

BARBEDWIRE, STONE, OR PICKET WITH ROSES—IT'S STILL A FENCE

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Have you ever had your subconscious mind take over and before you know it you're acting on something without even realizing it? After several recent incidences I caught on to what was happening. It started when I began trying to change what and how much I eat. I have no willpower (that's not the revelation, I've known that for decades) and I was thinking that if I had a force outside myself to control my portions I'd be fine. I like to eat + it tastes good = I eat it all. So my brain concluded that I needed to build a fence around my portion size.

Later this issue of building fences to control myself showed up again, with a different twist. In order to take advantage of its warranty I put my laptop in the shop so they could "run a diagnostic" and fix some quirks. I was both excited (what would my life look like without my laptop?) and terrified ("We may have to wipe everything off and start from scratch—are you fully backed up?"). What surprised me was how vulnerable I felt without it.

My laptop is a fence for me, an ever-present "boss" standing over me to keep me writing. Granted, I love writing, but I'm chained to my laptop. Every moment I'm free I'm writing, whether it's emails, newsletters, or books, and when I'm not writing there are other important things to pursue online, like finding a cheaper place to publish my book. Without the laptop demanding my attention I felt a delightful sense of freedom as I played my recorder, shopped, watched TV, and cleaned off my desk. I saw some of the adventure of what life looks like when my rose-covered picket fence (laptop) is removed, forcing me to change my routines. While my laptop gives me a boundary that keeps me responsible and writing, it can also be restricting.

Again, I noticed another fence when my niece and I started attending a free exercise class. On my own I don't get around to exercising, but the commitment (fence) involving another person will make it happen.

Each of these instances came together in my head and I thought, "If I just build enough fences to control my lack of self-discipline I'll finally do what I need and

want to do!" as in exercise, eat right, manage my time, etc. Being OCD my mind began swarming with ideas of how to do that, when suddenly red flags began to wave.

This is exactly the mentality I need to fight. Not that incorporating boundaries in my life is a bad thing, we all need nudges in the right direction to compensate for our weaker areas. (Is lack of self-discipline a thousand weaker areas or just one huge one?) We have a tendency to want to make rules in order to control both others and ourselves. Lately I've spent hours putting together a daily schedule to help me personally be more productive, but when I look at it I see my days scheduled from dawn to dusk, and I begin to feel some rebellion against the structure. **Where is the balance between running around accomplishing nothing and too many fences?** I'm not referring to social or legal fences, but to personal ones that we choose to build.

While we need some fences to give structure to life's chaos, those fences can quickly become a prison. My favorite quote goes, "A schedule altered is flexibility, a schedule absent is chaos." Without realizing it we can easily turn a fence (healthy boundaries and schedules) into a concrete fortress (religion, self-righteousness, and idols). I'm a perfectionist so I tend to build concrete structures titled "*the right way.*"

It's amazing how fast a fence can become a concrete fortress, like now when I'm working on this article. My schedule says that I'm writing during this part of my day. I need this fence in order to keep me writing instead of piddling my time away, but it becomes a fortress if I then won't allow myself to deviate from it. But 1) I wanted a snack, and 2) I don't feel good today, so I stopped during this "writing time" to eat a banana and read my book before coming back to it. My fence has a gate in it that allows me to come and go comfortably, and allows others to enter. Jessie just called, and while I could have been frustrated over the interruption, I was glad to sit and chat a minute. Because of my personality I have to make a conscious decision to keep my fences flexible. But now the dryer just buzzed loudly calling me to fold towels. In this instance I'm holding to my fence, making myself leave them alone until I've put in some focused time writing.

