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Imperfection*

THE GIFTS OF Imperfection



Let Go of Who You Think
You're Supposed to Be
and Embrace Who You Are

YOUR GUIDE TO A WHOLEHEARTED LIFE

Brené Brown, Ph.D., L.M.S.W.



**THE
GIFTS OF
Imperfection**



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Let Go of Who You Think You're Supposed
to Be and Embrace Who You Are

by Brené Brown, Ph.D., L.M.S.W.

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Editor's note

The names, details, and circumstances may have been changed to protect the privacy of those mentioned in this publication.

This publication is not intended as a substitute for the advice of health care professionals.

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To Steve, Ellen, and Charlie.
I love you with my whole heart.



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preface

Owning our story and loving ourselves through that process is the bravest thing that we will ever do.

Once you see a pattern, you can't *un-see* it. Trust me, I've tried. But when the same truth keeps repeating itself, it's hard to pretend that it's just a coincidence. For example, no matter how hard I try to convince myself that I can function on six hours of sleep, anything less than eight hours leaves me impatient, anxious, and foraging for carbohydrates. It's a pattern. I also have a terrible procrastination pattern: I always put off writing by reorganizing my entire house and spending way too much time and money buying office supplies and organizing systems. Every single time.

One reason it's impossible to *un-see* trends is that our minds are engineered to seek out patterns and to assign meaning to them. Humans are a meaning-making species. And, for better or worse, my mind is actually fine-tuned to do this. I spent years training for it, and now it's how I make my living.

As a researcher, I observe human behavior so I can identify and name the subtle connections, relationships, and patterns that help us make meaning of our thoughts, behaviors, and feelings.

I love what I do. Pattern hunting is wonderful work and, in fact, throughout my career, my attempts at *un-seeing* were strictly reserved for my personal life and those humbling vulnerabilities that I loved to deny. That all changed in November 2006, when the research that fills these pages smacked me upside the head. For the first time in my career, I was desperate to *un-see* my own research.

Up until that point, I had dedicated my career to studying difficult emotions like shame, fear, and vulnerability. I had written academic pieces on shame, developed a shame-resilience curriculum for mental health and addictions professionals, and written a book about shame resilience called *I Thought It Was Just Me*.¹

In the process of collecting thousands of stories from diverse men and women who lived all over the country—ranging in age from eighteen to eighty-seven—I saw new patterns that I wanted to know more about. Yes, we all struggle with shame and the fear of not being enough. And, yes, many of us are afraid to let our true selves be seen and known. But in this huge mound of data there was also story after story of men and women who were living these amazing and inspiring lives.

I heard stories about the power of embracing imperfection and vulnerability. I learned about the inextricable connection between joy and gratitude, and how things that I take for granted, like rest and play, are as vital to our health as nutrition and exercise. These research participants trusted themselves, and they talked about authenticity and love and belonging in a way that was completely new to me.

I wanted to look at these stories as a whole, so I grabbed a file and a Sharpie and wrote the first word that came to my mind on the tab: *Wholehearted*. I wasn't sure what it meant yet, but I knew that these stories were about people living and loving with their whole hearts.

I had a lot of questions about Wholeheartedness. What did these folks value? How did they create all of this resilience in their lives? What were their main concerns and how did they resolve or address them? Can anyone create a Wholehearted life? What does it take to cultivate what we need? What gets in the way?

As I started analyzing the stories and looking for re-occurring themes, I realized that the patterns

generally fell into one of two columns; for simplicity sake, I first labeled these *Do* and *Don't*. The *Do* column was brimming with words like worthiness, rest, play, trust, faith, intuition, hope, authenticity, love, belonging, joy, gratitude, and creativity. The *Don't* column was dripping with words like perfection, numbing, certainty, exhaustion, self-sufficiency, being cool, fitting in, judgment, and scarcity.

I gasped the first time I stepped back from the poster paper and took it all in. It was the worst kind of sticker shock. I remember mumbling, "No. No. No. How can this be?"

Even though I wrote the lists, I was shocked to read them. When I code data, I go into deep researcher mode. My only focus is on accurately capturing what I heard in the stories. I don't think about how I would say something, only how the research participants said it. I don't think about what an experience would mean to me, only what it meant to the person who told me about it.

I sat in the red chair at my breakfast room table and stared at these two lists for a very long time. My eyes wandered up and down and across. I remember at one point I was actually sitting there with tears in my eyes and with my hand across my mouth, like someone had just delivered bad news.

And, in fact, it was bad news. I thought I'd find that Wholehearted people were just like me and doing all of the same things I was doing: working hard, following the rules, doing it until I got it right, always trying to know myself better, raising my kids exactly by the books ...

After studying tough topics like shame for a decade, I truly believed that I deserved confirmation that I was "living right."

But here's the tough lesson that I learned that day (and every day since):

How much we know and understand ourselves is critically important, but there is something that is even more essential to living a Wholehearted life: loving ourselves.

Knowledge is important, but only if we're being kind and gentle with ourselves as we work to discover who we are. Wholeheartedness is as much about embracing our tenderness and vulnerability as it is about developing knowledge and claiming power.

And perhaps the most painful lesson of that day hit me so hard that it took my breath away: It was clear from the data that we cannot give our children what we don't have. Where we are on our journey of living and loving with our whole hearts is a much stronger indicator of parenting success than anything we can learn from how-to books.

This journey is equal parts heart work and head work, and as I sat there on that dreary November day, it was clear to me that I was lacking in my own heart work.

I finally stood up, grabbed my marker off the table, drew a line under the *Don't* list, and then wrote the word *me* under the line. My struggles seemed to be perfectly characterized by the sum total of the list.

I folded my arms tightly across my chest, sunk deep down into my chair, and thought, *This is just great. I'm living straight down the shit list.*

I walked around the house for about twenty minutes trying to un-see and undo everything that had just unfolded, but I couldn't make the words go away. I couldn't go back, so I did the next best thing: I folded all of the poster sheets into neat squares and tucked them into a Rubbermaid tub that fit nicely under my bed, next to my Christmas wrap. I wouldn't open that tub again until March of 2008.

Next, I got myself a really good therapist and began a year of serious soul work that would forever change my life. Diana, my therapist, and I still laugh about my first visit. Diana, who is a therapist to many therapists, started with the requisite, "So what's going on?" I pulled out the *Do* list and matter-of-factly said, "I need more of the things on this list. Some specific tips and tools would be helpful. Nothing deep. No childhood crap or anything."

It was a long year. I lovingly refer to it on my blog as the 2007 ~~Breakdown~~ Spiritual Awakening. It felt like a textbook breakdown to me, but Diana called it a spiritual awakening. I think we were both right. In fact, I'm starting to question if you can have one without the other.

Of course, it's not a coincidence that this unraveling happened in November 2006. The stars were perfectly aligned for a breakdown: I was raw from being newly sugar and flour free, I was days away from my birthday (always a contemplative time for me), I was burned out from work, and I was right on the cusp of my *midlife unraveling*.

People may call what happens at midlife “a crisis,” but it’s not. It’s an unraveling—a time when you feel a desperate pull to live the life you want to live, not the one you’re “supposed” to live. The unraveling is a time when you are challenged by the universe to let go of who you think you are supposed to be and to embrace who you are.

Midlife is certainly one of the great unraveling journeys, but there are others that happen to us over the course of our lives:

- marriage
- divorce
- becoming a parent
- recovery
- moving
- an empty nest
- retiring
- experiencing loss or trauma
- working in a soul-sucking job

The universe is not short on wake-up calls. We’re just quick to hit the snooze button.

As it turned out, the work I had to do was messy and deep. I slogged through it until one day, exhausted and with mud still wet and dripping off of my traveling shoes, I realized, “Oh, my God. I feel different. I feel joyful and real. I’m still afraid, but I also feel really brave. Something has changed—I can feel it in my bones.”

I was healthier, more joyful, and more grateful than I had ever felt. I felt calmer and grounded, and significantly less anxious. I had rekindled my creative life, reconnected with my family and friends in a new way, and most important, felt truly comfortable in my own skin for the first time in my life.

I learned how to worry more about how I felt and less about “what people might think.” I was setting new boundaries and began to let go of my need to please, perform, and perfect. I started saying *no* rather than *sure* (and being resentful and pissed off later). I began to say “Oh, hell yes!” rather than “Sounds fun, but I have lots of work to do” or “I’ll do that when I’m _____ (thinner, less busy, better prepared).”

As I worked through my own Wholehearted journey with Diana, I read close to forty books, including every spiritual awakening memoir I could get my hands on. They were incredibly helpful guides, but I still craved a guidebook that could offer inspiration, resources, and basically serve as a soul traveler’s companion of sorts.

One day, as I stared at the tall pile of books precariously stacked on my nightstand, it hit me! *I want to tell this story in a memoir*. I’ll tell the story of how a cynical, smart-ass academic became every bit of the stereotype that she spent her entire adult life ridiculing. I’ll fess up about how I became the middle-aged, recovering, health-conscious, creative, touchy-feely spirituality-seeker who spends days contemplating things like grace, love, gratitude, creativity, authenticity, and is happier than I imagined

possible. I'll call it *Wholehearted*.

I also remember thinking, *Before I write the memoir, I need to use this research to write a guidebook on Wholehearted living!* By mid-2008, I had filled three huge tubs with notebooks, journals, and mounds of data. I had also done countless hours of new research. I had everything I needed, including a passionate desire to write the book that you're holding in your hands.

On that fateful November day when the list appeared and I sunk into the realization that I wasn't living and loving with my whole heart, I wasn't totally convinced. Seeing the list wasn't enough to fully believe in it. I had to dig very deep and make the *conscious choice* to believe ... to believe in myself and the possibility of living a different life. A lot of questioning, countless tears, and a huge collection of joyful moments later, believing has helped me see.

I now see how owning our story and loving ourselves through that process is the bravest thing that we will ever do.

I now see that cultivating a Wholehearted life is not like trying to reach a destination. It's like walking toward a star in the sky. We never really arrive, but we certainly know that we're heading in the right direction.

I now see how gifts like courage, compassion, and connection only work when they are exercised. Every day.

I now see how the work of *cultivating* and *letting go* that shows up in the ten guideposts is not "to-do list" material. It's not something we accomplish or acquire and then check off our list. It's life work. It's soul work.

For me, believing was seeing. I believed first, and only then I was able to see how we can truly change ourselves, our families, and our communities. We just have to find the courage to live and love with our whole hearts. It's an honor to make this journey with you!





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INTRODUCTION

Wholehearted Living

Wholehearted living is about engaging in our lives from a place of worthiness. It means cultivating the courage, compassion, and connection to wake up in the morning and think, *No matter what gets done and how much is left undone, I am enough.* It's going to bed at night thinking, *Yes, I am imperfect and vulnerable and sometimes afraid, but that doesn't change the truth that I am also brave and worthy of love and belonging.*

The Journey

Wholehearted living is not a onetime choice. It is a process. In fact, I believe it's the journey of a lifetime. My goal is to bring awareness and clarity to the constellation of choices that lead to Wholeheartedness and to share what I've learned from many, many people who have dedicated themselves to living and loving with their whole hearts.

Before embarking on any journey, including this one, it's important to talk about what we need to bring along. What does it take to live and love from a place of worthiness? How do we embrace imperfection? How do we cultivate what we need and let go of the things that are holding us back? The answers to all of these questions are courage, compassion, and connection—the tools we need to work our way through our journey.

If you're thinking, *Great. I just need to be a superhero to fight perfectionism,* I understand. Courage, compassion, and connection seem like big, lofty ideals. But in reality, they are daily practices that, when exercised enough, become these incredible gifts in our lives. And the good news is that our vulnerabilities are what force us to call upon these amazing tools. Because we're human and so beautifully imperfect, we get to practice using our tools on a daily basis. In this way, courage, compassion, and connection become gifts—the gifts of imperfection.

Here's what you'll find in the pages that follow. In the [first chapter](#), I explain what I've learned about courage, compassion, and connection and how they are truly the tools for developing worthiness.

Once we get some clarity about the tools that we're going to use on this journey, in the [next chapter](#) we move to the heart of the matter: love, belonging, and worthiness. I answer some of the most difficult questions of my career: What is love? Can we love someone and betray them? Why does our constant need to fit in sabotage real belonging? Can we love the people in our lives, like our partners and children, more than we love ourselves? How do we define worthiness, and why do we so often end up hustling for it rather than believing in it?

We encounter obstacles on every journey we make; the Wholehearted journey is no exception. In the [next chapter](#), we'll explore what I've found to be the greatest barriers to living and loving with our whole hearts and how we can develop effective strategies to move through the barriers and to cultivate resilience.

From there, we'll explore the ten guideposts for the Wholehearted journey, daily practices that provide direction for our journey. There's one chapter for each guidepost, and each chapter is illustrated with stories, definitions, quotes, and ideas for making deliberate and inspired choices about the way we live and love.

Defining Moments

This book is full of big-concept words such as *love*, *belonging*, and *authenticity*. I think it's critically important to define the gauzy words that are tossed around every day but rarely explained. And I think good definitions should be accessible and actionable. I've tried to define these words in a way that will help us unpack the term and explore the pieces. When we dig down past the feel-good words and excavate the daily activities and experiences that put the *heart* in Wholehearted living, we can see how people define the concepts that drive their actions, beliefs, and emotions.

For example, when the research participants talked about a concept such as *love*, I was careful to define it as they experienced it. Sometimes that required developing new definitions (like I actually did with *love* and many other words). Other times, when I started looking around in the existing literature, I found definitions that captured the spirit of the participants' experiences. A good example of this is *play*. Play is an essential component to Wholehearted living, and when I researched the topic, I discovered the amazing work of Dr. Stuart Brown.¹ So, rather than creating a new definition, I referenced his work because it accurately reflects what I learned in the research.

I realize that definitions spark controversy and disagreement, but I'm okay with that. I'd rather we debate the meaning of words that are important to us than not discuss them at all. We need common language to help us create awareness and understanding, which is essential to Wholehearted living.

Digging Deep

In early 2008, when my blog was still pretty new, I wrote a post about breaking my "dig-deep" button. You know the dig-deep button, right? It's the button that you rely on when you're too bone-tired to get up one more time in the middle of the night or to do one more load of throw-up-diarrhea laundry or to catch one more plane or to return one more call or to please/perform/perfect the way you normally do even when you just want to flip someone off and hide under the covers.

The dig-deep button is a secret level of pushing through when we're exhausted and overwhelmed, and when there's too much to do and too little time for self-care.

In my blog post, I explained how I had decided not to fix my dig-deep button. I made a promise to myself that when I felt emotionally, physically, and spiritually done, I'd try slowing down rather than relying on my old standbys: pushing through, soldiering on, and sucking it up.

It worked for a while, but I missed my button. I missed having something to turn to when I was depleted and down. I needed a tool to help me dig my way out. So, I turned back to my research to see if I could find a way to dig that was more consistent with Wholehearted living. Maybe there was something better than just sucking it up.

Here's what I found: Men and women who live Wholeheartedly do indeed DIG Deep. They just do

it in a different way. When they're exhausted and overwhelmed, they get

Deliberate in their thoughts and behaviors through prayer, meditation, or simply setting their intentions;
Inspired to make new and different choices;
Going. They take action.

Since I made that discovery, I've been DIGging Deep the new way, and it's been pretty amazing. One example happened just recently when I was lost in an Internet fog. Rather than working, I was just lulling myself into a haze by mindlessly playing on Facebook and piddling on the computer. It was neither relaxing nor productive—it was just a giant time and energy suck.

I tried the new DIG Deep—get deliberate, inspired, and going. I told myself, “If you need to refuel and losing yourself online is fun and relaxing, then do it. If not, do something deliberately relaxing. Find something inspiring to do rather than something soul-sucking. Then, last but not least, get up and do it!” I closed my laptop, said a little prayer to remind myself to be self-compassionate, and watched a movie that had been sitting in a Netflix envelope on my desk for over a month. It was exactly what I needed.

It wasn't the old Dig Deep—the pushing through. I didn't force myself to start working or to do something productive. Rather, I prayerfully, intentionally, and thoughtfully did something restorative.

Each guidepost has a DIG Deep section to help us start thinking about how we get deliberate and inspired about our choices, and how we take action. I share my personal DIG Deep strategies with you and I encourage you to come up with your own. These new strategies have been so much more effective than the old “pushing through.”

What I Hope to Contribute

This book is full of powerful topics such as self-compassion, acceptance, and gratitude. I'm not the first to talk about these subjects, and I'm certainly not the smartest researcher or the most talented writer. I am, however, the first to explain how these topics work individually and together to cultivate Wholehearted living. And, maybe more important, I'm certainly the first person to come at these topics from the perspective of someone who has spent years studying shame and fear.

I can't tell you how many times I wanted to give up my research on shame. It's extremely difficult to dedicate your career to studying topics that make people squeamish. On several occasions I've literally thrown my hands up and said, “I quit. It's too hard. There are so many cool things to study. I want out of this!” I didn't choose to study shame and fear; the research chose me.

Now I know why. It was what I needed—professionally and personally—to prepare for this work on Wholeheartedness. We can talk about courage and love and compassion until we sound like a greeting card store, but unless we're willing to have an honest conversation about what gets in the way of putting these into practice in our daily lives, we will never change. Never, ever.

Courage sounds great, but we need to talk about how it requires us to let go of what other people think, and for most of us, that's scary. Compassion is something we all want, but are we willing to look at why boundary-setting and saying *no* is a critical component of compassion? Are we willing to say *no*, even if we're disappointing someone? Belonging is an essential component of Wholehearted living, but first we have to cultivate self-acceptance—why is this such a struggle?

Before I start writing, I always ask myself, “Why is this book worth writing? What's the contribution that I'm hoping to make?” Ironically, I think the most valuable contribution that I can make to the ongoing discussions about love, belonging, and worthiness stems from my experiences as a shame researcher.

Coming at this work with a full understanding of how the shame tapes and gremlins keep us feeling

afraid and small allows me to do more than present great ideas; this perspective helps me share real strategies for changing our lives. If we want to know why we're all so afraid to let our true selves be seen and known, we have to understand the power of shame and fear. If we can't stand up to the *never good enough* and *who do you think you are?* we can't move forward.

I only wish that during those desperate and defeated moments of my past, when I was knee-deep in shame research, I could have known what I know now. If I could go back and whisper in my ear, I'd tell myself the same thing that I'll tell you as we begin this journey:

Owning our story can be hard but not nearly as difficult as spending our lives running from it. Embracing our vulnerabilities is risky but not nearly as dangerous as giving up on love and belonging and joy—the experiences that make us the most vulnerable. Only when we are brave enough to explore the darkness will we discover the infinite power of our light.





Courage, Compassion, and Connection: The Gifts of Imperfection

Practicing courage, compassion, and connection in our daily lives is how we cultivate worthiness. The key word is *practice*. Mary Daly, a theologian, writes, “Courage is like—it’s a habitus, a habit, a virtue: You get it by courageous acts. It’s like you learn to swim by swimming. You learn courage by couraging.” The same is true for compassion and connection. We invite compassion into our lives when we act compassionately toward ourselves and others, and we feel connected in our lives when we reach out and connect.

Before I define these concepts and talk about how they work, I want to show you how they work together in real life—as practices. This is a personal story about the courage to reach out, the compassion that comes from saying, “I’ve been there,” and the connections that fuel our worthiness.

The Gun-for-Hire Shame Storm

Not too long ago, the principal of a large public elementary school and the president of the school’s parent-teacher organization (PTO) invited me to speak to a group of parents about the relationship between resilience and boundaries. I was in the process of collecting data about Wholehearted parenting and schools at the time, so I was excited about the opportunity. I had no idea what I was getting myself into.

The second I walked into the school auditorium, I felt this really strange vibe from the parents in the audience. They almost seemed agitated.

I asked the principal about it, and she just shrugged her shoulders and walked away. The PTO president didn’t have much to say about it either. I chalked it up to my nerves and tried to let it go.

I was sitting in the front row when the principal introduced me. This is always a very awkward experience for me. Someone is running through a list of my accomplishments while I’m secretly trying to stave off vomiting and talking myself out of running. Well, this introduction was beyond anything I had ever experienced.

The principal was saying things like, “You might not like what you’re going to hear tonight, but we need to listen for the sake of our children. Dr. Brown is here to transform our school and our lives! She’s going to set us straight whether we like it or not!”

She was talking in this loud, aggressive voice that made her seem downright pissed off. I felt like I was being introduced for WWE WrestleMania. All we needed were the Jock Jams and a few strobe lights.

In hindsight, I should have walked up to the podium and said, “I’m feeling very uncomfortable. I’m excited to be here, but I’m certainly not here to set anyone straight. I also don’t want you to think that I’m trying to transform your school in an hour. What’s going on?”

But I didn’t. I just started talking in my vulnerable I’m-a-researcher-but-I’m-also-a-struggling-parent way. Well, the die had been cast. These parents were not receptive. Instead, I felt row after row of people glaring at me.

One man, who was sitting right up front, had his arms folded across his chest and his teeth clenched so tightly that the veins in his neck were popping out. Every three or four minutes he’d shift in his seat, roll his eyes, and sigh louder than I’ve ever heard anyone sigh. It was so loud that I’m barely comfortable calling it a sigh. It was more like a *humpf!* It was so bad that the people next to him were visibly mortified by his behavior. They were still inexplicably unhappy with me, but he was making the entire evening unbearable for all of us.

As an experienced teacher and group leader, I know how to handle these situations and am normally comfortable doing so. When someone is being disruptive, you really only have two choices: ignore him or take a break so that you can privately confront him about his inappropriate behavior. I was so knocked off my game by this weird experience that I did the very worst thing possible: I tried to impress him.

I started talking louder and getting really animated. I quoted scary research statistics that would freak out any parent. I served up my authenticity for a big ole helping of *You better listen to me or your kids are going to drop out of third grade and take up hitchhiking, drugs, and running with scissors.*

Nothing. Nada.

I didn’t get a head nod or a slight grin or anything. I just managed to freak out the other 250 already-pissy parents. It was a disaster. Trying to co-opt or win over someone like that guy is always a mistake, because it means trading in your authenticity for approval. You stop believing in your worthiness and start hustling for it. And, oh man, was I hustling.

The second the talk ended, I grabbed my stuff and ran-walked to my car. As I was pulling out of the parking lot, my face was growing hotter. I felt small and my heart was racing. I tried to push back the instant replay of me acting crazy, but I couldn’t stop thinking about it. The shame storm was brewing.

When the shame winds are whipping all around me, it’s almost impossible to hold on to any perspective or to recall anything good about myself. I went right into the bad self-talk of *God, I’m such an idiot. Why did I do that?*

The greatest gift of having done this work (the research and the personal work) is that I can recognize shame when it’s happening. First, I know my physical symptoms of shame—the dry mouth, time slowing down, tunnel vision, hot face, racing heart. I know that playing the painful slow-motion reel over and over in my head is a warning sign.

I also know that the very best thing to do when this is happening feels totally counterintuitive: Practice courage and reach out! We have to own our story and share it with someone who has earned the right to hear it, someone whom we can count on to respond with compassion. We need courage, compassion, and connection. ASAP.

Shame hates it when we reach out and tell our story. It hates having words wrapped around it—it can’t survive being shared. Shame loves secrecy. The most dangerous thing to do after a shaming experience is hide or bury our story. When we bury our story, the shame metastasizes. I remember saying out loud: “I need to talk to someone RIGHT NOW. Be brave, Brené!”

But here’s the tricky part about compassion and connecting: We can’t call just anyone. It’s not that

simple. I have a lot of good friends, but there are only a handful of people whom I can count on to practice compassion when I'm in the dark shame place.

If we share our shame story with the wrong person, they can easily become one more piece of flying debris in an already dangerous storm. We want solid connection in a situation like this—something akin to a sturdy tree firmly planted in the ground. We definitely want to avoid the following:

1. The friend who hears the story and actually feels shame for you. She gasps and confirms how horrified you should be. Then there is awkward silence. Then you have to make *her* feel better.
2. The friend who responds with sympathy (I feel so sorry for you) rather than empathy (I get it, I feel with you, and I've been there). If you want to see a shame cyclone turn deadly, throw one of these at it: "Oh, you poor thing." Or, the incredibly passive-aggressive southern version of sympathy: "Bless your heart."
3. The friend who needs you to be the pillar of worthiness and authenticity. She can't help because she's too disappointed in your imperfections. You've let her down.
4. The friend who is so uncomfortable with vulnerability that she scolds you: "How did you let this happen? What were you thinking?" Or she looks for someone to blame: "Who was that guy? We'll kick his ass."
5. The friend who is all about making it better and, out of her own discomfort, refuses to acknowledge that you can actually be crazy and make terrible choices: "You're exaggerating. It wasn't that bad. You rock. You're perfect. Everyone loves you."
6. The friend who confuses "connection" with the opportunity to one-up you: "That's nothing. Listen to what happened to me one time!"

Of course, we're all capable of being "these friends"—especially if someone tells us a story that gets right up in our own shame grill. We're human, imperfect, and vulnerable. It's hard to practice compassion when we're struggling with our authenticity or when our own worthiness is off balance.

When we're looking for compassion, we need someone who is deeply rooted, able to bend, and, most of all, we need someone who embraces us for our strengths and struggles. We need to honor our struggle by sharing it with someone who has *earned* the right to hear it. When we're looking for compassion, it's about connecting with the *right person* at the *right time* about the *right issue*.

I called my sister. It's only been since the 2007 ~~Breakdown~~ Spiritual Awakening that I've called one of my sisters or my brother for shame-cyclone support. I'm four years older than my brother and eight years older than my sisters (they're twins). Before 2007, I was pretty vested in being the older, perfect (aka uptight, better than, and judgmental) sister.

Ashley was amazing. She listened and responded with total compassion. She had the courage to tap into her own struggles with worthiness so that she could genuinely connect to what I was experiencing. She said wonderfully honest and empathic things like, "Oh, man. That's so hard. I've done that dance. I hate that feeling!" That may not be what someone else would need to hear, but for me it was the best.

Ashley wasn't uprooted and thrown into the storm created by my experience. She also wasn't so rigid that she snapped with judgment and blame. She didn't try to fix me or make me feel better; she just listened and had the courage to share some of her own vulnerabilities with me.

I felt totally exposed and completely loved and accepted at the same time (which is the definition of compassion for me). Trust me when I tell you that shame and fear can't tolerate that kind of powerful connection surging between people. That's exactly why courage, compassion, and connection are the

tools we need for the Wholehearted journey. To top it off, my willingness to let someone I care about see me as imperfect led to a strengthening of our relationship that continues today—that's why I can call courage, compassion, and connection the gifts of imperfection. When we're willing to be imperfect and real, these gifts just keep giving.

Just a quick follow-up to the story: About a week after the wrestling match/parenting talk, I found out that the school was experiencing a hovering problem—parents were in the classrooms all day and interfering with instruction and class management. Without telling me, the principal and PTO president had required the parents to attend my lecture. They told the parents that I was coming to tell them why they needed to stop hovering. In other words, I was set up as a helicopter-parent mercenary. Not good. I may not be a fan of hovering in the classroom, but I'm also not a parenting gun-for-hire. The irony is that I had no idea that was an issue, so I never even mentioned the topic.

With this story in mind, let's take a closer look at each of the concepts of Wholeheartedness and how they work together.

Courage

Courage is a huge theme in my life. It seems that either I'm praying for some, feeling grateful for having found a little bit, appreciating it in other people, or studying it. I don't think that makes me unique. Everyone wants to be brave.

After interviewing people about the truths of their lives—their strengths and struggles—I realized that courage is one of the most important qualities that Wholehearted people have in common. And not just any kind of courage; I found that Wholeheartedness requires *ordinary courage*. Here's what I mean ...

The root of the word *courage* is *cor*—the Latin word for *heart*. In one of its earliest forms, the word *courage* had a very different definition than it does today. Courage originally meant “To speak one’s mind by telling all one’s heart.” Over time, this definition has changed, and, today, courage is more synonymous with being heroic. Heroics is important and we certainly need heroes, but I think we’ve lost touch with the idea that speaking honestly and openly about who we are, about what we’re feeling, and about our experiences (good and bad) is the definition of courage. Heroics is often about putting our life on the line. Ordinary courage is about putting our *vulnerability* on the line. In today’s world, that’s pretty extraordinary.¹

When we pay attention, we see courage every day. We see it when people reach out for help, like I did with Ashley. I see it in my classroom when a student raises her hand and says, “I’m completely lost. I have no idea what you’re talking about.” Do you know how incredibly brave it is to say “I don’t know” when you’re pretty sure everyone around you gets it? Of course, in my twelve-plus years of teaching, I know that if one person can find the courage to say, “You’ve lost me,” there are probably at least ten more students who feel the exact same way. They may not take the risk, but they certainly benefit from that one person’s courage.

I saw courage in my daughter, Ellen, when she called me from a slumber party at 10:30 p.m. and said, “Mom, can you come get me?” When I picked her up, she got in the car and said, “I’m sorry. I just wasn’t brave enough. I got homesick. It was so hard. Everyone was asleep, and I had to walk to Libby’s mom’s bedroom and wake her up.”

I pulled into our driveway, got out of the car, and walked around to the backseat where Ellen was sitting. I scooted her over and sat next to her. I said, “Ellen, I think asking for what you need is one of the bravest things that you’ll ever do. I suffered through a couple of really miserable sleepovers and

slumber parties because I was too afraid to ask to go home. I'm proud of you."

The next morning during breakfast, Ellen said, "I thought about what you said. Can I be brave again and ask for something else?" I smiled. "I have another slumber party next weekend. Would you be willing to pick me up at bedtime? I'm just not ready." That's courage. The kind we could all use more of.

I also see courage in myself when I'm willing to risk being vulnerable and disappointed. For many years, if I really wanted something to happen—an invitation to speak at a special conference, a promotion, a radio interview—I pretended that it didn't matter that much. If a friend or colleague would ask, "Are you excited about that television interview?" I'd shrug it off and say, "I'm not sure. It's not that big of a deal." Of course, in reality, I was praying that it would happen.

It's only been in the last few years that I've learned that playing down the exciting stuff doesn't take the pain away when it doesn't happen. It does, however, minimize the joy when it does happen. It also creates a lot of isolation. Once you've diminished the importance of something, your friends are not likely to call and say, "I'm sorry that didn't work out. I know you were excited about it."

Now when someone asks me about a potential opportunity that I'm excited about, I'm more likely to practice courage and say, "I'm so excited about the possibility. I'm trying to stay realistic, but I really hope it happens." When things haven't panned out, it's been comforting to be able to call a supportive friend and say, "Remember that event I told you about? It's not going to happen, and I'm so bummed."

I recently saw another example of ordinary courage at my son Charlie's preschool. Parents were invited to attend a holiday music presentation put on by the kids. You know the scene—twenty-five children singing with fifty-plus parents, grandparents, and siblings in the audience wielding thirty-nine video cameras. The parents were holding up cameras in the air and randomly snapping pictures while they scrambled to make sure that their kids knew they were there and on time.

In addition to all the commotion in the audience, one three-year-old girl, who was new to the class, cried her way through the entire performance because she couldn't see her mom from the makeshift stage. As it turns out, her mother was stuck in traffic and missed the performance. By the time her mother arrived, I was kneeling by the classroom door telling Charlie good-bye. From my low vantage point, I watched the girl's mother burst through the door and immediately start scanning the room to find her daughter. Just as I was getting ready to stand up and point her toward the back of the classroom where a teacher was holding her daughter, another mother walked by us, looked straight at this stressed mom, shook her head, and rolled her eyes.

I stood up, took a deep breath, and tried to reason with the part of me that wanted to chase after the better-than-you eye-rolling mom and kick her perfectly punctual ass. Just then two more moms walked up to this now tearful mother and smiled. One of the mothers put her hand on top of the woman's shoulder and said, "We've all been there. I missed the last one. I wasn't just late. I completely forgot." I watched as the woman's face softened, and she wiped away a tear. The second woman looked at her and said, "My son was the only one who wasn't wearing pajamas on PJ Day—he still tells me it was the most rotten day ever. It will be okay. We're all in the same boat."

By the time this mother made it to the back of the room where the teacher was still comforting her daughter, she looked calm. Something that I'm sure came in handy when her daughter lunged for her from about six feet away. The moms who stopped and shared their stories of imperfection and vulnerability were practicing courage. They took the time to stop and say, "Here's my story. You're not alone." They didn't have to stop and share; they could have easily joined the perfect-parent parade and marched right by her.

As these stories illustrate, courage has a ripple effect. Every time we choose courage, we make everyone around us a little better and the world a little braver. And our world could stand to be a little kinder and braver.

Compassion

To prepare for writing my book on shame, I read everything I could find on compassion. I ultimately found a powerful fit between the stories I heard in the interviews and the work of American Buddhist nun Pema Chödrön. In her book *The Places That Scare You*, Chödrön writes, “When we practice generating compassion, we can expect to experience the fear of our pain. Compassion practice is daring. It involves learning to relax and allow ourselves to move gently toward what scares us.”²

What I love about Chödrön’s definition is her honesty about the vulnerability of practicing compassion. If we take a closer look at the origin of the word *compassion*, much like we did with *courage*, we see why compassion is not typically our first response to suffering. The word *compassion* is derived from the Latin words *patti* and *cum*, meaning “to suffer with.” I don’t believe that compassion is our default response. I think our first response to pain—ours or someone else’s—is to self-protect. We protect ourselves by looking for someone or something to blame. Or sometimes we shield ourselves by turning to judgment or by immediately going into fix-it mode.

Chödrön addresses our tendency to self-protect by teaching that we must be honest and forgiving about when and how we shut down: “In cultivating compassion we draw from the wholeness of our experience—our suffering, our empathy, as well as our cruelty and terror. It has to be this way. Compassion is not a relationship between the healer and the wounded. It’s a relationship between equals. Only when we know our own darkness well can we be present with the darkness of others. Compassion becomes real when we recognize our shared humanity.”³

In my story, Ashley was willing to be in my darkness with me. She wasn’t there as my helper or to fix me; she was just with me—as an equal—holding my hand as I waded through my feelings.

Boundaries and Compassion

One of the greatest (and least discussed) barriers to compassion practice is the fear of setting boundaries and holding people accountable. I know it sounds strange, but I believe that understanding the connection between boundaries, accountability, acceptance, and compassion has made me a kinder person. Before the breakdown, I was sweeter—judgmental, resentful, and angry on the inside—but sweeter on the outside. Today, I think I’m genuinely more compassionate, less judgmental and resentful, and way more serious about boundaries. I have no idea what this combination looks like on the outside, but it feels pretty powerful on the inside.

Before this research, I knew a lot about each one of these concepts, but I didn’t understand how they fit together. During the interviews, it blew my mind when I realized that many of the truly committed compassion practitioners were also the most boundary-conscious people in the study. Compassionate people are boundaried people. I was stunned.

Here’s what I learned: The heart of compassion is really acceptance. The better we are at accepting ourselves and others, the more compassionate we become. Well, it’s difficult to accept people when they are hurting us or taking advantage of us or walking all over us. This research has taught me that if we really want to practice compassion, we have to start by setting boundaries and holding people accountable for their behavior.

We live in a blame culture—we want to know whose fault it is and how they’re going to pay. In our personal, social, and political worlds, we do a lot of screaming and finger-pointing, but we rarely hold people accountable. How could we? We’re so exhausted from ranting and raving that we don’t have the energy to develop meaningful consequences and enforce them. From Washington, DC, and Wall Street to our own schools and homes, I think this rage-blame-too-tired-and-busy-to-follow-through mind-set is why we’re so heavy on self-righteous anger and so low on compassion.

Wouldn’t it be better if we could be kinder, but firmer? How would our lives be different if there were less anger and more accountability? What would our work and home lives look like if we blamed less but had more respect for boundaries?

I was recently brought in to talk with a group of corporate leaders who were trying to manage a difficult reorganization in their company. One of the project managers told me that, after listening to me talk about the dangers of using shame as a management tool, he was worried that he shamed his team members. He told me that when he gets really frustrated, he singles people out and criticizes their work in team meetings.

He explained, “I’m so frustrated. I have two employees who just don’t listen. I explain every single detail of the project, I check to make sure they understand, and they *still* do it their way. I’m out of options. I feel backed into a corner and angry, so I take them down in front of their colleagues.”

When I asked him how he was holding these two employees accountable for not following the project protocol, he replied, “What do you mean by accountable?”

I explained, “After you check with them to make sure they understand your expectations and the objectives, how do you explain the consequences of not following the plan or not meeting the objectives?”

He said, “I don’t talk about the consequences. They know they’re supposed to follow the protocol.”

I gave him an example, “Okay. What would happen if you told them that you were going to write them up or give them an official warning the next time they violated protocol and that if it continues, they’re going to lose their jobs?”

He shook his head and said, “Oh, no. That’s pretty serious. I’d have to get the human resources people involved. That becomes a big hassle.”

Setting boundaries and holding people accountable is a lot more work than shaming and blaming. But it’s also much more effective. Shaming and blaming without accountability is toxic to couples, families, organizations, and communities. First, when we shame and blame, it moves the focus from the original behavior in question to our own behavior. By the time this boss is finished shaming and humiliating his employees in front of their colleagues, the only behavior in question is his.

Additionally, if we don’t follow through with appropriate consequences, people learn to dismiss our requests—even if they sound like threats or ultimatums. If we ask our kids to keep their clothes off the floor and they know that the only consequence of not doing it is a few minutes of yelling, it’s fair for them to believe that it’s really not that important to us.

It’s hard for us to understand that we can be compassionate and accepting while we hold people accountable for their behaviors. We can, and, in fact, it’s the best way to do it. We can confront someone about their behavior, or fire someone, or fail a student, or discipline a child without berating them or putting them down. The key is to separate people from their behaviors—to address what they’re doing, not who they are (I’ll talk more about this in the [next chapter](#)). It’s also important that we can lean into the discomfort that comes with straddling compassion and boundaries. We have to stay away from convincing ourselves that we hate someone or that they deserve to feel bad so that we can feel better about holding them accountable. That’s where we get into trouble. When we talk

ourselves into disliking someone so we're more comfortable holding them accountable, we're priming ourselves for the shame and blame game.

When we fail to set boundaries and hold people accountable, we feel used and mistreated. This is why we sometimes attack who they are, which is far more hurtful than addressing a behavior or a choice. For our own sake, we need to understand that it's dangerous to our relationships and our well-being to get mired in shame and blame, or to be full of self-righteous anger. It's also impossible to practice compassion from a place of resentment. If we're going to practice acceptance and compassion, we need boundaries and accountability.

Connection

I define *connection* as *the energy that exists between people when they feel seen, heard, and valued; when they can give and receive without judgment; and when they derive sustenance and strength from the relationship.*

Ashley and I felt deeply connected after our experience. I know I was seen, heard, and valued. Even though it was scary, I was able to reach out for support and help. And we both felt strengthened and fulfilled. In fact, a couple of weeks later, Ashley said, “I can’t tell you how glad I am that you called me that day. It helped me so much to know that I’m not the only one who does stuff like that. I also love knowing that I can help you and that you trust me.” Connection begets connection.

As a matter of fact, we are wired for connection. It’s in our biology. From the time we are born, we need connection to thrive emotionally, physically, spiritually, and intellectually. A decade ago, the idea that we’re “wired for connection” might have been perceived as touchy-feely or New Age. Today, we know that the need for connection is more than a feeling or a hunch. It’s hard science. Neuroscience, to be exact.

In his book *Social Intelligence: The New Science of Human Relationships*, Daniel Goleman explores how the latest findings in biology and neuroscience confirm that we are hardwired for connection and that our relationships shape our biology as well as our experiences. Goleman writes, “Even our most routine encounters act as regulators in the brain, priming our emotions, some desirable, others not. The more strongly connected we are with someone emotionally, the greater the mutual force.”⁴ It’s amazing—yet perhaps not surprising—that the connectedness we experience in our relationships impacts the way our brain develops and performs.

Our innate need for connection makes the consequences of disconnection that much more real and dangerous. Sometimes we only *think* we’re connected. Technology, for instance, has become a kind of imposter for connection, making us believe we’re connected when we’re really not—at least not in the ways we need to be. In our technology-crazed world, we’ve confused being communicative with feeling connected. Just because we’re plugged in, doesn’t mean we feel seen and heard. In fact, hyper-communication can mean we spend more time on Facebook than we do face-to-face with the people we care about. I can’t tell you how many times I’ve walked into a restaurant and seen two parents on their cell phones while their kids are busy texting or playing video games. What’s the point of even sitting together?

As we think about the definition of connection and how easy it is to mistake technology for connecting, we also need to consider letting go of the myth of self-sufficiency. One of the greatest barriers to connection is the cultural importance we place on “going it alone.” Somehow we’ve come to equate success with not needing anyone. Many of us are willing to extend a helping hand, but we’re very reluctant to reach out for help when we need it ourselves. It’s as if we’ve divided the world into

“those who offer help” and “those who need help.” The truth is that we are both.

I’ve learned so much about giving and receiving from the men and women who are engaged in Wholehearted living but nothing more important than this:

Until we can receive with an open heart, we are never really giving with an open heart. When we attach judgment to receiving help, we knowingly or unknowingly attach judgment to giving help.

For years, I placed value on being the helper in my family. I could help with a crisis or lend money or dispense advice. I was always happy to help others, but I would have never called my siblings to ask them for help, especially for support during a shame storm. At the time, I would have vehemently denied attaching judgment to my generous giving. But now, I understand how I derived self-worth from never needing help and always offering it.

During the breakdown, I needed help. I needed support and hand-holding and advice. Thank God! Turning to my younger brother and sisters completely shifted our family dynamics. I gained permission to fall apart and be imperfect, and they could share their strength and incredible wisdom with me. If connection is the energy that surges between people, we have to remember that those surges must travel in both directions.

The Wholehearted journey is not the path of least resistance. It’s a path of consciousness and choice. And, to be honest, it’s a little counterculture. The willingness to tell our stories, feel the pain of others, and stay genuinely connected in this disconnected world is not something we can do halfheartedly.

To practice courage, compassion, and connection is to look at life and the people around us, and say, “I’m all in.”





Exploring the Power of Love, Belonging, and Being Enough

Love is the most important thing in our lives, a passion for which we would fight or die, and yet we're reluctant to linger over its names. Without a supple vocabulary, we can't even talk or think about it directly.

— DIANE ACKERMAN

Love and belonging are essential to the human experience. As I conducted my interviews, I realized that only *one thing* separated the men and women who felt a deep sense of love and belonging from the people who seem to be struggling for it. That one thing is the belief in their worthiness. It's as simple and complicated as this: If we want to fully experience love and belonging, we must believe that we are *worthy* of love and belonging.

When we can let go of what other people think and own our story, we gain access to our worthiness—the feeling that we are enough just as we are and that we are worthy of love and belonging. When we spend a lifetime trying to distance ourselves from the parts of our lives that don't fit with who we think we're supposed to be, we stand outside of our story and hustle for our worthiness by constantly performing, perfecting, pleasing, and proving. Our sense of worthiness—that critically important piece that gives us access to love and belonging—lives inside of our story.

The greatest challenge for most of us is believing that we are worthy *now*, right this minute. Worthiness doesn't have prerequisites. So many of us have knowingly created/unknowingly allowed/been handed down a long list of worthiness prerequisites:

- I'll be worthy when I lose twenty pounds.
- I'll be worthy if I can get pregnant.
- I'll be worthy if I get/stay sober.
- I'll be worthy if everyone thinks I'm a good parent.
- I'll be worthy when I can make a living selling my art.
- I'll be worthy if I can hold my marriage together.
- I'll be worthy when I make partner.
- I'll be worthy when my parents finally approve.
- I'll be worthy if he calls back and asks me out.
- I'll be worthy when I can do it all and look like I'm not even trying.

Here's what is truly at the *heart* of Wholeheartedness: Worthy now. Not if. Not when. We are worthy of love and belonging *now*. Right this minute. As is.

In addition to letting go of the ifs and whens, another critical piece of owning our story and

claiming our worthiness is cultivating a better understanding of love and belonging. Oddly enough, we desperately need both but rarely talk about what they really are and how they work. Let's take a look.

Defining Love and Belonging

For years I avoided using the word *love* in my research because I didn't know how to define it, and I wasn't sure that "C'mon, you know, *love*" as a definition would fly. I also couldn't rely on quotes or song lyrics, however much they might inspire me and speak truth to me. It's not my training as a researcher.

As much as we need and want love, we don't spend much time talking about what it means. Think about it. You might say "I love you" every day, but when's the last time you had a serious conversation with someone about the meaning of love? In this way, love is the mirror image of shame. We desperately don't want to experience shame, and we're not willing to talk about it. Yet the only way to resolve shame is to talk about it. Maybe we're afraid of topics like love and shame. Most of us like safety, certainty, and clarity. Shame and love are grounded in vulnerability and tenderness.

Belonging is another topic that is essential to the human experience but rarely discussed.

Most of us use the terms *fitting in* and *belonging* interchangeably, and like many of you, I'm really good at fitting in. We know exactly how to hustle for approval and acceptance. We know what to wear, what to talk about, how to make people happy, what not to mention—we know how to chameleon our way through the day.

One of the biggest surprises in this research was learning that fitting in and belonging are not the same thing, and, in fact, fitting in gets in the way of belonging. Fitting in is about assessing a situation and becoming who you need to be to be accepted. Belonging, on the other hand, doesn't require us to *change* who we are; it requires us to *be* who we are.

Before I share my definitions with you, I want to point out three issues that I'm willing to call truths.

Love and belonging will always be uncertain. Even though connection and relationship are the most critical components of life, we simply *cannot* accurately measure them. Relational concepts don't translate into bubbled answer sheets. Relationship and connection happen in an indefinable space between people, a space that will never be fully known or understood by us. Everyone who risks explaining love and belonging is hopefully doing the best they can to answer an unanswerable question. Myself included.

Love belongs with belonging. One of the most surprising things that unfolded in my research is the pairing of certain terms. I can't separate the concepts of love and belonging because when people spoke of one, they always talked about the other. The same holds true for the concepts of joy and gratitude, which I'll talk about it in a later chapter. When emotions or experiences are so tightly woven together in people's stories that they don't speak of one without the other, it's not an accidental entanglement; it's an intentional knot. Love belongs with belonging.

Of this, I am actually certain. After collecting thousands of stories, I'm willing to call this a fact: **A deep sense of love and belonging is an irreducible need of all women, men, and children.** We are biologically, cognitively, physically, and spiritually wired to love, to be loved, and to belong. When those needs are not met, we don't function as we were meant to. We break. We fall apart. We numb. We ache. We hurt others. We get sick. There are certainly other causes of illness, numbing, and hurt, but the absence of love and belonging will always lead to suffering.

It took me three years to whittle these definitions and concepts from a decade of interviews. Let's take a look.

Love :

We cultivate love when we allow our most vulnerable and powerful selves to be deeply seen and known, and when we honor the spiritual connection that grows from that offering with trust, respect, kindness, and affection.

Love is not something we give or get; it is something that we nurture and grow, a connection that can only be cultivated between two people when it exists within each one of them—we can only love others as much as we love ourselves.

Shame, blame, disrespect, betrayal, and the withholding of affection damage the roots from which love grows. Love can only survive these injuries if they are acknowledged, healed, and rare.

Belonging :

Belonging is the innate human desire to be part of something larger than us. Because this yearning is so primal, we often try to acquire it by fitting in and by seeking approval, which are not only hollow substitutes for belonging, but often barriers to it. Because true belonging only happens when we present our authentic, imperfect selves to the world, our sense of belonging can never be greater than our level of self-acceptance.

One reason that it takes me so long to develop these concepts is that I often don't want them to be true. It would be different if I studied the effect of bird poop on potting soil, but this stuff is personal and often painful. Sometimes, as I turned to the data to craft definitions like the ones above, I would cry. I didn't want my level of self-love to limit how much I can love my children or my husband. Why? Because loving them and accepting their imperfections is much easier than turning that light of loving-kindness on myself.

If you look at the definition of love and think about what it means in terms of self-love, it's very specific. Practicing self-love means learning how to trust ourselves, to treat ourselves with respect, and to be kind and affectionate toward ourselves. This is a tall order given how hard most of us are on ourselves. I know I can talk to myself in ways that I would never consider talking to another person. How many of us are quick to think, *God, I'm so stupid* and *Man, I'm such an idiot*? Just like calling someone we love stupid or an idiot would be incongruent with practicing love, talking like that to ourselves takes a serious toll on our self-love.

It's worth noting that I use the words *innate* and *primal* in the definition of belonging. I'm convinced that belonging is in our DNA, most likely connected to our most primitive survival instinct. Given how difficult it is to cultivate self-acceptance in our perfectionist society and how our need for belonging is hardwired, it's no wonder that we spend our lives trying to fit in and gain approval.

It's so much easier to say, "I'll be whoever or whatever you need me to be, as long as I feel like I'm part of this." From gangs to gossiping, we'll do what it takes to fit in if we believe it will meet our need for belonging. But it doesn't. We can only belong when we offer our most authentic selves and when we're embraced for who we are.

Practicing Love and Belonging

To begin by always thinking of love as an action rather than a feeling is one way in which anyone using the word in this manner automatically assumes accountability and responsibility.

— BELL HOOKS ¹

While I have personally and professionally agonized over the definitions of love and belonging, I have to admit that they have fundamentally changed the way I live and parent. When I'm tired or stressed, I can be mean and blaming—especially toward my husband, Steve. If I truly love Steve (and, oh man, I do), then how I behave every day is as important, if not more important, than saying "I love you" every day. When we don't practice love with the people we claim to love, it takes a lot out of us. Incongruent living is exhausting.

It's also pushed me to think about the important differences between *professing* love and *practicing* love. During a recent radio interview about the rash of celebrity infidelities, the host asked me, "Can you love someone and cheat on them or treat them poorly?"

I thought about it for a long time, then gave the best answer I could based on my work: "I don't know if you can love someone and betray them or be cruel to them, but I do know that when you

betray someone or behave in an unkind way toward them, you are not practicing love. And, for me, I don't just want someone who says they love me; I want someone who practices that love for me every day."

In addition to helping me understand what love looks like between people, these definitions also forced me to acknowledge that cultivating self-love and self-acceptance is not optional. They aren't endeavors that I can look into if and when I have some spare time. They are priorities.

Can We Love Others More Than We Love Ourselves?

The idea of self-love and self-acceptance was, and still is, revolutionary thinking for me. So in early 2009, I asked my blog readers what they thought about the importance of self-love and the idea that we can't love others more than we love ourselves. Well, there was quite the emotional debate in the comments section.

Several folks passionately disagreed with the notion of self-love being a requirement for loving others. Others argued that we can actually learn how to love ourselves more by loving others. Some folks just left comments like, "Thanks for ruining my day—I don't want to think about this."

There were two comments that addressed the complexity of these ideas in very straightforward terms. I'd like to share these with you: Justin Valentin, a mental health professional, writer, and photographer, wrote:

Through my children I have learned to really love unconditionally, to be compassionate at times when I am feeling horrible, and to be so much more giving. When I look at my one daughter who looks so much like me, I can see myself as a little girl. This reminds me to be kinder to the little girl that lives inside me and to love and accept her as my own. It is the love for my girls that makes me want to be a better person and to work on loving and accepting myself. However, with that being said, it is still so much easier to love my daughters....

Perhaps thinking about it this way makes more sense: Many of my patients are mothers who struggle with drug addiction. They love their children more than themselves. They destroy their lives, hurt themselves, and often damage their bodies beyond repair. They say they hate themselves, but they love their children. They believe their children are lovable, but they believe they are unlovable. On the surface, one might say, yes, some of them love their children more than themselves. However, does loving your children mean that you are not intentionally poisoning them the way you poison yourself? Perhaps our issues are like secondhand smoke. At first, it was thought to be not so dangerous and by smoking we were only hurting ourselves. Yet [we have]

²
come to find out, years later, secondhand smoke can be very deadly.

Renae Cobb, a therapist-in-training by day and an undercover writer and occasional blog contributor by night, wrote:

Certainly, the people we love inspire us to heights of love and compassion that we might have never achieved otherwise, but to really scale those heights, we often have to go to the depths of who we are, light/shadow, good/evil, loving/destructive, and figure out our own stuff in order to love them better. So I'm not sure it's an either/or but a both/and. We love others fiercely, maybe more than we think we love ourselves, but that fierce love should drive us to the depths of ourselves so that we can learn to be compassionate with ourselves.
³

I agree with Justin and Renae. Loving and accepting ourselves are the ultimate acts of courage. In a society that says, "Put yourself last," self-love and self-acceptance are almost revolutionary.

If we want to take part in this revolution, we have to understand the anatomy of love and belonging; we need to understand when and why we hustle for worthiness rather than claim it; and we have to understand *the things that get in the way*. We encounter obstacles on every journey we make; the Wholehearted journey is no different. In the [next chapter](#) we'll explore what I've found to be the greatest barriers to living and loving with our whole hearts.





The Things That Get in the Way

In 2008, I was invited to give a talk at a very special event called The UP Experience. I really like the couple sponsoring the event, so without giving it much thought, I excitedly agreed to do it.

Well, you know how things always sound better when they're far away and you don't know the details? This was one of those things.

I accepted the invitation in late 2008 and never thought about it again until 2009, when the list of speakers was published on The UP Experience Web site. Suffice it to say that it was an overwhelmingly prestigious list of folks. And me. The event was billed as "16 of the world's most exciting thought-leaders and speakers. One mind-opening day!"

