

Speaker 1: The Window Podcast is a service of the Belin-Blank Centre for Gifted Education and Talent Development in the University of Iowa College of Education. The Belin-Blank Centre offers comprehensive programming for students with talent in academic areas, visual arts, writing, inventiveness, and leadership. The centre serves teachers of gifted and talented students through professional development available both online and on site. Go to [belinblank.org](http://belinblank.org) for a complete listing of resources. The Belin-Blank Centre is part of the University of Iowa College of Education—leaders, scholars, and innovators since 1847. Learn more about the top-rank college of education in the state of Iowa at [education.uiowa.edu](http://education.uiowa.edu).

Speaker 2: Welcome to The Window.

Speaker 3: Nicholas Kristof is an op-ed columnist for the New York Times and winner of two Pulitzer prizes. He is a strong voice for justice and equity and views education as the most important intervention in improving lives of people around the world. Nick has co-authored five books with his wife, Sheryl WuDunn, including the New York Times number one bestseller titled *Half The Sky: Turning Oppression into Opportunity for Women Worldwide* and their most current, *A Path Appears: Transforming Lives, Creating Opportunity*. Nick, welcome to the podcast *The Window*. It's really a pleasure to have you here.

Nicholas K.: Good to be with you.

Speaker 3: Nick, your life has been dedicated to the pursuit of human rights and social justice. When you think about your own upbringing, where did this advocacy come from?

Nicholas K.: You know, I'm not entirely sure. Certainly, both my parents were very socially conscious. My dad, as a refugee, had seen firsthand the difference that it makes when somebody offers him help. I can't say that this felt as if my upbringing was vastly different than that of other kids or that I was a particularly conscious high school kid or even college kid. When I first joined the New York Times, I was writing about exchange rates and oil prices as a business reporter. I do think that when I began to report as a foreign correspondent and I saw firsthand ... I met the people affected by policies. Then, it began to be hard to shake concerns for them. For example, I wrote what I thought was going to be one piece about sex trafficking in Cambodia back in 1997, but after you meet young teenagers who are essentially enslaved, it's sort of hard to go back to writing about exchange rates. They haunt you. To some extent, it just got some traction and then kept on building.

Speaker 3: You made a mention that for your father, a small or seemingly small act of kindness made a big difference. That seems to be a theme in a lot of your talking and a lot of your writing, that sometimes the smallest act of humanitarian kindness can really have quite a ripple.

Nicholas K.: Yeah. Look, I think that one thing we've learned is that helping people is harder than it looks and that our efforts to help others have a somewhat mixed record of success. Also, periodically, a modest effort to help others can just have a transformative impact on that person, on their family, and so on. Indeed, I think that's the case with my dad, that people were willing to take a risk on him when he was an East European refugee, very eager to come to the US. He met a young American in Paris who convinced her parents and her parents' church back in Portland, Oregon, to sponsor him. This wasn't going to solve the global refugee problem. Wouldn't really make a dent in it. They didn't know him. He was from Eastern Europe, from a Communist world, at a time when we were petrified of a Communist world, and yet, they did. It was completely transformative for him, and obviously, for me, as well. I wouldn't exist but for that kindness.

Speaker 3: You made mention that humanitarian aid and outreach is pretty complicated. You've even stated it's certainly imperfect. Yet, it makes a difference, and you've been so involved. Can you talk a bit more about the complexities, the imperfection of humanitarian aid?

Nicholas K.: Yeah. I think that a lot of well-meaning people in this country, while advocating for aid, sometimes ally the difficulties of actually getting it done. I think that's also a mistake. Over and over, I've seen that it's pretty easy to build a school abroad. What's really hard is making sure that the teachers show up, that there is school books for those kids, that they actually learn something. It's easy to build a well for a village that needs it. One of my friends built a well for a needy village and prompted a small war between two villages over who could use the well. Keeping the pump in repair is a perpetual difficulty. Over and over, you see these complexities and unintended consequences. That's kind of a feature of every aspect of life. One also sees that, overall, for all the complexities, aid has a pretty remarkable record, especially in health and in education. In other areas, it's more complicated. We have figured out how to get more kids in school. We figured out how to save kids' lives, in particular, at a dramatic rate by diseases. When I travel in the developing world today, it's really dramatically different from when I was backpacking around as a student journalist in the early and mid-1980s. That's, in part, a tribute to aid persevering despite these difficulties.

