

# FENCE WORSHIP



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COMMENCEMENT ADDRESS

Robert V. Hansberger

University of Idaho



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**Idaho**



# ***Introduction***

by

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The State of Idaho has long held a significant place on lumbering maps of the world. In recent years, new significance has been added with the coming to Idaho of Robert V. Hansberger as president of Boise Cascade Corporation. During Mr. Hansberger's seven years as president of Boise Cascade, the corporation has grown from 35 million dollars to 218 million dollars in sales volume, and from 1,700 to 10,500 employees. The corporation is ranked 253rd in Fortune Magazine's directory of the 500 largest U.S. industries.

Those who seek the human material from which a top executive in industry is formed look for a man of broad interests. In Mr. Hansberger, such a man was indeed found.

Mr. Hansberger, who holds a bachelor's degree from the University of Minnesota and a master's degree from the Harvard Graduate School of Business Administration, today has many responsibilities which reach far beyond the forests and mills and manufacturing plants of Boise Cascade. He is, for instance, a trustee of the Aspen, Colo-

rado, Institute of Humanistic Studies; a trustee of Pacific University and of St. Luke's Hospital in Boise; an overseer of Whitman College, and a director of the Boise Art Association.

This is your Commencement speaker then—a successful industrialist who is also playing leading roles in the progress of education, medicine and art. When he speaks at a directors' or trustees' meeting, he has attentive listeners. I know he will have the same reception here today. It is my pleasure to introduce to you an outstanding Idahoan, Mr. Robert V. Hansberger, who will speak on the subject of "Fence Worship."

## ***Fence Worship***

Robert V. Hansberger  
President  
Boise Cascade Corporation

They lived in a frontier area—two boys not yet 10. They were the same size and they looked alike though they were not related. They were neighbors and their fathers performed similar tasks in the frontier work of the region.

They played together and they learned together. The same winds blew upon them. The sun shone upon each at the same angle. And the rains wet them equally.

They were fast friends, and like friends, they sometimes quarreled. They had a simple device for settling these quarrels. One would draw a line on the ground between them and dare the other to cross it. Though the brawl that followed did not prove which one was right, it always stopped the quarrel. They simply exhausted themselves.

Two decades passed. The boys had left their homes and separated. Now they were back. But now they were mortal enemies and they faced each other across a battlefield.

In a distant city, years before, a line had been drawn on a map—a line that ran between their houses—a line that made them citizens of separate nations.



Once again the same winds blew upon them. Again the sun shone upon each from the same angle. The rains made both their trenches slimy with mud. And they were doing their best to kill each other.

There was no actual line on the ground, only on pieces of paper and in the minds of men. But over the passing years increasing differences between their countries had developed in their economic systems, in their religions, and in their principles of government. And now the frictions from these differences had created fractured tensions and all-out war.

The war went on and it produced two tired, hungry and exhausted nations. But even then they feebly mustered their resources and their energies to build a fence—a huge thing with barbed wire and electrified with high voltage. Now a line on the ground matched the line on the map—an ugly tribute to the **artificial differences** the line itself had created.

Nature builds no fences. There are no hard crisp edges in nature, for nature's truths are fluid. While she loves difference and goes to great pains to create an endless variety of differences, she builds no enclosures for them. Her day blends softly and slowly into night. And the dawn next day is a gradual transition from moonlight to sunlight.

Her mountains slope gradually into valleys. Her forests blend into prairies with tree dotted stubbornness. She divides her continents and her oceans with marshes and sloping beaches. The subtle differences among her living things are all linked together in endless variety. And death in nature is merely a cradle for new and continuing life.

Only man builds fences. Man is a creature of birth and death. And his awareness is dominated by his individual beginning and ending. He comprehends with great frustration the infinite and subtle variety of his environment and so, to better cope with parts of this environment, he compartmentizes. And around each compartment, he erects fences to keep them separate from each other. While nature's colors blend from one to another in an endless spectrum of wave lengths of electromagnetic energy, colors for man come in paint cans, each neatly enclosed in metal compartments.

And so we do with all around us. We divide our ground into townships, counties, states and nations. We cross our nautical maps with latitudes and longitudes and territorial limits. And the salmon swimming below has far more freedom to cross these lines than the fisherman above.

We classify existence into seconds, minutes, hours and years. Our account-



ants and our auditors devote many hours determining whether a business transaction belongs in the last second of one fiscal year or the first second of the next.

And even our pursuit of knowledge has its fences. Our education falls into groupings such as liberal arts, the sciences, business and medicine. And each of these disciplines is further classified into subjects and specialties—at times it seems to almost ridiculous extremes.

Two doctors of medicine who had attended medical school together met some years later at a medical convention. They were discussing their special fields of practice. One said that he had become an eye, ear, nose and throat man. His friend then asked in which area he really specialized. The reply was "the nose." His friend then said, "Yes, yes, but which nostril?"

