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Thunder Bay

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Reading

Mending Wall

By Robert Frost

SOMETHING there is that doesn't love a wall,  
That sends the frozen-ground-swell under it,  
And spills the upper boulders in the sun;  
And makes gaps even two can pass abreast.  
The work of hunters is another thing: 5  
I have come after them and made repair  
Where they have left not one stone on a stone,  
But they would have the rabbit out of hiding,  
To please the yelping dogs. The gaps I mean,  
No one has seen them made or heard them made, 10  
But at spring mending-time we find them there.  
I let my neighbour know beyond the hill;  
And on a day we meet to walk the line  
And set the wall between us once again.  
We keep the wall between us as we go. 15  
To each the boulders that have fallen to each.  
And some are loaves and some so nearly balls  
We have to use a spell to make them balance:  
"Stay where you are until our backs are turned!"  
We wear our fingers rough with handling them. 20  
Oh, just another kind of out-door game,  
One on a side. It comes to little more:

There where it is we do not need the wall:  
He is all pine and I am apple orchard.  
My apple trees will never get across 25  
And eat the cones under his pines, I tell him.  
He only says, "Good fences make good neighbours."  
Spring is the mischief in me, and I wonder  
If I could put a notion in his head:  
"Why do they make good neighbours? Isn't it 30  
Where there are cows? 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 offence.  
Something there is that doesn't love a wall, 35  
That wants it down." I could say "Elves" to him,  
But it's not elves exactly, and I'd rather  
He said it for himself. I see him there  
Bringing a stone grasped firmly by the top  
In each hand, like an old-stone savage armed. 40  
He moves in darkness as it seems to me,  
Not of woods only and the shade of trees.  
He will not go behind his father's saying,  
And he likes having thought of it so well  
He says again, "Good fences make good neighbours."

Sermon

## Good Fences

“Good fences make good neighbours,” Robert Frost writes.

Ministers add, Good boundaries make good ministry.

Our topic this morning is boundaries, healthy boundaries. And the future of ministry in this congregation.

In “Mending Wall,” Robert Frost announces, “Something there is / that doesn’t love a wall.”

Frost suggests several things that do not love a wall, which we will mention, briefly. Law adds some insights on boundaries. We’ll also look at three related concepts that bear on healthy boundaries – church, spirituality (including prayer), and ministry.

On ministry, by the way, the board has important choices to make tomorrow night. I will take a moment to tell you, what I think I see and hear. I’ll do my best to tell the truth in love.

And then, I will close with a stocking stuffer -- my favourite boundary-word in worship.

First, the poetry -- What doesn’t love a wall?

To begin with, Nature doesn’t -- the “frozen-ground-swell” each winter that topples stone walls, forcing neighbours, each spring, to mend them.

Hunters and their dogs don’t love walls. They destroy them, to capture the runaway bunnies hiding in them.

The stubborn stones, themselves, do not love the walls they make -- stones that will not balance, till subjected to a mock-heroic, pagan spell – “Stay where you are till our backs are turned!”

Cows don't love walls, but avoid them, as they are supposed to.

Yet, if cows are the reason of stone walls, still – around this wall, there are no cows.

Hence, no rhyme or reason exists to maintain this wall, to protect the yummy pine cones from hungry apple trees. Reason itself does not love this wall, the mending of which is just a game.

Yet some people do like walls, especially neighbour people. Frost's playful narrator may question walls, but there he is, in the orchard, mending wall with his distant, next-door neighbour -- trying to start a conversation, or at least some springtime mischief.

Mending, then, is an ancient social activity, a now-empty ritual that survives its apparent loss of rationale. Mending wall, neighbours with differing sensibilities renew acquaintances, work together cooperatively, and stumble into poetry together, the poetry of boundaries.

Law also creates boundaries. Repetition leads to habits, habits develop into customs, customs into laws. All laws are just categories and relationships. It's boundaries that create the categories. Some are fuzzy, some are bright-line categories. Eighty-nine kilometres an hour is legal, 91 is not. (Thank heavens for fudge factors.)

Some boundaries, though legal, are yet immoral, and cry out to be broken. Forty-two years ago this month, in Montgomery, Alabama, a woman named Rosa Parks sat down on a public bus, in a section reserved for white people. Rosa Parks was black. When the bus driver told her that, if she did not move, he would have her arrested, she made the breath-taking reply,

“You  
may  
do  
that.”

