Tear Down the Walls

by Rev. Diane Dowgiert, March 10, 2019

“Something there is that doesn’t love a wall.” These timeless words of the poet Robert Frost ring true. There is something in us that does not love a wall – and – by observation, one could come to the opposite conclusion. There is something in us that *does* love a wall. The Great Wall of China, the Berlin Wall, and the border wall, such as it currently exists on our southern US border, are all testament to the human impulse to build walls and the equal and opposite human impulse to transcend the boundaries that walls create, going over, under, and around them – or, tearing them down. We live between these two impulses, one being the feelings of safety and security that walls provide and the other being the longing for the freedom and knowledge and connection that exist beyond the walls.

The young Prince Siddhartha Gautama lived within the walls of his father’s palace. He had everything a young prince could need; more than enough to eat, a warm bed to sleep in at night, the best teachers in the land, leisure time for sports and entertainment. When he came of age, he married and his wife gave birth to a son. In today’s language, we would say he had it all. Yet, he was restless. He longed to see what existed beyond the palace walls. One day he asked his servant to take him beyond the walls and into the streets. There, for the first time in his life, he encountered the realities of poverty, illness, aging, and death. It was the first time in the young prince’s life that he had encountered suffering. Back at the palace, he bid his wife and his child a silent farewell, not waking them before he left the palace walls for good. He went to the edge of the forest, cut off his hair, and donned the robe of an ascetic. From there he went on a lifelong quest to discover the cause of suffering and the path to liberation. He became known as the Buddha, the enlightened one.

In the Hebrew scriptures we find the story of Joshua, a protégé of Moses. Under Moses, the Israelites wandered in the desert for forty years. It was Joshua who finally led the Hebrew people across the River Jordan and into the Promised Land. According to the story, Joshua first sent spies across the river to get an idea of what the Israelites would likely encounter when they got to Canaan, the land that had been promised them by their God. The spies came back with a report about the walled city of Jericho. Joshua went off to pray and came back with a plan. Joshua led the Israelites across the River Jordan and to the city of Jericho. They encircled the town and marched around the walls seven times while the priests blew their ram’s horns loudly. At the seventh time when the priests had blown their horns, Joshua said to the people “Shout!” The people raised a great shout and the wall fell flat. They then destroyed the entire city and killed all its inhabitants, except for Rahab and her family, for it was she who harbored Joshua’s spies behind the wall.

Many of us remember when the Berlin Wall came down, the wall that divided East Berlin from West Berlin. The wall was a symbol for the Iron Curtain that divided western European countries from the Soviet Bloc. When the wall was built in 1961, its stated purpose was to keep Western “fascists” from entering East Germany and contaminating its socialist ideals. In truth, it worked to prevent mass defections from East to West. Then, n November 9, 1989, the head of the East German Communist Party announced that citizens of the German Democratic Republic could cross the border freely. Swarms of jubilant people streamed across the border. Others took sledge hammers and pick axes to the wall, tearing it down.

“Something there is that doesn’t love a wall.” And, we build them anyway.

Prince Siddhartha’s father built palace walls to keep him. He feared his son would to leave become one of the ascetics who took extreme vows of poverty and so he kept him safely within the palace walls as the prophets had warned. It worked for a time, but eventually, the young prince could not be contained and he made his way beyond the palace walls. The walls had worked to keep him sheltered from the harder realities of life. Once Siddhartha had discovered the harsh truth of life beyond the walls, he could never go back to his sheltered existence.

As to the story of Joshua and the wall of Jericho, biblical scholars tell us there is no convincing archeological evidence for the existence of a walled city within the region of Canaan. Therefor, the story is not be read as history but as a teaching story. For people of Jewish and Christian faith, it is a story about the fulfilment of God’s promises, a story of how God’s chosen people were delivered to the promised land. For people of Jewish and Christian faith, it is a story about trusting in powers greater than themselves, a story about trusting in God.

The story of Joshua can be read through a psychological lens -- symbolically and metaphorically. The promised land is the place we all yearn for -- where all is well and the world is at peace. The story illustrates how the promised land is something we must work for, even fight for. To achieve the promised land we must tear down the walls that keep us separate and divided from each other. To enter the promised land, old ways of being must die to make room for the new.

For me, the most obvious lesson is that the wall did not keep the people of Jericho safe. It was first penetrated by spies and then came tumbling down, leaving them vulnerable to being conquered and annihilated.