Fence building can become not only ridiculous but downright embarrassing. William James said, "Science, like life, feeds on its own decay. New facts burst old rules; then newly divined conceptions bind old and new together into a reconciling law." But think of what the discovery of nuclear fission did to the early definitions of atoms or the Theory of Relativity to the definitions of matter and energy. What a jolt the early classifiers of life forms must have received when nature first unveiled the platypus of Australia.

After we create our artificial compartments and fence them in with our definitions, we then must label them so that we can communicate them to each other and to our computers. We have then succeeded in reducing the endless variety of things about us to a series of shorthand symbols and formulas.

Our fences make it possible.

But man has a way of venerating fences. Their origins may be careful and scientific or they may be casual or even careless. But habit and practice provide them with growing credence until they tend to become more important to us than the basic fact or truth which gave them their beginning. This loyalty to enclosures created only as artificial and arbitrary perimeters of truth is a dangerous "fence worship" which can conceal truth itself. We are all inherently lazy and so we tend to switch our emotions and our loyalties from the basic concepts within our fences to the labels we gave them.

Are we loyal Americans because we are so certain we are right, or simply because we are Americans? Or is it because we live between the 49th parallel and the Rio Grande? As time goes by and we become further removed from the basic principle of individual freedom which gave our forefathers the determination to found and defend a nation, we tend to ignore the principle our



boundaries enclose. When we have done this long enough, then America will become a hollow shell, a fenced compartment without a principle, a loyalty without a reason, a monument to intellectual laziness. Our diversion to the fence of America will have cost us a precious principle. The painful lessons of history show us how often this has already happened to other great nations and civilizations.

Within our American society our excessive devotions to fences create countless wasteful conflicts not between truths but between fences. Many of our disputes between labor and management are solely because of fences. Jurisdictional strikes of enormous economic waste are caused by misguided devotion to the arbitrary fences which divide labor unions. How often have we heard of a labor dispute over an issue such as whether a painter can drive a nail in the scaffolding he stands on when he does not belong to the Carpenters' Union. Or a major airline strike which attempts to deny an engineer with a pilot rating the right to occupy the third seat in the cockpit of a jet aircraft because he belongs to the Airline Pilots' Association instead of the Flight Engineers' Union.

Fences that exist only in narrow human minds are now causing cruel and tortured racial conflicts. Fences of dogma between religions have become more

important to many than basic religious belief itself. And today in this election year it has become painfully clear that the name Republican or Democrat is far more important to most than political principles.

Our fences also provide us with dangerous short cuts. Once we have our compartments all precisely fenced, our labels all in place and we have selected the most comfortable pen for ourselves, we have a tool of tremendous convenience for handling those who don't agree with us. We simply endow them with a label that carries an unpleasant connotation. We don't have to take the time or trouble to analyze why they do what they do and why they believe what they believe. We don't even have to worry about whether they are right or wrong. We merely pin an unpleasant label on them and we have them neatly caged. We have dealt with them and then we can go about our business of conforming with the other sheep in our pen.

Here are some convenient labels for you—"Birchers," "Socialists," "Communists," "Left Wingers," "Right Wingers." Even "Flagwavers!" Our young folks have their labels, too. How about "Squares," "Drips" and "Beatniks?" I understand there's a popular one out now called "Finks." Or if they want to be particularly selective it's "Rat Finks."



Of course we need our fences. You have them in this great University in the many separate disciplines taught here. Without them there could be no communication and therefore no teaching.

The use of fences is basic to the human mind and all its scientific and dialectical efforts to clarify discourse, to achieve precision of thought, to focus issues and to resolve them. We have no other way of coming to terms with one another than by defining the pens used to express our concepts. Fences provide a common ground for the meeting of minds either in agreement or in dispute. Fences make it possible for a mind to submit itself to the test of agreement with reality. Fences help us to ask nature or experience the only sort of questions to which answers can be found. And so our science, our computers, our very coexistence with each other requires our fences.

But because we need them we need not revere them. This is the insidious danger of a well fenced society. Our fences are so convenient to use that our loyalty to the truth they contain tends to be diverted to the fence itself. When this happens we find ourselves trying to force life and nature into our arbitrary pens. People then adjust to change not as a reaction to the friction and competition of truths but only to fences. And in the process our fences

for dealing with truth actually isolate us from truth.

In Plato's Dialogues over 23 centuries ago Socrates said, "I have long been wondering at my own wisdom; I cannot trust myself. And I think that I ought to stop and ask myself what am I saying for there is nothing worse than self-deception—when the deceiver is always at home and always with you."

Use our fences, but beware of them. We both need them and need to fear them. Above all, avoid the trap they lay for the indolent—avoid "fence worship." Fences are only tools to deal with truth. They should never be its substitute.



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