

*And the Walls Come Tumbling Down*

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Preceding reading: I.N.S.T.U.T.I.O.N.A.L.I.Z.E.D. (a poem—from the book: *“Words without Walls: Writing and Poetry by Women in Prison in Nova Scotia”*)

For our Fellowship Bid Night fundraiser last October I offered to write a sermon on a topic or theme of the purchaser’s choice.

Anne Neave was the successful bidder. In conversation with Anne, we covered a lot of ground. We talked about Elizabeth Fry, prisons, the justice system, and finally arrived at today’s theme, *walls*.

These human-built vertical projections prop up ceilings; they keep the elements, animals and creepy crawlies out of our interior spaces; and as a bonus, walls provide flat surfaces upon which we can hang art. Humanity shall be known by its walls.

Is there a spiritual perspective to be gleaned from studying walls? I think there is; their metaphor lies in the non-static, impermanent nature of walls.

Through the passage of time, wearing by natural forces, and the action of human hands, walls will change in appearance, structure, and purpose. Process theology would understand walls as emergent creations.

Not only is everything around us changing, our perception of it all is also changing. Unitarian theologian James Luther Adams used process theology to support his liberal claim that revelation or truth is therefore not ever sealed.

Let’s start this tour of walls with the Western Wall, in Jerusalem. Considered an important holy site – it’s also called the “wailing wall”, referring to the practice of Jews weeping at the site over the destruction of the Temples.

Another famous wall is found in America and commemorates a different loss. The Vietnam Veterans Memorial, in Washington, D.C. features a memorial wall upon which is inscribed 58, 307 names, representing the members of the armed forces who were either killed or who went missing in action during the Vietnam War.

A very different, unique kind of wall was created in 2004, and has since multiplied itself 1.86 billion times. The Facebook wall is like a virtual personal bulletin board where a quarter of the world’s population share images, news, announcements, and personal opinions.

As banal as social media can sometimes seem, there is no denying that the Facebook wall has changed the way baby boomers and millennials communicate and express themselves. Now, public opinion can be swayed quickly and significantly, influencing political, cultural, and social trends and actions.

Some people think that the world's increasing use of technology and electronic communication is spawning a society of people who no longer have the skills or desire to communicate face to face.

More worrisome is that people increasingly lack the capacity for going deep...taking time to discuss and study the nuances of complex issues. The virtual world is reactive, its users impulsively make instant responses and judgements, voting thumbs up or down on matters of which they have limited facts. Even when well intentioned, I think this impulsive reactivity is contributing to growing polarization of perspectives, and potentially adding to the conflict and alienation in the world.

It is not surprising that depression and substance use are prevalent in our times; or that vulnerable, lonely, and confused people self-medicate and create emotional walls behind which they can hide their pain, fear, and sense of helplessness.

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The word "wall" also suggests a barrier, a device to exclude, protect against, or to confine whatever humans desire to exclude, protect, or confine.

Throughout history, nations and their leaders have erected formidable walls for the purposes of military fortification, border control, and defence. Hadrian's Wall for example was ordered by the Emperor Hadrian following his visit to Britain in 122 ACE. 73 miles long, it crossed northern Britain and created the north-west frontier of the Roman Empire for nearly 300 years.

In China, a series of fortifications were built across the northern border to protect the Chinese states and empires against raids and invasions by various nomadic groups. Several walls were built as early as the 7th century BCE and were later joined together and made bigger and stronger. Collectively they are known as the Great Wall.

There are more recent examples of walls that were built to control and restrict the movement of people. In 1961 the German Democratic Republic, constructed the Berlin Wall to cut off land access to West Berlin from East Berlin and surrounding East Germany. With radical political changes and liberalization occurring in the eastern bloc, the Berlin Wall came down in 1989. The Berlin Wall with its guard towers prevented almost all emigration for 28 years. At least 5,000 people attempted to escape over the Wall, of whom nearly 200 were killed.

Now, in the news these days we are grappling with the astounding pronouncement of a certain American president, who wants to construct a wall along the US Mexico border.

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I want to share a little story about something that happened a few years ago. My elderly friends Audrey and Louise, and I travelled from Edmonton to Calgary together. They wanted to attend the CUC annual convention and meeting. I needed some downtime away from the demands of the residency program I was doing at University of Alberta hospital.