Another way we build fences is in what we determine is "Christian" and what isn't, according to our particular beliefs. I've personally put up fences around things I've believed strongly, only to discover later that that wasn't God at all, just my

interpretation of what I thought God wanted. As Christians we often attempt to control others and ourselves by fences instead of love. **While there is a place for boundaries, it's a slippery slope, until we're so hung up in the rules we have no room left for God to join us or change our direction.**

Fences cause self-righteousness. We think everyone else should do and think the same way we do. When you hear yourself judging someone else for not living up to your standard, stop and look at your fence. Yes, there are things that are wrong, or places where we all can do better, but any feeling of judgment is self-righteousness. God asks us to love others and leave the judgment to Him, and when we judge people we're committing the same sin as Adam—standing in a place that is meant for God and not us, as in believing that we are smarter than God and can make that judgment call ourselves. We like to set parameters of condemnation (fences) around others instead of letting Holy Spirit convict. Fortresses can keep us so focused on what someone else is doing "wrong" that we miss their heart.

Some of the biggest and strongest fences are built of opinions. Have you ever noticed that some people have such strong opinions that there's no room for others to express a different one? The different opinion is just bulldozed down by the strong one. With those people it's a drag to hold a conversation, because it's all one-sided. Whatever you say is tromped on and stamped out. Terry was referring to a person like that just now after he got off the phone, when he told me, "If a person has been successful in the least little thing they stop listening." The person he was talking to has concrete fences, which can't coexist with a team mentality.

This morning a man came to fix my dad's lift chair. I only caught the tail end of the visit, but I could tell before I even got in the room that he was surrounded by large fortresses. I could hear him adamantly talking about Hagar and Ishmael, and then showing a huge fortress over the war in Iraq. He was a walking concrete fence that plowed down everything in front of him. No matter how strongly we feel about something we need to apply God's grace in letting others have their own fences and leave the bulldozing of those fences to God.

Many times, without realizing it, we start out with nice gated fences only to end up with large concrete fortresses that have no doors. For example, I went years without reading any fiction, not because I had anything against it but because I hadn't been interested in reading any. Then a friend gave me a mystery that she thought I'd enjoy. I actually found myself struggling with whether or not

to read it, because after all those years of not reading fiction I wasn't sure I wanted to break my record. In the end I realized that I had created a stronghold and that my friend's heart mattered more than my fence. I read the book, enjoying it immensely and have reread it several times since. Once a fence becomes concrete it becomes an idol, a fortress of self-righteousness that we need to recognize and tear down.

As I've mentioned before, last January I prepared a box of Bible verses where Jesus is speaking to me as His bride, and every day I draw one. Well, a couple of weeks ago I ran out. My original plan was to just stir the pot and start over, but I decided that I'd rather pick *more* verses and have new ones to draw. That turned out to be time consuming and didn't happen as fast as I'd planned, and I felt the fence within me begin to harden into concrete as I stressed over going a day without my verse. I forced myself to step back, relax, and admit that it's not the end of the world if I don't complete the year by my original rules. (Our *rules* we make are instant concrete fences.) Instead, because I left a door in my fence, I've discovered something else. I've begun to write my own "verse" from Jesus to me, and I'm having a lot of fun doing it. It's bringing me closer to Him, and making me listen for Him to speak to me. Yesterday's was simple, He simply said, "Hold my hand." It stayed with me all day, comforting me and warming my heart with how much He loves me. Had I let my verses become concrete I would have missed some great fun, and my spontaneous gift of verses for the year would have become stale and forced.

We all need some boundaries to help us, but beware of allowing them to replace an open mind, choice, and spontaneity. They stifle God's ability to do something fresh and new. They box us in and can be dangerous, becoming strongholds that cause us to be intolerant of others whose fences aren't built to our blueprints.

A fence around my eating keeps me eating a reasonable amount, a fortress is believing that I can't eat anything outside my "rules" and feeling condemned when I do. (I did feel a bit guilty eating my Papa John's pizza tonight.) A fence around my exercise program is sticking to it when possible but not stressing when I can't because I'm sick. At lunch today we had some fences that began looking fortresses-like until we relaxed and lightened up, because some of us like crushed peanuts on our curry soup and some prefer whole peanuts.

A fence works both ways. What keeps you in can also keep God out. We forget how remarkably individual we are and how much God loves that individuality.

Walking in freedom brings choices, and while we do need some boundaries to our lives, beware of living so bound by your fences, whether set by you or others, that God has to take the bulldozer to your fence to get to you.