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Entering a Meadow of Common Ground to Address

Spiritual and Religious Diversity

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**Abstract**

This article uses the metaphor of the authors' meadow as a backdrop to finding common ground among diverse religious and spiritual beliefs. A discussion of our human need for boundaries and walls for ownership of property connects to our need for separation of those with differing beliefs. The article offers in place of walls the values of civility, dignity, honesty, and respecting the fact that no one has the "full truth" as stepping stones to entering common ground with others of diverse spiritual and religious perspectives.

## Entering a Meadow Common Ground to Address

### Spiritual and Religious Diversity

Our modest home is located in the “green” section of the county near a waterfall that is part of the state park system. From three sides of our house the neighbors can not be seen. On the fourth side, the house is visible only in the winter when the leaves have fallen. The back of our house contains a section of woods and then a meadow, shared with a neighbor. During our twelve years residing in this home we have never met our meadow-neighbor. There are no fences or markers where our property begins or ends, with only the original paperwork from buying the house providing us those details.

During the spring and summer months the meadow is mowed frequently. There is no written or verbal understanding as to when we or the neighbor mows. Each of us mows a week and then the other. The meadow is a beautiful, restful place in which to retreat and meditate, quietly cared for and shared by two families.

Such a visual metaphor is the definition of common ground. All belongs to all. The benefits are reaped by all. Common ground does not require knowledge or agreements. The focus is on the ground, not the people who own the ground. We are aware that really none of us own our properties, for eventually we die and someone else benefits. As time passes, another family unknown to us will likely own our property. The land is here for us now to enjoy together.

The need for ownership is especially strong when capitalism demands the need for purchasing “things”. Personal ownership then cause people to protect their

belongings; usually with walls and gates. As a result, there is now a sense of what is mine and what is yours.

Bruffee (2002) makes the connection to Frost's poem, *The Mending Wall*. The line most quoted is "Good fences make good neighbors." This line is spoken by the neighbor who must keep a fence or a wall intact by a philosophy of ownership constructed early in life. When the poem is studied carefully the emphasis is rather on the first line; "Something there is that doesn't like a wall." Other living animals may be territorial but do not build literal walls. Instead, the territorial animal's wishes are respected unless there is need of "a hostile takeover" for a new mate.

Walls are built to keep others in or out of their boundaries. Human nature speaks that "the grass must be greener on the other side." Frost asks the question, "Before I built a wall I'd ask to know, what I was walling in or walling out". Perhaps walls are really a social constructed pattern that reinforces our early egocentric needs. The walls are built before we have matured in our socialization process to even be curious as to "what we are walling out". If my meadow had a fence, how would the deer cross? Where would be the unfettered picture of greens and browns?

Common ground in this complete sense is threatening for the inference is common ownership and loss of identity. Few have attained this goal except those that take the vows of poverty while living in community.

Many of us build walls with different characteristics. There are large walls that are known globally such as the Chinese wall, the Berlin Wall and the Wailing Wall. Interestingly, the Berlin Wall could not withstand the process of time and change. The Chinese wall is a tourist site and could no longer keep the Northern Hordes from

invading. The Wailing Wall hears our sins and listens to our pleas; a metaphor of what separates us from God.

Today smaller walls are built. No longer are there even office walls. Cubicles and cells exist. Employees become a part of the common floor. Their behavior requires softer voices for their work. Interactions are more inclusive for even supervisors are not secluded in their “private fortresses”. The work place is increasingly conscious of the outcome of the company, achieved by the combined talents of all members. The walls have been lowered but still not removed.

The solution for the United States with Mexican immigration numbers is the building of a wall. Has there been full investigation as to what is being walled “out”? Investing in a longer process of “no harm” is not valued. Harm is created when one group loses free access to another. One group is deemed the group that is doing the building of the wall while the other group is the one walled “out”.

Immigrants came to the Americas from religious persecution. Such hatred was lessened with democracy, but each faith kept their respondents closely in sight. Our neighborhoods were based on race and religion. Now populations are experiencing each other and enjoying the benefits of shared customs, celebrations and menus. Should the expectation be that walls be torn down quickly or over time? Are the promoters of diversity setting false expectations of quick solutions?

There is an interfaith agency in Long Island that considers themselves an agency without walls. A secretary/bookkeeper sits in a closet-size office for basic work but all the other work is done on location. The interfaith function is underlined and valued by not having a physical location that could have a sign proclaiming religious identity.

Seminars and services are provided at the locations of those serviced. The traditions, symbols, and buildings of another's faith are respected. The workers in the agency are required to have a personal sense of identity so that an office is not needed.

In an imaginary world where religious common ground exists what are some of the principals that thrive in the dirt of mutuality. Kelly (1999) suggests that the first message from the Second Vatican Council may give direction. This addresses that the churches' work should "emphasize whatever concerns the dignity of persons, whatever contributes to a genuine community of peoples" (¶ 3). If we equate the meadow with the dignity of persons there would be the assumption that no covenant or special convocation of individuals would be needed to treat all people with dignity. The basic nature of humanity should be easily resurrected from each of us that view the necessity of basic dignity. Unfortunately, not all religious groups have taught such altruism. Many from an early nature belief teach that all are born sinners. Although these religions may be attempting to reconcile individuals with their Higher Power, the inference is that without repentance not all individuals deserve such respect. Some people are to be disregarded or placed behind a wall where they cannot infect others.

