

# Boundaries: Where You End and I Begin (Fireside / Parkside Recovery Book)

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### Are Your Boundaries Being Violated?

Boundaries separate us from others physically and emotionally. In fact, they are essential for our mental and physical health as well as for developing healthy relationships. Yet every day, people's boundaries are violated by friends, family, or coworkers. Despite the importance of personal boundaries many people are unaware of how or when these very important lines are crossed.

Which of the following are boundary violations?

Esther tells Betty a secret Mary told her.

Your therapist invites you to go for coffee.

Your boss wants to know the details of your personal life.

Your boss asks you if you'd like a hug.

Mom tells little Debbie about her troubles with Dad.

Your new neighbor pats you on the bottom as he turns away.

Your mother makes a comment about your being overweight.

All but one of the above incidents violate boundaries (your boss asks you if you'd like a hug). In *Boundaries: Where You End and I Begin*, Anne Katherine explains what healthy boundaries are, how to recognize if your personal boundaries are being violated, and what you can do to protect yourself.

For anyone who has walked away from a conversation, a meeting, or a visit with others feeling violated and not understanding why, this is a book that can help.

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## THE WALL BETWEEN

### Laura's Story

I was born a month premature. In those days, preemies were put in an incubator and left alone. In my imagination, armed with what I've gleaned from years of therapy, I can return to those first days. What I see first looks like a tunnel with a clear roof. I am looking up through the incubator. A bright light shines all the time. The walls beyond are plain and white. I feel cut off from everyone and don't know who I belong to. The only time I am touched is to be cleaned.

Recently, I asked my mother how much she held me those weeks we were still in the hospital after my birth.

"Why, I held you all the time!" she said.

"How much?" I insisted. All the time was not my memory.

"Why, whenever they'd let me."

"How often was that?" I persisted.

"I held you every time they brought you to me to be fed" she said. "Twenty minutes, three times a day."

An hour a day my first three weeks of life. My baby self knew that wasn't nearly enough.

That touch deprivation continued. When I was six months old my father left my mother, so she left me with my grandparents and took off. My grandparents were not the most demonstrative people in the world. Maybe I saw them kiss each other once in all the years I lived with them. Me, they never touched.

When I was ten my mother remarried and decided she wanted me back. The second night I was in their house -- my mother worked nights -- my stepfather came into my room and got into bed with me.

After never being touched or held, I felt hands on my body. His touch made me feel sick inside. Something told me this wasn't right but nothing had ever told me that my feelings mattered or that I had a choice about anything. So I put up with it.

I remember the first time a boy touched me. I was thirteen, he was sixteen. We were at a teen dance and all I could think about was that I finally had a boyfriend. He danced with me and kept his arm around me all night. Was I jubilant? Was I thrilled? No, I was terrified. The only kind of touch I'd ever known disgusted me.

This was a nice boy who was completely proper and respectful, but when he put his arm across my shoulders I felt sick. My heart was beating so loudly from fear I could hear its pounding cadence in my ears. Far from enjoying my first healthy experience with a boy, my heart beat like that far into the night, hours after I was home alone. I avoided his calls. I wouldn't see him again.

### Beth's Story

My mother was over 40 when I was born. My father, older still, was a military man. He commanded the household and everything in it, especially me. From preschool on he had long, serious discussions with every one of my teachers. He watched what I ate, directed my play, and as I got older interviewed my friends. It was he who taught me the neat way to dress, the proper way to sit and stand, and the meaning of duty, obedience, and loyalty.

When I had my first period, however, we were both shocked. Until then I had been perfect -- straight As, conducting myself with proper military bearing. I was the son he'd never had. But becoming a woman interrupted my perfection. He didn't have to tell me but I knew I'd failed him in a big way. So I stopped eating. Eventually I stopped looking like a woman and my period stopped. My mother was concerned but my father wasn't. And since she didn't have a lot of say in our house nothing happened. Eventually, however, I was so thin and had so much trouble concentrating that my mother insisted I see a doctor. The doctor put me

in the hospital immediately.

My father didn't want me away from him, but my therapists said I was anorexic and needed treatment. They forced me to eat. When my therapy group upset me, I called my father and he told me not to listen to them. He called my counselor and argued with her that nothing was wrong with me. The more he talked to me, the more I realized that it was ridiculous for me to be in the hospital. Those people didn't know what they were talking about. I was just fine. Besides, I missed him. He needed me. Finally my father came to get me. He didn't even care that insurance would no longer cover the costs because I'd left against medical advice. He wanted me with him that much.

