



7. MAINTAINING PERSONAL BOUNDARIES IN RELATIONSHIPS

*Your personal boundaries protect the inner core
of your identity and your right to choices:
"There lives the dearest freshness deep-down things."
—Gerard Manley Hopkins*

Our journey began at birth with no sense of boundaries. We did not know where mother ended and we began. We felt omnipotently in control of our need fulfillment and of its source.

Our first growthful realization was of separateness. Our first task was letting go, i.e. acknowledging a personal boundary: I am separate and so are those who care about me. This was a departure and a struggle.

It may have felt like an abandonment. From the very beginning of life, we may have equated letting go of attachment with loss of power and of secure need fulfillment.

The mystery of why we hold on so fiercely today may be in this original terrifying and illusory equation.

Adults learn that separateness is not an abandonment but simply a human condition, the only condition from which a healthy relationship can grow.

With boundaries comes interdependence rather than dependency. With boundaries comes personal accountability, not entitlement to be taken care of unilaterally. From boundaries comes the mutuality that drops control of another in favor of honor of another.

Boundaries do not create alienation; they safeguard contiguity. Boundaries are what makes it possible for us to have closeness while we still safely maintain a personal identity.

To give up personal boundaries would mean abandoning ourselves! No relationship can thrive when one or both partners have forsaken the inner unique core of their own separate identity. Love happens when two liberties embrace, salute, and foster one another.

In a healthy person, loyalty has its limits and unconditional love can coexist with conditional involvement. Unconditional does not, after all, mean uncritical. You can both love someone unconditionally and place conditions on your interactions to protect your own boundaries. "I love you unconditionally and I take care of myself by not living with you." This is shrewd fondness!

The essential inner core of yourself must remain intact as relationships begin, change, or end. The journey never violates our wholeness. When you are clear about your personal boundaries, the innate identity that is you is not bestowed by others nor do you let it be plundered by them.

It is building a functional healthy ego to relate intimately to others with full and generous openness while your own wholeness still remains inviolate. It is a great boost to self-esteem to be in-touch *and* intact. This is adult interdependence.

In every truly intimate relationship, we become ego-invested in the other person. This means that we care deeply about our partner's welfare. It also means that we care about our partner's opinions and treatment of us. We are vulnerable to hurt and rejection. We have given power to our partner. This is perfectly normal and flows logically from the nature of commitment.

In a *functional ego investment*, we will give power without thereby being personally diminished. We are vulnerable as lovers not as victims. In other words, our commitment does not mean losing our boundaries.

In a *neurotic ego investment*, we lose our ability to protect ourselves. The actions of our partner then determine our state of mind, rather than simply affect it temporarily. We live by reacting, rather than by taking action.

This is an example of how the unfinished business of early life,

discussed in Chapter One, can sabotage adult self-esteem. Those who were abused in childhood *and had no way of defending themselves*, have the most trouble in making a healthy ego-investment in relationships. For them, boundaries were never clear or safe and the drama of relating depletes their tentative ego supplies. Grieving past abuse replenishes the inner silo.

I know I have lost my boundaries and become co-dependent* when:

"I don't let go of what doesn't work"

and it feels like

"I can't let go of what could work."

Co-dependency is unconditional love for someone else that has turned against oneself.

Note: The left column of the checklist at the end of this chapter provides a working definition of "co-dependency."

How to maintain your personal boundaries:

1. Ask directly for what you want. This declares your identity to others and to yourself. The assertiveness skills in Chapter 2 describe clear boundaries, the only conditions for true human freedom. If your boundaries are rigid so that you avoid closeness, you may be in the grip of fear. If your boundaries are loose or undefined, you may be in the lap of submission to others' control.

2. Foster inner self-nurturance (a good parent within oneself). This builds an inner intuitive sense that lets you know when a relationship has become hurtful, abusive, or invasive. It is built as a result of the work you do on your childhood issues (see Chapter 1). It needs the ongoing support of honest feedback from friends, self-help programs, or therapy in order to be maintained.

