

ORGANSCHI Remarks for the Aalto U. Honorary Doctors Conferment Banquet 12 June 2026

Before dispensing with much deserved congratulations to my fellow conferees, and prior to conveying my sincere expressions of gratitude to our gracious hosts at Aalto University...

...and in reflecting on “borders and boundaries”— the theme of this year’s Conferment Ceremonies...

...and considering the outcome of the only relatively recent 2024 American Federal election—it seems like a lifetime ago, doesn’t it?— and the ongoing foreign policy conduct of the current US presidential administration and its *sundering* of the country’s longstanding alliances with our friends- and neighbor-states around the world...

...and, also, as a citizen of the United States of America...

...and *therefore*—at least for the purposes of this afternoon’s truly grand event and tonight’s banquet—a kind of emissary of my country, I feel that I should state, emphatically and without reservation, that...

I come in peace.

I have no intention of offering, for example, a proposal for the renaming of the Gulf of Bothnia in honor of American Triumphalism.

And I will make no demands tonight for a unilateral adjustment of Finnish boundaries to expand American territory in order to justify whatever claims one might possibly make to the rich deposits of woody cellulose fiber arrayed across your country’s expanse of spruce and birch forests (...although, I will note that President Trump did briefly cast his wandering eye on them, when, during his first administration, while a rash of wildfires raged across our continent’s forested flanks, Trump *commended* the Finns for their practice of—and I quote— “raking the forests” ... (“RAKING the forest...we have the BIGGEST and BEST RAKES” ...but you Finns apparently know how to use them.)

No. I am, as are many of my US compatriots, a “*respector*” of borders and boundaries, in the spirit of the great American poet laureate Robert Frost, whose *Mending Wall*, a beautiful poem about boundaries, nature, and the regular communication between two neighbors who repair their conjoining boundary wall together each spring offered the immortal and oft quoted closing line that is something of an accepted truth in New England, the northeastern region of America from which Robert Frost and I both hail:

“Good Fences Make Good Neighbors.”

Now I can state, with utter conviction, that when he wrote those lines, Frost intended no reference to the unclimbable, bulb-topped pair of concrete walls that separated East from West across a heavily armed no-man’s land in mid-20th century Berlin. Nor did he anticipate the towering, razor wire-topped wall that some in my country have dreamed up along our southern border with Mexico. And I’m certain he would never have countenanced the kind of punitive economic wall proposed at the 49th parallel, the latitudinal line that once signaled only a cartographic separation of the US from its formerly dear and trusted ally, Canada (not to mention the gross military transgressions of sovereign national borders that have now thrown the world’s economies into crisis.)

But it’s the possible misinterpretation of that poem’s precisely crafted words and clear sentiment that causes me to reflect briefly here on the duality of borders.

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On the one hand, we ought to recognize that borders are good, as in:

“this is our country... we welcome you with open arms... but we just want to have a rough idea about why you’re joining us, approximately how long you’re planning to stay, and — in rough outline only, of course— what you’ll be doing while you’re our guest here and where you intend to do it. (By the way... here’s a handy phrase book to help you navigate the vagaries of our culture and language to smooth any of the many commercial transactions we hope you’ll be making during your visit.)”

One has to admit that these are all fair questions if you’re in charge of governing a sovereign nation.

On the other hand, borders, whether physical or conceptual, can be bad, counterproductive when too strongly “reified”— here I use a bit of jargon from my own discipline of architecture—which is to say *constructed*; too strictly defined, by either intention or convention; hermetic and therefore impenetrable; hardened into an imposing edifice that separates our families, our tribes, our disciplines, our professions, our institutions and ideologies, in order to allay paranoid delusions of potential threat or to reinforce social hierarchies of difference and, its evil twin, exclusion.

But this evening we’re here at a most distinguished University, in a moment of joy, as we celebrate both the powerful traditions and awesome innovations of this very special institution, named after the architect Alvar Aalto, a true revolutionary, (who surely would have scoffed at that particular characterization) but who nonetheless transgressed and regularly traversed the boundaries between culture, politics, and economics as well as art, architecture, and design.

In that spirit, I salute Aalto’s newly minted doctors, 2026 Jubilee Doctors, and my fellow Honorary Doctors. You are all “boundary walkers”, thinkers and makers who have seen and understood the edges of knowledge, who at once recognize the value of what we already know but who choose, where necessary and advantageous, to step into the unknown to expand our understanding of ourselves, of our fellow humans and of all the other species who inhabit this planet with us and all the phenomena of our world and its universe.

I thank you, Dean Ryyänen, President Niemelä and the Aalto University Schools of Technology for your kind and generous hospitality and for the honor of allowing me these remarks on this truly glorious occasion.

And now, humbly (and with a full heart) I ask you all to join me in raising a glass, in admiration and with profound appreciation for the work, the inspiration, and the example offered.

Cheers! Kippis!