I freaked out. I couldn't imagine sharing the stage with Robert Ballard (the archaeological oceanographer who located the *Titanic*), Gavin Newsom (the mayor of San Francisco), Neil deGrasse Tyson (the astrophysicist who hosts NOVA and runs the Hayden Planetarium), and David Plouffe (the genius behind Obama's presidential campaign). And that's just four out of the fifteen.

On top of trying to manage feeling like a complete imposter, I was terrified about the format. The event was modeled after the TED talks (www.ted.com), and each speaker would have only twenty minutes to share their most innovative ideas with what they were calling a C-suite audience—an audience of mostly CEOs, CFOs, COOs, and CIOs who were paying \$1,000 for the day-long event.

Seconds after I saw the list of speakers, I called my friend Jen Lemen and read the list of names to her. After the last name, I took a deep breath and said, "I'm not so sure about this."

Even though we were on the phone and she was thousands of miles away, I could see her shaking her head. "Put your measuring stick away, Brené."

I bristled. "What do you mean?"

Jen said, "I know you. You're already thinking about how to make your twenty-minute talk super 'researchy' and complicated."

I still didn't get it. "Well, yes. Of course I'm going to be researchy. Do you see this list of people? They're ... they're ... grown-ups."

Jen chuckled. "Do you need an age-check?"

Dead silence on my end.

Jen explained, "Here's the thing. You are a researcher, but your best work isn't from the head; it's talking from the heart. You'll be fine if you do what you do best—tell stories. Keep it real. Keep it honest."

I hung up, rolled my eyes, and thought: *Tell stories. You've got to be kidding? Maybe I could do a*

little puppet show too.

Normally it takes me a day or two to develop a talk. I never speak from notes, but I normally have a visual presentation and an idea of what I want to say. Not this time. A puppet show would have been easier. I was paralyzed for weeks over this presentation. Nothing was working.

One evening, about two weeks before the event, Steve asked, “How’s your UP talk coming along?”

I burst into tears. “It’s not coming along. I don’t have shit. I can’t do it. I’m going to have to fake a car wreck or something.”

Steve sat down next to me and grabbed my hand. “What’s going on? This isn’t like you. I’ve never seen you unravel like this over a talk. You do these things all the time.”

I buried my head in my hands and mumbled, “I’m blocked. I just can’t stop thinking about this horrible experience that happened several years ago.”

Steve sounded surprised. “What experience?”

“I never told you about it,” I explained. He leaned toward me and waited.

“Five years ago I bombed a talk like I had never bombed before or since. It was a total disaster, and I’m so afraid that it’s going to happen again.”

Steve couldn’t believe that I had never told him about my disastrous experience. “What in the hell happened? Why didn’t you tell me?”

I got up from the table and said, “I don’t want to talk about it. It will just make it worse.”

He grabbed my hand and pulled me back to the table. He looked at me in an I’ve-been-waiting-my-whole-life-to-use-your-line-against-you way. “Don’t we need to talk about the hard things? Doesn’t talking always make it better?” I was too tired to fight, so I told him this story.

Five years ago, when my first book came out, I was asked to speak at a women’s networking lunch. I was so excited because, like the UP Experience, I would be speaking to a group of “normal” people—not therapists or academics—but normal businesspeople. In fact, this event was my first normal audience group.

I arrived early at the swanky country club where the event was being hosted, and I introduced myself to the woman in charge. After sizing me up for what felt like an eternity, she greeted me with a stack of short pronouncements. “Hello. You don’t look like a researcher. I’m going to introduce you. I need your bio.”

It was an uptight twist on “nice to meet you too,” but okay. I handed her my bio and that was the beginning of the end.

She read it for thirty seconds before she gasped, turned to me, and peering over her reading glasses, snapped, “This says that you’re a shame researcher. Is that true?”

All of a sudden, I was ten years old and in the principal’s office. I hung my head and whispered, “Yes, ma’am. I’m a shame researcher.”

With her lips pursed, she popped, “Do. You. Study. Anything. Else?”

I couldn’t tell her.

“Do. You?” she demanded.

“Yes. I also study fear and vulnerability.”

She shrapsed, which is like a combo shriek and gasp. “I was told that you collected research on how to be more joyful and how to have more connection and meaning in our lives.”

Ah ... got it. She didn’t know anything about me. She must have heard about me from someone who failed to mention the nature of my work. Now it all made sense.

I tried to explain, “I don’t really study ‘how-to’ be joyful and have more meaning in our lives. I know a lot about these topics because I study the things that get in the way of joy, meaning, and connection.” Without even responding to me, she walked out of the room and left me standing there.

Oh, the irony of a shame researcher standing in a puddle of “I’m not good enough.”

She came back a few minutes later, looked right over the top of my head, and said, “Here’s how this is going to go:

Number 1: You’re not going to talk about the things that get in the way. You’re going to talk about the how-to part. That’s what people want to hear. People want how-to.

Number 2: Do not mention the word *shame*. People will be eating.

Number 3: People want to be comfortable and joyful. That’s all. Keep it joyful and comfortable.”

I just stood there in total shock. After a few quiet seconds, she asked, “Okay?” and before I could say anything, she answered for me, “Sounds good.”

Then, just as she started walking away, she turned around and said, “Light and breezy. People like light and breezy.” And, just in case I wasn’t clear, she spread her fingers far apart and made huge sweeping gestures with her hands to illustrate “light” and “breezy” (picture Margaret Thatcher imitating Bob Fosse).

For forty minutes I stood in front of this group, totally paralyzed and repeating different versions of, “Joy is good. Happy is so, so good. We should all be joyful. And have meaning. Because they’re just so darn good.”

The women in the audience just smiled, nodded, and ate their chicken. It was a train wreck.

By the time I ended the story, Steve’s face was all scrunched up and he was shaking his head. He’s not a big fan of public speaking, so I think he was staving off his own anxiety as he listened to my disaster story.

But, strangely enough, telling the story made me less anxious. In fact, the second that I finished telling Steve the story, I felt different. I finally got it. My work—me—the decade I’ve spent doing research—it’s all about “the things that get in the way.” I’m not about the “how-to” because in ten years, I’ve never seen any evidence of “how-to” working without talking about the things that get in the way.

In a very powerful way, owning this story allowed me to claim who I am as a researcher and to establish my voice. I looked at Steve and smiled. “I don’t do how-to.”

For the first time in five years, I realized that the country club woman wasn’t out to get me and sabotage my talk. If that were the case, her ridiculous parameters wouldn’t have been so devastating to me. Her list was symptomatic of our cultural fears. We don’t want to be uncomfortable. We want a quick and dirty “how-to” list for happiness.

I don’t fit that bill. Never have. Don’t get me wrong, I’d love to skip over the hard stuff, but it just doesn’t work. We don’t change, we don’t grow, and we don’t move forward without the work. If we really want to live a joyful, connected, and meaningful life, we *must* talk about things that get in the way.

Until I owned and spoke this story, I let my lack of “quick tips” and “five simple steps” get in the way of my professional worthiness. Now that I’ve claimed that story, I see that my understanding of the darkness gives my search for the light context and meaning.

I’m happy to report that The UP Experience went really well. I actually told this “Light and Breezy” story as my talk. It was a risk, but I figured that even C-suites struggle with worthiness. A couple of weeks after the event, I got a call from the organizer. She said, “Congratulations! The evaluations are

in and your talk finished in the top two of the day, and given what you study, you were the dark horse going in.”

Here’s the bottom line:

If we want to live and love with our whole hearts, and if we want to engage with the world from a place of worthiness, we have to talk about the things that get in the way—especially shame, fear, and vulnerability.

In Jungian circles, shame is often referred to as the swampland of the soul. I’m not suggesting that we wade out into the swamp and set up camp. I’ve done that and I can tell you that the swampland of the soul is an important place to visit, but you would *not* want to live there.

What I’m proposing is that we learn how to wade through it. We need to see that standing on the shore and catastrophizing about what could happen if we talked honestly about our fears is actually more painful than grabbing the hand of a trusted companion and crossing the swamp. And, most important, we need to learn why constantly trying to maintain our footing on the shifting shore as we gaze across to the other side of the swamp—where our worthiness waits for us—is much harder work than trudging across.

“How-to” is a seductive shortcut, and I understand that. Why cross the swamp if you can just bypass it?

But here’s the dilemma: Why is “how-to” so alluring when, truthfully, we already know “how to” yet we’re still standing in the same place longing for more joy, connection, and meaning?

Most everyone reading this book knows how to eat healthy. I can tell you the Weight Watcher points for every food in the grocery store. I can recite the South Beach Phase I grocery shopping list and the glycemic index like they’re the Pledge of Allegiance. We know how to eat healthy.

We also know how to make good choices with our money. We know how to take care of our emotional needs. We know all of this, yet ...

We are the most obese, medicated, addicted, and in-debt Americans EVER.

Why? We have more access to information, more books, and more good science—why are we struggling like never before?

Because we don’t talk about the things that get in the way of doing what we know is best for us, our children, our families, our organizations, and our communities.

I can know everything there is to know about eating healthy, but if it’s one of those days when Ellen is struggling with a school project and Charlie’s home sick from school and I’m trying to make a writing deadline and Homeland Security increased the threat level and our grass is dying and my jeans don’t fit and the economy is tanking and the Internet is down and we’re out of poop bags for the dog—forget it! All I want to do is snuff out the sizzling anxiety with a pumpkin muffin, a bag of chips, and chocolate.

We don’t talk about what keeps us eating until we’re sick, busy beyond human scale, desperate to numb and take the edge off, and full of so much anxiety and self-doubt that we can’t act on what we know is best for us. We don’t talk about the hustle for worthiness that’s become such a part of our lives that we don’t even realize that we’re dancing.

When I’m having one of those days that I just described, some of the anxiety is just a part of living, but there are days when most of my anxiety grows out of the expectations I put on myself. I want Ellen’s project to be amazing. I want to take care of Charlie without worrying about my own deadlines. I want to show the world how great I am at balancing my family and career. I want our yard to look beautiful. I want people to see us picking up our dog’s poop in biodegradable bags and think, *My God! They are such outstanding citizens.* There are days when I can fight the urge to be everything to everyone, and there are days when it gets the best of me.

As we discussed in the [last chapter](#), when we struggle to believe in our worthiness, we hustle for it. The hustle for worthiness has its own soundtrack and for those of you who are my age and older, it's not the funky "Do the Hustle" from the '70s. It's the cacophony of shame tapes and gremlins—those messages that fuel "never good enough."

- "What will people think?"
- "You can't *really* love yourself yet. You're not _____ enough." (pretty, skinny, successful, rich, talented, happy, smart, feminine, masculine, productive, nice, strong, tough, caring,
- popular, creative, well-liked, admired, contributing)
- "No one can find out about _____."
- "I'm going to pretend that everything is okay."
- "I can change to fit in if I have to!"
- "Who do you think you are to put your thoughts/art/ideas/ beliefs/writing out in the world?"
- "Taking care of them is more important than taking care of me."

Shame is that warm feeling that washes over us, making us feel small, flawed, and never good enough. If we want to develop shame resilience—the ability to recognize shame and move through it while maintaining our worthiness and authenticity—then we have to talk about why shame happens.

Honest conversations about shame can change the way we live, love, parent, work, and build relationships. I have more than one thousand letters and e-mails from readers of *I Thought It Was Just Me*, my book on shame resilience, that all say the same thing: "I can't believe how much talking about shame changed my life!" (And I promise, even if you're eating while you're talking about shame, you'll be okay.)

Shame Resilience 101

Here are the first three things that you need to know about shame:

1. We all have it. Shame is universal and one of the most primitive human emotions that we experience. The only people who don't experience shame lack the capacity for empathy and human connection.
2. We're all afraid to talk about shame.
3. The less we talk about shame, the more control it has over our lives.

Shame is basically the fear of being unlovable—it's the total opposite of owning our story and feeling worthy. In fact, the definition of shame that I developed from my research is:

[1](#)

Shame is the intensely painful feeling or experience of believing that we are flawed and therefore unworthy of love and belonging.

Shame keeps worthiness away by convincing us that owning our stories will lead to people thinking less of us. Shame is all about fear. We're afraid that people won't like us if they know the truth about who we are, where we come from, what we believe, how much we're struggling, or, believe it or not, how wonderful we are when soaring (sometimes it's just as hard to own our strengths as our struggles).

People often want to believe that shame is reserved for the folks who have survived terrible traumas, but this is not true. Shame is something we all experience. And while it feels as if shame

hides in our darkest corners, it actually tends to lurk in all of the familiar places, including appearance and body image, family, parenting, money and work, health, addiction, sex, aging, and religion. To feel shame is to be human.

The stories of our struggles are difficult for everyone to own, and if we've worked hard to make sure everything looks "just right" on the outside, the stakes are high when it comes to truth-telling. This is why shame loves perfectionists—it's so easy to keep us quiet.

In addition to the fear of disappointing people or pushing them away with our stories, we're also afraid that if we tell our stories, the weight of a single experience will collapse upon us. There is a real fear that we can be buried or defined by an experience that, in reality, is only a sliver of who we are.

I tell a lot of these stories in my book *I Thought It Was Just Me*, but the one that comes to mind now is about a woman who worked up the courage to tell her neighbor that she was a recovering alcoholic, only to have her neighbor say, "I'm not sure I'm comfortable with my kids playing at your house anymore." This brave woman told me that she pushed through her fear and said, "But they've played here for two years, and I've been sober for twenty years. I'm not any different than I was ten minutes ago. Why are you?"

If shame is the universal fear of being unworthy of love and belonging, and if all people have an irreducible and innate need to experience love and belonging, it's easy to see why shame is often referred to as "the master emotion." We don't have to experience shame to be paralyzed by it—the fear of being perceived as unworthy is enough to force us to silence our stories.

And if we all have shame, the good news is that we're all capable of developing shame resilience. Shame resilience is the ability to recognize shame, to move through it constructively while maintaining worthiness and authenticity, and to ultimately develop more courage, compassion, and connection as a result of our experience. The first thing we need to understand about shame resilience is that the less we talk about shame, the more we have it.

Shame needs three things to grow out of control in our lives: secrecy, silence, and judgment. When something shaming happens and we keep it locked up, it festers and grows. It consumes us. We need to share our experience. Shame happens between people, and it heals between people. If we can find someone who has earned the right to hear our story, we need to tell it. Shame loses power when it is spoken. In this way, we need to cultivate our story to let go of shame, and we need to develop shame resilience in order to cultivate our story.

After a decade of research, I found that men and women with high levels of shame resilience share these four elements:

1. They understand shame and recognize what messages and expectations trigger shame for them.
2. They practice critical awareness by reality-checking the messages and expectations that tell us that *being imperfect* means being inadequate.
3. They reach out and share their stories with people they trust.
4. They speak shame—they use the word *shame*, they talk about how they're feeling, and they ask for what they need.

When I think about the men and women in my study who spoke about the transformative power of story—the folks who own and share their stories—I realize that they are also people who practice shame resilience.

Because so much of worthiness and shame resilience is about owning our stories, I want to share one of my own shame-resilience stories with you. But before I do that, I want to address two

commonly asked questions about shame. I think it will help you wrap your head and heart around this tough topic.

What's the difference between shame and guilt? The majority of shame researchers and clinicians agree that the difference between shame and guilt is best understood as the differences between "I am bad" and "I did something bad."

Guilt = I did something bad.

Shame = I am bad.

Shame is about who we are, and guilt is about our behaviors. We feel guilty when we hold up something we've done or failed to do against the kind of person we want to be. It's an uncomfortable feeling, but one that's helpful. When we apologize for something we've done, make amends to others, or change a behavior that we don't feel good about, guilt is most often the motivator. Guilt is just as powerful as shame, but its effect is often positive while shame often is destructive. When we see people apologize, make amends, or replace negative behaviors with more positive ones, guilt is often the motivator, not shame. In fact, in my research, I found that shame corrodes the part of us that believes we can change and do better.²

Doesn't shame keep us in line? Along with many other professionals, I've come to the conclusion that shame is much more likely to lead to destructive and hurtful behaviors than it is to be the solution. Again, it is human nature to want to feel worthy of love and belonging. When we experience shame, we feel disconnected and desperate for worthiness. Full of shame or the fear of shame, we are more likely to engage in self-destructive behaviors and to attack or shame others. In fact, shame is related to violence, aggression, depression, addiction, eating disorders, and bullying.

Children who use more shame self-talk (*I am bad*) versus guilt self-talk (*I did something bad*) struggle mightily with issues of self-worth and self-loathing. Using shame to parent teaches children that they are not inherently worthy of love.

Shame Researcher Heal Thyself!

No matter how much you know about shame, it can sneak up on you (trust me, I speak from experience). You can be in the middle of a shame experience without even knowing what's happening and why. The good news is that, with enough practice, shame resilience can also sneak up on you! The following story not only illustrates the insidious nature of shame, it also reinforces the importance of speaking about shame and telling our story.

For several months in 2009, my blog was featured as an example site on the hosting company's main page. It was really fun because I got lots of traffic from people who wouldn't normally search out a blog on authenticity and courage. One day I got an e-mail from a woman who liked my layout and design. I felt proud and grateful ... until I got to this part of her e-mail:

I really like your blog. It's very creative and easy to read. The snap of you and your girl friend in the theater would be the only exception ... egads! I would never add a bad photo to a blog, but I am the photographer here.:-)

I couldn't believe it. The photo she was referring to was a picture that I had taken of my good friend Laura and me sitting in a dark theater waiting for the *Sex and the City* movie to start. It was opening day and we were feeling goofy and excited, so I pulled out my camera and snapped a picture.

I was so angry, confused, and shocked by this woman's comment about my picture, but I kept reading. She went on to ask a lot of questions about the blog's design and then closed her e-mail by explaining that she works with many "clueless parents" and that she plans to let them know about my

parenting work. *Whatever*. I was so pissed off.

I paced back and forth in the kitchen, then sat down to pound out an e-mail.

Draft #1 included this line: "Egads! I would never put down someone's photography, but I'm the shame researcher here."

Draft #2 included this line: "I checked out your photography online. If you're concerned about posting bad photos, I'd rethink posting your photos."

Draft #3 included this line: "If you're going to send a shitty e-mail, the least you can do is spell-check it. 'Their' does not mean 'they are.'"

Mean. Nasty. I didn't care. But I also didn't send it. Something in my body stopped me. I read over my attack e-mails, took a deep breath, and then raced into the bedroom. I threw on my running shoes and a baseball cap and hit the pavement. I needed to get out of the house and discharge the weird energy coursing through my veins.

About one mile into my walk, I called my good friend Laura, the friend who happens to appear with me in said theater picture. I told her about the woman's e-mail and she gasped, "Are you kidding me?"

"Nope. I'm not kidding. Wanna hear my three responses? I'm still trying to decide which one to use." I recited my "kill and destroy" responses, and she gasped again.

"Brené, those are really ballsy. I couldn't do it. I'd just be really hurt and probably cry." Laura and I talk about heavy stuff all of the time. We have a very comfortable rhythm. We can ping words all over the place or both get really quiet. We're always analyzing and saying things like, "Okay, stay with me ... I'm thinking ..." and "Does this make sense?" or "No. No. Wait. It's coming to me."

At this point in our conversation, I said, "Laura, don't say anything. I need to think about what you just said." For two or three minutes the only sound was my sweaty panting.

Finally, I said, "You would get your feelings hurt and cry?"

Laura reluctantly responded, "Yes. Why?"

"Well ...," I hesitated, "I'm thinking that crying and getting my feelings hurt would be the brave option for me."

Laura sounded surprised. "What do you mean?"

I explained the best I could. "Mean and nasty is my default setting. It doesn't take courage for me to be shaming back. I can use my shame superpowers for evil in a split second. Letting myself feel hurt—that's a totally different story. I think your default is my courage."

We talked about it for a while and decided that Laura's courage is acknowledging hurt without running from it, and my courage is acknowledging hurt and not hurting back. We also agreed that cruelty is never brave—it's mostly cheap and easy, especially in today's culture.

After talking for another mile or so, Laura asked, "Okay, now that we've got the acknowledging-hurt thing down, what would be the courageous thing for you to do with this e-mail?"

I fought back tears. "Be hurt. Cry. Tell you about it. Let it go. Delete the e-mail. Don't even respond."

Laura was quiet for a minute; then she blurted out, "Oh my God! That's shame resilience, right? You're practicing courage."

I was confused, like I had never heard the term before. "Huh? What do you mean?"

Laura patiently said, "Shame resilience—you know—your book? The blue one. The four elements of shame resilience: Name it. Talk about it. Own your story. Tell the story. Your book." We both started laughing. I thought to myself, *Holy crap. It works.*

A week later I was standing in front of a group of seventy graduate students who were taking my course on shame and empathy. I was talking about the four elements of shame resilience when one of the students raised her hand and asked for an example. I decided to tell the “egads” story. It’s such a great example of how shame can happen at a totally unconscious level and how important it is to name it and talk about it.

I set up the story by describing my blog and my new commitment to learn photography. I told them that I felt vulnerable about sharing my pictures, and I felt ashamed and belittled when I received this critical e-mail.

When I told them about my deep desire to respond with cruelty, several of the students buried their heads in their hands and others just looked away. I’m sure some were disappointed by my lack of enlightenment. Others looked plain scared.

One student raised his hand and said, “Can I ask a personal question?” Given that I was in the middle of sharing a vulnerable shame story, I figured that it couldn’t hurt. I was wrong.

He bravely said, “I hear you saying that it was about feeling criticized about your photography, but was that really the vulnerability? Did the shame come from feeling like you were being criticized for a bad picture, or were you ashamed because you’re allowing yourself to be vulnerable and open rather than closed and protected, and someone hurt you? Was it really about letting yourself be open to connection and getting hurt?”

My mouth got dry. I started sweating. I rubbed my forehead and then looked straight at the red-faced students.

“I can’t believe it! That’s exactly what happened. I didn’t know it until this minute, but that’s what happened. That’s exactly what happened. I took a goofy picture in the theater—something I don’t normally do, but I was with a close friend and we were feeling giddy and girly. I posted it online because I was excited and thought it was fun. Then someone criticized me.”

A couple of the students glared at their brave colleague like, *Way to go. You traumatized her.* But I didn’t feel traumatized. Or found out. Or exposed. I felt liberated. The story I needed to own in order to access my worthiness was not a story of a rookie photographer struggling with criticism over a photograph. It was the story of a pretty serious person being fun and spontaneous and goofy and imperfect and having someone poke at that vulnerability.

Resilience is often a slow unfolding of understanding. What did that experience mean to me? What were the gremlins mumbling? Not only do we need to own our story and love ourselves in the process, we have to figure out the real story! We also have to learn how we protect ourselves from shame if we want to develop worthiness.

What Does Shame Look Like?

When it comes to understanding how we defend ourselves against shame, I have the utmost respect for the work from the Stone Center at Wellesley. Dr. Linda Hartling, a former relational-cultural theorist at the Stone Center and now the director of Human Dignity and Humiliation Studies, uses the late Karen Horney’s work on moving toward, moving against, and moving away to outline the strategies of disconnection we use to deal with shame.³

According to Dr. Hartling, in order to deal with shame, some of us *move away* by withdrawing, hiding, silencing ourselves, and keeping secrets. Some of us *move toward* by seeking to appease and please. And, some of us *move against* by trying to gain power over others, by being aggressive, and by using shame to fight shame (like sending really mean e-mails).

Most of us use all of these—at different times with different folks for different reasons. Yet all of these strategies move us away from our story. Shame is about fear, blame, and disconnection. Story is about worthiness and embracing the imperfections that bring us courage, compassion, and connection. If we want to live fully, without the constant fear of not being enough, we have to own our story. We also have to respond to shame in a way that doesn't exacerbate our shame. One way to do that is to recognize when we're in shame so we can react with intention.

Shame is a full-contact emotion. Men and women with high levels of shame resilience know when shame is happening. The easiest way to know shame is to cultivate an awareness of our physical shame symptoms. As I mentioned in the chapter on courage, compassion, and connection, I know that I'm struggling with shame when that warm wash of inadequacy comes over me, my heart races, my face feels hot, my mouth gets dry, my armpits tingle, and time slows down. It's important to know our personal symptoms so we can get *deliberate* in our response to shame.

When we're in shame, we're not fit for human consumption. We need to get back on our emotional feet before we do, say, e-mail, or text something that we'll regret. I know that it will take me ten to fifteen minutes to pull myself together and that I will definitely cry before I'm ready. I'll also need to pray. Knowing this is such a gift.

If you want to kick-start your shame resilience and story-claiming, start with these questions. Figuring out the answers can change your life:

1. Who do you become when you're backed into that shame corner?
2. How do you protect yourself?
3. Who do you call to work through the mean-nasties or the cry-n-hides or the people-pleasing?
4. What's the most courageous thing you could do for yourself when you feel small and hurt?

Our stories are not meant for everyone. Hearing them is a privilege, and we should always ask ourselves this before we share: "Who has earned the right to hear my story?" If we have one or two people in our lives who can sit with us and hold space for our shame stories, and love us for our strengths and struggles, we are incredibly lucky. If we have a friend, or a small group of friends, or family who embraces our imperfections, vulnerabilities, and power, and fills us with a sense of belonging, we are incredible lucky.

We don't need love and belonging and story-catching from everyone in our lives, but we need it from at least one person. If we have that one person or that small group of confidants, the best way to acknowledge these connections is to acknowledge our worthiness. If we're working toward relationships based in love, belonging, and story, we have to start in the same place: I am worthy.



GUIDEPOST #1



Cultivating Authenticity

LETTING GO OF WHAT PEOPLE THINK

Often people attempt to live their lives backwards: they try to have more things, or more money, in order to do more of what they want so that they will be happier. The way it actually works is the reverse. You must first be who you really are, then do what you really need to do, in order to have what you want.

— Margaret Young

Before I started doing my research, I always thought of people as being either authentic or inauthentic. Authenticity was simply a quality that you had or that you were lacking. I think that's the way most of us use the term: "She's a very authentic person." But as I started immersing myself in the research and doing my own personal work, I realized that, like many desirable ways of being, authenticity is not something we have or don't have. It's a practice—a conscious choice of how we want to live.

Authenticity is a collection of choices that we have to make every day. It's about the choice to show up and be real. The choice to be honest. The choice to let our true selves be seen.

There are people who consciously practice being authentic, there are people who don't, and there are the rest of us who are authentic on some days and not so authentic on other days. Trust me, even though I know plenty about authenticity and it's something I work toward, if I am full of self-doubt or shame, I can sell myself out and be anybody you need me to be.

The idea that we can choose authenticity makes most of us feel both hopeful and exhausted. We feel hopeful because being real is something we value. Most of us are drawn to warm, down-to-earth, honest people, and we aspire to be like that in our own lives. We feel exhausted because without even giving it too much thought, most of us know that choosing authenticity in a culture that dictates everything from how much we're supposed to weigh to what our houses are supposed to look like is a huge undertaking.

Given the magnitude of the task at hand—be authentic in a culture that wants you to "fit in" and "people-please"—I decided to use my research to develop a definition of authenticity that I could use as a touchstone. What is the anatomy of authenticity? What are the parts that come together to create an authentic self? Here's what I developed:

Authenticity is the daily practice of letting go of who we think we're supposed to be and embracing who we are.

Choosing authenticity means

- *cultivating the courage to be imperfect, to set boundaries, and to allow ourselves to be vulnerable;*
- *exercising the compassion that comes from knowing that we are all made of strength and struggle; and*
- *nurturing the connection and sense of belonging that can only happen when we believe that we are enough.*

Authenticity demands Wholehearted living and loving—even when it's hard, even when we're wrestling with the shame and fear of not being good enough, and especially when the joy is so intense that we're afraid to let ourselves feel it.

You'll notice that many of the topics from the ten guideposts are woven throughout the definition. That theme will repeat itself throughout this book. All of the guideposts are interconnected and related to each other. My goal is to talk about them individually and collectively. I want us to explore how each of them works on its own and how they fit together. We'll spend the rest of the book unpacking terms like *perfection* so that we can understand why they're so important and what often gets in our way of living a Wholehearted life.

Choosing authenticity is not an easy choice. E. E. Cummings wrote, "To be nobody-but-yourself in a world which is doing its best, night and day, to make you everybody but yourself—means to fight the hardest battle which any human being can fight—and never stop fighting." "Staying real" is one of the most courageous battles that we'll ever fight.

When we choose to be true to ourselves, the people around us will struggle to make sense of how and why we are changing. Partners and children might feel fearful and unsure about the changes they're seeing. Friends and family may worry about how our authenticity practice will affect them and our relationships with them. Some will find inspiration in our new commitment; others may perceive that we're changing too much—maybe even abandoning them or holding up an uncomfortable mirror.

It's not so much the *act of authenticity* that challenges the status quo—I think of it as the *audacity of authenticity*. Most of us have shame triggers around being perceived as self-indulgent or self-focused. We don't want our authenticity to be perceived as selfish or narcissistic. When I first started mindfully practicing authenticity and worthiness, I felt like every day was a walk through a gauntlet of gremlins. Their voices can be loud and unrelenting:

- "What if I think I'm enough, but others don't?"
- "What if I let my imperfect self be seen and known, and nobody likes what they see?"
- "What if my friends/family/co-workers like the perfect me better ... you know, the one who takes care of everything and everyone?"

Sometimes, when we push the system, it pushes back. The pushback can be everything from eye rolls and whispers to relationship struggles and feelings of isolation. There can also be cruel and shaming responses to our authentic voices. In my research on authenticity and shame, I found that speaking out is a major shame trigger for women. Here's how the research participants described the struggle to be authentic:

- Don't make people feel uncomfortable but be honest.
- Don't upset anyone or hurt anyone's feelings but say what's on your mind.
- Sound informed and educated but not like a know-it-all.
- Don't say anything unpopular or controversial but have the courage to disagree with the crowd.

I also found that men and women struggle when their opinions, feelings, and beliefs conflict with our culture's gender expectations. For example, research on the attributes that we associate with "being feminine" tells us that some of the most important qualities for women are thin, nice, and modest.¹ That means if women want to play it totally safe, we have to be willing to stay as small, quiet, and attractive as possible.

When looking at the attributes associated with masculinity, the researchers identified these as

important attributes for men: emotional control, primacy of work, control over women, and pursuit of status.² That means if men want to play it safe, they need to stop feeling, start earning, and give up on meaningful connection.

The thing is ... authenticity isn't always the safe option. Sometimes choosing being real over being liked is all about playing it unsafe. It means stepping out of our comfort zone. And trust me, as someone who has stepped out on many occasions, it's easy to get knocked around when you're wandering through new territory.

It's easy to attack and criticize someone while he or she is risk-taking—voicing an unpopular opinion or sharing a new creation with the world or trying something new that he or she hasn't quite mastered. Cruelty is cheap, easy, and rampant. It's also chicken-shit. Especially when you attack and criticize anonymously—like technology allows so many people to do these days.

As we struggle to be authentic and brave, it's important to remember that cruelty always hurts, even if the criticisms are untrue. When we go against the grain and put ourselves and our work out in the world, some people will feel threatened and they will go after what hurts the most—our appearance, our lovability, and even our parenting.

The problem is that when we don't care at all what people think and we're immune to hurt, we're also ineffective at connecting. Courage is telling our story, not being immune to criticism. Staying vulnerable is a risk we have to take if we want to experience connection.

If you're like me, practicing authenticity can feel like a daunting choice—there's risk involved in putting your true self out in the world. But I believe there's even more risk in hiding yourself and your gifts from the world. Our unexpressed ideas, opinions, and contributions don't just go away. They are likely to fester and eat away at our worthiness. I think we should be born with a warning label similar to the ones that come on cigarette packages: *Caution: If you trade in your authenticity for safety, you may experience the following: anxiety, depression, eating disorders, addiction, rage, blame, resentment, and inexplicable grief.*

Sacrificing who we are for the sake of what other people think just isn't worth it. Yes, there can be authenticity growing pains for the people around us, but in the end, being true to ourselves is the best gift we can give the people we love. When I let go of trying to be everything to everyone, I had much more time, attention, love, and connection for the important people in my life. My authenticity practice can be hard on Steve and the kids—mostly because it requires time, energy, and attention. But the truth is that Steve, Ellen, and Charlie are engaged in the same struggle. We all are.

DIG Deep

Get Deliberate: Whenever I'm faced with a vulnerable situation, I get deliberate with my intentions by repeating this to myself: "Don't shrink. Don't puff up. Stand on your sacred ground." I think there's something deeply spiritual about standing your ground. Saying this little mantra helps me remember not to get small so other people are comfortable and not to throw up my armor as a way to protect myself.

Get Inspired: I'm inspired by everyone who shares their work and opinions with the world. Courage is contagious. My friend Katherine Center says, "You have to be brave with your life so that others can be brave with theirs."³

Get Going: I try to make authenticity my number one goal when I go into a situation where I'm

feeling vulnerable. If authenticity is my goal and I keep it real, I never regret it. I might get my feelings hurt, but I rarely feel shame. When acceptance or approval becomes my goal, and it doesn't work out, that can trigger shame for me: "I'm not good enough." If the goal is authenticity and they don't like me, I'm okay. If the goal is being liked and they don't like me, I'm in trouble. I get going by making authenticity the priority.

How do you DIG Deep?





Cultivating Self-Compassion

LETTING GO OF PERFECTIONISM

The thing that is really hard, and really amazing, is giving up on being perfect and beginning the work of becoming yourself.

— ANNA QUINDLEN¹

One of the best parts of my work is receiving letters and e-mails from readers. In early 2009, I received my one thousandth e-mail from a reader of *I Thought It Was Just Me*. To celebrate, I decided to facilitate an eight-week read-along of the book on my blog. I called it the *Shame.Less Joy.Full* read-along.

Basically, the read-along was a Web-based book club. We covered one chapter per week, and I offered posts, podcasts, discussions, and creative arts exercises along the way. The read-along is now on my blog, and people still use it—reading through the book with a group or friend is so much more powerful.

Just before the read-along started, I received an e-mail that said, “I love the idea of a read-along. I don’t think I have shame issues, but if you ever do something on perfectionism, I’ll be the first in line.” Her sign-off was followed by a short little sentence that read: “PS—shame and perfectionism aren’t related, are they?”

I e-mailed her back and explained the relationship between shame and perfectionism: Where perfectionism exists, shame is always lurking. In fact, shame is the birthplace of perfectionism.

I loved her response: “You might want to talk about that before WE start the read-along. My friends and I know that we struggle with perfectionism, but we don’t claim shame.”

We don’t claim shame. You can’t believe how many times I’ve heard that! I know *shame* is a daunting word. The problem is that when we don’t claim shame, it claims us. And one of the ways it sneaks into our lives is through perfectionism.

As a recovering perfectionist and an aspiring good-enoughist, I’ve found it extremely helpful to bust some of the myths about perfectionism so that we can develop a definition that accurately captures what it is and what it does to our lives.

- *Perfectionism is not the same thing as striving to be your best.* Perfectionism is *not* about healthy achievement and growth. Perfectionism is the belief that if we live perfect, look perfect, and act perfect, we can minimize or avoid the pain of blame, judgment, and shame. It’s a shield. Perfectionism is a twenty-ton shield that we lug around thinking it will protect us when, in fact, it’s the thing that’s really preventing us from taking flight.
- *Perfectionism is not self-improvement.* Perfectionism is, at its core, about trying to earn approval

and acceptance. Most perfectionists were raised being praised for achievement and performance (grades, manners, rule-following, people-pleasing, appearance, sports). Somewhere along the way, we adopt this dangerous and debilitating belief system: I am what I accomplish and how well I accomplish it. *Please. Perform. Perfect.* Healthy striving is self-focused—*How can I improve?* Perfectionism is other-focused—*What will they think?*

Understanding the difference between healthy striving and perfectionism is critical to laying down the shield and picking up your life. Research shows that perfectionism hampers success. In fact, it's often the path to depression, anxiety, addiction, and life-paralysis.² *Life-paralysis* refers to all of the opportunities we miss because we're too afraid to put anything out in the world that could be imperfect. It's also all of the dreams that we don't follow because of our deep fear of failing, making mistakes, and disappointing others. It's terrifying to risk when you're a perfectionist; your self-worth is on the line.

I put these three insights together to craft a definition of perfectionism (because you know how much I love to get words wrapped around my struggles!). It's long, but man has it helped me! It's also the “most requested” definition on my blog.

- *Perfectionism is a self-destructive and addictive belief system that fuels this primary thought:* If I look perfect, live perfectly, and do everything perfectly, I can avoid or minimize the painful feelings of shame, judgment, and blame.
- *Perfectionism is self-destructive simply because there is no such thing as perfect. Perfection is an unattainable goal. Additionally, perfectionism is more about perception—we want to be perceived as*
- *perfect. Again, this is unattainable—there is no way to control perception, regardless of how much time and energy we spend trying.*
- *Perfectionism is addictive because when we invariably do experience shame, judgment, and blame, we often believe it's because we weren't perfect enough. So rather than questioning the faulty logic of perfectionism, we become even more entrenched in our quest to live, look, and do everything just right.*
- *Feeling shamed, judged, and blamed (and the fear of these feelings) are realities of the human experience. Perfectionism actually increases the odds that we'll experience these painful emotions and often leads to self-blame:* It's my fault. I'm feeling this way because “I'm not good enough.”

To overcome perfectionism, we need to be able to acknowledge our vulnerabilities to the universal experiences of shame, judgment, and blame; develop shame resilience; and practice self-compassion. When we become more loving and compassionate with ourselves and we begin to practice shame resilience, we can embrace our imperfections. It is in the process of embracing our imperfections that we find our truest gifts: courage, compassion, and connection.

Based on my data, I don't think that some people are perfectionists and others are not. I think perfectionism exists along a continuum. We all have some perfectionistic tendencies. For some, perfectionism may only emerge when they're feeling particularly vulnerable. For others, perfectionism can be compulsive, chronic, and debilitating, similar to addiction.

I've started to work on my perfectionism, one messy piece at a time. In doing so, I finally understand (in my bones) the difference between perfectionism and healthy achieving. Exploring our fears and changing our self-talk are two critical steps in overcoming perfectionism.

Here's my example:

Like most women, I struggle with body image, self-confidence, and the always-complicated relationship between food and emotions. Here's the difference between perfectionism diets and healthy goals.

Perfectionism self-talk: "Ugh. Nothing fits. I'm fat and ugly. I'm ashamed of how I look. I need to be different than I am right now to be worthy of love and belonging."

Healthy-striving self-talk: "I want this for me. I want to feel better and be healthier. The scale doesn't dictate if I'm loved and accepted. If I believe that I'm worthy of love and respect now, I will invite courage, compassion, and connection into my life. I want to figure this out for me. I can do this."

For me, the results of this shift were life changing. Perfectionism didn't lead to results. It led to peanut butter.

I've also had to rely on the old "fake it 'til you make it" a few times. I think of it as practicing imperfection. For example, right after I started working on this definition, some friends dropped by our house. My then nine-year-old daughter, Ellen, shouted, "Mom! Don and Julie are at the door!" Our house was trashed, and I could tell by the sound of Ellen's voice that she was thinking, *Oh no! Mom's going to freak.*

I said, "Just a second," as I hurried to get dressed. She ran back to my room and said, "Do you want me to help pick up?"

I said, "No, I'm just getting dressed. I'm so glad they're here. What a nice surprise! Who cares about the house!" Then I put myself in a Serenity Prayer trance.

So, if we want to live and love with our whole hearts, how do we keep perfectionism from sabotaging our efforts? When I interviewed women and men who were engaging with the world from a place of authenticity and worthiness, I realized that they had a lot in common regarding perfectionism.

First, they spoke about their imperfections in a tender and honest way, and without shame and fear. Second, they were slow to judge themselves and others. They appeared to operate from a place of "We're all doing the best we can." Their courage, compassion, and connection seemed rooted in the way they treated themselves. I wasn't quite sure how to capture these attributes, but I assumed that they were separate qualities. That is until two years ago, when I found Dr. Kristin Neff's work on self-compassion. Let's explore the concept of self-compassion and why it's essential to practicing authenticity and embracing imperfection.

Self-Compassion

*A moment of self-compassion can change your entire day.
A string of such moments can change the course of your life.*

— CHRISTOPHER K. GERMER ³

Dr. Kristin Neff is a researcher and professor at the University of Texas at Austin. She runs the Self-Compassion Research Lab, where she studies how we develop and practice self-compassion. According to Neff, self-compassion has three elements: self-kindness, common humanity, and mindfulness.⁴ Here are abbreviated definitions for each of these:

- **Self-kindness:** Being warm and understanding toward ourselves when we suffer, fail, or feel inadequate, rather than ignoring our pain or flagellating ourselves with self-criticism.
- **Common humanity:** Common humanity recognizes that suffering and feelings of personal inadequacy are part of the shared human experience—something we all go through rather than something that happens to "me" alone.
- **Mindfulness:** Taking a balanced approach to negative emotions so that feelings are neither

suppressed nor exaggerated. We cannot ignore our pain and feel compassion for it at the same time. Mindfulness requires that we not “over-identify” with thoughts and feelings, so that we are caught up and swept away by negativity.

One of the many things that I love about Dr. Neff’s work is her definition of *mindfulness*. Many of us think that being mindful means not avoiding painful emotions. Her definition reminds us that mindfulness also means not over-identifying with or exaggerating our feelings. I think that’s key for those of us who struggle with perfectionism. I’ll give you the “perfect” example: I recently e-mailed an author to ask if I could quote her work in this book. I included the exact passage that I wanted to include so that she could make an informed choice. She generously said yes, but warned me against using the paragraph in the e-mail because I had misspelled her name.

I went into total perfection paralysis. “Oh my God! I’m writing to ask her if I can quote her and I misspell her name. She probably thinks I’m a total hack. Why was I so sloppy?” It wasn’t a shame attack—I didn’t get sucked under that far—but I also didn’t respond with self-compassion. I came close to being “swept away by negative reactivity.” Luckily, a draft of this chapter was on the table next to me. I looked down at it and smiled. *Be kind to yourself, Brené. This is not a big deal.*

Using this e-mail exchange as an example, you can see how my perfectionism and lack of self-compassion could easily lead to judgment. I think of myself as a sloppy hack because of one tiny mistake. By the same token, when I get an e-mail from someone and there are mistakes, I have a tendency to make sweeping judgments. It gets really dangerous if Ellen comes to me and says, “I just sent my teacher an e-mail, and I accidentally misspelled her name.” Do I say, “What? That’s unacceptable!” or do I say, “I’ve done the same thing—mistakes happen.”

Perfectionism never happens in a vacuum. It touches everyone around us. We pass it down to our children, we infect our workplace with impossible expectations, and it’s suffocating for our friends and families. Thankfully, compassion also spreads quickly. When we’re kind to ourselves, we create a reservoir of compassion that we can extend to others. Our children learn how to be self-compassionate by watching us, and the people around us feel free to be authentic and connected.

DIG Deep

Get Deliberate: One tool that’s helped me get deliberate about my self-compassion is Dr. Neff’s Self-Compassion Scale.⁵ It’s a short test that measures the elements of self-compassion (self-kindness, common humanity, and mindfulness) and the things that get in the way (self-judgment, isolation, and overidentification). The scale helped me to realize that I do really well in terms of common humanity and mindfulness, but self-kindness needs my constant attention. The Self-Compassion Scale and other wonderful information are available on Dr. Neff’s Web site: www.self-compassion.org.

Get Inspired: Most of us are trying to live an authentic life. Deep down, we want to take off our game face and be real and imperfect. There is a line from Leonard Cohen’s song “Anthem” that serves as a reminder to me when I get into that place where I’m trying to control everything and make it perfect.⁶ The line is, “There is a crack in everything. That’s how the light gets in.” So many of us run around spackling all of the cracks, trying to make everything look just right. This line helps me remember the beauty of the cracks (and the messy house and the imperfect manuscript and the too-tight jeans). It reminds me that our imperfections are not inadequacies; they are reminders that we’re all in this together. Imperfectly, but together.

Get Going: Sometimes it helps me to wake up in the morning and tell myself, “Today, I’m going to believe that showing up is enough.”

How do you DIG Deep?





Cultivating a Resilient Spirit

LETTING GO OF NUMBING AND POWERLESSNESS

She could never go back and make some of the details pretty. All she could do was move forward and make the whole beautiful.

[1](#)

—TERRI ST. CLOUD, WWW.BONESIGHARTS.COM

Resilience—the ability to overcome adversity—has been a growing topic of study since the early 1970s. In a world plagued by stress and struggle, everyone from psychologists, psychiatrists, and social workers to clergy and criminal justice researchers want to know why and how some folks are better at bouncing back from hardship than others. We want to understand why some people can cope with stress and trauma in a way that allows them to move forward in their lives, and why other people appear more affected and stuck.

As I collected and analyzed my data, I recognized that many of the people I interviewed were describing stories of resilience. I heard stories about people cultivating Wholehearted lives despite adversity. I learned about people's capacities to stay mindful and authentic under great stress and anxiety, and I heard people describe how they were able to transform trauma into Wholehearted thriving.

It wasn't difficult to recognize these stories as tales of resilience because I was in graduate school during the heyday of resilience research. I knew these narratives were threaded with what we call *protective factors*—the things we do, have, and practice that give us the bounce.

What Makes Up Resilience?

If you look at the current research, here are five of the most common factors of resilient people:

1. They are resourceful and have good problem-solving skills.
2. They are more likely to seek help.
3. They hold the belief that they can do something that will help them to manage their feelings and to cope.
4. They have social support available to them.
5. They are connected with others, such as family or friends.[2](#)

Of course, there are more factors, depending on the researchers, but these are the big ones.

At first, I hoped the patterns that I observed in my research would lead to a very straightforward conclusion—resilience is a core component of Wholeheartedness—just like the other guideposts. But there was something more to what I was hearing. The stories had more in common than just

resilience; all of these stories were about spirit.

According to the people I interviewed, the very foundation of the “protective factors”—the things that made them bouncy—was their spirituality. By spirituality, I’m not talking about religion or theology, but I am talking about a shared and deeply held belief. Based on the interviews, here’s how I define *spirituality*:

Spirituality is recognizing and celebrating that we are all inextricably connected to each other by a power greater than all of us, and that our connection to that power and to one another is grounded in love and compassion. Practicing spirituality brings a sense of perspective, meaning, and purpose to our lives.

Without exception, spirituality—the belief in connection, a power greater than self, and interconnections grounded in love and compassion—emerged as a component of resilience. Most people spoke of God, but not everyone. Some were occasional churchgoers; others were not. Some worshipped at fishing holes; others in temples, mosques, or at home. Some struggled with the idea of religion; others were devout members of organized religions. The one thing that they all had in common was spirituality as the foundation of their resilience.

From this foundation of spirituality, three other significant patterns emerged as being essential to resilience:

1. Cultivating hope
2. Practicing critical awareness
3. Letting go of numbing and taking the edge off vulnerability, discomfort, and pain

Let’s take a look at each of these and how they’re connected to resilience and spirit.

Hope and Powerlessness

As a researcher, I can’t think of two words that are more misunderstood than the words *hope* and *power*. As soon as I realized that hope is an important piece of Wholehearted living, I started investigating and found the work of C. R. Snyder, a former researcher at the University of Kansas, Lawrence.³ Like most people, I always thought of hope as an emotion—like a warm feeling of optimism and possibility. I was wrong.

I was shocked to discover that hope is *not* an emotion; it’s a way of thinking or a cognitive process. Emotions play a supporting role, but hope is really a thought process made up of what Snyder calls a trilogy of goals, pathways, and agency.⁴ In very simple terms, hope happens when

- We have the ability to set realistic goals (*I know where I want to go*).
- We are able to figure out how to achieve those goals, including the ability to stay flexible and develop alternative routes (*I know how to get there, I’m persistent, and I can tolerate disappointment and try again*).
- We believe in ourselves (*I can do this!*).

So, hope is a combination of setting goals, having the tenacity and perseverance to pursue them, and believing in our own abilities.

And, if that’s not news enough, here’s something else: Hope is learned! Snyder suggests that we learn hopeful, goal-directed thinking in the context of other people. Children most often learn hope from their parents. Snyder says that to learn hopefulness, children need relationships that are characterized by boundaries, consistency, and support. I think it’s so empowering to know that I have the ability to teach my children how to hope. It’s not a crapshoot. It’s a conscious choice.

To add to Snyder's work on hope, I found in my research that men and women who self-report as hopeful put considerable value on persistence and hard work. The new cultural belief that everything should be *fun, fast, and easy* is inconsistent with hopeful thinking. It also sets us up for hopelessness. When we experience something that is difficult and requires significant time and effort, we are quick to think, *This is supposed to be easy; it's not worth the effort*, or, *This should be easier: it's only hard and slow because I'm not good at it*. Hopeful self-talk sounds more like, *This is tough, but I can do it*.

On the other hand, for those of us who have the tendency to believe that everything worthwhile should involve pain and suffering (like yours truly), I've also learned that *never fun, fast, and easy* is as detrimental to hope as *always fun, fast, and easy*. Given my abilities to chase down a goal and bulldog it until it surrenders from pure exhaustion, I resented learning this. Before this research I believed that unless blood, sweat, and tears were involved, it must not be that important. I was wrong. Again.

We develop a hopeful mind-set when we understand that some worthy endeavors will be difficult and time consuming and not enjoyable at all. Hope also requires us to understand that just because the process of reaching a goal happens to be *fun, fast, and easy* doesn't mean that it has less value than a difficult goal. If we want to cultivate hopefulness, we have to be willing to be flexible and demonstrate perseverance. Not every goal will look and feel the same. Tolerance for disappointment, determination, and a belief in self are the heart of hope.

As a college professor and researcher, I spend a significant amount of time with teachers and school administrators. Over the past two years I've become increasingly concerned that we're raising children who have little tolerance for disappointment and have a strong sense of entitlement, which is very different than agency. Entitlement is "I deserve this just because I want it" and agency is "I know I can do this." The combination of fear of disappointment, entitlement, and performance pressure is a recipe for hopelessness and self-doubt.

Hopelessness is dangerous because it leads to feelings of powerlessness. Like the word *hope*, we often think of power as negative. It's not. The best definition of *power* comes from Martin Luther King Jr. He described power as the ability to effect change. If we question our need for power, think about this: *How do you feel when you believe that you are powerless to change something in your life?*

Powerlessness is dangerous. For most of us, the inability to effect change is a desperate feeling. We need resilience and hope and a spirit that can carry us through the doubt and fear. We need to believe that we can effect change if we want to live and love with our whole hearts.

Practicing Critical Awareness

Practicing critical awareness is about reality-checking the messages and expectations that drive the "never good enough" gremlins. From the time we wake up to the time our head hits the pillow at night, we are bombarded with messages and expectations about every aspect of our lives. From magazine ads and TV commercials to movies and music, we're told exactly what we should look like, how much we should weigh, how often we should have sex, how we should parent, how we should decorate our houses, and which car we should drive. It's absolutely overwhelming, and, in my opinion, no one is immune. Trying to avoid media messages is like holding your breath to avoid air pollution—it's not going to happen.

It's in our biology to trust what we see with our eyes. This makes living in a carefully edited, overproduced, and Photoshopped world very dangerous. If we want to cultivate a resilient spirit and stop falling prey to comparing our ordinary lives with manufactured images, we need to know how to reality-check what we see. We need to be able to ask and answer these questions:

1. Is what I'm seeing real? Do these images convey real life or fantasy?
2. Do these images reflect healthy, Wholehearted living, or do they turn my life, my body, my family, and my relationships into objects and commodities?
3. Who benefits by my seeing these images and feeling bad about myself? Hint: This is *ALWAYS* about money and/or control.

In addition to being essential to resilience, practicing critical awareness is actually one of the four elements of shame resilience. Shame works like the zoom lens on a camera. When we are feeling shame, the camera is zoomed in tight and all we see is our flawed selves, alone and struggling. We think to ourselves, *I'm the only one with a muffin-top? Am I the only one with a family who is messy, loud, and out of control? Am I the only one not having sex 4.3 times per week (with a Calvin Klein model)? Something is wrong with me. I am alone.*

When we zoom out, we start to see a completely different picture. We see many people in the same struggle. Rather than thinking, *I'm the only one*, we start thinking, *I can't believe it! You too? I'm normal? I thought it was just me!* Once we start to see the big picture, we are better able to reality-check our shame triggers and the messages and expectations that we're never good enough.

In my experiences as a teacher and shame researcher, I have found incredible insight and wisdom in the work of Jean Kilbourne and Jackson Katz. Both Kilbourne and Katz explore the relationship of media images to actual problems in the society, such as violence, the sexual abuse of children, pornography and censorship, masculinity and loneliness, teenage pregnancy, addiction, and eating disorders. Kilbourne writes, “Advertising is an over \$200 billion a year industry. We are each exposed to over 3000 ads a day. Yet, remarkably, most of us believe we are not influenced by advertising. Ads sell a great deal more than products. They sell values, images, and concepts of success and worth, love and sexuality, popularity and normalcy. They tell us who we are and who we should be. Sometimes they sell addictions.”⁵ I highly recommend Kilbourne’s and Katz’s DVDs—they’ve changed the way I see the world and myself. (Jean Kilbourne’s latest DVD is *Killing Us Softly 4*,⁶ and Katz’s DVD is titled *Tough Guise: Violence, Media, and the Crisis in Masculinity*.⁷)

As I mentioned earlier, practicing spirituality brings perspective, meaning, and purpose to our lives. When we allow ourselves to become culturally conditioned to believe that we are not enough and that we don’t make enough or have enough, it damages our soul. This is why I think practicing critical awareness and reality-checking is as much about spirituality as it is about critical thinking.