3. Observe others' behavior toward you—taking it as infor-

mation—without getting caught in their drama. Be a fair witness who sees from a self-protected place. This is honoring your own boundaries. It empowers you then to decide—uninfluenced by another's seductive or aggressive power—how much you will accept of what someone offers you or of what someone fires at you.

4. Maintain a bottom line: a limit to how many times you allow someone to say no, lie, disappoint, or betray you before you will admit the painful reality and move on to mutual work or separate tables. This includes confronting addiction to exciting but futureless relationships in which you keep looking for more where there is only less, keep looking for happiness where there is only hurt. In addition, our illusory belief compensates for and inflates the diminished reality.

5. Change the locus of trust from others to oneself. As an adult you are not looking for someone you can trust absolutely. You acknowledge the margins of human failing and let go of expecting security. You then trust *yourself* to be able to receive love and handle hurt, to receive trustworthiness and handle betrayal, to receive intimacy and handle rejection.

A Checklist on Boundaries in Relationship

When you give up your boundaries in a relationship you:

1. Are unclear about your preferences
2. Do not notice unhappiness since enduring is your concern
3. Alter your behavior, plans, or opinions to fit the current moods or circumstances of another (live reactively)
4. Do more and more for less and less
5. Take as truth the most recent opinion you have heard
6. Live hopefully while wishing and waiting
7. Are satisfied if you are coping and surviving
8. Let the other's minimal improvement maintain your stalemate
9. Have few hobbies because you have no attention span for self-directed activity

When your boundaries are intact in a relationship you:

1. Have clear preferences and act on them
2. Recognize when you are happy/unhappy
3. Acknowledge moods and circumstances around you while remaining centered (live actively)
4. Do more when that gets results
5. Trust your own intuition while being open to others' opinions
6. Live optimistically while co-working on change
7. Are only satisfied if you are thriving
8. Are encouraged by sincere ongoing change for the better
9. Have excited interest in self-enhancing hobbies and projects

When you give up your boundaries in a relationship you:

10. Make exceptions for this person for things you would not tolerate in anyone else and accept alibis
11. Are manipulated by flattery so that you lose objectivity
12. Keep trying to create intimacy with a narcissist
13. Are so strongly affected by another that obsession results
14. Will forsake every personal limit to get sex or the promise of it
15. See your partner as causing your excitement
16. Feel hurt and victimized but not angry
17. Act out of compliance and compromise
18. Do favors that you inwardly resist (cannot say No)
19. Disregard intuition in favor of wishes

When your boundaries are intact in a relationship you:

10. Have a personal standard that, albeit flexible, applies to everyone and ask for accountability
11. Appreciate feedback and can distinguish it from attempts to manipulate
12. Relate only to partners with whom *mutual* love is possible
13. Are strongly affected by your partner's behavior and take it as information
14. Integrate sex so that you can enjoy it but never at the cost of your integrity
15. See your partner as stimulating your excitement
16. Let yourself feel anger, say "Ouch!" and embark on a program of change
17. Act out of agreement and negotiation
18. Only do favors you choose to do (can say No)
19. Honor intuitions and distinguish them from wishes

When you give up your boundaries in a relationship you:

20. Allow your partner to abuse your children or friends
21. Mostly feel afraid and confused
22. Are enmeshed in a drama that unfolds beyond your control
23. Are living a life that is not yours, and that seems unalterable
24. Commit yourself for as long as the other needs you to be committed that way (no bottom line)
25. Believe you have no right to secrets

These entries define "co-dependency."

When your boundaries are intact in a relationship you:

20. Insist others' boundaries be as safe as your own
21. Mostly feel secure and clear
22. Are always aware of choices
23. Are living a life that mostly approximates what you always wanted for yourself
24. Decide how, to what extent, and how long you will be committed
25. Protect your private matters without having to lie or be surreptitious

These entries define "self-parenting."