

“Necessary Tensions: Separation and Unity: ‘Good fences make good neighbors’”

March 7, 2010

Quimper Unitarian Universalist Fellowship

Rev. Bruce Bode

Lighting the Chalice (in unison)

We are travelers. We meet for a moment in this sacred place to love, to share, to serve. Let us use compassion, curiosity, reverence, and respect while seeking our truths. In this way we will support a just and joyful community, and this moment shall endure. (QUUF Covenant Statement)

Opening Words

Holy and beautiful is the custom by which we gather together on this Sunday morning. Here we come to give our thanks, to face our ideals, to remember our loved ones, to seek that which is permanent, and to serve integrity, beauty, and the qualities of life that make it rich and whole.

Through this hour breathes the worship of all ages, the cathedral music of all history; blessed are the ears that hear that eternal sound.

Introduction to Responsive Reading:

Our responsive reading this morning is an early poem of Robert Frost, written, remarkably, when he was still a teenager. It's titled, "The Tuft of Flowers," and, as you will see, there's a movement in this poem from the solitary to the social – what it is that links humans together. Later in his life, Frost was to relate this early poem to one of his most well-known poems, "Mending Wall," which he said takes up the theme of separation and connection where "The Tuft of Flowers" leaves off.

Responsive Reading

MINISTER: I went to turn the grass once after one
Who mowed it in the dew before the sun.

CONGREGATION: The dew was gone that made his blade so keen/Before I came to
view the leveled scene.

MINISTER: I looked for him behind an isle of trees;
I listened for his whetstone on the breeze.

CONGREGATION: But he had gone his way, the grass all mown,/And I must be, as he
had been – alone,

MINISTER: "As all must be," I said within my heart,
"Whether they work together or apart."

CONGREGATION: But as I said it, swift there passed me by/On noiseless wing a bewildered butterfly,

MINISTER: Seeking with memories grown dim o'er night
Some resting flower of yesterday's delight.

CONGREGATION: And once I marked his flight go round and round,/As where some flower lay withering on the ground.

MINISTER: And then he flew as far as eye could see,
And then on tremulous wing came back to me.

CONGREGATION: I thought of questions that have no reply,/And would have turned to toss the grass to dry;

MINISTER: But he turned first, and led my eye to look
At a tall tuft of flowers beside a brook,

CONGREGATION: A leaping tongue of bloom the scythe had spared/Beside a reedy brook the scythe had bared.

MINISTER: The mower in the dew had loved them thus,
By leaving them to flourish, not for us,

CONGREGATION: Nor yet to draw one thought of ours to him,/But from sheer morning gladness at the brim.

MINISTER: The butterfly and I had lit upon,
Nevertheless, a message from the dawn,

CONGREGATION: That made me hear the wakening birds around,/And hear his long scythe whispering to the ground,

MINISTER: And feel a spirit kindred to my own;
So that henceforth I worked no more alone;

CONGREGATION: But glad with him, I worked as with his aid,/And weary, sought at noon with him the shade;

MINISTER: And dreaming, as it were, held brotherly speech
With one whose thought I had not hoped to reach.

CONGREGATION: "Men work together,; I told him from the heart,/"Whether they work together or apart."

(Robert Frost, "The Tuft of Flowers," from *A Boy's Will*)

Introduction to Reading

During the late winter and early spring each year, I present a sermon series, ending at Easter, in which I can go into a greater depth with a subject that I might ordinarily be able to do.

This year I will explore the subject of “necessary tensions” in our lives, illustrating those “necessary tensions” through the work of poet Robert Frost, whose poems are marked by interior tensions, conflicts, contradictions, and paradoxes.

Most of my ministerial career was spent as an associate minister at the Fountain Street Church in Grand Rapids, Michigan, a religiously liberal and unaffiliated congregation that holds its services in a beautiful cathedral-like sanctuary that seats over 1600 people. I served there for twenty-two years from 1978 to 2001 and learned during that time that the poet Robert Frost had once visited and given a reading at the church. But that was all I knew.