Numbing and Taking the Edge Off

I talked to many research participants who were struggling with worthiness. When we talked about how they dealt with difficult emotions (such as shame, grief, fear, despair, disappointment, and sadness), I heard over and over about the need to numb and take the edge off of feelings that cause vulnerability, discomfort, and pain. Participants described engaging in behaviors that numbed their feelings or helped them to avoid experiencing pain. Some of these participants were fully aware that their behaviors had a numbing effect, while others did not seem to make that connection. When I interviewed the participants whom I’d describe as living a Wholehearted life about the same topic, they consistently talked about *trying to feel the feelings, staying mindful about numbing behaviors, and trying to lean into the discomfort of hard emotions*.

I knew this was a critically important finding in my research, so I spent several hundred interviews trying to better understand the consequences of numbing and how taking the edge off behaviors is related to addiction. Here’s what I learned:

1. Most of us engage in behaviors (consciously or not) that help us to numb and take the edge off of vulnerability, pain, and discomfort.
2. Addiction can be described as chronically and compulsively numbing and taking the edge off of feelings.
3. We cannot selectively numb emotions. When we numb the painful emotions, we also numb the positive emotions.

The most powerful emotions that we experience have very sharp points, like the tip of a thorn. When they prick us, they cause discomfort and even pain. Just the anticipation or fear of these feelings can trigger intolerable vulnerability in us. We know it's coming. For many of us, our first response to vulnerability and pain of these sharp points is not to lean into the discomfort and feel our way through but rather to make it go away. We do that by numbing and taking the edge off the pain with whatever provides the quickest relief. We can anesthetize with a whole bunch of stuff, including alcohol, drugs, food, sex, relationships, money, work, caretaking, gambling, staying busy, affairs, chaos, shopping, planning, perfectionism, constant change, and the Internet.

Before conducting this research I thought that numbing and taking the edge off was just about addiction, but I don't believe that anymore. Now I believe that everyone numbs and takes the edge off and that addiction is about engaging in these behaviors compulsively and chronically. The men and women in my study whom I would describe as fully engaged in Wholehearted living were not immune to numbing. The primary difference seemed to be that they were aware of the dangers of numbing and had developed the ability to feel their way through high-vulnerability experiences.

I definitely believe that genetics and neurobiology can play a critical role in addiction, but I also believe that there are countless people out there struggling with numbing and taking the edge off because the disease model of addiction doesn't fit their experiences as closely as a model that takes numbing processes into consideration. Not everyone's addiction is the same.

When I first started my research, I was very familiar with addiction. If you've read *I Thought It Was Just Me*, or if you follow my blog, you probably know that I've been sober for close to fifteen years. I've always been very up front about my experiences, but I haven't written about it in great detail because until I started working through this new research on Wholeheartedness, I didn't really understand it.

Now I get it.

My confusion stemmed from the fact that I never have felt completely in sync with the recovery community. Abstinence and the Twelve Steps are powerful and profoundly important principles in my life, but not everything about the recovery movement fits for me. For example, millions of people owe their lives to the power that comes from saying, "Hi, I'm (name), and I'm an alcoholic." That's never fit for me. Even though I'm grateful for my sobriety, and I'm convinced that it has radically changed my life, saying those words has always felt disempowering and strangely disingenuous for me.

I have often wondered if I felt out of place because I quit so many things at one time. My first sponsor couldn't figure out what meeting I needed and was perplexed by my "very high bottom" (I quit drinking because I wanted to learn more about true self, and my wild party-girl persona kept getting in the way). She looked at me one night and said, "You have the pupu platter of addictions—a little bit of everything. To be safe, it would be best if you just quit drinking, smoking, comfort-eating, and getting in your family's business."

I remember looking at her, throwing my fork on the table, and saying, "Well, that's just awesome. I guess I'll have some free time on my hands for all of the meetings." I never found my meeting. I quit

drinking and smoking the day after I finished my master's degree and made my way through enough meetings to work the Steps and get one year of sobriety under my belt.

Now I know why.

I've spent most of my life trying to outrun vulnerability and uncertainty. I wasn't raised with the skills and emotional practice needed to "lean into discomfort," so over time I basically became a take-the-edge-off-aholic. But they don't have meetings for that. And after some brief experimenting, I learned that describing your addiction that way in a meeting doesn't always go over very well with the purists.

For me, it wasn't just the dance halls, cold beer, and Marlboro Lights of my youth that got out of hand—it was banana bread, chips and queso, e-mail, work, staying busy, incessant worrying, planning, perfectionism, and anything else that could dull those agonizing and anxiety-fueled feelings of vulnerability.

I've had a couple of friends respond to my "I'm a take-the-edge-off-aholic" with concern about their own habits: "I drink a couple of glasses of wine every night—is that bad?" "I always shop when I'm stressed or depressed." "I come out of my skin if I'm not always going and staying busy."

Again, after years of research, I'm convinced that we all numb and take the edge off. The question is, does our _____ (eating, drinking, spending, gambling, saving the world, incessant gossiping, perfectionism, sixty-hour workweek) get in the way of our authenticity? Does it stop us from being emotionally honest and setting boundaries and feeling like we're enough? Does it keep us from staying out of judgment and from feeling connected? Are we using _____ to hide or escape from the reality of our lives?

Understanding my behaviors and feelings through a vulnerability lens rather than strictly through an addiction lens changed my entire life. It also strengthened my commitment to sobriety, abstinence, health, and spirituality. I can definitely say, "Hi. My name is Brené, and today I'd like to deal with vulnerability and uncertainty with an apple fritter, a beer and cigarette, and spending seven hours on Facebook." That feels uncomfortably honest.

When We Numb the Dark, We Numb the Light

In another very unexpected discovery, my research also taught me that there's no such thing as selective emotional numbing. There is a full spectrum of human emotions and when we numb the dark, we numb the light. While I was "taking the edge off" of the pain and vulnerability, I was also unintentionally dulling my experiences of good feelings, like joy. Looking back, I can't imagine any research finding that has changed what my daily life looks like more than this. Now I can lean into joy, even when it makes me feel tender and vulnerable. In fact, I expect tender and vulnerable.

Joy is as thorny and sharp as any of the dark emotions. To love someone fiercely, to believe in something with your whole heart, to celebrate a fleeting moment in time, to fully engage in a life that doesn't come with guarantees—these are risks that involve vulnerability and often pain. When we lose our tolerance for discomfort, we lose joy. In fact, addiction research shows us that an intensely positive experience is as likely to cause relapse as an intensely painful experience.⁸

We can't make a list of all of the "bad" emotions and say, "I'm going to numb these" and then make a list of the positive emotions and say, "I'm going to fully engage in these!" You can imagine the vicious cycle this creates: I don't experience much joy so I have no reservoir to draw from when hard things happen. They feel even more painful, so I numb. I numb so I don't experience joy. And so on.

More on joy is coming in the [next chapter](#). For now, as the sharp edges have started to come back

in my own life, I'm learning that recognizing and leaning into the discomfort of vulnerability teaches us how to live with joy, gratitude, and grace. I'm also learning that the uncomfortable and scary leaning requires both spirit and resilience.

The most difficult thing about what I'm proposing in this chapter is captured by a question that I get a lot (especially from my colleagues in the academic world): Is spirituality a necessary component for resilience? The answer is yes.

Feelings of hopelessness, fear, blame, pain, discomfort, vulnerability, and disconnection sabotage resilience. The only experience that seems broad and fierce enough to combat a list like that is the belief that we're all in this together and that something greater than us has the capacity to bring love and compassion into our lives.

Again, I didn't find that any one interpretation of spirituality has the corner on the resilience market. It's not about denominations or dogma. Practicing spirituality is what brings healing and creates resilience. For me, spirituality is about connecting with God, and I do that most often through nature, community, and music. We all have to define spirituality in a way that inspires us.

Whether we're overcoming adversity, surviving trauma, or dealing with stress and anxiety, having a sense of purpose, meaning, and perspective in our lives allows us to develop understanding and move forward. Without purpose, meaning, and perspective, it is easy to lose hope, numb our emotions, or become overwhelmed by our circumstances. We feel reduced, less capable, and lost in the face of struggle. The heart of spirituality is connection. When we believe in that inextricable connection, we don't feel alone.

DIG Deep

Get Deliberate: A good friend of mine heard this wonderful intention-setting reminder during a Twelve Step meeting. I love it! It's called the vowel check: AEIOUY.

A = Have I been **Absent** today? (However you define that—I find it a little more challenging when it comes to things like food, work, and the computer.)

E = Have I **Exercised** today?

I = What have I **done** for myself today?

O = What have I **done** for Others today?

U = Am I holding onto **Unexpressed emotions** today?

Y = Yeah! What is something good that's happened today?

Get Inspired: I'm inspired by this quote from writer and researcher Elisabeth Kübler-Ross: "People are like stained-glass windows. They sparkle and shine when the sun is out, but when the darkness sets in, their beauty is revealed only if there is a light from within." I really do believe the light that I saw within the resilient people I interviewed was their spirit. I love the idea of being "lit from within."

Get Going: I love daily meditations and prayers. Sometimes the best way for me to get going is quiet prayer.

How do you DIG Deep?





Cultivating Gratitude and Joy

LETTING GO OF SCARCITY AND FEAR OF THE DARK

Earlier I mentioned how surprised I was to see certain concepts from my research emerge in pairs or groups. These “collections of concepts” have created major paradigm shifts for me in terms of the way I think about my life and the choices I make every day.

A good example of this is the way that love and belonging go together. Now I understand that in order to feel a true sense of belonging, I need to bring the real me to the table and that I can only do that if I’m practicing self-love. For years I thought it was the other way around: I’ll do whatever it takes to fit in, I’ll feel accepted, and that will make me like myself better. *Just typing those words and thinking about how many years I spent living that way makes me weary. No wonder I was tired for so long!*

In many ways, this research has not only taught me new ways to think about how I want to live and love, it’s taught me about the relationship between my experiences and choices. One of the most profound changes in my life happened when I got my head around the relationship between gratitude and joy. I always thought that joyful people were grateful people. I mean, why wouldn’t they be? They have all of that goodness to be grateful for. But after spending countless hours collecting stories about joy and gratitude, three powerful patterns emerged:

- Without exception, every person I interviewed who described living a joyful life or who described themselves as joyful, actively practiced gratitude and attributed their joyfulness to their gratitude practice.
- Both joy and gratitude were described as spiritual practices that were bound to a belief in human interconnectedness and a power greater than us.
- People were quick to point out the differences between happiness and joy as the difference between a human emotion that’s connected to circumstances and a spiritual way of engaging with the world that’s connected to practicing gratitude.

Gratitude

When it comes to gratitude, the word that jumped out at me throughout this research process is *practice*. I don’t necessarily think another researcher would have been so taken aback, but as someone who thought that knowledge was more important than practice, I found these words to be a call to action. In fact, it’s safe to say that reluctantly recognizing the importance of practice sparked my 2007 Breakdown Spiritual Awakening.

For years, I subscribed to the notion of an “attitude of gratitude.” I’ve since learned that an attitude is an orientation or a way of thinking and that “having an attitude” doesn’t always translate to a behavior.

For example, it would be reasonable to say that I have a yoga attitude. The ideals and beliefs that guide my life are very in line with the ideas and beliefs that I associate with yoga. I value mindfulness, breathing, and the body-mind-spirit connection. I even have yoga outfits. But, let me assure you, my yoga attitude and outfits don’t mean jack if you put me on a yoga mat and ask me to stand on my head or strike a pose. As I’m sitting here writing this, I’ve never practiced yoga. I plan to change that between now and the time you’re holding this book in your hand, but to date, I’ve never put the attitude into action. So where it really matters—on the mat—my yoga attitude doesn’t count for much.

So, what does a gratitude practice look like? The folks I interviewed talked about keeping gratitude journals, doing daily gratitude meditations or prayers, creating gratitude art, and even stopping during their stressful, busy days to actually say these words out loud: “I am grateful for ...” When the Wholehearted talk about gratitude, there are a whole bunch of verbs involved. It seems that gratitude without practice may be a little like faith without works—it’s not alive.

What Is Joy?

Joy seems to me a step beyond happiness. Happiness is a sort of atmosphere you can live in sometimes when you're lucky. Joy is a light that fills you with hope and faith and love.

— ADELA ROGERS ST. JOHNS

The research has taught me that happiness and joy are different experiences. In the interviews, people would often say something like, “Being grateful and joyful doesn’t mean that I’m happy all of the time.” On many occasions I would delve deeper into those types of statements by asking, “What does it look like when you’re joyful and grateful, but not happy?” The answers were all similar: Happiness is tied to circumstance and joyfulness is tied to spirit and gratitude.

I also learned that neither joy nor happiness is constant; no one feels happy all of the time or joyful all of the time. Both experiences come and go. Happiness is attached to external situations and events and seems to ebb and flow as those circumstances come and go. Joy seems to be constantly tethered to our hearts by spirit and gratitude. But our actual experiences of joy—these intense feelings of deep spiritual connection and pleasure—seize us in a very vulnerable way.

After these differences emerged from my data, I looked around to find what other researchers had written about joy and happiness. Interestingly, the explanation that seemed to best describe my findings was from a theologian.

Anne Robertson, a Methodist pastor, writer, and executive director of the Massachusetts Bible Society, explains how the Greek origins of the words *happiness* and *joy* hold important meaning for us today. She explains that the Greek word for happiness is *Makarios*, which was used to describe the freedom of the rich from normal cares and worries, or to describe a person who received some form of good fortune, such as money or health. Robertson compares this to the Greek word for joy which is *chairo*. *Chairo* was described by the ancient Greeks as the “culmination of being” and the “good mood of the soul.” Robertson writes, “*Chairo* is something, the ancient Greeks tell us, that is found only in God and comes with virtue and wisdom. It isn’t a beginner’s virtue; it comes as the culmination. They say its opposite is not sadness, but fear.”¹

We need both happiness and joy. I think it’s important to create and recognize the experiences that make us happy. In fact, I’m a big fan of Gretchen Rubin’s book *The Happiness Project* and Tal Ben-Shahar’s research and book *Happier*. But in addition to creating happiness in our lives, I’ve learned

that we need to cultivate the spiritual practices that lead to joyfulness, especially gratitude. In my own life, I'd like to experience more happiness, but I want to *live* from a place of gratitude and joy. To do this, I think we have to take a hard look at the things that get in the way of gratitude and joy, and to some degree, even happiness.

Scarcity and Fear of the Dark

The very first time I tried to write about what gets in the way of gratitude and joy, I was sitting on the couch in my living room with my laptop next to me and my research memo journal in my hands. I was tired and rather than writing, I spent an hour staring at the twinkle lights hanging over the entryway into my dining room. I'm a huge fan of those little clear, sparkly lights. I think they make the world look prettier, so I keep them in my house year-round.

As I sat there flipping through the stories and gazing at the twinkle lights, I took out a pen and wrote this down:

Twinkle lights are the perfect metaphor for joy. Joy is not a constant. It comes to us in moments—often ordinary moments. Sometimes we miss out on the bursts of joy because we're too busy chasing down extraordinary moments. Other times we're so afraid of the dark that we don't dare let ourselves enjoy the light.

A joyful life is not a floodlight of joy. That would eventually become unbearable.

I believe a joyful life is made up of joyful moments gracefully strung together by trust, gratitude, inspiration, and faith.

For those of you who follow my blog, you'll recognize this as the mantra for my gratitude posts on Fridays that I call TGIF. I turned this quote into a small badge, and part of my gratitude practice is a weekly post about what I'm *Trusting*, what I'm *Grateful* for, what Inspires me, and how I'm practicing my *Faith*. It's incredibly powerful to read everyone's comments.

Joy and gratitude can be very vulnerable and intense experiences. We are an anxious people and many of us have very little tolerance for vulnerability. Our anxiety and fear can manifest as scarcity. We think to ourselves:

- *I'm not going to allow myself to feel this joy because I know it won't last.*
- *Acknowledging how grateful I am is an invitation for disaster.*
- *I'd rather not be joyful than have to wait for the other shoe to drop.*

Fear of the Dark

I've always been prone to worry and anxiety, but after I became a mother, negotiating joy, gratitude, and scarcity felt like a full-time job. For years, my fear of something terrible happening to my children actually prevented me from fully embracing joy and gratitude. Every time I came too close to softening into sheer joyfulness about my children and how much I love them, I'd picture something terrible happening; I'd picture losing everything in a flash.

At first I thought I was crazy. Was I the only person in the world who did this? As my therapist and I started working on it, I realized that "my too good to be true" was totally related to fear, scarcity, and vulnerability. Knowing that those are pretty universal emotions, I gathered up the courage to talk about my experiences with a group of five hundred parents who had come to one of my parenting lectures. I gave an example of standing over my daughter watching her sleep, feeling totally engulfed in gratitude, then being ripped out of that joy and gratitude by images of something bad happening to her.

You could have heard a pin drop. I thought, *Oh, God. I'm crazy and now they're all sitting there*

like, “She’s a nut. How do we get out of here?” Then all of the sudden I heard the sound of a woman toward the back starting to cry. Not sniffle cry, but sob cry. That sound was followed by someone from the front shouting out, “Oh my God! Why do we do that? What does it mean?” The auditorium erupted in some kind of crazy parent revival. As I had suspected, I was not alone.

Most of us have experienced being on the edge of joy only to be overcome by vulnerability and thrown into fear. Until we can tolerate vulnerability and transform it into gratitude, intense feelings of love will often bring up the fear of loss. If I had to sum up what I’ve learned about fear and joy, this is what I would say:

The dark does not destroy the light; it defines it. It's our fear of the dark that casts our joy into the shadows.

Scarcity

These are anxious and fearful times, both of which breed scarcity. We’re afraid to lose what we love the most, and we hate that there are no guarantees. We think not being grateful and not feeling joy will make it hurt less. We think if we can beat vulnerability to the punch by imaging loss, we’ll suffer less. We’re wrong. There is one guarantee: If we’re not practicing gratitude and allowing ourselves to know joy, we are missing out on the two things that will actually sustain us during the inevitable hard times.

What I’m describing above is scarcity of safety and uncertainty. But there are other kinds of scarcity. My friend Lynne Twist has written an incredible book called *The Soul of Money*. In this book, Lynne addresses the myth of scarcity. She writes,

For me, and for many of us, our first waking thought of the day is “I didn’t get enough sleep.” The next one is “I don’t have enough time.” Whether true or not, that thought of *not enough* occurs to us automatically before we even think to question or examine it. We spend most of the hours and the days of our lives hearing, explaining, complaining, or worrying about what we don’t have enough of ... We don’t have enough exercise. We don’t have enough work. We don’t have enough profits. We don’t have enough power. We don’t have enough wilderness. We don’t have enough weekends. Of course, we don’t have enough money—ever.

We’re not thin enough, we’re not smart enough, we’re not pretty enough or fit enough or educated or successful enough, or rich enough—ever. Before we even sit up in bed, before our feet touch the floor, we’re already inadequate, already behind, already losing, already lacking something. And by the time we go to bed at night, our minds race with a litany of what we didn’t get, or didn’t get done, that day. We go to sleep burdened by those thoughts and wake up to the reverie of lack ... What begins as a simple

²

expression of the hurried life, or even the challenged life, grows into the great justification for an unfulfilled life.

As I read this passage, it makes total sense to me why we’re a nation hungry for more joy: Because we’re starving from a lack of gratitude. Lynne says that addressing scarcity doesn’t mean searching for abundance but rather choosing a mind-set of sufficiency:

We each have the choice in any setting to step back and let go of the mindset of scarcity. Once we let go of scarcity, we discover the surprising truth of sufficiency. By sufficiency, I don’t mean a quantity of anything. Sufficiency isn’t two steps up from poverty or one step short of abundance. It isn’t a measure of barely enough or more than enough. Sufficiency isn’t an amount at all. It is an experience, a context we generate, a declaration, a knowing that there is enough, and that we are enough

³

Sufficiency resides inside of each of us, and we can call it forward. It is a consciousness, an attention, an intentional choosing of the way we think about our circumstances.

Scarcity is also great fuel for the gremlins. In my earlier shame research and in this more recent research, I realized how many of us have bought into the idea that something has to be extraordinary if it’s going to bring us joy. In *I Thought It Was Just Me*, I write, “We seem to measure the value of people’s contributions (and sometimes their entire lives) by their level of public recognition. In other words, worth is measured by fame and fortune. Our culture is quick to dismiss quiet, ordinary, hardworking men and women. In many instances, we equate *ordinary* with *boring* or, even more dangerous, *ordinary* has become synonymous with *meaningless*.⁴

I think I learned the most about the value of ordinary from interviewing men and women who have experienced tremendous loss such as the loss of a child, violence, genocide, and trauma. The memories that they held most sacred were the ordinary, everyday moments. It was clear that their most precious memories were forged from a collection of ordinary moments, and their hope for others is that they would stop long enough to be grateful for those moments and the joy they bring. Author and spiritual leader Marianne Williamson says, “Joy is what happens to us when we allow ourselves to recognize how good things really are.”

DIG Deep

Get Deliberate: When I'm flooded with fear and scarcity, I try to call forward joy and sufficiency by acknowledging the fear, then transforming it into gratitude. I say this out loud: "I'm feeling vulnerable. That's okay. I'm so grateful for _____." Doing this has absolutely increased my capacity for joy.

Get Inspired: I'm so inspired by the daily doses of joy that happen in those ordinary moments, like walking my kids home from school, jumping on the trampoline, and sharing family meals. Acknowledging that these moments are really what life is about has changed my outlook on work, family, and success.

Get Going: From taking turns being thankful during grace to more creative projects like creating a jar to keep gratitude notes in, we're making Wholeheartedness a family affair.

How do you DIG Deep?





Cultivating Intuition and Trusting Faith

LETTING GO OF THE NEED FOR CERTAINTY

Everything about this research process has pushed me in ways that I never imagined. This is especially true when it comes to topics like faith, intuition, and spirituality. When the importance of intuition and faith first emerged as key patterns in Wholehearted living, I winced a little bit. Once again, I felt like my good friends—logic and reason—were under attack. I remember telling Steve, “Now it’s intuition and faith! Can you believe it?”

He replied, “I’m surprised that you’re surprised. You work off of faith and your gut all of the time.”

He took me off guard with his comment.

I sat down next to him and said, “Yeah, I know I’m a gut and faith kinda girl, but I guess I’m not very intuitive. Read this definition from the dictionary: ‘Intuition is direct perception of truth or fact, independent of any reasoning process.’”¹

Steve chuckled, “So, maybe the definition doesn’t match what you’re learning from the data. You’ll write a new one. It won’t be the first time.”

I spent a year focusing on intuition and faith. I interviewed and collected stories so that I could get my head and heart around what it means to cultivate intuition and trust faith. I was surprised by what I learned.

Intuition

Intuition is not independent of any reasoning process. In fact, psychologists believe that intuition is a rapid-fire, unconscious associating process—like a mental puzzle.² The brain makes an observation, scans its files, and matches the observation with existing memories, knowledge, and experiences. Once it puts together a series of matches, we get a “gut” on what we’ve observed.

Sometimes our intuition or our gut tells us what we need to know; other times it actually steers us toward fact-finding and reasoning. As it turns out, intuition may be the quiet voice within, but that voice is not limited to one message. Sometimes our intuition whispers, “Follow your instincts.” Other times it shouts, “You need to check this out; we don’t have enough information!”

In my research, I found that what silences our intuitive voice is our need for certainty. Most of us are not very good at not knowing. We like sure things and guarantees so much that we don’t pay attention to the outcomes of our brain’s matching process.

For example, rather than respecting a strong internal instinct, we become fearful and look for

assurances from others.

- “What do you think?”
- “Should I do it?”
- “Do you think it’s a good idea, or do you think I’ll regret it?”
- “What would you do?”

A typical response to these survey questions is, “I’m not sure what you should do. What does your gut say?”

And there it is. *What does your gut say?*

We shake our head and say, “I’m not sure” when the real answer is, “I have no idea what my gut says; we haven’t spoken in years.”

When we start polling people, it’s often because we don’t trust our own knowing. It feels too shaky and too uncertain. We want assurances and folks with whom we can share the blame if things don’t pan out. I know all about this. I’m a professional pollster—it’s hard for me to go it alone sometimes. When I’m making a difficult decision and feel disconnected from my intuition, I have a tendency to survey everyone around me. Ironically, since doing this research, surveying has become a red flag for me—it tells me that I’m feeling vulnerable about making a decision.

As I mentioned earlier, if we learn to trust our intuition, it can even tell us that we don’t have a good instinct on something and that we need more data. Another example of how our need for certainty sabotages our intuition is when we ignore our gut’s warning to slow down, gather more information, or reality-check our expectations:

- “I’m just going to do it. I don’t care anymore.”
- “I’m tired of thinking about it. It’s too stressful.”
- “I’d rather just do it than wait another second.”
- “I can’t stand not knowing.”

When we charge headlong into big decisions, it may be because we don’t want to know the answers that will emerge from doing due diligence. We know that fact-finding might lead us away from what we think we want.

I always tell myself, “If I’m afraid to run the numbers or put pencil to paper, I shouldn’t do it.” When we just want to get the decision-making over with, it’s a good idea to ask ourselves whether we simply can’t stand the vulnerability of being still long enough to think it through and make a mindful decision.

So, as you can see, intuition isn’t always about accessing the answers from within. Sometimes when we’ve tapped into our inner wisdom, it tells us that we don’t know enough to make a decision without more investigation. Here’s the definition I crafted from the research:

Intuition is not a single way of knowing—it’s our ability to hold space for uncertainty and our willingness to trust the many ways we’ve developed knowledge and insight, including instinct, experience, faith, and reason.

Faith

I’ve come to realize that faith and reason are not natural enemies. It’s our human need for certainty and our need to “be right” that have pitted faith and reason against each other in an almost reckless way. We force ourselves to choose and defend one way of knowing the world at the expense of the other.

I understand that faith and reason can clash and create uncomfortable tensions—those tensions play out in my life, and I can feel them in my bones. But this work has forced me to see that it's our fear of the unknown and our fear of being wrong that create most of our conflict and anxiety. We need both faith and reason to make meaning in an uncertain world.

I can't tell you how many times I've heard the terms *having faith* and *my faith* in my interviews with men and women who are living the Wholehearted journey. At first I thought that faith meant "there's a reason for everything." I personally struggled with that because I'm not comfortable with using God or faith or spirituality to explain tragedy. It actually feels like substituting certainty for faith when people say, "There's a reason for everything."

But I quickly learned from the interviews that faith meant something else to these people. Here's how I define *faith* based on the research interviews:

Faith is a place of mystery, where we find the courage to believe in what we cannot see and the strength to let go of our fear of uncertainty.

I also learned that it's not always the scientists who struggle with faith and the religious who fully embrace uncertainty. Many forms of fundamentalism and extremism are about choosing certainty over faith.

I love this from theologian Richard Rohr: "My scientist friends have come up with things like 'principles of uncertainty' and dark holes. They're willing to live inside imagined hypotheses and theories. But many religious folks insist on *answers* that are *always* true. We love closure, resolution and clarity, while thinking that we are people of 'faith'! How strange that the very word 'faith' has come to mean its exact opposite."³

Faith is essential when we decide to live and love with our whole hearts in a world where most of us want assurances before we risk being vulnerable and getting hurt. To say, "I'm going to engage Wholeheartedly in my life" requires believing without seeing.

DIG DEEP

Get Deliberate: Letting go of certainty is one of my greatest challenges. I even have a physical response to "not knowing"—it's anxiety and fear and vulnerability combined. That's when I have to get very quiet and still. With my kids and my busy life, that can mean hiding in the garage or driving around the block. Whatever it takes, I have to find a way to be still so I can hear what I'm saying.

Get Inspired: The process of reclaiming my spiritual and faith life was not an easy one (hence the 2007 ~~Breakdown~~ Spiritual Awakening). There's a quote that literally cracked open my heart. It's from a book by Anne Lamott: "The opposite of faith is not doubt, but certainty."⁴ Her books about faith and grace inspire me.⁵ I'm inspired by and thankful for *When the Heart Waits* by Sue Monk Kidd⁶ and Pema Chödrön's *Comfortable with Uncertainty*⁷; they saved me. And last, I absolutely love this quote from Paulo Coelho's *The Alchemist*: "... intuition is really a sudden immersion of the soul into the universal current of life, where the histories of all people are connected, and we are able to know everything, because it's all written there."⁸

Get Going: When I'm really scared or unsure, I need something right away to calm my cravings for certainty. For me, the Serenity Prayer does the trick. *God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference.* Amen!





Cultivating Creativity

LETTING GO OF COMPARISON

Some of my best childhood memories involve creativity, and almost all of them are from the years that we lived in New Orleans, in a funky, pink stucco duplex a couple of blocks from Tulane University. I remember my mom and me spending hours painting wooden key chains shaped like turtles and snails, and making crafts out of sequins and felt with my friends.

I can vividly see my mom and her friends in their bell-bottoms coming home from the market in the French Quarter and making stuffed mirlitons and other delicious dishes. I was so fascinated with helping her in the kitchen that one Sunday afternoon she and my dad let me cook alone. They said I could make anything I wanted with any ingredient that I wanted. I made oatmeal-raisin cookies. With crawfish boil spices instead of cinnamon. The entire house stank for days.

My mom also loved to sew. She made matching shift dresses that she and I wore (along with my doll, who also had her own tiny matching dress). It's so strange to me that all of these memories that involve creating are so real and textured to me—I can almost feel them and smell them. They also hold so much tender meaning.

Sadly, my memories of creating end around age eight or nine. In fact, I don't have a single creativity memory after about fifth grade. That was the same time that we moved from our tiny house in the Garden District to a big house in a sprawling Houston suburb. Everything seemed to change. In New Orleans, every wall in our house was covered with art done by my mom or a relative or us kids, and homemade curtains hung over every window. The art and curtains may have been out of necessity, but I remember it being beautiful.

In Houston, I remember walking into some of my new neighbors' houses and thinking that their living rooms looked like the lobby of a fancy hotel—I vividly remember thinking at the time, *like a Howard Johnson or a Holiday Inn*. There were long heavy drapes, big sofas with matching chairs, and shiny glass tables. There were plastic plants with hanging vines strategically sitting on top of armoires, and dried flowers in baskets decorating the tops of tables. Strangely, everyone's lobby kinda looked the same.

While the houses were all the same and fancy, the school was a different story. In New Orleans, I went to a Catholic school and everyone looked the same, prayed the same, and, for the most part, acted the same. In Houston I started public school, which meant no more uniforms. In this new school, cute clothes counted. And not homemade cute clothes, but clothes from "the mall."

In New Orleans, my dad worked during the day and was a law student at Loyola at night. There was always an informal and fun feel to our lives there. Once we got to Houston, he dressed up every morning and commuted to an oil and gas corporation along with every other father in our

neighborhood. Things changed, and in many ways that move felt like a fundamental shift for our family. My parents were launched on the accomplishments-and-acquisitions track, and creativity gave way to that stifling combination of fitting in and being better than, also known as comparison.

Comparison is all about conformity and competition. At first it seems like conforming and competing are mutually exclusive, but they're not. When we compare, we want to see who or what is best out of a specific collection of "alike things." We may compare things like how we parent with parents who have totally different values or traditions than us, but the comparisons that get us really riled up are the ones we make with the folks living next door, or on our child's soccer team, or at our school. We don't compare our houses to the mansions across town; we compare our yard to the yards on our block. When we compare, we want to be the best or have the best of our group.

The comparison mandate becomes this crushing paradox of "fit in and stand out!" It's not cultivate self-acceptance, belonging, and authenticity; it's be just like everyone else, but better.

It's easy to see how difficult it is to make time for the important things such as creativity, gratitude, joy, and authenticity when we're spending enormous amounts of energy conforming and competing. Now I understand why my dear friend Laura Williams always says, "Comparison is the thief of happiness." I can't tell you how many times I'm feeling so good about myself and my life and my family, and then in a split second it's gone because I consciously or unconsciously start comparing myself to other people.

As far as my own story, the older I got, the less value I put on creativity and the less time I spent creating. When people asked me about crafting or art or creating, I relied on the standard, "I'm not the creative type." On the inside I was really thinking, *Who has time for painting and scrapbooking and photography when the real work of achieving and accomplishing needs to be done?*

By the time I was forty and working on this research, my lack of interest in creativity had turned into disdain. I'm not sure if I would categorize my feelings about creativity as negative stereotypes, shame triggers, or some combination of the two, but it came to the point where I thought of creating for the sake of creating as self-indulgent at best and flaky at worst.

Of course I know, professionally, that the more entrenched and reactive we are about an issue, the more we need to investigate our responses. As I look back with new eyes, I think tapping into how much I missed that part of my life would have been too confusing or painful.

I never thought I'd come across something fierce enough to shake me loose from my entrenched beliefs about creativity. Then this research came along ...

Let me sum up what I've learned about creativity from the world of Wholehearted living and loving:

1. "I'm not very creative" doesn't work. There's no such thing as creative people and non-creative people. There are only people who use their creativity and people who don't. Unused creativity doesn't just disappear. It lives within us until it's expressed, neglected to death, or suffocated by resentment and fear.
2. The only unique contribution that we will ever make in this world will be born of our creativity.
3. If we want to make meaning, we need to make art. Cook, write, draw, doodle, paint, scrapbook, take pictures, collage, knit, rebuild an engine, sculpt, dance, decorate, act, sing—it doesn't matter. As long as we're creating, we're cultivating meaning.

Literally one month after I worked through the data on creativity, I signed up for a gourd-painting class. I'm not even kidding. I went with my mom and Ellen, and it was one of the best days of my life.

For the first time in decades, I started creating. And I haven't stopped. I even took up photography.

It might sound cliché, but the world doesn't even look the same to me anymore. I see beauty and potential everywhere—in my front yard, at a junk store, in an old magazine—everywhere.

It's been a very emotional transition for me and for my family. Both of my kids love art, and we do family projects together all the time. Steve and I are Mac addicts, and we love to make movies together. Last month, Ellen told us that she either wants to be a chef or a “life artist” like my friend Ali Edwards, who inspires both of us. At this point, Charlie loves to paint and would like to own a booger store (which is both creative and entrepreneurial).

I also realized that much of what I do in my work is creative work. Writer William Plomer described creativity as “the power to connect the seemingly unconnected.” My work is all about making connections, so part of my transformation was owning and celebrating my existing creativity.

Letting go of comparison is not a to-do list item. For most of us, it’s something that requires constant awareness. It’s so easy to take our eyes off our path to check out what others are doing and if they’re ahead or behind us. Creativity, which is the expression of our originality, helps us stay mindful that what we bring to the world is completely original and cannot be compared. And, without comparison, concepts like *ahead* or *behind* or *best* or *worst* lose their meaning.

DIG Deep

Get Deliberate: If creativity is seen as a luxury or something we do when we have spare time, it will never be cultivated. I carve out time every week to take and process photographs, make movies, and do art projects with the kids. When I make creating a priority, everything in my life works better.

Get Inspired: Nothing inspires me more than my friendship with the Lovebombers, a group of artists, writers, and photographers whom I met online and spend a long weekend with every year. I think it’s so important to find and be a part of a community of like-spirited people who share your beliefs about creativity.

Get Going: Take a class. Risk feeling vulnerable and new and imperfect and take a class. There are wonderful online classes if you need more flexibility. Try something that scares you or something you’ve dreamt about trying. You never know where you’ll find your creative inspiration.

How do you DIG Deep?





Cultivating Play and Rest

LETTING GO OF EXHAUSTION AS A STATUS SYMBOL
AND PRODUCTIVITY AS SELF-WORTH

At times, when I was interviewing people for my research, I felt like an alien—like a visitor trying to figure out the customs and habits of people living lives that looked incredibly different from mine. There were many awkward moments when I struggled to understand what *they, the Wholehearted*, were doing and why. Sometimes the concepts were so foreign to me that I didn’t have the language to name them. This was one of those times.

I remember telling one of my colleagues, “These Wholehearted people fool around a lot.” She laughed and asked, “Fool around? How?”

I shrugged, “I don’t know. They have fun and … I don’t know what you call it. They hang out and do fun things.”

She looked confused. “Like what kind of fun things? Hobbies? Crafts? Sports?”

“Yes,” I replied. “Kinda like that but not so organized. I’m going to have to dig around some more.”

Now I look back on that conversation and think, *How did I not know what I was seeing?* Was I so personally removed from this concept that I couldn’t recognize it?

It’s *play!* A critically important component of Wholehearted living is play!

I came to this realization by watching my children and recognizing the same playful behaviors in them that were described by the men and women I interviewed. These folks play.

Researching the concept of play got off to a rocky start. I learned this very quickly: Do not Google “Adult play.” I was closing pornography pop-ups so fast it was like playing *Whac-A-Mole*.

Once I recovered from that search disaster, I was lucky enough to find the work of Dr. Stuart Brown. Dr. Brown is a psychiatrist, clinical researcher, and founder of the National Institute for Play. He is also the author of a wonderful book titled, *Play: How It Shapes the Brain, Opens the Imagination, and Invigorates the Soul.*¹

Drawing on his own research, as well as the latest advances in biology, psychology, and neurology, Brown explains that play shapes our brain, helps us foster empathy, helps us navigate complex social groups, and is at the core of creativity and innovation.

If you’re wondering why play and rest are paired together in this guidepost, it’s because after reading the research on play, I now understand that play is as essential to our health and functioning as rest.

So, if you’re like me, you want to know, “What exactly is play?” Brown proposes seven properties

of play, the first of which is that play is apparently purposeless. Basically this means that we play for the sake of play. We do it because it's fun and we want to.

Well, this is where my work as a shame researcher comes in. In today's culture—where our self-worth is tied to our net worth, and we base our worthiness on our level of productivity—spending time doing purposeless activities is rare. In fact, for many of us it sounds like an anxiety attack waiting to happen.

We've got so much to do and so little time that the idea of spending time doing anything unrelated to the to-do list actually creates stress. We convince ourselves that playing is a waste of precious time. We even convince ourselves that sleep is a terrible use of our time.

We've got to *get 'er done!* It doesn't matter if our job is running a multimillion-dollar company, raising a family, creating art, or finishing school, we've got to keep our noses to the grindstone and work! There's no time to play around!

But Brown argues that play is not an option. In fact he writes, "The opposite of play is not work—the opposite of play is depression." He explains, "Respecting our biologically programmed need for play can transform work. It can bring back excitement and newness to our job. Play helps us deal with difficulties, provides a sense of expansiveness, promotes mastery of our craft, and is an essential part of the creative process. Most important, true play that comes from our own inner needs and desires is the only path to finding lasting joy and satisfaction in our work. In the long run, work does not work without play."²

What's shocking is the similarity between the biological need for play and our body's need for rest, a topic that also emerged as a major theme in Wholehearted living. It seems that living and loving with our whole hearts requires us to respect our bodies' need for renewal. When I first researched the ideas of rest, sleep, and *sleep debt*—the term for not getting enough—I couldn't believe some of the consequences of not getting proper rest.

According to the Centers for Disease Control, insufficient sleep is associated with a number of chronic diseases and conditions, such as diabetes, heart disease, obesity, and depression.³ We're also learning that drowsy driving can be as dangerous—and as preventable—as driving while intoxicated. Yet, somehow many of us still believe that exhaustion is a status symbol of hard work and that sleep is a luxury. The result is that we are so very tired. Dangerously tired.

The same gremlins that tell us we're too busy to play and waste time fooling around are the ones that whisper:

- "One more hour of work! You can catch up on your sleep this weekend."
- "Napping is for slackers."
- "Push through. You can handle it."

But the truth is, we can't handle it. We are a nation of exhausted and overstressed adults raising overscheduled children. We use our spare time to desperately search for joy and meaning in our lives. We think accomplishments and acquisitions will bring joy and meaning, but that pursuit could be the very thing that's keeping us so tired and afraid to slow down.

If we want to live a Wholehearted life, we have to become intentional about cultivating sleep and play, and about letting go of exhaustion as a status symbol and productivity as self-worth.

Making the choice to rest and play is, at best, counterculture. The decision to let go of exhaustion and productivity as badges of honor made total sense to Steve and me, but putting Wholeheartedness into practice has been a struggle for our entire family.

Steve and I sat down in 2008 and made a practical list of the things that make our family work. We basically answered the question, “When things are going really well in our family, what does it look like?” The answers included sleep, working out, healthy food, cooking, time off, weekends away, going to church, being present with the kids, a sense of control over our money, meaningful work that doesn’t consume us, time to piddle, time with family and close friends, and time to just hang out. These were (and are) our “ingredients for joy and meaning.”

Then we looked at the dream list that we started making a couple of years ago (and keep adding to). Everything on this list was an accomplishment or an acquisition—a house with more bedrooms, a trip here, personal salary goals, professional endeavors, and so forth. Everything required that we make more money and spend more money.

When we compared our dream list to our “joy and meaning” list, we realized that by merely letting go of the list of things we want to accomplish and acquire, we would be actually living our dream—not striving to make it happen in the future, but living it right now. The things we were working toward did nothing in terms of making our life fuller.

Embracing our “joy and meaning” list has not been easy. There are days when it makes perfect sense, and then there are days when I get sucked into believing how much better everything would feel if we just had a really great guest room or a better kitchen, or if I got to speak here or write an article for that popular magazine.

Even Ellen has had to make some changes. Last year, we told her that we were going to limit her extracurricular activities and that she would have to make choices between multiple sports and Girl Scouts and after-school activities. At first there was some resistance. She pointed out that she did fewer things than most of her friends. This was true. She has many friends who are in two or three sports every semester and take music lessons and language lessons and art classes. These kids wake up at 6 a.m. and go to bed at 10 p.m.

We explained that the “cutting down” was part of a larger family plan. I had decided to go part-time at the university, and her dad was going to a four-day workweek. She looked at us as if she were bracing for bad news. She asked, “Is anything wrong?”

We explained that we wanted more downtime. More time to hang out and take it easy. After we swore that we weren’t sick, she got excited and asked, “Are we making time for more TV?”

I explained, “No. Just more family play time. Your dad and I love our work, but it can be very demanding. I travel and have writing deadlines; your dad has to be on call. You also work hard at your schoolwork. We want to make sure that we schedule in downtime for all of us.”

While this experience may sound great, it was terrifying for me as a parent. What if I’m wrong? What if busy and exhausted is what it takes? What if she doesn’t get to go to the college of her choice because she doesn’t play the violin and speak Mandarin and French and she doesn’t play six sports?

What if we’re normal and quiet and happy? Does that count?

I guess the answer to this is only yes if it counts to us. If what matters to us is what we’re concerned about, then play and rest is important. If what matters to us is what other people think or say or value, then it’s back to exhaustion and producing for self-worth.

Today, I choose play and rest.

DIG Deep

Get Deliberate: One of the best things that we’ve ever done in our family is making the “ingredients for joy and meaning” list. I encourage you to sit down and make a list of the specific conditions that

are in place when everything feels good in your life. Then check that list against your to-do list and your to-accomplish list. It might surprise you.

Get Inspired: I'm continually inspired by Stuart Brown's work on play and Daniel Pink's book *A Whole New Mind*.⁴ If you want to learn more about the importance of play and rest, read these books.

Get Going: Say *no* today. Buck the system. Take something off your list and add "take a nap."

How do you DIG Deep?





Cultivating Calm and Stillness

LETTING GO OF ANXIETY AS A LIFESTYLE

After this research first emerged, remember that I made a beeline for my therapist's office. I knew my life was out of balance, and I wanted more of what I was learning about in my study. I also wanted to figure out why I was having dizzy spells whenever I got really anxious and stressed out. I would actually get lightheaded, and the room would start to spin. A couple of times, I literally fell over.

The dizziness was new; the anxiety was not. Before I started learning about Wholehearted living, I had always been able to manage the competing priorities, the family demands, and the unrelenting pressure of academic life. In many ways, anxiety was a constant in my life.

But as I started developing an awareness about Wholehearted living, it's as if my body said, "I'm going to help you embrace this new way of living by making it very difficult for you to ignore anxiety." If I became too anxiety ridden, I'd literally have to sit down or risk falling.

I remember telling Diana, my therapist, "I can't function this way any longer. I really can't."

She replied, "I know. I see that. What do you think you need?"

I thought about it for a second and said, "I need a way to stay on my feet when I'm really anxious."

She just sat there nodding her head and waiting, like therapists do. Waiting and waiting and waiting.

Finally, it dawned on me. "Oh. I get it. I can't function *this way*. I can't function in this much anxiety anymore. I don't need to figure out a way to keep going with this level of anxiety—I need to figure out how to be less anxious."

That silence thing can be effective. It's a pain in the ass, but nonetheless effective.

I used my research to formulate a plan to lessen my anxiety. The men and women I interviewed weren't anxiety-free or even anxiety-averse; they were anxiety-aware. They were committed to a way of living where anxiety was a reality but not a lifestyle. They did this by cultivating calm and stillness in their lives and making these practices the norm.

Calm and stillness may sound like the same things, but I learned that they are different and that we need both.

Calm

I define *calm* as *creating perspective and mindfulness while managing emotional reactivity*. When I think about calm people, I think about people who can bring perspective to complicated situations and feel their feelings without reacting to heightened emotions like fear and anger.

When I was pregnant with Ellen, someone gave me a small book called *Baby Love: A Tradition of*

Calm Parenting by Maud Bryt.¹ Bryt's mother, grandmother, and great-grandmother were midwives in Holland and the book draws on their wisdom. I can still see myself sitting in my brand-new glider with one hand resting on my very pregnant belly and the other hand holding that book. I remember thinking, *This is my goal. I want to be a calm parent.*

Surprisingly, I am a pretty calm parent. Not because it comes naturally to me, but because I practice. A lot. I also have an incredible role model in my husband, Steve. By watching him, I've learned about the value of bringing perspective and quiet to difficult situations.

I try to be slow to respond and quick to think *Do we even have all the information we need to make a decision or form a response?* I also stay very mindful about the effect that calm has on an anxious person or situation. A panicked response produces more panic and more fear. As psychologist and writer Harriet Lerner says, "Anxiety is extremely contagious, but so is calm."² The question becomes, *Do we want to infect people with more anxiety, or heal ourselves and the people around us with calm?*

If we choose to heal with calm, we have to commit to practicing calm. Small things matter. For example, before we respond we can count to ten or give ourselves permission to say, "I'm not sure. I need to think about this some more." It's also extremely effective to identify the emotions that are the most likely to spark your reactivity and then practice non-reactive responses.

A couple of years ago there was this powerful public service announcement that showed a couple screaming at each other and slamming the door in each other's faces. They were shouting things like, "I hate you!" and "Mind your own business!" and "I don't want to talk to you." As you watched it, you had no idea what or why they kept saying these things, slamming the door, and then starting over. After about twenty seconds of the slamming and yelling, the couple held hands and walked away from screen. One of them says to the other, "I think we're ready." The commercial then cut to the announcer, who said something like, "Talk to your kids about drugs. It's not easy, but it could save their lives."

The commercial is a great example of practicing calm. Unless we had calm modeled by our parents and grew up practicing it, it's unlikely that it will be our default response to anxious or emotionally volatile situations.

For me, breathing is the best place to start. Just taking a breath before I respond slows me down and immediately starts spreading calm. Sometimes I actually think to myself, *I'm dying to freak out here! Do I have enough information to freak out? Will freaking out help?* The answer is always *no*.

Stillness

The concept of stillness is less complicated than the concept of calm but, for me at least, way more difficult to put into practice.

I wish I could tell you how much I resisted even hearing people describe stillness as an integral part of their Wholehearted journey. From meditation and prayer to regular periods of quiet reflection and alone time, men and women spoke about the necessity of quieting their bodies and minds as a way to feel less anxious and overwhelmed.

I'm sure my resistance to this idea comes from the fact that just thinking about meditating makes me anxious. When I try to meditate, I feel like a total poser. I spend the entire time thinking about how I need to stop thinking, *Okay, I'm not thinking about anything. I'm not thinking about anything. Milk, diapers, laundry detergent ... stop!* *Okay, not thinking. Not thinking. Oh, man. Is this over yet?*

I don't want to admit it, but the truth is that stillness used to be very anxiety provoking for me. In my mind, being still was narrowly defined as sitting cross-legged on the floor and focusing on that

elusive nothingness. As I collected and analyzed more stories, I realized that my initial thinking was wrong. Here's the definition of *stillness* that emerged from the data:

Stillness is not about focusing on nothingness; it's about creating a clearing. It's opening up an emotionally clutter-free space and allowing ourselves to feel and think and dream and question.

Once we can let go of our assumptions about what stillness is supposed to look like and find a way to create a clearing that works for us, we stand a better chance of opening ourselves up and confronting the next barrier to stillness: fear. And it can be big, big fear.

If we stop long enough to create a quiet emotional clearing, the truth of our lives will invariably catch up with us. We convince ourselves that if we stay busy enough and keep moving, reality won't be able to keep up. So we stay in front of the truth about how tired and scared and confused and overwhelmed we sometimes feel. Of course, the irony is that the thing that's wearing us down is trying to stay out in front of feeling worn down. This is the self-perpetuating quality of anxiety. It feeds on itself. I often say that when they start having Twelve Step meetings for busy-aholics, they'll need to rent out football stadiums.

In addition to fear, another barrier that gets in the way of both stillness and calm is how we're raised to think about these practices. From very early in our lives, we get confusing messages about the value of calm and stillness. Parents and teachers scream, "Calm down!" and "Sit still!" rather than actually modeling the behaviors they want to see. So instead of becoming practices that we want to cultivate, calm gives way to perpetuating anxiety, and the idea of stillness makes us feel jumpy.

In our increasingly complicated and anxious world, we need more time to do less and be less. When we first start cultivating calm and stillness in our lives, it can be difficult, especially when we realize how stress and anxiety define so much of our daily lives. But as our practices become stronger, anxiety loses its hold and we gain clarity about what we're doing, where we're going, and what holds true meaning for us.

DIG Deep

Get Deliberate: My anxiety detox included more calm and more stillness, but it also included more exercise and less caffeine. I know so many people who take something at night to help them sleep and drink caffeine all day to stay awake. Calm and stillness are potent medicine for general sleeplessness and a lack of energy. Increasing my daily intake of calm and stillness along with walking and swimming and cutting caffeine has done wonders for my life.

Get Inspired: I remain inspired and transformed by something I learned from Harriet Lerner's book *The Dance of Connection*.³ Dr. Lerner explains that we all have patterned ways of managing anxiety. Some of us respond to anxiety by *overfunctioning* and others by *underfunctioning*. Overfunctioners tend to move quickly to advise, rescue, take over, micromanage, and get in other people's business rather than look inward. Underfunctioners tend to get less competent under stress. They invite others to take over and often become the focus of family gossip, worry, or concern. They can get labeled as the "irresponsible one" or the "the problem child" or the "fragile one." Dr. Lerner explains that seeing these behaviors as patterned responses to anxiety, rather than truths about who we are, can help us understand that we can change. Overfunctioners, like me, can become more willing to embrace our vulnerabilities in the face of anxiety, and underfunctioners can work to amplify their strengths and competencies.

Get Going: Experiment with different forms of still and quiet. We all need to find something that

works for us. To be honest, I'm never more open and emotionally clutter-free than when I'm walking alone outside. It's not technically still, but it's an emotional opening for me.

How do you DIG Deep?





Cultivating Meaningful Work

LETTING GO OF SELF-DOUBT AND "SUPPOSED TO"

In the chapter on creativity, I wrote that a significant part of my work involves making connections. In fact, the heart of my work is finding and naming the subtle and often unspoken connections between how we think, feel, and act. Sometimes the connections are easy to spot and fall right into place. Other times they are elusive, and trying to put things together feels messy and tangled. This guidepost started out as one of those messy and tangled experiences, but with time, I learned about some striking connections.

Early in this research, it was clear to me that living a Wholehearted life included engaging in what many people I interviewed called *meaningful work*. Others spoke of having a calling. And some simply described feeling a tremendous sense of accomplishment and purpose from their work. It all seemed pretty straightforward, except for this pesky list of words that emerged as being important and somehow *connected* to the quest for meaningful work:

- gifts and talents
- spirituality
- making a living
- commitment
- supposed to's
- self-doubt

I say pesky because it took me a long time to figure out how they all worked together. The exhausted part of me wanted to forget about these “extra” words, much like what Steve does when he puts together furniture from IKEA and there are twelve unused screws when he’s done. I wanted to stand back, give it a little shake, and say, “Good enough! These must be extras.”

But I couldn’t. So I took apart the idea of meaningful work, interviewed more participants, found the connections, and rebuilt the guidepost. This is what emerged:

- *We all have gifts and talents.* When we cultivate those gifts and share them with the world, we create a sense of meaning and purpose in our lives.
- *Squandering our gifts brings distress to our lives.* As it turns out, it’s not merely benign or “too bad” if we don’t use the gifts that we’ve been given; we pay for it with our emotional and physical well-being. When we don’t use our talents to cultivate meaningful work, we struggle. We feel disconnected and weighed down by feelings of emptiness, frustration, resentment, shame, disappointment, fear, and even grief.

