

"Bridges and Walls"

Jeff May
The Unitarian Universalist Church in Meriden, CT
July 10, 2016

*“ . . . But here there are no cows.
Before I built a wall I'd ask to know
What I was walling in or walling out,
And to whom I was like to give offense.*

*Something there is that doesn't love a wall,
That wants it down.” - (Robert Frost)*

The house I grew up in had an old stone wall in the back yard. It was a pretty substantial stone wall, and it ran quite a distance, marking the boundary between not only our yard but the yards of our neighbors and the land beyond, some overgrown former pasture, some wooded with evergreen and oak that my mom used to call “the deep dark green forest”.

Like the wall in Frost's poem this one had gaps from frost heaves no doubt, and those from children like myself. Like Frost's wall it no longer served the purpose for which it had originally been constructed. Mr. Hunter, who apparently had once owned all of the land including that on which our neighborhood had been constructed and whose name the street we lived on, “Hunternvale Avenue” bore - had long since passed away by the time I came along. The cows that had once roamed his pasture beyond the wall were gone and in their place thickets and brambles had grown, stands of pine and scrub maple in which we would create our make-believe fortresses and villages, wild blueberry bushes – tall shrubs and low ground plants ripe for the picking in the summertime. Here there was a stream passing under an ancient rock bridge along a winding path. We used to make “boats” out of sticks placing them in the water upstream, then moving quickly to the other side to watch them emerge from beneath the giant stones as the lazy stream took them on its journey toward Eel Pond and the ocean at Sawyers Beach.

Bridges and walls.

When a wall is constructed it is generally put there for a purpose. Our houses have walls marking the boundary between inside and out, between dry and wet, warm and cold or hot, and surely walling out insects, mice, mischievous chipmunks and squirrels, and marking the private place that is our castle – our space for family and into which we sometime invite friends. Inside our walls we

make the rules of how we work and play, how we interact with one-another, when and what we eat, when we rise and when we sleep.

Ancient cities often had walls. The oldest we know of was the wall around the Neolithic city of Jericho dating to some 8000 years before the common era – long before the other wall by that name central to the story in the Biblical book of Joshua - and probably built, according to archeologists, for some combination of flood control and defense against hostile tribes, but like all such walls whether after decades, centuries, or millennia it fell into disuse and disrepair and like the later wall in that place of legend, like the wall in Frost's narrative, like the walls around pastures and fields, the walls around states and nations this wall came tumbling down, stone by stone until finally it was no more.

*“Something there is that doesn't love a wall,
That wants it down.”*

As Frost suggests, when we build a wall it is important to consider what it is we are walling in, what it is we are walling out, and whom as he asks, we are likely to offend. In our current political debate there are those who call for the construction of a great wall between this nation and our neighbor to the south – a wall to keep out people who apparently are so different from us, so frightening, such a threat to our way of life. I shall not bother to repeat the vile characterization of our neighbors used by the most vocal of these current wall proponents. It is, we are told, because these neighbors will come to take our jobs. I have friends in California who insist that this is so, but is it really about jobs or economics?

*“Before I built a wall I'd ask to know
What I was walling in or walling out,
And to whom I was like to give offense.”*

Are those who live beyond this boundary to be walled off, on the other side of the Rio Grande or that sharper, more arbitrary line with a few angular jogs between El Paso and San Diego – are those people so different from ourselves? And what threat do they pose that we should build such a wall? Is it actually the taking of employment desired by “worthy Americans” we seek to protect, or is it really something else, something harder to define? Is it really a wall of economics or is it more a wall of culture constructed out of fear that “our way of life” is being threatened by those who speak another language, whose customs differ from those passed to us by our European forebears?

We build walls – real and virtual, communal and personal, physical and psychological to mark the boundaries between safe and threatening, me and thee, mine and yours, us and them. And certainly there is a need for boundaries – for a safety zone within and around our own skin defining our personal space. But when we build walls we really need to ask – and be honest with ourselves what it is we are actually walling in or walling out and if the wall we are building is likely to be successful or be filled with gaps. In a world ever more connected by technology enabling easy travel

and technology facilitating instant communication of ideas, the notion that we can build a wall like our Neolithic forebears to preserve the comfortable and familiar against the different and the alien is both ludicrous and futile. These walls have been breached ere they have been constructed and are porous from their conception. Our cultures are merged and continue to merge, our ways of life are evolving as we ultimately realize and experience our common humanity. As dark as it may seem right now, this is a step along the way to the aspirational Sixth Principle of Unitarian Universalism, “The goal of world community with peace, liberty, and justice for all”.

The Rev. Sean Parker Dennison, minister of the Unitarian Universalist Tree of Life congregation in McHenry, IL writes,

“The sixth Principle seems extravagant in its hopefulness and improbable in its prospects. Can we continue to say we want ‘world community’? ‘Peace, liberty, and justice for all’? The world is full of genocide, abuse, terror, and war. What have we gotten ourselves into?”

“As naïve or impossible as the sixth Principle may seem, I’m not willing to give up on it. In the face of our culture’s apathy and fear, I want to imagine and help create a powerful vision of peace by peaceful means, liberty by liberatory means, justice by just means. I want us to believe—and to live as if we believe—that a world community with peace, liberty, and justice for all is possible. There is no guarantee that we will succeed, but I can assure you that we will improve ourselves and improve the world by trying.”

