

Norbert Hirschhorn: The mending wall

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The mending wall

By Norbert Hirschhorn

"Something there is that doesn't love a wall," begins Robert Frost's memorable poem, "Mending Wall." It starts by telling a farmer's story: How each spring boulders in the wall separating his farm from his neighbor's have tumbled down, leaving large gaps. Not the work of hunters, nor elves - frost heaves perhaps, but since no one has seen it happen, mysterious all the same. The farmer arranges a day when he and the neighbor will walk the line, restoring the stones. "We keep the wall between us as we go./ To each the boulders that have fallen to each."

Each time I read the poem I think of other famous walls, like the one dividing Berlin, where President Reagan famously called out, "Mr Gorbachev, tear down this wall!" As the poet Frost wisely noted, "Before I built a wall I'd ask to know/ What I was walling in or walling out..." The East German Communist regime surely knew: it wanted its citizens imprisoned behind the wall, every aspect of their lives controlled. People were shot trying to escape.

These days it's the "Security Wall" built by the Israelis around the occupied Palestinian West Bank, intended to keep suicide bombers out, which now seems a permanent barrier to prevent the two peoples from ever engaging peacefully, even if the Occupation were to end. Roger Waters of Pink Floyd who wrote 'Another Brick in the Wall' ("We don't need no thought control"), performed it at the 10th anniversary of the fall of the

Berlin Wall; one day he hopes to do so again if the wall around Bethlehem ever comes down. The Great Wall of China and Hadrian's Wall of the Roman Empire in England were also built to keep belligerent enemies out. Is Mexico our enemy? Yet we're building a 1,951-mile barrier on our southern border. Walls are built for security to be sure, yet the land, air and sea walls Israel has built around Gaza seem only to have strengthened its enemy Hamas, leaving Israel no more secure while bring great suffering to ordinary people.

"...Walling in or walling out..." Think of walls we take for granted each day, hardly noticed - gated communities, keeping the well-to-do behind guarded walls, safe from the Outsider; and the emotional walls we sometimes build between spouses, children and ourselves - hardly letting in their turmoil, or letting ours out. "Something there is that ... wants it down." Consider all the security barriers we now accept as "normal": In London CCTV cameras everywhere; in DC concrete blocks in front of public buildings; in Beirut, tanks and armored personnel carriers blocking crossroads and checkpoints; at every airport the walls created by x-ray scanners. Security, oh yes. We understand, and we even accept the increasing intrusions into our public and private lives. Those "walls" may never come down. The poet teases his neighbor: "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/ And eat the cones under his pines, I tell him." To which the neighbor mutters the most misunderstood line in modern poetry: "Good fences makes good neighbors." Frost watches him sadly, "Bringing a stone grasped firmly by the top/ In each hand, like an old-stone savage armed./ 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 neighbors.'"

Frost is telling us that stubbornly held clichés become another kind of wall, sealing off the possibility of further thought and communication. Here we may consider how political slogans and sound-bite phrases (Pro-choice! ... Pro-life! / Terrorism! ... Resistance!) lock us out from any sincere exchange, negotiation, reconciliation. We need mendings, not walls, good neighbors, not blockades.

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