- Most of us who are searching for spiritual connection spend too much time looking up at the sky and wondering why God lives so far away. God lives within us, not above us. *Sharing our gifts and talents with the world is the most powerful source of connection with God.*
- *Using our gifts and talents to create meaningful work takes a tremendous amount of commitment*, because in many cases the meaningful work is not what pays the bills. Some folks have managed to align everything—they use their gifts and talents to do work that feeds their souls and their families; however, most people piece it together.
- No one can define what's meaningful for us. Culture doesn't get to dictate if it's working outside the home, raising children, lawyering, teaching, or painting. *Like our gifts and talents, meaning is unique to each one of us.*

Self-Doubt and “Supposed To”

The gauntlet of gremlins can get in the way of cultivating meaningful work. They start by taunting us about our gifts and talents:

- “Maybe everyone has special gifts ... *except for you*. Maybe that's why you haven't found them yet.”
- “Yes, you do that well, but that's not really a gift. It's not big enough or important enough to be a real talent.”

Self-doubt undermines the process of finding our gifts and sharing them with the world. Moreover, if developing and sharing our gifts is how we honor spirit and connect with God, self-doubt is letting our fear undermine our faith.

The gremlins get lots of mileage out of “supposed to”—the battle cry of fitting in, perfectionism, people-pleasing, and proving ourselves:

- “You're supposed to care about making money, not meaning.”
- “You're supposed to grow up and be a _____. Everyone's counting on it.”
- “You're supposed to hate your work; that's the definition of work.”
- “If you're brave, you're supposed to quit your job and follow your bliss. Don't worry about money!”
- “You're supposed to choose: Work you love or work that supports the people you love.”

To overcome self-doubt and “supposed to,” we have to start owning the messages. What makes us afraid? What's on our “supposed to” list? Who says? Why?

Gremlins are like toddlers. If you ignore them, they get louder. It's usually best to just acknowledge the messages. Write them down. I know it seems counterintuitive, but writing them down and owning the gremlins' messages doesn't give the messages more power; it gives us more power. It gives us the opportunity to say, “I get it. I see that I'm afraid of this, but I'm going to do it anyway.”

Nice to Meet You. What Do You Do?

In addition to the gremlins, another thing that gets in the way of meaningful work is the struggle to define who we are and what we do in an honest way. In a world that values the primacy of work, the most common question that we ask and get asked is, “What do you do?” I used to wince every time someone asked me this question. I felt like my choices were to reduce myself to an easily digestible

sound bite or to confuse the hell out of people.

Now my answer to “What do you do?” is, “How much time do you have?”

Most of us have complicated answers to this question. For example, I’m a mom, partner, researcher, writer, storyteller, sister, friend, daughter, and teacher. All of these things make up who I am, so I never know how to answer that question. And, to be honest with you, I’m tired of choosing to make it easier on the person who asked.

In 2009, I met Marci Alboher, an author/speaker/coach. If you’re wondering what’s up with the slashes, I think they’re very appropriate as Marci is the author of *One Person/Multiple Careers: A New Model for Work/Life Success*.¹

Alboher interviewed hundreds of people pursuing multiple careers simultaneously and discovered how slash careers—researcher/storyteller, artist/real estate agent—integrate and fully express the multiple passions, talents, and interests that a single career cannot accommodate. Marci’s book is full of stories about people who have created meaningful work by refusing to be defined by a single career. Examples include a longshoreman/documentary filmmaker, a management consultant/cartoonist, a lawyer/chef, a rabbi/stand-up comic, a surgeon/playwright, an investment manager/rapper, and a therapist/violin maker.

I wanted to share the idea of the slash effect with you because in the blogging, art, and writing world, I meet so many people who are afraid to claim their work. For example, I recently met a woman at a social media conference who is an accountant/jeweler. I was excited to meet her, because I had bought a beautiful pair of earrings from her online. When I asked her how long she had been a jeweler, she blushed and said, “I wish. I’m a CPA. I’m not a real jeweler.”

I thought to myself, *I’m wearing your earrings right now, not your abacus*. When I pointed to my ears and said, “Of course you’re a jewelry maker!” she just smiled and replied, “I don’t make very much money doing that. I just do it because I love it.” As ludicrous as that sounded to me, I get it. I hate calling myself a writer because it doesn’t feel legitimate to me. I’m not writer *enough*. Overcoming self-doubt is all about believing we’re enough and letting go of what the world says we’re supposed to be and supposed to call ourselves.

Every semester I share this quote by theologian Howard Thurman with my graduate students. It’s always been one of my favorites, but now that I’ve studied the importance of meaningful work, it’s taken on new significance: “Don’t ask what the world needs. Ask what makes you come alive, and go do it. Because what the world needs is people who have come alive.”

DIG Deep

Get Deliberate: It can take some time to figure out how to get deliberate about doing meaningful work. I finally got very specific and wrote down my own criteria for “meaningful.” Right now, just for me, I want my work to be inspiring, contemplative, and creative. I’m using these as a filter to make decisions about what I do/what I commit to/how I spend my time.

Get Inspired: I highly recommend Marci Alboher’s *One Person/ Multiple Careers*. It includes lots of practical strategies for living the slash. Malcom Gladwell is also a constant source of inspiration for me. In his book *Outliers*, Gladwell proposes that there are three criteria for meaningful work—complexity, autonomy, and a relationship between effort and reward—and that these can often be found in creative work.² These criteria absolutely fit with what cultivating meaningful work means in the context of the Wholehearted journey. Last, I think everyone should read Paulo Coelho’s *The*

*Alchemist*³—I try to read it at least once a year. It's a powerful way of seeing the connections between our gifts, our spirituality, and our work (slashed or not) and how they come together to create meaning in our lives.

Get Going: Make a list of the work that inspires you. Don't be practical. Don't think about making a living; think about doing something you love. There's nothing that says you have to quit your day job to cultivate meaningful work. There's also nothing that says your day job isn't meaningful work—maybe you've just never thought of it that way. What's your ideal slash? What do you want to be when you grow up? What brings meaning to you?

How do you DIG Deep?





Cultivating Laughter, Song, and Dance

LETTING GO OF BEING COOL AND “ALWAYS IN CONTROL”

Dance like no one is watching. Sing like no one is listening. Love like you've never been hurt and live like it's heaven on Earth.

— MARK TWAIN

Throughout human history, we've relied on laughter, song, and dance to express ourselves, to communicate our stories and emotions, to celebrate and mourn, and to nurture community. While most people would tell you that a life without laughter, music, and dance would be unbearable, it's easy to take these experiences for granted.

Laughter, song, and dance are so woven into the fabric of our everyday life that we can forget how much we value the people who can make us laugh, the songs that inspire us to roll down the car window and sing at the top of our lungs, and the total freedom we feel when we “dance like no one is watching.”

In her book *Dancing in the Streets: A History of Collective Joy*, social critic Barbara Ehrenreich draws on history and anthropology to document the importance of engaging in what she refers to as “collective ecstasy.” Ehrenreich concludes that we are “innately social beings, impelled almost instinctively to share our joy.”¹ I absolutely believe she is right. I also love the idea of collective ecstasy—especially now, when we seem to be stuck in a state of collective fear and anxiety.

As I sifted through my data, I asked myself two questions:

1. Why are laughter, song, and dance so important to us?
2. Is there some transformational element that they have in common?

These were complicated questions to answer because, yes, we yearn to laugh and sing and dance when we feel joy, but we also turn to these forms of expression when we feel lonely, sad, excited, in love, heartbroken, afraid, ashamed, confident, certain, doubtful, brave, grief, and ecstasy (just to name a few). I'm convinced that there's a song, a dance, and a path to laughter for every human emotion.

After a couple of years of analyzing my data, here's what I learned:

Laughter, song, and dance create emotional and spiritual connection; they remind us of the one thing that truly matters when we are searching for comfort, celebration, inspiration, or healing: We are not alone.

Ironically, I learned the most about laughter during the eight years that I was studying shame. Shame resilience requires laughter. In *I Thought It Was Just Me*, I refer to the kind of laughter that helps us heal as *knowing laughter*. Laughter is a spiritual form of communing; without words we can say to one another, “I'm with you. I get it.”

True laughter is not the use of humor as self-deprecation or deflection; it's not the kind of painful laughter we sometimes hide behind. Knowing laughter embodies the relief and connection we experience when we realize the power of sharing our stories—we're not laughing *at* each other but *with* each other.

One of my favorite definitions of laughter comes from writer Anne Lamott, whom I once heard say, “Laughter is a bubbly, effervescent form of holiness.” Amen!

Song

From the eight-track tapes my parents played in our station wagon to my stack of vinyl records from the 1970s to my mix-tapes from the '80s and '90s to the iTunes playlists on my new computer, my life has a soundtrack. And the songs from that soundtrack can stir memories and provoke emotion in me like nothing else.

I realize that not everyone shares the same passion for music, but the one thing that is universal about song is its ability to move us emotionally—sometimes in ways we don't even think about. For example, I was recently watching the director's cut of a movie. It showed a very dramatic scene from the film with music and then without music. I couldn't believe the difference.

The first time I watched the film, I didn't even notice that music was playing. I was just on the edge of my seat waiting and hoping that things would turn out the way I wanted them to. When I watched it without music, the scene was flat. There wasn't the same level of anticipation. Without music it felt factual, not emotional.

Whether it's a hymn at church, the national anthem, a college fight song, a song on the radio, or the carefully scored soundtrack to a movie, music reaches out and offers us connection—something we really can't live without.

Dancing

I measure the spiritual health of our family by how much dancing is happening in our kitchen. Seriously. Charlie's favorite dance song is “Kung Fu Fighting” and Ellen likes Vanilla Ice’s “Ice Ice Baby”! We're music and dance lovers, not snobs. We're not above kicking it old-school with “The Twist” or “The Macarena.” We don't have a big kitchen so when the four of us are in there, sock-footed and sliding around, it looks more like a mosh pit than a sock hop. It's messy, but it's always fun.

It didn't take me long to learn that dance is a tough issue for many people. Laughing hysterically can make us feel a little out of control, and singing out loud can make some of us feel self-conscious. But for many of us, there is no form of self-expression that makes us feel more vulnerable than dancing. It's literally full-body vulnerability. The only other full-body vulnerability that I can think of is being naked, and I don't have to tell you how vulnerable that makes most of us feel.

For many people, risking that kind of public vulnerability is too difficult, so they dance at home or only in front of people they care about. For others, the vulnerability is so crushing that they don't dance at all. One woman told me, “Sometimes if I'm watching TV and people are dancing or there's a good song playing, I tap my feet without even noticing it. When I finally catch myself, I feel embarrassed. I have no rhythm.”

There's no question that some people are more musically inclined or coordinated than others, but I'm starting to believe that dance is in our DNA. Not super-hip and cool dancing, or line dancing, or

Dancing with the Stars dancing—but a strong pull toward rhythm and movement. You can see this desire to move in children. Until we teach our children that they need to be concerned with how they look and with what other people think, they dance. They even dance naked. Not always gracefully or with the beat, but always with joy and pleasure.

Writer Mary Jo Putney says, “What one loves in childhood stays in the heart forever.” If this is true, and I believe it is, then dance stays in our heart, even when our head becomes overly concerned with what people might think.

Being Cool and “Always in Control”

The only true currency in this bankrupt world is what you share with someone else when you’re uncool.

— A QUOTE FROM THE FILM *ALMOST FAMOUS*, 2000

A good belly laugh, singing at the top of your lungs, and dancing like no one is looking are unquestionably good for the soul. But as I mentioned, they are also exercises in vulnerability. There are many shame triggers around the vulnerability of laughing, song, and dance. The list includes the fear of being perceived as awkward, goofy, silly, spastic, uncool, out of control, immature, stupid, and foolish. For most of us, this is a pretty scary list. The gremlins are constantly there to make sure that self-expression takes a backseat to self-protection and self-consciousness.

1. “What will people think?”
2. “Everyone is watching—calm down!”
3. “You look ridiculous! Get a hold of yourself.”

Women spoke about the dangers of being perceived as “getting too loud” or “out of hand.” I can’t tell you how many women told me about the painful experience of throwing caution to the wind, only to be patronizingly told, “Whoa … settle down.”

Men were quick to point out the dangers of being perceived as “out of control.” One man told me, “Women say we should let loose and have fun. How attractive will they think we are if we get out on the dance floor and look like assholes in front of other guys—or worse—your girlfriend’s friends. It’s easier to just hang back and act like you’re not interested in dancing. Even if you really want to.”

There are many ways in which men and women hustle for worthiness around these issues, but the two that keep us the most quiet and still are hustling to be perceived as “cool” and “in control.” Wanting to be perceived as cool isn’t about wanting to be “The Fonz”—it’s about minimizing vulnerability in order to reduce the risk of being ridiculed or made fun of.

We hustle for our worthiness by slipping on the emotional and behavioral straitjacket of cool and posturing as the tragically hip and the terminally “better than.” Being “in control” isn’t always about the desire to manipulate situations, but often it’s about the need to manage perception. We want to be able to control what other people think about us so that we can feel good enough.

I grew up in a family where being cool and fitting in were highly valued. As an adult, I have to constantly work at allowing myself to be vulnerable and authentic around some of these issues. I could laugh and sing and dance as an adult, as long as I stayed clear of silly, goofy, and awkward. For years, these were major shame triggers for me.

During my 2007 *Breakdown* Spiritual Awakening, I learned how much I’ve missed while pretending to be cool. I realized that one of the reasons I’m afraid to try new things (like yoga or the hip-hop exercise class at my gym) is my fear of being perceived as goofy and awkward.

I’ve spent a lot of time and energy working on this. It’s a slow process. I’m still only supersilly and goofy around people I trust, but I think that’s okay. I’m also working hard not to pass this down to my

kids. It's easy to do when we're not mindful of the gremlins and shame triggers. Here's proof:

Last year, I had to run to Nordstrom to pick up some make-up. I was in one of those "nothing fits and I feel like Jabba the Hutt" moods, so I put on my baggiest sweats, pulled my dirty hair back with a headband, and told Ellen, "We're just running in and running out."

On the way to the mall, Ellen reminded me that the shoes her grandmother had bought her were in the back of the car and asked if we could exchange them for a bigger size while we were at the store. After I bought my makeup, we went upstairs to the kid's shoe department. As soon as we cleared the top of the escalator, I saw a trio of gorgeous women standing in the shoe department. They were tossing their long (clean) hair over their narrow, square shoulders as they perched on their high-heeled, pointed-toe boots, and watched their equally beautiful daughters try on sneakers.

As I tried to avoid crumbling and comparing by focusing on the display shoes, I saw a strange blur of jerky movement out of the corner of my eye. It was Ellen. A pop song was playing in the neighboring children's department, and Ellen, my totally confident eight-year-old, was dancing. Or, to be more specific, she was doing the robot.

At the very moment that Ellen looked up and saw me watching her, I saw the magnificent moms and their matching daughters staring right at Ellen. The mothers looked embarrassed for her, and the daughters, who were a couple of years older than Ellen, were visibly on the edge of doing or saying something mean-spirited. Ellen froze. Still bent over with her arms in rigid formation, she looked up at me with eyes that said, "What do I do, Mom?"

My default response in this scenario is to shoot a diminishing look at Ellen that says, "Geez, man. Don't be so uncool!" Basically, my immediate reaction would be to save myself by betraying Ellen. Thank God I didn't. Some combination of being immersed in this work, having a mother instinct that was louder than my fear, and pure grace told me, "Choose Ellen! Be on her side!"

I glanced up at the other mothers and then looked at Ellen. I reached down into my courage, as far as I go, smiled, and said, "You need to add the scarecrow to your moves." I let my wrist and hand dangle from my extended arm and pretended to bat my forearm around. Ellen smiled. We stood in the middle of the shoe department and practiced our moves until the song was over. I'm not sure how the onlookers responded to our shoe department Soul Train. I didn't take my eyes off Ellen.

Betrayal is an important word with this guidepost. When we value being cool and in control over granting ourselves the freedom to unleash the passionate, goofy, heartfelt, and soulful expressions of who we are, we betray ourselves. When we consistently betray ourselves, we can expect to do the same to the people we love.

When we don't give ourselves permission to be free, we rarely tolerate that freedom in others. We put them down, make fun of them, ridicule their behaviors, and sometimes shame them. We can do this intentionally or unconsciously. Either way the message is, "Geez, man. Don't be so uncool."

The Hopi Indians have a saying, "To watch us dance is to hear our hearts speak." I know how much courage it takes to let people hear our hearts speak, but life is way too precious to spend it pretending like we're super-cool and totally in control when we could be laughing, singing, and dancing.

DIG Deep

Get Deliberate: If we believe that laughter, song, and dance are essential to our soul-care, how do we make sure that we hold space for them in our lives? One thing that we've started doing is turning on music in the kitchen while we do a family cleanup after supper. We dance and sing, which in turn, always leads to a good laugh.

Get Inspired: I love making “themed playlists”—groups of songs that I want to listen to when I’m feeling a certain way. I have everything from a playlist called “God on the iPod,” to a “Run like you mean it” list. My favorite is my “Authentic Me” list—the songs that make me feel most like myself.

Get Going: Dare to be goofy. Dance every day for five minutes. Make a CD of songs to sing along with in the car. Watch that dumb YouTube video that makes you laugh every time!

How do you DIG Deep?





Final Thoughts

I think most of us have developed fairly sensitive bullshit meters when it comes to reading “self-help” books. I think this is a good thing. There are too many books that make promises they can’t keep or make change sound so much easier than it is. The truth is that meaningful change is a process. It can be uncomfortable and is often risky, especially when we’re talking about embracing our imperfections, cultivating authenticity, and looking the world in the eye and saying, “I am enough.”

However afraid we are of change, the question that we must ultimately answer is this: *What’s the greater risk? Letting go of what people think or letting go of how I feel, what I believe, and who I am?*

Wholehearted living is about engaging in our lives from a place of worthiness. It’s about cultivating the courage, compassion, and connection to wake up in the morning and think, *No matter what gets done and how much is left undone, I am enough.* It’s going to bed at night thinking, *Yes, I am imperfect and vulnerable and sometimes afraid, but that doesn’t change the truth that I am also brave and worthy of love and belonging.*

It makes sense to me that the gifts of imperfection are courage, compassion, and connection, because when I think back to my life before this work, I remember often feeling fearful, judgmental, and alone—the opposite of the gifts. I wondered, *What if I can’t keep all of these balls in the air? Why isn’t everyone else working harder and living up to my expectations? What will people think if I fail or give up? When can I stop proving myself to everyone?*

For me, the risk of losing myself felt far more dangerous than the risk of letting people see the real me. It’s been close to four years since that day in 2006, when my own research turned my life upside down. It’s been the best four years of my life, and I wouldn’t change a thing. The **Breakdown** Spiritual Awakening was tough, but I’m hardheaded. I guess the universe needed a way to get my attention.

Despite where this book will be shelved in your local bookstore, I’m not at all sure that this work is about self-help. I think of it as an invitation to join a Wholehearted revolution. A small, quiet, grassroots movement that starts with each of us saying, “My story matters because I matter.” A movement where we can take to the streets with our messy, imperfect, wild, stretch-marked, wonderful, heartbreaking, grace-filled, and joyful lives. A movement fueled by the freedom that comes when we stop pretending that everything is okay when it isn’t. A call that rises up from our bellies when we find the courage to celebrate those intensely joyful moments even though we’ve convinced ourselves that savoring happiness is inviting disaster.

Revolution might sound a little dramatic, but in this world, choosing authenticity and worthiness is an absolute act of resistance. Choosing to live and love with our whole hearts is an act of defiance. You’re going to confuse, piss off, and terrify lots of people—including yourself. One minute you’ll

pray that the transformation stops, and the next minute you'll pray that it never ends. You'll also wonder how you can feel so brave and so afraid at the same time. At least that's how I feel most of the time ... brave, afraid, and very, very alive.





About the Research Process

FOR THRILL-SEEKERS AND METHODOLOGY JUNKIES

A couple of years ago, a young woman came up to me after a speaking event and said, “I hope you won’t think this is weird or rude or something, but you don’t look like a researcher.” She didn’t say anything else; she just stood there waiting and looking confused.

I smiled and asked, “What do you mean?”

She replied, “You seem so normal.”

I chuckled. “Well, looks can be deceiving. I’m so *not* normal.”

We ended up having a great conversation. She was a single mother getting her undergraduate degree in psychology and loved her research classes, but her faculty advisor wasn’t encouraging her to pursue the research track. We talked about work and motherhood and what researchers are supposed to look like. It seemed that I was missing the mice, the long white lab coat, and the Y chromosome. She told me, “I pictured older white guys working in labs and studying mice, not a soccer mom studying feelings.”

The journey that led me to become a researcher was anything but a straight and narrow path, which, ironically, is probably why and how I ended up studying human behavior and emotion for a living. I was a college drop-in and drop-out for a number of years. During my “off semesters,” I waited tables and tended bar, hitchhiked through Europe, played a lot of tennis ... you get the point.

I found the social work profession in my late twenties and knew it was home. I did a two-year stint in junior colleges to raise my GPA enough to get into a big university with a social work program. It was in those junior college classes that I fell in love with the idea of teaching and writing.

After years of dropping out, I graduated with honors from the University of Texas–Austin with my bachelor’s degree in social work when I was twenty-nine and immediately applied for graduate school at the University of Houston. I got accepted, worked hard and finished my master’s, and was accepted into the doctoral program.

During my doctoral studies, I discovered qualitative research. Unlike quantitative research, which is about tests and statistics that give you what you need to predict and control phenomena, qualitative research is about finding patterns and themes that help you better understand the phenomenon you’re studying. They’re equally important approaches but very different.

I use a specific qualitative methodology called Grounded Theory.¹ I was fortunate enough to be trained by Barney Glaser, one of the two men who developed the methodology in the 1960s. Dr. Glaser commuted from California to serve as the methodologist on my dissertation committee.

The basic premise of Grounded Theory research is to start with as few preconceived ideas and assumptions as possible so that you can build a theory based on the data that emerges from the process. For example, when I first started with what I would later refer to as Wholehearted Research, I had two questions: What is the anatomy of human connection, and how does it work? After studying the best and worst of humanity, I had learned that nothing is as important as human connection and I wanted to know more about the ins and outs of how we develop meaningful connections.

In the process of collecting data to answer the questions, I ran into shame—this thing that corroded connection. I decided to take a quick detour to understand shame so that I could better understand connection. At that point, my questions became, “What is shame, and how does it affect our lives?”

My quick detour turned into eight years (there was lots to learn). I posed new questions based on what I had learned: The men and women who had embraced their vulnerabilities and imperfections and developed a powerful level of resilience to shame seemed to value a certain way of living. What did they value, and how did they cultivate what they needed? These questions became the basis for determining what it takes for most people to live with their whole hearts.

My data doesn't come from questionnaires or surveys; I interview people and collect stories using field notes. I'm basically a story catcher. Over the past ten years, I've collected more than ten thousand stories. I've done formal research interviews with close to one thousand men and women individually and in focus groups. People have shared their stories with me through letters, e-mail, my blog, and the courses I've taught. Some have even sent me their art and copies of their journals. I've also presented to tens of thousands of mental health professionals who have shared their case studies with me.

When I'm finished interviewing, I analyze the stories for themes and patterns so I can generate theories from the data. When I code data (analyze the stories), I go into deep researcher mode where my only focus is on accurately capturing what I heard in the stories. I don't think about how I would say something, only how they said it. I don't think about what an experience would mean to me, only what it meant to the person who told me about it.

Rather than approaching a problem and saying, “I need to collect evidence of what I know to be true,” the Grounded Theory approach forces me to let go of my interests and investments so I can focus on the concerns, interests, and ideas of the people I interview.

The data-coding process is laborious and difficult. My husband, Steve, likes to leave town with the kids when I'm going into my comparing, coding, memoing phase. He says it's kind of scary because I walk around the house dazed and mumbling with a stack of yellow legal pads in my hands. It's a very attractive process.

What I love/hate the most about Grounded Theory is that it's never really done. The theory that you generate from your data is only as “good” as its ability to explain new data. That means every time you collect a new story or a new piece of information, you have to hold it up against the theory you've developed. Does it work? Does it ring true? Does your existing theory work this new data in a meaningful way?

If you follow my blog or if you've attended any of my lectures, you can probably attest to the evolving nature of my theory-building. If you want to honor the stories that people have shared with you, you have to stay rigorous in your attempts to accurately capture their meaning. It's a challenge, but I honestly love what I do.

If you're really interested in Grounded Theory or if you want more information on methodology, visit my Web site for links to the academic articles on Shame Resilience Theory and the Theory on Wholehearted Living (www.brenebrown.com).





notes

Preface

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about the author

Dr. Brené Brown is a researcher, writer, and professor. She is a member of the research faculty at the University of Houston Graduate College of Social Work, where she has spent the past ten years studying a concept that she calls Wholeheartedness, posing the questions: *How do we engage in our lives from a place of authenticity and worthiness? How do we cultivate the courage, compassion, and connection that we need to embrace our imperfections and to recognize that we are enough—that we are worthy of love, belonging, and joy?*

Brené spent the first seven years of her decade-long research journey studying how the universal experiences of shame and fear affect us and how practicing resilience in our everyday lives can change the way we live, love, parent, and work.

In 2008, she was named Behavioral Health Scholar-in-Residence at the Council on Alcohol and Drugs in Houston. Brené's work has been featured on PBS and the Oprah and Friends Radio Network, and her articles have appeared in *Self* magazine, *Elle* magazine, and many national newspapers. She is also a frequent guest on radio shows across the United States. Most recently, *Houston Women Magazine* named her one of "The 50 Most Influential Women of 2009."

In addition to this book, Brené is the author of *I Thought It Was Just Me (but it isn't): Telling the Truth About Perfectionism, Inadequacy, and Power* (Gotham, 2007) and *Wholehearted: Spiritual Adventures in Falling Apart, Growing Up, and Finding Joy* (Hazelden, forthcoming). She is also the author of *Connections*, a psychoeducational shame-resilience curriculum that is being facilitated across the nation by mental health and addictions professionals.

Brené lives in Houston with her husband, Steve, and their two young children, Ellen and Charlie.

You can learn more about Brené and her research by visiting www.brenebrown.com or by visiting her blog at www.ordinarycourage.com. For a *Gifts of Imperfection* reading guide and a list of book recommendations, please visit her Web site.

Hazelden, a national nonprofit organization founded in 1949, helps people reclaim their lives from the disease of addiction. Built on decades of knowledge and experience, Hazelden offers a comprehensive approach to addiction that addresses the full range of patient, family, and professional needs, including treatment and continuing care for youth and adults, research, higher learning, public education and advocacy, and publishing.

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A close-up photograph of a wooden pencil with a red eraser at the top. The pencil is positioned diagonally, with its tip pointing towards the bottom right. It has just drawn a single, dark, vertical line that extends from the middle of the page down to the bottom edge.

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Since the case studies in this book are composites from Dr. Henry Cloud's and Dr. John Townsend's practices, we have not attempted to identify which author is counseling which client. All names and circumstances have been fictionalized to protect privacy.

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**To Henry and Louise Cloud
and
John and Rebecca Townsend,
whose training in boundaries
made a difference in our lives.**

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Dave Anderson translated this book into a video curriculum.

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PART ONE

WHAT ARE BOUNDARIES?

I

A Day in a Boundaryless Life

6:00 A.M.

The alarm jangled. Bleary-eyed from too little sleep, Sherrie shut off the noisy intruder, turned on the bedside lamp, and sat up in bed. Looking blankly at the wall, she tried to get her bearings.

Why am I dreading this day? Lord, didn't you promise me a life of joy?

Then, as the cobwebs left her mind, Sherrie remembered the reason for her dread: the four-o'clock meeting with Todd's third-grade teacher. The phone call returned to her memory: "Sherrie, this is Jean Russell. I wonder if we could meet about Todd's performance and his...behavior."

Todd couldn't keep still and listen to his teachers. He didn't even listen to Sherrie and Walt. Todd was such a strong-willed child, and she didn't want to quench his spirit. Wasn't that more important?

"Well, no time to worry about all that," Sherrie said to herself, raising her thirty-five-year-old body off the bed and padding to the shower. "I've got enough troubles to keep me busy all day."

Under the shower, Sherrie's mind moved out of first gear. She began mentally ticking off the day's schedule. Todd, nine, and Amy, six, would have been a handful even if she *weren't* a working mother.

"Let's see...fix breakfast, pack two lunches, and finish sewing Amy's costume for the school play. That will be a

trick—finishing sewing the costume before the car pool picks her up at 7:45 A.M.”

Sherrie thought regretfully about last night. She’d planned to work on Amy’s costume then, using her talents to make a special day for her little girl. But her mother had dropped over unexpectedly. Good manners dictated that she play hostess, and another evening was shot. The memories of her attempts to salvage the time weren’t pretty.

Trying to be diplomatic, Sherrie artfully told her mother, “You can’t imagine how much I enjoy your surprise visits, Mom! But I was wondering, would you mind if I sew Amy’s costume while we talk?” Sherrie cringed inwardly, correctly anticipating her mother’s response.

“Sherrie, you know I’d be the last to intrude on your time with your family.” Sherrie’s mother, widowed for twelve years, had elevated her widowhood to the status of martyrdom. “I mean, since your father died, it’s been such an empty time. I still miss our family. How could I deprive you of that for yourself?”

I’ll bet I find out how, Sherrie thought to herself.

“That’s why I can understand why you don’t bring Walt and the children to see me much anymore. How could I be entertaining? I’m just a lonely old lady who gave her entire life to her children. Who would want to spend any time with me?”

“No, Mom, no, no, no!” Sherrie quickly joined the emotional minuet she and her mom had been dancing for decades. “That’s not what I meant at all! I mean, it’s so special having you over. Goodness knows, with our schedule, we’d like to visit more, but we just haven’t been able to. That’s why I’m so glad you took the initiative!” *Lord, don’t strike me dead for this little lie,* she prayed silently.

“In fact, I can do the costume any old time,” Sherrie said. *Forgive me for this lie, too.* “Now, why don’t I make us some coffee?”

Her mother sighed. “All right, if you insist. But I’d just hate to think I’m intruding.”

The visit lasted well into the night. By the time her mother left, Sherrie felt absolutely crazy, but she justified it to herself.

At least I've helped make her lonely day a little brighter. Then a pesky voice piped up. *If you helped so much, why was she still talking about her loneliness when she left?* Trying to ignore the thought, Sherrie went to bed.

6:45 A.M.

Sherrie returned to the present. "No use crying over spilt time, I guess," she mumbled to herself as she struggled to close the zipper of her black linen skirt. Her favorite suit had become, as many others had, too tight. *Middle-age spread so soon?* she thought. *This week, I really have to go on a diet and start exercising.*

The next hour was, as usual, a disaster. The kids whined about getting out of bed, and Walt complained, "Can't you get the kids to the table on time?"

7:45 A.M.

Miraculously, the kids made it to their rides, Walt left for work in his car, and Sherrie went out and locked the front door after her. Taking a deep breath, she prayed silently, *Lord, I'm not looking forward to this day. Give me something to hope for.* In her car on the freeway, she finished applying her makeup. *Thank the Lord for traffic jams.*

8:45 A.M.

Rushing into McAllister Enterprises where she worked as a fashion consultant, Sherrie glanced at her watch. Only a few minutes late. Maybe by now her colleagues understood that being late was a way of life for her and did not expect her to be on time.

She was wrong. They'd started the weekly executive meeting without her. Sherrie tried to tiptoe in without being noticed, but every eye was on her as she struggled into her seat. Glancing around, she gave a fleeting smile and muttered something about "that crazy traffic."

11:59 A.M.

The rest of Sherrie's morning proceeded fairly well. A talented fashion designer, Sherrie had an unerring eye for attractive clothing and was a valuable asset to McAllister. The only hitch came just before lunch.

Her extension rang. "Sherrie Phillips."

"Sherrie, thank goodness you're there! I don't know what I'd have done if you'd been at lunch!" There was no mistaking this voice. Sherrie had known Lois Thompson since grade school. A high-strung woman, Lois was always in crisis. Sherrie had always tried to make herself available to Lois, to "be there for her." But Lois never asked Sherrie how she was doing, and when Sherrie mentioned her struggles, Lois either changed the subject or had to leave.

Sherrie genuinely loved Lois and was concerned about her problems, but Lois seemed more like a client than a friend. Sherrie resented the imbalance in their friendship. As always, Sherrie felt guilty when she thought about her anger at Lois. As a Christian, she knew the value the Bible placed on loving and helping others. *There I go again*, she would say to herself. *Thinking of myself before others. Please, Lord, let me give to Lois freely and not be so self-centered.*

Sherrie asked, "What's the matter, Lois?"

"It's horrible, just horrible," Lois said. "Anne was sent home from school today, Tom was denied his promotion, and my car gave out on the freeway!"

This is what my life's like every day! Sherrie thought to herself, feeling the resentment rising. However, she merely said, "Lois, you poor thing! How are you coping with all of this?"

Lois was happy to answer Sherrie's question in great detail—so much detail that Sherrie missed half her lunch break consoling her friend. Well, she thought, *fast food's better than no food.*

Sitting at the drive-through waiting for her chicken burger, Sherrie thought about Lois. *If all my listening, consoling, and advice had made any difference over the years, maybe it would*

be worth it. But Lois makes the same mistakes now that she made twenty years ago. Why do I do this to myself?

4:00 P.M.

Sherrie's afternoon passed uneventfully. She was on the way out of the office to the teacher's meeting when her boss, Jeff Moreland, flagged her down.

"Glad I caught up with you, Sherrie," he said. A successful figure at MacAllister Enterprises, Jeff made things happen. Trouble was, Jeff often used other people to "make things happen." Sherrie could sense the hundredth verse of the same old song tuning up again. "Listen, I'm in a time crunch," he said, handing her a large sheaf of papers. "This is the data for the final recommendations for the Kimbrough account. All it needs is a little writing and editing. And it's due tomorrow. But I'm sure it'll be no problem for you." He smiled ingratiatingly.

Sherrie panicked. Jeff's "editing" needs were legendary. Hefting the papers in her hands, Sherrie saw a minimum of five hours' work. *I had this data in to him three weeks ago!* she thought furiously. *Where does this man get off having me save his face for his deadline?*

Quickly she composed herself. "Sure, Jeff. It's no problem at all. Glad I can help. What time do you need it?"

"Nine o'clock would be fine. And...thanks, Sherrie. I always think of you first when I'm in a jam. You're so dependable." Jeff strolled away.

Dependable...faithful...reliable, Sherrie thought. *I've always been described this way by people who wanted something from me. Sounds like a description of a good mule.* Suddenly the guilt hit again. *There I am, getting resentful again. Lord, help me "bloom where I'm planted."* But secretly she found herself wishing she could be transplanted to another flowerpot.

4:30 P.M.

Jean Russell was a competent teacher, one of many in the profession who understood the complex factors beneath a child's

problem behavior. The meeting with Todd's teacher began as so many before, minus Walt. Todd's father hadn't been able to get off work, so the two women talked alone.

"He's not a bad child, Sherrie," Mrs. Russell reassured her. "Todd is a bright, energetic boy. When he minds, he's one of the most enjoyable kids in the class."

Sherrie waited for the ax to fall. *Just get to the point, Jean. I have a "problem child," don't I? What's new? I have a "problem life" to go with it.*

Sensing Sherrie's discomfort, the teacher pressed ahead. "The problem is that Todd doesn't respond well to limits. For example, during our task period, when children work on assignments, Todd has great difficulty. He gets up from his desk, pesters other kids, and won't stop talking. When I mention to him that his behavior is inappropriate, he becomes enraged and obstinate."

Sherrie felt defensive about her only son. "Maybe Todd has an attention-deficit problem, or he's hyperactive?"

Mrs. Russell shook her head. "When Todd's second-grade teacher wondered about that last year, psychological testing ruled that out. Todd stays on task very well when he's interested in the subject. I'm no therapist, but it seems to me that he's just not used to responding to rules."

Now Sherrie's defensiveness turned from Todd to herself. "Are you saying this is some sort of home problem?"

Mrs. Russell looked uncomfortable. "As I said, I'm not a counselor. I just know that in third grade, most children resist rules. But Todd is off the scale. Any time I tell him to do something he doesn't want to it's World War III. And since all his intellectual and cognitive testing comes out normal, I was just wondering how things were at home?"

Sherrie no longer tried to hold back the tears. She buried her head in her hands and wept convulsively for a few minutes, feeling overwhelmed with everything.

Eventually, her crying subsided. "I'm sorry... I guess this just hit on a bad day." Sherrie rummaged in her purse for a tissue. "No, no, it's more than that. Jean, I need to be honest with you.

Your problems with him are the same as mine. Walt and I have a real struggle making Todd mind at home. When we're playing or talking, Todd is the most wonderful son I could imagine. But any time I have to discipline him, the tantrums are more than I can handle. So I guess I don't have any solutions for you."

Jean nodded her head slowly. "It really helps me, Sherrie, to know that Todd's behavior is a problem at home, too. At least now we can put our heads together on a solution."

5:15 P.M.

Sherrie felt strangely grateful for the afternoon rush-hour traffic. *At least there's no one tugging on me here*, she thought. She used the time to plan around her next crises: kids, dinner, Jeff's project, church, . . . and Walt.

6:30 P.M.

"For the fourth and last time, dinner's ready!" Sherrie hated to scream, but what else worked? The kids and Walt always seemed to shuffle in whenever they felt like it. More often than not, dinner was cold by the time everyone was assembled.

Sherrie had no clue what the problem was. She knew it wasn't the food, because she was a good cook. Besides, once they got to the table, everyone inhaled it in seconds.

Everyone but Amy. Watching her daughter sit silently, picking distractedly at her food, Sherrie again felt uneasy. Amy was such a loveable, sensitive child. Why was she so reserved? Amy had never been outgoing. She preferred to spend her time reading, painting, or just sitting in her bedroom "thinking about stuff."

"Honey, what kind of stuff?" Sherrie would probe.

"Just stuff," would be the usual reply. Sherrie felt shut out of her daughter's life. She dreamed of mother-daughter talks, conversations for "just us girls," shopping trips. But Amy had a secret place deep inside where no one was ever invited. This unreachable part of her daughter's heart Sherrie ached to touch.

7:00 P.M.

Halfway through dinner, the phone rang. *We really need to get an answering machine to handle calls during dinner*, Sherrie thought. *There's precious little time for us to be together as a family anymore*. Then, as if on cue, another familiar thought struck her. *It might be someone who needs me.*

As always, Sherrie listened to the second voice in her head and jumped up from the table to answer the phone. Her heart sank as she recognized the voice on the other end.

"Hope I'm not disturbing anything," said Phyllis Renfrow, the women's ministries leader at church.

"Certainly you aren't disturbing anything," Sherrie lied again.

"Sherrie, I'm in deep water," Phyllis said. "Margie was going to be our activities coordinator at the retreat, and now she's cancelled. Something about 'priorities at home.' Any way you can pitch in?"

The retreat. Sherrie had almost forgotten that the annual gathering of church women was this weekend. She had actually been looking forward to leaving the kids and Walt behind and strolling around the beautiful mountainous area for two days, just herself and the Lord. In fact, the possibility of solitude felt better to her than the planned group activities. Taking on Margie's activities coordinator position would mean giving up her precious alone time. No, it wouldn't work. Sherrie would just have to say . . .

Automatically, the second thought pattern intervened. *What a privilege to serve God and these women, Sherrie! By giving up a little portion of your life, by letting go of your selfishness, you can make a big difference in some lives. Think it over.*

Sherrie didn't have to think it over. She'd learned to respond unquestioningly to this familiar voice, just as she responded to her mother's, and Phyllis's, and maybe God's, too. Whoever it belonged to, it was too strong to be ignored. Habit won out.

"I'll be happy to help," Sherrie told Phyllis. "Just send me whatever Margie's done, and I'll get working on it."

Phyllis sighed, audibly relieved. "Sherrie, I know it's a sacrifice. Myself, I have to do it several times, every day. But that's the abundant Christian life, isn't it? Being living sacrifices."

If you say so, thought Sherrie. But she couldn't help wondering when the "abundant" part would come in.

7:45 P.M.

Dinner finally finished, Sherrie watched Walt position himself in front of the TV for the football game. Todd reached for the phone, asking if his friends could come over and play. Amy slipped unobserved to her room.

The dishes stayed on the table. The family hadn't quite gotten the hang of helping clean up yet. But maybe the kids were still a little young for that. Sherrie started clearing the dishes from the table.

11:30 P.M.

Years ago, Sherrie could have cleaned up after dinner, gotten the kids to bed on time, and performed Jeff's handed-off project with ease. A cup of coffee after dinner and the adrenaline rush that accompanied crises and deadlines galvanized Sherrie into superhuman feats of productivity. She wasn't called "Super Sherrie" for nothing!

But it was becoming noticeably harder these days. Stress didn't work like it used to. More and more, she was having trouble concentrating, forgetting dates and deadlines, and not even caring a great deal about it all.

At any rate, by sheer willpower, she had completed most of her tasks. Maybe Jeff's project had suffered a little in quality, but she felt too resentful to feel bad. *But I did say yes to Jeff,* Sherrie thought. *It's not his fault, it's mine. Why couldn't I tell him how unfair it was for him to lay this on me?*

No time for that now. She had to get on with her real task for the evening: her talk with Walt.

Her and Walt's courtship and early marriage had been pleasant. Where she'd been confused, Walt had been decisive. Where

she'd felt insecure, he'd been strong. Not that Sherrie wasn't contributing to the marriage. She saw Walt's lack of emotional connectedness, and she had taken upon herself the job of providing the warmth and love the relationship lacked. *God has put together a good team*, she would tell herself. *Walt has the leadership, and I have the love.* This would help her get over the lonely times when he couldn't seem to understand her hurt feelings.

But over the years, Sherrie noted a shift in the relationship. It started off subtly, then became more pronounced. She could hear it in his sarcastic tone when she had a complaint. She saw it in the lack of respect in his eyes when she tried to tell him about her need for more support from him. She felt it in his increasingly insistent demands for her to do things his way.

And his temper. Maybe it was job stress, or having kids. Whatever it was, Sherrie never dreamed she'd ever hear the cutting, angry words she heard from the lips of the man she'd married. She didn't have to cross him much at all to be subjected to the anger—burnt toast, a checking overdraft, or forgetting to gas up the car—any of these seemed to be enough.

It all pointed to one conclusion: the marriage was no longer a team, if it ever had been one. It was a parent-child relationship, with Sherrie on the wrong end.

At first she thought she was imagining things. *There I go again, looking for trouble when I have a great life*, she told herself. That would help for a while—until Walt's next temper attack. Then her hurt and sadness would tell her the truth her mind wasn't willing to accept.

Finally realizing that Walt was a controlling person, Sherrie took the blame upon herself. *I'd be that way, too, if I had a basket case like me to live with*, she'd think. I'm the reason he gets so critical and frustrated.

These conclusions led Sherrie to a solution she had practiced for years: "Loving Walt Out of His Anger." This remedy went something like this: first, Sherrie learned to read Walt's emotions by watching his temper, body language, and speech. She became exquisitely aware of his moods, and especially sensitive

to things that could set him off: lateness, disagreements, and her own anger. As long as she was quiet and agreeable, things went well. But let her preferences raise their ugly heads and she risked getting her head lopped off.

Sherrie learned to read Walt well, and quickly. After sensing that she was crossing an emotional line, she would employ Stage Two of “Loving Walt”: She did an immediate backtrack. Coming around to his viewpoint (but not really), quietly holding her tongue, or even outrightly apologizing for being “hard to live with” all helped.

Stage Three of “Loving Walt” was doing special things for him to show that she was sincere. This might mean dressing more attractively at home. Or making his favorite meals several times a week. Didn’t the Bible talk about being this kind of wife?

The three steps of “Loving Walt” worked for a time. But the peace never lasted. The problem with “Loving Walt Out of His Anger” was that Sherrie was dead tired of trying to soothe Walt out of his tantrums. Thus, he stayed angry longer, and his anger isolated her more from him.

Her love for her husband was eroding. She had felt that no matter how bad things were, God had joined them and that their love would get them through. But, in the past few years, it was more commitment than love. When she was honest, she admitted that many times she could feel nothing at all toward Walt but resentment and fear.

And that’s what tonight was all about. Things needed to change. Somehow, they needed to rekindle the flames of their first love.

Sherrie walked into the family room. The late-night comedian on the television screen had just finished his monologue. “Honey, can we talk?” she asked tentatively.

There was no answer. Moving closer, she saw why. Walt had fallen asleep on the couch. Thinking about waking Walt up, she remembered his stinging words the last time she’d been so “insensitive.” She turned off the television and lights and walked to the empty bedroom.

11:50 P.M.

Lying in bed, Sherrie couldn't tell which was greater, her loneliness or her exhaustion. Deciding it was the first, she picked up her Bible from the bedside table and opened it to the New Testament. *Give me something to hope for, Lord. Please,* she prayed silently. Her eyes fell to the words of Christ in Matthew 5:3–5:

“Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted. Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.”

But Lord, I already feel like that! Sherrie protested. I feel poor in spirit. I mourn over my life, my marriage, my children. I try to be gentle, but I just feel run over all the time. Where is your promise? Where is your hope? Where are you?

Sherrie waited in the darkened room for an answer. None came. The only sound was the quiet pit-pat of tears running off her checks and onto the pages of her Bible.

What's the Problem?

Sherrie tries to live her life the right way. She tries to do a good job with her marriage, her children, her job, her relationships, and her Lord. Yet it's obvious that something isn't right. Life isn't working. Sherrie's in deep spiritual and emotional pain.

Woman or man, we can all identify with Sherrie's dilemma—her isolation, her helplessness, her confusion, her guilt. And, above all, her sense that her life is out of control.

Look closely at Sherrie's circumstances. Parts of Sherrie's life may be remarkably similar to your own. Understanding her struggle may shed light on yours. You can immediately see a few answers that *don't work* for Sherrie.

First, *trying harder isn't working*. Sherrie expends lots of energy trying to have a successful life. She isn't lazy. Second, *being nice out of fear isn't working*. Sherrie's people-pleasing efforts don't seem to bring her the intimacy she needs. Third,

taking responsibility for others isn't working. A master of taking care of the feelings and problems of others, Sherrie feels like her life is a miserable failure. Sherrie's unproductive energy, fearful niceness, and overresponsibility point to the core problem: *Sherrie suffers from severe difficulties in taking ownership of her life.*

Back in the Garden of Eden, God told Adam and Eve about ownership: “Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air and over every living creature that moves on the ground” (Gen. 1:28).

Made in the image of God, we were created to take responsibility for certain tasks. Part of taking responsibility, or ownership, is knowing what *is* our job, and what *isn't*. Workers who continually take on duties that aren't theirs will eventually burn out. It takes wisdom to know what we should be doing and what we shouldn't. We can't do everything.

Sherrie has great difficulty in knowing what things *are* her responsibility and what *aren't*. In her desire to do the right thing, or to avoid conflict, she ends up taking on problems that God never intended her to take on: her mother's chronic loneliness, her boss's irresponsibility, her friend's unending crises, her church leader's guilt-ridden message of self-sacrifice, and her husband's immaturity.

And her problems don't end there. Sherrie's inability to say no has significantly affected her son's ability to delay gratification and behave himself in school, and, in some way, this inability may be driving her daughter to withdraw.

Any confusion of responsibility and ownership in our lives is a problem of *boundaries*. Just as homeowners set physical property lines around their land, we need to set mental, physical, emotional, and spiritual boundaries for our lives to help us distinguish what is our responsibility and what isn't. As we see in Sherrie's many struggles, the inability to set appropriate boundaries at appropriate times with the appropriate people can be very destructive.

And this is one of the most serious problems facing Christians today. Many sincere, dedicated believers struggle with

tremendous confusion about when it is biblically appropriate to set limits. When confronted with their lack of boundaries, they raise good questions:

1. Can I set limits and still be a loving person?
2. What are legitimate boundaries?
3. What if someone is upset or hurt by my boundaries?
4. How do I answer someone who wants my time, love, energy, or money?
5. Why do I feel guilty or afraid when I consider setting boundaries?
6. How do boundaries relate to submission?
7. Aren't boundaries selfish?

Misinformation about the Bible's answers to these issues has led to much wrong teaching about boundaries. Not only that, but many clinical psychological symptoms, such as depression, anxiety disorders, eating disorders, addictions, impulsive disorders, guilt problems, shame issues, panic disorders, and marital and relational struggles, find their root in conflicts with boundaries.

This book presents a biblical view of boundaries: what they are, what they protect, how they are developed, how they are injured, how to repair them, and how to use them. This book will answer the above questions and more. Our goal is to help you use biblical boundaries appropriately to achieve the relationships and purposes that God intends for you as his child.

Sherrie's knowledge of the Scriptures seems to support her lack of boundaries. This book aims to help you see the deeply biblical nature of boundaries as they operate in the character of God, his universe, and his people.

What Does a Boundary Look Like?

The parents of a twenty-five-year-old man came to see me with a common request: they wanted me to “fix” their son, Bill. When I asked where Bill was, they answered, “Oh, he didn’t want to come.”

“Why?” I asked.

“Well, he doesn’t think he has a problem,” they replied.

“Maybe he’s right,” I said, to their surprise. “Tell me about it.”

They recited a history of problems that had begun at a very young age. Bill had never been “quite up to snuff” in their eyes. In recent years he had exhibited problems with drugs and an inability to stay in school and find a career.

It was apparent that they loved their son very much and were heartbroken over the way he was living. They had tried everything they knew to get him to change and live a responsible life, but all had failed. He was still using drugs, avoiding responsibility, and keeping questionable company.

They told me that they had always given him everything he needed. He had plenty of money at school so “he wouldn’t have to work and he would have plenty of time for study and a social life.” When he flunked out of one school, or stopped going to classes, they were more than happy to do everything they could to get him into another school, “where it might be better for him.”

After they had talked for a while, I responded: “I think your son is right. He doesn’t have a problem.”

You could have mistaken their expression for a snapshot; they stared at me in disbelief for a full minute. Finally the

father said, “Did I hear you right? You don’t think he has a problem?”

“That’s correct,” I said. “He doesn’t have a problem. You do. He can do pretty much whatever he wants, no problem. You pay, you fret, you worry, you plan, you exert energy to keep him going. He doesn’t have a problem because you have taken it from him. Those things *should* be his problem, but as it now stands, they are yours. *Would you like for me to help you help him to have some problems?*”

They looked at me like I was crazy, but some lights were beginning to go on in their heads. “What do you mean, ‘help him to have some problems?’” his mother asked.

“Well,” I explained, “I think that the solution to this problem would be to clarify some boundaries so that his actions cause *him* problems and not you.”

“What do you mean, ‘boundaries’?” the father asked.

“Look at it this way. It is as if he’s your neighbor, who never waters his lawn. But, whenever you turn on your sprinkler system, the water falls on his lawn. Your grass is turning brown and dying, but Bill looks down at his green grass and thinks to himself, ‘My yard is doing fine.’ That is how your son’s life is. He doesn’t study, or plan, or work, yet he has a nice place to live, plenty of money, and all the rights of a family member who is doing his part.

“If you would define the property lines a little better, if you would fix the sprinkler system so that the water would fall on your lawn, and if he didn’t water his own lawn, he would have to live in dirt. He might not like that after a while.

“As it stands now, he is *irresponsible and happy*, and you are *responsible and miserable*. A little boundary clarification would do the trick. You need some fences to keep his problems out of your yard and in his, where they belong.”

“Isn’t that a bit cruel, just to stop helping like that?” the father asked.

“Has helping him helped?” I asked.

His look told me that he was beginning to understand.

Invisible Property Lines and Responsibility

In the physical world, boundaries are easy to see. Fences, signs, walls, moats with alligators, manicured lawns, or hedges are all physical boundaries. In their differing appearances, they give the same message: THIS IS WHERE MY PROPERTY BEGINS. The owner of the property is legally responsible for what happens on his or her property. Non-owners are not responsible for the property.

Physical boundaries mark a visible property line that *someone holds the deed to*. You can go to the county courthouse and find out exactly where those boundaries of responsibility are and whom to call if you have business there.

In the spiritual world, boundaries are just as real, but often harder to see. The goal of this chapter is to help you define your intangible boundaries and to recognize them as an everpresent reality that can increase your love and save your life. In reality, these boundaries define your soul, and they help you to guard it and maintain it (Prov. 4:23).

Me and Not Me

Boundaries define us. They define *what is me* and *what is not me*. A boundary shows me where I end and someone else begins, leading me to a sense of ownership.

Knowing what I am to own and take responsibility for gives me freedom. If I know where my yard begins and ends, I am free to do with it what I like. Taking responsibility for my life opens up many different options. However, if I do not “own” my life, my choices and options become very limited.

Think how confusing it would be if someone told you to “guard this property diligently, because I will hold you responsible for what happens here,” and then did not tell you the boundaries of the property. Or they did not give you the means with which to protect the property? This would be not only confusing but also potentially dangerous.

This is exactly what happens to us emotionally and spiritually, however. God designed a world where we all live “within”

ourselves; that is, we inhabit our own souls, and we are responsible for the things that make up “us.” “The heart knows its own bitterness, and no one shares its joy” (Prov. 14:10). We have to deal with what is in our soul, and boundaries help us to define what that is. If we are not shown the parameters, or are taught wrong parameters, we are in for much pain.

