

Aliens, Gaijin, Stranieri, Etrangers, Gringos and other Walls

Foreigner. Stranger. Alien. I have learned over my lifetime that we fear what we don't understand and fear breeds distrust. Fear and distrust are very dangerous emotions. We tend to keep things alien away one way or the other. We make it difficult for them to be near us. Or we make sure they are isolated in some way. Or we get rid of them.

Walls. Symbols of history as well as territory. Physical walls like the Great Wall of China kept the barbarians at bay and is still the only-man made edifice which can be seen with the naked eye from the moon. Hadrian's wall was the northernmost perimeter of the Roman Empire in Britain. It kept Vikings away. In our time the Berlin Wall became synonymous with the fall of despotic Communism. It kept the prisoners inside.

I am reminded of Robert Frost's poem, "Mending Walls."

*"Before I built a wall I'd ask to know
What I was walling in or walling out,"*

There are personal walls. Everyone has them and I am no exception. My first wall was an enforced quarantine from my father after I was born. He died of tuberculosis three years later. I have a small memory looking at him through the gate across the door to his bedroom. Perhaps I was crying because I could not get in.

There are intellectual walls. Mine took the form of complete indifference to learning during Junior High School and was likely a barrier I built against the hurt and complexity of my parent's divorce. It's pretty hard to flunk woodshop, but I did. A scholastically meat-grinding Roman Catholic boarding school run by the Christian Brothers broke those walls down forever. By the time I got to college, it was easy by comparison...and I had been given something amazing. I had discovered how to learn, and I liked learning.

There are religious walls. I became a Christian Brother for a short time. Founded by a wealthy French cleric in the seventeenth century intent on educating poor children, John Baptist de la Salle designed a "rule" or procedures and guidelines for its members. Religious communities of all denominations build walls to minimize secular intrusion into the life of prayer and devotion to God. While my personal beliefs are utterly altered from that

time in my life, I would not be surprised to find I still carry some of this wall with me to this day.

There are walls made of money. I've learned from my friend, LeRoy Chatfield, the founder of Loaves & Fishes in Sacramento, the reality of being poor in the United States. Loaves & Fishes is a homeless haven in a culture worshiping wealth and power. There, street people can sit in a park without fear of police harassment. There are job training opportunities. Over eight hundred homeless folks can eat there every day. Medical attention is available. There is a substantial library. Where government authorities are heartless, Loaves & Fishes offer heart and, sometimes, even hope.

What I have learned about the homeless in my own small way is this: we are a Christian nation, by and large, with very un-Christian values. Our poor are walled out of our economy, out of our communities, out of our sight. To be poor in America is to be hopeless. Walled out and walled in at the same time. Our prisons are filled with poverty induced crime. We have more people walled into prisons than any other industrialized nation on Earth.

Cultural walls. I had never thought of my country in terms of walls, but we have them. We call foreigners "aliens" and are rather petulant about the illegal ones, even if they prop up our economy. Perhaps because of our geographical isolation from the world for the best part of five centuries, separated by two huge oceans, we American citizens are not used to dealing with other countries as Europeans are. Foreigners come to us, get stirred around in our human stew, and after a couple of generations become "American." Not unlike England and Japan, we are a huge island, demanding others to speak our language, reluctant to learn theirs. We are a nation of rich tourists. We sample for a couple of weeks and if we have a bad experience, we dislike the whole country and their inhabitants. Our irrational dislike of the French as my wife likes to say, is based on a tourist view of Paris. Paris anyway is just about as representative of France as New York City is of the United States. Unlike our British progenitors, we are as humorless about other cultures as we are about our own even if there are observably amusing things about us and them. Robert Morley, the English humorist, when asked why the English so disliked the French, he answered with a straight face: "Well, because they own France!"

Cultural walls taken to an extreme: legislation has just been introduced in our Congress to erect a two thousand mile, two hundred foot wall on the border of Mexico to keep out all those dangerous workers who are the backbone of the California, Arizona, New Mexico and Texas labor force. That would be really

funny if the bill were introduced as a joke. But the bill is serious business to Congressmen Virgil Goode (Virginia) and Duncan Hunter (California).

My own cultural walls gradually crumbled by living in other cultures. Duh, as my daughters would say. What a complicated idea. When I was a young engineer, full of obscure computer technology skills, I and my young family moved to England. Because of that I can claim to be bilingual. I speak fluent American, but having lived for two years in Highgate, a northern suburb of London, I understand English fairly well too. While a foreigner, I wasn't treated as one. A little strange, perhaps. A little arrogant, perhaps. But not alien.