Then, in the fall of 1999, since I was planning to facilitate a poetry class on Robert Frost (much as I have done here), I decided to investigate a little further into the reading that Frost had given. I discovered that the reading was given on a Thursday evening – November 19, 1959 – when Frost was 85 years old, to an overflow crowd of over 1800 persons. The reading had been postponed two weeks because of a bad cold that Frost had.

But what most excited me was the discovery that the reading was recorded on a reel-to-reel tape that was still in very good condition. A member of that congregation volunteered to transfer that reel-to-reel recording onto a CD disc. And what I’d like to do now is have our audio folks play the cut of Robert Frost reading the poem, “Mending Wall.” This will serve as the text for my thoughts this morning.

That poem is also printed as an insert in your Order of Service today so that you might follow along as Frost reads – or rather recites the poem – because he delivered his poems without notes and from memory.

In the recording, you will hear Frost introducing this poem with some of his witty banter and commentary. Please attend now as Robert Frost introduces and reads one of the great poems of the 20th century, “Mending Wall.”

Reading [transcribed from the recording]

I'll say one of the sort of metaphorical things that I've been followed around about. They've all got – any of them are liable to have them – ulterioriors. Let's get angry at the people that act as if symbolism had just appeared in the world. The Bible, everything, is double meanings, ulterioriors. The only thing is that you've got to know when I mean double, and you've gotta not see double when I'm not being double. That's all. Ya gotta watch out.

You know what breaks families up as quick as anything? It's when people don't understand each other enough to know when one's hinting and not hinting, taking hints when there's no hint intended, and missing hints that are intended. That breaks up families. See, I'm a psychiatrist. [Laughter]

Well, here's one that I've had. It's got something like that, anyone can see.

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:
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,
But at spring mending-time we find them there.
I let my neighbor 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.
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.
Oh, just another kind of outdoor 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
And eat the cones under his pines, I tell him.
He only says, "Good fences make good neighbors."
Spring is the mischief in me, and I wonder
If I could put a notion in his head:
"Why do they make good neighbors? Isn't it
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 offense.
Something there is that doesn't love a wall,
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.

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."

Somebody said that's the only thing I ever wrote – that one sentence in there, years ago when that was new – that's the only thing you've written that anyone will ever remember: "Good fences make good neighbors." And you didn't write that yourself. [Laughter]

"Necessary Tensions: Separation and Unity: 'Good fences make good neighbors'"

Before looking at the poem, "Mending Wall," and the theme of separation and unity, or separation and connection, I'd like to give a little background to this poem.

I realize that knowing the background of a poem can almost be disappointing sometimes, the initiating event seeming rather slight in relation to where the imagination has taken that event.

But, for myself, I usually find that knowing a little background to a poem or a work of art can be interesting or helpful, and sometimes even illuminating. At a minimum, it indicates where the imagination or muse has taken the subject beyond the initiating circumstance.

With regard to the poem "Mending Wall," it's worth noting that it was written while Robert Frost was living in England, not New England. He and his family resided in England from 1910 to 1913, and this poem was written in 1913 shortly after Frost had visited Scotland. There, in the village of Kingsbarns, walking with a friend, Frost had come upon some loosely heaped, unmortared stone walls that reminded him of similar stone walls that had bordered the farm he had left in Derry, New Hampshire when he came to England.

Frost, born in 1874, lived the first decade of his life in San Francisco, but as a youngster of eleven moved to the Northeast. After marriage, he lived on a farm in Derry, New Hampshire from 1900 to 1910. You can still visit that farm; it's about 12 miles from Lawrence, Massachusetts.

Later, Frost was to recall that he had written "Mending Wall" in a mood of homesickness while "thinking of the old wall that I hadn't mended in several years and which must be in a terrible condition."

He and his neighbors would care for their boundary walls, neighbor joining neighbor to keep them in good repair; and, as mentioned in this poem, it was sometimes to repair the damage hunters had done to the walls.

But one must careful not to read this poem too autobiographically, or to think that the “old stone savage” in the poem is his actual neighbor, the one who said, “Good fences make good neighbors.” That sentence was a proverb that had appeared for years in the Farmers’ Almanac, of which Frost had a copy.

Further, Frost’s actual neighbor was a French-Canadian named Napoleon Guy, with whom Frost got on well.