The Bible tells us clearly what our parameters are and how to protect them, but often our family, or other past relationships, confuses us about our parameters.

In addition to showing us what we are responsible for, boundaries help us to define what is *not* on our property and what we are *not* responsible for. We are not, for example, responsible for other people. Nowhere are we commanded to have “other-control,” although we spend a lot of time and energy trying to get it!

To and For

We are responsible *to* others and *for* ourselves. “Carry each other’s burdens,” says Galatians 6:2, “and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ.” This verse shows our responsibility *to* one another.

Many times others have “burdens” that are too big to bear. They do not have enough strength, resources, or knowledge to carry the load, and they need help. Denying ourselves to do for others what they *cannot* do for themselves is showing the sacrificial love of Christ. This is what Christ did for us. He did what we could not do for ourselves; he saved us. This is being responsible “to.”

On the other hand, verse 5 says that “each one should carry his own load.” Everyone has responsibilities that only he or she can carry. These things are our own particular “load” that we need to take daily responsibility for and work out. No one can do certain things *for* us. We have to take ownership of certain aspects of life that are our own “load.”

The Greek words for *burden* and *load* give us insight into the meaning of these texts. The Greek word for *burden* means “excess burdens,” or burdens that are so heavy that they weigh us down. These burdens are like boulders. They can crush us.

We shouldn't be expected to carry a boulder by ourselves! It would break our backs. We need help with the boulders—those times of crisis and tragedy in our lives.

In contrast, the Greek word for *load* means “cargo,” or “the burden of daily toil.” This word describes the everyday things we all need to do. These loads are like knapsacks. Knapsacks are possible to carry. We are expected to carry our own. We are expected to deal with our own feelings, attitudes, and behaviors, as well as the responsibilities God has given to each one of us, even though it takes effort.

Problems arise when people act as if their “boulders” are daily loads, and refuse help, or as if their “daily loads” are boulders they shouldn't have to carry. The results of these two instances are either perpetual pain or irresponsibility.

Lest we stay in pain or become irresponsible, it is very important to determine what “me” is, where my boundary of responsibility is and where someone else's begins. We will define what we are responsible for later in this chapter. For now let's look more closely at the nature of boundaries.

Good In, Bad Out

Boundaries help us to distinguish our property so that we can take care of it. They help us to “guard our heart with all diligence.” We need to keep things that will nurture us inside our fences and keep things that will harm us outside. In short, *boundaries help us keep the good in and the bad out*. They guard our treasures (Matt. 7:6) so that people will not steal them. They keep the pearls inside, and the pigs outside.

Sometimes, we have bad on the inside and good on the outside. In these instances, we need to be able to open up our boundaries to let the good in and the bad out. In other words, our *fences need gates in them*. For example, if I find that I have some pain or sin within, I need to open up and communicate it to God and others, so that I can be healed. Confessing pain and sin helps to “get it out” so that it does not continue to poison me on the inside (1 John 1:9; James 5:16; Mark 7:21–23).

And when the good is on the outside, we need to open our gates and “let it in.” Jesus speaks of this phenomenon in “receiving” him and his truth (Rev. 3:20; John 1:12). Other people have good things to give us, and we need to “open up to them” (2 Cor. 6:11–13). Often we will close our boundaries to good things from others, staying in a state of deprivation.

In short, *boundaries are not walls*. The Bible does not say that we are to be “walled off” from others; in fact, it says that we are to be “one” with them (John 17:11). We are to be in community with them. But in every community, all members have their own space and property. The important thing is that property lines be permeable enough to allow passing and strong enough to keep out danger.

Often, when people are abused while growing up, they reverse the function of boundaries and keep the *bad in* and the *good out*. When Mary was growing up she suffered abuse from her father. She was not encouraged to develop good boundaries. As a result, she would close herself off, holding the pain inside; she would not open up to express her hurt and get it out of her soul. She also would not open up to let support from the outside in to heal her. In addition, she would continually allow others to “dump” more pain into her soul. Consequently, when she came in for help, she was carrying a lot of pain, still being abused, and “walled off” from support from the outside.

She had to reverse the ways her boundaries worked. She needed fences that were strong enough to keep the bad out and gates in those fences to let out the bad already in her soul and let in the good she desperately needed.

God and Boundaries

The concept of boundaries comes from the very nature of God. God defines himself as a distinct, separate being, and he is responsible for himself. He defines and takes responsibility for his personality by telling us what he thinks, feels, plans, allows, will not allow, likes, and dislikes.

He also defines himself as separate from his creation and from us. He differentiates himself from others. He tells us who

he is and who he is not. For example, he says that he is love and that he is not darkness (1 John 4:16; 1:6).

In addition, he has boundaries within the Trinity. The Father, the Son, and the Spirit are one, but at the same time they are distinct persons with their own boundaries. Each one has his own personhood and responsibilities, as well as a connection and love for one another (John 17:24).

God also limits what he will allow in his yard. He confronts sin and allows consequences for behavior. He guards his house and will not allow evil things to go on there. He invites people in who will love him, and he lets his love flow outward to them at the same time. The “gates” of his boundaries open and close appropriately.

In the same way he gave us his “likeness” (Gen. 1:26), he gave us personal responsibility within limits. He wants us to “rule and subdue” the earth and to be responsible stewards over the life he has given us. To do that, we need to develop boundaries like God’s.

Examples of Boundaries

Boundaries are anything that helps to differentiate you from someone else, or shows where you begin and end. Here are some examples of boundaries.

Skin

The most basic boundary that defines you is your physical skin. People often use this boundary as a metaphor for saying that their personal boundaries have been violated: “He really gets under my skin.” Your physical self is the first way that you learn that you are separate from others. As an infant, you slowly learn that you are different from the mother or father who cuddles you.

The skin boundary keeps the good in and the bad out. It protects your blood and bones, holding them on the inside and all together. It also keeps germs outside, protecting you from infection. At the same time skin has openings that let the “good” in, like food, and the “bad” out, like waste products.

Victims of physical and sexual abuse often have a poor sense of boundaries. Early in life they were taught that their property did not really begin at their skin. Others could invade their property and do whatever they wanted. As a result, they have difficulty establishing boundaries later in life.

Words

In the physical world a fence or some other kind of structure usually delineates a boundary. In the spiritual world, fences are invisible. Nevertheless, you can create good protective fences with your words.

The most basic boundary-setting word is *no*. It lets others know that you exist apart from them and that you are in control of you. Being clear about your no—and your yes—is a theme that runs throughout the Bible (Matt. 5:37; James 5:12).

No is a confrontational word. The Bible says that we are to confront people we love, saying, “No, that behavior is not okay. I will not participate in that.” The word *no* is also important in setting limits on abuse. Many passages of Scripture urge us to say no to others’ sinful treatment of us (Matt. 18:15–20).

The Bible also warns us against giving to others “reluctantly or under compulsion” (2 Cor. 9:7). People with poor boundaries struggle with saying no to the control, pressure, demands, and sometimes the real needs of others. They feel that if they say no to someone, they will endanger their relationship with that person, so they passively comply but inwardly resent. Sometimes a person is pressuring you to do something; other times the pressure comes from your own sense of what you “should” do. If you cannot say no to this external or internal pressure, you have lost control of your property and are not enjoying the fruit of “self-control.”

Your words also define your property for others as you communicate your feelings, intentions, or dislikes. It is difficult for people to know where you stand when you do not use words to define your property. God does this when he says, “I like this and I hate that.” Or, “I will do this, and I will not do that.” Your words let people know where you stand and thus give them a sense of

the “edges” that help identify you. “I don’t like it when you yell at me!” gives people a clear message about how you conduct relationships and lets them know the “rules” of your yard.

Truth

Knowing the truth about God and his property puts limits on you and shows you his boundaries. Realizing the truth of his unchangeable reality helps you to define yourself in relation to him. When he says that you will reap what you sow (Gal. 6:7), for example, you either define yourself in relation to that reality, or continue to get injured if you try to go against it. To be in touch with God’s truth is to be in touch with reality, and to live in accord with that reality makes for a better life (Ps. 119:2, 45).

Satan is the great distorter of reality. Recall in the garden when he tempted Eve to question God’s boundaries and his truth. The consequences were disastrous.

There is always safety in the truth, whether it be knowing God’s truth or knowing the truth about yourself. Many people live scattered and tumultuous lives trying to live outside of their own boundaries, not accepting and expressing the truth of who they are. Honesty about who you are gives you the biblical value of integrity, or oneness.

Geographical Distance

Proverbs 22:3 says that “the prudent man sees the evil and hides himself.” Sometimes physically removing yourself from a situation will help maintain boundaries. You can do this to replenish yourself physically, emotionally, and spiritually after you have given to your limit, as Jesus often did.

Or, you can remove yourself to get away from danger and put limits on evil. The Bible urges us to separate from those who continue to hurt us and to create a safe place for ourselves. Removing yourself from the situation will also cause the one who is left behind to experience a loss of fellowship that may lead to changed behavior (Matt. 18:17–18; 1 Cor. 5:11–13).

When a relationship is abusive, many times the only way to finally show the other person that your boundaries are real is to create space until they are ready to deal with the problem. The Bible supports the idea of limiting togetherness for the sake of “binding evil.”

Time

Taking time off from a person, or a project, can be a way of regaining ownership over some out-of-control aspect of your life where boundaries need to be set.

Adult children who have never spiritually and emotionally separated from their parents often need time away. They have spent their whole lives embracing and keeping (Eccl. 3:5–6) and have been afraid to refrain from embracing and to throw away some of their outgrown ways of relating. They need to spend some time building boundaries against the old ways and creating new ways of relating that for a while may feel alienating to their parents. This time apart usually improves their relationship with their parents.

Emotional Distance

Emotional distance is a temporary boundary to give your heart the space it needs to be safe; it is never a permanent way of living. People who have been in abusive relationships need to find a safe place to begin to “thaw out” emotionally. Sometimes in abusive marriages the abused spouse needs to keep emotional distance until the abusive partner begins to face his or her problems and become trustworthy.

You should not continue to set yourself up for hurt and disappointment. If you have been in an abusive relationship, you should wait until it is safe and until real patterns of change have been demonstrated before you go back. Many people are too quick to trust someone in the name of forgiveness and not make sure that the other is producing “fruit in keeping with repentance” (Luke 3:8). To continue to open yourself up emotionally to an

abusive or addicted person without seeing true change is foolish. Forgive, but guard your heart until you see sustained change.

Other People

You need to depend on others to help you set and keep boundaries. People subject to another person's addictions, control, or abuse are finding that after years and years of "loving too much," they can find the ability to create boundaries only through a support group. Their support system is giving them the strength to say no to abuse and control for the first time in their lives.

There are two reasons why you need others to help with boundaries. The first is that *your most basic need in life is for relationship*. People suffer much to have relationships, and many put up with abuse because they fear their partners will leave them and they will be alone if they stand up to them. Fear of being alone keeps many in hurtful patterns for years. They are afraid that if they set boundaries they will not have any love in their life.

When they open themselves up to support from others, however, they find that the abusive person is not the only source of love in the world and that they can find the strength through their support system to set the limits they need to set. They are no longer alone. The church of Christ is there to give strength to ward off the blows against them.

The other reason we need others is because *we need new input and teaching*. Many people have been taught by their church or their family that boundaries are unbiblical, mean, or selfish. These people need good biblical support systems to help them stand against the guilt that comes from the old "tapes" inside that tell them lies to keep them in bondage. They need supportive others to stand against the old messages and the guilt involved in change. In Part II we will be discussing in greater detail how to build boundaries in all the primary relationships in your life. Our point for now is that boundaries are not built in a vacuum; *creating boundaries always involves a support network*.

Consequences

Trespassing on other people's property carries consequences. "No Trespassing" signs usually carry a threat of prosecution if someone steps over the boundaries. The Bible teaches this principle over and over, saying that if we walk one way, this will happen, and if we walk another way, something else will happen.

Just as the Bible sets consequences for certain behaviors, we need to back up our boundaries with consequences. How many marriages could have been saved if one spouse had followed through with the threat of "if you don't stop drinking" (or "coming home at midnight," or "hitting me," or "yelling at the kids"), I will leave until you get some treatment!" Or how many young adults' lives would have been turned around if their parents had followed through with their threat of "no more money if you quit another job without having further employment" or "no bed if you continue to smoke marijuana in my house."

Paul is not kidding in 2 Thessalonians 3:10 when he says that if anyone will not work, don't let him or her eat. God does not enable irresponsible behavior. Hunger is a consequence of laziness (Prov. 16:26).

Consequences give some good "barbs" to fences. They let people know the seriousness of the trespass and the seriousness of our respect for ourselves. This teaches them that our commitment to living according to helpful values is something we hold dear and will fight to protect and guard.

What's Within My Boundaries?

The story of the Good Samaritan is a model of correct behavior in many dimensions. It is a good illustration of boundaries—when they should be both observed and violated. Imagine for a moment how the story might read if the Samaritan were a boundaryless person.

You know the story. A man traveling from Jerusalem to Jericho was mugged. The robbers stripped him and beat him, leaving him half dead. A priest and Levite passed by on the other side of the road, ignoring the hurt man, but a Samaritan took

pity on him, bandaged his wounds, brought him to an inn, and took care of him. The next day the Samaritan gave the innkeeper some money and said, “Look after him. When I return, I will reimburse you for any extra expense you may have.”

Let’s depart from the familiar story here. Suppose the injured man wakes up at this point in the story and says:

“What? You’re leaving?”

“Yes, I am. I have some business in Jericho I have to attend to,” the Samaritan replies.

“Don’t you think you’re being selfish? I’m in pretty bad shape here. I’m going to need someone to talk to. How is Jesus going to use you as an example? You’re not even acting like a Christian, abandoning me like this in my time of need! Whatever happened to ‘Deny yourself’?”

“Why, I guess you’re right,” the Samaritan says. “That would be uncaring of me to leave you here alone. I should do more. I will postpone my trip for a few days.”

So he stays with the man for three days, talking to him and making sure that he is happy and content. On the afternoon of the third day, there’s a knock at the door and a messenger comes in. He hands the Samaritan a message from his business contacts in Jericho: “Waited as long as we could. Have decided to sell camels to another party. Our next herd will be here in six months.”

“How could you do this to me?” the Samaritan screams at the recovering man, waving the message in the air. “Look what you’ve done now! You’ve caused me to lose those camels that I needed for my business. Now I can’t deliver my goods. This may put me out of business! How could you do this to me?”

At some level this story may be familiar to all of us. We may be moved with compassion to give to someone in need, but then this person manipulates us into giving more than we want to give. We end up resentful and angry, having missed something we needed in our own life. Or, we may want more from someone else, and we pressure them until they give in. They give not out of their heart and free will, but out of compliance, and they resent us for what they give. Neither one of us comes out ahead.

To avoid these scenarios, we need to look at what falls within our boundaries, what we are responsible for.

Feelings

Feelings have gotten a bad rap in the Christian world. They have been called everything from unimportant to fleshly. At the same time, example after example shows how our feelings play an enormous role in our motivation and behavior. How many times have you seen people do ungodly things to one another because of hurt feelings? Or how many times has someone had to be hospitalized for depression after years and years of trying to ignore the way they felt until they became suicidal?

Feelings should neither be ignored nor placed in charge. The Bible says to “own” your feelings and be aware of them. They can often motivate you to do much good. The Good Samaritan’s pity moved him to go to the injured Israelite (Luke 10:33). The father was filled with compassion for his lost son and threw his arms around him (Luke 15:20). Many times Jesus “had compassion” for the people to whom he ministered (Matt. 9:36; 15:32).

Feelings come from your heart and can tell you the state of your relationships. They can tell you if things are going well, or if there is a problem. If you feel close and loving, things are probably going well. If you feel angry, you have a problem that needs to be addressed. But the point is, your feelings are *your* responsibility and you must own them and see them as your problem so you can begin to find an answer to whatever issue they are pointing to.

Attitudes and Beliefs

Attitudes have to do with your orientation toward something, the stance you take toward others, God, life, work, and relationships. Beliefs are anything that you accept as true. Often we do not see an attitude, or belief, as the source of discomfort in our life. We blame other people as did our first parents, Adam

and Eve. We need to *own* our attitudes and convictions because they fall within our property line. We are the ones who feel their effect, *and* the only ones who can change them.

The tough thing about attitudes is that we learn them very early in life. They play a big part in the map of who we are and how we operate. People who have never questioned their attitudes and beliefs can fall prey to the dynamic that Jesus referred to when he described people holding on to the “traditions of men,” instead of the commands of God (Mark 7:8; Matt. 15:3).

People with boundary problems usually have distorted attitudes about responsibility. They feel that to hold people responsible for their feelings, choices, and behaviors is *mean*. However, Proverbs repeatedly says that setting limits and accepting responsibility will save lives (Prov. 13:18, 24).

Behaviors

Behaviors have consequences. As Paul says, “A man reaps what he sows” (Gal. 6:7–8). If we study, we will reap good grades. If we go to work, we will get a paycheck. If we exercise, we will be in better health. If we act lovingly toward others, we will have closer relationships. On the negative side, if we sow idleness, irresponsibility, or out-of-control behavior, we can expect to reap poverty, failure, and the effects of loose living. These are natural consequences of our behavior.

The problem comes when someone interrupts the law of sowing and reaping in another’s life. A person’s drinking or abuse *should* have consequences for the drinker or the abuser. “Stern discipline awaits him who leaves the path” (Prov. 15:10). To rescue people from the natural consequences of their behavior is to render them powerless.

This happens a lot with parents and children. Parents often yell and nag, instead of allowing their children to reap the natural consequences of their behavior. Parenting with love and limits, with warmth and consequences, produces confident children who have a sense of control over their lives.

Choices

We need to take responsibility for our choices. This leads to the fruit of “self-control” (Gal. 5:23). A common boundary problem is disowning our choices and trying to lay the responsibility for them on someone else. Think for a moment how often we use the phrases, “I had to” or “She (he) made me” when explaining why we did or did not do something. These phrases betray our basic illusion that we are not active agents in many of our dealings. We think someone else is in control, thus relieving us of our basic responsibility.

We need to realize that we *are* in control of our choices, no matter how we feel. This keeps us from making choices to give “reluctantly or under compulsion,” as 2 Corinthians 9:7 says. Paul would not even accept a gift that he felt was given because the giver felt he “had to” give it. He once sent a gift back so “that any favor you do will be spontaneous and not forced” (Philem. 1:14). Joshua said the same thing to the people in his famous “choice” verse: “But if serving the Lord *seems undesirable to you*, then *choose for yourselves* this day whom you will serve” (Josh. 24:15).

Jesus said a similar thing to the worker who was angry about the wage for which he had agreed to work: “Friend, I am not being unfair to you. Didn’t you agree to work for a denarius?” (Matt. 20:13). The man had made a free choice to work for a certain amount and was angry because someone who had worked fewer hours had gotten the same wage.

Another example is the prodigal son’s brother, who had chosen to stay home and serve and then was resentful. Not satisfied with his choice, he needed to be reminded that he made a choice to stay home.

Throughout the Scriptures, people are reminded of their choices and asked to take responsibility for them. Like Paul says, if we choose to live by the Spirit, we will live; if we choose to follow our sinful nature, we will die (Rom. 8:13). Making decisions based on others’ approval or on guilt breeds resentment, a product of our sinful nature. We have been so trained by others on what we “should” do that we think we are being loving when we do things out of compulsion.

Setting boundaries inevitably involves taking responsibility for your choices. You are the one who makes them. You are the one who must live with their consequences. And you are the one who may be keeping yourself from making the choices you could be happy with.

Values

What we value is what we love and assign importance to. Often we do not take responsibility for what we value. We are caught up in valuing the approval of men rather than the approval of God (John 12:43); because of this misplaced value, we miss out on life. We think that power, riches, and pleasure will satisfy our deepest longing, which is really for love.

When we take responsibility for out-of-control behavior caused by loving the wrong things, or valuing things that have no lasting value, when we confess that we have *a heart that values things that will not satisfy*, we can receive help from God and his people to “create a new heart” within us. Boundaries help us not to deny but to own our old hurtful values so God can change them.

Limits

Two aspects of limits stand out when it comes to creating better boundaries. The first is *setting limits on others*. This is the component that we most often hear about when we talk about boundaries. In reality, setting limits on others is a misnomer. We can’t do that. What we *can* do is set limits on our own exposure to people who are behaving poorly; we can’t change them or make them behave right.

Our model is God. He does not really “set limits” on people to “make them” behave. God sets standards, but he lets people be who they are and then separates himself from them when they misbehave, saying in effect, “You can be that way if you choose, but you cannot come into my house.” Heaven is a place for the repentant, and all are welcome.

But God limits his exposure to evil, unrepentant people, as should we. Scripture is full of admonitions to separate ourselves

from people who act in destructive ways (Matt. 18:15–17; 1 Cor. 5:9–13). We are not being unloving. Separating ourselves protects love, because we are taking a stand against things that destroy love.

The other aspect of limits that is helpful when talking about boundaries is *setting our own internal limits*. We need to have spaces inside ourselves where we can have a feeling, an impulse, or a desire, without acting it out. *We need self-control without repression.*

We need to be able to say no to ourselves. This includes both our destructive desires and some good ones that are not wise to pursue at a given time. Internal structure is a very important component of boundaries and identity, as well as ownership, responsibility, and self-control.

Talents

Contrast these two responses:

“Well done, good and faithful servant! You have been faithful with a few things; I will put you in charge of many things. Come and share your master’s happiness!”

“You wicked, lazy servant! So you knew that I harvest where I have not sown and gather where I have not scattered seed? Well then, you should have put my money on deposit with the bankers, so that when I returned I would have received it back with interest. Take the talent from him and give it to the one who has the ten talents.” (Matt. 25:23, 26–28)

No other passage better illustrates God-ordained responsibility for ownership and use of talents. Although the example is of money, it also applies to internal talents and gifts. Our talents are clearly within our boundaries and are our responsibility. Yet taking ownership of them is often frightening and always risky.

The parable of the talents says that we are accountable—not to mention much happier—when we are exercising our gifts and being productive. It takes work, practice, learning, prayer, resources, and grace to overcome the fear of failure that the

“wicked and lazy” servant gave in to. He was not chastised for being afraid; we are all afraid when trying something new and difficult. He was chastised for not confronting his fear and trying the best he could. Not confronting our fear denies the grace of God and insults both his giving of the gift and his grace to sustain us as we are learning.

Thoughts

Our minds and thoughts are important reflections of the image of God. No other creature on earth has our thinking ability. We are the only creatures who are called to love God with all our mind (Mark 12:30). And Paul wrote that he was taking “captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ” (2 Cor. 10:5). Establishing boundaries in thinking involves three things.

1. *We must own our own thoughts.* Many people have not taken ownership of their own thinking processes. They are mechanically thinking the thoughts of others without ever examining them. They swallow others’ opinions and reasonings, never questioning and “thinking about their thinking.” Certainly we should listen to the thoughts of others and weigh them; but we should never “give our minds” over to anyone. We are to weigh things for ourselves in the context of relationship, “sharpening” each other as iron, but remaining separate thinkers.

2. *We must grow in knowledge and expand our minds.* One area in which we need to grow is in knowledge of God and his Word. David said of knowing God’s Word, “My soul is consumed with longing for your laws at all times. Your statutes are my delight; they are my counselors” (Ps. 119:20, 24). We also learn much about God by studying his creation and his work. In learning about his world, we obey the commandment to “rule and subdue” the earth and all that is within it. We must learn about the world that he has given us to become wise stewards. Whether we are doing brain surgery, balancing our checkbook, or raising children, we are to use our brains to have better lives and glorify God.

3. *We must clarify distorted thinking.* We all have a tendency to not see things clearly, to think and perceive in distorted

ways. Probably the easiest distortions to notice are in personal relationships. We rarely see people as they really are; our perceptions are distorted by past relationships and our own pre-conceptions of who we think they are, even the people we know best. We do not see clearly because of the “logs” in our eyes (Matt. 7:3–5).

Taking ownership of our thinking in relationships requires being active in checking out where we may be wrong. As we assimilate new information, our thinking adapts and grows closer to reality.

Also we need to make sure that we are communicating our thoughts to others. Many people think that others should be able to read their minds and know what they want. This leads to frustration. Even Paul says, “For who among men knows the thoughts of a man except the man’s spirit within him?” (1 Cor. 2:11). What a great statement about boundaries! We have our own thoughts, and if we want others to know them, we must tell them.

Desires

Our desires lie within our boundaries. Each of us has different desires and wants, dreams and wishes, goals and plans, hungers and thirsts. We all want to satisfy “me.” But why are there so few satisfied “me’s” around?

Part of the problem lies in the lack of structured boundaries within our personality. We can’t define who the real “me” is and what we truly desire. Many desires masquerade as the real thing. They are lusts that come out of not owning our real desires. For example, many sex addicts are looking for sexual experiences, but what they really desire is love and affection.

James writes about this problem of not owning and seeking our real desires with pure motives: “You want something but don’t get it. You kill and covet, but you cannot have what you want. You quarrel and fight. You do not have, because you do not ask God. When you ask, you do not receive, because you ask with wrong motives, that you may spend what you get on your pleasures” (James 4:2–3).

We often do not actively seek our desires from God, and those desires are mixed up with things that we do not really need. God is truly interested in our desires; he made them. Consider the following: “You have granted him the desire of his heart and have not withheld the request of his lips. You welcomed him with rich blessings and placed a crown of pure gold on his head” (Ps. 21:2–3). “Delight yourself in the LORD and he will give you the desires of your heart” (Ps. 37:4). “He fulfills the desires of those who fear him” (Ps. 145:19).

God loves to give gifts to his children, but he is a wise parent. He wants to make sure his gifts are right for us. To know what to ask for, we have to be in touch with who we really are and what are our real motives. If we are wanting something to feed our pride or to enhance our ego, I doubt that God is interested in giving it to us. But if it would be good for us, he’s very interested.

We are also commanded to play an active role in seeking our desires (Phil. 2:12–13; Ecc. 11:9; Matt. 7:7–11). We need to own our desires and pursue them to find fulfillment in life. “A desire accomplished is sweet to the soul” (Prov. 13:19 kJV), but it sure is a lot of work!

Love

Our ability to give and respond to love is our greatest gift. The heart that God has fashioned in his image is the center of our being. Its abilities to open up to love and to allow love to flow outward are crucial to life.

Many people have difficulty giving and receiving love because of hurt and fear. Having closed their heart to others, they feel empty and meaningless. The Bible is clear about both functions of the heart: the receiving of grace and love inward and the flow outward.

Listen to how the Bible tells how we should love: “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. . . . Love your neighbor as yourself” (Matt. 22:37, 39). And how we should receive love: “We have spoken

freely to you, Corinthians, and opened wide our hearts to you. We are not withholding our affection from you, but you are withholding yours from us. As a fair exchange—I speak as to my children—open wide your hearts also” (2 Cor. 6:11–13).

Our loving heart, like our physical one, *needs an inflow as well as an outflow of lifeblood*. And like its physical counterpart, our heart is a muscle, a trust muscle. This trust muscle needs to be used and exercised; if it is injured it will slow down or weaken.

We need to take responsibility for this loving function of ourselves and use it. Love concealed or love rejected can both kill us.

Many people do not take ownership for how they resist love. They have a lot of love around them, but do not realize that their loneliness is a result of their own lack of responsiveness. Often they will say, “Others’ love can not ‘get in.’” This statement negates their responsibility to respond. We maneuver subtly to avoid responsibility in love; we need to claim our hearts as our property and work on our weaknesses in that area. It will open up life to us.

We need to take responsibility for all of the above areas of our souls. These lie within our boundaries. But taking care of what lies within our boundaries isn’t easy; neither is allowing other people to take care of what lies within their boundaries. Setting boundaries and maintaining them is hard work. But, as you’ll see in the next chapter, boundary problems take some very recognizable shapes.

3

Boundary Problems

Following a day-long seminar that we were leading on biblical boundaries, a woman raised her hand and said, “I understand that I have boundary problems. But my estranged husband’s the one who had an affair and took all our money. Doesn’t he have a problem with boundaries?”

It’s easy to misunderstand boundaries. At first glance, it seems as if the individual who has difficulty setting limits is the one who has the boundary problem; however, people who don’t respect others’ limits also have boundary problems. The woman above may have difficulty setting limits, but, in addition, her husband hasn’t respected her limits.

In this chapter, we’ll categorize the main types of boundary problems, providing you some pegs on which to hang your thoughts. You’ll see that boundary conflicts are by no means limited to those who “can’t say no.”

Compliants: Saying “Yes” to the Bad

“May I tell you something embarrassing?” Robert asked me. A new client, Robert was trying to understand why he had so much difficulty refusing his wife’s constant demands. He was going broke trying to keep up with the Joneses.

“I was the only boy in my family, the youngest of four children. There was a strange double standard in my house involving physical fighting.” Robert cleared his throat, struggling to continue. “My sisters were three to seven years older than me.

Until I was in sixth grade, they were a lot bigger and stronger. They'd take advantage of their size and strength and wale on me until I was bruised. I mean, they really hurt me.

"The strangest part of it all was my parents' attitude. They'd tell us, 'Robert is the boy. Boys don't hit girls. It's bad manners.' Bad manners! I was getting triple-teamed, and fighting back was bad manners?" Robert stopped. His shame kept him from continuing, but he'd said enough. He had unearthed part of the reason for his conflicts with his wife.

When parents teach children that setting boundaries or saying no is bad, they are teaching them that others can do with them as they wish. They are sending their children defenseless into a world that contains much evil. Evil in the form of controlling, manipulative, and exploitative people. Evil in the form of temptations.

To feel safe in such an evil world, children need to have the power to say things like:

- "No."
- "I disagree."
- "I will not."
- "I choose not to."
- "Stop that."
- "It hurts."
- "It's wrong."
- "That's bad."
- "I don't like it when you touch me there."

Blocking a child's ability to say no handicaps that child for life. Adults with handicaps like Robert's have this first boundary injury: they say yes to bad things.

This type of boundary conflict is called *compliance*. Compliant people have fuzzy and indistinct boundaries; they "melt" into the demands and needs of other people. They can't stand alone, distinct from people who want something from them. Compliants, for example, pretend to like the same restaurants and movies their friends do "just to get along." They minimize their differences with others so as not to rock the boat. Compliants are chameleons. After a while it's hard to distinguish them from their environment.

The inability to say no to the bad is pervasive. Not only does it keep us from refusing evil in our lives, *it often keeps us from recognizing evil*. Many compliant people realize too late that they're in a dangerous or abusive relationship. Their spiritual and emotional "radar" is broken; they have no ability to guard their hearts (Prov. 4:23).

This type of boundary problem paralyzes people's no muscles. Whenever they need to protect themselves by saying no, the word catches in their throats. This happens for a number of different reasons:

- Fear of hurting the other person's feelings
- Fear of abandonment and separateness
- A wish to be totally dependent on another
- Fear of someone else's anger
- Fear of punishment
- Fear of being shamed
- Fear of being seen as bad or selfish
- Fear of being unspiritual
- Fear of one's overstrict, critical conscience

This last fear is actually experienced as guilt. People who have an overstrict, critical conscience will condemn themselves for things God himself doesn't condemn them for. As Paul says, "Since their conscience is weak, it is defiled" (1 Cor. 8:7). Afraid to confront their unbiblical and critical internal parent, they tighten appropriate boundaries.

When we give in to guilty feelings, we are complying with a harsh conscience. This fear of disobeying the harsh conscience translates into an inability to confront others—a saying yes to the bad—because it would cause more guilt.

Biblical compliance needs to be distinguished from this kind of compliance. Matthew 9:13 says that God desires "compassion, and not sacrifice" (NASB). In other words, God wants us to be compliant from the inside out (compassionate), not compliant on the outside and resentful on the inside (sacrificial). Compliers take on too many responsibilities and set too few boundaries, not by choice, but because they are afraid.

Avoidants: Saying “No” to the Good

The living room suddenly became very quiet. The Bible study group that had been meeting at the Craigs’ house for six months had suddenly become more intimate. Tonight the five couples began to share real struggles in their lives, not just the usual “please pray for Aunt Sarah” requests. Tears were shed, and genuine support, not just well-meaning advice, was offered. Everyone, except the hostess, Rachel Henderson, had taken a turn talking.

Rachel had been the driving force behind the formation of the Bible study. She and her husband, Joe, had developed the format, invited the other couples, and opened up their home to the study. Caught up in her leadership role, however, Rachel never opened up about her struggles. She shied away from such opportunities, preferring instead to help draw out others. Tonight the others waited.

Rachel cleared her throat. Looking around the room, she finally spoke, “After hearing all the other problems in the room, I think the Lord’s speaking to me. He seems to be saying that my issues are nothing compared to what you all deal with. It would be selfish to take up time with the little struggles I face. So...who’d like dessert?”

No one spoke. But disappointment was evident on each face. Rachel had again avoided an opportunity for others to love her as they’d been loved by her.

This boundary problem is called *avoidance*: saying no to the good. It’s the inability to ask for help, to recognize one’s own needs, to let others in. Avoidants withdraw when they are in need; they do not ask for the support of others.

Why is avoidance a boundary problem? At the heart of the struggle is a confusion of boundaries as walls. Boundaries are supposed to be able to “breathe,” to be like fences with a gate that can let the good in and the bad out. Individuals with walls for boundaries can let in neither bad nor good. No one touches them.

God designed our personal boundaries to have gates. We should have the freedom to enjoy safe relationships and to avoid destructive ones. God even allows us the freedom to let him in or to close him off:

“Here I am! I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with him, and he with me.” (Rev. 3:20)

God has no interest in violating our boundaries so that he can relate to us. He understands that this would cause injuries of trust. It is our responsibility to open up to him in need and repentance. Yet, for avoidants, opening up to both God and people is almost impossible.

The impermeable boundaries of avoidants cause a rigidity toward their God-given needs. They experience their problems and legitimate wants as something bad, destructive, or shameful.

Some people, like Marti, are both compliants and avoidants. In a recent session, Marti laughed ruefully at herself. “I’m beginning to see a pattern here. When someone needs four hours with me, I can’t say no. When I need someone for ten minutes, I can’t ask for it. Isn’t there a transistor in my head that I can replace?”

Marti’s dilemma is shared by many adults. She says “yes” to the bad (compliant) and says “no” to the good (avoidant). Individuals who have both boundary conflicts not only cannot refuse evil, they are unable to receive the support they so readily offer to others. They are stuck in a cycle of feeling drained, but with nothing to replace the lost energy.

Compliant avoidants suffer from what is called “reversed boundaries.” They have no boundaries where they need them, and they have boundaries where they shouldn’t have them.

Controllers: Not Respecting Others’ Boundaries

“What do you mean, you’re quitting? You can’t leave now!” Steve looked across his desk at his administrative assistant. Frank had been working for Steve for several years and was finally fed up. He had given his all to the position, but Steve didn’t know when to back off.

Time after time, Steve would insist on Frank’s spending unpaid time at the office on important projects. Frank had even switched his vacation schedule twice at Steve’s insistence. But

the final straw was when Steve began calling Frank at home. An occasional call at home Frank could understand. But almost every day, during dinnertime, the family would wait while Frank had a telephone conference with his boss.

Several times Frank had tried to talk with Steve about the time violations. But Steve never really understood how burned out Frank was. After all, he needed Frank. Frank made him look successful. And it was so easy to get him to work harder.

Steve has a problem hearing and accepting others' boundaries. To Steve, no is simply a challenge to change the other person's mind. This boundary problem is called *control*. Controllers can't respect others' limits. They resist taking responsibility for their own lives, so they need to control others.

Controllers believe the old jokes about training top sales people: no means maybe, and maybe means yes. While this may be productive in learning to sell a product, it can wreak havoc in a relationship. Controllers are perceived as bullies, manipulative and aggressive.

The primary problem of individuals *who can't hear no*—which is different from *not being able to say no*—is that they tend to project responsibility for their lives onto others. They use various means of control to motivate others to carry the load intended by God to be theirs alone.

Remember the “boulder and knapsack” illustration in chapter 2? Controllers look for someone to carry their knapsacks (individual responsibilities) in addition to their boulders (crises and crushing burdens). Had Steve shouldered the weight of his own job, Frank would have been happy to pitch in extra hours from time to time. But the pressure of covering for Steve's irresponsibility made a talented professional look elsewhere for work.

Controllers come in two types:

1. *Aggressive controllers*. These people clearly don't listen to others' boundaries. They run over other people's fences like a tank. They are sometimes verbally abusive, sometimes physically abusive. But most of the time they simply aren't aware that others even have boundaries. It's as if they live in a world of yes.

There's no place for someone else's no. They attempt to get others to change, to make the world fit their idea of the way life should be. They neglect their own responsibility to accept others as they are.

Peter is an example of an aggressive controller. Jesus was telling the disciples about his upcoming suffering, death, and resurrection. Peter took Jesus aside and began to rebuke him. But Jesus rebuked Peter, saying, "Get behind me, Satan! You do not have in mind the things of God, but the things of men" (Mark 8:33).

Peter didn't want to accept the Lord's boundaries. Jesus immediately confronted Peter's violation of his boundaries.

2. *Manipulative controllers.* Less honest than the aggressive controllers, manipulators try to persuade people out of their boundaries. They talk others into yes. They indirectly manipulate circumstances to get their way. They seduce others into carrying their burdens. They use guilt messages.

Remember how Tom Sawyer tricked his playmates into whitewashing the fence for him? He made it seem like such a privilege that kids were lined up to paint!

Isaac's son Jacob finagled his twin brother Esau into giving up his birthright (Gen. 25:29–34) and, with his mother's help, deceived his father into bestowing Esau's blessing on him (Gen. 27:1–29). In fact, Jacob's name means "deceiver." Numerous times he used his cleverness to avoid others' boundaries.

The event that helped Jacob work out of his manipulative boundarylessness was his confrontation with God in human form (Gen. 32:24–32). God "wrestled" with him all night long and then changed his name to Israel. The word *Israel* means "he who fights with God." God left Jacob with a dislocated thigh.

And Jacob changed. He became less deceitful and more honest. His aggressiveness was clearer, as evidenced by his new name. He was owning his feistiness. Only when the manipulative controller is confronted with his dishonesty can he take responsibility for it, repent of it, and accept his and others' limits.

Manipulators deny their desires to control others; they brush aside their own self-centeredness. They are like the adulterous

woman in Proverbs: “She eats and wipes her mouth and says, ‘I’ve done nothing wrong’” (30:20).

Believe it or not, compliants and avoidants can also be controllers. They tend, however, to be more manipulative than aggressive. When compliant avoidants need emotional support, for example, they may do a favor for a friend. They hope that by being loving, they’ll receive love. So then they wait, anticipating the return of the favor. And sometimes they wait for years. Especially if they performed the favor for someone who can’t read minds.

What’s wrong with this picture? It’s not a picture of love. The love that God talks about doesn’t seek a return on its investment: “It is not self-seeking” (1 Cor. 13:5). Caring for someone so that they’ll care back for us is simply an indirect means of controlling someone else. If you’ve ever been on the “receiving” end of that kind of maneuver, you’ll understand. One minute you’ve taken the compliment, or favor—the next minute you’ve hurt someone’s feelings by not figuring out the price tag attached.

Boundary Injuries

At this point, you might be saying to yourself, “Wait a minute. How can controllers be called ‘injured’? They are the injurers, not the injured!” Indeed, controllers do lots of damage to others, but they also have boundary problems. Let’s see what goes on underneath.

Controllers are undisciplined people. They have little ability to curb their impulses or desires. While it appears that they “get what they want in life,” they are still slaves to their appetites. Delaying gratification is difficult for them. That’s why they hate the word no from others. They desperately need to learn to listen to the boundaries of others to help them observe their own.

Controllers also are limited in their ability to take responsibility for owning their lives. Having relied on bullying or indirectness, they can’t function on their own in the world. The only remedy is to let controllers experience the consequences of their irresponsibility.

Finally, controllers are isolated. People stay with them out of fear, guilt, or dependency. If they're honest, controllers rarely feel loved. Why? Because in their heart of hearts, they know that the only reason people spend time with them is because they are pulling the strings. If they stopped threatening or manipulating, they would be abandoned. And, at some deep level, they are aware of their isolation. "There is no fear in love. But perfect love drives out fear" (1 John 4:18). We can't terrorize or make others feel guilty and be loved by them at the same time.

Nonresponsives: Not Hearing the Needs of Others

Brenda's hand trembled as she talked. "Usually I've got pretty thick skin with Mike. But I guess the past couple of weeks of kid problems and work stresses had me feeling very vulnerable. This time his response didn't make me angry. It just hurt. And it hurt bad."

Brenda was recounting a recent marital struggle. Overall, she thought her marriage to Mike was a good one. He was a good provider, an active Christian, and a competent father. Yet the relationship allowed no room for her hurts or needs.

The incident Brenda was discussing began in a fairly benign manner. She and Mike were talking in the bedroom after putting the kids to bed. Brenda began to unburden her fears about child rearing and her feelings of inadequacy at work.

Without warning, Mike turned to her and said, "If you don't like the way you feel, change your feelings. Life's tough. So just...just handle it, Brenda."

Brenda was devastated. She felt she should have expected the rebuff. It wasn't that easy to express her neediness in the first place, especially with Mike's coldness. Now she felt as if he had chopped her feelings to bits. He seemed to have no understanding whatsoever of her struggles—and didn't want to.

How could this be a boundary problem? Isn't it just basic insensitivity? Partially. But it's not quite that simple. Remember that boundaries are a way to describe our spheres of responsibility: what we are and are not responsible for. While we

shouldn't take on the responsibility of others' feelings, attitudes, and behaviors, we do have certain responsibilities *to* each other.

Mike does have a responsibility to connect with Brenda, not only as a provider and as a parenting partner, but also as a loving husband. Connecting emotionally with Brenda is part of loving her as himself (Eph. 5:28, 33). He isn't responsible *for* her emotional well-being. *But he is responsible to her.* His inability to respond to her needs is a neglect of his responsibility.

Termed "nonresponsives" because of their lack of attention to the responsibilities of love, these individuals exhibit the opposite of the pattern exhorted in Proverbs 3:27 (NRSV): "Do not withhold good from those to whom it is due, when it is in your power to do it" (that last phrase, "in your power," has to do with our resources and availability). Another key Scripture here is "If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all" (Rom. 12:18 NRSV). Again, note the condition: "so far as it depends on you": we can't bring peace to someone who doesn't accept it!

Both of the above verses indicate the same idea: we are responsible to care about and help, *within certain limits*, others whom God places in our lives. To refuse to do so when we have the appropriate resources can be a boundary conflict.

Nonresponsives fall into one of two groups:

1. Those with a critical spirit toward others' needs (a projection of our own hatred of our needs onto others, a problem Jesus addressed in Matthew 7:1–5). They hate being incomplete in themselves. As a result, they ignore the needs of others.

2. Those who are so absorbed in their own desires and needs they exclude others (a form of narcissism).

Don't confuse this self-absorption with a God-given sense of taking responsibility for one's own needs first so that one is able to love others: "Do not merely look out for your own personal interests, but also for the interests of others" (Phil. 2:4). God wants us to take care of ourselves so that we can help others without moving into a crisis ourselves.

Controllers and Nonresponsives

Controlling nonresponsives have a hard time looking past themselves. They see others as responsible for their struggles and are on the lookout for someone to take care of them. They gravitate toward someone with blurry boundaries, who will naturally take on too many responsibilities in the relationship and who won't complain about it. It's like the old joke about relationships: What happens when a rescuing, enabling person meets a controlling, insensitive person? Answer: they get married!

Actually, this makes sense. Compliant avoidants search for someone to repair. This keeps them saying yes and keeps them out of touch with their own needs. Who fits the bill better than a controlling nonresponsive? And controlling nonresponsives search for someone to keep them away from responsibility. Who better than a compliant avoidant?

Below is a chart of the four types of boundary problems.¹ It will help you see at a glance the kinds of problems with which you may struggle.

Summary of Boundary Problems

	CAN'T SAY	CAN'T HEAR
NO	The Compliant Feels guilty and/or controlled by others; can't set boundaries	The Controller Aggressively or manipulatively violates boundaries of others
YES	The Nonresponsive Sets boundaries against responsibility to love	The Avoidant Sets boundaries against receiving care of others

Functional and Relational Boundary Issues

A final boundary problem involves the distinction between functional and relational boundaries. *Functional boundaries* refers to a person's ability to complete a task, project, or job. It

has to do with performance, discipline, initiative, and planning. *Relational boundaries* refers to the ability to speak truth to others with whom we are in relationship.

Another way of looking at it is that functional boundaries refer to our “Martha” parts, and relational, our “Mary” parts (Luke 10:38–42). Mary and Martha were friends of Jesus. Martha prepared dinner, while Mary sat at Jesus’ feet. When Martha complained about Mary’s not helping her, Jesus said: “Mary has chosen what is better” (v. 42). He didn’t mean that Martha’s busyness was bad; it was just the wrong thing at the wrong time.

Many people have good functional boundaries, but poor relational ones; that is, they can perform tasks at quite high levels of competence, but they may not be able to tell a friend that they don’t like their chronic lateness. The reverse can also be true. Some people can be absolutely honest with others about their complaints and dislikes but be unable to get up for work in the morning!

We’ve taken a look at the different categories of boundaries. But how do you develop boundaries? Why do some people seem to have natural boundaries and others have no boundaries at all? As with many things, it has a lot to do with the family in which you grew up.

4

How Boundaries Are Developed

Jim had never been able say no to anyone, especially to his supervisors at work. He'd moved up to the position of operations manager in a large firm. His dependability had earned him the reputation of "Mr. Can Do."

But his kids had another name for him: "The Phantom." Jim was never home. Being "Mr. Can Do" meant late nights at the office. It meant business dinners several nights a week. It meant weekends on the road, even after he'd promised the kids fishing trips and trips to the zoo.

Jim didn't like being absent so much, but he had justified it to himself, saying, *This is my contribution to the kids, my way of giving them the good life.* His wife, Alice, had rationalized the "dadless dinners" by telling the children (and herself), "This is Dad's way of telling us he loves us." And she almost believed it.

Finally, however, Alice had had enough. One night she sat Jim down on the couch in the family room and said, "I feel like a single parent, Jim. I missed you for a while, but now all I feel is nothing."

Jim avoided her eyes. "Honey, I know, I know," he replied. "I'd really like to say no to people more, but it's just so hard to—"

"I found someone you can say no to," Alice broke in. "Me and the kids!"

That did it. Something broke deep within Jim. A sense of pain, of guilt and shame, of helplessness and rage.

The words tumbled out of his mouth. "Do you think I like being like this, always giving in to others? Do you think I enjoy

letting my family down?" Jim paused, struggling for composure. "All my life it's been this way, Alice. I've always feared letting people down. I hate this part of me. I hate my life. How did I get like this?"

How *did* Jim "get like this"? He loved his family. The last thing he wanted was to neglect his most precious relationships: his wife and children. Jim's problems didn't start the day he was married. They developed during his early significant relationships. They were already a part of his character structure.

How do boundary abilities develop? That's the purpose of this chapter. We hope you'll be able to gain some understanding of where your own boundaries started crumbling or became set in concrete—and how to repair them.

As you read this section, remember David's prayer to God about his life and development:

Search me, O God, and know my heart; test me and know my anxious thoughts. See if there is any offensive way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting. (Ps. 139:23–24)

God's desire is for you to know where your injuries and deficits are, whether self-induced or other-induced. Ask him to shed light on the significant relationships and forces that have contributed to your own boundary struggles. The past is your ally in repairing your present and ensuring a better future.

Boundary Development

Remember the old saying, "Insanity is genetic. You inherit it from your kids"? Well, boundaries aren't inherited. They are built. To be the truth-telling, responsible, free, and loving people God wants us to be we need to learn limits from childhood on. Boundary development is an ongoing process, yet its most crucial stages are in our very early years, where our character is formed.

The Scriptures advise parents to "train a child in the way he should go, and when he is old he will not turn from it" (Prov. 22:6). Many parents misunderstand this passage. They think

“the way he should go” means “the way *we, the parents* think he (or she) should go.” Can you see the boundary conflicts already beginning?

The verse actually means “the way God has planned for him (or her) to go.” In other words, good parenting isn’t emotionally bludgeoning the child into some clone or ideal of the perfect child. It’s being a partner in helping young ones discover what God intended for them to be and helping them reach that goal.

The Bible teaches that we pass through life in stages. John writes to “little children,” “young men,” and “fathers.” Each group has distinct tasks to perform (1 John 2:12–13 kJV).

Boundaries also develop in specific, distinct phases that you can perceive. In fact, by noting infants and children in their early parental interactions, child development professionals have been able to record the specific phases of boundary development.¹

Bonding: The Foundation of Boundary Building

Wendy couldn’t understand it. Something wasn’t jelling. All those codependency books. All those assertiveness tapes. All that self-talk about being more confrontive. And yet, every time she talked to her mother on the phone, all the advice, all the self-help techniques melted away into vague, cloudy memories.

A typical conversation about Wendy’s children would always conclude with her mom’s analysis of Wendy’s imperfect parenting style. “I’ve been a mother longer than you,” Mom would say. “Just do it my way.”

Wendy resented her advice. It wasn’t that she wasn’t open to guidance—Lord knows she could use it. It was just that her mom thought her way was the only way. Wendy wanted a new relationship with her mom. She wanted to be honest about her mom’s control, her polite put-downs, and her inflexibility. Wendy wanted an adult-to-adult friendship with her mom.

But the words wouldn’t pass her lips. She’d write letters explaining her feelings. She’d rehearse before telephoning. Yet,

when the time came, she panicked and remained silent. She well knew how to be compliant, appreciative, and childlike with her mom. It was only later, when she became angry, that she knew she'd been taken to task again. She was beginning to give up hope that things would ever change.

Wendy's struggle illustrates a basic need that we all have in boundary building. No matter how much you talk to yourself, read, study, or practice, *you can't develop or set boundaries apart from supportive relationships with God and others.* Don't even try to start setting limits until you have entered into deep, abiding attachments with people who will love you no matter what.

Our deepest need is to belong, to be in a relationship, to have a spiritual and emotional "home." The very nature of God is to be in relationship: "God is love," says 1 John 4:16. Love means relationship—the caring, committed connection of one individual to another.

Like God, our most central need is to be connected. When God said that even in his perfect new universe, it wasn't "good for the man to be alone" (Gen. 2:18), he wasn't talking about marriage. He was talking about relationship—other people outside ourselves to bond with, trust, and go to for support.

We are built for relationship. Attachment is the foundation of the soul's existence. When this foundation is cracked or faulty, boundaries become impossible to develop. Why? Because when we lack relationship, *we have nowhere to go in a conflict.* When we are not secure that we are loved, we are forced to choose between two bad options:

1. *We set limits and risk losing a relationship.* This was Wendy's fear. She was afraid her mother would reject her, and she would be isolated and alone. She still needed Mom's connection to feel secure.

2. *We don't set limits and remain a prisoner to the wishes of another.* By not setting limits on her mom, Wendy was a prisoner to her mom's wishes.

So the first developmental task of infants is to bond with their mom and dad. They need to learn that they are welcome and safe in the world. To bond with baby, Mom and Dad need

to provide a consistent, warm, loving, and predictable emotional environment for him or her. During this stage, Mom's job is to woo the child into entering a relationship with the world—via attachment with her. (Most often, this is Mom's job, but Dad or a caregiver can do this as well.)

Bonding takes place when the mother responds to the needs of the child, the needs for closeness, for being held, for food, and for changing. As baby experiences needs and the mother's positive response to those needs, he or she begins to internalize, or take in, an emotional picture of a loving, constant mother.

Babies, at this stage, have no sense of self apart from Mother. They think, "Mommy and me are the same." It's sometimes called *symbiosis*, a sort of "swimming in closeness" with Mother. This symbiotic union is the reason babies panic when Mother isn't around. No one can comfort them but their mother.

The emotional picture developed by infants forms from thousands of experiences in the first few months of life. The ultimate goal of Mother's "being there" is a state called *emotional object constancy*. Object constancy refers to the child's having an internal sense of belonging and safety, even away from the presence of the mother. All those experiences of constant loving pay off in a child's inner sense of security. It's been built in.

Object constancy is referred to in the Bible as "being rooted and established in love" (Eph. 3:17) and as having been "rooted and built up in [Christ]" (Col. 2:7). It illustrates the principle that *God's plan for us is to be loved enough by him and others, to not feel isolated—even when we're alone.*²

Bonding is the prelude. As children learn to feel safe and at home with their primary relationships, they are building good foundations to withstand the separateness and conflict that comes with boundary development.

Separation and Individuation: The Construction of a Soul

"It's like a switch was thrown," said Millie to the friends who made up her church Mom's Group. The Mom's Group provided

activities and a place to talk for mothers of infants and toddlers. “On her first birthday—to the very day—my Hillary became the most difficult child I’d ever seen. This is the same baby who, the day before, had eaten her spinach like it was her last meal. The next day, though, it all ended up on the floor!”

Millie’s exasperation was met with approving nods and smiles. The mothers all agreed—their babies had seemed to switch personalities around the same time. Gone were the agreeable, lovable infants. In their places were cranky, demanding toddlers.

What had happened? Any competent pediatrician or child therapist will attest to a shift that begins during the first year of life and continues until about three years. A shift which, though sometimes disruptive and chaotic, is completely normal. And part of God’s plan for the child.

