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### **Not Merely External**

A mere cursory glance at my life *suggests* that my life has been free from alienation. While it is true that as a heterosexual Caucasian male growing up in a predominately white community I did not experience much isolation based on my skin color, my gender, or my sexual orientation, I was **not** immune to alienation as a child. My timidity that came about as a result of having no older siblings in whose steps I could follow, in addition to my slightly above-average intelligence proved to be the grounds for fellow students to treat me differently than they treated others. My feelings of alienation while growing up are similar to those both the speaker of Robert Frost's "Mending Wall," and Bartleby, of Herman Melville's "Bartleby, the Scrivener" experience.

Just as in Frost's "Mending Wall," the speaker questions why his neighbor insists upon keeping the barrier between the two, asking, "Why do they [fences] make good neighbors?" so I, to this day, question why I was alienated as a child (line 30). In my first few years of grade school, I had lots of friends – it seemed as though everyone liked everyone else. As time progressed, however, students began to notice differences between themselves and others and act according to those often inaccurate perceptions. I remember being criticized for a variety of unsubstantiated reasons – whether it was for tucking my shirt in when it was popular to leave t-shirts untucked, for not having heard of the latest musical group, for doing my work diligently, or for getting a 100% on the test –

the sarcastic and hurtful remarks did not sit well with me. Though it is clear they most likely made such comments to make themselves look “cool,” I have yet to understand what is so attractive about making others look bad. True, if the other person looks bad – worse than you – you look better in comparison, but the act of putting the other person down actually puts yourself far below their level.

Just as I have yet to comprehend why students felt the need to put *me* down, Frost’s speaker has trouble determining exactly why his neighbor sustains the wall. He comments on his desire to make his neighbor question what he “was walling in or walling out and to whom [he] was like to give offense” (lines 33-34). From this statement, the speaker implies his neighbor keeps the wall between them without giving thought as to why it exists.

While he is opposed to the presence of the wall, the speaker in “Mending Wall” makes no effort to tear down the barrier. Rather, he contributes to its existence by assisting his neighbor in repairing the wall, almost as if it were “just another kind of outdoor game” (line 21). Likewise, while I would have to attribute much of my feeling of alienation to negative treatment by my peers, much of it also came about from my own expectation that others would not treat me with respect. If something happened to me once, I would expect it to happen again. For example, in fifth grade I was working on reading *A Christmas Carol* with two other students. I, unlike the other two, actually wanted to get work done in the time allotted for us to read and discuss the assigned chapters. All they wanted to do was discuss some other topic, and they ridiculed me for following the teacher’s instructions to the best of my ability. As a result, I dreaded working with them on projects in the future. When I did, in fact, work with them at later

times, rather than giving these students a chance to treat me properly, I automatically felt estranged. By expecting to experience hostility, I brought about its passing.

Because of the expectation I had for others to treat me poorly, I was alienating myself from them in a sense. Rather than trying to make amends with my unfriendly peers, I would avoid them at all costs because I expected the worst from them. Rather than having control over my fears, I let my fears decide my actions. This behavior on my part, to an extent, mirrors the behavior of Bartleby in Melville's "Bartleby, the Scrivener." As an employee of the narrator, Bartleby has a simple task – follow his boss's requests and receive the pay due him. While his tasks are probably not the most interesting, he accepts the job knowing what he must do. He works diligently at his job for a while, but as time goes on, he randomly begins to decline his boss's requests, commenting, "I would prefer not to" (pg 76). As far as I can find, the narrator never quotes Bartleby as saying anything else. As time goes on, Bartleby continues to not only decline his boss' requests, but also simple suggestions that are for his own good. He even goes so far as to decline accepting money and food.

Regardless of what anyone might have done to him in the past, Bartleby is at fault for any alienation he experiences. Just as I let my fears – an emotion – rule me as a child, Bartleby allows his sentiments to rule his actions. He puts himself in a position to be abnormal. Though many would argue that there is no meaning for "normal," we all know that at a bare minimum, we require food for survival. Bartleby eventually fails to do even this, explaining, as always, that he simply "would prefer not to."

Allowing myself to feel alienated by living in submission to my fears made my early days at school miserable. None the less, in the end, the situation turned out for the

better. As my peers and I matured and I “proved myself” to them by making my voice heard in class discussions and other aspects of school outside of academics, and as I learned to expect more from others, the alienation slowly came nearly to a standstill. There will always be those who treat some people poorly. That’s their loss. Once one is able to acknowledge the fact that though unfriendly, ill-natured people *do* exist, not all humanity acts as such, his alienation can be overcome. Even Bartleby and Frost’s narrator could have overcome their alienation. All they had to do was put forth some effort to break down the barriers between themselves and their peers.