

**20th Anniversary of European Foundation Center: Berlin Walls of the Mind  
Delivered: November 10, 2009**

It is a pleasure to be here tonight at this joint reception of the Grantmakers East Forum and the European Foundation Centre, and to be celebrating dual 20<sup>th</sup> anniversaries—that of the fall of the Berlin Wall, and the founding of the EFC.

As I thought about traveling to Berlin at this particular moment in time, I couldn't help but reflect on what the anniversary of the fall of the Berlin Wall must mean to so many of you in the room. Surely I am preaching to the choir when I talk tonight about how walls harm humanity, and how we must work together as global citizens and engaged philanthropists to unite people for the common good. Undoubtedly, many of you had family split apart, and lives forever altered, by the Berlin Wall.

Walls have a way of triggering intense, lasting feelings. And, in fact, the Berlin Wall served as the inspiration for my message in the Mott Foundation's 1995 Annual Report, which I titled: "Berlin Walls of the Mind." Our report that year took a focused look at American society – especially at the fractures, divides, "walls," if you will, that seemed to be separating us. What we wanted to explore in the report was not only what was separating American society, but also how to bridge those divides, how to scale those walls, which is, I think, in large part what philanthropy tries to do: serve as a convener and bring together resources – financial and human – in the interest of nurturing a civil society.

We titled our report, “America’s Tattered Tapestry,” and included the sub-theme: “Can we reclaim our civility through connectedness?” To better understand the time period in which that report was written, let me briefly describe some of the events that had only recently transpired. In 1989, the Berlin Wall fell. In 1990, the Soviet Union disintegrated. That same year, Nelson Mandela was released from prison and in 1994, he was elected president of South Africa. In 1991, the first Gulf War occurred. In 1995, the Dayton Peace Accords were signed. And, in 1996, the first elections of the Palestinian Authority were held. A lot happened in a few short years, but I was particularly stuck with the image of the Berlin Wall.

In my 1995 message, I reflected on a host of unsettling events that had left many of us in the United States wondering if we were losing our civility, our connectedness. At that time the United States was experiencing a wave of hate crimes. Specifically, rural African American churches were being burned, and homegrown violence was erupting as evidenced by the bombing of a federal government building in one of our major cities. Uncivil discourse was beginning to rule the day in the media and entertainment industries. And sharp divides were surfacing as we debated health care, welfare reform, immigration and other important issues.

While our 1995 report was clearly U.S. centric, much of what I wrote then is still relevant today, so I would like to hearken back to some of those words and themes.

I began my message by asking people to conjure up walls, real and symbolic, and how they affect civil society. Recognizing that there were divides in places all around the world at that time, I wanted readers to first think globally, before asking them to think locally. Here's what I wrote:

“The Berlin Wall. What does it mean to you? Stop a moment ... close your eyes, and picture the city of Berlin with the wall running through it. What images do you see? What does it symbolize to you?

“Now picture South Africa and another Berlin Wall, a racial wall, if you will. What pictures come to mind? Let's move to another part of the world – Bosnia. What kind of Berlin Wall divides the people of Bosnia? How impenetrable does that wall seem to be? And what of America?”

I wanted readers to think about America's urban cities — New York, Los Angeles, Detroit, et cetera — and to consider what it must feel like to live in one of those places and sense walls caused by poverty, inequality, race, or class.

I then asked: “Is there a Berlin Wall in your own backyard? How did it get there? How does it divide your community? More importantly, how do you make it go away?”

My message registered deep concern over a sense that Americans increasingly were isolating themselves from each other – wall-building, if you will. And mental walls are just as formidable as walls of bricks and mortar. When motivated by fear we can build mental barriers – Berlin Walls of the mind – to protect ourselves. The problem is that when we build walls – whether mental or physical – we destroy our relationships with one another. And that connectedness or belonging is fundamental to building community and ensuring a civil society.

My definition then of a civil society holds true today:

“A civil society embraces tolerance and respect for not just the diversity of people and cultures, but also the diversity of ideas. A civil society is a place where freedom is celebrated, and justice and equity are paramount. A civil society is a place where the rights of individuals are respected and individuals respect the rights and needs of the greater community. A civil society is a place where civic participation undergirds everything.”

I further recognized that without civil society, democracy is tenuous at best. And I can think of no quicker way of letting democracy slip away from us than by walling ourselves off from each other.