As infants gain a sense of internal safety and attachment, a second need arises. The baby’s need for autonomy, or independence, starts to emerge. Child experts call this *separation and individuation*. “Separation” refers to the child’s need to perceive him or herself as distinct from Mother, a “not-me” experience. “Individuation” describes the identity the child develops while separating from Mother. It’s a “me” experience.

You can’t have “me” until you first have a “not-me.” It’s like trying to build a house on a plot of land filled with trees and wild brush. You must first cut away some space, then begin building your home. You must first determine who you *aren’t* before you discover the true, authentic aspects of your God-given identity.

The only recorded instance of Jesus’ boyhood describes this principle. Remember when Jesus’ mother and father left Jerusalem without him? When they went back and found him teaching in the temple, his mother admonished him. Jesus’ words to his mother were, “Why were you searching for me? Didn’t you know I had to be in my Father’s house?” (Luke 2:49). Translation: I have values, thoughts, and opinions that are different from yours, Mother. Jesus knew who he was not, as well as who he was.

The separation-individuation process isn't a smooth transition into a person. Three phases are critical to developing healthy boundaries in childhood: hatching, practicing, and rapprochement.

Hatching: “Mommy and Me Aren’t the Same”

“It’s not fair,” a mother of a five-month-old boy told me. “We had four months of bliss and closeness. I loved Eric’s helplessness, his dependency. He needed me, and I was enough for him.”

“All of a sudden it changed. He got—I don’t know how to say it—more restless, wigglier. He didn’t always want me to hold him. He became more interested in other people, even in brightly colored toys, than me!

“I’m beginning to get the picture,” the woman concluded. “He needed me for four months. Now motherhood is spending the next seventeen and half years letting him leave me!”

In many ways, this mother got the picture. The first five to ten months of life mark a major shift in infants: from “Mommy and me are the same” to “Mommy and me aren’t the same.” During this period, babies begin moving out of their passive union with Mother into an active interest in the outside world. They become aware that there’s a big, exciting world out there—and they want a piece of the action!

This period is called “hatching” or “differentiation” by child researchers. It’s a time of exploration, of touching, of tasting and feeling new things. Though children in this phase are still dependent on Mother, they aren’t wrapped up in closeness with her. The months of nurturing have paid off—the child feels safe enough to start taking risks. Watch crawlers in full tilt. They don’t want to miss out. This is a geographical boundary in motion—away from Mother.

Look into the eyes of a baby in the “hatching” phase. You can see Adam’s wide-eyed wonder at the flora, fauna, and majesty of the earth created for him by the Lord. You can see the desire to discover, the drive to learn hinted at in Job 11:7: “Can you discover the depths of God? Can you discover the

limits of the Almighty?” No, we can’t. But we are created to discover, to experience the Creation and to know the Creator.

This is a difficult period for new mothers. As the mom in the beginning of this section described, it can be a letdown. It’s especially hard for women who have never really “hatched” themselves. They long for nothing but closeness, neediness, and dependency from their baby. These women often conceive lots of children, or find ways to spend time with very young infants. They often don’t enjoy the “separating” part of mothering. They don’t like the distance between themselves and baby. It’s a painful boundary for Mother, but a necessary one for the child.

Practicing: “I Can Do Anything!”

“But what’s wrong with wanting to have fun? Life wasn’t meant to be boring,” protested Derek. In his late forties, Derek dressed like a college student. His face had that tanned, unlined look that appears unnatural on a middle-aged man.

Something was out of place. Derek was talking to his pastor about switching his membership from the thirty-five-and-older singles group to the twenties and thirties group. “They’re just not my speed. I like roller coasters, late nights out, and switching jobs. Keeps me young, you know?”

Derek’s style describes someone still stuck in the second stage of separation-individuation: practicing. During this period, which usually lasts from age ten months to eighteen months (and then returns later), babies learn to walk and begin to use words.

The difference between hatching and practicing is radical. While the hatching baby is overwhelmed by this new world and still leans a great deal on Mother, the practicing child is trying to leave her behind! The newfound ability to walk opens up a sense of omnipotence. Toddlers feel exhilaration and energy. And they want to try everything, including walking down steep stairs, putting forks into electric sockets, and chasing cats’ tails.

People like Derek who are stuck in this stage can be lots of fun. Except when you pop their bubble about their unrealistic

grandiosity and their irresponsibility. Then you become a “wet blanket.” It’s revealing to talk to the “wet blanket” who is married to a practicing child. No job is more tiring.

Proverbs 7:7 describes the youth stuck in the practicing stage: “I saw among the simple, I noticed among the young men, a youth who lacked judgment.”

This young man had energy, but no impulse control, no boundaries on his passions. He becomes sexually promiscuous, which often happens to adults who are caught in this phase. And he ends up dead: “till an arrow pierces his liver, like a bird darting into a snare, little knowing it will cost him his life” (Prov. 7:23).

Practicers feel that they’ll never be caught. But life does catch up with them.

What practicing infants (the ones for whom omnipotence *is* appropriate!) need most from parents is a responsive delight in their delight, exhilaration at their exhilaration, and some safe limits to practice. Good parents have fun with toddlers who jump on the bed. Poor parents either quench their children’s desire by not allowing any jumping, or they set no limits and allow them to jump all over Mom and Dad’s orange juice and coffee. (Derek’s parents were the second type.)

In the practicing phase children learn that aggressiveness and taking initiative are good. Parents who firmly and consistently set realistic boundaries with children in this period, but without spoiling their enthusiasm, help them through the transition.

Have you ever seen the posters depicting “baby’s first steps”? Some of these portray a wrong notion. They present the child taking hesitant steps toward a waiting mother, arms outstretched. The truth is different. Most mothers report, “I watched my baby’s first steps from behind!” The practicing toddler moves from safety and warmth to excitement and discovery. Physical and geographical boundaries help the child learn action without danger.

The practicing phase provides the child with the energy and drive to make the final step toward becoming an individual, but energetic exhilaration can’t last forever. Cars can’t always run at

full speed. Sprinters can't keep up the pace for miles. And practicing children must give way to the next phase, *rapprochement*.

Rapprochement: “I Can’t Do Everything”

Rapprochement, which occurs from around eighteen months to three years, comes from a French word meaning “a restoration of harmonious relations.” In other words, the child comes back to reality. The grandiosity of the past few months slowly gives way to the realization that “I can’t do everything I want.” Children become anxious and aware that the world’s a scary place. They realize that they still need Mother.

The rapprochement phase is a return to connection with Mother, but this time it’s different. This time the child brings a more separate self into the relationship. There are two people now, with differing thoughts and feelings. And the child is ready to relate to the outside world without losing a sense of self.

Typically, this is a difficult period for both children and parents. Rapprochement toddlers are obnoxious, oppositional, temperamental, and downright angry. They can remind you of someone with a chronic toothache.

Let’s look at some of the tools toddlers use to build boundaries in this stage.

Anger. Anger is a friend. It was created by God for a purpose: to tell us that there’s a problem that needs to be confronted. Anger is a way for children to know that their experience is different from someone else’s. The ability to use anger to distinguish between self and others is a boundary. Children who can appropriately express anger are children who will understand, later in life, when someone is trying to control or hurt them.

Ownership. Sometimes misunderstood as simply a “selfish” stage, rapprochement introduces words to the youngster’s vocabulary such as, *mine*, *my*, and *me*. Suzy doesn’t want anyone else to hold her doll. Billy doesn’t want to share his trucks with a visiting toddler. This important part of becoming a self is often quite difficult for Christian parents to understand. “Well,

that old sinful nature is rearing its ugly head in my little girl,” the parents will remark while their friends nod sagely. “We’re trying to help her share and love others, but she’s caught up in that selfishness we all have.”

This is neither accurate nor biblical. The child’s newfound fondness for “mine” does have roots in our innate self-centeredness—part of the sinful depravity in all of us that wants to, as did Satan, “make myself like the Most High” (Isa. 14:14). However, this simplistic understanding of our character doesn’t take into consideration the full picture of what being in the image of God truly is.

Being created in God’s image also means having ownership, or *stewardship*. As Adam and Eve were given dominion over the earth to subdue and rule it, we are also given stewardship over our time, energy, talents, values, feelings, behavior, money, and all the other things mentioned in chapter 2. Without a “mine,” we have no sense of responsibility to develop, nurture, and protect these resources. Without a “mine,” we have no self to give to God and his kingdom.

Children desperately need to know that *mine*, *my*, and *me* aren’t swear words. With correct biblical parenting, they’ll learn sacrifice and develop a giving, loving heart, but not until they have a personality that has been loved enough to give love away: “We love because he first loved us” (1 John 4:19).

No: The One-Word Boundary. Toddlers going through rapprochement frequently use one of the most important words in the human language: the word *no*. While it can emerge during hatching, *no* is perfected during rapprochement. It’s the first verbal boundary children learn.

The word *no* helps children separate from what they don’t like. It gives them the power to make choices. It protects them. Learning to deal with a child’s *no* is crucial to that child’s development. One couple who didn’t attend to their child’s refusal to eat certain foods found out later that she was allergic to one of them!

Often, children at this age become “no” addicts. They’ll not only refuse vegetables and nap time, but also turn away from

Popsicles and favorite toys! It's worth it for them to have the no. It keeps them from feeling completely helpless and powerless.

Parents have two tasks associated with no. First, they need to help their child feel safe enough to say no, thereby *encouraging his or her own boundaries*. Though they certainly can't make all the choices they'd like, young children should be able to have a no that is listened to. Informed parents won't be insulted or enraged by their child's resistance. They will help the child feel that his no is just as loveable as his yes. They won't withdraw emotionally from the child who says no, but will stay connected. One parent must often support another who is being worn down by their baby's no. This process takes work!

One couple was faced with an aunt whose feelings were hurt by their daughter's refusal to kiss and hug her upon every visit. Sometimes the child wanted to be close; sometimes she wanted to stand back and watch. The couple responded to the aunt's complaint by saying, "We don't want Casey to feel that her affection is something she owes people. We'd like her to be in charge of her life." These parents wanted their daughter's yes to be yes, and her no to be no (Matt. 5:37). They wanted her to be able to say no, so that in the future she would have the ability to say no to evil.

The second task facing parents of children in rapprochement is that of *helping the child respect others' boundaries*. Children need to be able to not only give a no, but also take a no.

Parents need to be able to set and keep age-appropriate boundaries with children. It means not giving in to temper tantrums at the toy shop, though it would be less humiliating to quiet the child by purchasing half of the store. It means time-outs, appropriate confrontations, and spanking, when necessary. "Discipline your son, for in that there is hope; do not be a willing party to his death" (Prov. 19:18). In other words, help the child learn to take limits before it's too late.

Boundary construction is most evident in three-year-olds. By this time, they should have mastered the following tasks:

1. The ability to be emotionally attached to others, yet without giving up a sense of self and one's freedom to be apart.
2. The ability to say appropriate no's to others without fear of loss of love.
3. The ability to take appropriate no's from others without withdrawing emotionally.

Noting these tasks, a friend said half-joking, "They need to learn this by age three? How about by forty-three?" Yes, these are tall orders. But boundary development is essential in the early years of life.

Two additional periods of life focus on boundaries. The first is adolescence. The adolescent years are a reenactment of the first years of life. They involve more mature issues, such as sexuality, gender identity, competition, and adult identity. But the same issues of knowing when to say yes and no and to whom are central during this confusing time.

The second period is young adulthood, the time when children leave home or college and start a career or get married. Young adults suffer a loss of structure during this period. There are no class bells, no schedules imposed by others, and a great deal of very scary freedom and responsibility, as well as the demands of intimacy and commitment. This can often become an intense time of learning more about setting good boundaries.

The earlier the child learns good boundaries, the less turmoil he or she experiences later in life. A successful first three years of life will mean a smoother (but not smooth!) adolescence and a better transition into adulthood. A problematic childhood can be helped greatly by lots of hard work in the family during adolescence. But serious boundary problems during both these periods can be devastating during the adult years.

"It helps to know the way it should have been for me," said one woman who attended a talk on child development. "But what would really help is to know what went wrong for me." Let's look next at where our boundary development goes wrong.

Boundary Injuries: What Goes Wrong?

Boundary problems are rooted in thousands of encounters with others, as well in our own nature and personality. The most important boundary conflicts, however, occur in the crucial first few years of life. They may happen in any or all of the three phases of separation-individuation: hatching, practicing, or rapprochement. Generally, the earlier and more severe the injury, the deeper the boundary problem.

Withdrawal from Boundaries

“I don’t know why it happens, but it happens,” mused Ingrid over coffee with her friend Alice. “Every time I disagree with my mother, even on little things, I feel this terrible sense that she’s not there anymore. It’s like she’s hurt and withdrawn, and I can’t get her back. It’s really a horrible feeling to think you’ve lost someone you love.”

Let’s be honest. None of us enjoys being told no. It’s difficult to accept another person’s refusal to give support, to be intimate, or to forgive. Yet good relationships are built on the freedom to refuse and confront: “As iron sharpens iron, so one man sharpens another” (Prov. 27:17).

Not only good relationships but also mature characters are built on appropriate nos. Developing children need to know their boundaries will be honored. *It is crucial that their disagreements, their practicing, their experimentation not result in a withdrawal of love.*

Please don’t misunderstand this. Parental limits are crucial. Children need to know behavioral lines that should not be crossed. They need to suffer biblical, age-appropriate consequences for acting out. (In fact, when parents do not set and maintain good boundaries with their children, the children suffer another type of boundary injury, which we will discuss shortly.) What we’re talking about here isn’t allowing the child free rein. Parents need to stay attached and connected to their children *even when they disagree with them.* That doesn’t mean they shouldn’t get angry. It means they shouldn’t withdraw.

How often do we hear the statement that “God loves the sinner, but hates the sin”? It’s true. His love is constant and “never fails” (1 Cor. 13:8). When parents detach from a misbehaving young child instead of staying connected and dealing with the problem, God’s constant love is misrepresented. When parents pull away in hurt, disappointment, or passive rage, they are sending this message to their youngster: *You’re loveable when you behave. You aren’t loveable when you don’t behave.*

The child translates that message something like this: *When I’m good, I am loved. When I’m bad, I am cut off.*

Put yourself in the child’s place. What would you do? It’s not a difficult decision. God created people with a need for attachment and relationship. Parents who pull away from their child are, in essence, practicing *spiritual and emotional blackmail*. The child can either pretend to not disagree and keep the relationship, or he can continue to separate and lose his most important relationship in the world. He will most likely keep quiet.

Children whose parents withdraw when they start setting limits learn to accentuate and develop their compliant, loving, sensitive parts. At the same time, they learn to fear, distrust, and hate their aggressive, truth-telling, and separate parts. If someone they love pulls away when they become angry, cantankerous, or experimental, children learn to hide these parts of themselves.

Parents who tell their children, “It hurts us when you’re angry” make the child responsible for the emotional health of the parent. In effect, *the child has just been made the parent of the parent*—sometimes at two or three years old. It’s far, far better to say, “I know you’re angry, but you still can’t have that toy.” And then to take your hurt feelings to a spouse, friend, or the Lord.

By nature, children are omnipotent. They live in a world where the sun shines because they were good, and it rains because they were naughty. Children will give up this omnipotence gradually over time, as they learn that needs and events besides theirs are important. But during the early years, this omnipotence plays right into boundary injury. When children feel parents withdrawing, they readily believe that they are

responsible for Mom and Dad's feelings. That's what *omnipotent* means: "I am powerful enough to make Mom and Dad pull away. I'd better watch it."

A parent's emotional withdrawal can be subtle: A hurt tone of voice. Long silences for no reason. Or it can be overt: Crying spells. Illness. Yelling. Children of parents like these grow up to be adults who are terrified that setting boundaries will cause severe isolation and abandonment.

Hostility Against Boundaries

"Do I understand why I can't say no?" Larry chuckled. "Why don't you ask me a hard one? I grew up in the military. Dad's word was law. And disagreeing was always rebellion. I contradicted him once when I was nine. All I remember is waking up on the other side of the room with a whopping headache. And lots of hurt feelings."

The second boundary injury, easier to spot than the first, is a parent's hostility against boundaries. The parent becomes angry at the child's attempts at separating from him or her. Hostility can emerge in the form of angry words, physical punishment, or inappropriate consequences.

Some parents will say to the child, "You'll do what I say." This is fair enough. God meant for parents to be in charge of children. But then they'll say, "And you'll like doing it." This makes a child crazy, because it's a denial of the separate soul of the child. To "make the child like it" is to pressure the child into becoming a "people pleaser," not a "God pleaser" (Gal. 1:10).

Some parents criticize the boundaries of their children:

- "If you disagree with me, I'll . . ."
- "You'll do it my way or else."
- "Don't question your mother."
- "You need an attitude adjustment."
- "You've got no reason to feel bad."

Children need to be under the authority and control of their parents, but when parents punish their child for his growing independence, he will usually retreat into hurt and resentment.

This hostility is a poor counterfeit of God's program of learning discipline. Discipline is the art of teaching children self-control by using consequences. Irresponsible actions should cause discomfort that motivates us to become more responsible.

The "my-way-or-else" approach teaches children to pretend to be obedient, at least when the parent is in earshot. The "you-have-a-choice" approach teaches children to be responsible for their own actions. Instead of saying, "You'll make your bed or you'll be grounded for a month," the parent says, "You have a choice: Make your bed, and I'll let you play Nintendo; don't make your bed and you lose your Nintendo privileges for the rest of the day." The child decides how much pain he is willing to endure to be disobedient.

God's discipline teaches, not punishes:

God disciplines us for our good, that we may share in his holiness. No discipline seems pleasant at the time, but painful. Later on, however, it produces a harvest of righteousness and peace for those who have been trained by it.
(Heb. 12:10–11)

When parents greet their children's disagreement, disobedience, or practicing with simple hostility, the children are denied the benefit of being trained. They don't learn that delaying gratification and being responsible have benefits. They only learn how to avoid someone's wrath. Ever wonder why some Christians fear an angry God, no matter how much they read about his love?

The results of this hostility are difficult to see because these children quickly learn how to hide under a compliant smile. When these children grow up they suffer depression, anxiety, relationship conflicts, and substance-abuse problems. For the first time in their lives, many boundary-injured individuals realize they have a problem.

Hostility can create problems in both saying and hearing no. Some children become pliably enmeshed with others. But some react outwardly and become controlling people—just like the hostile parent.

The Bible addresses two distinct reactions to hostility in parents: Fathers are told not to “embitter [their] children, or they will become discouraged” (Col. 3:21). Some children respond to harshness with compliance and depression. At the same time, fathers are told not to “exasperate [their] children” (Eph. 6:4). Other children react to hostility with rage. Many grow up to be just like the hostile parent who hurt them.

Overcontrol

Overcontrol occurs when otherwise loving parents try to protect their children from making mistakes by having too-strict rules and limits. For example, they may keep their children from playing with other kids to protect them from being hurt or learning bad habits. They may be so concerned about their children catching a cold that they make them wear galoshes on cloudy days.

The problem with overcontrol is this: while a major responsibility of good parents is certainly to control and protect, they must make room for their children to make mistakes. Remember that we learn maturity “by constant use” (Heb. 5:14). Overcontrolled children are subject to dependency, enmeshment conflicts, and difficulty setting and keeping firm boundaries. They also have problems taking risks and being creative.

Lack of Limits

Eileen sighed. Her husband Bruce was in his twice-a-week mode of throwing fits whenever she “dropped the ball.” This time he was yelling about having to reschedule their night out with the Billingses. Eileen had forgotten to call a babysitter for the kids until four that afternoon.

She couldn’t understand why Bruce got so wound up about such little things. Maybe he just needed some time off. *That was it!* Eileen brightened up. *We need a vacation!* She forgot that they’d had one a month ago.

Eileen had very loving, but very indulgent parents. They couldn’t stand to make her do anything, to discipline her with time-outs, consequences, or spankings. Her folks thought that

lots of love and lots of forgiveness would help her be the adult she needed to be.

So whenever Eileen didn't pick up after herself, her mother would cover for her. When she wrecked the family car three times, her dad got her her own car. And when she overdrew her checking account, her parents quietly put more money in it. *After all, isn't love patient?* they'd say.

Eileen's parents' lack of limits on her hurt her character development. Though she was a loving wife, mother, and worker, others were constantly frustrated at her undisciplined, careless way of living. It cost others a lot to be in relationship with her. Yet she was so loveable that most of her friends didn't want to hurt her feelings by confronting her. So the problem remained unsolved.

Lack of parental boundaries is the opposite of hostility. Again, biblical discipline would have provided the necessary structure to help Eileen develop her character.

Sometimes a lack of parental limits, coupled with a lack of connection, can produce an aggressively controlling person. We all know the experience of going into a supermarket and observing a four-year-old in total control of a mother. The mother begs, pleads, and threatens her son to stop having his tantrum. Then, at her wits' end, she gives him the candy bar he's been screaming for. "But that's the last one," she says, struggling for some control. But by then control is an illusion.

Now imagine that four-year-old as a forty-year-old man. The scenario has changed, but the script is the same. When he is crossed, or when someone sets a limit with him, the same tantrum erupts. And by then, he's had thirty-six more years of having the world cater to him. His recovery program will need to be very strong and consistent to help him. Sometimes recovery comes in the form of hospitalization, sometimes in divorce, sometimes in jail, and sometimes in disease. But no one can really escape the disciplines of life. They will always win out. We always reap what we sow. And the later in life it is, the sadder a picture it is, for the stakes are higher.

Obviously, we're describing the person who has a difficult time hearing others' boundaries and/or needs. These people have been as injured by a lack of boundaries as others are by too-rigid boundaries.

Inconsistent Limits

Sometimes, due to their confusion about rearing children or their own injuries, some parents combine strict and lax limits, sending conflicting messages to children. The children don't know what the rules of family and life are.

Alcoholic families often exhibit inconsistent limits. A parent may be loving and kind one day, unreasonably harsh the next. This is particularly true because of the behavior changes brought on by drinking.

Alcoholism causes massive boundary confusion in the child. Adult children of alcoholics never feel safe in relationships. They're always waiting for the other person to let them down or attack them unexpectedly. They keep their guard up constantly.

Setting limits is traumatic for adult children of alcoholics. Saying no might bring respect, or it might bring rage. They feel like the double-minded person described in James 1:6: "like a wave of the sea, blown and tossed by the wind." They are uncertain about what they are and aren't responsible for.

Trauma

Up until now, we've dealt with characteristics of family relating. Withdrawal, hostility, and setting inappropriate limits are ways parents act toward their children. Over time, these become ingrained in the soul of the child.

In addition, specific traumas can injure boundary development. A trauma is an intensely painful emotional experience, rather than a character pattern. Emotional, physical, and sexual abuse are traumatic. Accidents and debilitating illnesses are traumatic. Severe losses such as the death of a parent, divorce, or extreme financial hardship are also traumatic.

A good way to look at the difference between character-relating patterns, such as withdrawal and hostility, and trauma, is

to look at how a tree in a forest can be hurt. It can be fed inappropriately, through bad ingredients in the soil, or it can be given too much or too little sun or water. That's an illustration of character-pattern problems. Trauma is like lightning hitting the tree.

A trauma can affect boundary development because it shakes up two necessary foundations to children's growth:

1. The world is reasonably safe.
2. They have control over their lives.

Children who undergo trauma feel these foundations shaken up. They become unsure that they are safe and protected in the world, and they become frightened that they have no say-so in any danger that approaches them.

Jerry had been physically abused by both of his parents for years. He had left home early, joined the Marines, and had several bad marriages. In therapy as an adult in his thirties, he began realizing why, under his tough exterior, he always longed for controlling women. He'd fall madly in love with the fact that they could "handle" him. Then a pattern of compliance to the woman would emerge, with Jerry always on the losing end.

One day in session, Jerry remembered his mother striking him across the face for some small infraction. He vividly remembered his vain attempts to protect himself, pleading, "Please, Mom—I'm sorry. I'll do anything you say. Please, Mom." When he promised unquestioning obedience, the hitting would stop. That memory tied in with his lack of power and self-control with his wives and girlfriends. Their anger always terrified him, and he would instantly comply. Jerry's boundary development was seriously injured by his mother's abuse.

The heart of God seems to beat especially close to the victim of trauma: "He has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted" (Isa. 61:1). God desires the wounds of the traumatized to be bound up by loving people.

Victims of trauma in the family are almost always recipients of poor or sinful character-relating patterns. Withdrawal from our boundaries and hostility toward our boundaries are the ground from which trauma springs.

Our Own Character Traits

Have you ever heard someone described as being that way “from the womb”? Perhaps you were always active and confrontive, always exploring new horizons. Or maybe you liked to be quiet and reflective “since forever.”

We contribute to our boundary issues by our own individual character styles. For example, some people with a constitutionally greater amount of aggression deal with boundary problems more confrontationally. And some with less aggression shy more from boundaries.

Our Own Sinfulness

We also contribute to our own boundary development problems by our own depravity. Depravity is what we inherited from Adam and Eve. It is our resistance to being creatures under God, our resistance to humility. It’s a refusal to accept our position, and a lust for being omnipotent and “in charge,” not needing anyone and not accountable to anyone. Our depravity enslaves us to the law of sin and death, from which only Christ can save us (Rom. 8:2).

By now you should be gaining a clearer picture of what goes into boundary problems and boundary development. It’s time now to look at what the Bible says about how boundaries should operate in our lives, and how they can be developed—all through our lives.

5

Ten Laws of Boundaries

Imagine for a moment that you live on another planet operating under different principles. Suppose your planet has no gravity and no need for a medium of exchange such as money. You get your energy and fuel from osmosis, instead of eating and drinking. Suddenly, without warning, you find yourself transported to Earth.

When you awake from your trip, you step out of your hovering spacecraft and fall abruptly to the ground. “Ouch!” you say, not knowing exactly why you fell. After regaining your composure, you decide to travel around a bit, but are unable to fly, because of this new phenomenon called gravity. So you start walking.

After a while, you notice that, strangely, you feel hungry and thirsty. You wonder why. Where you come from, the galactic system rejuvenates your body automatically. Luckily, you run across an earthling who diagnoses your problem and tells you that you need food. Better yet, he recommends a place where you can eat, called Jack’s Diner.

You follow his directions, go into the restaurant, and manage to order some of this Earth food that contains all the nutrients you need. You immediately feel better. But then, the man who gave you the food wants “seven dollars” for what he gave you. You have no idea what he’s talking about. After quite an argument, some men in uniforms come and take you away and put you in a small room with bars. *What in the world is going on*, you wonder.

You didn’t mean anyone harm, yet you are in “jail,” whatever that is. You can no longer move about as you want, and you

resent it. You only tried to be about your own business, and now you have a sore leg, fatigue from your long walk, and a stomach-ache from eating too much. Nice place, this Earth.

Does this sound farfetched? People raised in dysfunctional families, or families where God's ways of boundaries are not practiced, have experiences similar to that of the alien. They find themselves transported into adult life where spiritual principles that have never been explained to them govern their relationships and well-being. They hurt, are hungry, and may end up in jail, but they never know the principles that could have helped them operate in accord with reality instead of against it. So, they are prisoners of their own ignorance.

God's world is set up with laws and principles. Spiritual realities are as real as gravity, and if you do not know them, you will discover their effects. Just because we have not been taught these principles of life and relationships does not mean they will not rule. We need to know the principles God has woven into life and operate according to them. Below are ten laws of boundaries that you can learn to begin to experience life differently.

Law #1: The Law of Sowing and Reaping

The law of cause and effect is a basic law of life. The Bible calls it the Law of Sowing and Reaping. "You reap whatever you sow. If you sow to your own flesh, you will reap corruption from the flesh; but if you sow to the Spirit, you will reap eternal life from the Spirit" (Gal. 6:7–8 NRSV).

When God tells us that we will reap what we sow, he is not punishing us; he's telling us how things really are. If you smoke cigarettes, you most likely will develop a smoker's hack, and you may even get lung cancer. If you overspend, you most likely will get calls from creditors, and you may even go hungry because you have no money for food. On the other hand, if you eat right and exercise regularly, you may suffer from fewer colds and bouts with the flu. If you budget wisely, you will have money for the bill collectors and for the grocery store.

Sometimes, however, people don't reap what they sow, because someone else steps in and reaps the consequences for them. If every time you overspent, your mother sent you money to cover check overdrafts or high credit-card balances, you wouldn't reap the consequences of your spendthrift ways. Your mother would be protecting you from the natural consequences: the hounding of creditors or going hungry.

As the mother in the above example demonstrates, the Law of Sowing and Reaping can be interrupted. And it is often people who have no boundaries who do the interrupting. Just as we can interfere with the law of gravity by catching a glass tumbling off the table, people can interfere with the Law of Cause and Effect by stepping in and rescuing irresponsible people. Rescuing a person from the natural consequences of his behavior enables him to continue in irresponsible behavior. The Law of Sowing and Reaping has not been repealed. It is still operating. But the doer is not suffering the consequences; someone else is.

Today we call a person who continually rescues another person a codependent. In effect, codependent, boundaryless people "co-sign the note" of life for the irresponsible person. Then they end up paying the bills—physically, emotionally, and spiritually—and the spendthrift continues out of control with no consequences. He continues to be loved, pampered, and treated nicely.

Establishing boundaries helps codependent people stop interrupting the Law of Sowing and Reaping in their loved one's life. Boundaries force the person who is doing the sowing to also do the reaping.

It doesn't help just to confront the irresponsible person. A client will often say to me, "But I do confront Jack. I have tried many times to let him know what I think about his behavior and that he needs to change." In reality, my client is only nagging Jack. Jack will not feel the need to change because his behavior is not causing him any pain. *Confronting an irresponsible person is not painful to him; only consequences are.*

If Jack is wise, confrontation might change his behavior. But people caught in destructive patterns are usually not wise. They need to suffer consequences before they change their behavior. The Bible tells us it is worthless to confront foolish people: “Do not rebuke a mocker or he will hate you; rebuke a wise man and he will love you” (Prov. 9:8).

Codependent people bring insults and pain onto themselves when they confront irresponsible people. In reality, they just need to stop interrupting the law of sowing and reaping in someone’s life.

Law #2: The Law of Responsibility

Many times when people hear a talk on boundaries and taking responsibility for their own lives, they say, “That’s so self-centered. We should love one another and deny ourselves.” Or, they actually become selfish and self-centered. Or, they feel “guilty” when they do someone a favor. These are unbiblical views of responsibility.

The Law of Responsibility includes loving others. The commandment to love is the entire law for Christians (Gal. 5:13–14). Jesus calls it “my” commandment, “Love each other as I have loved you” (John 15:12). Anytime you are *not* loving others, you are not taking full responsibility for yourself; you have disowned your heart.

Problems arise when boundaries of responsibility are confused. We are to *love* one another, not *be* one another. I can’t feel your feelings for you. I can’t think for you. I can’t behave for you. I can’t work through the disappointment that limits bring for you. In short, I can’t grow for you; only you can. Likewise, you can’t grow for me. The biblical mandate for our own personal growth is “Continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you to will and to act according to his good purpose” (Phil. 2:12–13). You are responsible for *yourself*. I am responsible for *myself*.

An additional theme in the Bible says that we are to treat others the way we would want to be treated. If we were down and out, helpless and without hope, we would certainly want

help and provision. This is a very important side of being responsible “to.”

Another aspect of being responsible “to” is not only in the giving but in the setting of limits on another’s destructive and irresponsible behavior. It is not good to rescue someone from the consequences of their sin, for you will only have to do it again. You have reinforced the pattern (Prov. 19:19). It is the same principle spoken of in child rearing; it is hurtful to not have limits with others. It leads them to destruction (Prov. 23:13).

A strong strand throughout the Bible stresses that you are to *give* to needs and put *limits* on sin. Boundaries help you do just that.

Law #3: The Law of Power

As the Twelve Step movement grows within the church, Christians in therapy and recovery voice a common confusion. Am I powerless over my behavior? If I am, how can I become responsible? What *do I* have the power to do?

The Twelve Steps and the Bible teach that people must admit that they are moral failures. Alcoholics admit that they are powerless over alcohol; they don’t have the fruit of self-control. They are powerless over their addiction, much like Paul was: “I do not understand what I do. For what I want to do I do not do, but what I hate I do. . . . For what I do is not the good I want to do; no, the evil I do not want to do—this I keep on doing. . . wagging war against the law of my mind and making me a prisoner of the law of sin at work within my members” (Rom. 7:15, 19, 23). This is powerlessness. John says that we are all in that state, and that anyone that denies it is lying (1 John 1:8).

Though you do not have the power in and of yourself to overcome these patterns, you do have the power to do some things that will bring fruits of victory later:

1. *You have the power to agree with the truth about your problems.* In the Bible this is called “confession.” To confess means to “agree with.” You have the ability to at least say “that is me.” You may not be able to change it yet, but you can confess.

2. You have the power to submit your inability to God. You always have the power to ask for help and yield. You have the power to humble yourself and turn your life over to him. You may not be able to make yourself well, but you can call the Doctor! The humbling of yourself commanded in the Bible is always coupled with great promises. If you do what you are able—confess, believe, and ask for help—God will do what you are unable to do—bring about change (1 John 1:9; James 4:7–10; Matt. 5:3, 6).

3. You have the power to search and ask God and others to reveal more and more about what is within your boundaries.

4. You have the power to turn from the evil that you find within you. This is called *repentance*. This does not mean that you'll be perfect; it means that you can see your sinful parts as aspects that you want to change.

5. You have the power to humble yourself and ask God and others to help you with your developmental injuries and leftover childhood needs. Many of your problematic parts come from being empty inside, and you need to seek God and others to have those needs met.

6. You have the power to seek out those that you have injured and make amends. You need to do this in order to be responsible for yourself and your sin, and be responsible to those you have injured. Matthew 5:23–24 says, “Therefore, if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there in front of the altar. First go and be reconciled to your brother; then come and offer your gift.”

On the other side of the coin, your boundaries help define what you do not have power over: *everything outside of them!* Listen to the way the serenity prayer (probably the best boundary prayer ever written) says it:

God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference.

In other words, God, clarify my boundaries! You can work on submitting yourself to the process and working with God to change you. You cannot change anything else: not the weather,

the past, the economy—and especially not other people. *You cannot change others.* More people suffer from trying to change others than from any other sickness. And it is impossible.

What you *can* do is *influence* others. But there is a trick. Since you cannot get *them* to change, you must change *yourself* so that their destructive patterns no longer work on you. Change your way of dealing with them; they may be motivated to change if their old ways no longer work.

Another dynamic that happens when you let go of others is that you begin to get healthy, and they may notice and envy your health. They may want some of what you have.

One more thing. You need the wisdom to know what is you and what is not you. Pray for the wisdom to know the difference between what you have the power to change and what you do not.

Law #4: The Law of Respect

One word comes up again and again when people describe their problems with boundaries: *they*. “But *they* won’t accept me if I say no.” “But *they* will get angry if I set limits.” “But *they* won’t speak to me for a week if I tell them how I really feel.”

We fear that others will not respect our boundaries. We focus on others and lose clarity about ourselves. Sometimes the problem is that we judge others’ boundaries. We say or think things such as this:

“How could he refuse to come by and pick me up? It’s right on his way! He could find some ‘time alone’ some other time.”

“That’s so selfish of her to not come to the luncheon. After all, the rest of us are sacrificing.”

“What do you mean, ‘no’? I just need the money for a little while.”

“It seems that, after all I do for you, you could at least do me this one little favor.”

We judge the boundary decisions of others, thinking that we know best how they “ought” to give, and usually that means “they ought to give to me the way I want them to!”

But the Bible says whenever we judge, we will be judged (Matt. 7:1–2). When we judge others’ boundaries, ours will fall under the same judgment. If we condemn others’ boundaries, we expect them to condemn ours. This sets up a fear cycle inside that makes us afraid to set the boundaries that we need to set. As a result, we comply, then we resent, and the “love” that we have “given” goes sour.

This is where the Law of Respect comes in. As Jesus said, “So in everything, do to others what you would have them do to you” (Matt. 7:12). We need to respect the boundaries of others. We need to love the boundaries of others in order to command respect for our own. We need to treat their boundaries the way we want them to treat ours.

If we love and respect people who tell us no, they will love and respect our no. Freedom begets freedom. If we are walking in the Spirit, we give people the freedom to make their own choices. “Where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom” (2 Cor. 3:17). If we are going to judge at all, it needs to be by the “perfect law that gives freedom” (James 1:25).

Our real concern with others should not be “Are they doing what I would do or what I want them to do?” but “Are they really making a free choice?” When we accept others’ freedom, we don’t get angry, feel guilty, or withdraw our love when they set boundaries with us. When we accept others’ freedom, we feel better about our own.

Law #5: The Law of Motivation

Stan was confused. He read in the Bible and was taught in church that it was more blessed to give than to receive, but he found that this often was not true. He frequently felt unappreciated for “all he was doing.” He wished people would have more consideration for his time and energy. Yet, whenever

someone wanted something from him, he would do it. He thought this was loving, and he wanted to be a loving person.

Finally, when the fatigue grew into depression, he came to see me.

When I asked what was wrong, Stan replied that he was “loving too much.”

“How can you ‘love too much?’” I asked. “I’ve never heard of such a thing.”

“Oh, it’s very simple,” replied Stan. “I do far more for people than I should. And that makes me very depressed.”

“I’m not quite sure what you are doing,” I said, “but it certainly isn’t love. The Bible says that true love leads to a blessed state and a state of cheer. Love brings happiness, not depression. If your loving is depressing you, it’s probably not love.”

“I don’t see how you can say that. I do so much for everyone. I give and give and give. How can you say that I’m not loving?”

“I can say that because of the fruit of your actions. You should be feeling happy, not depressed. Why don’t you tell me some of the things you do for people?”

As we spent more time together, Stan learned that a lot of his “doing” and sacrificing was not motivated by love but by fear. Stan had learned early in life that if he did not do what his mother wanted, she would withdraw love from him. As a result, Stan learned to give reluctantly. His motive for giving was not love, but fear of losing love.

Stan was also afraid of other people’s anger. Because his father frequently yelled at him when he was a boy, he learned to fear angry confrontations. This fear kept him from saying no to others. Self-centered people often get angry when someone tells them no.

Stan said yes out of fear that he would lose love and that other people would get angry at him. These false motives and others keep us from setting boundaries:

1. *Fear of loss of love, or abandonment.* People who say yes and then resent saying yes fear losing someone’s love. This is the dominant motive of martyrs. They give to get love, and when they don’t get it, they feel abandoned.

2. *Fear of others' anger.* Because of old hurts and poor boundaries, some people can't stand for anyone to be mad at them.

3. *Fear of loneliness.* Some people give in to others because they feel that that will "win" love and end their loneliness.

4. *Fear of losing the "good me" inside.* We are made to love. As a result, when we are not loving, we are in pain. Many people cannot say, "I love you *and* I do not want to do that." Such a statement does not make sense to them. They think that to love means to always say yes.

5. *Guilt.* Many people's giving is motivated by guilt. They are trying to do enough good things to overcome the guilt inside and feel good about themselves. When they say no, they feel bad. So they keep trying to earn a sense of goodness.

6. *Payback.* Many people have received things with guilt messages attached. For example, their parents say things like, "I never had it as good as you." "You should be ashamed at all you get." They feel a burden to pay for all they have been given.

7. *Approval.* Many feel as if they are still children seeking parental approval. Therefore, when someone wants something from them, they need to give so that this symbolic parent will be "well pleased."

8. *Overidentification with the other's loss.* Many times people have not dealt with all their own disappointments and losses, so whenever they deprive someone else with a no, they "feel" the other person's sadness to the *nth* degree. They can't stand to hurt someone that badly, so they comply.

The point is this: we were called into freedom, and this freedom results in gratitude, an overflowing heart, and love for others. To give bountifully has great reward. It is truly more blessed to give than to receive. If your giving is not leading to cheer, then you need to examine the Law of Motivation.

The Law of Motivation says this: Freedom first, service second. If you serve to get free of your fear, you are doomed to failure. Let God work on the fears, resolve them, and create some healthy boundaries to guard the freedom you were called to.

Law #6: The Law of Evaluation

“But if I told him I wanted to do that, wouldn’t he be hurt?” Jason asked. When Jason told me he wished to assume responsibility for tasks his business partner was performing poorly, I encouraged him to talk to his partner.

“Sure he might be hurt,” I said, in response to his question. “So, what’s your problem?”

“Well, I wouldn’t want to hurt him,” Jason said, looking at me as though I should have known that.

“I’m sure you would not want to hurt him,” I said. “But what does that have to do with the decision you have to make?”

“Well, I couldn’t just make a decision without taking his feelings into account. That’s cruel.”

“I agree with you. That would be cruel. But, when are you going to tell him?”

“You just said that to tell him would hurt him and that would be cruel,” Jason said, perplexed.

“No, I didn’t,” I replied. “I said to tell him *without considering his feelings* would be cruel. That is very different from not doing what you need to do.”

“I don’t see any difference. It would still hurt him.”

“But it would not *harm* him, and that’s the big difference. If anything, the hurt would help him.”

“Now I’m really confused. How can it possibly help to hurt him?”

“Well, have you ever gone to the dentist?” I asked.

“Sure.”

“Did the dentist hurt you when he drilled your tooth to remove the cavity?”

“Yes.”

“Did he harm you?”

“No, he made me feel better.”

“*Hurt* and *harm* are different,” I pointed out. “When you ate the sugar that gave you the cavity, did that hurt?”

“No, it tasted good,” he said, with a smile that told me he was catching on.

“Did it harm you?”

“Yes.”

“That’s my point. Things can hurt and not harm us. In fact they can even be good for us. And things that feel good can be very harmful to us.”

You need to evaluate the effects of setting boundaries and be responsible to the other person, but that does not mean you should avoid setting boundaries because someone responds with hurt or anger. To have boundaries—in this instance, Jason’s saying no to his partner—is to live a purposeful life.

Jesus refers to it as the “narrow gate.” It is always easier to go through the “broad gate of destruction” and continue to not set boundaries where we need to. But, the result is always the same: destruction. Only the honest, purposeful life leads to good fruit. Deciding to set boundaries is difficult because it requires decision making and confrontation, which, in turn, may cause pain to someone you love.

We need to evaluate the pain caused by our making choices and empathize with it. Take Sandy, for example. Sandy chose to go skiing with friends instead of going home for Christmas vacation. Her mother was sad and disappointed, but she was not harmed. Sandy’s decision caused sadness, but her mother’s sadness should not cause Sandy to change her mind. A loving response to her mother’s hurt would be, “Oh, Mom, I’m sad that we won’t be together too. I’m looking forward to next summer’s visit.”

If Sandy’s mother respected her freedom to make choices, she would say something like this: “I’m so disappointed that you’re not coming home for Christmas, but I hope you all have a great time.” She would be owning her disappointment and respecting Sandy’s choice to spend her time with friends.

We cause pain by making choices that others do not like, but we also cause pain by confronting people when they are wrong. But if we do not share our anger with another, bitterness and hatred can set in. We need to be honest with one another about how we are hurt. “Speak truthfully to [your] neighbor, for [you] are all members of one body” (Eph. 4.25).

As iron sharpens iron, we need confrontation and truth from others to grow. No one likes to hear negative things about him

or herself. But in the long run it may be good for us. The Bible says that if we are wise, we will learn from it. Admonition from a friend, while it can hurt, can also help.

We need to evaluate the pain our confrontation causes other people. We need to see how this hurt is helpful to others and sometimes the best thing that we can do for them and the relationship. We need to evaluate the pain in a positive light.

Law #7: The Law of Proactivity

For every action, there is an equal and opposite reaction. Paul says that wrath and sinful passions are a direct reaction to the severity of the law (Rom. 4:15; 5:20; 7:5). In Ephesians and Colossians he says wrath and disillusionment can be reactions to parental injustice (Eph. 6:4; Col. 3:21).

Many of us have known people who, after years of being passive and compliant, suddenly go ballistic, and we wonder what happened. We blame it on the counselor they are seeing or the company they've been keeping.

In reality, they had been complying for years, and their pent-up rage explodes. This reactive phase of boundary creation is helpful, especially for victims. They need to get out of the powerless, victimized place in which they may have been forced by physical and sexual abuse, or by emotional blackmail and manipulation. We should herald their emancipation.

But when is enough enough? Reaction phases are *necessary but not sufficient* for the establishment of boundaries. It is crucial for the two-year-old to throw the peas at Mommy, but to continue that until forty-three is too much. It is crucial for victims of abuse to feel the rage and hatred of being powerless, but to be screaming "victim rights" for the rest of their lives is being stuck in a "victim mentality."

Emotionally, the reactive stance brings diminishing returns. You must react to find your own boundaries, but having found them, you must "not use your freedom to indulge the sinful nature....If you keep on biting and devouring each other, watch

out or you will be destroyed by each other” (Gal. 5:13, 15). Eventually, you must rejoin the human race you have reacted to, and establish connections as equals, loving your neighbor as yourself.

This is the beginning of the establishment of *proactive*, instead of reactive, boundaries. This is where you are able to use the freedom you gained through reacting to love, enjoy, and serve one another. Proactive people show you what they love, what they want, what they purpose, and what they stand for. These people are very different from those who are known by what they hate, what they don’t like, what they stand against, and what they will not do.

While reactive victims are primarily known by their “against” stances, proactive people do not demand rights, they *live them*. Power is not something you demand or deserve, it is something you express. The ultimate expression of power is love; it is the ability not to express power, but to restrain it. Proactive people are able to “love others as themselves.” They have mutual respect. They are able to “die to self” and not “return evil for evil.” They have gotten past the reactive stance of the law and are able to love and not react.

Listen to Jesus compare the reactive person who is still controlled by the law and others with the free person: “You have heard that it was said, ‘Eye for eye, and tooth for tooth.’ But I tell you, Do not resist an evil person. If someone strikes you on your right cheek, turn to him the other also” (Matt. 5:38–39).

Do not try to get to freedom without owning your reactive period and feelings. You do not need to act this out, but you do need to express the feelings. You need to practice and gain assertiveness. You need to get far enough away from abusive people to be able to fence your property against further invasion. And then you need to own the treasures you find in your soul.

But, do not stay there. Spiritual adulthood has higher goals than “finding yourself.” A reactive stage is a stage, not an identity. It is necessary, but not sufficient.

Law #8: The Law of Envy

The New Testament speaks strongly against the envious heart. Consider James: “You want something but don’t get it. You kill and covet, but you cannot have what you want. You quarrel and fight” (James 4:2).

What does envy have to do with boundaries? Envy is probably the basest emotion we have. A direct result of the Fall, it was Satan’s sin. The Bible says that he had a wish to “be like the Most High.” He envied God. In turn, he tempted Adam and Eve with the same idea, telling them that they could be like God also. Satan and our parents, Adam and Eve, were not satisfied with who they were and could rightfully become. They wanted what they did not have, and it destroyed them.

Envy defines “good” as “what I do not possess,” and hates the good that it has. How many times have you heard someone subtly put down the accomplishments of others, somehow robbing them of the goodness they had attained? We all have envious parts to our personalities. But what is so destructive about this particular sin is that it guarantees that we will not get what we want and keeps us perpetually insatiable and dissatisfied.

This is not to say that it is wrong to want things we do not have. God has said that he will give us the desires of our heart. The problem with envy is that it focuses outside our boundaries, onto others. If we are focusing on what others have or have accomplished, we are neglecting our responsibilities and will ultimately have an empty heart. Look at the difference in Galatians 6:4: “Each one should test his own actions. Then he can take pride in himself, without comparing himself to somebody else.”

Envy is a self-perpetuating cycle. Boundaryless people feel empty and unfulfilled. They look at another’s sense of fullness and feel envious. This time and energy needs to be spent on taking responsibility for their lack and doing something about it. Taking action is the only way out. “You have not because you ask not.” And the Bible adds “because you work not.” Possessions and accomplishments are not the only things we envy. We can

envy a person's character and personality, instead of developing the gifts God has given us (Rom. 12:6).

Think of these situations:

A lonely person stays isolated and envious of the close relationships others have.

A single woman withdraws from social life, envying the marriages and families of her friends.

A middle-aged woman feels stuck in her career and wants to pursue something she would enjoy, yet always has a "yes, but . . ." reason why she can't, resenting and envying those who have "gone for it."

A person chooses the righteous life, but envies and resents those who seem to be "having all the fun."

These people are all negating their own actions (Gal. 6:4) and comparing themselves to others, staying stuck and resentful. Notice the difference between those statements and these:

A lonely person owns his lack of relationships and asks himself and God, "I wonder why I always withdraw from people. I can at least go and talk to a counselor about this. Even if I am afraid of social situations, I could seek some help. No one should live this way. I'll make the call."

The single woman asks, "I wonder why I never get asked out, or why I keep getting turned down for dates? What is wrong about what I am doing or how I'm communicating, or where I'm going to meet people? How could I become a more interesting person? Maybe I could join a therapy group to find out why or I could subscribe to a dating service to find people with interests similar to mine."

The middle-aged woman asks herself, "Why am I reluctant to pursue my interests? Why do I feel selfish when I want to quit my job to do something I enjoy? What am I afraid of? If I were really honest, I would notice that the ones who are doing what they like have had to take some risks and sometimes work and go to school to change jobs. That may just be more than I am willing to do."

The righteous person asks himself, “If I am really ‘choosing’ to love and serve God, why do I feel like a slave? What is wrong with my spiritual life? What is it about me that envies someone living in the gutter?”

These people are questioning themselves instead of envying others. Your envy should always be a sign to you that you are lacking something. At that moment, you should ask God to help you understand what you resent, why you do not have whatever you are envying, and whether you truly desire it. Ask him to show you what you need to do to get there, or to give up the desire.

Law #9: The Law of Activity

Human beings are responders and initiators. Many times we have boundary problems because we lack initiative—the God-given ability to propel ourselves into life. We respond to invitations *and push ourselves into life*.

The best boundaries are formed when a child is pushing against the world naturally, and the outside world sets its limits on the child. In this way, the aggressive child has learned limits without losing his or her spirit. Our spiritual and emotional well-being depends on our having this spirit.

Consider the contrast in the parable of the talents. The ones who succeeded were active and assertive. *They initiated and pushed.* The one who lost out was passive and inactive.

The sad thing is that many people who are passive are not inherently evil or bad people. But evil is an active force, and passivity can become an ally of evil by not pushing against it. Passivity never pays off. God will match our effort, but he will never do our work for us. That would be an invasion of our boundaries. He wants us to be assertive and active, seeking and knocking on the door of life.

We know that God is not mean to people who are afraid; the Scripture is full of examples of his compassion. But he will not enable passivity. The “wicked and lazy” servant was passive. He did not try. God’s grace covers failure, but it cannot make up for passivity. We have to do our part.

The sin God rebukes is not trying and failing, but failing to try. Trying, failing, and trying again is called learning. Failing to try will have no good result; evil will triumph. God expresses his opinion toward passivity in Hebrews 10:38–39: “‘But my righteous one will live by faith. And if he shrinks back, I will not be pleased with him.’ But we are not of those who shrink back and are destroyed, but of those who believe and are saved.” Passive “shrinking back” is intolerable to God, and when we understand how destructive it is to the soul, we can see why God does not tolerate it. God wants us to “preserve our souls.” That is the role of boundaries; they define and preserve our property, our soul.

I have been told that when a baby bird is ready to hatch, if you break the egg for the bird, it will die. The bird must peck its own way out of the egg into the world. This aggressive “work-out” strengthens the bird, allowing it to function in the outside world. Robbed of this responsibility, it will die.

This is also the way God has made us. If he “hatches” us, does our work for us, invades our boundaries, we will die. We must not shrink back passively. Our boundaries can only be created by our being active and aggressive, by our knocking, seeking, and asking (Matt. 7:7–8).

Law #10: The Law of Exposure

A boundary is a property line. It defines where you begin and end. We have been discussing why you need such a line. One reason stands above all the others: You do not exist in a vacuum. You exist in relation to God and others. Your boundaries define you in relation to others.

The whole concept of boundaries has to do with the fact that we exist in relationship. Therefore, boundaries are really about relationship, and finally about love. That’s why the Law of Exposure is so important.

The Law of Exposure says that your boundaries need to be made visible to others and communicated to them in relationship. We have many boundary problems because of relational

fears. We are beset by fears of guilt, not being liked, loss of love, loss of connection, loss of approval, receiving anger, being known, and so on. These are all failures in love, and God's plan is that we learn how to love. These relational problems can only be solved in relationships, for that is the context of the problems themselves, and the context of spiritual existence.

Because of these fears, we try to have secret boundaries. We withdraw passively and quietly, instead of communicating an honest no to someone we love. We secretly resent instead of telling someone that we are angry about how they have hurt us. Often, we will privately endure the pain of someone's irresponsibility instead of telling them how their behavior affects us and other loved ones, information that would be helpful to their soul.

In other situations, a partner will secretly comply with her spouse, not offering her feelings or opinions for twenty years, and then suddenly "express" her boundaries by filing for divorce. Or parents will "love" their children by giving in over and over for years, not setting limits, and resenting the love they are showing. The children grow up never feeling loved, because of the lack of honesty, and their parents are befuddled, thinking, "After all we've done."