We arranged to stay at the home of Louise's son, Frank. Frank quickly showed us around his house and then took off on a weekend camping trip---we had the house to ourselves. The next morning, Audrey and Louise left early to go to the CUC event; I planned to relax and do my own thing.

At 7 AM, half-awake, I went to use the toilet. I had a vague recollection of Frank mentioning something about the bathroom door needing repair, but this was not foremost in my mind...until I tried to leave the bathroom, and found the door would not budge. It was stuck.

It took a moment to register that I was trapped. In a bathroom. In an empty house. In Calgary.

I am generally resourceful, and frankly, I didn't believe I couldn't find a way out somehow. I jiggled and twisted and yanked at the doorknob, to no avail.

Then I found a pair of scissors in the medicine cabinet which I ruined attempting to jimmy the latch. It used to work when I was a teenager burgling my parents' liquor cabinet.

The window over the bathtub was tiny, too small to climb out of, and faced away from the street where people could potentially hear my calls for help... should I decide to go that desperate route.

I worked at the knob some more, then put my shoulder to the door, thinking I could bust it open like in a Hollywood movie. Real doors are not like Hollywood props.

I was in no danger. There are worse things than being locked in a bathroom in a stranger's empty house. Audrey and Louise would be back... in about 12 hours. The worse part of my predicament was the feeling of being utterly helpless, alone, and captive that swelled inside me.

Camilla meanwhile, remained on the other side of the door in the hallway, confused and anxious. My default emotion was becoming fear. A nameless, visceral, fear. I sat on the floor, miserable for an hour... until I realized I had a cell phone in my pocket.

The only person in Calgary with a cell phone and whose phone number I had was Rev. Brian Kiely...also in town for the CUC event.

I reached Brian and explained my plight. He tracked down Louise at the CUC event. She returned to the house with a couple of big Polish fellows she recruited at the Tim Horton's. They all brainstormed for an hour, and after several failed attempts...it was one formidable door, one of the Polish guys finally chopped the door open with an axe.

My experience of captivity, though small and benign, gave me a taste of what it is like to be confined against one's choice... and the feeling of being vulnerable, powerless, and fearful.

I cannot imagine what it's really like to be imprisoned. I am in awe of my colleague from Burundi, Rev. Fulgence who remained so strong when the Burundi Unitarian church was ransacked and he was imprisoned, his life in great danger. Unitarians around the world called global attention to his plight, and he now further displays resilience as he credentials for our ministry here in Canada.

Potentially, we could all be prisoners.

Try for a moment to imagine yourself a prisoner.

Maybe you were a college student... you got caught with some pot or other drugs the 60s generation liked to experiment with.

Or perhaps you made an honest but significant mistake on your taxes and somehow, ran afoul of Canada Revenue Agency.

Was there ever an occasion when you had one drink too many and instead of calling for a taxi, you risked driving yourself home? What if you'd been pulled over by the police and ended up in jail?

Imagine spending a year or two years, or five in a controlled setting behind prison walls where you're told when to wake up, when to sleep, when to work.

Imagine eating prison food, living under constant surveillance. Imagine the impersonal and demoralizing diminishment of your personality. Given a shapeless uniform to wear, the authorities will know you only as another inmate and a number.

These images are definitely not of the life any of us would want or choose.

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Would you ever risk arrest and going to jail for standing up for your beliefs?

An early unitarian named Michael Servetus did. Servetus was a 16<sup>th</sup> century scientist and theologian who wrote a book called: *The Errors of The Trinity*. In 1533, he was tried for heresy and given a death sentence by Calvin's court. Tied to a stake and bound, Servetus refused to recant his beliefs and was executed. He was burned to death along with his heretical books.

Soon after, church reformers began to protest religious persecution. Conscience should be free, they argued, since faith was a gift of God. For over four centuries, the themes of individual freedom, tolerance, and freedom in religious belief have had an enduring impression upon our religious movement.

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For children, and sometimes in fiction, the distinction between good guys and bad guys usually seems very clear; right and wrong are as distinct as black and white.

How do societies really determine what is just?

Given a code of law, how are laws enforced fairly and consistently? How do we determine what do about people who do not follow the law?