I made mistakes by assuming that because our languages were similar, our cultures were similar as well. But all in all, we were treated with respect and generosity by this deceptively different culture. Along the way I learned a little Cockney slang too. When a Cockney gentleman at a pub refers to his "Trouble and Strife," insiders know the phrase rhymes with "wife," Unlike in the US, my Trouble and Strife, Valerie, was invited to parties and escorted to events by my male colleagues when I traveled. English men are gentlemen.

My children went to a proper British public school, "Channing School for Girls," and obtained an educational head start that put them ahead of their US student counterparts for a number of years. There were cultural barriers in England to be sure, but they were not so readily apparent as with my next adventure.

We moved to Kobe, Japan. For the first time in my life I was introduced to institutional, cultural, linguistic and nationality walls. Most of my North American and European professional colleagues lived in a place exclusive to them. Guards blocked the entrance. Credentials needed to be evaluated. A gate raised and lowered, or not, according to the acceptability of the supplicant seeking entrance. Everyone spoke English. Everyone had access to westernized goods. Not a single Japanese person lived within those walls unless they were domestic laborers.

We decided to live in the Kobe village in an apartment building on *Yamamoto Dori*. We were surrounded on all sides by Japanese neighbors and a downstairs family from India. I traveled to Osaka for work daily on the train, the only *gaijin* (foreigner) on the train on most days. I was the subject of furtive looks. My fair complexioned young daughters heard the word *kawai* (cute!) all the time. We became Sumo wrestling fans, always the only *gaijin* family sitting

cross legged on the arena *tatami* mats, ordering *sake* for my wife and I, tasty snacks of unknown origin, learning how to use the *hashi*, or Japanese chopsticks, slurping *udon*, or noodle soup. I found out how profoundly ignorant I was about Japanese history, literature, drama and, for that matter, wars.

And addresses. The house numbers weren't in sequential order. The number corresponded to *when* the house was built, not *where* it was located. So it was possible to have house 1001 Yamamoto Dori next to 23 Yamamoto Dori, next to 237 Yamamoto Dori and so on. I had cards printed in both Japanese and English with a map on the other side for taxis. The first words we learned, in fact had to learn in order to get home, corresponded to "left," "right" and "straight ahead": *migi*, *hidari* and *masugu*.

So we began to learn the Japanese language, Valerie most of all. Every day she went to the market, the only *gaijin* there, pointing and asking the words for chicken, vegetables, drinks. The chicken guy apparently decided to learn an English word. Every time my wife went to the poultry shop, he would bow, and with a huge smile, proudly say "cheeeeekin?"

We had culinary surprises. My cheeseburgers one night were interesting. The hamburger buns turned out to have a sweet, purple bean curd inside....very unacceptable for an American cheeseburger to be sure. Then the cheese wouldn't melt. No matter how high I turned up the grill, the damn cheese slices just would not melt. I presumed they were made of asbestos and would make fine insulators. I can offer an alternative rational as to why Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego weren't burnt in the fiery furnace of Nebuchadnezzar. God had them wear clothes made of Japanese cheese.

Japan was by far the most challenging and interesting cultural adventure we have ever had. At least partially because we lived without walls.

Italian walls had a flavor all their own. Many of my American colleagues in Rome lived in an area near the sea called *Casal Paloco*. There were a few Italians who lived there, but not many. English was spoken everywhere including in the local stores. We decided to live in an apartment just outside the Roman walls, *Via Nicolo Porpora*. The apartment belonged to a lady who was also an architect. It was on the seventh floor, a balcony surrounding it, overlooking the *Villa Borguese*, the main park in Rome. The silhouette of St. Peter's Cathedral was in the background. Sometimes during the year the sun would set right on the dome. I often sat on the balcony and watched the end of day. We had our very own neighborhood hooker on the corner. My daughters referred

to them as “campfire girls” because of their habits of burning wood and papers in large garbage cans to keep warm during the winter months.

And we began to learn Italian. We shopped in the open markets. Our children learned the vagaries of busses. Driving was a challenge. Parking a bigger one, sometimes five abreast on some downtown Rome streets.

Get this! I could walk to work. Across the Villa Bourguese, down the Via Veneto, across to the Spanish Steps, over to the Fontana di Trevi and into the Piazza Venezia where Mussolini shook his fists and big chin at the people of Rome. Past Trajan’s Column, a wonderful piece of graffiti stolen from Egypt and into the bar under my office for a cornetto and cappuccino. Every day was a different strike, or *sciopero*.