With those quiet words, America's civil rights movement took fire, and the trickle of justice rolled down like water, and righteousness like a flowing stream. Amos 5:24.

Boundaries are especially important in church. In these walls, spirit blows where it will, and the common human yearning, for order, structure, and permanence, plays out against the flimsy backdrop of our mortality. We hope and pray that institutions like churches will survive, where we mortal human beings cannot.

Spirit at play can be wild. Once, in my home church, I asked the senior co-minister, How come so many meetings around here, take on the tone of the most dysfunctional person in the room? He just smiled and said, You noticed.

For some, wildness might demand official boundaries, like rules. For us, uncomfortable with rules, a better answer is love. Sometimes the power to love is easily misplaced, and requires great effort. But it is worth it.

Churches, wrestling with spirit, may struggle to establish what is OK and what is not. At memorial services, where people from different faiths gather, sometimes people are reassured to learn what is OK at Unitarian Universalist memorial services – laughter, tears, silence, even anger. It is radical hospitality, to give people permission to do, that which they're going to do anyway.

Covenants of Right Relations, like the one we began two weeks ago, can help establish what's OK. They are the whole congregation's democratic consensus on who it wants to be, at its best. We are refining, combining, and developing the initial suggestions you made. And we encourage more. Stay tuned.

The presence of a minister in a formerly lay-led church challenges the status quo. Boundary shifts occur. Three years ago, the Sunday Services Committee planned the leadership and topics for all the Sunday services. Now a full-time minister plans and leads two-thirds. That is a big change.

The lay chaplains used to perform all the church's weddings, memorial services, and child dedications. With full-time ministry, usually the minister conducts those services for members, and the chaplains for non-members.

In other things, clear procedures have yet to be invented. When you have a full-time minister, for example, who does what in projects like the Pledge Drive?

One important area for ministers, and boundaries, is the manner of their departure.

In the year 2000, at the Berry Street lecture at General Assembly, a colleague, UU minister the Rev. Mark Morrison-Reed, of Toronto, set forth three stark truths of parish ministers who retire from a pastorate:

“You will love your parishioners  
with all your heart but  
never befriend them.

“You will pour out your lifeblood  
for the community but  
never settle there.

“You shall die to the congregation  
so that the ministry might live.”

When a minister leaves a congregation, the leaving requires as clean a break as possible. Ministerial guidebooks say, a departing minister is rehearsing his or her own death. It needs to be a good goodbye, fully and freely grieved by the congregation and minister, after which – life goes on.

Boundaries affect spirituality. Our Fourth UU Principle suggests the goal of accepting one another, and encouraging spiritual growth.

I cannot accept you, in depth, until I accept myself, and I can't accept myself, until I know myself – until I know, for example, where I stop and you begin.

Discourse that focuses on I-statements asks us to speak for ourselves, and not for others. When I read “what Unitarian Universalists believe,” and find that I don't believe that at all, I feel disappeared, as if I were somehow not real to the person claiming to speak for me, telling me what I believe. That's the way heretics were treated, including some of our spiritual ancestors.

The self-awareness, that knows where I stop and you begin, involves hard spiritual work. It is also rewarding.

I learned of the need for self-awareness in the Fourth Step of the 12-Step program – “we made a searching and fearless moral inventory of ourselves.”

Sometimes I jokingly call it, a shallow and fearful moral inventory, because you only do what you can. Better to do it badly, than not at all. For, like prayer, the habit of self-inventory has a gyroscopic imperative – practice it, and you may like it. You may even get good at it.

That moral inventory terrified some of us, who’d never really done anything like it. We had told ourselves pleasant half-truths, which we pleasantly half-believed, and those half-truths were killing us. That can happen to institutions, by the way, as well as people.

This fear of taking a good hard look at reality is just that – plain old fear, with a dash of pride thrown in. It helps to know that, in this self-awareness process, many truths have more than one side to them. You know that old joke -- I am principled, you are stubborn, he is pig-headed.

Two great joys come from accepting deep insights about yourself. You really do learn where you stop and others begin.

And when you know yourself, criticism feels different. If the criticism nails you, you can say, You got me! and enjoy the feeling that you’ve been really seen, for who you are. And if the criticism doesn’t nail you, perhaps it’s more about them than you.

