

Some Thoughts on a Border and a Frontier

Please note: this document is situated under the New Testament banner. Reason? Because the more appropriate one dealing with philosophical matters is taking up a considerable amount of space.

At first glance any talk about a border sounds pretty restrictive, even foreboding. It evokes one or two feelings: either you're hemmed in or forbidden to cross. In other words, a border suggests being deprived of the ability to move from your homeland to one which is not. The same restrictive movement applies to other forms of borders. Might as well equate it with being imprisoned; the two don't seem that much different. Then there's a border in the positive sense which nevertheless retains a similar negative connotation: don't go there because it's dangerous...a region marred by conflict or by some kind of contamination such as Chernobyl. You may cross it but you do so at the risk of your own life. Both indeed are the stuff of documentaries and movies.

Finally, there's the most discussed type of border today, the one which hopefully this essay offers a modest remedy, albeit indirectly. It has a lot to do with the Internet and social media where people don't feel restricted by common guidelines of courtesy. In other words, there's a lack of respect with regard to the invisible but very real borders of other persons. Write an email or text a message then hit "send," and there's not turning back. Here the distinction between how what one does with the media and the person receiving the harmful message is done away with. Not only is this a form of trespassing: it's more like barging in...should I say trampling?...as a trail of destruction is left behind. Two factors make it worse. First, it's anonymous and second, a whole slew of people can join in on the abuse. Talk about mob lynching. Once such brazen interlopers have acclimatized themselves to this cyber form of intrusion, it's easy to make the switch to the physical realm where things get real scary. That, of course, means resorting physical violence.

A footnote, if I may, since it has dominated the American media at the time of this writing. Even as a candidate President Donald Trump has been fixated on erecting a fence among the Mexican-American border and continues to do so now that he's in the White House. For many, that has left a bad impression of what a border is or should be. When you focus on a border like this, it's even more tempting to breach and breach it people will. So instead of thinking in terms of a border pertaining to relationships, it might be helpful to do so in terms of a frontier. More on this potentially helpful suggestion later.

With that brief warning as to what this essay is not about, let's expand the idea of a border. The common understanding is a separation or division between two political or geographical areas. In actuality there's no difference in the physical territory involved.

The land doesn't hold up a big sign saying "no trespassing" nor do any of the animals on either side. At the same time a border suggests an edge, a word connoting sharpness. I recall an experience of this some years ago when driving from the United States into Canada. While in the customs line I was struck by all the birds flying back and forth with impunity. Even though I realized a border is an arbitrary human invention, I couldn't help but look for some distinct physical characteristics when I was near one, all in vain. Another example is driving across a state line. Beforehand we can anticipate entering a different dimension and are disappointed when the landscape on the other side is the same as in the one we had just left. Actually, it's a kind of let down. The same applies to crossing a time zone where the only difference is setting our clocks either forward or backward.

Let's spell this out further. While driving along you see a sign saying "New York border 10 miles." Then a few more signs are posted as you get closer until you see something like "Welcome to the Empire State" followed by a picture of the state bird and notices relative to law enforcement. Also you might detect a change in the quality of the pavement, traffic lines and so forth but not much else. However, you're in a place subject to New York jurisdiction which is different from the state you had just left. Should you be driving across New York State to Pennsylvania, there are different signs for that state with the same basic messages. String these together across the United States and you get a sense of moving through multiple spaces. The real differences however, are in the landscape: Mississippi River, Great Plains, Rocky Mountains, Sierra Nevada and finally the ultimate border of the Pacific Ocean.

It's a wholly different story when you cross from one country into another, say in Europe as opposed to flying. Even though in recent years borders have become less important (not so much recently), you have a feeling of moving from one distinct place to another. When you cross from France into Germany, the physical border certainly is there with birds flying overhead, heedless of any division, but you're entering a space with a wholly different language and culture. This, of course was pronounced to the extreme in the days of the Soviet Union and remains so between North and South Korea. Passing between the two gives you a genuine sense of entering with some foreboding space, actually quite alien. As for the division between the two Koreas, there's the intriguing border crossing called the Military Demarcation Line which, I believe, runs through a building where both sides sit opposite each other, each in his own country.