Boundaries -- What Are They?

Therapists and recovering people toss the word around easily. But what do they mean? Why have these stories been included? Do they say something about boundaries? Maybe not yet, but they will.

In this chapter we'll look at the big picture, boundaries from an eagle's point of view. Later we'll close in on the details. We'll swoop down on specific aspects of boundaries so that you'll recognize both the forest and the trees.

Exercises pepper the chapters. Enjoy them. Most are brief. Some involve other people. All let your body and heart in on the knowledge you're collecting with your mind -- in learning what boundaries are all about.

An Amoeba Is Not a Tulip

So what is a boundary? A boundary is a limit or edge that defines you as separate from others. A boundary is a limit that promotes integrity.

Your skin is a boundary. Everything within your skin is the physical you.

Each living organism is separated from every other living organism by a physical barrier. Amoebae, orange trees, frogs, leopards, bacteria, tulips, turtles, salmon -- all have physical limits that delineate them as unique from other organisms. This limit can be breached by injury or other organisms, if the breach is severe enough or if the invading organism is toxic or hostile, the host organism can die. An intact physical boundary preserves life.

Even an organism's physical components have boundaries. Your nerves are covered with a sheath or membrane. Your bones are distinct from your muscles. The physical world abounds with boundaries. Were it not so, when we sat down, we'd pass right through the chair (and the chair through us) and be sprawled on the floor. Except then we'd pass through the floor, too. And then the earth? Where would we stop?

We Are Surrounded by an Invisible Circle

Our skin marks the limit of our physical selves, but we have another boundary that extends beyond our skin. We become aware of this when someone stands too close. It's as if we are surrounded by an invisible circle, a comfort zone. This zone is fluid. A lover, say, can stand closer than most friends, and a friend can stand closer than a stranger. With someone who is hostile we might need a great deal of distance.

We have other boundaries as well -- emotional, spiritual, sexual, and relational. You have a limit to what is safe and appropriate. You have a border that separates you from others. Within this border is your yoness, that which makes you an individual different and separate from others.ar

What is an emotional boundary? We have a set of feelings and reactions that are distinctly ours. We respond to the world uniquely based on our individual perceptions, our special histories, our values, goals, and concerns. We can find people who react similarly, but no one reacts precisely as we do.

### My Size Is None of Your Business

When it comes to how others treat us emotionally, we have limits on what is safe and appropriate. I came out of a store in downtown Seattle and a stranger started screaming at me about a religious matter. I turned and walked away. I do not have to accept screaming from anyone. I will accept appropriate anger from my friends and loved ones, but even then, I determine how close I'm willing to be to an angry person.

When I was younger, my landlady routinely commented about my weight. "You're getting bigger, ain't cha."

I let her say those things to me because I didn't know any better. Now I know that no one has a right to comment on my body. If that happened today, I'd tell her, "My size is none of your business and I want you to keep those thoughts to yourself." If she persisted, I'd also persist. I might never again deal with her in person. I might even move, whatever it would take to protect my emotional boundaries.

I used to let my clients say anything they wanted to me. If their need to be angry is that urgent, I thought, let them learn anger with me. Now I sacrifice myself for no one. If a client says something that hurts, I set a limit. Clients can be angry with me, and they can tell me so, but meanness and hostility advance neither the relationship nor the individual. If I let someone abuse me verbally, I have done neither one of us a favor.

The same is true for you. When you let someone abuse you or hurt you verbally, the other person is not advanced. Protecting yourself sets a necessary limit for both of you. That limit advances the relationship.

We have spiritual boundaries. You are the only one who knows the right spiritual path for yourself. If someone tries to tell you he knows the only way you can believe, he's out of line. "You must work out your own salvation with fear and trembling." (Philippians 2:12, New

English Bible) We can be assisted but not forced. Our spiritual development comes from our inner selves.

We have sexual boundaries, limits on what is safe and appropriate sexual behavior from others. We have a choice about who we interact with sexually and the extent of that interaction.

We have relational boundaries. The roles we play define the limits of appropriate interaction with others.

In later chapters, we'll explore and further define these kinds of boundaries. But why so much talk about boundaries? Why are they so important?

Boundaries bring order to our lives. As we learn to strong then our boundaries, we gain a clearer sense of ourselves and our relationship to others. Boundaries empower us to determine how we'll be treated by others. With good boundaries, we can have the wonderful assurance that comes from knowing we can and will protect ourselves from the ignorance, meanness, or thoughtlessness of others.