Still, my message also reflected a sense of hopefulness derived from the Mott Foundation's work in places around the world – such as former Soviet republics and South Africa – that had known all about walls of exclusion and oppression but where ordinary people with a vision of civil society led dramatic, inspiring change.

As I said then:

“Seeing these struggles reminded me one of the most famous walls of all time, which sliced into the very heart of the community. In its heyday, the Berlin Wall was a gray monster, complete with barbed wire and armed guards, a horribly apt symbol of the Cold War. I have wondered many times how the people of Berlin survived this near-fatal blow.

“But the fact remains that when citizens on both sides of the Berlin Wall kicked it down, they took part in the greatest symbolic act of our era. They proved a simple truth: The democratic impulse is fundamentally at odds with walls that separate the prosperous from the impoverished, the free from the oppressed.”

As I was composing that message back in 1995, I also was struck by the question: What was fueling isolationism and extremism in America? Fear, I concluded, was playing a pivotal role. I cited some of those fears – which, unfortunately, run high even today:

- fear that we were becoming a nation devoid of values;

- fear that family, as we knew it, was collapsing;
- fear that the children of our inner cities wouldn't live to see their 20s;
- fear that that our children would never enjoy a standard of living equal to our own;
- fear that our systems of education, government and medical care were already overstretched and would be unable to meet the needs of tomorrow;
- fear that our cities were beyond repair and that increasing polarization was discouraging investment in them;
- fear that the jobs and pensions of today will be gone tomorrow;
- fear that there is no way out of the despair and hopelessness brought about by persistent poverty;
- fear of competing cultures;
- fear of each other; and
- fear that no one really cares.

I called those fears the bricks of many Berlin Walls, pointing out that with such ample evidence that our nation was becoming divided by class, inequality and racism, it was little wonder that we would create walls in our minds. These “walls of the mind” may be invisible, but they are just as tall and formidable—perhaps even more so—than the Berlin Wall once was. They are imprisoning us through fear and despair, dividing our communities and separating us as people.

Still, I found reason to hope. And that hope is derived from a fundamental belief that people know what needs to be done to restore community. Our job in philanthropy is to figure out fresh ways to unleash human energy and capital resources, and help focus the will of the people on the needs and tasks at hand.

Partnerships and civic participation undergird a civil society. They are the tools that can help us create and maintain our sense of connectedness, our sense of community. And it is within the community that we find our most fundamental values such as caring, decency, trust, honesty, forgiveness and faith. These common values – not real or imagined walls “protecting” us from one another – are the keys to the future.

Even today, some 14 years after that report was written, I believe that it is our challenge to find commonality, to bridge divides, to scale “walls.” The will to accomplish that will come from clear vision and wise leadership. I see much evidence of that, all around me here tonight.

Although it seems like yesterday, it was, indeed, 20 years ago that the EFC’s first AGA was held in Bruges. That first group of people had vision, but they also knew how to make the vision a practical reality. They respected each other and knew that great accomplishments required patience, persistence, and partnership. They realized that the EFC was like a great airport or railroad switchyard. Many people and ideas would flow

into it. In some cases it was an incubator of ideas and enabler of action and implementation. It was, and is, a place where the philanthropic entrepreneurial spirit could flourish. Because of its staff—many of whom were youngsters—it was, and is, a center of energy, enthusiasm, and positive thought. The EFC has become a thought leader for philanthropy and, as such, I believe the people in this room and the people who will be in this room 20 years from now, will have the values, vision, leadership, and practicality to address problems such as climate change, immigration, conflict, financial crisis, and corruption. As regions such as Central Asia and the South Caucasus continue to build civil society, the partnership between EFC and the Grantmakers East Forum holds great promise.

I would like to close with another quote from my 1995 annual message:

“Let me end my comments at that most infamous wall of our time.

“Thanks to the events of recent years, the Berlin Wall now symbolizes more than division. By crumbling, it almost miraculously has become a symbol of unity, persistence and courage. I am in awe of the people who remained faithful to the idea that one day the wall would be torn down — that their children would dance with joy as it disintegrated. That day came at last.” As Poland’s former president observed in a conversation with me in the 1990s, “We are one Europe now.”



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Thank you for all that you are doing, and congratulations on this 20-year milestone.