Yet there's one more border worth mentioning, perhaps the least understood but more significant. That pertains to a monastic enclosure. Most people remark how they feel a profound sense of peace when visiting a cloistered community as soon as they enter the property. If this isn't the ultimate border I don't know what is. This is noticeable even if you walk in the monastery's woods and come across postings as to the property. The

landscape is the same, no distinguishing marks except for the modest signs. You step over the border which here technically is called the enclosure and walk onto someone else's land. Immediately, and I mean immediately, you perceive the difference. The enclosure side is sacred land whereas the other is not. It's secular in the sense of being of this world whereas the enclosure is not of this world. Same physical landscape, of course, but two completely different worlds even when no one is around for miles.

On a more familiar level we have local borders as in an urban setting where you pass from one heavily populated area to another such as from Boston into Brookline. The designation generally is marked by a small-ish sign for which you'd have to be on the lookout else you'd never know that you're passing from one city to another. Often towns will have a sign with the name of the other town into which a road passes, a hint that you're headed to that place. And so on and on it goes, an innumerable amount of artificial yet real distinctions of one place from another. Some are more obvious than others as already pointed out. Once we've become aware of them, we realize that without them we'd become pretty much disorientated. The whole set-up is quite intriguing when you stop and consider it, a commentary on how we organize ourselves.

Borders are clear-cut divisions, obviously artificial although some may follow geographical features such as rivers, mountains and valleys. Then there's the territory which acts as a buffer on both sides, sometimes more pronounced than the other such a mountain range, marshes or plains. This points to the real subject matter of interest of this essay which may be designated as a frontier. Physically speaking it's a less clearly defined area although it's associated with a border. As you move toward a border well before it you enter a territory associated with it which is different from the one you had left. Actually the distinction between the two is one for which you have to be on the look out. Returning to the example of two countries, the frontier area on one side may be marked by the frequency of the language of the other side and visa versa. It's necessary to move further inland, if you will, for this admixture to disappear. In addition to language, within the frontier area there may be closer similarities with regard to architecture, food and even bilingual signs.

For Americans the word "frontier" has had a special connotation. It applied to the Wild West and got pushed back little by little starting with the first colonists on the Atlantic coast. For those settlers the idea of a frontier was absolutely frightening since it was filled with unknown dangers and potentially hostile peoples. They had absolutely no borders except the Atlantic on their back which they had just crossed at the peril of their lives. Surely many must have glanced out over the limitless ocean, wishing they were on the other side but no. They're stuck. Although I'm unaware of no record, chances are that the native Americans felt the European settlers formed a frontier area, one they knew

instinctively would be pushed back upon themselves. The same applied pretty much to the ancient Romans which for people worldwide rings as the truest picture of a frontier.

As for the Empire, it represented civilization and order whereas across border lived the barbarians. It too was a well-defined demarcation line and had frontier territories on either side. For example, as you approached the Germanic border you felt a growing sense of the wildness though the region was populated with people from the Roman Empire speaking Latin. However, more and more you'd hear what to a Roman sounded like mambo-jumbo, the language of barbarians. The same must have applied the other side of the border, a mirror frontier, if you will, just like the native Americans noted in the paragraph above. Over time Germanic tribes spilled into the Roman side mingling with the Romans living there. Then as you moved past the boarder you enter God-only-knows-what. Actually the image of the Roman notion of border and frontier continue to haunt us today. It's the classic symbol of order versus disorder, of us versus them. For a Roman soldier or even civilian to be assigned to a frontier post was less than welcoming. The same can apply to hostile areas today. Such is the power of frontier to affect our lives.