#### Touching Tells Us Where We Begin and End

How do we develop boundaries? Boundaries begin to form in infancy. In a healthy family a child is helped to individuate, to develop a self-concept separate and unique from the other family members.

Early on, Laura and Beth both received consistent family messages about boundaries. Beth had a father who wouldn't let her individuate; he didn't or couldn't let her develop separately, with values and an outlook different from his own. She therefore had no boundary with her father. By insisting that she think and be a certain way he prevented her from developing emotional boundaries. He denied her femaleness which catapulted her into anorexia, and thus violated her physical boundaries. He sabotaged treatment, preventing her from receiving the nutrition her body needed, and ultimately was prepared to risk her life rather than let her develop an identity separate from his. Beth's father was enmeshed with her.

Laura, on the other hand, was exposed to boundaries set far too distant for an infant and growing child. After being a part of our mother's body, we are thrust into the world as a separate entity. We depend on touch for our first sense of ourselves. Touching tells us where we are, where we end. Cuddling and holding tells us where we belong and that we do belong somewhere with someone.

A wonderful new type of birthing is spreading. After birth, which occurs in warm water, a massage therapist gently helps the baby unfold from the crumpled position he or she's held for so long. The therapist carefully stretches the small cramped limbs and lightly massages the tiny muscles. "Welcome, Baby. This is you. We will help you know yourself. We are with you. We know your needs."

From the earliest days of her life Laura was seriously deprived of touch. In contrast to the enmeshment Beth experienced, Laura lived in a family that set boundaries so far away from themselves that each person moved in a separate circle, so disconnected that Laura seemed to be growing up all by herself. By the time she was ten, she'd felt alone for so long that it didn't occur to her to ask for help in handling her stepfather's incestuous behavior. She expected to handle it alone.

Like Beth, Laura had no sense of her own boundaries. The lack of healthy physical and emotional contact from her family deprived her of developing a sense of her limits and how to protect them.

### Put Up with My Behavior and You'll Be Okay

Incest is a grave violation of physical, emotional, and sexual boundaries. Laura's feelings told her that she didn't like what her stepfather was doing. But feelings had never been talked about or tended to in her family. Each person, within his or her separate circle, was expected to put up with hardship and do his duty regardless of feelings.

Her stepfather was asking her to act in spite of her feelings. When we are forced to act against our internal messages, feelings become increasingly more difficult to bear. Slowly, feelings themselves change from a friend to a betrayer that only brings pain. (This takes place over the years.) This effect of incest is one of the most serious damages of all, to cause these harmful splits within a person, splits that result from having learned to act contrary to feelings.

If you grew up in a dysfunctional family, you probably had little help with boundary development. You may have grown up without any clear sense of your own boundaries. In fact, you may have been taught to let others run over your boundaries.

We learn about our boundaries by the way we are treated as children. Then we teach others where our boundaries are by the way we let them treat us. Most people will respect our boundaries if we indicate where they are. With some people, however, we must actively defend them.

### Boundaries Require Maintenance

Your skin is an obvious example of your physical boundary. Your emotional and relational boundaries may be less obvious, but they are just as important.

If the barrier of your skin is breached by a scratch, you become vulnerable to infection. If your emotional or relational boundaries are breached, you also become vulnerable to harm. When these invisible boundaries are trespassed by the thoughtless or intrusive actions of others, it is called a boundary violation.

Like any fence, boundaries require maintenance. Some people are like ivy. They keep

trying to crawl over or through our boundaries. It's tiresome, but if we let these people stay in our lives, we must keep pruning them and throwing the behavior weeds out of our yards.

What are boundaries like? Are they rigid or stiff? If I have a boundary that limits hostile comments from others, am I also walling out compliments?

Boundaries come in assorted shapes and sizes. They can be rigid like a brick wall or as flexible as a plastic bag, as impenetrable as a lead shield or as permeable as a chain-link fence. Some boundaries are transparent, others are opaque. Boundaries can be so far out that people can hardly get within yelling distance. Or they can be so close that, in the words of Groucho Marx, "If I were any closer, I'd be in back of you." Chapter Six describes different boundaries in more detail.

What is seen as a healthy boundary in one country or culture may be misunderstood or feared in another culture. Actions interpreted as boundary violations by white people in the United States may be common customs in Native American circles. U.S. citizens, with their easy familiarity, may unwittingly violate boundaries in other more formal countries by practices common within our own borders.

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