

Of Walls and Windows

By Richard Scott Morehead

My academic division is enlarging, and down the hall they have been creating new offices. These new workspaces feature large windows looking Southwest from the hospital toward the railroad tracks and the hills beyond. Ah, those windows! They reveal places my mind might inhabit, and in this regard are an upgrade from the four walls I now face. During their construction I often find myself strolling past those rooms, mooning over the vistas, and pondering the would-be occupants. Later, the new faculty begin arriving – they are recently trained, young and smart. And in the hallway outside their new offices we converse about neighborhoods, schools, and the idiosyncrasies of the patients here. In many respects they are reminiscent of a younger version of me, but a question forms and lingers: are they also an upgrade? In the muddle of it all my Division Chief asks if I want a new office, too. And that is something to think about.

My current abode is spacious: the walls are covered with the mementos of a long career, and there is also a large metal cabinet filled with journal articles in hanging files, representing a collecting habit of more than three decades. But there is no window. There are bookshelves filled with texts and monographs, a white board for teaching, extra chairs for meetings, and a desktop computer with dual screens and a printer. But there are no sunsets, and I can only smell the rain from here.

Should I want a windowed workspace next to the others? I was content before this was an option. Comfortably close to the conference room and the elevators, I am currently situated on a main thoroughfare, such that I can leave the door ajar for the occasional passing resident or student who might want to talk. Someone once said that comparison is the thief of joy, but that maxim is easier to embrace when you have a view. Indeed, it soon strikes me that I will also be physically distant from all the other faculty. I will not hear the jokes or the gossip as readily, and it might be more difficult to become friends. They are already referring to me by my honorific instead of my given name, which also gives me pause. Is this an age-related segregation, am I no longer in the Club? My current neighbor is a specialist from another Division who is older than me – on his walls are an impressive display of his black and white photography – but he has no window, either, and I wonder if he wants one. Is this the place where the ice flows depart?

Am I remarkably different from my new colleagues because I am older? Verily, social media holds little interest for me, and I do not Tweet. Journals still arrive via the U.S. Postal Service, and I still pull them apart. I have it on good authority that newly trained physicians do not keep paper articles – everything is now digital. I guess that explains the absence of filing cabinets when I peer into their newly occupied digs. I have known for a while that information technology is a reality in medicine, but my usual experience of chart reviews these

days leaves me sad for the absence of communicated thought. Newer is clearly faster, and templated notes are easier to bill, but educational quality has seemingly not kept pace. I must also confess to sentimental feelings towards the loose x-rays and light boxes that were once ubiquitous in clinics and lecture halls, where untold teaching moments began with the glance of a passing clinician and a contemplative, “What’s going on with that patient?” Virtual meetings still seem a poor substitute for the teaching conferences of the past. During residency I recall being mesmerized by an impromptu lecture on tuberculosis given with chalk on a blackboard – a display of erudition that impressive I have not recently witnessed. But I suppose today’s learners would complain about a lack of learning objectives and slide animation for such a presentation.

What I really need to do is collect some data on these offices; be the internist-diagnostician. One afternoon when no one is about I perform the examination. I find the dimensions about the same as my office, but the windows take up a good bit of the available wall space – I suppose that is less of an issue when there are fewer items to hang. And though the new offices do seem airy, I have heard that the occupants sometimes complain, depending on the weather, that they are either too cold or too hot, and to me the winters do seem harsher than they once did. Afternoon sunsets, while potentially esthetically pleasing, also carry the likelihood of UV exposure and the necessity to obtain curtains or blinds. Moreover, since they are newly renovated, particulate dust may be a concern, especially if the older ceiling tiles have been retained and disturbed during the construction process. Yet another consideration is the ease of movement and privacy. Although I am not in the practice of leaving work early, a potential downside of office proximity to other faculty is that your habits are more easily monitored. That prompts another thought: should I cultivate more time “working from home”? There are quite a few things to consider before making this therapeutic decision.

Nevertheless, maybe I should march right into the Chief’s office and declare with a flourish that I am ready for a new office with a window. After all, perhaps by embracing the new I will be reborn professionally, learn to seamlessly work the electronic medical record, and become an expert in point-of-care ultrasound. Being closer to the younger faculty may also help me to understand and deploy a whole raft of internet abbreviations and obtain an online presence with Followers, possibly with the capacity to Monetize. The sky is the limit, that is what I say.

But one last thing: if the Chief says yes, I will have to move all this stuff myself, and worse than that, everything will not fit on the walls in the new office, and I am fairly sure the filing cabinet will not fit at all – some of this stuff will have to go!

Am I really ready to jettison the past for the future, and pay for the exchange with a sore back?

Nix, kid.

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