My knowledge of the law is minimal; I'm a minister, influenced by too many old episodes of Matlock and Law and Order.

Like others, I have valid concerns, and wonder if our justice system adequately accounts for the existing imbalance of social privilege and power, and the resulting conditions of inequality, disparity, and oppression, which affect some individuals and groups more than others? How is justice possible when the playing field is so uneven?

In a letters written from Birmingham Jail, Martin Luther King Jr. observed:

*"A just law is a man made code that squares with the moral law or the law of God. An unjust law is a code that is out of harmony with the moral law. To put it in the terms of St. Thomas Aquinas: An unjust law is a human law that is not rooted in eternal law and natural law. Any law that uplifts human personality is just. Any law that degrades human personality is unjust..."*

What purpose do prisons and walls of exclusion and segregation actually serve?

Does removing one's freedom through incarceration really accomplish anything? Is prison meant to "rehabilitate" and transform people's troubled lives?

Psychologist, B.F. Skinner suggested that *"A person who has been punished is not less inclined to behave in a given way; at best, he learns how to avoid punishment."*

For author, Dostoevsky, no character is too high to fall and no character is too low to be redeemed. His novel, 'Crime and Punishment' begins with the protagonist, Raskolnikov going out and consciously becoming a cold-blooded murderer. It takes 800 pages and an epilogue before he finally asks for forgiveness.

The first two Principles of Unitarian Universalism speak to the inherent worth and dignity of every person and justice, equity, and compassion in human relations. Do you think you could forgive someone who committed a violent crime against you, or if they killed your spouse or child? Would you still be able to see your attacker's inherent worth and dignity?

Eugene Debs was an American union leader; when sentenced to prison for war resisting, he remarked:

*"...years ago I recognized my kinship with all living beings, and I made up my mind that I was not one bit better than the meanest on earth. I said then, and I say now, that while there is a lower class, I am in it, and while there is a criminal element I am of it, and while there is a soul in prison, I am not free."*

Unitarian Universalists do not believe in judgemental gods, or the notion of original sin, or of a fallen humanity. Instead, we affirm life and its goodness and beauty.

The broad theology of our liberal faith allows us to recognize that much of what is wrong in the world was wrought by human hands. We do not defer to a supernatural deity, rely on a fated cosmic plan, or blame unknowable evil forces for the troubles of the world; our task is to believe that by joining our hands and hearts together, we can, and we do, heal much of that harm in the world.

Under Canadian law, prison is supposed to be viewed as a last resort to be used as little as possible for the shortest time necessary. Prisoners continue to have human rights and are sent to prison *as* punishment, not *for* punishment. In theory.

How well is Canada's system working? Canadian crime rates have decreased in the last decade, while incarceration rates have grown, suggesting that the growth in the custody population is policy, not crime driven.

Howard Sapers, former Correctional Investigator of Canada in 2013 commented on statistics released at that time. Sapers observed:

*"Aboriginal and visible minorities are over-represented in Canada's maximum security institutions and segregation placements. They are more likely to be subject to use of force interventions and incur a disproportionate number of institutional disciplinary charges. They are released later in their sentences and less likely to be granted day or full parole."*

Seems there remains much to do to reform this system.

For centuries, Unitarians and Universalists and others have worked to improve conditions for prisoners, and advocated for prison reform and sometimes, calling for total abolition of the existing system to be replaced by alternative means such as restorative and reconciliatory justice. The solutions are not simple or quick to find.

Robert Kennedy said, *“Each time a man stands up for an ideal, or acts to improve the lot of others, or strikes out against injustice, he sends forth a tiny ripple of hope, and, crossing each other from a million different centers of energy and daring, those ripples build a current that can sweep down the mightiest walls of oppression and resistance.”*

18<sup>th</sup> century Universalist minister John Murray left us with this commission:

*Go out into the highways and byways. Give the people something of your new vision.*

*You may possess a small light, but uncover it, let it shine, use it in order to bring more light and understanding to the hearts and minds of men and women.*

*Give them not hell, but hope and courage; preach the kindness and everlasting love of God.*

In doing so, the walls of injustice and oppression cannot help but come tumbling down.

May it be so, and amen.