Speaker 3: You've mentioned about the importance of education as part of an intervention. If we can talk a little bit about that, how do you see education having an impact in terms of the global community?

Nicholas K.: I think that the single greatest experiment in human history was public education. There is nothing that is more transformative in an area than education. It leads to changes in fertility. Parents tend to have fewer kids and invest more in them. It leads to people to have better healthcare standards, to earn more money, to create a middle class, to be more tolerant. It leads to these whole cascade of generally positive changes. It's also something that is completely transforming the world. Until the 1950s, or by some counts the 1960s, a majority of human beings had always been illiterate. These days, we're up to almost 90% literacy, adult literacy. That makes it a different world, when

people are overwhelmingly literate and can communicate and have some understanding of what is happening outside their village. I'd say it's also particularly empowering for women and girls. There are a lot of efforts to empower women that aren't as successful as we would like, but boy, you get girls in school and educate them so that they become literate, and that is a powerful force for creating greater social equality between men and women.

Speaker 3: Nick, if we can follow up on that theme a bit more, in your book *Half The Sky*, which you wrote co-authored with your wife, Sheryl WuDunn, you really focus on, in particular, the plight of women and girls around the world. Can you give a bit more description about what this plight is? Also, have things changed since the publication of *Half The Sky*?

Nicholas K.: Yeah. Sheryl and I argued that the single greatest moral challenge in the world in this century, akin to the challenge of slavery in the 19th century and totalitarianism in the 20th century, is gender and equity around the world. I think people often think that's an exaggeration or hyperbole, and it really isn't. One way of measuring that is that we always think that there is more females than males in the world, because that's true of the US and of Europe, but globally, there are substantially more males than females. That's because gender discrimination in much of the world isn't just a matter of unequal pay or inappropriate comments or touching. It's lethal. I think there's a profound issue of social justice to focus on gender equity. Also, putting aside issues of justice, just at a practical level, if you try to think how one can make an impact on issues that we care about, about reducing terrorism, reducing conflict, creating economic growth and development, then there are no perfect solutions and no magic wands. In general, investing in educating girls and then seeing those educated women get a foothold in the economy tends to do better than almost anything else in creating the kind of societies that are stable and economically dynamic.

Speaker 3: Nick, if we can talk a bit about schooling and education right here in the United States. I know in the past, you've given some concern about how unions work in our schools and so forth. As an educator, I'm very aware of the importance of valuing teachers, individually and as a profession. Do you have any comments about how you see America valuing its teaching profession?

Nicholas K.: We know from polling that one of the big differences between ... And I just know anecdotally. One of the big differences in education here versus in other countries, where education tends to be better, is that other countries have much greater reverence for education and for teachers. It's a much more respected profession. It tends to attract much more talented people. I think that's kind of a fundamental social challenge that we face in trying to improve schooling. I'd also say that there are a lot of differences between poverty in America and in Malawi, but one of the common threads is the best escalator out of poverty, whether you're talking about the Bronx or you're talking about Malawi, is education. The other common thread is that for the kids who most need that escalator, it's often not functioning very well. As for unions, I think

some places, they have been part of the problem and have resisted accountability and experimentation and longer school days, this kind of thing. I also think that the conservative narrative that the basic problem is teacher unions is also clearly wrong. If you look at the states that have some of the best education systems in America, like Massachusetts, they're also the ones with strong unions, while Mississippi, et cetera, that have very weak education performances, those are the ones with the very weak unions.

I think there is plenty of reason to be critical of teacher unions in the US, but I think it's also easy to hugely exaggerate their role in the overall inequities.

Speaker 3: You talked about the escalator, especially, maybe, for poverty kids, inner city kids. Do you have anything else to say? It seems like when we talk about our schools, that that seems to be where they're at their weakest. Do you have any insight or comment about that?