One other introductory remark that may be helpful in looking at this poem is Frost’s interest and pleasure in what he called “feats of association.” You take one thing and bring it together with a second thing, thus making a third thing. Said Frost on the tape, “Feats of association ... one thing comes together with another thing, and, smack!, that’s the game.”

And so, for Robert Frost, poems were “feats of association,” or “feats of connection,” as he also referred to them. “Each one of them,” he said in another part of the tape that we listened to, “each poem, does something like that for me; every poem has represented some step I took, some relief I got, from putting one thing together with another thing.”

This is why he so liked the rhymed couplet, saying of it that it’s “an outward symbol of the inner feat of association.” In just two lines an association is made. Something that has never been put together with another thing now comes together: smack!, a connection, a coupling, a “feat of association.”

“It’s a regular matchmaker I am,” says Frost, again in that tape. “That’s my life. We all do it, but we don’t value ourselves enough for it. But I treasure them. It’s my business. It’s my profession. And it’s always stirring to me when I come up with one.”

But warns Frost, as we heard in his introduction to “Mending Wall”: “Ya gotta know when I mean double, and ya gotta not see double when I’m not being double.”

Well, clearly, “Mending Wall” is a poem in which Frost thought it was appropriate to take him double – and perhaps even more than double.

And so now onto the poem itself, which I suggest you may want to follow in its printed form in the insert of today’s bulletin.

Something there is that doesn’t love a wall,

What is that “something”? That’s the question we will try to answer in this poem.

***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.***

So that “something” must be pretty powerful to make gaps that large, moving the ground beneath us – ground-swells, perhaps like the swells of the ocean (John Evangelist Walsh, Into My Own, p. 140), waves moving, not through water, but through earth ... subterranean, unseen, and powerful.

The work of hunters is another thing:

So this is *not* the “something” we’re talking about. But let’s digress for a moment to something else that breaks down walls.

The work of hunters is another thing:

I have come after them and made repair

Where they have left not one stone on a stone,

The hunters have utterly ripped the wall apart, leaving not one stone on a stone. Not a very neighborly thing to do. And Frost must certainly be echoing the gospels here, where Jesus, leaving the Temple in Jerusalem in the last week of his life, is asked by a disciple:

Master, see what manner of stones and what buildings are here! And Jesus answering said unto him, “Seest thou these great buildings? there shall not be left one stone upon another, that shall not be thrown down.” (Mark 13:1-2)

And, indeed, those stones in Jerusalem were thrown down – not one stone was left on another ... with one exception, a single remnant wall of the old temple, the “Wailing Wall,” before which many to this day try to mend their lives ... a wall of connection, a wall of association ... but for others a wall of separation.

The work of hunters is another thing:

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.

So the hunters’ sport tears the wall apart. They are in the grip of a kind of game, and therefore not conscious or considerate of the work or need of others.

And sometimes this is what tears things apart and destroys form and structure and the great effort and creative work of others. And why, sometimes, more secure walls are needed ... to protect and to keep out those who lack the courtesy or the consciousness to recognize appropriate boundaries.

This is the *human* destruction of walls and boundaries we’re talking about. But this has been a digression from our original theme, for there’s another kettle of fish we’re frying here ...

The gaps I mean,

No one has seen them made or heard them made,

So this is another thing ... these gaps that mysteriously appear in the wall ... not the places where humans have destroyed the walls ... but there's something other than human that doesn't love a wall, that likes to create gaps and openings in walls...

*No one has seen them made or heard them made,
But at spring mending-time we find them there.
I let my neighbor know beyond the hill;
And on a day we meet to walk the line
And set the wall between us once again.*

Please note who it is that puts out the call to mend the wall, who insists on the yearly ritual of fence mending. It's not the neighbor who will later say, "Good fences make good neighbors." No, it's the narrator of this story, the one who is often thought not to care about walls. He is the one who makes the contact to mend the fence.

And, who knows, maybe the neighbor wouldn't have done anything to mend the fence. Maybe the neighbor thought the yearly ritual wasn't so important. Maybe he was even reluctant to mend the fence. We don't know.

What we do know is that the narrator thinks it's important to mend the wall ... important to maintain a proper boundary and barrier.

