

How to Love Your Neighbor and (Almost) Love Your Fence

by [Jeff Plude](#) (June 2021)



Two Houses With Wooden Fence, Gabriele Münter, 1919

“Something there is that doesn’t love a wall,” the narrator of [“Mending Wall”](#) declares in the first verse. And he repeats the line three-quarters of the way through the nearly four-hundred-word poem about two New Englanders who are walking their property line and fixing their stone-wall fence. They do

this every year, like a couple of salmon returning to spawn, since the stones are always moved out of place—by the “frozen-ground-swell,” by rabbit hunters, and by who knows what else?

The gaps I
mean,
No one has seen them made or heard them made,
But at spring mending-time we find them there.

Gaps in the stone wall, gaps in the heart and soul.

Well, it's spring again, and my wife and I have just put up a fence between our backyard and our immediate neighbor. And though I wouldn't quite say we love it, we're quite fond of it. So much for truth in poetry, at least in this case.

On the other hand I do think Robert Frost is on to something, which is why “Mending Wall” is considered among his best poems.

“Something there is that doesn't love a wall” is kind of smug, with which is later played out in the more famous quote from the poem, “Good fences make good neighbors.” Frost repeats that line too, about two-thirds of the way through, and then as the final words of the poem. The pair of verses act as a sort of counterpoint in this rustic dance between these couple of crusty farmers. “Good fences make good neighbors,” of course, is said by the narrator's neighbor, whom Frost paints as an unthinking suspicious Yankee who follows his father's maxim blindly instead of being enlightened like the narrator-poet.

Frost's narrator likens his fence-loving neighbor to living in “darkness,” and even to “an old-stone savage” when he's carrying a big stone with both hands. I think in that respect the poem is a little cruel and even condescending. I personally sympathize with the neighbor.

"Mending Wall" also reminds me of Jesus ordering his followers to "Love your neighbor as yourself," which he said is the second of the two greatest commandments of God. It's that last little phrase—"as yourself"—that wallops us like an eternal sledgehammer. Jesus goes on to show in the parable of the Good Samaritan that your neighbor isn't just whoever lives next door or down the street, but everybody ... including enemies. His colossal command seems impossible to obey. It's like the former pastor of our church used to say: "Being a Christian isn't hard, it's impossible." What he left unsaid in that epigram, but implied (which makes it even stronger), is that it's impossible for an *unbeliever*, but not for a true believer, who by definition is imbued with the Holy Spirit, that is, the spirit and power of God. And with God, as Jesus also says, all things are possible.

Even so, this is a very tall order, and Christians struggle with it too. I'm no exception. But I also think that loving your neighbor as yourself doesn't mean that you have to let him have the run of your house, so to speak.

All this is nothing new. "Mending Wall" was published a little over a century ago. That means the neighbor's insistence that "Good fences make good neighbors" would've been passed down from at least the early nineteenth century. So there's something that likes a fence too. Fences, in fact, seem built into us. The word is derived from the Latin *defensa*, so the idea of defense and protection from others in the form of a fence or wall is ingrained in our very being.

The white-picket fences of suburbia were more of a dream, of something hoped for rather than attained, however picturesque they might be (like the stone walls in the fields of New England). Revelation says that even the New Jerusalem, the eternal paradise for believers after God ultimately purges the earth of evil, will be encompassed by a wall too, and then some—fifteen hundred miles square and high and a couple of hundred feet thick! But according to the Apostle John, this

elaborate fence will be merely symbolic, not to mention beautiful. It will be made of jasper, decorated with various precious stones, and entered through twelve pearl gates that are never closed.

But John's last words about this wall of all walls reminds us of the purpose of a fence as we know it in this world:

And there shall no wise enter into it any thing that defileth, neither whatsoever worketh abomination, or maketh a lie: but they which are written in the Lamb's book of life.

My apology for fences doesn't include all fences.

The Nolo guide to *Neighbor Law* has a special chapter, in addition to a general one on fences, called "Spite Fences." I recently came across a perfect [example](#) of such a fence, if you can even call it that. A farmer angry over a boundary dispute piled the two-hundred-and-fifty-foot line between his property and his neighbor's with cow manure. (Coincidentally, Frost's narrator thinks about asking his fellow wall mender: "'Why do they make good neighbors? Isn't it / Where there are cows? But here there are no cows.'") As you might guess, the vengeful farmer's house was a lot farther away than his neighbor's from the barrier, or whatever you want to call it.