The story of the Berlin Wall teaches us that walls built for political purposes can be overcome by the political will of the people. Politics is the way we express power, individually and collectively. Walls built for political purposes can be torn down when political power is used to unite rather than divide.

Walls can be built of stone or brick or concrete or steel or razor wire or armed guards carrying machine guns.

All of these walls -- the ones that have been built, climbed over, tunneled under, penetrated, tumbled and torn down – all of these walls have something to teach us about ourselves and the walls we build in an attempt to guard against vulnerability and to feel safe.

Walls can be built many ways. Maybe you will recognize your preferred method from this list. Walls can be built of silence or anger or resentment. They can be built of self-righteousness or bigotry or hatred. They can be built of mistrust and fear. They can be built of overwork, overbusyness, and overintellectualizing. Walls can be built of avoidance and indifference. They can be built of ignorance. They can be built of judgement. They can be built of pride. They can even be built of politeness or humor. We all know how the polite banter goes. “How are you?” someone asks. “I’m fine. I’m good,” we respond, not wanting to burden someone else with what may really be going on. Anything that keeps people at a safe distance. Anything that keeps us from being our authentic self – our tender, vulnerable self – is a wall.

Like the physical walls we build, the walls of emotional defense may work for a time, but when we are in relationship with each other, it is inevitable that someone will find a way around or through. When the walls come tumbling down, maybe it means that the promised land is at hand. Quaker teacher and scholar Parker Palmer puts it this way: “If we are willing to embrace the challenge of becoming whole, we cannot embrace it alone—at least, not for long: we need trustworthy relationships to sustain us, tenacious communities of support, to sustain the journey toward an undivided life.”

When the walls come tumbling down we can replace them with healthy boundaries, that like the walls of a cell are permeable, letting in what we need and keeping out what is harmful. Boundaries are made of self-awareness, knowing where I leave off and another person begins. Boundaries are made of clear communication.

“Something there is that doesn’t love a wall.” And perhaps, something there is that does love a bridge.

Where walls divide, bridges connect. They span the distances across rivers and canyons. They carry us from one place to another. Bridges can be built of wood or stone or brick or concrete or steel. They can also be built of mutual care and understanding, respect and acceptance. Bridges are built of trust. They are built of love. They are built with human hands reaching across that which divides to form bonds of connection.

As Unitarian Universalists, we seek to create a promised land where there is a place for everyone, where anyone who would join our covenant of mutual care and support is welcome. Ours is a pluralistic faith. We welcome people of diverse beliefs and religious perspectives. When we gather, we cannot expect that the person sitting next to us shares our ideas about God or Jesus or the Buddha or Muhammed or Confuscious or Lao Tzu. We cannot expect that the person sitting next to us shares our class location or lifestyle choices or political party. We cannot expect that the person sitting next to us shares our life experience or worldview. We cannot expect that the person sitting next to us shares our ethnic or cultural heritage. This is what it means to be a pluralistic faith tradition. We can expect that it will be messy at times, uncomfortable at times. But that’s how it is when walls come tumbling down.

I have a friend who was in Berlin when the wall was being torn down. By his account, it was an exuberant day. The air was filled with joy and it was filled with dust and debris. Much as the day felt exuberant and joyful, it also felt risky as pieces of the wall went flying through the air and nobody knew exactly what was going to happen next. No one was certain that they could trust this new-found freedom of movement across the border.

What we know about walls that are built along the borders of countries don’t just work to keep people out, they also work to keep people in. Walls keep us isolated and divided.

Ours is a bold faith, this pluralistic, diverse faith of ours. We seek to tear down the walls that divide us, be they physical walls that work to keep asylum seekers, refugees and immigrants out of our country or the walls of systems that divide us along lines of race and class and gender and gender identity. Sometimes we come together expecting that the work of tearing down these walls has already been done, that we as Unitarian Universalists have reached the promised land, only to discover the walls that exist in our own hearts and minds. As much work as there is to do out in the world, an equal amount of the work is internal, tearing down the walls that keep us divided from each other. And this, my friends, takes trust.

We build bridges of trust when we take the time to listen to and hear another person, to truly see them for who they are rather than who we want them to be.

“Something there is that doesn’t love a wall.” And, something there is in us that loves a circle that is more like a cell membrane, permeable, allowing others to come in. It’s as the Universalist poet Edwin Markham once wrote:

“[They] drew a circle that shut me out-
Heretic, rebel, a thing to flout.
But love and I had the wit to win:
We drew a circle and took [them] In!”

May we tear down walls and make ever-wider circles of love and trust. May we make it so with our living.