

Human Interest

The Different Walls in Our Lives

Vince Parrillo

Robert Frost once wrote, "Something there is that doesn't love a wall." That statement is true in many cases, but the fact remains that we humans also get much pleasure from walls. We decorate indoor walls with artwork and photographs to admire as well as to enhance our surroundings or memories. We might enjoy the serenity of a backyard garden wall covered with ivy or as a backdrop for our flowers and shrubs. Children love to climb walls, as do adventurous individuals, both in natural settings outdoors and on artificial structures indoors and even on some cruise ships. Older children play ball against walls, and immature others spray graffiti on them for ego gratification.

Historically, walls have played a large part in civilizations. For example, there is the Great Wall of China, the Walls of Babylon, the Great Wall of Gorgan, and Hadrian's Wall. Walls also once served to enclose and protect medieval cities. One also might contend that gated communities provide a comparable form of walled security today. Countries have built border walls

to discourage open migration, such as at our southern border or the West Wall in Israel for its security. Some walls come tumbling down (Jericho), and others get torn down (Berlin). Some walls serve a well-intended purpose, like the Wailing Wall in Jerusalem, the Peace Wall in Northern Ireland, and the retaining wall for Four Seasons at Great Notch. Still other walls act not to keep out, but to keep in, like those at a prison.

Prison-like walls are not just physical ones. Societal expressions such as "feeling walled-in," "walls closing in," "hitting (or banging) my head against the wall," "talking to the wall," and "up against the wall" are just a few of many phrases that speak to the negativity of emotional walls. In contrast, other adages advise us that walls are necessary for us to grow as individuals. Here are a few examples: "Behind every wall, there's a door if you know where to look;" "Walls are not obstacles; they are a threshold to a new beginning;" and "A wall is nothing more than a division between who we are and who we want to be."

Sometimes, it is not the walls that keep us apart, but the thought that they are there, perhaps out of doubt or fear. For many reasons, the psychological walls of silence can be weapons to use for personal noninvolvement. Walls may keep people out, but they also keep out relationships. Worse are the social walls of prejudice, because they divide us. They go beyond disengagement from personal interaction, serving as a springboard for indifference to the plight of others, isolating groups of people from mainstream society, or as a rationality for taking other discriminatory actions. The opposite of such thinking perhaps was best offered by polio pioneer Jonas Salk who said, "There are no walls to divide us if we share the same vision."

In his poem, "Mending Wall," Frost stated, "Before I built a wall, I'd ask to know what I was walling in or walling out." Therein, lies the truth: Our lives can be constrained or embellished (or both) by the walls we build for ourselves. What are your walls like?



Babylonian Ishtar Gate Wall



English country garden wall



Great Wall of FSGN



Tearing down the Berlin Wall



Wall Street grafitti wall