

---

## It's Not What's Behind You, It's What Lies Ahead

*By Laura K. Bangert*

The walls are caving in.  
You know you've hit the end.  
There's nowhere else but up from here,  
yet all you feel is fear.  
You know that where you are is bad,  
that all you feel when you're there is sad,  
and yet, when you look beyond the HERE,  
you see not a single path that's clear.  
~ *Bangert, 2011*

Everyone, at one time or another, be it leaving home, ending a marriage, changing to a new job, leaving an organization or moving to a new home, has come to some point where they know that something has to change and that all they have known, their comfort zone, is no longer what it was. Staying where they are is no longer comfortable or positive. Chronic restlessness sets in and eventually, this restlessness fuels action and a sense of urgency that defies logic or facts. It is more important to take a chance on happiness, peace, or a chance to grow; a chance to feel appreciated, a chance to feel safe, etc., than it is to stay in the familiar zone.

The man in Shaun Tan's graphic novel, *The Arrival*, seems to have reached a point where taking a chance, a very scary chance, on a better life was more important than the risks he might encounter. He obviously loves his wife and daughter very much but he feels that he can do more for them by heading out to find a new job than by staying where he is. He must also feel that the unknown journey may have dangers that he must conquer alone before having his wife and daughter join him. The known dangers or fears are bad enough that he must leave and find change, yet the familiarity of these dangers

---

and fears do not outweigh the unknown dangers and fears that may lie ahead. He must venture alone. He will have to worry about his family's safety and they will have to be very brave themselves. Such faith, hope, love, courage and strength it takes to set out alone on such a journey because the door has closed behind you and the only choice left is to go forth.

The journey is humbling. The man must rely on strangers to help him find his way. What trust! The journey is humiliating. How degrading, being "processed" like a load of produce being inspected and sorted through by people you can't even talk to and ask questions of. The journey is lonely. The man is surrounded by people. Yet, instead of people that love and support him, these people just stare and judge. It must feel like walking into the waiting room at the doctor's office where everyone stares at you and wonders what is wrong. No one asks, just stares. Then, there is the nurse who asks you a lot of questions, many of which scare you, but she never tells you why she asks or what it all means. Next, comes all of the equipment. What is that? How does it all work? Will it hurt? What are they going to do to me? You can't communicate your fears or your feelings and therefore can't get the answers you need. You plunge on in darkness.

The man in Tan's novel is determined. He finds ways to communicate by being willing to open up to anyone he thinks will listen. He is unyielding in his quest to find a connection that will lead him to the next step of his journey. The images of his family and his origami bird are forever before him, giving him strength and meaning; reiterating the purpose of his journey.

I remember the first time I walked into a major department store. Everything about the store seemed larger than life. I had no idea how to relate to such a store. I

---

suddenly felt self-conscious about everything I was wearing, everything I did. Should I even look for the price tag? Will that immediately send a signal that I can't afford this place if I have to look at the price tag? I felt so conspicuous! The man in the Tan's novel must have felt this many times over when he stepped off the boat. Everything around him was new! He had to feel like a neon sign in a desert! And, if he even opened his mouth to speak it would reveal the truth! He is different. He's not "from these parts". And, if he didn't brave the "processing line" his only choice would be to turn around and go back. NO! He can't do that! He must forge ahead. After passing "the test" and being "let in", the question remains. Now what? Here he is, a lonely being in a big new world, feeling so small. But, the BIG PAPER BIRD, his symbol of strength for him and his family, looms over the city and prods him forward. It is interesting how Tan uses birds throughout the book at turning points in the story, reiterating the bird as a guide and source of strength.

Everywhere the man looks are unknown sights and sounds with some hint of familiarity yet everything still seems so foreign. There are so many paths he could take but none seem the obvious choice. He trudges on with a faith that somehow he will know when to turn left or right. As if his feeling of confusion isn't bad enough, the weather begins to turn bad and he must find shelter! Where? No one to ask! How to ask? When he draws a picture of a bed on a piece of paper, he makes a connection with an Indonesian man. Ah! He is directed to a place to stay. But what a place it is! It is all that he "asked" for, a place to sleep. His limited ability to communicate hindered him being able to request anymore than the simplest of accommodations. It reminds me of an episode of *I Love Lucy* (The Bicycle Trip, 1956) when Lucy Ricardo goes to Europe and

---

decides that she, Ricky, Ethel and Fred should bicycle across Italy. They realize at some point that they can't go on and yet, they have no idea where they can stay for the night. They meet up with a farmer. Ethel tries her hand at high school Italian (some 50 years after the fact) to no avail. Lucy then breaks into mime. It is extremely comical as she displays every element of the bedtime process (putting on PJ's, brushing your teeth, gargling, etc., and then the head on folded hands for goodnight), but it works! There is a connection! Oh, but wait, bedtime will be in the barn! Communication is only as strong as its participants.

The man, our hero, established his new home, found a way for his family to join him and paved the way for his daughter to help the next adventurer begin her new journey! As I watched this man overcome his fears, gain friendships and finally make his way, I realized that as a teacher, I am a part of a beautiful journey everyday. I help make connections! I help provide strength and hope. I can be the one to encourage and guide-without the humility, the fear and the loneliness. I can be the one who points the way! I, as one of the parts in the communication process, must be as persevering in my journey to understand my students as my students are persevering in trying to understand me. I must never tire of finding one more approach to "breaking through" and achieving the "ah, yes!" moment. *That* is what language is about. It can be a barrier or it can break *all* barriers –our choice! Language is *our* origami bird that gives us freedom to fly, to express ourselves freely and go where we want to go!

*About the author: Laura Bangert is a graduate student in TESOL, University of Missouri. She may be reached at [lkpfh7@mail.mizzou.edu](mailto:lkpfh7@mail.mizzou.edu)*