

Holding back the future . . .

I've been thinking about walls these days . . .

About Ying Sheng, Allen Octavian Hume and Nikita Khrushchev . . .

Thousands of years apart in time and space, but all with the same, impossible desire . . .

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The Great Wall of China began to take shape in 221 B.C. after Ying Sheng ended more than 500 years of conflict by unifying the country, established the Qin Dynasty, and proclaimed himself "Qin Shi Huang" (the First Emperor of Qin).

Several ducal states had started building walls along their boundaries as early as the 7th century B.C. Ying Sheng began incorporating them into his own defense network, linking the ramparts, erecting watchtowers, and constructing beacons to alert the capital in case of attack.

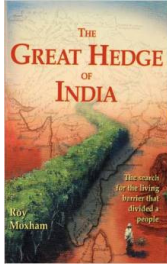


But that was just the beginning. The size and scope of the wall grew dramatically during the next 2,000 years. Natural features such as mountain ridges, river gorges and narrow passes were threaded into the design. Watch towers, signal towers and moats were regularly spaced and three overlapping layers protected key strategic areas. Troop barracks and garrison stations were added and the wall reached an average height of 32 feet and an average width of 16 feet, enough for ten soldiers or five horses to stand abreast. The emperors were confident the wall would protect them.

Much of what we see today was completed during the Ming Dynasty, which ended in 1644. At one point it extended 5,500 miles, 71% actual wall, 25% natural defensive barriers such as hills and rivers, and the rest trenches. The entire wall, including all its branches, meandered across roughly 13,000 miles.

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The British thought they had found a way to outwit salt smugglers during the 1800s.

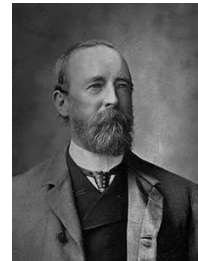


According to a contemporary account by Sir John Strachey quoted in Roy Moxham's fascinating book *The Great Hedge of India: The Search for the Living Barrier that Divided A People*:

“To secure the levy of a duty on salt . . . there grew up gradually a monstrous system, to which it would be almost impossible to find a parallel in any tolerably civilized country. A Customs line was established which stretched across the whole of India, which in 1869 extended from the Indus to the Mahanadi in Madras, a distance of 2,300 miles, and it was guarded by nearly 12,000 men . . . It would have stretched from London to Constantinople . . . It consisted principally of an immense impenetrable hedge . . .”

The British were so enamored of the hedge that Allan Octavian Hume, the Commissioner of Inland Customs, reported proudly to his superiors that

“ . . . in populated parts of the country, where smuggling is rife, (our) men are active in preventing the passage of contraband goods by a barrier which, in its most perfect form, is utterly impassable to man or beast . . . the hedge is a live one, from ten to fourteen feet in height, and six to twelve feet thick, composed of closely clipped thorny trees and shrubs . . . (with) a thorny creeper . . . constantly intermingled.”



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The Allies carved up Germany's capital city after the Second World War and the Soviets occupied East Berlin. But the endless flow of people defecting from the Soviet bloc by traveling through West Berlin gnawed at Soviet leaders for years. By 1961, more than three million people escaped, many of them young, skilled workers such as doctors, teachers and engineers. In June 1961 alone, some 19,000 people crossed into West Berlin. In July, 30,000. During the first 11 days of August, 16,000 East Germans crossed into West Berlin, and on August 12 some 2,400 followed -- the largest number of defectors ever to leave East Germany in a single day.

On August 13, Soviet leader Nikita Krushchev gave the East German government permission to stop the flow of emigrants by closing its borders for good. In just two weeks, the East German army, police force and volunteer construction workers completed a makeshift barbed wire and concrete block wall between East and West Berlin.



Over time, East German officials replaced the temporary wall with reinforced concrete 12 feet high and four feet wide, with massive pipes above it that made climbing over the top nearly impossible. Behind the wall on the East German side was the infamous “Death Strip,” a no-man’s-land of soft sand (to reveal footprints), floodlights, ferocious dogs, trip-wire machine guns and patrolling soldiers with orders to shoot escapees on sight. At least 138 people were killed trying to get over, under or around the wall between 1961 and 1989.

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A 5,500 mile wall? A 2,300 mile hedge? A barrier down the heart of a city?

None of them forestalled the future:

- The Great Wall was supposed to prevent hostile nomadic groups from invading, but it failed again and again. Alien hordes swept in, supplanting one dynasty after another. The Jurchens arrived in the 12th century and ruled for nine generations before they fell to Genghis Khan and the Mongols. A hundred years later, rebels from the south established the Ming Dynasty. But the cost of improving the wall drained the Ming dynasty's resources and, in the end, failed to preserve their hold on the country. The Manchu leaders who easily breached the wall and overcame the Ming understandably doubted the need for such expensive border defenses -- and eventually became pre-occupied with other forces arriving from the sea, including Catholic missionaries from Europe. The Manchus spent neither time nor treasure maintaining the wall and today it's a broken network of remnants, nothing more than a tourist attraction.
- The Great Hedge became irrelevant within half a century as Hume's successors began to see it as a major obstacle damaging other British interests, especially free trade and travel. By the early 1880s, the Viceroy of India had standardized the salt tax across most of the country, which made smuggling unprofitable and eliminated the need for the Customs line. When Moxham began searching for the hedge that gave Commissioner Hume such great pride, he couldn't find it. Almost nothing remained . . . just some scattered and withered remnants.
- And of course the Berlin Wall lasted only 28 years, until international pressures helped it fall. And it wasn't completely effective as a barrier even while it stood: More than 5,000 East Germans (including some 600 border guards) managed to cross the border by jumping out of windows adjacent to the wall, climbing over the barbed wire, flying in hot air balloons, crawling through sewers, and driving through unfortified parts of the wall at high speeds. When the end came in November 1989, more than two million people celebrated what one journalist called "the greatest street party in the history of the world." People used hammers and picks to knock away chunks of the wall while cranes and bulldozers pulled down section after section. Soon the wall was gone and Berlin was united for the first time since 1945. "Only today," one Berliner spray-painted on a piece of the wall, "is the war really over."

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But physical walls aren't the only barriers we throw up to guard against the future.

How many social enterprise Board members, executives and staff members suffer from the paralytic hold of the past? We earnestly cling to solutions that worked yesterday but are woefully inadequate as the world changes. We stay hunkered behind our mental walls, trusting them to protect us. They seem sturdy. They've sheltered us in the past.

But they aren't as helpful as they appear. I've seen too many social enterprises succeed, for a while, then falter because the Board or the management team or the staff begin to fear the future and encase themselves in mental prisons.

A friend once told a group of us about a scenario psychologists were using to identify personality traits. "Suppose you're walking down a country road," she said, "and suddenly come upon an enormous brick wall that stretches entirely across the road and miles away on either side. It's too high to climb and too deep to crawl underneath. What are you going to do?"

We came up with plenty of possible solutions: Borrow a cannon and blast the wall down; hire a helicopter and fly over the top; rent a set of carabiners and climb the rock face. Or we could just give up and go home.

Finally, one of my friends simply said: "You know, I think I'd just walk up to the wall, poke my finger against one of the bricks and watch it fall out on the other side, then poke away a few others and climb on through."

Wouldn't it be something if we each had the courage to poke a bit at those invisible walls holding us back from the future? They might all turn out to be as flimsy as the barrier demolished by my friend . . .