Using the metaphor of our meadow for further contemplation, would any new neighbor be able to see the need to cut their share of the lawn without special discussion? Would there be some neighbors who would watch to see if they could do no work? Would there be evil new neighbors whose first impulse would be to wall and gate their boundaries? Does common ground just occur when by chance two easily going families need no further communication?

Perhaps the word civility would be an easier step (Steffen, 2006). A person may be able to be civil to one of religious diversity even though their spiritual maturity may not permit them to treat others with dignity. The danger is the word civility may also mean a larger commitment. An authentic civility is motivated by a deep concern for another's well-being (Steffen, ¶ 3).

Another possibility of finding spiritual common ground among diverse beliefs is found in Old Testament Scriptures. Ecclesiastes 3:11 reads, "God has set eternity in the hearts of humans; yet they can not fathom what God has done from the beginning." As humans we truly can not fully comprehend God. The mysteries of the spirit are beyond our understanding. At the same time, all humans can identify moments of doubt. Some of us have stronger faith and beliefs than others, but human nature leaves us with questions. This scripture indicates that God expects there to be moments of loss of faith. If individuals could speak honestly with each other, relief and support would occur because of this common experience. Even though God understands humanity; individuals set up unreachable expectations that some will always believe every moment of every day. Ecclesiastical superiors have set images of themselves as being forever faithful. Such spiritual rankings become walls in meadows.

There are times I know that I have mowed my meadow twice in a row. My neighbor has likely mowed the meadow even more often. There is no discussion: "Are you sick? Is the mower broken? Will you take an extra turn? Has our understanding changed? The adult in each of us just realize that "life happens". I love the meadow enough that I will mow until my neighbor returns to once again mow.

A third common ground principle that all spiritual groups must value has been articulated by Bill Clinton, “none of us can claim full title to the truth” (Albright (2006). Clinton writes after his administration:

The three Abrahamic faiths have more similarities than differences. Each calls for reverence, charity, humility, and love. None is fully revealed. The challenge for our leaders is to use what we have in common as a basis for defeating the most extreme elements and draining support for terror. Once people acknowledge their common humanity, it becomes more difficult for them to demonize and destroy each other. It is far easier to find principled compromise with one of “us” than with one of “them”. (Albright).

The commonality is that we are all human and that no one can claim with certainty they have all the answers. Deep in the soul of each religious begot is a whisper that says, “I wonder if this is really true?” The fact that priests, rabbis and ministers have periods of doubt to their spiritual calling is evidence. The “circle of life” including birth, death, love, and loss is a common human experience. Human nature is “to want to see God’s work in our own doings, and God’s purpose as our own purpose” (Albright, 2006, p.147). The common ground is already present in our humanity. The problem is one of reflection and acceptance. Life and maturity lead us to acceptance of our humanity.

This past weekend, we visited another neighbor with horses that we frequent for our young granddaughter to enjoy. As we departed, the owner of the farm left us with his weekly admonition: “Coming here will cost you!” His meaning is that since our granddaughter is a baby she will grow with a compulsion to own a horse. A family member replied, “That is not a problem, you could put a pony in the meadow.” I thought

immediately, “Sure that is a possibility!” How quickly my own personal need trumps the need for the common good. We would lose so much by destroying the meadow with a permanent guest, stable and fencing. My granddaughter would never realize how much the neighborhood would lose on her account.

Where there are walls there are gates. There are different gates: white picket gates, wire gates, electric gates, creaky gates, hidden gate and especially heaven’s gate. There are two possible gates (Bruffee, 2002) that exist when entering a walled area. The first gate is when there is an agreement thru negotiation (Bruffee) or in biblical terms, a covenant. The modern day “zoning laws” is an agreement as to what and where something to be built is permitted.

Genesis 21 tells of Abraham making a covenant with Abimelech. The complaint is that Abimelech has stolen one of Abraham’s wells (Marshall, 2001).

An understanding was reached and the terms honored. The agreement comes through negotiation. Negotiation works when parties feel equally empowered (Marshall). Often, a mediator is necessary to keep the focus on the common ground. In religious diversity disputes: Who is our mediator? The answer needs to be the “Higher Power.”

When Abraham dies, Abimelech takes advantage and steals the wells. This time Isaac ignores the fight and digs a well elsewhere. His statement being: “Now the Lord has made room for both of us, and we shall be fruitful in the land” (Genesis 26). In other words, in time of prosperity, there is enough for everyone. Isaac’s name means “laughter” (Marshall, 2001). Isaac shows the ability to laugh and go on with his life. Therefore, a second gate to the common ground is laughter.

We enjoy the meadow between our home and our neighbor. There is an inner peace and satisfying reflection when entering the meadow, for there are no harsh words or negotiations involved to keep the meadow pristine. Creating ground with others of diverse beliefs can likewise become enjoyable if approached with civility and dignity, without harsh words or negotiations, and with a true desire to be a place of peace to all who enter.

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