



CLAIMING YOUR SPACE
AND THE COST OF CONVENIENCE
Leidy Klotz

Humans learn by reading, studying, and practicing.

Long before classrooms existed, our ancestors acquired new skills and knowledge by adapting to their surroundings—turning wilderness into shelter, chaos into order. Their physical environment was the classroom, and dealing with new challenges in it was the curriculum.

This primal way of learning hasn't lost its power. Preschoolers discover how to set personal boundaries by sharing a playroom with their peers. A small-town kid gains quiet confidence from learning his way around the big city. An executive thinks of new ways to support frontline workers after moving her office from headquarters to the factory floor. These aren't just changes in scenery; they're catalysts for personal growth.

Unfortunately, many of these opportunities are being engineered away. Offices in Tokyo feel identical to ones in Toronto. College dorms offer all the amenities of home. And why would we bother learning our way around a new city when we have a maps app right on our phone?

We don't need to give up modern comforts to keep growing through our spaces. But we do need to venture beyond our routines—whether by exploring unfamiliar territories or by seeing fresh potential in familiar ones. Sometimes just sitting at a new café sparks different thinking. Other times we stumble upon spaces so vast they humble us completely, reminding us how much more there is to discover. Our surroundings offer both kinds of opportunities. It's up to us to recognize them.

MAKING SPACE PERSONAL

"Space!" That was the greeting to me when I crossed into the playroom, hoping to get some quality time with Josie, who was twisting together pipe cleaners. Her directive was clear. *"Space,"* she had learned, was the magic word, allowing her to lay claim to a circle roughly ten feet in diameter: a force field around her that no one was permitted to enter.

Josie had learned this life hack at preschool, where the curriculum included jumping from boxes, swinging on ropes, painting each other, and occasionally tossing shovels (I'm looking at you, Noah). In the midst of this chaos, children learned by necessity how to claim their personal *"space!"*

I saw Josie's mastery of this lesson during school pickup. Sometimes she'd created a ten-foot circle of alone time with that single word. Other times she'd staked claim to a protected corner, sheltered under a table, or erected a pillow fort. And in that little oasis of her own making, Josie didn't need to be on high alert. She could work on her art, take care of her stuffed pigs, or fine-tune her dance moves. It was up to her.

Josie wasn't only retreating from the chaos when she claimed her space. She was developing a transferable skill. Learning to set physical boundaries teaches us to set emotional ones too.

Once we've established our territory, it's time to venture beyond.

A bit of neuroscience helps us appreciate how intertwined our physical and emotional boundaries are. Our sense of personal space is partly regulated by the amygdala, the same brain region that processes emotions like fear and anxiety. We know this because in some well-documented cases people with damaged amygdalae will freely approach and touch strangers, showing no discomfort when others do the same to them. Without the amygdala's emotional processing, their instinctive need for personal space seems to dissolve. For the rest of us, the amygdala lights up when someone gets too close, triggering that urge to maintain our bubble.

Back in the 1960s, anthropologist Edward Hall gave this invisible phenomenon a (fancy) name: proxemics. Hall was among the first to systematically study how we all carry invisible bubbles around with us, mapping zones from intimate space (out to about eighteen inches) to social space (from four to twelve feet). He showed that when someone violates these boundaries in either direction—standing too close during casual conversation or maintaining formal distance during intimate moments—we feel it immediately, even if we can't articulate why. The ability to enforce our personal space translates directly to setting boundaries with pushy coworkers, creating work-life balance, and establishing healthy emotional limits in relationships. Those social boundaries have gone from therapy-speak to dinner party conversation, and they matter enormously. But we need to keep reinforcing their physical foundations.

Parents can nurture this boundary-setting skill in their children by giving them age-appropriate ownership over specific spaces—and not just kid-friendly areas that adults control, but spaces that are truly the kids'. Like letting preschoolers lay claim to "their" chair at the kitchen table, or giving middle schoolers a bedroom wall they're allowed to draw on or a corner where they can build projects without being told to clean up (it can be in the basement).

Teenagers need even more autonomy: their own room (and the expectation that parents will knock before entering) or a garage space where they can play loud music, paint, or tinker, on their own terms. Having total control over these small realms builds the independence kids need to assert their agency everywhere.

When we are adults, opportunities to practice setting our physical boundaries abound. When we enter a coffee shop, we might scan for a quiet corner with ample space between tables, then angle our chair to discourage interruptions. At work, we can position our computer so that we aren't tempted to make eye contact and then conversation with passersby, or perhaps we take a deep work task out of the cubicle to the flex space with a door and full-height walls. When we wish to make our boundaries more porous rather than firmer, we can choose the communal table, signaling openness to chance encounters, or leave our office door slightly ajar, creating a permeable boundary that says "I'm concentrating, but not unreachable."

The ability to enforce our personal space translates directly to setting boundaries with pushy coworkers, creating worklife balance, and establishing healthy emotional limits in relationships.

Learning to claim and defend our personal space is just one way in which our surroundings help us grow. Once we've established our territory, it's time to venture beyond.

