

Week 20: What to Do with Your Walls

Walls are everywhere in the world we walk through. They keep the heat in the house and the snow and the wind out. They give us borders, clarifying where our land stops and another's begins. They keep those that break rules and commit crimes in a place apart. They keep the water in the reservoirs. When planes hit them, they fall down and it changes everything. We memorialize our heroes on them. We build them so big they are the only things we create that can be seen from space. It's like we're advertising to the universe, "Walls matter on this big, spinning rock!"

But perhaps the biggest walls, the most important walls, are the ones that cannot be seen at all. Perhaps the walls that matter most are the walls we erect in our minds, build around our hearts, and place firmly between ourselves and other people.

Quinn has walls like that, and I learned an important lesson about them one day when he was four, during a friendly game of Junior Monopoly. As usual, I was losing. Badly. (I'd like to promote myself as the sensitive father going easy on his son's budding ego, but the truth is, the kid has my number in Junior Monopoly.) I was losing and having fun. Really having fun. So I decided to tell him. I looked him directly in the eye, and I said, "Quinn, it's really good to be here with you."

Things can change *so* quickly.

I could almost *see* the veil that dropped over his eyes. And before I could fully digest what was happening, the dice were sailing across the room. Needless to say, our time together did not end as well as it had begun. What happened? I think my words got inside his walls. And he wanted me out. He has claimed his interior world as his space, and he gets to decide who comes in and how far in and when they enter, and I had somehow surprised him by going too far, without warning, when all he wanted was to buy ticket booths and sip hot cocoa.

You see, our walls are an essential part of who we are. Without walls—without a boundary on our self, without something in us that says this is *me* and that is *you*—we risk a kind of psychic nakedness that results in chaos at best and, at worst, a psychotic confusion about what is real and what is not. We cannot exist as individuals without our walls. And if our walls all worked perfectly, the world would suddenly become a lot less complicated place and our relationships would become easier and more peaceful.

But they don't work perfectly.

For most of us, our walls are broken and, sometimes, badly in need of repair. Some of us have walls that are always down, and the smallest comment can eviscerate us. Or we become a receptacle for all of the vile things that one human being can do to another. Or we confuse the goals, values, and desires of everyone we love for our

own. Some of us have walls that are big, thick, and impenetrable, and no one gets in—ever—and what begins by feeling safe ends with feeling lonely. And some of us have walls that don't know *what* they want to do—they are down one moment and completely erect the next, and no one can predict how we will act from one day to another.

We need safe spaces in which to practice doing something new with our walls.

Therapy is meant to be one such space, and understanding how our walls are treated in the therapeutic space can help us to understand what to look for in *any* place of belonging. More specifically, though there is a popular misconception that therapy is a place where our walls are completely dismantled—where total openness and vulnerability are made manifest and nothing is withheld—this is actually not the ultimate goal of good therapy. Therapy is not meant to be a wrecking ball for the walls we have built; therapy is simply a space where we learn how to be wise and healthy with our walls.

For instance, if we walk through life with no walls—in a state of psychological nudity—therapy is a place where we *build* walls, and we learn that not everyone has to get in, and when they do, it will be the right people and it will be up to us, and we will decide when and how.

In contrast, if we walk through life behind an impenetrable wall of smiles, intellect, work, sarcasm, image, isolation, or any other form of hiding, then therapy is a place to build a door in our wall. Not a revolving door, where anyone can come and go as they please, but a door of our choosing, that opens from the inside, a door that makes it possible for you to confidently invite people in to your lonely space, because it is good to have company we can trust.

Furthermore, if you don't know what to do with your walls—if they drop when you don't want them to and shoot skyward at the slightest provocation—therapy is a partnership with someone who won't leave you alone when your too-tall walls are telling everyone else to leave, and who won't invade you when the absence of boundaries invites everyone else in.

In other words, therapy is an exemplar of a safe space—a place of belonging—in which our walls can undergo a renovation. But it is not the only such space. A place of belonging can be found with anyone who insists that your decisions about intimacy and vulnerability be slow and wise, but most of all, definitively *yours*.

Let's cultivate those kinds of relationships, *wherever* we find them.