"It's a compost fence," the farmer told a reporter.

His neighbor was more blunt, but a lot more accurate: "It's just a s— pile over there."

"It's like you can't leave the window open," her boyfriend said. "The whole upstairs will smell like it."

So fences can cut both ways. Both the fenced in and the fenced out can be less than neighborly.

Fences were sparse where I grew up, in the sixties and

seventies. I could walk from backyard to backyard and hardly ever run into one. There was only one fence I can remember in my neighborhood; it was made of wood, about six feet high, a picnic-table red, and sat kitty-corner to an empty lot we played baseball and football in. Once in a while we had to scale it to retrieve a ball from a homer or a wayward pass or kick. Which was actually quite fun, both the climbing and dropping into the rows of corn and having to get back over without being caught by the owner.

Even back then, however, a bad neighbor would sprout up like a weed here and there. I know this because one moved in right next door to us when I was seven or eight.

Without going into detail about the family, they were a little strange, especially the father. Their side yard was narrow and right next to our driveway, and their back door was about fifteen to twenty feet from our breezeway entrance, which led directly into our kitchen. At one point they stopped, for some reason, disposing of their household garbage. The bulging plastic bags piled up and eventually spilled out their back door. It was summer, and it stank.

My father, who was friendly and easygoing for the most part, finally spoke up and told our neighbor, the other father, to get rid of the garbage. But still it remained, and still it stank. My father ended up reporting them to the town enforcement officer or the health department, or both.

So the bags of garbage vanished, and we could breathe again. We foolishly thought the matter was settled. The problem was that our neighbor had other ideas.

I was about thirteen or fourteen, I was bored in late winter, and I grew at least a dozen and a half tomato plants from seeds into what seemed to me giant bushes of Big Boy tomatoes (I was ambitious without knowing it—the seeds looked so small). Then it started happening—somebody pulled one of my

tomato plants up! Then another and a couple more, one night after the other.

So one night my father, instead of going back to the mill after he came home for supper, parked a few streets away and then after dark walked back to our house and stood on patrol. My bedroom was on the first floor, and my window faced the backyard, though the garden was hidden behind the side wall of our two-car garage. I stood guard at the open bedroom window and looked through the screen into the still summer night, seeing and hearing the cruel plant killer at every slightest sound or shadow.

Suddenly I heard a commotion—the culprit, the tomato thief, was violating my beloved plants! I heard some yelling and rushing and I ran out and by that time my father had chased our neighbor across our backyard and his own backyard into the empty lot next to that and tackled him!

He'd been destroying my tomato plants, he told the cops, because my father had reported him for the garbage. After that my father resolved to put up a fence. It was an ugly chain-link fence and only about four feet high, but what else could he do at that point?

Now I know what my father felt like.

My wife and I have been living in our townhouse for four years, and last year we bought the place. Ron, I'll call him, shares a common wall with us. He moved in two years ago. Everything started out neighborly enough. We gave him a ride somewhere, and he spilled out his life story to us (he's divorced and lives alone).

But then Ron started blocking our driveway with his big pickup truck and trailer, which he uses to haul rocks, dirt, mulch, plants. He takes meticulous care of his lawn, and likes to plant flowers and set up ornaments in his yard and such, front and back. He can't park in his driveway because he

has another big pickup truck (which has an incriminating decal on the back window—above and under a cartoon of one of the Seven Dwarfs it says, “I’m Grumpy ... Back Off!”). And he can’t park the second pickup truck in his one-car garage because that space is permanently occupied by Whiplash, the name of Ron’s convertible Corvette, according to the license plate.

After giving him the benefit of the doubt a few times, I walked out to get the mail one Saturday morning and asked him how long he was going to be. “Why, you gotta go somewhere?” Ron said. Not right now, I said, but soon. “Just let me know when you gotta go,” he said. I was a little irritated that, in his eyes, the onus was on *me* for him to do what he was supposed to do. So I told him that I didn’t want to have to come out and ask him to move every time we wanted to go somewhere in our car. “That’s bulls—!” he erupted, and called me an “f—ing baby.”

