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Robert Frost's "Mending Wall" as an Allegory of Tolerance: Understanding, Acceptance, and Invitation

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Lane Fischer's discussion of the nature of law in Turning Freud Upside Down (2005) describes tolerance as the combination of understanding, acceptance, and invitation to do better. This conceptualization of tolerance is equated to love for the other. The poem "Mending Wall" by Robert Frost is analyzed as an allegory of tolerance so defined.

MENDING WALL

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: 5
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, 10
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. 15
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. 20
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 25

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 30
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, 35
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. 40
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." 45

TOLERANCE (Re)DEFINED

Fischer (2005) suggests that tolerance, based on God's order of kingdoms as described in the Doctrine and Covenants sections 76 and 88, is founded on understanding, acceptance, and an invitation to do better. In Fischer's model of ecologies of law, organisms relate with environments according to variable levels of laws, which they are free to choose. Understanding this concept allows a person "to engage people where they are while simultaneously inviting them to a more adequate law" (p. 49). Fischer explains that although a person may not be striving to live according to the highest possible order of law, he or she can still be fulfilled while meeting the demands of lower orders. The variable laws that compose this model may be fundamentally hierarchical, but humankind's experiences are nested within these laws in a neither horizontal nor vertical fashion. Each person has the opportunity "to live the most adequate laws that they can abide" (p. 49). Each person's "tolerance" of the other, then, is the phenomenological experience of understanding the other in his or her current situation, accepting and engaging the person, and inviting the other to do better.

It is through this trifold of understanding, acceptance, and invitation that tolerance becomes more than its synonyms: open-mindedness, lenience, or forbearance. According to Fischer's explanation, tolerance moves beyond its common misconception of recognizing and then overlooking another's differences to what is appropriately described as love. Love conceptualized as an understanding, accepting, inviting relationship shared between two people is ultimately applicable to any meaningful relationship. For example, Rodriguez (2005) explains Erich Fromm's position that love is not a feeling, but an attitude—a way of being in the world and with others—a truly existential quality. For Fromm (1956/1989) respect is inherent in love if love is defined as "the ability to see a person as he is, to be aware of his unique quality" (p. 26). This "seeing" and "awareness" sounds remarkably like Fischer's understanding and acceptance. Other definitions of love make their equation with tolerance just as appropriate. Vida (2002) describes love as "an experience of deep human connection, on an unconscious as well as conscious level, that involves generosity, recognition, acceptance, and something like forgiveness" (p. 438). If this "something like forgiveness" is understood as Fischer's

godlike invitation to do better, rather than a simple absolution of sin, it might be difficult (and unnecessary) to differentiate between tolerance and love.

INVITATION

It is important here to emphasize that the invitation in tolerance is just that—an enticement or incitement for positive change. With an invitation, there is no suggestion of force or coercion. Moss (1996) explains Whitehead's conceptualization of this change as process. He states, "Process is the universal notion of actual entities working toward experiencing novelty and reaching the 'subjective aim' or satisfaction of its potential as illuminated by God" (p. 72). God is necessary in this ecology as the ultimate guide, support, and exemplar of self-creation. Whitehead (1929/1978) explains,

God's role is not the combat of productive force with productive force, of destructive force with destructive force; it lies in the patient operation of the overpowering rationality of his conceptual harmonization. He does not create the world, he saves it: or, more accurately, he is the poet of the world, with tender patience leading it by his vision of truth, beauty and goodness. (p. 346)

According to this idea, God's receptive love works to bring about goodness and harmony in the universe. This form of inviting based on "tender patience" is akin to the tolerance and love described above. Humankind, in this ecology, is both a receiver of God's invitation and a partner in his poetry.

FROST'S "MENDING WALL"

A different "poet of the world," Robert Frost (1874–1963), was a contemporary of Whitehead and artfully confronted some of the same issues about which Whitehead wrote. The issue of tolerance as described in this paper is found in Frost's 1914 poem "Mending Wall." At first glance, Frost appears simply to be describing his annual landscaping encounter with his neighbor—an event that Frost seems to regard as traditional, rather than necessary. Of course, as with most Frost poems, a closer inspection of the work reveals that the setting and activities detailed in the poem are less important than the social or philosophical themes. The themes described here—understanding, acceptance, and invitation—are central to this colloquial, thoughtful, and tolerant reflection on

an interaction with the other. In short, the poem is an allegory of tolerance.

MENDING

The title of this poem is important to consider. While the subsequent lines describe with realistic, vivid imagery the setting, action, and characters in the poem, the title suggests a journey together, a common cause. The title is not simply "Wall," "Standing Wall," or "Fallen Wall," but "Mending Wall"—almost an invitation for improvement in itself. The title, "Mending Wall," celebrates the process of interaction with the other. This is an important element in Frost's poetry and is inextricably tied to tolerance and love as defined earlier. Even though many of Frost's works rely on inanimate objects in nature for structure, inevitably it is man's interaction with nature or his ecology (such as in mending a wall) that is more important. After all, as Moss (1996) explains, "man is united with and intricate to nature and the universe" through process (p. 84).

Frost begins his allegory with the playfully mysterious description of the mess of stones no longer resembling the garden fence with the phrase

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.

By not naming the culprit "something" to which he is referring, Frost plays with the reader and allows him or her to determine what Frost is talking about. The "something" here is most likely the winter frost, born of groundwater from the spring and summer and frozen during the cold winter months. When the springtime sun appears again to "spill the upper boulders," the frost, in its nonlove of the wall, makes gaps. Notice that the frost is the "something there is that doesn't love a wall." Perhaps, in this case, *frost* might just as appropriately be replaced by *Frost*.