In these instances, because of unexpressed boundaries, the relationships suffered. An important thing to remember about boundaries is that they exist, and they will affect us, whether or not we communicate them. In the same way that the alien suffered from not knowing the laws of Earth, we suffer when we do not communicate the reality of our boundaries. If our boundaries are not communicated and exposed directly, they will be communicated indirectly or through manipulation.

The Bible speaks to this issue in many places. Listen to the words of Paul: "Therefore each of you must put off falsehood and speak truthfully to his neighbor, for we are all members of one body. 'In your anger do not sin': Do not let the sun go down while you are still angry" (Eph. 4:25–26). The biblical mandate is *be honest* and *be in the light*. Listen further, "But everything exposed by the light becomes visible, for it is light that makes

everything visible. This is why it is said: ‘Wake up, O sleeper, rise from the dead, and Christ will shine on you’” (Eph. 5:13–14).

The Bible continually speaks of our being in the light and of the light as the only place where we have access to God and others. But, because of our fears, we hide aspects of ourselves in the darkness, where the devil has an opportunity. When our boundaries are in the light, that is, are communicated openly, our personalities begin to integrate for the first time. They become “visible,” in Paul’s words, and then they become light. They are transformed and changed. Healing always takes place in the light.

David speaks of it in this way: “Surely you desire truth in the inner parts; you teach me wisdom in the inmost place” (Ps. 51:6). God wants real relationship with us and wants us to have real relationship with each other. Real relationship means that I am in the light with my boundaries and other aspects of myself that are difficult to communicate. Our boundaries are affected by sin; they “miss the mark,” and need to be brought into the light for God to heal them and others to benefit from them. This is the path to real love: Communicate your boundaries openly.

Remember the story of the alien. The good news is that when God brings us out from an alien land, he does not leave us untaught. He rescued his people from the Egyptians, but, he taught them his principles and ways. These proved to be life to them. But, they had to learn them, practice them, and fight many battles to internalize these principles of faith.

God has probably led you out of captivity also. Whether it was from a dysfunctional family, the world, your own religious self-righteousness, or the scatteredness of being lost, he has been your Redeemer. But what he has secured needs to be possessed. The land to which he has brought you has certain realities and principles. Learn these as set forth in his Word, and you’ll find his kingdom a wonderful place to live.

6

Common Boundary Myths

One of the definitions of a myth is a fiction that looks like a truth. Sometimes it sounds so true that Christians will believe it automatically. Some of these myths come from our family backgrounds. Some come from our church or theological foundations. And some come from our own misunderstandings. Whatever the source, prayerfully investigate the following “sounds-like-truths.”

Myth #1: If I Set Boundaries, I'm Being Selfish

“Now, wait a minute,” Teresa said, shaking her head. “How can I set limits on those who need me? Isn’t that living for me and not for God?”

Teresa was voicing one of the main objections to boundary setting for Christians: a deep-seated fear of being self-centered, interested only in one’s own concerns and not those of others.

It is absolutely true that we are to be a loving people. Concerned for the welfare of others. In fact, *the number-one hallmark of Christians is that we love others* (John 13:35).

So don’t boundaries turn us from other-centeredness to self-centeredness? The answer is no. *Appropriate boundaries actually increase our ability to care about others.* People with highly developed limits are the most caring people on earth. How can this be true?

First, let’s make a distinction between *selfishness* and *stewardship*. Selfishness has to do with a fixation on our own wishes and desires, to the exclusion of our responsibility to love others.

Though having wishes and desires is a God-given trait (Prov. 13:4), we are to keep them in line with healthy goals and responsibility.

For one thing, we may not *want* what we *need*. Mr. Insensitive may desperately need help with the fact that he's a terrible listener. But he may not want it. God is much more interested in meeting our needs than he is granting all our wishes. For example, he denied Paul's wish to heal his "thorn in the flesh" (2 Cor. 12:7–10). At the same time, he met Paul's needs to the point that Paul felt content and full:

I know what it is to be in need, and I know what it is to have plenty. I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want. I can do everything through him who gives me strength. (Phil. 4:12–13)

It helps the Christian afraid of setting boundaries to know that God meets our needs. "God will meet all your needs according to his glorious riches in Christ Jesus" (Phil. 4:19). At the same time, God does not make our wishes and desires "all bad" either. He will meet many of them.

Our Needs Are Our Responsibility

Even with God's help, however, it is crucial to understand that meeting our own needs is basically *our* job. We can't wait passively for others to take care of us. Jesus told us to "Ask...seek...knock" (Matt. 7:7). We are to "work out [our] salvation with fear and trembling" (Phil. 2:12). Even knowing that "it is God who works in [us]" (Phil. 2:13), we are our own responsibility.

This is a very different picture than many of us are used to. Some individuals see their needs as bad, selfish, and at best, a luxury. Others see them as something that God or others should do for them. But the biblical picture is clear: our lives are our responsibility.

At the end of our lives this truth becomes crystal clear. We will all "appear before the judgment seat of Christ, that each one may receive what is due him for the things done while in the body, whether good or bad" (2 Cor. 5:10). A sobering thought.

Stewardship

A helpful way to understand setting limits is that our lives are a gift from God. Just as a store manager takes good care of a shop for the owner, we are to do the same with our souls. If a lack of boundaries causes us to mismanage the store, the owner has a right to be upset with us.

We are to develop our lives, abilities, feelings, thoughts, and behaviors. Our spiritual and emotional growth is God's "interest" on his investment in us. When we say no to people and activities that are hurtful to us, we are protecting God's investment. As you can see, there's quite a difference between selfishness and stewardship.

Myth #2: Boundaries Are a Sign of Disobedience

Many Christians fear that setting and keeping limits signals rebellion, or disobedience. In religious circles you'll often hear statements such as, "Your unwillingness to go along with our program shows an unresponsive heart." Because of this myth, countless individuals remain trapped in endless activities of no genuine spiritual and emotional value.

The truth is life-changing: a *lack* of boundaries is often a sign of disobedience. People who have shaky limits are often compliant on the outside, but rebellious and resentful on the inside. They would like to be able to say no, but are afraid. So they cover their fear with a half-hearted yes, as Barry did.

Barry had almost made it to his car after church when Ken caught up with him. *Here goes*, Barry thought. *Maybe I can still get out of this one.*

"Barry!" Ken boomed. "Glad I caught you!"

The singles class officer in charge of Bible studies, Ken was a dedicated recruiter to the studies he presided over; however, he was often insensitive to the fact that not everyone wanted to attend his meetings.

"So which study can I put you down for, Barry? The one on prophecy, evangelism, or Mark?"

Barry thought desperately to himself. *I could say, “None of the above interest me. Don’t call me—I’ll call you.” But he’s a ranking officer in the singles class. He could jeopardize my relationships with others in the group. I wonder which class will be the shortest?*

“How about the one on prophecy?” Barry guessed. He was wrong.

“Great! We’ll be studying end times for the next eighteen months! See you Monday.” Ken walked off triumphantly.

Let’s take a look at what just happened. Barry avoided saying no to Ken. At first glance, it looks like he made a choice for obedience. He committed himself to a Bible study. That’s a good thing, right? Absolutely.

But take a second look. What were Barry’s motives for not saying no to Ken? What were the “thoughts and attitudes of the heart” (Heb. 4:12)? Fear. Barry was afraid of Ken’s political clout in the singles group. He feared that he would lose other relationships if he disappointed Ken.

Why is this important? Because it illustrates a biblical principle: *an internal no nullifies an external yes*. God is more concerned with our hearts than he is with our outward compliance. “For I desire mercy, not sacrifice, and acknowledgment of God rather than burnt offerings” (Hos. 6:6).

In other words, if we say yes to God or anyone else when we really mean no, we move into a position of *compliance*. And that is the same as lying. Our lips say yes, but our hearts (and often our half-hearted actions) say no. Do you really think Barry will finish out his year and a half with Ken’s Bible study? The odds are that some priority will arise to sabotage Barry’s commitment, and he’ll leave—but without telling Ken the real reason why.

Here’s a good way to look at this myth that boundaries are a sign of disobedience: *if we can’t say no, we can’t say yes*. Why is this? It has to do with our motivation to obey, to love, or to be responsible. We must always say yes out of a heart of love. When our motive is fear, we love not.

The Bible tells us how to be obedient: “Each of you must give as you have *made up your mind*, not reluctantly or under

compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver” (2 Cor. 9:7 NRSV, italics mine).

Look at the first two ways of giving: “reluctantly” and “under compulsion.” They both involve fear—either of a real person or a guilty conscience. These motives can’t exist side by side with love, because “there is no fear in love; but perfect love casts out fear” (1 John 4:18 NASB). Each of us must give as we have made up our minds. When we are afraid to say no, our yes is compromised.

God has no interest in our obeying out of fear “because fear has to do with punishment. The one who fears is not made perfect in love” (1 John 4:18). God wants a response of love.

Are boundaries a sign of disobedience? They can be. We can say no to good things for wrong reasons. But having a “no” helps us to clarify, to be honest, to tell the truth about our motives; then we can allow God to work in us. This process cannot be accomplished in a fearful heart.

Myth #3: If I Begin Setting Boundaries, I Will Be Hurt by Others

Usually the quiet one in her women’s Bible study group, Debbie spoke up. The topic of the evening was “biblical conflict resolution,” and she couldn’t be silent another second. “I know how to present facts and arguments about my opinion in a caring way. But my husband will walk out on me if I start disagreeing! Now what do I do?”

Debbie’s problem is shared by many. She genuinely believes in boundaries, but she is terrified of their consequences.

Is it possible that others will become angry at our boundaries and attack or withdraw from us? Absolutely. God never gave us the power or the right to control how others respond to our no. Some will welcome it; some will hate it.

Jesus told the rich young man a hard truth about eternal life. He understood that the man worshiped money. So he told him to give it away—to make room in his heart for God. The results were not encouraging: “When the young man heard this, he went away sad, because he had great wealth” (Matt. 19:22).

Jesus could have manipulated the situation so that it was less hard to swallow. He could have said, “Well, how about ninety percent?” After all, he’s God, and he makes up the rules! But he didn’t. He knew that the young man had to know whom to worship. So he let him walk away.

We can do no less. We can’t manipulate people into swallowing our boundaries by sugarcoating them. *Boundaries are a “litmus test” for the quality of our relationships.* Those people in our lives who can respect our boundaries will love our wills, our opinions, our separateness. Those who can’t respect our boundaries are telling us that they don’t love our no. They only love our yes, our compliance.

When Jesus said, “Woe to you when all men speak well of you, for that is how their fathers treated the false prophets” (Luke 6:26), he was saying, “Don’t be an ear tickler. Don’t be a chronic peacemaker.” If everything you say is loved by everyone, the odds are good that you’re bending the truth.

Setting limits has to do with telling the truth. The Bible clearly distinguishes between those who love truth and those who don’t. First, there is the person who welcomes your boundaries. Who accepts them. Who listens to them. Who says, “I’m glad you have a separate opinion. It makes me a better person.” This person is called *wise*, or *righteous*.

The second type hates limits. Resents your difference. Tries to manipulate you into giving up your treasures. Try our “litmus test” experiment with your significant relationships. Tell them no in some area. You’ll either come out with increased intimacy—or learn that there was very little to begin with.

So what does Debbie, whose husband is an avowed “boundary buster,” do? Will her husband carry out his threat to walk out on her? He might. We can’t control the other person. But if the only thing keeping Debbie’s husband home is her total compliance, is this a marriage at all? And how will problems ever be addressed when she and he avoid them?

Do Debbie’s boundaries condemn her to a life of isolation? Absolutely not. If telling the truth causes someone to leave you,

this gives the church an opportunity to provide support and a spiritual and emotional “home” to the abandoned person.

In no way are we advocating divorce. The point is that you can’t make anyone stay with or love you. Ultimately that is up to your partner. Sometimes setting boundaries clarifies that you were left a long time ago, in every way, perhaps, except physically. Often, when a crisis like this occurs, it helps the struggling couple reconcile and remake their marriage into a more biblical one. The problem was raised, and now can be addressed.

Warning: the boundaryless spouse who develops limits begins changing in the marriage. There are more disagreements. There are more conflicts over values, schedules, money, kids, and sex. Quite often, however, the limits help the out-of-control spouse begin to experience the necessary pain that can motivate him or her to take more responsibility in the marriage. Many marriages are strengthened after boundaries are set because the spouse begins to miss the relationship.

Will some people abandon or attack us for having boundaries? Yes. Better to learn about their character and take steps to fix the problem than never to know.

Bonding First, Boundaries Second

Gina listened attentively to her counselor as he presented her boundary problems. “It all seems to make sense now,” she said as she left the session. “I can see changes I’m going to have to make.”

The next session was quite different. She entered the office defeated and hurt. “These boundaries aren’t what they’re cracked up to be,” she said sadly. “This week I confronted my husband, my kids, my parents, and my friends on how they don’t respect my boundaries. And now nobody will talk to me!”

What was the problem? Gina certainly jumped into her boundary work with both feet—but she neglected to find a safe place to work on boundaries. It isn’t wise to immediately alienate yourself from everyone important to you. Remember that

you are made for relationship. You need people. You must have places where you are connected, where you are loved unconditionally. It's only from that place of being "rooted and grounded in love" (Eph. 3:17 NASB) that you can safely begin learning to tell the truth. This is how you can prepare yourself for the resistance of others to your setting of biblical boundaries.

Myth #4: If I Set Boundaries, I Will Hurt Others

"The biggest problem with telling my mother no is the 'hurt silence,'" Barbara said. "It lasts about forty-five seconds, and it always happens after I tell her I can't visit her. It's only broken by my apologizing for my selfishness and setting up a time to visit. Then she's fine. I'll do *anything* to avoid that silence."

If you set boundaries, you fear that your limits will injure someone else—someone you would genuinely like to see happy and fulfilled:

- The friend who wants to borrow your car when you need it
- The relative in chronic financial straits who desperately asks for a loan
- The person who calls for support when you are in bad shape yourself

The problem is that sometimes *you see boundaries as an offensive weapon*. Nothing could be further from the truth. *Boundaries are a defensive tool*. Appropriate boundaries don't control, attack, or hurt anyone. They simply prevent your treasures from being taken at the wrong time. Saying no to adults, who are responsible for getting their own needs met, may cause some discomfort. They may have to look elsewhere. But it doesn't cause injury.

This principle doesn't speak only to those who would like to control or manipulate us. It also applies to the legitimate needs of others. Even when someone has a valid problem, there are times when we can't sacrifice for some reason or another. Jesus left the multitudes, for example, to be alone with his Father

(Matt. 14:22–23). In these instances, we have to allow others to take responsibility for their “knapsacks” (Gal. 6:5) and to look elsewhere to get their needs met.

This is a crucial point. We all need more than God and a best friend. We need a group of supportive relationships. The reason is simple: having more than one person in our lives allows our friends to be human. To be busy. To be unavailable at times. To hurt and have problems of their own. To have time alone.

Then, when one person can’t be there for us, there’s another phone number to call. Another person who may have something to offer. And we aren’t enslaved to the schedule conflicts of one person.

This is the beauty behind the Bible’s teachings on the church, the body of Christ. We’re all a group of lumpy, bumpy, unfinished sinners, who ask for help and give help, who ask again and give again. And when our supportive network is strong enough, we all help each other mature into what God intended us to be: “showing forbearance to one another in love, being diligent to preserve the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace” (Eph. 4:2–3).

When we’ve taken the responsibility to develop several supportive relationships in this biblical fashion, we can take a no from someone. Why? Because we have somewhere else to go.

Remember that God had no problem telling Paul that he would not take away his thorn. He tells all of us no quite often! God doesn’t worry that his boundaries will injure us. He knows we are to take responsibility for our lives—and sometimes no helps us do just that.

Myth #5: Boundaries Mean That I Am Angry

Brenda had finally mustered up the courage to tell her boss she was no longer going to work weekends for no pay. She had asked for a meeting, which had gone well. Her boss had been understanding, and the situation was being ironed out. Everything had gone well, except inside Brenda.

It had begun innocently enough. Brenda had itemized her issues with the work situation and had presented her view and suggestions. But midway through her presentation, she'd been surprised by a sense of rage welling up inside. Her feeling of anger and injustice had been difficult to keep hidden. It had even slipped out in a couple of sarcastic comments about the boss's "golfing Fridays," comments that Brenda had had no intention of making.

Sitting at her desk, Brenda felt confused. Where had the anger come from? Was she "that kind of person"? Maybe the culprit was these boundaries she'd been setting.

It's no secret that quite often, when people begin telling the truth, setting limits, and taking responsibility, an "angry cloud" follows them around for a while. They become touchy and easily offended, and they discover a hair-trigger temper that frightens them. Friends will make comments like, "You're not the nice, loving person I used to know." The guilt and shame caused by these remarks can further confuse new boundary setters.

So do boundaries cause anger in us? Absolutely not. This myth is a misunderstanding of emotions in general, and anger specifically. Emotions, or feelings, have a function. They tell us something. They are a signal.

Here are some of the things our "negative" emotions tell us. Fear tells us to move away from danger, to be careful. Sadness tells us that we've lost something—a relationship, an opportunity, or an idea. Anger is also a signal. Like fear, anger signals danger. However, rather than urging us to withdraw, anger is a sign that we need to move forward to confront the threat. Jesus' rage at the defilement of the temple is an example of how this feeling functions (John 2:13–17).

Anger tells us that our boundaries have been violated. Much like a nation's radar defense system, angry feelings serve as an "early warning system," telling us we're in danger of being injured or controlled.

"So that's why I find myself hostile to pushy salesmen!" Carl exclaimed. He couldn't understand why he had a hard time loving sales personnel who couldn't hear his no. They were

attempting to get inside his financial boundaries, and Carl's anger was simply doing its job.

Anger also provides us with a sense of power to solve a problem. It energizes us to protect ourselves, those we love, and our principles. In fact, a common Old Testament illustration of an angry person is someone with a "hard-breathing nose."¹ Imagine a bull in a ring, snorting and pawing, getting the steam up to attack, and you'll get the picture.

However, as with all emotions, anger doesn't understand time. Anger doesn't dissipate automatically if the danger occurred two minutes ago—or twenty years ago! It has to be worked through appropriately. Otherwise, anger simply lives inside the heart.

This is why individuals with injured boundaries often are shocked by the rage they feel inside when they begin setting limits. This is generally not "new anger"—it's "old anger." It's often years of nos that were never voiced, never respected, and never listened to. The protests against all the evil and violation of our souls sit inside us, waiting to tell their truths.

The Scriptures say that the earth quakes "under a slave when he becomes king" (Prov. 30:22). The only difference between a slave and a king is that one has *no choices* and the other has *all choices* available to him. When you suddenly give those who have been imprisoned all their lives a great deal of power, the result is often an angry tyrant. Years of constant boundary violations generate great anger.

It's very common for boundary-injured people to do some "catching up" with anger. They may have a season of looking at boundary violations of the past that they never realized existed.

Nathan's family was known in his small town as the ideal family. Other kids envied him growing up, saying, "You're lucky your parents are so close to you—mine couldn't care less about me." Feeling a great deal of gratitude for his close family, Nathan never noticed that his family carefully controlled differences and separateness. No one ever really disagreed or fought over values or feelings. "I always thought conflict meant a loss of love," he would say.

It wasn't until Nathan's marriage began suffering that he began questioning his past. He naively married a woman who manipulated and controlled him. Several years into the marriage, he knew it was in serious trouble. But to Nathan's surprise, he was not only angry at himself for getting into this mess, but also at his parents for not equipping him with tools for handling life better.

Because he genuinely loved the warm family in which he was raised, Nathan felt guilty and disloyal when he remembered occasions in which his attempts to separate from his parents and set his own limits were constantly and lovingly frustrated. Mom would cry about his argumentativeness. Dad would tell Nathan not to upset his mom. And Nathan's boundaries remained immature and nonfunctional. The more clearly he saw what this had cost him, the angrier he felt. "I made my own choices in life," he said. "But life would have been a lot better had they helped me learn to say no to people."

Did Nathan remain angry at his parents forever? No, and neither do you have to. As hostile feelings surface, bring them to relationship. Confess them. The Bible tells us to tell the truth to each other about our lacks, so that we may be healed (James 5:16). Experience the grace of God through others who love you in your anger. This is a first step toward resolving past anger.

A second step is to rebuild the injured parts of your soul. Take responsibility for healing the "treasures" that may have been violated. In Nathan's case, his sense of personal autonomy and safety had been deeply wounded. He had to practice for a long time to regain this in his primary relationships. But the more he healed, the less anger he felt.

Finally, as you develop a sense of biblical boundaries, you develop more safety in the present. You develop more confidence. You are less enslaved to the fear of other people. In Nathan's case, he set better limits with his wife and improved his marriage. As you develop better boundaries, you have less need for anger. This is because in many cases, anger was the only boundary you had. Once you have your no intact, you no

longer need the “rage signal.” You can see evil coming your way and prevent it from harming you by your boundaries.

Don’t fear the rage you discover when you first begin your boundary development. It is the protest of earlier parts of your soul. Those parts need to be unveiled, understood, and loved by God and people. And then you need to take responsibility for healing them and developing better boundaries.

Boundaries Decrease Anger

This brings us to an important point about anger: The more biblical our boundaries are, the less anger we experience! Individuals with mature boundaries are the least angry people in the world. While those who are just beginning boundary work see their anger increase, this passes as boundaries grow and develop.

Why is this? Remember the “early warning system” function of anger. We feel it when we are violated. If you can prevent boundary violation in the first place, you don’t need the anger. You are more in control of your life and values.

Tina resented her husband’s coming home forty-five minutes late to dinner every night. She had a hard time keeping the food hot; the kids were hungry and crabby, and their evening study schedule was thrown off. Things changed, however, when she began serving dinner on time, with or without her husband. He came home to refrigerated leftovers that he had to reheat and eat alone. Three or four “sessions” like this prompted Tina’s husband to tear himself away from work earlier!

Tina’s boundary (eating with the kids on time) kept her from feeling violated and victimized. She got her needs met, the kids’ needs met, and she didn’t feel angry anymore. The old saying, “Don’t get mad. Just get even” isn’t accurate. It’s far better to say, “Don’t get mad. Set a limit!”

Myth #6: When Others Set Boundaries, It Injures Me

“Randy, I’m sorry, but I can’t lend you the money,” Pete said. “This is just a bad time for me.”

My best friend, Randy thought to himself. I come to him in need, and he refuses me. What a blow! I guess that shows me what kind of friendship we really have.

Randy is preparing to embark on a life of boundarylessness with others. Why? Because being on the “receiving end” was hurtful to him. He even made an emotional vow never to put anyone else through his experience.

Many of us are like Randy. Having someone say no to our request for support leaves a bad taste in our mouths. It feels hurtful, rejecting, or cold. It becomes difficult to conceive of setting limits as being helpful or good.

Having to accept the boundaries of others is certainly not pleasant. None of us enjoys hearing the word no. Let’s look at why accepting others’ boundaries is such a problem.

First, having inappropriate boundaries set on us can injure us, especially in childhood. A parent can hurt a child by not providing the correct amount of emotional connection at the appropriate time. Children’s emotional and psychological needs are primarily the responsibility of the parents. The younger the child, the fewer places he or she can go to get those needs met. A self-centered, immature, or dependent parent can hurt a child by saying no at the wrong times.

Robert’s earliest memories were of being in his crib, alone in the room, for hours at a time. His parents would simply leave him there, thinking he was fine if he wasn’t crying. Actually, he had moved past crying to infant depression. Their no created a deep sense of being unwanted, which followed him into adulthood.

Second, we project our own injuries onto others. When we feel pain, one response is to “disown” the bad feeling and to throw it onto others. This is called *projection*. Quite often, people who have been hurt by inappropriate childhood boundaries will throw their fragility onto others. Sensing their own pain in others, they will avoid setting limits on others, as they imagine how devastating it would be to them.

Robert had extreme difficulty setting nighttime limits with his three-year-old daughter, Abby. Whenever she would cry about having to go to bed, he would panic inside, thinking, *I’m*

abandoning my daughter—she needs me and I'm not there for her. Actually, he was a wonderful father, who read stories at night, prayed, and sang songs with his little girl. But he read his own pain in her tears. Robert's injuries kept him from setting the correct limits on Abby's wish to keep him singing songs and playing—until sunrise.

Third, *an inability to receive someone's boundary may mean there is an idolatrous relationship.* Kathy felt wounded and isolated when her husband wouldn't want to talk at night. His silence resulted in severe feelings of alienation. She began wondering if she were being injured by her husband's boundaries.

The real problem, however, lay in Kathy's dependence on her husband. Her emotional well-being rested on his being there for her at all times. He was to have provided everything that her own alcoholic parents hadn't. When he had a bad day and withdrew, her own day was a disaster.

Though we certainly need each other, no one but God is indispensable. When a conflict with one significant person can bring us to despair, it is possible that we are putting that person on a throne that should only be occupied by God. We should never see one other person as the only source of good in the world. It hurts our spiritual and emotional freedom, and our development.

Ask yourself: "If the person I can't hear no from were to die tonight, to whom would I go?" It's crucial to develop several deep, significant relationships. This allows those in our lives to feel free to say no to us without guilt because we have somewhere else to go.

When we have a person we can't take no from, we have, in effect, handed over the control of our lives to them. All they have to do is threaten withdrawal, and we will comply. This occurs quite often in marriages, where one spouse is kept in emotional blackmail by the other's threat to leave. Not only is this no way to live—it doesn't work, either. The controller continues withdrawing whenever he or she is displeased. And the boundaryless person continues frantically scrambling to keep him or her happy. Dr. James Dobson's *Love Must Be Tough* is a classic work on this kind of boundary problem.²

Fourth, *an inability to accept others' boundaries can indicate a problem in taking responsibility.* Randy, who needed a loan from his best friend, is an example of this problem. He was making Pete responsible for his own financial woes. Some people become so accustomed to others rescuing them that they begin to believe that their well-being is someone else's problem. They feel let down and unloved when they aren't bailed out. They fail to accept responsibility for their own lives.

Paul strongly confronted the Corinthians in a letter that has since been lost. He set limits on their rebelliousness. Thankfully, they responded well:

Even if I caused you sorrow by my letter, I do not regret it.
Though I did regret it—I see that my letter hurt you, but
only for a little while—yet now I am happy, not because
you were made sorry, but because your sorrow led you to
repentance. (2 Cor. 7:8–9)

The Corinthians took, accepted, and responded well to Paul's boundaries, whatever they were. That's a sign of taking responsibility.

It's helpful to remember Jesus' Golden Rule here: "In everything, do to others what you would have them do to you" (Matt. 7:12). Apply it to setting limits. Do you want others to respect your boundaries? Then you must be willing to respect the boundaries of others.

Myth #7: Boundaries Cause Feelings of Guilt

Edward shook his head. "There's something not right about all this for me," he said. My folks were always so caring and concerned about me. It's been such a great relationship. And then..." He paused, groping for words.

"And then I met Judy and we got married. And that was wonderful. We saw my folks every week, sometimes more. Then the kids came along. Everything was fine. Until I got the job offer from across the country. It was the position of my dreams—Judy was excited about it, too.

"But as soon as I told my parents about the offer, things changed. I started hearing them talk about Dad's health—I

hadn't realized it was that bad. About Mom's loneliness—about how we were the only bright spots in their lives. And about all the sacrifices they'd made for me.

"What do I do? They're right...they've given their lives to me. How can I leave them after all that?"

Edward isn't alone in his dilemma. One of the major obstacles to setting boundaries with others in our lives is our feelings of obligation. What do we owe not only our parents, but anyone who's been loving toward us? What's appropriate and biblical, and what isn't?

Many individuals solve this dilemma by avoiding boundary setting with those to whom they feel an obligation. In this sense, they can avoid the guilty feelings that occur when they say no to someone who has been kind to them. They never leave home, never change schools or churches, and never switch jobs or friends. Even when it would be an otherwise mature move.

The idea is that *because we have received something, we owe something*. The problem is the nonexistent debt. The love we receive, or money, or time—or anything which causes us to feel obligated—should be accepted as a gift.

"Gift" implies no strings attached. All that's really needed is gratitude. The giver has no second thought that the present will provide a return. It was simply provided because someone loved someone and wanted to do something for him or her. Period.

That is how God views his gift of salvation to us. It cost him his Son. It was motivated out of love for us. And our response is to receive it, and to be grateful. Why is gratitude so important? Because God knows that our gratitude for what he has done for us will move us to love others: "as you were taught, and overflowing with thankfulness" (Col. 2:7).

What do we owe those who are kind to us, who have genuinely cared for us? We owe them thanks. And from our grateful heart, we should go out and help others.

We need to distinguish here between those who "give to get" and those who truly give selflessly. It's generally easy to tell the difference. If the giver is hurt or angered by a sincere thanks, the gift was probably a loan. If the gratitude is enough, you probably received a legitimate gift with no feelings of guilt attached.

God does an instructive job of keeping the issue of gratitude and boundaries separate. In Revelation’s letters to the seven churches, he singles out three churches (Ephesus, Pergamum, and Thyatira):

1. He praises their accomplishments (gratitude).
2. He then tells them that even so, he has “something against” them (2:4, 14, 20).
3. He finally confronts their irresponsibilities (boundaries).

He doesn’t allow the two issues to be confused. Neither should we.

Myth #8: Boundaries Are Permanent, and I’m Afraid of Burning My Bridges

“But what if I change my mind?” Carla asked. “I’m scared that I’ll set a boundary with my best friend, and then she’ll leave and forget about me.”

It’s important to understand that your no is always subject to you. You own your boundaries. They don’t own you. If you set limits with someone, and she responds maturely and lovingly, you can renegotiate the boundary. In addition, you can change the boundary if you are in a safer place.

Changing and renegotiating boundaries has many biblical precedents: God chose not to destroy Nineveh, for example, when the city repented (Jonah 3:10). In addition, Paul rejected John Mark for a mission trip because the younger man had deserted Paul (Acts 15:37–39). Yet, years later, Paul requested John Mark’s companionship (2 Tim. 4:11). The timing was ripe to change his boundary.

As you’ve probably noticed, some of these myths are genuine misconceptions you may have learned from distorted teachings. Yet others simply result from the fear of standing up and saying no to unbiblical responsibility. Prayerfully review which myths have entangled and ensnared you. Search the Scripture mentioned in this chapter. And ask God to give you a sense of confidence that he believes in good boundaries more than you do.

PART TWO

BOUNDARY CONFLICTS

Boundaries and Your Family

Susie had a problem that I had seen countless times before. This thirty-year-old woman would return from a visit to her parents' home and suffer a deep depression.

When she described her problem to me, I asked her if she noticed that every time she went home to visit, she came back extremely depressed.

"Why that's ridiculous," she said. "I don't live there anymore. How could the trip affect me this way?"

When I asked her to describe the trip, Susie told of social gatherings with old friends and family times around the dinner table. These were fun, she said, especially when it was only family.

"What do you mean 'only family'?" I asked.

"Well, other times my parents would invite some of my friends over, and I didn't like those dinners as well."

"Why was that?"

Susie thought for a minute and then replied, "I guess I start to feel guilty." She began to recount the subtle remarks her parents would make comparing her friends' lives to hers. They would talk of how wonderful it is for grandparents to have a "hands on" role in raising the children. They would talk of the community activities her friends were doing and how wonderful she would be at those activities if she only lived there. The list went on and on.

Susie soon discovered that, when she returned home, she felt as if she were bad for living where she lived. She had a nagging sense that she really should do what her parents wanted her to do.

Susie had a common problem. She had made choices *on the outside*. She had moved away from the family she grew up in to pursue a career on her own. She had been paying her own bills. She had even gotten married and had a child. But *on the inside*, things were different. She did not have emotional permission to be a separate person, make free choices about her life, and not feel guilty when she did not do what her parents wanted. She could still yield to pressure.

The real problem is on the inside. Remember, boundaries define someone's property. Susie, and others like her, do not really "own" themselves. People who own their lives do not feel guilty when they make choices about where they are going. They take other people into consideration, but when they make choices for the wishes of others, they are choosing out of love, not guilt; to advance a good, not to avoid being bad.

Signs of a Lack of Boundaries

Let's look at some common signs of a lack of boundaries with the family we grew up in.

Catching the Virus

A common scenario is this: one spouse doesn't have good emotional boundaries with the family he grew up in—his family of origin. Then when he has contact with them by phone or in person, he becomes depressed, argumentative, self-critical, perfectionistic, angry, combative, or withdrawn. It is as though he "catches" something from his family of origin and passes it on to his immediate family.

His family of origin has the power to affect his new family in a trickle-down effect. One sure sign of boundary problems is when your relationship with one person has the power to affect your relationships with others. You are giving one person way too much power in your life.

I remember one young woman who made steady gains in therapy until she talked to her mother, when she would withdraw for three weeks. She would say things like, "I'm not chang-

ing at all. I'm not getting any better." Fusing with many of her mother's ideas about her, she wasn't able to stay separate. This fusion with her mother affected her other relationships. She virtually shut everyone out of her life after an interaction with her mother. Her mother owned her life; she was not her own.

Second Fiddle

"You wouldn't believe how she is with him," Dan said. "She totally focuses on his every wish. When he criticizes her, she tries harder. And she practically ignores me. I'm tired of being the 'second man' in her life."

Dan wasn't talking about Jane's lover. He was talking about her father. Dan was tired of feeling like Jane cared more about her father's wishes than his.

This is a common sign of a lack of boundaries with the family of origin: the spouse feels like he gets leftovers. He feels as if his mate's real allegiance is to her parents. This spouse hasn't completed the "leaving before cleaving" process; she has a boundary problem. God has designed the process whereby a "man shall leave his father and his mother and shall cleave to his wife; and they shall become one flesh" (Gen. 2:24 NASB). The Hebrew word for "leave" comes from a root word that means to "loosen," or to relinquish or forsake. For marriage to work, the spouse needs to loosen her ties with her family of origin and forge new ones with the new family she is creating through marriage.

This does not mean that husbands and wives shouldn't have a relationship with their extended families. But they do need to set clear boundaries with their families of origin. Many marriages fail because one partner fails to set clear boundaries with the family of origin, and the spouse and children get leftovers.

May I Have My Allowance, Please?

Terry and Sherry were an attractive couple. They owned a big house and went on lavish vacations; their children took piano lessons and ballet, and they had their own skis, roller blades, ice

skates, and wind surfers. Terry and Sherry had all the trappings of success. But, there was one problem. This lifestyle was not supported by Terry's paycheck. Terry and Sherry received much financial help from his family.

Terry's family had always wanted the best for him, and they had always helped him get it. They had contributed to the house, the vacations, and the children's hobbies. While this allowed Terry and Sherry to have things they could not otherwise have, it cost them dearly as well.

The periodic bailouts from his parents cut into Terry's self-respect. And Sherry felt as if she couldn't spend any money without consulting her in-laws, since they contributed the funds.

Terry illustrates a common boundary problem for young adults today, both married and single: he was not yet an adult financially. He could not set boundaries on his parents' desire for him and Sherry to "have everything we have." He also found that he had so fused with their ideas of success that he had trouble saying no to these wishes in himself. He wasn't sure he wanted to forsake the gifts and handouts for a greater sense of independence.

Terry's story is the "up" side of the financial boundary problem. There is also the "I'm in trouble" side. Many adult children perpetually get into financial messes because of irresponsibility, drug or alcohol use, out-of-control spending, or the modern "I haven't found my niche" syndrome. Their parents continue to finance this road of failure and irresponsibility, thinking that "this time they'll do better." In reality, they are crippling their children for life, preventing them from achieving independence.

An adult who does not stand on his own financially is still a child. To be an adult, you must live within your means and pay for your own failures.

Mom, Where Are My Socks?

In the *perpetual child syndrome*, a person may be financially on his own, but allows his family of origin to perform certain life management functions.

This adult child often hangs out at Mom and Dad's house, vacations with them, drops off laundry, and eats many meals there. He is Mom or Dad's closest confidant, sharing "everything" with them. At thirtysomething, he hasn't found his career niche, and he has no savings, no retirement plan, and no health insurance. On the surface these things do not appear to be serious problems. But often, Mom and Dad are symbolically keeping their adult child from emotionally leaving home.

This often happens in friendly, loving families, where things are so nice it's hard to leave. (Psychologists often refer to this as the "enmeshed family," one in which the children do not separate with clear boundaries.) It does not look like a problem, because everyone gets along so well. The family is very happy with one another.

However, the adult children's *other* adult relationships may be dysfunctional. They may choose "black sheep" friends and lovers. They may be unable to commit to a member of the opposite sex or to a career.

Often their finances are a problem. They have large and multiple credit-card balances and usually are behind on their taxes. Although they may be earning their own way daily, they never think about the future. This is essentially an adolescent financial life. Adolescents make enough money to buy a surfboard, stereo, or dress, but do not think past the immediate present to the future. Did I make enough money for the pleasures of this weekend? Adolescents—and adult children who have not separated from their parents—are still under parental protection, and it's a parent's job to think about the future.

Three's a Crowd

Dysfunctional families are known for a certain type of boundary problem called *triangulation*. It goes something like this: Person A is angry at Person B. Person A does not tell Person B. Person A calls Person C and gripes about Person B. Person C enjoys Person A's confidence and listens whenever A wants to play the triangle game.

By this time, Person B, feeling lonely, calls C, and, in passing, mentions the conflict with A. Person C becomes the confidant of B as well as A. Persons A and B have not resolved their conflict, and C has two “friends.”

Triangulation is the failure to resolve a conflict between two persons and the pulling in of a third to take sides. This is a boundary problem because the third person has no business in the conflict, but *is used for comfort and validation by the ones who are afraid to confront each other.* This is how conflicts persist, people don’t change, and enemies are made unnecessarily.

What happens in the triangle is that people speak falsely, covering up their hatred with nice words and flattery. Person A is usually very cordial, nice, and even complimentary to B in person, but when A talks to C, the anger comes out.

This is a clear lack of boundaries because Person A is not “owning” his anger. The person with whom A is angry deserves to hear it straight from him. How many times have you been hurt by a “Do you know what John said about you?” And the last time you talked to John things were fine.

In addition, Person C is being drawn into the conflict and his knowledge of the conflict gets in the way of his relationship with Person B. Gossip gets between people. It affects our opinions of the people being gossiped about without their having a chance to defend themselves. Many times what we hear from a third person is inaccurate. This is why the Bible commands us to listen to at least two or three witnesses, not just one.

Triangulation is a common boundary problem with families of origin. Old patterns of conflict between a parent and a child, or between two parents, result in one family member calling another family member and talking about the third family member. These extremely destructive patterns keep people dysfunctional.

The Scripture is very serious about dealing with conflict *directly* with the one you are angry with:

He who rebukes a man will in the end gain more favor than he who has a flattering tongue. (Prov. 28:23)

Do not hate your brother in your heart. Rebuke your neighbor frankly so you will not share in his guilt. (Lev. 19:17)

Therefore, if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there in front of the altar. First go and be reconciled to your brother; then come and offer your gift. (Matt. 5:23–24)

If your brother sins against you, go and show him his fault, just between the two of you. (Matt. 18:15)

These Scriptures show that a simple way to avoid triangulation is to always talk to the person with whom you have a conflict first. Work it out with her, and only if she denies the problem, talk to someone else to get insight about how to resolve it, not to gossip and to bleed off anger. Then you *both* go to talk to her together to try to solve the problem.

Never say to a third party something about someone that you do not plan to say to the person himself.

Who's the Child Here, Anyhow?

“Children should not have to save up for their parents, but parents for their children” (2 Cor. 12:14).

Some people were born to take care of their parents. They did not sign up for this duty; they inherited it. Today we call these people “codependent.” Early in life they learned they were responsible for their parents, who were stuck in childish patterns of irresponsibility. When they became adults, they had a difficult time setting boundaries between themselves and their irresponsible parents. Every time they tried to have separate lives, they felt selfish.

Indeed, the Bible teaches that adult children should take care of their elderly parents. “Give proper recognition to those widows who are really in need. But if a widow has children or grandchildren, these should learn first of all to put their religion into practice by caring for their own family and so repaying their parents and grandparents, for this is pleasing to God” (1 Tim. 5:3–4).

It is good to feel grateful to our parents and to repay them for what they have done for us.

But two problems generally crop up. First, your parents may not be “really in need.” They may be irresponsible, demanding, or acting like martyrs. They may need to take responsibility for their own knapsacks.

Second, when they are “really in need,” you may not have clear boundaries to determine what you can give and what you can’t give. You may not be able to limit your giving, and your parents’ inability to adjust to old age, for example, will dominate your family. Such domination can ruin marriages and hurt children. A family needs to decide what they want to give and what they do not want to give, so they will continue to love and appreciate the parent, and not grow resentful.

Good boundaries prevent resentment. *It is good to give.* Make sure, however, that it is the proper amount for your situation and resources.

But I'm Your Brother

Another frequent dynamic is the grown sibling relationship. An irresponsible adult child depends on a responsible adult sibling to avoid growing up and leaving the family. (We are not talking about a true needy sibling who has a mental or physical impairment.) The irresponsible child continues to play old family games well into adulthood.

The tough issue here is the guilt and pressure you feel because it is your brother or sister. I have seen people do totally crazy and unhelpful things for a brother or sister that they would never do for their closest friend. Our families can tear down our best-built fences because they are “family.”

But Why Do We Do That?

Why in the world do we choose to continue these sorts of patterns? What is wrong?

One reason is that we did not learn the laws of boundaries in our family of origin, and our adult boundary problems are actually old boundary problems that have been there since childhood.

Another reason is that we may not have gone through the biblical transition into adulthood and the spiritual adoption into the family of God. Let's look at both.

Continuation of Old Boundary Problems

Remember the story about the alien? He had grown up on another planet and was unfamiliar with the laws of Earth, such as gravity and money as a medium of exchange.

The patterns you learn at home growing up are continued into adulthood with the same players: lack of consequences for irresponsible behavior, lack of confrontation, lack of limits, taking responsibility for others instead of yourself, giving out of compulsion and resentment, envy, passivity, and secrecy. These patterns are not new, they have just never been confronted and repented of.

These patterns run deep. Your family members are the ones you learned to organize your life around, so they are able to send you back to old patterns by their very presence. You begin to act automatically out of *memory* instead of growth.

To change, you must identify these "sins of the family" and turn from them. You must confess them as sins, repent of them, and change the way you handle them. The first step in establishing boundaries is becoming aware of old family patterns that you are still continuing in the present.

Look at the struggles you are having with boundaries in your family of origin, identify which laws are being broken, and then pinpoint the resulting negative fruit in your life.

Adoption

This is not a book about spiritual development, but boundaries are an essential aspect of growing up. One step in growing up is coming out from under parental authority and putting yourself under God's authority.

The Bible says that children are *under* the authority of their parents until they become adults (Gal. 4:1–7). In a real sense their parents are responsible for them. But when adulthood and the "age of accountability" comes, that person comes out from

under guardians and managers and becomes responsible for him or herself. Christians move into another parental relationship with God as Father. God does not leave us as orphans, but takes us into his family.

Numerous New Testament passages teach that we need to forsake our allegiance to our original family and become adopted by God (Matt. 23:9). God commands us to look to him as our father and to have no parental intermediaries. Adults who are still holding an allegiance to earthly parents have not realized their new adoptive status.

Many times we are not obeying the Word of God because we have not spiritually left home. We feel we still need to please our parents and their traditional ways of doing things rather than obey our new Father (Matt. 15:1–6).

When we become part of God's family, obeying his ways will sometimes cause conflict in our families and sometimes separate us (Matt. 10:35–37). Jesus says that our spiritual ties are the closest and most important (Matt. 12:46–50). Our true family is the family of God.

In this family, which is to be our strongest tie, things are done a certain way. We are to tell the truth, set limits, take and require responsibility, confront each other, forgive each other, and so on. Strong standards and values make this family run. And God will not allow it any other way in his family.

This in no way means that we are to cut other ties. We are to have friends outside of God's family and strong ties with our family of origin. However, we need to ask two questions: Do these ties keep us from doing the right thing in any situation? and Have we really become an adult in relation to our family of origin?

If our ties are truly loving, we will be separate and free and give out of love and a “purposeful” heart. We will stay away from resentment, we will love with limits, and we will not enable evil behavior.

If we are not “under guardians and managers” as adults, we can make truly *adult* decisions, having control over our own will (1 Cor. 7:37), subject to our true Father.

Resolution of Boundary Problems with Family

Establishing boundaries with families of origin is a tough task, but one with great reward. It is a process, with certain distinguishable steps.

Identify the Symptom

Look at your own life situation and see where boundary problems exist with your parents and siblings. The basic question is this: *Where have you lost control of your property?* Identify those areas and see their connection with the family you grew up in, and you are on your way.

Identify the Conflict

Discover what dynamic is being played out. For example, what “law of boundaries” are you violating? Do you triangulate? Do you take responsibility *for* a sibling or parent instead of being responsible *to* them? Do you fail to enforce consequences and end up paying for their behavior? Are you passive and reactive toward them and the conflict?

You cannot stop acting out a dynamic until you understand what you are doing. “Take the log out” of your own eye. Then, you will be able to see clearly to deal with your family members. See yourself as the problem and find your boundary violations.

Identify the Need That Drives the Conflict

You do not act in inappropriate ways for no reason. You are often trying to meet some underlying need that your family of origin did not meet. Maybe we are still entangled because of a need to be loved, or approved of, or accepted. You must face this deficit and accept that it can only be met in your new family of God, those who are now your true “mother, father, brothers, and sisters,” those who do God’s will and can love you the way he designed.

Take in and Receive the Good

It is not enough to understand your need. *You must get it met.* God is willing to meet your needs through his people, but you must humble yourself, reach out to a good support system, and take in the good. Do not continue to hide your talent in the ground and expect to get better. Learn to respond to and receive love, even if you're clumsy at first.

Practice Boundary Skills

Your boundary skills are fragile and new. You can't take them immediately into a difficult situation. Practice them in situations where they will be honored and respected. Begin saying no to people in your supportive group who will love and respect your boundaries.

When you are recovering from a physical injury, you do not pick up the heaviest weight first. You build up to the heavy stuff. Look at it as you would physical therapy.

Say No to the Bad

In addition to practicing new skills in safe situations, avoid hurtful situations. When you are in the beginning stages of recovery, you need to avoid people who have abused and controlled you in the past.

When you think you are ready to reestablish a relationship with someone who has been abusive and controlling in the past, bring a friend or supporter along. Be aware of your pull toward hurtful situations and relationships. The injury you are recovering from is serious, and you can't reestablish a relationship until you have the proper tools. Be careful to not get sucked into a controlling situation again because your wish for reconciliation is so strong.

Forgive the Aggressor

Nothing clarifies boundaries more than forgiveness. To forgive someone means to let him off the hook, or to cancel a debt he owes you. When you refuse to forgive someone, you still want

something from that person, and even if it is revenge that you want, it *keeps you tied to him forever*.

Refusing to forgive a family member is one of the main reasons people are stuck for years, unable to separate from their dysfunctional families. They still want something from them. It is much better to receive grace from God, who has something to give, and to forgive those who have no money to pay their debt with. This ends your suffering, because it ends the wish for repayment that is never forthcoming and that makes your heart sick because your hope is deferred (Prov. 13:12).

If you do not forgive, you are demanding something your offender does not choose to give, even if it is only confession of what he did. This “ties” him to you and ruins boundaries. Let the dysfunctional family you came from go. Cut it loose, and you will be free.

Respond, Don't React

When you *react* to something that someone says or does, you may have a problem with boundaries. If someone is able to cause havoc by doing or saying something, she is in control of you at that point, and your boundaries are lost. When you *respond*, you remain in control, with options and choices.

If you feel yourself reacting, step away and regain control of yourself so family members can't force you to do or say something you do not want to do or say and something that violates your separateness. When you have kept your boundaries, choose the best option. The difference between responding and reacting is choice. When you are reacting, *they* are in control. When you respond, *you* are.

Learn to Love in Freedom and Responsibility, Not in Guilt

The best boundaries are loving ones. The person who has to remain forever in a protective mode is losing out on love and freedom. Boundaries in no way mean to stop loving. They mean the opposite: you are gaining freedom to love. It is good to sacrifice and deny yourself for the sake of others. But you need boundaries to make that choice.

Practice purposeful giving to increase your freedom. Sometimes people who are building boundaries feel that to do someone a favor is codependent. Nothing is farther from the truth. Doing good for someone, when you freely choose to do it, is boundary enhancing. Codependents are not doing good; they are allowing evil because they are afraid.

Boundaries and Your Friends

Marsha switched on the television, not even noticing which show was on. She was thinking about her phone call with her best friend, Tammy. She had asked Tammy to go to a movie with her. Tammy had had other plans for the evening. Once again, Marsha had taken the initiative. Once again, she was disappointed. Tammy never called her. Was this what friendship was supposed to be about?

Friendship. The word conjures up images of intimacy, fondness, and a mutual drawing together of two people. Friends are symbols of how meaningful our lives have been. The saddest people on earth are those who end their days with no relationships in which they are truly known and truly loved.

Friendship can be a broad category; most of the relationships mentioned in this book have friendship components. But for our purposes, let's define friendship as *a nonromantic relationship that is attachment-based rather than function-based*. In other words, let's exclude relationships based on a common task, like work or ministry. Let's look at friendship as comprising people we want to be around just for their own sake.

Boundary conflicts with friends come in all sizes and shapes. To understand the various issues, let's look at a few conflicts and how they can be resolved with boundaries.

Conflict #1: Compliant/Compliant

In some ways it was a great friendship; in other ways, it was awful. Sean and Tim enjoyed the same sports, activities, and

recreation. They went to the same church and liked the same restaurants. But they were just too nice to each other. They both had difficulty saying no to each other.

Their realization of the problem came up one weekend when a white-water rafting trip and a sixties concert were scheduled on the same day. Sean and Tim enjoyed both activities, but they couldn't do both. Sean called Tim, suggesting they go rafting. "Absolutely," answered his friend. However, unbeknownst to each other, neither Sean nor Tim really wanted to go rafting. In their heart of hearts, both men had been looking forward to going to the concert.

Halfway down the river, Sean and Tim got honest with each other. Tired and wet, Tim blurted out, "It was your big idea to come on this trip."

"Tim," Sean said with surprise. "I thought *you* wanted to go rafting."

"Oh, no! Since you called me, I figured that's what *you* wanted! Old buddy," he continued ruefully, "maybe it's time we stopped treating each other like china dolls."

The result of two compliants' interacting is that neither does what he really wants. Each is so afraid of telling the other the truth that neither ever does.

Let's apply a boundary checklist to this conflict. This checklist of questions will not only help you locate where you are in setting boundaries, but also show you how to get where you want to go.

1. *What are the symptoms?* One symptom of a compliant/compliant conflict is dissatisfaction—a sense that you allowed something you shouldn't have.

2. *What are the roots?* Compliants come from backgrounds where they had to avoid saying no to keep others happy. Since their roots are similar, it's often hard for two compliant people to help each other.

3. *What is the boundary conflict?* Compliant people politely deny their own boundaries to keep the peace.

4. *Who needs to take ownership?* Each compliant needs to take responsibility for his or her attempts to appease or please the other. Sean and Tim both need to admit that they each control the other by being nice.

5. *What do they need?* Compliant people need to have supportive relationships to plug into, be they support groups, home Bible studies, or counselors. Their fear of hurting the other person makes it difficult for them to set boundaries on their own.

6. *How do they begin?* Both compliants practice setting limits on trivial things. They may begin with being honest about things like tastes in restaurants, church liturgies, music, and the like.

7. *How do they set boundaries with each other?* Sean and Tim talk with each other face-to-face, finally telling the truth and revealing limits they'd like to start setting. They commit themselves to better boundaries with each other.

8. *What happens next?* Sean and Tim may have to admit that their interests are not as similar as they'd thought. They may need to separate more from each other. Having different friends for different activities is no blot on the relationship; it might help their friendship in the long run.

Conflict #2: Compliant/Aggressive Controller

The compliant/aggressive controller conflict, the most identifiable of friendship conflicts, has classic symptoms. The compliant feels intimidated and inferior in the relationship; the aggressive controller feels irritated at being nagged by the compliant.

“Well, all right, if you insist” is a catchphrase of the compliant. Usually, the aggressive controller is insisting on using some of the compliant’s time, talents, or treasures. The aggressive controller has no problem demanding what she wants. Sometimes she just takes what she wants without asking. “I needed it” is enough reason for the aggressive controller to help herself to whatever the compliant has, be it car keys, a cup of sugar, or three hours of time.

Since the compliant is usually unhappy in this relationship, he is the one who needs to take action. Let’s put this relationship through the boundary checklist:

1. *What are the symptoms?* The compliant feels controlled and resentful; the aggressive controller feels good, except she doesn’t like to be nagged.

2. *What are the roots?* The compliant probably grew up in a family who taught him to avoid conflict, rather than embrace it. The aggressive controller never received training in delaying gratification and in taking responsibility for herself.

3. *What is the boundary conflict?* Two specific boundary conflicts are the inability of the compliant to set clear limits with his friend, and the inability of the aggressive controller to respect the compliant's limits.

4. *Who needs to take ownership?* The compliant needs to see that he isn't a victim of the aggressive controller; he is volunteering his power to his friend on a silver platter. Giving up his power is his way of controlling his friend. The compliant controls the aggressive controller by pleasing her, hoping it will appease her and cause her to change her behavior. The aggressive controller needs to own that she has difficulty listening to no and accepting the limits of others. She needs to take responsibility for her need to control her friend.