The spiritual value is humility, being right-sized. The big challenge for some of us has been to be five feet, eleven inches tall, not seven foot nine, or four foot six. Claiming who we are. Knowing our boundaries.

Rabbi Edwin Friedman called this claiming process self-differentiation -- knowing who you are, and who you are not. Of it, his colleague Thomas Fischer writes:

“Undifferentiated congregations, like families, spend so much time focusing on finding ‘lost love’ that difficult decisions are delayed. Energies are directed toward self-sabotaging fusion. With little or no energy for vision, the vision is lost. . . . [S]uch congregations not only have no healthy positive vision for ministry. They are vision-resistant [,] and will be until they either become self-differentiated . . . or die.” Thomas Fischer, *Self-Differentiation: An Essential Attitude for Healthy Leadership*, <http://ministryhealth.net>.

Probably the best known of modern prayers is a boundary prayer. It was composed in the 1940's by the theologian Reinhold Niebuhr. It soon caught on with 12-Step Groups. Some of you may know it:

“God grant me the serenity  
To accept the things I cannot change,  
The courage to change the things I can,  
And the wisdom to know the difference.”

A pragmatic prayer if ever there was one!

This prayer sets up dividing lines between what I can change, and what I can't – bright lines, that exist in space, and time.

In space, the dividing line between the changeable and unchangeable is my skin. Inside stuff – thinking, intentions, and attitudes, sympathies and loves – stuff inside my skin, I may be able to change. Modifying our breathing, or reducing our blood pressure, or walking over glowing hot coals – maybe not.

Stuff outside our skin – the world at large, and its institutions – all of that is beyond my control or power to change. Other people, places, and things will do what they will do. If I am wise, I'll let them go, as gracefully as I can.

In time, the dividing line is now, the present moment. Everything that has ever occurred throughout history, until just one nanosecond ago, is unchangeable, utterly beyond my control. The present and the immediate future, however, I have some control over.

But even if I cannot change what happened yesterday, sometimes yesterday's actions carry over to today, and continue to affect a current, living relationship. That, perhaps, I can do something about.

On a trip to the desert, we descended into a valley. Coming toward us was a vaguely familiar van. As it passed, we wondered, Was that Peter and Deborah? We had missed them, a fact unchangeable forever.

But the friendship continued into the present. Sure enough, two weeks later, a note arrived, from Peter and Deborah: Was that you? Sorry we missed you!

The tiny breach in our friendship was mended. We couldn't change the past, but we could change the ongoing relationship, and we did.

Tomorrow night, your board meets to hash out a proposed budget for next year. It's a big decision. A lot hangs on it. The basic question is, full-time ministry, or not?

The choice belongs to the board, and you. I will support you, either way. Ministry is what I have chosen to give my life to, and so my bias is predictable, and not very relevant. You need to decide what is best for you, because you live with the consequences of your actions.

Let me tell you, as best I can, the straws in the wind that I see.

I see the most hospitable congregation I have ever served. You have been so warm, so kind to me. And when asked to vote last year about professional ministry, you voted yes, you wanted that.

But much else I have seen and experienced here, tells me you are hesitant about professional ministry.

The Pledge Drive is over. It aimed to raise \$120,000. It looks like it will raise about \$80,000. That is a big shortfall. More might be raised, but it would take a vision, a vision that is not yet clear.

People give to visions. Without them, they back off. The Pledge Drive lacked a vision, in part because it could not find a chair.

Some budgets that the Board has been entertaining allocate about seventy percent of the total budget to the minister's salary, housing, and expenses. Peter Raible, dean of UU ministers in the Pacific Northwest until his death a few years ago, wrote a book for ministers called "How to Case a Church, An Irreverent Guide to Finding and Getting the Church of Your Choice."

On ministers' pay, he wrote: "In smaller churches under roughly 200 members, the ministerial remuneration may surge over 50% of the budget, but if the figure verges toward 75%, that is a pronounced danger sign. It means that there will be little money for anything else in the church and this can cause

pressures upon the minister and lead to dissatisfaction among members as they wrestle with church financing.” How to Case a Church, 29.