I make mention of another border, the Berlin Wall. Perhaps it's the most instructive modern image of a border as well as a frontier. The wall itself was the border, heavily guarded and patrolled. People mostly on the western side would approach the clearly defined no-man's land which was planted with mines. That was the frontier area with an abundance of signs warning no one to enter. If you did, you'd be shot on the spot. Points of entry were controlled carefully, the most famous being Checkpoint Charlie. While visitors naturally were attracted to the wall, what really mesmerized them was the empty space before it. Narrow as it was, just beholding this man-made desert was a foreboding experience.

With regard to those living in frontier areas, ancient and modern, they are different from people in the so-called hinterland on either side of the border. While they may be natives to this hinterland, by reason of the mixture of familiarity and strangeness, they are neither fish nor fowl but are a kind of hybrid. Sometimes people from the hinterland like to visit frontier areas by reason of experiencing an exotic atmosphere. They catch a glimpse of life on the other side of the border without going there and being in a fully alien land. It's not unlike having traveled to West Berlin and approaching the wall separating east from west. Only there it got really dangerous.

As for this idea of a frontier, some childhood memories of it remain quite vivid personally in its own unique fashion. We had a cottage on the coast south of Boston, quite close to the ocean. While it was absolutely wonderful, on occasion we'd travel inland to do shopping and other errands. You didn't have to travel far to notice the change. People right by the

coast lived differently, chiefly because for the most part they were part-timers or there during the summer. Move a few miles inland, and it was a different story. This was frontier territory where the real natives lived. Nevertheless, all around you saw tell-tale signs of the coast such as businesses catering to marine related items and so forth. Even the climate a few miles inland was noticeably different, that is, warmer. For some mysterious reason or other, there was an air of excitement when going inland, a voyage to a different territory. While inland you had a peculiar joy of being somewhere out of the ordinary. After a while you return to the coastal area and look back, knowing that you've experienced two distinct modes of living so close to each other and glad to partake of them both.

This practice of cultivating sensitivity to a border and the frontier up against it has broader implications. It compels us to develop not so much an explanation as to why it exists to tell a story of how we respond. That story, in turn, is passed on to other people. Of essence to this story is having an awareness of what lies on the other side, a land that may be partially familiar to us because we don't live there. We get an overall feel for it by hanging around in the territory associated with the border which partakes of some elements on the other side by reason of the two rubbing up against each other. Essentially a frontier is a mixture of both, so what we're familiar with is blended with what is not. This is more than enough material to make a story filled with mystery and intrigue as we know from Hollywood. Yet our story is one that can be passed on not so much by writing it down but transmitting it orally. Talk about taking a vacation on the cheap. Besides, it's perfectly safe.

Living in a frontier zone or in proximity to a border with a view to composing a story brings to mind the "as-if" formula expounded by Hans Vaihinger¹. He calls it a fictive device where an experience we've just had and referred it to something with which we are familiar. However, this familiarity isn't necessarily first-hand. For example, when climbing a hill and enjoying the expansive view a person can say "I feel *as if* I'm on top of world" or "I feel *as if* I'm on top of Mount Everest." Of course, you're not on top of Mount Everest but know that is the tallest mountain in the world not by having climbed it (quite unlikely) but by what we've learned about it. Obviously being on this hill and on Mount Everest are two distinct realities, and we know this full well. A child does the same spontaneously when playing. He may act *as if* he were on Mount Everest but should his play be interrupted, immediately he'd come back to reality without missing a beat.

The difference between a border and the frontiers on either side of it has been pointed out with several examples. We can throw in another term, zone, which is a region or area set off as distinct from others surrounding it as can be designated for a particular purpose. And so a zone can be part of a territory whether or not it rubs up against a border or not.

1 There's an article devoted to him on this homepage entitled **Some Reflections on Hans Vaihinger**.

Generally speaking a zone has a somewhat menacing, even mysterious, quality about it. Automatically we think of it as an area set aside for military or biological research, let alone for confining aliens from outer space. A frontier we can enter. However, a zone is something else.