INDIVIDUALITY AND COMMONALITY

After a moment's clarification about what the narrator really means when he's talking about the gaps in the wall, the poet enters a section of the poem that captures both the individuality of the two characters in the work and their mending process:

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.

The narrator describes this coming together with the other as

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.

It seems important to Frost, here, that although the two have met together, the wall remains squarely fixed between them. Pragmatically, this is probably the most efficient way to mend a wall—working at it from both sides—but the fact that Frost says both that they "set the wall between [them] once again," and that they "keep the wall between [them] as [they] go," might suggest that this arrangement is particularly noteworthy. Does the separation bother Frost? Might the wall here represent a figurative or perceptual barrier of which only Frost is aware?

This separation is contrasted with his use of the words *we* and *us* in lines 13 through 15, suggesting once again the common process that has brought the two together. The mending is a joint effort in that the wall and work are shared, but the two individuals described in this section ultimately work only with "the boulders that have fallen to each." If the process of mending could be equated to the development of the self (a comfortable cognitive stretch), such a dialogical conceptualization of the development of the self might be similar to the postmodern notion of self as described by Moss (1996). Throughout this process of mending, the self is both relational and momentary. Moss explains Gergen's suggestion that "reality is a relative and variable consequent of personal and social interaction or construction" (p. 95). Construction in this case might mean a very literal building of a structure, but it seems plausible that this building, or rebuilding, might also be considered both a "personal and social interaction."

Lines 18 through 20 include several uses of the words *we* and *our*, suggesting again a shared effort or outcome. This time, however, the tone is playful, and the reader can easily imagine the two men looking over their shoulders with pointed fingers threatening the magically balanced stones to "Stay where you are until our backs are

turned!" Carse (1986) explains that "to be playful is not to be trivial or frivolous, or to act as though nothing of consequence will happen" (n.p.). He suggests that playfulness allows relation as free persons, open to surprise. In this type of relationship, "everything that happens is of consequence" (n.p.). Lines 21 through 27, however, grow philosophically more serious while shrouded by Frost-like good humor. Describing the process again Frost says,

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."

In this section of the poem, both characters use personification to distance themselves from the true meaning of their words. The author states outright that the wall is not needed. Frost uses tongue-in-cheek banter to refer to hypothetical rascals who might try to steal and eat apples fallen from his orchard trees by jokingly reassuring his friend that his own trees are unlikely to poach the valueless pinecones off of the forest floor of his friend's property. It seems in this section that the narrator of the poem is not committed to any defined ends, but to the process itself, which he sees as having nonutilitarian value: "There where it is we do not need the wall." The boundary is clearly defined and the trees are unlikely to mingle, so the building of the wall is essentially an "outdoor game." To this suggestion, however, the other recites his father's cliché, "Good fences make good neighbors." It is here that the narrator's understanding and acceptance are exemplified.

UNDERSTANDING, ACCEPTANCE, AND INVITATION

With instantaneous understanding, the narrator's reaction to the neighbor's cliché is to invite him to do better. In this case, the "better" might be explained as more imaginative, more creative, or more playful. Carse (1986) maintains that "we are playful when we engage others at the level of choice" (n.p.). With evidence of his desire for engagement with the other, Frost's narrator does not give up easily; he tries again to tempt his neighbor to enter into the fictive world with him and to share his experience of play. In this section, the narrator becomes the

voice of possibilities, the voice of mischief, and even the voice of insight. In lines 28 through 38 he states:

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.

Frost has created a narrator who demonstrates an uncanny amount of thoughtfulness and curiosity surrounding his neighbor's maxim. The narrator wants to understand the other ("Why do they make good neighbors?"), by inviting the neighbor to reconsider his own statement. Although in line 29 the narrator wonders about his ability "to put a notion in his [neighbor's] head," by line 38 he admits that what he really wants is for his friend to raise his thoughts to a higher (and ultimately more playful) order of thinking. This inviting coincides with Carse's proposal that "to be playful is to allow for possibility" (1986, n.p.) The narrator recognizes that he could force the issue and, just to be funny, suggest "elves" as the tiny sprites who tear down walls. Alternately, he could castigate his neighbor for being so close-minded or mechanical that he is willing to spend an entire day each year rebuilding an unnecessary wall for some unknown reason ("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"). He could take offense at the idea that an inanimate, unfeeling wall might actually be a better neighbor than he is. But instead, he chooses to invite his friend to enlarge, to examine, and to consider. His playfulness invites possibility.

The final lines of the poem tie nicely to Moss's (1996) concept of acceptance and peace:

Peace as described by Whitehead becomes the hallmark of the mentally healthy—understanding the tragic element of life and consciously integrating it, along with elements of beauty, into a changing harmony. . . . Peace, the acceptance of life and the life processes, is the defining quality. (p. 114)

According to Moss's and Whitehead's above definition, Frost's narrator exemplifies this peace and acceptance by

understanding the darkness in which this neighbor man moves, by accepting him as he is, and by acknowledging and encouraging his potential for betterment. This consciously integrated understanding coupled with the process of mending results in peace.

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."

A positive interpretation of the final two lines admits that this short, trite statement is still fairly clever. And while it doesn't allow for much process, the fact that the narrator can recognize that his neighbor is pleased with himself and enjoys his little truism suggests that the narrator may see some value in this observation in itself and that this value is enough on which to ponder. The poem ends not in a lack of hope, but in a willingness of the narrator to accept the neighbor as he is and acknowledge his friend's reasons for choosing, as Fischer might put it, the most adequate law that he can abide. This acknowledgement then, or practice of tolerance as defined as understanding, acceptance, and invitation, emerges as the poem's central tenet. The wall itself is trivial, but the process of mending is invaluable.

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