ADAPTING TO NEW LANDS

Back when I was looking at colleges, my dad always insisted on going “off-tour” during campus visits, to see what my life there would *really* be like. Rather than sticking to the sanctioned route of information sessions and pristine tour-approved dorm rooms, he'd veer off to explore academic buildings where the classes happened. We'd peek into labs where students ran experiments and art studios where half-finished projects lay scattered about. He'd even insist we eat in dining halls with college students in their natural habitat. Picture me trying to look cool while my dad asked strangers about snack food options and salad bar logistics: “Are there always SunChips?” These unscripted moments were the beginning of my higher education. Despite the occasional humiliation, they allowed me to imagine myself navigating these new spaces—and my new life in them.

The growth that happens when people venture from home to explore new lands is so formative that it has become a classic storyline. Think of Odysseus, whose journey has captivated audiences for nearly three thousand years. Homer's hero stands at the threshold between two worlds: Behind him lies the memory of Ithaca, his safe harbor. Ahead stretches that wine-dark sea, promising glory but also monsters and magic unknown. The great ships wait at anchor. Like countless heroes before and since, Odysseus steps across that boundary between the familiar and the uncertain. The known world falls away and ahead lies only possibility.

Odysseus took to the sea, Dorothy left Kansas, and Ariel emerged from her grotto to explore the human world. While these stories are fiction, the larger arcs resonate because they're true. These mythical characters grow when they acclimate to new lands. So do we. And while it's not just the new physical surroundings that change us, learning to adapt to new places is a big part of the equation.

One juncture at which this learning reliably happens is when we first leave home, whether off to college, to the military, to a new city, or just to our own apartment. I see it every fall. Whether the UVA first-years I encounter have embarked from a suburb of Washington, DC, a small rural town in Virginia, or another country, they are standing on a threshold between two worlds, leaving one set of experiences behind and immersing themselves in new ones.

The growth during those first months is remarkable to witness. Yes, students learn from their classes—but incrementally; after all, they've been taking math and English for over a decade. The most dramatic learning comes from adapting to a whole new world. The dorm room requires negotiating shared space with a stranger. The campus layout demands figuring out the fastest route to class and learning to distinguish between nearly identical-looking buildings. And the dining hall's seating configurations are like a seminar in the social hierarchies of college life.

Just as exploration teaches us about the physical world, this same built-in learning mechanism helps us acquire social skills too. College students explore the rhythms of campus life to discover when the best time is to visit the student center, which library tables offer quiet study spots, and where their latest crush tends to hang out on Thursday nights.

As Annie Murphy Paul argues convincingly in her acclaimed book *The Extended Mind*, “Much more than we usually recognize, humans use their environment to solve problems—an environment that is both material and social.”

When students gain confidence navigating their surroundings, their confidence grows in other areas. The once-overwhelmed first-year student who showed up with a parent-curated schedule now confidently drops a class that isn’t the right fit and adds one that sparks their interest. Students who were (sensibly) nervous about the communal bathroom start hosting movie nights in the common room. By Thanksgiving break, the same kids who were sending a constant stream of texts home are lobbying for a semester abroad.

To grow in a big way, we need to get slightly out of our comfort zone, adapt to the new reality, and then do it again, and again, and again.

Colleges carefully design the environment for their students, but the next new place they move to comes with no such guardrails. Whether it’s a new country, a new city, or merely a new apartment, adapting to a new physical place can sometimes overwhelm us, especially when that shift is compounded by other life changes we’re managing. New spaces can help us grow, but sometimes they can push us over the edge.

This tension is reflected in the Social Readjustment Rating Scale, versions of which have been used since the 1960s as a rough measure of how someone is handling change. The scale assigns points to life events that require readjusting, things like marriage, pregnancy, and retirement (with bigger disruptions counting for more points). The total score indicates how much stress someone might be under. It's a simple but revealing scale: High scores correlate with stress-related symptoms and illnesses like fatigue, anxiety, and heart disease.

One thing to notice about the scale is that it includes living in a new place. Being a new parent with a new job gets a high score. But being a new parent with a new job in a new city gets an even higher one. Getting used to new spaces—whether that first dorm room, a forever home, or a retirement downsized—consistently ranks at or near the top of life's most stressful experiences, right up there with personal injury, divorce, and death of a close family member.

These events are especially stressful when we take a sink-or-swim approach. Spatial learning deserves the same care and preparation we give other types of growth. When learning math, we don't go from times tables straight to calculus. When getting fit, we don't run our first mile one day and a marathon the next. Going away to college will be terrifying for the teen who has never spent more than a night away from home, and moving halfway around the world may overwhelm the young adult who has never traveled outside their home state. We want to be challenged by our spaces, not overwhelmed. At the same time, we'll never reach the marathon if we only run a mile each day, and we'll never learn calculus if we never master multiplication. To grow in a big way, we need to get slightly out of our comfort zone, adapt to the new reality, and then do it again, and again, and again.

It seems we've gotten so good at controlling our environments that we're designing away the very discomforts that expand our horizons. Planned communities eliminate the need to venture into unfamiliar territory, with every essential service tucked safely within the subdivision. Individual homes have become fortresses against uncertainty, with temperature, humidity, and lighting carefully controlled no matter what is happening outside. Even that college transition offers less spatial growth today than it did a generation ago, as students arrive with GPS-enabled phones that eliminate the need to learn campus geography. If students need new clothes or run out of toothpaste, there are apps for that; no need to venture off campus in search of the nearest store.

These conveniences serve us well enough in many ways. But each time we choose predictability over possibility we lose a chance to adapt and learn. 📖

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