As for borders, they have far more subtle and immediate ramifications as noted in the first few paragraphs. Their brief mention is mentioned of how today people transgress without impunity the psychological space of others. Invading them is more like it. Access to various forms of social media make this easier than in the past, for you can blow into someone's space at the click of a mouse while simultaneously remaining anonymous. That's why we hear a lot of talk about firewalls, strong passwords to be changed often and so forth, words with an uncanny resemblance to a border. Here emphasis is to keep people out, rightly so.

So with this almost daily image of a border and transgressing them both electronically and otherwise (the former invariably leads to the latter, a direct one-way street), no wonder we're stressed out. At all times we must be as vigilant as the Roman soldiers in their forts keeping the barbarians on the other side.

That means it's time it's time to make a story. Stressful times demand it as we know from history, for they provide the best ingredients. We can take Vaihinger's fictive as-if device to creating a story about being in a frontier which rubs up against a border. That is to say, we can use the power of our imagination when assaulted either anonymously or physically to feel *as if* we were up against the border with a hostile nation, North Korea, for example. And so the assaults which are real to our psyche are *as if* they were missiles being lobbed over the border at us. We can really act this out to the max, *as if* it were real. Once such a scenario is implanted, we can view in a kind of detached way the assaults to which we are subject. Putting them out there, not inside, is what this as-if strategy is all about. If we don't the incoming missiles would flatten us in no time. When other persons with the same affliction hear our story they are encouraged to act in a similar fashion. Such is the power of a story endowed with a personal as-if quality. So while telling them about us—keeping in mind that everyone enjoys a good story—many of their fears (as well as ours) about us are assuaged.

And so we have a strategy to counter a threat which comes at us 7-24. By not means is it a cure-all but can be a crack in our somewhat hardened stance to one which is healthier. We've come to recognize that our habitual way of thinking in terms of a border makes too sharp a distinction between us and them, here and there, as it does with regard to the demarcation line between two countries. Quickly we get weary of being perpetually on the defense, on the watch for a breach, one here and another over there. Whether personally or on the level of a full-fledged country, nobody can keep this up forever. Instead, we can

withdraw a few steps from the front line in place of being on heightened alert. Such a withdraw puts us squarely in frontier territory. Behind it, of course, is the so-called hinterland brushing up against the frontier which uses it as a necessary buffer. Now when someone comes on strong, instead of viewing it as a violation of our border, we can employ our awareness *as if* it were a territory to absorb the blow. And so awareness equals this more expansive territory protecting the hinterland. Being so supple instead of brittle is a major advantage. The problem is, how do we do it?

It all comes down to first distinguishing between the type of awareness we had when our boarder was violated and the one which is able to absorb it. In this way we can be prepared for an invasion before it happens. We tend to be more brittle in our definitions which is re-enforced by society's over-emphasis on justice and personal rights. Society primes us for something to go wrong as we sit around almost inviting it. We can visualize ourselves in this situation as a border and realize a lot of resources lay just behind us. By this I mean the frontier area which is somewhat amorphous because it can absorb anything coming across the frontier before entering the hinterland. Just cultivating such an image which takes into account these two realities is a step forward. Actually it demands considerable courage to step back because we've been so conditioned to control the border, not unlike the East German guards manning their posts ready to shoot anyone who approaches it.

Should the enemy—the person violating our border or personal space—push further, it's within our power to make a tactical withdrawal to counter his moves. That is, we pull further back into the frontier. There the enemy unwittingly suffers the prospect of being swallowed up in territory unfamiliar to him. Indeed, this is a classic guerrilla move. At the same time the hinterland (let's call it our true nature) remains far less affected. So the trick to all this boils down to maneuverability. The invader is focused on attacking straight-on while our familiarity with the frontier land enables us to make hit-and-run attacks. Traveling light is what it's all about. Such a tactic easily can be worked into a story of how we handle such difficult situations. The story then enables us to visualize a problem so we can go about our lives with greater confidence and less fear. Perhaps that's why so many stories and myths surround the idea of a border. The challenge, then, is to shift these tales from the border area to the frontier and thus protect the hinterland.

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