

Shining Light on the Unknown - Your Box of Light is Waiting to Expand

By Sharon Moskowitz

“When one door closes, another opens,” as the saying goes - is intended to help us feel better when an opportunity reaches a sudden dead-end. The focus in this six-word phrase becomes the opportunity to open a new door. Through the game of etymological telephone, this phrase, like [many others](#), has morphed meaning away from its original purpose.

The full phrase [cited first](#) in Miguel de Cervantes' *Don Quixote de la Mancha*, reveals a deeper meaning of focusing on the closed door: “When one door closes, another opens; but we often look so long and regretfully upon the closed door that we do not see the one which has opened for us.” We look at the closed door with fear of all that was lost. In our grief, fear of the unknown keeps us from seeing the open door and opportunities.

The basis for all fear is the unknown. Fear of snakes? Study snakes and understand their patterns, temperament, and how they live, eat, survive, and evolve. I bet the next time you're around a snake, understanding and curiosity may (subtly) replace fear.

Fear of the unknown is a primitive survival tactic. The things you don't understand could cause harm; your actions align to prevent you from imminent danger. These actions are both a learned and a natural response. Think of your life and what you understand as contained in a box. What you do not understand exists outside of the box. The bright light of understanding illuminates everything inside the box. Being known and understood is, therefore, safe and familiar. There are clues to understanding things on the periphery of the box; some light reaches there and reveals clues. The farther away from the borders of your box, the darker, less known and more scary things seem. Strange things lurk in the dark.

Nothing in life is to be feared. It is only to be understood.

- Marie Curie

At birth, the reptilian part of the brain, known as the amygdala, is hard-wired for emotional responses to basic survival needs: food, temperature regulation, discomfort caused by a full diaper, and sleep. Outside of colic, when an infant cries, it's most likely attributed to one of these. As the brain develops, fear is learned based on whether these needs are met or neglected. Children start to explore and become more exposed to understanding within their cognitive capabilities. [Amygdala activity](#) increases when conditions are ambiguous or uncertain; it navigates threat paradigms during high-uncertainty learning experiences. So much is unknown; therefore, many things are scary - the dark room, being alone, loud noises, etc. If a child's development never includes being safe in the dark, the child panics when the light goes out. In this situation, being alone or left in the dark remains a fear after childhood. The child learns that the darkness is not permanent when a loved one restores the light, which with time and repetition, builds trust and trains the amygdala response to the dark.

As the human brain develops, the prefrontal cortex (the part of the brain to fully develop) begins to kick online, and with it, emotional regulation control collaborates with the amygdala. As your understanding grows, your box expands; the light illuminates more things. As you learn more, you expand the volume of the box by adding experiences and quests.

Children with present adults who are encouraged to explore and take risks have the luxury of an under-developed rational thought process, and a safety net of guardians limiting their fear of the unknown while they test the hot plate, leap from death-defying heights, run with scissors, and play with fire.

Adults with fully developed rational thought, and higher cognition have a [highway of signals](#) running in all directions through the prefrontal cortex, the medial prefrontal cortex (which acts as a traffic guard, receiving and coordinating signals in both directions) and the amygdala. This wiring, when firing on all cylinders creates an opportunity to evolve what was formerly unknown and misunderstood to be capable of being known and comfortable. It's out of sight, out of mind. You are basking in the light of your box and what you know. Braving the unknown outside your box is the antithesis of safety. Knowing all you have to navigate in your professional and personal roles, learning and breaking outside of your comfort zone is less than ideal. It's energy you'd rather not spend, when you could use that precious energy on doing what you know very well.

**People think about the word 'fearless' to mean without fear.
I see it to actually mean 'with fear but you do it anyway'.
- Luvvie Ajayi Jones**

Here's the thing, very little happens inside your comfort zone. It's a warm, cozy weighted blanket on a chilly day that fills up your hot beverage automatically from the bottom. It turns the page for you of your favorite book. Your comfort zone knows to click "yes" for you when Netflix asks if you're still watching without having to untuck a cozy finger from the couch. Your comfort zone is a grand space, but it doesn't expand who you are as a human and certainly doesn't challenge you to do better, be better, learn, grow, and seek to experience your inherent worthiness.

Your comfort zone is the "safe space" in the running game of capture-the-flag. You have the flag in your hand; now what? You're staring down the gauntlet of ever-changing defensive opponents mapping your intended route through danger to try your hand at a successful capture of the other team's flag. You don't hang out here forever because the game only lasts so long. You give it a go. With fear gripping your body and your senses heightened, as Patches O'Houlihan wisely spoke, you "dodge, duck, dip, dive and dodge" your way through human obstacles. And you learn along the way for the next time. You actively choose to expand your box right then and there.

There are lots of [methods](#) to work on overcoming your fears. The tried and sometimes true tactic is to face them head-on. Depending on the outcome, this could help or hinder your

response in the future - but making [a choice](#) - and going in with a learning-centered focus will help the former prevail.

One thing is certain, make your goal to remain critical of your fears. Challenge the borders of your box and step towards the fringes of light. Test out the periphery to see if what's on the other side is as scary as the dark makes it seem. Stop looking at discomfort as a zero-sum game where you either win or lose. Instead, try an "infinite game" approach developed by New York University professor James Carse. An [infinite game](#) is one in which transformation happens of all the players, rules, and conditions of the game rather than fixed sets towards a single win and termination. The purpose of the infinite game is to continue to play.

**We are more often frightened than hurt; and we suffer more from
imagination than from reality.**
- Seneca

Become an interrogator of your fears. Pay attention to heightened emotions in the face of unknowns and proverbial darkness. Allow those feelings to act as a trigger to go forth and expand your box. Ask yourself in an emotional response:

Where does the fear come from?

When was the first time I felt this fear?

How likely is it that the fears will be realized?

What could you gain from illuminating light onto this fear?

When you begin to answer these questions, the fear itself becomes replaced with understanding and learning. Better yet the fear becomes an opportunity to expand your box.

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