

“Mending Wall”
by Robert Frost
A Civic Reflection Discussion Guide

❖ **Beginnings**

Give people a few minutes to read the poem silently if they haven’t read it ahead of time

Facilitator reads poem aloud

❖ **What do walls do?**

Individual and Dyad Reflective Exercise

Invite participants to take a moment to think about “walls” in their lives. Give each everyone a piece of paper with the following instructions on it (and remind them they will not be asked to turn it in):

Take a few minutes to think about some walls in your life:

- Describe a wall or a fence you love. *Why do you love it?*
- Describe a wall or fence you don’t love. *Why do you not love it?*

After a few minutes, ask participants to turn to their neighbor and talk briefly about the walls they thought about.

Large group-report back

What did you find yourselves observing about these walls? What are some features of the ones we love? The ones we don’t love?

❖ **The Poem**

We’ve talked about some walls in our own lives. Now let’s turn our attention to a particular wall, the one in this poem.

What Brings Walls Down:

The poem begins by making a distinction about kinds of things that bring walls down. Let’s listen to the opening lines of the poem again. [Read aloud first 11 lines]

What kinds of things bring walls down in this poem?
(ground-swell, hunters, yelping dogs, something mysterious...)

Why do you think the narrator says the hunters are “another thing?”

What is the difference Frost is pointing us toward?

Perspectives in the Poem:

There are two perspectives in the poem: the narrator, the neighbor. Let’s consider their differences in perspective:

The narrator says:

“Why do they make good neighbors? Isn’t it
Where there are cows? But here there are no cows.
Before I build a wall I’d ask to know
What I was walling in or walling out,
And to whom I was like to give offense.
Something there is that doesn’t love a wall,
That wants it down.”...

What kind of person is the narrator? How does he feel about the wall? What motivates him, do you think?

Of his neighbor he says:

... I see him there,
Bringing a stone grasped firmly by the top
In each hand, like an old-stone savage armed.
He moves in darkness as it seems to me,
Not of woods only and the shade of trees.
He will not go behind his father’s saying,
And he likes having thought of it so well
He says again, “Good fences make good neighbors.”

What kind of person is the neighbor? How does the neighbor feel about the wall? What motivates him?

Which perspective do you most identify with? Why?

❖ **Civic Life**

Now let’s turn our attention back to walls in our lives, particularly those in our civic life (our shared work):

In what ways do the perspectives of the characters in the poem we've discussed represent perspectives in civic life?

Where are the groundswells in civic life? Who are the hunters? The yelping dogs?

How do you know when to abandon the wall, let nature takes its course?

If in fact "good fences make good neighbors," where do we walk the fences with our neighbors—with people with whom we have differences?

So what? Where does this discussion leave us as people who live in community, people who have neighbors, people who work towards a better common life?

❖ **Wrap Up** (don't skip this part!)

Ask someone to volunteer to read the poem aloud again.

❖ **One-minute Evaluation and Closing**

On a small, separate piece of paper to be turned in, ask:

1. Has your perception of the poem changed over the course of the discussion? Do you hear it differently?
2. Has your perception of "walls" changed?

—or—

1. What, if anything, was useful about this conversation?
2. As you leave, what is your question?