic of care*. Routledge.