

The Fifth Wall

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My parents were wall-builders, two per person. Many only have one or no parents, but they still find themselves inside four walls. To our credit, children are often also complicit in wall-building. For better or worse, we help. Yet there remains one piece of the puzzle that some of us are still trying to figure out. It is the secret of the fifth wall, which we'll uncover using the same virtue I used before I even knew the name for it, the ancient Greek cardinal virtue of fortitude.

Being a parent isn't easy. As the prompt mentions, neglect for aging parents has gotten so bad that there some countries are forced to institute laws to have adults even pretend to lift a hand to care for their parents. There are many parents out there that have not done what I'll describe. And you should know I continue to help my parents with many things as they advance in their years. Know that the awareness I have been lucky to attain did not cause me to forsake them. But you must also know how close my heart came to being forsaken.

Walls are there to prevent passage. It can have positive utility as part of the shelter of a home. But used in general, a wall commonly has negative connotations. You try and try, but you "hit a wall." And one wall is nothing by itself. If it's tall, just go around. If it's wide, just walk away. A grouping of walls forming an enclosure, though, becomes a problem. And I think a four-wall enclosure paints my picture very well. There is the illusion of freedom of movement. You supposedly have two dimensions of choice for where to go, but in the end the space is very limited. You are only the area of the enclosure. Nothing more.

My parents formed those four walls around me. Through telling me various things about what I am and what I am not, they did their best to lock me into the enclosure. It's clear we look

up to our parents as children. They are not only authority figures, but teachers. Naturally, the student will have a hard time knowing if the well is poisoned. They are supposed to drink from it! Thus, children are all too prone to getting caught in this trap.

It was fortitude that allowed me to free myself from that trap and ascend through the fifth wall, something we will cover in more depth soon. This cardinal virtue is also known as courage, but it is better termed as I said it. The word fortitude gets at the core of my message. It is a great effort to persist after being your own battering ram for the walls that have surrounded you. It is even greater when those walls are suddenly their own battering rams directed at you. This successful effort of persistence is the core of fortitude. But it should also be known that one does not need to stand still and take the blows in order to possess fortitude.

The *Tao Te Ching* was not a text I had read until very recently, but an analysis of some of its passages may serve as a good way of relating some of the ideas that were going through my brain at the time. Verse 8 has a note about presence in family life, but it's punctuated by its final line, that "When you are content to be simply yourself and don't compare or compete, everybody will respect you." Crucial to avoiding folly, there is another verse you must read to understand what exactly that means to not think that quote is suggesting a mindset of *winning the popularity contest*. Verse 9, where we are given several metaphors as examples of the folly of trying too hard, culminates so: "Care about people's approval and you will be their prisoner. Do your work, then step back. The only path to serenity." These were the same ideas going through my mind at the time. It seemed no matter what I did to manifest a door inside the walls, they still remained walls. And no matter how much I cared for and watered them, walls were nothing like plants, which may expand and allow more space. Yet even if a child understood this about the walls, this doesn't exactly say a lot about what one must do.

Recognition of the situation one is in is already a big step. The next step to take? Once again, the *Tao Te Ching* tells us what we can do next. Verse 36 articulates, “If you want to shrink something, you must first allow it to expand. If you want to get rid of something, you must first allow it to flourish. If you want to take something, you must first allow it to be given.” This emphasizes the importance of opposites, of maintaining a duality in all things. It's also really good parenting advice, but advice my parents never heeded. Instead, we must take it upon ourselves to follow this advice. The text emphasizes the importance of oscillation. We must grow and shrink and flourish and trim ourselves to prosper and truly *be*. In a limited space, shrinking may come easily, but if we are to ever be in our growing phases, we must find somewhere with more room.

Here, another text may serve as our guide. In the book *In Order To Live*, North Korean defector Yeonmi Park discusses the fundamental need to escape a poor situation. She says, “I wasn’t dreaming of freedom when I escaped from North Korea. I didn’t even know what it meant to be free. All I knew was that if my family stayed behind, we would probably die...I was willing to risk my life for the promise of a bowl of rice” (2-3). Park escaped a very dire situation. And while I never experienced the kind of hunger she did myself, I was still able to understand in my childhood that something very fundamental to my being, the freedom to simply be, was missing. My longing for something else in the face of the four walls’ physical and mental constraint felt just as genuine as the longing for a bowl of rice. And it was in that longing that I was finally able to notice the truth about my four walls: they had no fifth.

One normally calls it the ceiling, but when one acknowledges a ceiling, they say that it is at least a point at which one can make some progress towards. “Hitting your ceiling” is “hitting your peak.” It’s not the same meaning of being completely stopped as hitting a wall. And that’s

why I prefer calling it the fifth wall. I eventually developed the cognizance to look up at this wall. I looked past my circumstances with my parents and their instilled dogma of automatic obedience. I looked to see if there was a new boundary beyond all of this. And I found nothing.

I reveled in this discovery. You must read Epictetus to understand how excited I was. In section IX, he says, “Whereas if Caesar were to adopt you, your haughty looks would be intolerable” (4). Adopted into tremendous wealth was exactly how I felt. The beam of my smile was the lament of my parents. And why not?! I no longer had to be my parents’ expectations. They were no longer always right. And if you’ve ever had the pleasure of reading Epictetus at length, that feeling he describes in that section and throughout his works, that all of us are and always will be above diminishment because we are all the “sons and daughters of God,” that internal trumpeting in celebration is exactly what I felt back then when I first climbed out of those four walls, and what I continue to feel today.

Much to my parents’ chagrin, I remain beyond the reach and influence of their four walls, miles away by now in my philosophy and a fair distance away physically, too. All because I was able to see the truth that I could climb out that was there all along. Once again, the best I can find for quotation here is Yeonmi Park, where she says the following: “After I escaped to South Korea, I was surprised to hear that the blossoms and green shoots of spring symbolize life and renewal in other parts of the world. In North Korea, spring is the season of death” (79). My mind had been closed in those four walls, but after I escaped, there was so much more I was able to learn and attain. My only hope, more than anything else, is for anyone reading this essay who is going through the same situation I went through to realize that they have fortitude, that they truly can climb out of the four walls, too, and take one step closer to finally being, just as I can today.

Works Cited

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