Ministerial prospects may say, Too much will be expected of me, all alone; no help will be available to do it; people will say, she or he is getting the big bucks, let them do it; and -- every person in the church whose committee budget was reduced, whose pet project got eliminated, or whose dreams wound up on the cutting room floor, will be uncomfortable with the minister’s compensation, before that minister even gets there.

The numbers are part of it, but only part. It is December, and there is no committee on ministry. So far as I know, one person has expressed an interest in serving. The Full-Time Minister Search Committee is looking for potential members, and apparently having trouble finding them. The same goes for another Interim Minister Search Committee.

My interim committee on ministry consists of two of the hardest-working, busiest people in the fellowship, Suzanne Hansen and David Belrose, but they are so busy that I am reluctant to call upon them.

I find myself in the awkward position of trying to prepare this fellowship for a full-time minister that I am not convinced it really wants.

I am an experienced minister, I care, I work hard, and I am specially trained in interim ministry. But I am not at all sure how interim ministry fits in to what you want or need, or how much buy-in interim ministry has had.

I am sorry to say there is more. Planning for full-time ministry seems to have been difficult. Office space and furnishings, the extent of clerical help, adjustments of roles by committees – these are issues which are still being worked out.

This church has not fully grieved the departure of my predecessor. Nor has it come to terms with its only full-time ministry experience, ten years ago, which ended so painfully. A history session a few weeks ago spent a full hour rehashing that unhappy episode. It was later suggested that all the blame for what happened belonged to that one minister and to the UUA, and this congregation had little part in what happened. That is a denial of responsibility, and an unaffordable luxury.

The Canadian Unitarian Council's take on that episode is that the congregation made a commitment to extension ministry which it was unable to support financially. The congregation is now contemplating making another commitment to full-time ministry, and some of the signs suggest that it will also not be able to support that commitment. Those who refuse to learn from history, as Santayana said, are condemned to repeat it. Has this congregation really learned everything that it can, from its own history?

Finally, no relationship with a professional minister has exceeded two years. None, including the experiment with my predecessor, has ended entirely satisfactorily. (You liked her, but she left.) Until those experiences are mined for all the learning they can offer, future full-time ministry feels awfully chancy. Perhaps it shouldn't. But that's how it feels.

What can be done?

First, we all need to calm down. To take a deep breath, all around. The atmosphere is frazzled and anxious, and those who work hard for you – your board, your minister – can't help being affected. Good decisions do not get made in an atmosphere of crisis. This church has a history of decision-making that has left hard feelings. So let us all relax, get centered, and remind ourselves of the best that is in us, and the best that we want to be.

Second, let's try to read the tea leaves accurately. They're not clear yet. The board is getting two conflicting messages from the congregation – yes, we want full-time ministry, but -- we are not so sure we want to pay for it.

You would not be the first congregation ever to have champagne tastes and a beer budget. One great gift of humanism to our movement is the realization that yes, we are all human, and we tend to do human things. Perhaps it is time for us to consider that quota I suggested, that all of us are entitled to three major mistakes. Forgiveness, in other words. Forgiveness for all of us, in advance.

Third, we ought to be as honest and imaginative with ourselves and with each other as we can possibly be. Let's make sure ours are the right conversations. This is not a time to be loud, insistent, or pressureful. It is not a time for opinions and attitudes, for poses and recriminations.

It is a time for thoughtfulness, for deep care for one another, for quiet, candid examination of our own motives, for consideration of what is really best for

the fellowship as a whole, over the long term. The temptation to selfishness should have little place in the deliberations. It is a time for fresh ideas, for thinking outside the box – something UUs do very well. The old ideas will not do any more. The future, this generation’s heritage, what all of us make available for those who follow – those ought to be the watchwords.

A vision is essential – a united vision.

It breaks my heart to tell you this. As I am sure you can tell, I am in sympathy with those who see the future of this fellowship in ministry. If it is wise ministry, it will build on what has gone before, honouring all the contributions, all the traditions, and all the ancestors. But it may be time for some who have gone before to consider stepping gracefully aside, taking on the status of esteemed elders in the tribe.

No congregation needs false gods. Idolatry is idolatry, no matter what the source or stripe. You have the capacity for a unique vision, to make a great, original gift to this community, and you have a great future as a fellowship -- if you can only see it, only grasp it.

Oh, how I hope you do!

I promised you, in closing, a tiny present -- my single favourite, boundary-word in worship. Here it is:

Amen.

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