I loved living in Italy, partially, I am sure, because we lived without walls. Many of my colleagues who lived in Casal Poloco never learned Italian. They never learned to bargain in the open markets. They depended on English speaking guides to show them where to go. Valerie conducted tours of Rome before we finished living there....in Italian. We were never treated like *stranieri* and even my meager Italian was applauded by shop keepers and neighbors.

In Paris, the walled community was located in Saint Cloud near the American School of Paris. We chose an apartment near Napoleon’s tomb, walking distance to the house of sculptor August Rodin. We bought wines down the street, cheese on Rue Sevre, took the subway at the Duroc station, shopped in the open markets. We began to learn French, though I will admit even though I had three years of French in High School, French was hardest for me to learn. During that time, I traveled a lot throughout Europe and the Middle East and the only common language in my international office was English.

But we tried. My mother who majored in French Literature in college came for visits. One time we took her to the famous Normandy beach to see the museum. It was a dreadful, cold, drizzly day. I stopped the car in a small village near Normandy for a coffee and brioche. When it came time to pay the young man waiting on me behind the bar, barely ten years old I supposed, held out his hand and quoted me the price. His mother came out from a room in back. She said to her son in French, “No, no, we do not charge Americans. They have done so much for us.”

One of our children went to a bilingual school and is fluent in French. We drove, traveled, went skiing, walked the wonderful city of lights, went to the

Russian Orthodox cathedral near the Champs Elysee and listened to the world famous choir sing the polyphonic liturgical songs based on ancient Russian folk tunes. We found the French citizenry to be cheerful, smart and helpful. We were rarely if ever treated like *étrangers*.

For my fellow Americans who think the French are snotty and rude, well don't eat on the Champs Elysee in a tourist bar, speak as much French as you can, and don't live behind walls. And go to that little bar near Normandy Beach.

So now we live in Ajijic, Mexico, on the northern shore of Lake Chapala, a mile high, fifty mile long lake near Guadalajara. We are learning Spanish. We live in a house we just purchased, a funky multi-colored house that looks like it was designed by E. M. Escher, the Dutch artist who specialized in optical illusions and impossible structures. We have a small swimming pool in the courtyard. On the bottom of the pool is a mosaic of the Virgin of Guadalupe in very bright colors against a backdrop of deep blue. We are surrounded by a mixture of gringo and Mexican villagers. We go to the open market each Wednesday.

This is a noisy, celebration crazy country. The prevailing religion is sort of Roman Catholic, but with a heavy dose of Mexican, Aztec, Toltec and, to us, bizarre sauces thrown in. I am sure the Vatican doesn't approve, but what can they do about it? The people are very poor, warm, hard working. They dance and sing a lot, shoot off fireworks at the drop of a fiesta, make fun of things we would never make fun of in the USA. For example, a Christmas shrine we saw in the courtyard of our local church depicting Genesis had Adam and Eve portrayed by Barbie and Ken dolls. And believe me, Barbie is a fox and dressed to kill.

The Mexican equivalent of Wonder Bread is *Bimbo*. Milk is produced by a company called *LaLa*. A common phrase as one leaves a cash register of any kind is "*Que la vaya bien*," How can you not love a country where the bread is made by a bimbo, the milk is made in LaLa land and everyone says "May you go well" or "good luck" every time you buy something?

There are people who live here who would never think Bimbo Bread is funny. Or the Chapala bus. It goes from the village of San Juan Cosola to the town of Chapala, winding through all the villages in between. Because of the peculiar font that is used on the sides of the bus it looks a little like "Crapola." So I have indoctrinated everyone I know. We all now call it the crapola bus. The people who don't think these things are amusing live up on the mountain slopes in guarded, gated tennis, golf and private communities. Only English is

spoken there and nothing is funny. Few speak any Spanish. They seem not to be interested in Mexico if the truth be known.

I am reminded that Mexico is a very poor country and what I wrote about the walls built around the poor in the United States. But even the poorest Mexican household takes good care of its elderly, its children, its misfits. Many houses are built behind physical walls, partly by custom, partly for privacy, but everyone knows his neighbors. There are discussions in the middle of the streets, not board meetings to determine club rules.

I am neither an alien, foreigner, gaijin, straniero, etranger or a gringo.

I am a citizen of the world, thanks to living in six countries. Like St. Paul's Cathedral in Rome, I am outside the walls.