

Good Fences

I recently ran into a whopping heap of trouble when I attempted to replace the fence the surrounds the perimeter of my corner house. I could write a book about the ridiculous bureaucratic gyrations they made me go through just to replace something that was already there but that would divert me from the real lesson I took from the experience.

It occurred to me that whenever one attempts to establish a boundary, whether it is between myself and the busy intersection I live on or a country defining the borders of their land, trouble invariably starts.

The issue with the village was that my fence was ignoring the new regulations requiring a six inch border from my property line.

Six inches doesn't seem like a lot to give up. That's what the village was thinking. I'm normally a reasonable person and had I been informed that I had to leave six inches before I put up half my fence I would have happily done it and not thought twice about it but once part of that fence was up it seemed unfathomable to me that I would be asked to move it.

Something strange happens when you own property. You get possessive about what you have worked hard to own. I am by nature a reasonable person but I am also a middle child and am protective of what is mine. Much to my surprise six inches of property was more than I was willing to bend on. As the village dug in their heels so did I. "I'll live without a fence before I'll tear this one down," I thought. "I'll hire a lawyer, I'll write letters to the editor. I'll..."

I would not be told what I had to do on my property especially when a ratty old fence that was falling down got no notice from the busy-bodies in town but my nice new one elicited ire. No I would not budge Not unless they reduced my taxes for the six inch border I was being asked to forfeit. Why should I mow the six inches of grass? Why should I own it if I can't use it?

A good deal of the trouble in life is about fences. Wars are often about borders, or differences in cultural boundaries. Relationships either make you fortress your emotions deeper or cause you to tear down barriers that isolate you. Success at work is often about establishing turf and protecting your professional property (intellect, skill, aptitude.) Fences are our way of announcing to the world this is the space I have carved out for myself. Please do not enter unless invited. Please stay out, unless you are in and if you are in, please feel safe.

The expression Good fences make good neighbors is not really truly. Good fences make more fences I think. I put mine up to keep people from throwing garbage in my yard and as a buffer to the noise from motorcycles and cars with vibrating stereos. I put mine up so I could have an illusion of safety. A place where no one could bother me.

What started as a desire for peace turned me into a property owning zealot ready to fight city hall to the death for my right to my fence.

As a result of the stalemate I spent a good portion of the summer without a fence. I went from having the illusion of privacy to having none at all. As the weeks passed, a quiet voice was ushering me to a new reality --a place that some of us eventually get to -- it is without boundaries, without a winner or a loser or a bureaucrat or a tax payer. It is the place called compromise.

I gave up the six inch border and the village let me keep the fence I had already installed. No one got exactly what they wanted.

I'm pretty sure no one ever does when a fence is involved.