

Open spaces, open minds

One of the pleasant features of suburban life used to be the absence of fences between properties

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As I remember my early days, one of the pleasant features of suburban life was the absence of fences between properties, all along my street. On the average village block you could walk from one end of the street to the other, albeit carefully, through gardens, across lawns, around swimming pools and confront no larger obstacle than a beautiful silver maple tree, a thin line of shrubs or a carefully cultivated "victory garden."

Overnight, as if by magic, Canadian suburbia sprouted tall fences of wood, bricks, cinder blocks and wire ... some of it barbed, some of it razor.

Gated communities are currently *de rigueur*. When we were children we played our games in other peoples' back and front yards – often without permission and without incurring the wrath of householders. Such might rarely be done today. Maybe you remember John Cheever's short story *The Swimmer* where a middle-aged man swims home from his business office, from backyard pool to backyard pool, on a nostalgia trip one hot afternoon. Each pool he swam in evoked past moments and past events. Wading through each pool he did confront the puzzled faces of his neighbours yet he never confronted a fence.

Novelist John Updike has said: "Openness and generosity expressed in the unfenced shape of our yards now threatens to turn defensive, protectionist, exclusionist, isolationist; the fences are going up in our minds and on our properties." Yes ... the universally useful backyard is disappearing and with it some of our Canadian generosity, kindness, and tolerance.

NIMBY now takes physical form, with most backyards today inaccessible. Clearly, some of this territoriality results from fear – of thieves, burglars and more, but the symbolic aspects of these changes may indicate not merely closing off properties but as Updike suggests, a closing of minds.

Great nations have become great partly because of accessibility: the central notion of preserving wide open spaces for all, but also they have sought the preservation of wide open minds. Very simply, such openness stimulates the imagination, promotes new ideas, new approaches to old problems, and creates new communities, all of which ensure the growth and development of the country itself.

When visiting Sweden, I learned of Sweden's "Universal access legislation" which means that all land belongs, to a certain extent, to all the people. You may picnic on someone's lakefront property or quiet backyard as long as you clean up your picnic leavings before you depart.

Travelling around North America, Ben Macintyre of the Times of London found that a sense of who we are and want to be is dictated by who we are not. Our definition of self is determined through elimination – not gay, not African-Canadian, not Muslim, not liberal/conservative, not urbanite, not Asian, not feminist, not Catholic So the fences go up in our minds, fences between generations, the genders, the ambitious and the indolent, Conservative and Liberal. Eventually, we will have a severely limited social and cultural life, one that involves increasing isolation from and growing distrust of one another.

Yes, we have reason for concern – the violence on the streets, child abuse, crack houses, global warming, unemployment and the recession. In fact, we worry about the entire wretched zeitgeist of 2010.

A reclamation process must begin. We must reclaim our generosity, our openness, our accessibility as individuals. The solution to fenced-in minds is to bring the fences down, bringing us together, as this great nation's people.

To open our hearts is to tear down the fences that are thrown up everywhere. Whereas I do like his poetry, I am not sure I agree with Robert Frost that "Good fences make good neighbours." Rather, things dividing us must be dissolved, only then can we build a world where "Promises are kept." Here Frost was right.

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