The two points of view in this poem, as we shall see, are equally worthy: the point of view, "Something there is that doesn't love a wall, that wants it down," and the point of view, "Good fences make good neighbors."

Frost, in another place in the tape we listened to, said:

The separateness of the parts is equally important with the connection of the parts ... and right inside your own body: the *separateness* of your heart from your gizzard is just as important as the *connection* of your heart and your gizzard." [Frost had a down-to-earth way of speaking.]

*I let my neighbor 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.*

Here is where I think we can really start to take Frost double, for this is not just the description of two farmers mending a stone wall, though it is that; but this has to do with the universal importance, meaning, and value of form, structure, organization, manners, and mores. It has to do with the importance and value of boundaries, of borders, of barriers, of limits, of knowing who belongs to what and what belongs to whom.

Frost often argued for limits, boundaries, structures, and forms, as he did in his reading at the church that evening. With regard to writing poetry, he recited his well-known line: "I'd as soon write free verse as play tennis with the net down."

Not that Frost thought this settled anything with regard to poetry, except, he said, it settled it for him. Free verse didn't work for him. He needed a particular form, structure, and boundary to write his poems.

Form and structure are the necessary pre-requisites for the act of creation. They are the pre-condition for freedom. Freedom is always related to boundaries that one plays off against.

Frost also had a marvelous little couplet he recited in that reading to the effect that duality, division, and separation are inherent in things. He said:

Nature within her inmost self divides,
To trouble men with having to take sides.

And so:

*We keep the wall between us as we go.
To each the boulders that have fallen to each.*

This belongs to me; that belongs to you. And the wall, the fence, the boundary, the border, belongs to both of us. And both of us are duty-bound to make repair. Both of us must do the work that has fallen to each of us in order to keep this border in repair, in order to keep civilization going.

*We keep the wall between us as we go.
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.
Oh, just another kind of outdoor game,
One on a side. It comes to little more:***

And so a sense of play now enters this serious activity of wall-repair. And, perhaps, we begin to wonder: Is this wall important or isn't it? I mean, if we really cared about this wall, wouldn't we try to make certain the stones would stay solidly in place, perhaps put some mortar in the wall to keep the stones in place? But here, apparently, some of the stones only have to stay in place as long as you're looking. Once you turn your back, if they tumble down, it's no big deal.

So is this wall-repair activity just a game ... a bit arduous as games sometimes are, but still just a game? Is that what this wall-repair activity is, just an excuse to play, to do

something together with a neighbor ... like gathering with friends or neighbors to watch a Superbowl Game when you could care less about football or the two teams involved?

Does it come to little more than that? Yes? No? Let's see where the poem takes us.

There where it is we do not need the wall:

Now where might that be? Where would we not need a wall?

There where it is we do not need the wall:

He is all pine and I am apple orchard.

Oh, I see, we don't need a wall where there is already a clear separation and demarcation.

***My apple trees will never get across
And eat the cones under his pines, I tell him.***

In another place in his reading on that tape, Frost said, "I'm never so serious as when I'm foolin'." So pay attention here.

My apple trees will never get across

And eat the cones under his pines, I tell him.

He only says, "Good fences make good neighbors."

So now we get the first little chink in this neighborly game of wall-repair. The narrator doesn't see the need for repairing the wall between the pine trees and the apple orchard – "Why would we need to repair the wall there? There's no confusion as to who owns what" – "My apple trees will never get across/ And eat the cones under your pines."

"Oh, I don't know," says the other. "I think we'd better keep things as they are. Let's just repair the whole thing. Maybe sometime it will be needed again. Besides, as my father always said, 'Good fences make good neighbors.'"

So now watch what happens, because there's going to be a little movement, a little challenge. The conventional, traditional position, the old walls, call forth a challenging position. The building and maintaining of walls is important, but there are other dimensions of life as well, and now we move in that other direction.

Spring is the mischief in me, and I wonder

If I could put a notion in his head:

"Why do they make good neighbors? Isn't it

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 offense.

So what's the purpose of a wall? Here the narrator, the person that wanted the wall to be repaired and who had contacted his neighbor about that repair, is now asking his neighbor to think about *why* there should be a wall. What's a wall for? And what is it that doesn't want walls, that wants them down?

