

## **Walls - what are they good for.**

DEOHS commencement address June 10, 2016

By Steven Gilbert

Thank you XX for the kind introduction. I really appreciate this opportunity to spend a few minutes with the graduates and their families. It is an honor to be here with you tonight.

The title of my talk is Walls – What are they good for. I would like to talk with you about why I think walls will be an inevitable part of your future and some ideas about how your new degree can be used as powerful tool and voice for shaping the world and the walls that you will confront. We need more bridges not more walls.

So, why have I become so obsessed by walls. We depend upon walls in our daily lives – we are surrounded by walls. One very important thing is that we consent to these walls – we have doors and windows.

I first encountered walls that I did not consent to during a brief stay in San Francisco when I was about 20. I was arrested for obstructing the sidewalk and spent a long weekend in jail. I was locked in a large cell with another dozen or so males. Ultimately, I pleaded guilty and received a 15 day suspended sentence with credit for 3 days and 3 months' probation. It was scary being locked up and it gave me a very different perspective on walls.

More recently, I have been increasingly driven by my convictions that we need to prevent disease and disaster. I used my body as a temporary wall to block some traffic. This act did not go over well with the authorities as we were blocking the road into the Trident submarine base – just 20 miles from here with the largest concentration of nuclear weapons in the world. We were promptly arrested. The authorities did not like us using our bodies as a wall blocking access to the base, but we made our point.

Typically, we see walls as distinct barriers for safety against the unknown or 'the other'. Indeed, walls provide protection. Walls set boundaries, establish a sense of certainty, security, or protection. As Robert Frost notes in his poem 'Mending Wall': "Good fences make good neighbors." Walls serve both to separate and to join neighbors. Think of the energy that goes into building and maintaining walls.

Walls can be a symbol of power, fear, occupation, oppression, and isolation. For example, in the Game of Thrones '*The Wall*' is described as a colossal fortification, which stretches for 100 leagues along the northern border of the Seven Kingdoms, defending the realm from the wildlings who live beyond. The Wall is reported to be over 700 feet tall and is made of solid ice.' What also takes some magical thinking is that we are using ice walls in Fukushima Japan to protect us from radiation from their failed nuclear reactors.

Whether it's the wall in the Game of Thrones, the Berlin wall, the Israeli wall surrounding Gaza, or Donald Trump's Mexican wall, the value and purpose of a wall is a matter of perspective. For some they are protection, but for others they offend, restrict, and narrow opportunities. For example, the Berlin wall was erected to restrict the movement of the East Berliners. They fought against the wall and eventually moved to, 'Tear down this wall'.

Some walls are not of your choosing or will seem arbitrary and obstructive; you still will be forced to deal with them. Many walls have outlived their usefulness or have unfortunate unforeseen consequences and should be scaled, tunneled under, or torn down. On the other hand, some walls you will build yourselves. But ALL walls deserve frequent re-examination.

Even the best of walls often cease to meet the intended goals of their builders or users. They leak and crumble and sag. When walls fail, one can use that opportunity to re-examine, reconsider, and explore the

apparent and unstated purpose of the wall. Let me give you an example:

I've always loved learning new things and exploring new challenges. In 1995 I left academia to work for small biotech contract research company and soon became the CEO and part owner. I **loved** creating walls for my company; I made it so useful and attractive that a bigger company bought it. I ran the new company for several years, building a \$20 million dollar facility, and hired more than 100 people. I was on top of the world! But one day the walls came tumbling down when the owner and major shareholder decided he didn't like my leadership style and fired me. Pretty devastating. But being unemployed is also an opportunity. I had hit a wall and could see it was a way of telling me I was going the wrong way. I took time to examine and re-examine this new wall that had been thrown up in front of me. I realized that corporate life had become a barrier, a diversion. I had lost my focus.

Since early in my career what I really cared about child health and helping ensure that children live in an environment free of harmful chemicals – Prevent disease not treating disease. So, while running a business was interesting and challenging, it did not inspire or support my real passion – using my knowledge to protect kids. Rather than serving as protection or strength or an ego boost, the corporate wall became a barrier to progress toward my personal convictions.

Always take time to revisit your walls and the walls that you come across. If they are there by your choice and making – great! Take care of them, but don't let them go unexamined. Periodically check to see if your walls are offending others, limiting your perspective or your own growth, or distracting you from your real convictions.

One of the new worlds I've been building for myself since my re-examination of my corporate walls has been based on my passion to protect child health and turn my scientific knowledge into action. I decided **not** to go back to research, but rather I paired my toxicology

education and passion for child health with my interest in technology to build large, publically accessible website on toxicology called Toxipedia. The purpose of Toxipedia is to put scientific information in the context of history, society, and culture and make that information relevant to the general public. I wanted to give people the tools to break through the walls of misinformation.

I also wrote a book, 'A Small Dose of Toxicology', to support individuals, schools and public educators who are interested in applying toxicology principles in everyday situations.

I talk to groups about how technology and science have helped me cope with Parkinson's Disease.

I work with non-profits, legislators, educators, and the public to help them translate science into action and policy. I am more and more convinced that we have sufficient knowledge to solve many of the problems that confront us. We just need to act and make decisions based on the knowledge we have. We need to connect the dots.

When you first applied to your academic program and wrote your personal statement, you most likely talked about what an education meant to you and your family and how you were going to use your educational experience to change the world, right a wrong, save the environment, protect workers, or to be a better person.

I encourage you to take action on those lofty goals you outlined a few years ago. Apply the science you've been learning to tear down walls of ignorance and apathy and build new foundations of engagement on the issues you care about.

Keep your heart open. Yes, your heart might get bruised or even broken along the way, but try to avoid building walls of protection. To paraphrase William Goldman in the Princess Bride: don't let your heart become a secret garden with the walls that are very high. High walls

will confine your growth and limit your ability to make the changes you want to see in yourself and the world.

Think about the walls you build and live with; examine their purpose and their unintended consequences. As Robert Frost also notes in his poem ‘Mending Wall’:

...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 offence.  
Something there is that doesn't love a wall,  
That wants it down!"...

PAUSE

In the process of getting through your academic program you've probably hit the wall once or twice, felt like you were up against the wall when you were preparing for a test or trying to finish a paper, climbed the walls with boredom, been pushed to the wall of your intellectual and physical capabilities, felt like you wanted to go over the wall and get out of this place, or even been a fly on the wall in a faculty office when they were grading papers or tests. Walls have already been part of your experience.

Now as you move on to the next chapter of your life, I encourage you to see the walls you will continue to confront as opportunities.

Remember the issues you wanted to address when you first came to the Department. Climb, tunnel under, go around, or go through walls that impede your progress toward those goals. You are graduating with a powerful set of tools and knowledge that can be used to break down or at least put cracks in some of those walls. Those tools and new ones you will gain over the years will help you build a new kind of wall that will encourage openness, tolerance, honesty, transparency, and action. You have a powerful and respected voice for public health.

Thanks to Mike Yost and the Department of Environmental and Occupational Health Sciences for giving me this opportunity to speak with you. Congratulations to all those who are graduating. I congratulate you on the walls that you've conquered to get to this point. And thanks to all those in your life who helped you tear down the walls that were in your way. And helped you build foundations of support and love that made this day and your future a possibility.

I encourage you to build bridges and use your new voice to break down the many unnecessary walls.

Thank you very much –