I began writing these remarks several weeks ago – born of frustration with the current political dialog and what I believe to be the preposterous notion that we are better when we are separate. It gained focus in my mind with the vote of Great Britain to sever the bridge so carefully constructed with the rest of Europe; and like the proposed wall between this country and Mexico ostensibly to protect Britain from the threat of refugees that might carry the seeds terrorism and threaten jobs and the economy, but likewise really an attempt to retain a sense of autonomy – the way it used to be.

Make England great again.

Make America great again.

But in reality is this really possible? Can we really turn back the hands of time to the days of nation states containing tribal members who look alike and whose habits and language and cuisine and religions are uniform and unquestioned within the secure walls of national identity?

And to what would we go back? Back to a day when black people were enslaved and treated as property? Back to a day before workers had rights? Was America greater when those who are gay and lesbian lived in the shadows and were denied the right to marry who they love?

What great America would we return to?

What great Britain would they return to?

*“Before I built a wall I’d ask to know
What I was walling in or walling out,
And to whom I was like to give offense.”*

In the past week our senses have been violated yet again – and multiple times by more of our black brothers being killed under the guise of law enforcement, and by those whose uncontrolled anger causes them to strike back and kill those whose job it is to protect and provide security.

So frequent are these atrocities that we can scarcely name them all. We wake up each morning wondering what form of brutality we will hear about, what innocents will have perished, what children will be fatherless, motherless, botherless, sisterless.

And then we log on to social media, we watch our Facebook feeds streaming with memes bearing slogans defending one side or the other of the social debate – attempting to claim that Black Lives Mater is an affront to other lives or an attack on law enforcement, smearing half-truths and outright falsehoods across the digital landscape in an effort to stake sides in the battle between the way the world is and must go, and the way it used to be, or at least our romanticized imagination of a better time now lost. And in our frustration and out of our own fear and rage and desire to feel safe we burrow ourselves in our own safe psychological wall – shouting back across cyberspace, friending those with whom we agree and viscerally lashing out at those on the other side, fortifying our walls of difference and tearing down the bridges of connection.

“If you talk about that again, I’ll unfriend you!”

Until about six months ago I was not a Facebook user – I somewhat famously avoided it, and in the interest of time I won’t relate the journey that brought me to that platform right now, but as a consequence of becoming a Facebook user I have renewed connections with family members I haven’t spoken with in years, and friends and acquaintances from long ago. One such acquaintance – a woman named Barbara – was a girl I went to school with from the time I was in first grade. Now living in California she and I have reconnected, and while most of our exchanges have been cordial we differ significantly in our political and religious outlooks, she rather conservative in both regards and I, as most of you are aware quite liberal and progressive. Last week in response to a meme she shared regarding the FBI decision in the supposed email scandal. I responded that I differed in opinion, posting [a link to an article I had written on my blog a few days before](#), addressing this particular issue. She posted the following on her timeline:

“A fellow FB friend posted today about moving on with the conversation regarding the political arena.

This is what I have say.

You may not agree with me, you may not like what i have to say and you have that right as I have the same right to say...

Power To The People

My ancestors came over to this Country for purposes that this Country is so far away from that they are rolling over in their graves! How is it you are willing to say move on!

For the people, by the people!

We have been so complacent over the years that we/I, actually think my "Voice Matters"! Not

And to my original comment on her meme she replied, "Jeff I'm sorry - I don't see things the way you do."

I responded:

"That's quite okay . . . we're allowed to differ.

And to a point I saw you post elsewhere, I didn't say "move on", and I am not implying that people shouldn't speak up for what they believe in. I'm also not suggesting we ignore the problems and challenges. I believe you finished that post with the imperative, "Say what you mean, mean what you say."

Exactly."

I went on to explain how the debates that we were having struck me as superficial, and that what we seemed to be arguing about was not really what we were arguing about, and then continued:

"My point is that there are very real challenges we face both here and abroad and instead of talking about those challenges in a meaningful way we (as a society) are expending most of our energy arguing about peripheral issues trying to inflict wounds on the "other side". I don't care for either of the two major candidates we are presented with. I believe America can do far better and I believe we need far better - but the system we have in place leaves us with the choices we have, in no small part because we allow our dialog to be limited to partisan barbs that can fit in a 140 character tweet or fit on a 300 x 400 meme.

All of this is a long way of saying that I'm not suggesting that we move on, I'm suggesting that we move deeper."

Her response was heartening –

“Thank you Jeffrey for sharing. I better understand now what your post meant. Thank you God for bringing further answers to that of which I was needing. I appreciate your words Jeff.”

No, Barbara and I still don't see eye-to-eye, but now we are talking – building a bridge where there was the potential of having a wall. Continuing the type of connection and conversation we need to have with each other in these unsettling times. Conversations we all need to have if we are to move through these unsettling times.

*“Something there is that doesn't love a wall,
That wants it down.”*

We move closer to the vision, aspirational and inspirational of our Sixth Principle when each of us, takes the risk to reach beyond our individual perspectives, place ourselves in the heart of another - not surrendering our own identity or our own truth - but allowing the other person space within their own personal wall for their truth.

In the words of a benediction familiar to some of us here:

“Despite our differences and beyond our diversity there lies a unity that makes us one and binds us forever together, in spite of time and death, and the space between the stars.”

There is hope. We are hope's agents.

*“Something there is that doesn't love a wall,
That wants it down.”*

Each of us can choose to build a wall, or build a bridge this day and each day.

Let us be conscious in each moment of how we make that choice.

And may you live in blessing.