We didn’t speak after that. And he didn’t block our driveway either, at least personally. A cement truck he hired did. When I asked the grizzly bear of a guy driving it to please move, he ignored me at first, then fingered me. Ron wasn’t home, but when he got home our doorbell savagely rang a bunch of times. Upstairs working, I didn’t answer it.

A year went by, and a *détente* seemed to be in place. Though deep down I knew better. In the back of my mind was the tomato vandal.

Then Ron started backing up onto our lawn when he was mowing his grass, which he did every few days in the summer. And I don’t mean a foot or two, which would be fine, but about ten feet! He went a few feet past our patio, which is seven feet from our common wall. Then one time my wife and I were eating an alfresco dinner and he backed up right onto the patio, right behind my wife’s chair! I was so stunned at his brazenness that I didn’t say a word.

But that was it, I resolved. The next time he mowed, I had to do something.

I saw through the kitchen window that Ron was mowing the lawn. Again, he was coming way over into our backyard. I walked out the patio door and stood about midway down our boundary line. As he headed toward me from the other side of his backyard with the push lawnmower, I held up my phone to video all this (which I hate, but I needed evidence) and told him to not come way into our backyard like he'd been doing.

He stopped and glared at me. "Are you stupid?" he said. "Or do you just act stupid?"

I stood my ground. Ron came toward me and ran into me knocking me back a foot or two! He was bigger than me but not too much, a bit older with a potbelly, an ex-college football player, but I was an old wrestler and prepared to defend myself. But I realized that now I had to call the police, because I know from experience how these things can turn against you and get you, not the instigator, thrown in the lockup.

The cops came and listened to our story. But they didn't take any notes or do much, though we showed them the video of Ron coming way over into our backyard, shot from our upstairs window. Even so, he denied everything, though he refused to look at the video. Not standing far from our patio, he told the cops that we drink beer in the afternoon, which stunned me but at the same time gave me some much needed comic relief at that point. "So what?" said the woman cop (as did my wife). But Ron didn't even get that right—he saw us out on our front porch in the afternoon drinking *iced tea* (which he apparently mistook for beer), though on the weekend we each have a half glass of beer with our dinner on the patio.

"He said he'd try to stay off your lawn," the big cop with the shaved head told us. The timing was unfortunate for

us; the George Floyd riots had been raging, and my neighbor is African American. My wife and I aren't.

Anyhow after that Ron mostly left us alone. Though the next week he was blaring music on his patio (R&B, he's in his mid-sixties) on a Sunday afternoon and I had to ask him twice to please turn the music down. "I'm asking you nicely," I said sternly. He glared at me, said nothing, and turned it down.

But that was it. It was the summer of COVID madness, we bought our townhouse in the fall, and vowed to put up a fence as soon as possible in the spring.

This was a project I might have tackled myself, but I couldn't afford any slipups and needed a pro. We found a good one, a contractor with a crew of two. They put up our vinyl white fence—four posts and three panels, six feet high and twenty-four feet long—in under an hour and a half. We planned it so Ron wouldn't be home when the fence was going up. We thought it was best to keep him in the dark about it.

We were a little concerned about how he might take it, but he seems to have taken it in stride. Though he didn't mow his lawn for over a week, the longest stretch we ever remember him going.

In truth we would've put up a fence anyway sooner or later for privacy, since our connected townhouse units are so close together. We don't miss being watched every time we're on our patio, or seeing our neighbor do his perpetual yard work. But I can't deny that there's more to it than that. Whether people are passively or actively aggressive, letting them run amok under the pretense of loving them isn't going to make them any better, and in fact it often makes them worse. Isn't trying to correct them a form of love too? As the Epistle to the Hebrews says in a different context, "For whom the Lord loveth he chasteneth."

Fences may not make good neighbors, but I don't think

they make bad ones either as implied by Frost, who's not quite as folksy as he seems. And they certainly don't prevent the fence builders from loving those on the other side of it.

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

We may not quite love our new fence, but something there is that wants it up too.

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