And now we return to the beginning line of the poem:

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

So a wall may be important and valuable; but there is a force larger and greater that knows that walls are secondary, temporary, useful but not permanent, necessary but not ultimate.

What is that force? What is that power? What is that something that doesn't love a wall, that wants it down?

I could say "Elves" to him,

Perhaps it's elves that want the wall down ... those diminutive, human-like creatures that capriciously interfere in human affairs with their magical powers ... it could be these mischievous elves, within and without, that want to take apart the wall. ***But*** no, no...

it's not elves exactly,

Okay, but then what it is? What is that push, that power, that subterranean ground-swell that doesn't love a wall?

Do we come here to a central mystery of existence? Are we here talking about that which is at the very heart of being-itself, working both within us but also beyond us? Are we meeting here the One that is prior to the two, the Unity that transcends and is prior to all separation, the Singularity that precedes all duality?

It's not elves exactly; but it is mysterious, and it is powerful, and it is playful, too. And it is what no human word can define, and what each of us must find for ourselves.

***I could say "Elves" to him,
But it's not elves exactly, and I'd rather
He said it for himself.***

This "something" that doesn't love a wall is deep in the heart of things, and each of us must find our way to that something:

"Erase the lines," says the poet, Robinson Jeffers, "I pray you not to love classifications."
"The classifications,"/ says Jeffers, "Are mostly a kind of *memoria technica*" [a technical

aid], use it but don't be fooled./ [for] It is all truly one life, red-blood and tree-sap,/ Animal, mineral, sidereal [star-stuff], one stream, one organism, one God.

And now in light of this understanding that walls are not ultimate but that there is another equally, and perhaps even greater, dimension of life at work, we get another view of the one who seems to act or think as if they are ultimate, or who is too one-sided to recognize other dimensions of being.

I see him there

*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."*

Who is this one that moves in the dark, who wants the barrier up, who will not venture beyond the traditional, the conventional, the sayings of "the fathers"?

Is not this a barrier erected within each of us? And are not all of us at times old-stone savages, armed, moving in darkness and fear, bringing stones in each hand to build up walls within us and around us and between us?

And, yet, we build these walls to protect things that are tender and deep within us, or things within that are hurt and injured ... things we cannot touch, or share, or look at, or explore.

Something in us needs a wall, as an infant needs a womb, to protect from attack, and to allow room to grow into oneself. Good fences do make good neighbors.

But there is also something at least as potent, more potent, I would say, that wants the wall down ... that knows that walls are not ultimate, but penultimate, necessary but temporary, and secondary not primary.

The creative power at the heart of being is ultimately towards unity, but, paradoxically, it works through separation ... perhaps the greatest paradox of all in life.

The building and repair of walls and fences is ultimately and paradoxically for the purpose of breaking beyond them ... unity out of duality, and duality within unity. That's the necessary tension and paradox of life.

Out of the scatter of our lives, out of the necessary walls and good fences that we build, there is something unseen, some subterranean groundswell pushing us, "something ... that doesn't love a wall, that wants it down," something that wants things new and fresh and never seen before.

Out of the scatter of our lives we bring this and that together ... an act of creation, a “feat of association,” a “feat of connection.” “That’s the game,” says Robert Frost, “smack! that’s the game.”

Spoken Benediction

We clasp the hands of those that go before us,
And the hands of those who come after us.
We enter the little circle of each other’s arms
And the larger circle of lovers,
Whose hands are joined in a dance.
And the larger circle of all creatures,
Passing in and out of life,
Who move also in a dance,
To a music so subtle and vast that no ear hears it
Except in fragments.

(Wendell Berry)

Extinguishing of Chalice

We extinguish this flame
But not the light of truth,
The warmth of community,
Or the fire of commitment;
These we carry in our hearts
Until we are together again.

(NOTE: This is a manuscript version of the sermon given by the Reverend Bruce A. Bode on March 7, 2010, at the Quimper Unitarian Universalist Fellowship, the first in a sermon series on “Necessary Tensions in Life.” The spoken sermon, available on CD disc at the Fellowship, may differ somewhat in phrasing and detail from this manuscript version.)