Nicholas K.: Two points. One is that there's a profound inequity in America in the way we fund our schools. School funding is dysfunctional. When we rely on localities to fund schools, we ensure that kids in poor neighbourhoods won't get the resources that kids in rich suburban schools will get. It's the disadvantaged kids that should get more resources. In fact, in much of America, it's the opposite, that the most privileged kids get the most resources in public schools. I think that we have a profound problem with school funding systems. The other thing I'd say is that I think there's been a revolution in research over the last 20 years or so about the importance of early childhood interventions. By the time a kid is five years old and entering kindergarten, I wouldn't say it's too late, exactly, but we've missed a huge opportunity. There is just abundant evidence that we should be doing more to try to reduce disadvantage in the first two or three years of life, in particular. That's even before what we tend to think of as pre-K. Really, very early on. Not exactly just education programmes, but there's still 535,000 kids a year who suffer lead poisoning. That's going to impair their school performance for their whole lives. There are millions who suffer ACEs, adverse childhood experiences, traumatic experiences. We could do a better job with that and so on.

I think especially at a time when the K-12 space is pretty toxic, it just might be possible to make some headway on a bipartisan basis probably on the same local level on early childhood interventions.

Speaker 3: Very good point, and I agree with you, Nick, that investing in early childhood is just critical. Yet, it seems like, as a society, we tend more towards remediation than prevention. I appreciate the point you make. I just want to ask your opinion, we have a new Secretary of Education, Betsy DeVos, basically just starting out. What do you see as, perhaps, the impact that she will have on education over the next few years, especially the idea of early childhood preparation?

Nicholas K.: Well, I find Betsy DeVos singularly unimpressive, but the redeeming feature about her is that, at the end of the day, Secretary of Education doesn't have vast influence, if you will. At least, it's limited, given the way the US structures education. I guess I think that she will be pushing for vouchers for private schools, which we have pretty good evidence doesn't actually help and, in fact, probably harms kids. I hope that that effort isn't going to get very far, partly because education secretaries, in general, don't have all that much impact and I think she, in particular, will have less than most.

Speaker 3: Again, I think you're very insightful about the minimal impact that a Secretary of Education can have, but I appreciate your comments. I'm going to stay with this theme of education with you, and it's something that's more personal to you. About 2006, you started a programme. Win a trip with Nick Kristof was launched. What you do is basically offer a college student an opportunity to take a reporting trip with you, and you just reported on Aneri Pattani of Northeastern University, who accompanied you in Liberia. Can you share, what is the inspiration behind this programme that you started?

Nicholas K.: It began when I was trying to get more attention on the Darfur genocide. I was searching for ways to get young people more interested in Darfur. I thought maybe if I have a contest to bring a student with me on a reporting trip there, then maybe the contest will generate interest. Maybe the students' writing will generate interest. I proposed this internally within the Times. The New York Times lawyers came back and said, "Oh, so you want to take a student into a war zone?" So I backed off and reformulated it as a trip to take a student with me on a journey to report from the developing world. The first trip was in 2006. As you mentioned, I'm just back from the latest one, where we were travelling in Liberia, looking at issues with global health and education. I find it useful, in part, because this year, for example, President Trump ... It's so important, and these issues are getting so much attention that they're sucking the life out of every other issue in the world. It's enormously important, but at the end of the day, there are a lot of other things going on in the world, especially beyond our borders, that are life and death matters. We can't completely ignore them. This is one way of me to try to highlight some of these other issues and try to keep them in the spotlight.

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Speaker 3: I'm sure that any of these young people that have accompanied you on your trips have learned a tremendous amount and probably will have a lasting impact. Anything in particular that you've learned from them?

