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In Praise of Open Windows

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OPINION

In Praise of Open Windows

By Shari Motro

Last spring, the Obamas planted a White House vegetable garden. This year, why not follow up by cutting the air conditioning and opening the windows? They might also set a temperature range for the White House within which neither artificial heating nor cooling is used—recognizing that for much of the spring and fall what nature provides simply cannot be improved.

I'm no fan of indoor refrigeration even in summer. I realize I'm in the minority. Nevertheless, year-round climate control is surely not what most people want. During these glorious weeks, I cannot believe the office and retail workers who crowd every outdoor café and park bench at lunchtime appreciate returning to their airtight posts. I cannot believe the guests of most major hotels prefer stale recycled air over an April

breeze. I cannot believe the bedridden sick and elderly prefer the drone of forced air to the calls of nesting birds. Novelist Henry Miller called the United States the "air-conditioned nightmare." He had a point.

It's been a long
winter. Let the
sun shine in.

The ubiquity of windows that do not open may cause some not to notice what they are missing. Sealed spaces divide, they alienate, they blind us to what is happening beyond our threshold. They rob us of the goose bumps you feel as the sun sets at the end of a balmy day, of the sounds of crickets and children, of the smell of freshly mown grass, honeysuckle, earth. A different kind

of comfort emerges when we tune in rather than anesthetizing ourselves to our given reality, and with this comfort comes a different kind of compassion for ourselves and our surroundings.

In the end, of course, this isn't only about us. Americans make up 4% of the world's population and we produce a quarter of its carbon dioxide pollution. I don't know where you draw the line between personal comfort and responsibility, but treating our air 12 months a year, 24/7 is on the wrong side of it. This isn't comfort, it's gratuitous waste.

Who stands to lose from an open-window revolution? The multibillion dollar HVAC industry. I'm okay with that.

It's been a long winter—let the sun shine in.

Ms. Motro teaches law at the University of Richmond.