

- Journey 2 -



You've already done the hard work of establishing who you are. Your beliefs and values define you. This journey is all about how to protect yourself—to not lose yourself as you interact with others. Healthy boundaries between people keep our core identities intact.

We all have a basic need for relationships with others. At the same time, our ability to have healthy relationships depends a great deal on our being free to “own” and to “be” our unique selves. If we do not “own” our lives, we leave ourselves open to being controlled, persuaded, and manipulated by others. Some may want us to be like them or to live out the dreams they could not; others may insist that we live up to their ideals for a partner, mate, child, or friend.

We should have a basic conceptual framework for boundaries. They rest on the foundation of our beliefs and values and serve as a sort of life manual. We can check back to see what we have read about and written down for our personal beliefs and values. Next to every belief and value statement we examine, we should be erecting, defining, communicating, and defending appropriate boundaries. They are necessary for us to honor and protect our beliefs and values. Meanwhile, we can be more aware of and open to respecting others' beliefs and values and their boundaries. If we don't do this introspection for ourselves, we are really incapable of being true to ourselves or being respectful of others.

If we have boundaries for who we are, we have choices. We are able to set limits on the intrusion, help, advice, influence, or requests of others. Healthy boundaries directly relate to our self-image, self-confidence, self-control, and self-respect. Boundaries give us the freedom and limitless options to be ourselves. It is as if we have a fence around ourselves with many gates, allowing people to come into our space and lives appropriately and positively. These gates



allow us to decide who we give permission to share our life, learning, work, and varying experiences. When we open our gates to let others in, we can define and communicate the circumstances or parameters under which they are invited into our lives.

The individual-versus-society dilemma

The authors stand on a belief that “every person is unique, precious, worthy, and has a destiny.” That simple belief statement insists that we all deserve to be our own true selves, to follow *our* dreams and passions, to have and act on causes, to realize and use our skills in meaningful careers. It requires that boundaries are communicated and honored to allow that independence. No one has the right to infringe upon our individual prerogative to chart our own life course.

There is an inherent, unavoidable tension between our rights as individuals and our obligations to others, for humans cannot live fully and happily as hermits. We need one another from the moment of conception to our death beds. Choices on where to draw the line between our personal needs and our social obligations will always be with us. No hard-and-fast rule can save us from agonizing over these decisions.

How beliefs become boundaries

Beliefs—whether obvious or unstated—are key starting points for defining the limits and boundaries for each person or group. For example, families or organizations are often known for their beliefs related to such values as respect for others, openness to new ideas, creativity, persistence in the face of adversity, or loyalty. Such a reputation encourages each person in the group to uphold those shared beliefs and to act upon those values.

Ponder what your own reputation is among different people and groups with whom you associate. Think about the times you have investigated the reputation, beliefs, values, and boundaries of a school, company, or organization before you decided to join them or to work with them. Personal and group boundaries are there if we look for them. Finding the right match first requires that we know our personal beliefs, values, and boundaries. Then we are able to recognize where we will genuinely fit in and be happy.

ENTRY 32

We cannot define proper boundaries without reference to the beliefs and values from which they should stem. Look back at your Beliefs & Values Compass (on page 54). Choose one or two of the belief/value words that you adopted there and give examples of how boundaries and boundary issues might flow from them.

- *For example, people who aspire to leadership roles might value being “bold” or “visionary.” Adopting that role might affect other values, such as the importance of family or personal time. Being an inspiring leader can take over your life, leaving little time to spend on family, leisure, or personal pursuits. Bold leaders may over-commit their organizations, trampling on the rights and free time of their colleagues.*
- *Someone who prizes “dependability” can easily come up with guidelines from that ideal: doing what they said they would, showing up on time, coming through when others count on them. But we may allow our lives to get out of balance if we are determined to be dependable but we can’t say “no.” We may commit to too many projects and end up neglecting ourselves and our families, feeling constantly guilty and inadequate, and guaranteeing a life of stress and unhappiness.*

Personal boundaries are the most difficult to define and defend

Interpersonal boundaries are rarely as simple as the examples cited above. To begin with, the most difficult boundaries to define and to defend are not those between us and some enemy, but rather between us and those we love. We are obligated to our closest friends and relations, so it can be very difficult to draw the line with them. There should be a give and take to personal relationships, but we cannot give so much as to threaten our own safety or health—either physical or mental. We may love a person but disagree over values or behavior. Keeping a healthy distance through clear boundaries will allow you to preserve the relationship without becoming enmeshed in fights with no point or problems you cannot solve. Here are some examples of boundary issues within important relationships.

- We want to please our parents and make them proud of us, for example, but does that mean we should do whatever they expect? Should they be able to dictate our profession? Our marriage partner? Where we live? Should we sacrifice our family's security to repeatedly bail out a parent addicted to alcohol, drugs, or gambling?
- We expect to submerge some of our personal wants and needs in the give and take of a marriage, but how much cooperation is too much? Should a spouse control who we interact with and when? How we dress? What opinions we may express? Where we live or work? How we raise our children?
- It is normal and healthy for parents to put the needs of their children above their own, at least some of the time. We lose sleep to care for infants. We feed our children first even when we are hungry. We may stay in a job we hate because of the financial security or the health insurance it offers our children. But should we stay in that hated job so that we can afford a car for a teenager? Should we sacrifice to pay for college for a child when our own bills are unpaid? Should we deny ourselves a second chance for happiness after losing a mate because a child does not approve?
- We expect friends to be mutually supportive, but sometimes a friend can come to rely upon us too much or too often. Should we repeatedly allow ourselves to get sucked into someone's drama, when that person seems unable or unwilling to learn from mistakes? Should we continue to spend time with someone who is always critical, leaving us feeling depressed and worthless?

Clearly, there are limits to how much we should give to or sacrifice for those we love, but exactly where those boundaries lie is far from clear.

ENTRY 37

Sometimes someone important in your life really pushes your buttons. You may replay the same fights, never able to agree to disagree. What are you really fighting about? Could it be a belief or value issue?

How might you change the script? Perhaps you can choose not to share some differences of belief. Maybe you can agree not to talk about issues that always lead to fighting. (You may need to remove yourself to enforce this agreement.) Can you frame the issue as a belief that you cannot compromise on? (For example, you might insist on driving when the other has been drinking.)

Analyze a difficult relationship like this, in terms of how your establishing and enforcing boundaries might make it more bearable, limit it, or end it.

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ENTRY 38

Looking back over my life, there were times when someone important to me tried to exert too much control over my behavior or beliefs. Was I sending mixed messages? Did I openly declare my boundaries or expect others to read my mind?

ENTRY 42

The boundary between supportive coach or partner and co-dependent can be hard to draw. Have you ever, even with the best of motives, demanded too much from a child, spouse, or friend? What were the circumstances and why did you do so? Did things work out as you'd hoped, or was the person alienated by your overbearing attitude? Even if you got what you wanted, was it really worth it?

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