Nicholas K.: They bring fresh eyes, which is a useful thing. I will never again have a fresh eyes in reporting in the developing world, because I've made too many of these trips. Malnutrition is something that is everywhere. More than 1/5 of the kids on the planet are stunted physically because of malnutrition, physically and mentally. You just kind of forget how horrifying this is and what a failure this is, but it's something that always strikes and impresses the students who are with me. Likewise, maybe the simplest low-hanging fruit to address malnutrition around the world is promotion of optimal breastfeeding. Again, it's a pretty low-tech solution that is cheap, does not require refrigeration, and so on. It's something that, again, just always strikes the students, that here is something that we can actually do that has related results and saves hundreds of thousands of lives when it's promoted. It's useful to see what resonates with them.

Speaker 3: That's a very good point about the fresh eyes. I did read the article about Ms. Pattani and you. It was very much an impact on myself. You're obviously steeped in journalism. It seems to me that we're getting the news 24/7. I'm not totally convinced that we're always being well informed or being thoughtful about what we hear, so I'd like to know from you, Nick, what do you see as the biggest challenge in today's media?

Nicholas K.: You know, I think there are a few of them. One is that there is a real crisis in the business model of journalism across the board, from TV to news magazines to newspapers to websites, and everybody is desperate for audience. In that context, I think that we sometimes drop the ball by rushing for an audience in ways that don't always enlighten people. I think 2016 and the presidential race is a case study of that. I think that cable TV, in particular, too often handed the microphone to Donald Trump because he was great for ratings. Didn't adequately fact-check him or provide context because that was a little more expensive and didn't help the ratings. I think that we in the media, collectively, to some degree, failed the public in 2016 by going for endless coverage of Donald Trump without that fact-checking and rigour and scrutiny that we should have provided. I guess, more broadly, one of my concerns is that I think we in the media are pretty good at covering particular events that are in the news. If there is a White House briefing, we'll be on it. If there is an explosion somewhere or a big shooting, then we'll be on it.

What we tend to be least good at is covering things that happen every day, because there's no one day in which they're really news, so we tend to ignore them. They become the backdrop. Issues like mental health, domestic violence, sex trafficking, poverty. Anything that happens in the shadows, anything that is hard to talk about, we tend not to be very good at covering, even though a vast numbers of lives are affected. I mean, that's one reason why I try to cover these issues, but it's hard. Audiences are not eager to read a column about lead poisoning or about domestic violence or whatever it may be. One has to push against the natural desire for ratings.

Speaker 3: A final question, Nick. You have spent so much of your writing, your actions being in parts of the world that have some serious, serious problems, whether

we're talking about genocide, human sex trafficking, child malnutrition. What I'd like to know from you is, what have you learned about what it takes to help people begin to reach out on some of these issues?

Nicholas K.:

I learned this issue partly out of frustration. When I was covering the Darfur crisis, I was making these trips to Darfur. It was expensive, it was dangerous, and it felt like my columns were just disappearing without a ripple. At that very same time in New York City, there were two hawks that were living in a building right off Central Park in a nest. The building didn't like the bird droppings, so it dismantled the hawk's nest. All of a sudden, New Yorkers were all up in arms about these two homeless hawks. I thought, how is it that I can't generate the same outrage about hundreds of thousands of people being slaughtered as people feel for these two hawks? That led me to the work of neuroscientists, of psychologists about what makes us connect to a cause, what makes us care. The lessons, I think, are ones that journalists and bleeding hearts more broadly tend to neglect. One is that we are moved by individual stories, not by numbers. At least the starting point to get people to care is to tell an individual story. Then, you can bring in the numbers later on. The other is you can't just focus on how awful things are, because then people tune out. Then it seems hopeless. You also have to provide some kind of indication that people do care, that if there is a better effort, that one can make a difference.

I think too often, we in journalism, and too often a humanitarian community, tells you that there are 8 million malnourished children somewhere and leave this impression that there's this unrelenting despair and failure. I try to push back at that by telling some individual human stories and also noting that the backdrop is, indeed, progress and that if we put our shoulders to it, we can, indeed, achieve a better world.

Speaker 3:

Some really good insights. Nick, I want to thank you for being our guest today. I want to wish you continued success in your work to get a message out so that all of us can help reach back into some of the issues that you raised. Thank you very much.

Nicholas K.:

Thanks. My pleasure to be with you. Best to your listeners.

Speaker 3:

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