5. *What is needed?* The unhappier one in the friendship, the compliant, needs to plug into a supportive group of people to help him with this boundary conflict.

6. *How do they begin?* In preparation for confronting his friend, the compliant needs to practice setting limits in his support group. The aggressive controller could really benefit from honest feedback from loving friends on how she runs over people and how she can learn to respect the limits of others.

7. *How do they set boundaries?* The compliant applies biblical principles to his friendship (see Matthew 18). He confronts his friend on her control and intimidation. He tells her that the next time she tries to control him, he will leave.

He does not attempt to control her. Confrontation isn't an ultimatum meant to rob her of her choices. He sets limits to let her know that her control hurts him and wounds their friendship. Such limits protect the compliant from further hurt. The aggressive controller can become as angry or intimidating as she wants, but the compliant won't be around to get hurt. He will be out of the room, the house, or the friendship—until it's safe to come back.

The aggressive controller experiences the consequences of her actions. Not having her friend around may force her to miss

the attachment, and she can begin to take responsibility for the control that ran her friend off.

8. *Now what?* At this point, if both friends are open, the two can renegotiate the relationship. They can set new ground rules, such as, “I’ll stop nagging if you’ll stop being critical,” and can build a new friendship.

Conflict #3: Compliant/Manipulative Controller

“Cathy, I’m in a real jam, and you’re the only one I can depend on to help me out. I can’t get a baby-sitter for the kids, and I have this church meeting. . . .”

Cathy listened to the plight of her friend, Sharon. It was the usual story. Sharon neglected to plan for events, to call ahead for sitters. She often called Cathy to help out in these self-induced emergencies.

Cathy hated being stuck in this position. Sharon didn’t do it on purpose, and she needed her for a good cause, but Cathy still felt used and exploited. What was she to do?

Many friendships get stuck in this interaction between compliants and manipulative controllers. Why do we call Sharon controlling? She’s not consciously trying to manipulate her friend; however, no matter what her good intentions are, when she’s in a jam, Sharon uses her friends. She takes them for granted, thinking that they shouldn’t mind doing a friend a favor. Her friends go along, saying, “Well, that’s just Sharon.” They stifle their resentment.

Let’s run this conflict through our boundary checklist:

1. *What are the symptoms?* The compliant (Cathy) feels resentment at the manipulative controller’s (Sharon’s) last-minute requests. Cathy feels as though her friendship is being taken for granted. She begins to avoid her friend.

2. *What are the roots?* Sharon’s parents rescued her from every jam, from finishing term papers at 3:00 A.M. to lending her money when she was well into her thirties. She lived in a very forgiving universe, where nice people would always help her out. She never had to face her own irresponsibility and lack of discipline and planning.

As a child, Cathy didn’t like her mother’s hurt look when she said no. She grew up afraid of hurting others by setting

boundaries. Cathy would do anything to avoid conflict with friends—especially with Sharon.

3. *What is the boundary conflict?* Sharon doesn't plan ahead and take responsibility for her schedule. When responsibilities "get away from her," she calls out to the nearest compliant for help. And Cathy comes running.

4. *Who needs to take ownership?* Cathy, the motivated party in this conflict, sees how her never-ending yes contributes to Sharon's illusion that she doesn't ever have to plan ahead. Cathy needs to stop feeling like a victim and take responsibility for saying no.

5. *What does she need?* Cathy needs to connect with others who will support her as she looks at the boundary issues between her and her friend.

6. *How does she begin?* Cathy practices saying no with supportive friends. In a supportive atmosphere she learns to disagree, to state her opinion, and to confront. They all pray for strength and guidance in this relationship.

7. *How does she set boundaries?* At their next lunch, Cathy tells Sharon about her feelings of being used and taken advantage of. She explains how she'd like a more mutual relationship. Then she lets her friend know that she won't be taking any more "emergency" baby-sitting jobs.

Sharon, unaware of how she was hurting her friend, is genuinely sorry about the problem. She begins to take more responsibility for her schedule. After a few futile attempts to get Cathy to baby-sit at the last minute and having to miss a few important meetings, she starts planning for events a week or two ahead of time.

8. *What happens next?* The friendship grows and deepens. Over time, Cathy and Sharon laugh over the conflict that actually brought them closer.

Conflict #4: Compliant/Nonresponsive

Remember the Marsha-Tammy friendship at the beginning of this chapter? One friend doing all the work and the other coasting illustrates the compliant/nonresponsive conflict. One party feels frustrated and resentful; the other wonders what the

problem is. Marsha sensed that the friendship wasn't as important to Tammy as it was to her.

Let's analyze the situation:

1. *What are the symptoms?* Marsha feels depressed, resentful, and unimportant. Tammy, however, may feel guilty or overwhelmed by her friend's needs and demands.

2. *What are the roots?* Marsha always feared that if she didn't control her important attachments by doing all the work, she'd be abandoned. So she became a Martha to everyone else's Mary, a worker instead of a lover (Luke 10:38–42).

Tammy has never had to work hard for friendships. Always popular and in demand, she's passively taken from important friendships. She's never lost anyone by not being responsive. In fact, they work harder to keep her around.

3. *What is the boundary conflict?* There could be two boundary conflicts here. First, Marsha takes on too much responsibility for the friendship. She's not letting her friend bear her own load (Gal. 6:5). Second, Tammy doesn't take enough responsibility for the friendship. She knows that Marsha will come up with activities from which she can pick and choose. Why work when someone else will?

4. *Who needs to take ownership?* Marsha needs to take responsibility for making it too easy for Tammy to do nothing. She sees that her attempts to plan, call, and do all the work are disguised attempts to control love.

5. *What do they need?* Both women need support from other friends. They can't look objectively at this problem without a relationship or two of unconditional love around them.

6. *How do they begin?* Marsha practices setting limits with supportive friends. She realizes that she will still have friendships in which each friend carries her own weight if she and Tammy break off their friendship.

7. *How do they set boundaries?* Marsha tells Tammy about her feelings and informs her that she will need to take equal responsibility for their friendship in the future. In other words, after Marsha calls, she won't call again unless Tammy does. Marsha hopes that Tammy will miss her and begin calling.

If worst comes to worst and the friendship atrophies due to Tammy's unresponsiveness, Marsha has gained something. She's learned it wasn't a mutual connection in the first place. Now she can grieve, get over it, and move on to find real friends.

8. *What happens next?* The mini-crisis changes the character of the friendship permanently. It either exposes it for a nonrelationship—or it provides soil for the rebuilding of a better one.

Questions about Friendship Boundary Conflicts

Boundary conflicts in friendships are difficult to deal with because the only cord tying the relationship together is the attachment itself. There's no wedding ring. There's no job connection. There's just the friendship—and it often seems all too fragile and in danger of being severed.

People who are in the above conflicts often raise the following questions when they consider setting boundaries on their friendships.

Question #1: Aren't Friendships Easily Broken?

Most friendships have no external commitment, such as marriage, work, or church, to keep the friends together. The phone could just stop ringing and the relationship die with no real ripples in the lives of the participants. So aren't friendships at greater risk of breaking up when boundary conflicts arise?

This type of thinking has two problems. First, it assumes that external institutions such as marriage, work, and church are the glue that holds relationships together. It assumes that our commitments are what hold us together, not our attachments. Biblically and practically, nothing could be further from the truth.

We hear this thinking in many Christian circles: "If you don't like someone, act like you do." Or, "make yourself love them." Or, "commit to loving someone." Or, "choose to love someone, and the feelings will come."

Choice and commitment *are* elements of a good friendship. We do need more than fair-weather friends. However, Scripture teaches us that we can't depend on commitment or sheer

willpower, for they will always let us down. Paul cried out that he did what he didn't want to do, and he didn't do what he wanted to do (Rom. 7:19). He was stuck. We all experience the same conflict. Even when we commit to a loving friendship, bad things happen. We let them down. Feelings go sour. Simply white-knuckling it won't reestablish the relationship.

We can solve our dilemma the same way Paul solved his: "Therefore, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus" (Rom. 8:1). The answer is being "in Christ Jesus"—in other words, in relationship with Christ, both vertically and horizontally. As we stay connected to God, to our friends, and to our support groups, we are filled up with the grace to hang in there and fight out the boundary conflicts that arise. Without this external source of connection, we're doomed to an empty willpower that ultimately fails or makes us think we're omnipotent.

Again, the Bible teaches that all commitment is based on a loving relationship. Being loved leads to commitment and willful decision-making—not the reverse.

How does this apply to friendships? Look at it this way. How would you feel if your best buddy approached you and said: "I just wanted to tell you that the only reason we're friends is because I'm committed to our friendship. There's nothing that draws me to you. I don't particularly enjoy your company. But I will keep choosing to be your friend."

You probably wouldn't feel very safe or cherished in this relationship. You'd suspect you were being befriended out of obligation, not out of love. Don't let anyone fool you. All friendships need to be based on attachment, or they have a shaky foundation.

The second problem with thinking that friendships are weaker than institutionalized relationships such as marriage, church, and work is in assuming that those three aren't attachment-based. It simply isn't true. If it were, wedding vows would ensure a zero percent divorce rate. Professions of faith would ensure faithful church attendance. A hiring would ensure one hundred percent attendance at work. These three important institutions, so crucial to our lives, are, to a large degree, attachment-based.

It's scary to realize that the only thing holding our friends to us isn't our performance, or our lovability, or their guilt, or their obligation. The only thing that will keep them calling, spending time with us, and putting up with us is love. And that's the one thing we can't control.

At any moment, any person can walk away from a friendship. However, as we enter more and more into an attachment-based life, we learn to trust love. We learn that the bonds of a true friendship are not easily broken. And we learn that, in a good relationship, we can set limits that will strengthen, not injure, the connection.

Question #2: How Can I Set Boundaries in Romantic Friendships?

Single Christians have tremendous struggles with learning to be truth-tellers and limit-setters in romantic, dating friendships. Most of the conflicts revolve around the fear of losing the relationship. A client may say: "There's someone in my life whom I like a lot—but I'm afraid if I say no to him, I'll never see him again."

A couple of unique principles operate in the romantic sphere:

1. *Romantic relationships are, by nature, risky.* Many singles who have not developed good attachments with other people and who have not had their boundaries respected try to learn the rules of biblical friendships by dating. They hope that the safety of these relationships will help them learn to love, be loved, and set limits.

Quite often, these individuals come out of a few months of dating more injured than when they went in. They may feel let down, put down, or used. This is not a dating problem. It's a problem in understanding the purpose of dating.

The purpose of dating is to practice and experiment. The end goal of dating is generally to decide, sooner or later, whether or not to marry. Dating is a means to find out what kind of person we complement and with whom we are spiritually and emotionally compatible. It's a training ground for marriage.

This fact causes a built-in conflict. When we date, we have the freedom to say, at any time, “This isn’t working out,” and to end the relationship. The other person has the same freedom.

What does this mean for the person whose boundaries have been injured? Often, she brings immature, undeveloped aspects of her character to an adult romantic situation. In an arena of low commitment and high risk, she seeks the safety, bonding, and consistency that her wounds need. She entrusts herself too quickly to someone whom she is dating because her needs are so intense. And she will be devastated when things “don’t work out.”

This is a little like sending a three-year-old to the front lines of battle. Dating is a way for adults to find out about each other’s suitability for marriage; it’s not a place for young, injured souls to find healing. This healing can best be found in nonromantic arenas, such as support groups, church groups, therapy, and same-sex friendships. We need to keep separate the purposes of romantic and nonromantic friendships.

It’s best to learn the skill of setting boundaries in these non-romantic arenas, where the attachments and commitments are greater. Once we’ve learned to recognize, set, and keep our biblical boundaries, we can use them on the adult playground called dating.

2. *Setting limits in romance is necessary.* Individuals with mature boundaries sometimes suspend them in the initial stages of a dating relationship in order to please the other person. However, truth-telling in romance helps define the relationship. It helps each person to know where he starts and the other person stops.

Ignorance of one another’s boundaries is one of the most blatant red flags of the poor health of a dating relationship. We’ll ask a couple in premarital counseling, “Where do you disagree? Where do you lock horns?” When the answer is, “It’s just amazing, we’re so compatible, we have very few differences,” we’ll give the couple homework: Find out what you’ve been lying about to each other. If the relationship has any hope, that assignment will generally help.

Question #3: What If My Closest Friends Are My Family?

Boundary-developing individuals sometimes say, “But my mother (or father, or sister, or brother) is my best friend.” They often feel fortunate that, in these times of family stress, their best friends are the family in which they were raised. They don’t think they need an intimate circle of friends besides their own parents and siblings.

They misunderstand the biblical function of the family. God intended the family to be an incubator in which we grow the maturity, tools, and abilities we need. Once the incubator has done its job, then, it’s supposed to encourage the young adult to leave the nest and connect to the outside world (Gen. 2:24), to establish a spiritual and emotional family system on one’s own. The adult is free to do whatever God has designed for him or her.

Over time, we are to accomplish God’s purposes of spreading his love to the world, to make disciples of all the nations (Matt. 28:19–20). Staying emotionally locked in to the family of origin frustrates this purpose. It’s hard to see how we’ll change the world when we have to live on the same street.

No one can become a truly biblical adult without setting some limits, leaving home, and cleaving somewhere else. Otherwise, we never know if we have forged our own values, beliefs, and convictions—our very identity—or if we are mimicking the ideas of our family.

Can family be friends? Absolutely. But if you have never questioned, set boundaries, or experienced conflict with your family members, you may not have an adult-to-adult connection with your family. If you have no other “best friends” than your family, you need to take a close look at those relationships. You may be afraid of separating and individuating, of becoming an autonomous adult.

Question #4: How Can I Set Limits with Needy Friends?

I was talking to a woman one day in session who felt extremely isolated and out of control. Setting limits with her friends seemed impossible for her; they were in perpetual crisis.

I asked her to describe the quality of her relationships. “Oh, I’ve got lots of friends. I volunteer at the church two nights a week. I teach a Bible study once a week. I’m on a couple of church committees, and I sing in the choir.”

“I’m getting exhausted just listening to you describe your week,” I said. “But what about the quality of these relationships?”

“They’re great. People are being helped. They’re growing in their faith, and troubled marriages are getting healed.”

“You know,” I said, “I’m asking you about friendships, and you’re answering about ministries. They’re not the same thing.”

She had never considered the difference. Her concept of friendship was to find people with needs and throw herself into a relationship with them. She didn’t know how to ask for things for herself.

And that was the source of her boundary conflicts. Without these “ministry relationships,” this woman would have had nothing. So she couldn’t say no. Saying no would have plummeted her into isolation, which would have been intolerable.

But it had happened anyway: she had come for help because of burnout.

When the Bible tells us to comfort with the comfort with which we are comforted (2 Cor. 1:4), it’s telling us something. We need to be comforted before we can comfort. That may mean setting boundaries on our ministries so that we can be nurtured by our friends. We must distinguish between the two.

A prayerful look at your friendships will determine whether you need to begin building boundaries with some of your friends. By setting boundaries, you may save some important ones from declining. And when romantic, dating relationships lead to marriage, you will still need to remember how to build and maintain boundaries even in this most intimate of human relationships.

9

Boundaries and Your Spouse

If there were ever a relationship where boundaries could get confused, it is marriage, where by design husband and wife “become one flesh” (Eph. 5:31). Boundaries foster separateness. Marriage has as one of its goals the giving up of separateness and becoming, instead of two, one. What a potential state of confusion, especially for someone who does not have clear boundaries to begin with!

More marriages fail because of poor boundaries than for any other reason. This chapter will apply the laws of boundaries, as well as its myths, to the marital relationship.

Is This Yours, Mine, or Ours?

A marriage mirrors the relationship that Christ has with his bride, the church. Christ has some things that only he can do, the church has some things that only it can do, and they have some things they do together. Only Christ could die. Only the church can represent him on earth in his absence and obey his commands. And together, they work on many things, such as saving the lost. Similarly, in marriage, some duties one spouse does, some the other does, and some they do together. When the two become one on their wedding day, spouses do not lose their individual identities. Each participates in the relationship, and each has his or her own life.

No one would have a problem deciding who wears the dress and who wears the tie. It’s a little trickier to decide who balances the checkbook and who mows the lawn. But these duties can be

worked out according to the spouses' individual abilities and interests. Where boundaries can get confusing is in the elements of personhood—the elements of the soul that each person possesses and can choose to share with someone else.

The problem arises when one trespasses on the other's personhood, when one crosses a line and tries to control the feelings, attitudes, behaviors, choices, and values of the other. These things only each individual can control. To try to control these things is to violate someone's boundaries, and ultimately, it will fail. Our relationship with Christ—and any other successful relationship—is based on freedom.

Let's look at some common examples:

Feelings

One of the most important elements that promotes intimacy between two people is the ability of each to take responsibility for his or her own feelings.

I was counseling a couple who were having marital problems because of the husband's drinking. I asked the wife to tell her husband how she felt when he drank.

"I feel like he doesn't think about what he's doing. I feel like he . . ."

"No, you are evaluating his drinking. How do you feel about it?"

"I feel like he doesn't care. . . ."

"No," I said, "That is what you *think* about him. How do you *feel* when he drinks?"

She started to cry. "I feel very alone and afraid." She had finally said what she felt.

At that point her husband reached out and put his hand on her arm. "I never knew you were afraid," he said. "I would never want to make you afraid."

This conversation was a real turning point in their relationship. For years the wife had been nagging her husband about the way he was and about the way he should be. He responded by blaming her and justifying his actions. In spite of hours and hours of talking, they had continued to talk past each other.

Neither was taking responsibility for his or her own feelings and communicating them.

We do not communicate our feelings by saying, "I feel that you . . ." We communicate our feelings by saying, "I feel sad, or hurt, or lonely, or scared, or . . ." Such vulnerability is the beginning of intimacy and caring.

Feelings are also a warning signal telling us that we need to do something. For example, if you are angry at someone for something she did, it is your responsibility to go to her and tell her you are angry and why. If you think that your anger is her problem and that she needs to fix it, you may wait years. And your anger may turn to bitterness. If you are angry, even if someone else has sinned against you, it is your responsibility to do something about it.

This was a lesson Susan needed to learn. When her husband, Jim, did not come home from work early enough for them to have time together, Susan became angry. Instead of confronting her husband, she would become very quiet for the rest of the evening. Jim became annoyed with having to pull out of her what was wrong. Eventually, hating her pouting, he left her alone.

Not dealing with hurt or anger can kill a relationship. Susan needed to talk with Jim about how she was feeling, instead of waiting for him to draw her out. Even though she felt he had been the one who had hurt her, she needed to take responsibility for her own hurt and anger.

Jim and Susan did not solve their problem by her simply expressing her anger to him. She needed to go one more step. She needed to clarify her desires in the conflict.

Desires

Desires are another element of personhood that each spouse needs to take responsibility for. Susan was angry because she wanted Jim to be home. She blamed him for being late. When they came in for counseling, our conversation went like this:

"Susan, tell me why you get angry at Jim," I said.

"Because he's late," she replied.

"That can't be the reason," I said. "People don't make other people angry. Your anger has to come from something inside of you."

"What do you mean? He's the one who comes home late."

"Well, what if you had plans to go out with your friends that night? Would you still be angry at him for being late?"

"Well, no. That's different."

"What's different? You said you were angry because he was late, and he would still be late, yet you wouldn't be angry."

"Well, in that situation, he wouldn't be doing anything to hurt me."

"Not exactly," I pointed out. "The difference is that you wouldn't be wanting something that he didn't want to give. Your disappointed desire is what hurts you, not his being late. The problem lies in who is responsible for the want. It is your want, not his. You are responsible for getting it fulfilled. That is a rule of life. We do not get everything we want, and we all must grieve over our disappointments instead of punish others for them."

"What about common respect? Staying at the office is selfish," she said.

"Well, he wants to work some nights, and you want him home. Both of you want something for yourselves. We could say that you are as selfish as he is. The truth is that neither one of you is selfish. You just have conflicting wants. This is what marriage is about—getting conflicting wants worked out."

There was no "bad guy" in this situation. Both Jim and Susan had needs. Jim needed to work late, and Susan needed him home. Problems arise when we make someone else responsible for our needs and wants, and when we blame them for our disappointments.

Limits on What I Can Give

We are finite creatures and must give as we "decide in [our] heart to give" (2 Cor. 9:7), being aware of when we are giving past the love point to the resentment point. Problems arise when we blame someone else for our own lack of limits. Often

spouses will do more than they really want to and then resent the other for not stopping them from overgiving.

Bob had this problem. His wife, Nancy, wanted the perfect home, including handmade patios, landscaping, and remodeling. She was always coming up with something for him to do around the house. He was beginning to resent her projects.

When he came to see me, I asked him why he was angry.

"Well, because she wants so much. I can't find any time for myself," he said.

"What do you mean 'can't'? Don't you mean 'won't'?"

"No, I *can't*. She would be angry if I didn't do the work."

"Well, that's her problem; it's her anger."

"Yes, but I have to listen to it."

"No, you *don't*," I said. "You are choosing to do all of these things for her, and you are choosing to take the tongue lashings that happen if you *don't*. Any time you spend doing things for her is a gift from you; if you do not want to give it, you *don't* have to. Stop blaming her for all of this."

Bob didn't like that. He wanted her to stop wanting instead of his learning to say no.

"How much time do you want to give her each week for home improvement?" I asked.

He thought for a minute. "About four hours. I could work on things for her and still have a little time left for a hobby."

"Then tell her that you have been thinking about your time and that with all the other things you are doing for the family, you would like to give her four hours a week to work around the house. She is free to use that time any way she chooses."

"But what if she says that four hours is not enough?"

"Explain to her that you understand that this may not be enough time to complete all the jobs she wants done, but those are her wants, not yours. Therefore, she is responsible for her own wants, and she is free to be creative in how she gets them done. She could earn some extra money and hire someone. She could learn to do them herself. She could ask a friend to help. Or, she could cut down on her wants. It is important that she learns

that you are not going to take responsibility for her wants. You're going to give as you choose, and she is responsible for the rest."

Bob saw the logic in my suggestion and decided to talk with Nancy. It was not pretty at first. No one had ever said no to Nancy before, and she did not take well to it. But, over time, Bob took responsibility for his limits instead of wishing that Nancy would not want so much, and his limits took effect. She learned something that she had never learned before: the world does not exist for her. Other people are not extensions of her wants and desires. Other people have wants and needs of their own, and we must negotiate a fair and loving relationship and respect each other's limits.

The key here is that the other person is not responsible for our limits; we are. Only we know what we can and want to give, and only we can be responsible for drawing that line. If we do not draw it, we can quickly become resentful.

Applying the Laws of Boundaries to Marriage

In Chapter 5 we talked about the ten laws of boundaries. Let's apply a few of those laws to troubled marital situations.

The Law of Sowing and Reaping

Many times one spouse may be out of control and may not suffer the consequences of this behavior. The husband yells at his wife, and she tries to be more loving. In effect, the evil (yelling) produces good things (more loving) for him. Or, a wife overspends, and her husband pays the consequences. He gets a second job to cover the mound of bills.

Natural consequences are needed to resolve these problems. A wife needs to tell her overly critical husband that if he continues to berate her, she will go into another room until he can discuss the problem rationally. Or, she could say something like, "I will not talk about this issue with you anymore alone. I will only talk in the presence of a counselor." Or, "If you start yelling at me again, I will go to Jane's house to spend the night." The husband with the spendthrift wife needs to cancel the credit

cards or tell her *she* needs to get a second job to pay the bills. These spouses all need to let the out-of-control spouses suffer the consequences of their actions.

A friend of mine decided to let his wife suffer the consequences of her chronic lateness. He had nagged and nagged his wife about her tardiness, to no avail. Finally, he realized he could not change her; he could only change his response to her. Tired of suffering the consequences of her behavior, he decided to give them back to her.

One night they had plans to go to a banquet, and he did not want to be late. In advance, he told her that he wanted to be on time and that if she were not ready by 6:00 P.M., he would leave without her. She was late, and he left. When he came home that night, she screamed, "How could you leave without me!" He let her know that her lateness was what caused her to miss the banquet and that he was sad to have to go alone, but he did not want to miss the dinner. After a few more incidents like this, she knew that her lateness would affect her and not him, and she changed.

These moves are not manipulative, as the other spouse will accuse. They are examples of someone limiting how they will allow themselves to be treated and exhibiting self-control. The natural consequences are falling on the shoulders of the responsible party.

The Law of Responsibility

We talked earlier about taking responsibility *for* ourselves and having responsibility *to* others. The above examples show that. People who set limits exhibit self-control and show responsibility for themselves. They act responsible to their partner by confronting him or her. Setting limits is an act of love in the marriage; by binding and limiting the evil, they protect the good.

Taking responsibility for someone's anger, pouting, and disappointments by giving in to that person's demands or controlling behavior destroys love in a marriage. Instead of taking responsibility for people we love, or rescuing them, we need to show responsibility to them by confronting evil when we see it.

This is truly loving our partner and the marriage. The most responsible behavior possible is usually the most difficult.

The Law of Power

We have looked at our basic inability to change another person. A nagging spouse, in effect, keeps the problem going. Accepting someone as she is, respecting her choice to be that way, and then giving her appropriate consequences is the better path. When we do this, we execute the power we do have, and we stop trying to wield the power no one has. Contrast these ways of reacting:

BEFORE BOUNDARIES

1. “Stop yelling at me. You must be nicer.”
2. “You’ve just got to stop drinking. It’s ruining our family. Please listen. You’re wrecking our lives.”
3. “You are a pervert to look at pornography. That’s so degrading. What kind of a sick person are you anyway?”

AFTER BOUNDARIES

1. “You can continue to yell if you choose to. But I will choose not to be in your presence when you act that way.”
2. “You may choose to not deal with your drinking if you want. But I will not continue to expose myself and the children to this chaos. The next time you are drunk, we will go to the Wilsons’ for the night, and we will tell them why we are there. Your drinking is your choice. What I will put up with is mine.”
3. “I will not choose to share you sexually with naked women in magazines. It’s up to you. I will only sleep with someone who is interested in me. Make up your mind and choose.”

These are all examples of taking power over what you do have power over—yourself—and giving up trying to control and have power over someone else.

The Law of Evaluation

When you confront your husband or wife and begin to set boundaries, your partner may be hurt. In evaluating the pain that your boundary setting causes your spouse, remember that love and limits go together. When you set boundaries, be lovingly responsible to the person in pain.

Spouses who are wise and loving will accept boundaries and act responsibly toward them. Spouses who are controlling and self-centered will react angrily.

Remember that a boundary always deals with yourself, not the other person. You are not demanding that your spouse do something—even respect your boundaries. You are setting boundaries to say what you will do or will not do. Only these kinds of boundaries are enforceable, for you *do* have control over yourself. Do not confuse boundaries with a new way to control a spouse. It is the opposite. It is giving up control and beginning to love. You are giving up trying to control your spouse and allowing him to take responsibility for his own behavior.

The Law of Exposure

In a marriage, as in no other relationship, the need for revealing your boundaries is important. Passive boundaries, such as withdrawal, triangulation, pouting, affairs, and passive-aggressive behavior, are extremely destructive to a relationship. Passive ways of showing people that they do not have control over you never lead to intimacy. They never educate the other on who you really are; they only estrange.

Boundaries need to be communicated first verbally and then with actions. They need to be clear and unapologetic. Remember the types of boundaries we listed earlier: skin, words, truth, physical space, time, emotional distance, other people, consequences. All of these boundaries need to be respected and revealed at different times in marriage.

Skin. Each spouse needs to respect the other's physical body boundaries. Physical boundary violations can range from hurtful displays of affection to physical abuse. The Bible says that the husband and wife have "authority" over each other's body (1 Cor. 7:4–6 NASB); this is mutual authority, given freely. One should always remember Jesus' principle: "Treat others as you would want to be treated."

Words. Your words need to be clear and spoken in love. Confront your spouse directly. Say no. Don't use passive resistance. Don't pout or withdraw. Say things like, "I do not feel comfortable with that. I do not want to. I won't."

Truth. Paul says that "each of you must put off falsehood and speak truthfully" (Eph. 4:25). Honest communication is always best. This includes telling the other person when he is not aware that he is violating one of God's standards. You also need to own the truth about your feelings and hurts and communicate those feelings directly to your spouse with love.

Physical Space. When you need time away, tell your spouse. Sometimes you need space for nourishment; other times you need space for limit setting. In either instance, your spouse should not have to guess why you do not want him around for a while. Communicate clearly so your spouse does not feel as though he is being punished, but knows he is experiencing the consequences of his out-of-control behavior (Matt. 18:17; 1 Cor. 5:9–13).

Emotional Distance. If you are in a troubled marriage, where your partner has had an affair, for example, you may need emotional space. Waiting to trust again is wise. You need to see if your spouse is truly repentant, and your spouse needs to see that her behavior has a cost. Your spouse may interpret this as punishment, but the Bible teaches that we are to judge a person by her actions, not by her words (James 2:14–26).

In addition, a hurt heart takes time to heal. You cannot rush back into a position of trust with too much unresolved hurt. That hurt needs to be exposed and communicated. If you are hurting, you need to own that hurt.

Time. Each spouse needs time apart from the relationship. Not just for limit setting, as we pointed out above, but for

self-nourishment. The Proverbs 31 wife has a life of her own; she is out doing many things. The same is true of her husband. They have their own time for doing what they like and for seeing their own friends.

Many couples have trouble with this aspect of marriage. They feel abandoned when their spouse wants time apart. In reality, spouses need time apart, which makes them realize the need to be back together. Spouses in healthy relationships cherish each other's space and are champions of each other's causes.

Other People. Some spouses need the support of others to set boundaries. If they haven't ever stood up for themselves, they need help from friends and the church in learning how. If you are too weak to set and enforce boundaries, get help from supporters outside your marriage. Do not, however, seek support from someone of the opposite sex that could lead to an affair. Get help from other people within relationships that have built-in boundaries, such as counselors or support groups.

Consequences. Communicate consequences clearly and enforce them firmly as you have said you would. Spelling out consequences in advance and enforcing them gives your spouse a choice about whether or not he or she wants the consequences to happen. Because people have control over their own behavior, they have control over the consequences of that behavior.

But That Doesn't Sound Submissive

Whenever we talk about a wife setting boundaries, someone asks about the biblical idea of submission. What follows is not a full treatise on submission, but some general issues you should keep in mind.

First, both husbands and wives are supposed to practice submission, not just wives. "Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ" (Eph. 5:21). Submission is always the free choice of one party to another. Wives choose to submit to their husbands, and husbands choose to submit to their wives.

Christ's relationship with the church is a picture of how a husband and wife should relate: "Now as the church submits to

Christ, so also wives should submit to their husbands in everything. Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her to make her holy, cleansing her by the washing with water through the word, and to present her to himself as a radiant church, without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish, but holy and blameless” (Eph. 5:24–27).

Whenever submission issues are raised, the first question that needs to be asked is, What is the nature of the marital relationship? Is the husband’s relationship with his wife similar to Christ’s relationship with the church? Does she have free choice, or is she a slave “under the law”? Many marital problems arise when a husband tries to keep his wife “under the law,” and she feels all the emotions the Bible promises the law will bring: wrath, guilt, insecurity, and alienation (Rom. 4:15; James 2:10; Gal. 5:4).

Freedom is one issue that needs to be examined; grace is another. Is the husband’s relationship with his wife full of grace and unconditional love? Is she in a position of “no condemnation” as the church is (Rom. 8:1), or does her husband fail to “wash her” of all guilt? Usually husbands who quote Ephesians 5 turn their wives into slaves and condemn them for not submitting. If she incurs wrath or condemnation for not submitting, she and her husband do not have a grace-filled Christian marriage; they have a marriage “under the law.”

Often, in these situations, the husband is trying to get his wife to do something that either is hurtful or takes away her will. Both of these actions are sins against himself. “Husbands ought to love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself. After all, no one ever hated his own body, but he feeds and cares for it, just as Christ does the church” (Eph. 5:28–29). Given this, the idea of slavelike submission is impossible to hold. Christ never takes away our will or asks us to do something hurtful. He never pushes us past our limits. He never uses us as objects. Christ “gave himself up” for us. He takes care of us as he would his own body.

We have never seen a “submission problem” that did not have a controlling husband at its root. When the wife begins to

set clear boundaries, the lack of Christlikeness in a controlling husband becomes evident because the wife is no longer enabling his immature behavior. She is confronting the truth and setting biblical limits on hurtful behavior. Often, when the wife sets boundaries, the husband begins to grow up.

A Question of Balance

“I can’t get him to spend any time with me. All he wants to do is go with his friends to sporting events. He never wants to see me,” Meredith complained.

“What do you say to that?” I asked her husband.

“That’s not true at all,” Paul replied. “It feels like all we have is togetherness. She calls me at work two or three times a day. She is waiting at the door when I get home and wants to talk. She has our evenings and weekends all planned out. It drives me crazy. So, I try to get away and go to a game or to play golf. I feel smothered.”

“How often do you try to get out?”

“Any time I can. Probably about two nights a week and one afternoon on the weekend.”

“What do you do at those times?” I asked Meredith.

“Well, I wait for him to come home. I miss him very much.”

“Don’t you have something you want to do for yourself?”

“No. My family is my life. I live for them. I hate it when they are gone and we can’t have time together.”

“Well, it’s not like you never have time together,” I said. “But it is true that you don’t have all the time together. And when that happens, Paul seems to be relieved and you are distressed. Can you explain that imbalance?”

“What do you mean, ‘imbalance’?” she asked.

“Every marriage is made up of two ingredients, togetherness and separateness. In good marriages, the partners carry equal loads of both of those. Let’s say there are 100 points of togetherness and 100 points of separateness. In a good relationship, one partner expresses 50 points of togetherness and 50 points of separateness, and the other does the same. They both do things on their own, and that creates some mutual longing for the

other, and the togetherness creates some need for separateness. But in your relationship, you have divided the 200 points differently. You are expressing all of the 100 together points, and he is expressing the 100 points of separateness.

“If you want him to move toward you,” I continued, “you need to move away from him and create some space for longing. I don’t think Paul ever gets a chance to miss you. You’re always pursuing him, and he is turning away to create space. If you would create some space, he would have some space to long for you in, and then he would pursue you.”

“That’s exactly right,” Paul broke in. “Honey, it’s like when you were getting your graduate degree and were gone so much. Remember? I used to long to see you. I don’t get a chance to miss you now. You’re always around.”

Meredith was reluctant to concede my point, but eager to explore with Paul ways to bring balance to their marital relationship.

Balance. It’s something that God has wired into every system. Every system tries to find balance in any way it can. And many dimensions need to be balanced in a marriage: power, strength, togetherness, sex, and so on. Problems come when, instead of trading places in these areas, one spouse is always powerful and the other powerless; one spouse is always strong and the other weak; one spouse always wants togetherness and the other wants separateness; one spouse always wants sex and the other doesn’t. In each case, the couple has struck a balance, but it is not a *mutual* balance.

Boundaries help create mutual balance, instead of split balance. They help couples keep each other accountable. If someone does not have boundaries and begins to do another’s work for him, such as creating all the togetherness in the relationship, that person is on the road to codependency or worse. The other partner will live out the opposite side of the split. Boundaries keep partners accountable through consequences and force the balance to become mutual.

The Preacher in Ecclesiastes says, “There is a time for everything, and a season for every activity under heaven” (3:1). There are balanced polarities in life and relationship. When you find

yourself in an unequal relationship, you may lack boundaries. Setting boundaries may correct the imbalance. For example, when Paul sets boundaries on Meredith's demands, he forces her to become more independent.

Resolution

It is often easy to see problems, but difficult to make the hard choices and risks that result in change. Let's look at the steps toward personal change in a marital relationship.

1. *Inventory the symptom.* First, you need to recognize the problem and agree to take action to solve it. You will not resolve the problem by wishing. You need to own the problem, whether it be sex, discipline of the children, lack of togetherness, or unfair spending of money.

2. *Identify the specific boundary problem.* One step beyond identifying the symptom is putting your finger on the specific boundary issue. For instance, the symptom may be that one person does not want sex; the boundary problem may be that this person does not say no often enough in other areas of the relationship so that this is the one place that she has some power. Or, she may feel as if she does not have enough control in the sexual arena. She may feel powerless; she may feel that her choices are not honored.

3. *Find the origins of the conflict.* This is probably not the first relationship in which this boundary issue has arisen. You probably learned to relate this way in a significant relationship in the family in which you grew up. Certain fears that were developed in that relationship are still operative. You need to name these original issues; you may need to stop confusing your parent with your spouse. No other relationship repeats parental conflicts more often than the marriage relationship.

4. *Take in the good.* This step involves establishing a support system. Remember, "Boundaries are not built in a vacuum." We need bonding and support before we build boundaries; the fear of abandonment keeps many people from setting boundaries in the first place.

For this reason, establish a support system that will encourage boundary setting in your marriage. This may be a co-dependency group, Al-Anon, a therapist, a marriage counselor, or a pastor. Do not set boundaries alone. You have not set boundaries because you are afraid; the only way out is through support. “And if one can overpower him who is alone, two can resist him. A cord of three strands is not quickly torn apart” (Ecc. 4:12). Boundaries are like muscles. They need to be built up in a safe support system and allowed to grow. If you try to shoulder too much weight too quickly, your muscles may tear or be pulled. Get help.

5. *Practice.* Practice new boundaries in safe relationships, relationships in which people love you unconditionally. Tell a good friend no when you can’t do lunch, or let her know when your opinion differs from hers, or give something to her without expecting anything in return. As you practice setting limits with safe people, you will begin to grow in your ability to set limits in your marriage.

6. *Say no to the bad.* Put limits on the bad in your marriage. Stand up to abuse; say no to unreasonable demands. Remember the parable of the talents. There was no growth without risk and a facing up to fear. Being successful is not as important as stepping out and trying.

7. *Forgive.* To not forgive is to lack boundaries. Unforgiving people allow other people to control them. Setting people who have hurt you free from an old debt is to stop wanting something from them; it sets you free as well. Forgiving can lead to proactive behavior in the present, instead of passive wishes from the past.

8. *Become proactive.* Instead of allowing someone else to be in control, figure out what you want to do, set your course, and stick to it. Decide what your limits are, what you will allow yourself to be a party to, what you will no longer tolerate, and what consequences you will set. Define yourself proactively, and you will be ready to maintain your boundaries when the time comes.

9. *Learn to love in freedom and responsibility.* Remember the goal of boundaries: love coming out of freedom. This is the true self-denial of the New Testament. When you are in control

of yourself, you can give and sacrifice for loved ones in a helpful way instead of giving in to destructive behavior and self-centeredness. This kind of freedom allows one to give in a way that leads to fruit. Remember, “no greater love has anyone than to lay down his life for his friends.” This is to live up to the law of Christ, to serve one another. But this must be done out of freedom, not boundaryless compliance.

Setting and receiving firm boundaries with your spouse can lead to a much greater intimacy. But you not only need to address boundaries with your spouse; you need to address boundaries with your children. And it’s never too late to start.

Boundaries and Your Children

Shannon couldn't stop crying. A young mother of two preschool children, she couldn't imagine herself being angry, out of control, and certainly not abusive. Yet a week ago, she had picked up three-year-old Robby and shaken him. Hard. She had screamed at him. Loudly. And it wasn't the first time. She had done it numerous times in the past year. The only difference was that this time, Shannon almost physically injured her son. She was frightened.

The experience had so shaken Shannon and her husband, Gerald, that they called and made an appointment with me to discuss what had happened. Her shame and guilt were intense. She avoided eye contact with me as she told her story.

The several hours before Shannon had lost control with Robby had been horrible. Gerald and she had had an argument over breakfast. He had left for work without saying good-bye. Then one-year-old Tanya spilled cereal all over the floor. And Robby chose that morning to do everything he'd been told not to for the past three years. He pulled the cat's tail. He figured out how to open the front door, and he ran outside into the yard and into the street. He smeared Shannon's lipstick all over the white dining room wall, and he pushed Tanya to the floor.

This last incident was the straw that broke Shannon's back. Seeing Tanya lying on the floor, crying, with Robby standing over her with a defiantly pleased look, was too much. Shannon saw red and impulsively ran to her son. You know the rest of the story.

After she had calmed down a little, I asked Shannon how she and Gerald normally disciplined Robby.

"Well, we don't want to alienate Robby, or quench his spirit," Gerald began. "Being negative is so...so...negative. So we try to reason with him. Sometimes we'll warn him that 'you won't get ice cream tonight.' Sometimes we try to praise good things he does. And sometimes we try to ignore the bad behavior. Then maybe he'll stop it."

"Doesn't he push the limits?"

Both parents nodded. "You wouldn't believe it," Shannon said. "It's like he doesn't hear us. He keeps on doing what he jolly well pleases. And generally, he'll keep it up until one of us explodes and yells at him. I guess we just have a problem child."

"Well, there's certainly a problem," I replied. "But perhaps Robby has been trained to not respond to anything but out-of-control rage. Let's talk about boundaries and kids...."

Of all the areas in which boundaries are crucially important, none is more relevant than that of raising children. How we approach boundaries and child rearing will have enormous impact on the characters of our kids. On how they develop values. On how well they do in school. On the friends they pick. On whom they marry. And on how well they do in a career.

The Importance of Family

God, at his deepest level, is a lover (1 John 4:8). He is relationally oriented and relationally driven. He desires connection with us from womb to tomb: "I have loved you with an everlasting love" (Jer. 31:3). God's loving nature isn't passive. It's active. Love multiplies itself. God the relational Lover is also God the aggressive Creator. He wants to fill up his universe with beings who care for him—and for each other.

The family is the social unit God invented to fill up the world with representatives of his loving character. It's a place for nurturing and developing babies until they're mature enough to go out of the family as adults and to multiply his image in other surroundings.

God first picked the nation Israel to be his children. After centuries of resistance by Israel, however, God chose the church: “Because of [Israel’s] transgression, salvation has come to the Gentiles to make Israel envious” (Rom. 11:11). The body of Christ has the same role as Israel had—to multiply God’s love and character.

The church is often described as a family. We are to do good “especially to those who belong to the family of believers” (Gal. 6:10). Believers “are members of God’s household” (Eph. 2:19). We are to “know how people ought to conduct themselves in God’s household” (1 Tim. 3:15).

These and many other powerful passages show us how God “thinks family.” He explains his heart as a parent would. He’s a daddy. He likes his job. This biblical portrayal of God helps show us how parenting is such a vital part of bringing God’s own character to this planet in our own little ones.

Boundaries and Responsibility

God, the good parent, wants to help us, his children, grow up. He wants to see us “become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ” (Eph. 4:13). Part of this maturing process is helping us know how to take responsibility for our lives.

It’s the same with our own flesh-and-blood kids. Second only to learning how to bond, to form strong attachments, the most important thing parents can give children is a sense of responsibility—knowing what they are responsible for and knowing what they aren’t responsible for, knowing how to say no and knowing how to accept no. Responsibility is a gift of enormous value.

We’ve all been around middle-aged people who have the boundaries of an eighteen-month-old. They have tantrums or sulk when others set limits on them, or they simply fold and comply with others just to keep the peace. Remember that these adult people started off as little people. They learned long, long ago to either fear or hate boundaries. The relearning process for adults is laborious.

Instilling vs. Repairing Boundaries

A wise mother of adult children once watched her younger friend struggle with her youngster. The child was refusing to behave, and the young mother was quickly losing her mind. Affirming the mother's decision to make the child sit on a chair by himself, the older woman said, "Do it now, Dear. Discipline the child now—and you just might survive adolescence."

Developing boundaries in young children is that proverbial ounce of prevention. If we teach responsibility, limit setting, and delay of gratification early on, the smoother our children's later years of life will be. The later we start, the harder we and they have to work.

If you're a parent of older children, don't lose heart. It just means boundary development will be met with more resistance. In their minds, they do not have a lot to gain by learning boundaries. You'll need to spend more time working on it, getting more support from friends—and praying harder! We'll review age-appropriate boundary tasks for the different stages of childhood later in this chapter.

Boundary Development in Children

The work of boundary development in children is the work of learning responsibility. As we teach them the merits and limits of responsibility, we teach them autonomy—we prepare them to take on the tasks of adulthood.

The Scriptures have much to say about the role of boundary setting in child rearing. Usually, we call it discipline. The Hebrew and Greek words that scholars translate as "discipline" mean "teaching." This teaching has both a positive and a negative slant.

The positive facets of discipline are *proactivity, prevention, and instruction*. Positive discipline is sitting someone down to educate and train him in a task: fathers are to raise children "in the training and instruction of the Lord" (Eph. 6:4). The negative facets of discipline are *correction, chastisement, and conse-*

quences. Negative discipline is letting children suffer the results of their actions to learn a lesson in responsibility: “Stern discipline awaits him who leaves the path” (Prov. 15:10).

Good child rearing involves both preventive training and practice, and correctional consequences. For example, you set a ten o’clock bedtime for your fourteen-year-old. “It’s there so that you’ll get enough sleep to be alert in school,” you tell her. You’ve just disciplined positively. Then your teen dawdles until 11:30 P.M. The next day you say, “Because you did not get to bed on time last night, you may not use the phone today.” You’ve just disciplined negatively.

Why are both the carrot and the whip necessary in good boundary development? Because God uses practice—trial and error—to help us grow up. We learn maturity by getting information, applying it poorly, making mistakes, learning from our mistakes, and doing better the next time.

Practice is necessary in all areas of life: in learning to ski, write an essay, or operate a computer. We need practice in developing a deep love relationship and in learning to study the Bible. And it’s just as true in our spiritual and emotional growth: “But solid food is for the mature, who by constant use have trained themselves to distinguish good from evil” (Heb. 5:14). Practice is important in learning boundaries and responsibility. Our mistakes are our teachers.

Discipline is an external boundary, designed to develop internal boundaries in our children. It provides a structure of safety until the child has enough structure in his character to not need it. Good discipline always moves the child toward more internal structure and more responsibility.

We need to distinguish between discipline and punishment. Punishment is payment for wrongdoing. Legally, it’s paying a penalty for breaking the law. Punishment doesn’t leave a lot of room for practice, however. It’s not a great teacher. The price is too high: “The wages of sin is death” (Rom. 6:23), and “whoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles at just one point is guilty of breaking all of it” (James 2:10). Punishment does not leave much room for mistakes.

Discipline, however, is different. Discipline is not payment for a wrong. It's the natural law of God: our actions reap consequences.

Discipline is different from punishment because God is finished punishing us. Punishment ended on the cross for all those who accept Christ as Savior: "He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree" (1 Peter 2:24). Christ's suffering paid for our wrongdoing.

In addition, discipline and punishment have a different relationship to time. Punishment looks back. It focuses on making payment for wrongs done in the past. Christ's suffering was payment, for example, for our sin. Discipline, however, looks forward. The lessons we learn from discipline help us to not make the same mistakes again: "God disciplines us for our good, that we may share in his holiness" (Heb. 12:10).

How does that help us? It frees us to make mistakes without fear of judgment, without fear of loss of relationship: "Therefore, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus" (Rom. 8:1). The freedom of the cross allows us to practice without having to pay a terrible price. The only danger is consequences—not isolation and judgment.

Take, for example, the mother who tells her ten-year-old, "You smart off again, and I won't love you anymore." The youngster is immediately in a no-win situation. She can either rebel and lose her most important relationship in life, or she can comply and become externally obedient, losing any chance of practicing confrontational skills. Now, compare that response with this, "I'll never stop loving you. That's a constant in my heart. However, if you smart off again you've lost your boom box for three days." The relationship is still intact. There's no condemnation. And the child gets an opportunity to choose responsibility or suffer consequences—with no risk of losing love and safety. This is the way to maturity, to learning to eat solid food: the safe practice of discipline.

The Boundary Needs of Children

What specific needs do boundaries meet in our kids? Limit-setting abilities have several important jobs that will pay enormous dividends throughout life.

Self-Protection

Have you ever seen anything more helpless than the human infant? Human babies are less able to take care of themselves than animal babies. God designed the newborn months as a means for the mother and father (or another caregiver) to connect deeply with their infant, knowing that without their minute-by-minute care, the baby would not survive. All this time and energy translates into an enduring attachment, in which the child learns to feel safe in the world.

God's program of maturation, however, doesn't stop there. Mom and Dad can't always be there to care and provide. The task of protection needs to ultimately pass on to the children. When they grow up, they need to protect themselves.

Boundaries are our way of protecting and safeguarding our souls. Boundaries are designed to keep the good in and the bad out. And skills such as saying no, telling the truth, and maintaining physical distance need to be developed in the family structure to allow the child to take on the responsibility of self-protection.

Consider the following two twelve-year-old boys:

Jimmy is talking with his parents at the dinner table. "Guess what—some kids wanted me to smoke pot with them. When I told them I didn't want to, they said I was a sissy. I told them they were dumb. I like some of them, but if they can't like me because I don't smoke pot, I guess they aren't really my friends."

Paul comes home after school with red eyes, slurred speech, and coordination difficulties. When asked by his concerned parents what is wrong, he denies everything until, finally, he blurts out, "Everybody's doing it. Why do you hate my friends?"

Both Jimmy and Paul come from Christian homes with lots of love and an adherence to biblical values. Why did they turn out so differently? Jimmy's family allowed disagreements between parent and child and gave him practice in the skill of boundary setting, even with them. Jimmy's mom would be holding and hugging her two-year-old when he would get fidgety. He'd say, "Down," meaning, "Let me get a little breathing space, Ma." Fighting her own impulses to hold on to her child, she would set him down on the floor and say, "Wanna play with your trucks?"

Jimmy's dad used the same philosophy. When wrestling with his son on the floor, he tried to pay attention to Jimmy's limits. When the going got too rough, or when Jimmy was tired, he could say, "Stop, Daddy," and Dad would get up. They'd go to another game.

Jimmy was receiving boundary training. He was learning that when he was scared, in discomfort, or wanted to change things, he could say no. This little word gave him a sense of power in his life. It took him out of a helpless or compliant position. And Jimmy could say it without receiving an angry and hurt response, or a manipulative countermove, such as, "But Jimmy, Mommy needs to hold you now, okay?"

Jimmy learned from infancy on that his boundaries were good and that he could use them to protect himself. He learned to resist things that weren't good for him.

A hallmark of Jimmy's family was permission to disagree. When, for example, Jimmy would fight his parents about his bedtime, they never withdrew or punished him for disagreeing. Instead, they would listen to his reasoning, and, if it seemed appropriate, they would change their minds. If not, they would maintain their boundaries.

Jimmy was also given a vote in some family matters. When family night out would come up, his parents listened to his opinion on whether they should go to a movie, play board games, or play basketball. Was this a family with no limits? On the contrary! It was a family who took boundary setting seriously—as a skill to develop in its children.

This was good practice for resisting in the evil day (Eph. 5:16), when some of Jimmy's friends turned on him and pressured him to take drugs. How was Jimmy able to refuse? Because by then, he'd had ten or eleven years of practice disagreeing with people who were important to him without losing their love. He didn't fear abandonment in standing up against his friends. He'd done it many times successfully with his family with no loss of love.

Paul, on the other hand, came from a different family setting. In his home, no had two different responses. His mom would be hurt and withdraw and pout. She would send guilt messages, such as "How can you say no to your mom who loves you?" His dad would get angry, threaten him, and say things like, "Don't talk back to me, Mister."

It didn't take long for Paul to learn that to have his way, he had to be externally compliant. He developed a strong yes on the outside, seeming to agree with his family's values and control. Whatever he thought about a subject—the dinner menu, TV restrictions, church choices, clothes, or curfews—he stuffed inside.

Once, when he had tried to resist his mother's hug, she had immediately withdrawn from him, pushing him away with the words, "Someday you'll feel sorry for hurting your mother's feelings like that." Day by day, Paul was being trained to not set limits.

As a result of his learned boundarylessness, Paul seemed to be a content, respectful son. The teens, however, are a crucible for kids. We find out what kind of character has actually been built into our children during this difficult passage.

Paul folded. He gave in to his friends' pressure. Is it any wonder that the first people he said no to were his parents—at twelve years old? Resentment and the years of not having boundaries were beginning to erode the compliant, easy-to-live-with false self he'd developed to survive.

Taking Responsibility for One's Needs

The group therapy session I was leading was quiet. I'd just asked Janice an unanswerable question. The question was,

“What do you need?” She looked confused, became thoughtful, and sat back in her chair.

Janice had just described a week of painful loss: her husband had made moves to separate, her kids were out of control, and her job was in jeopardy. The concern on the faces of the group members, who were all working on issues of attachment and safety, was evident. Yet no one knew quite how to help. So when I asked the question, I was asking it for all of us. But Janice couldn’t answer.

This was typical of Janice’s background. She’d spent most of her childhood taking responsibility for her parents’ feelings. The peacemaker of the house, she was always smoothing over the ruffled feathers of either parent, with soothing words like, “Mom, I’m sure Dad didn’t mean to blow up at you—he’s had a rough day.”

The result of such unbiblical responsibility toward her family was clear in Janice’s life: a sense of overresponsibility for others and a lack of attunement toward her own needs. Janice had radar out for the hurts of others; but the radar pointed her way was broken. It was no wonder she couldn’t answer my question. Janice didn’t understand her own God-given, legitimate needs. She had no vocabulary for this thinking.

The story does, however, have a happy ending. One of the group members said, “If I were in your shoes, I know what I’d need. I’d really need to know that you people in this room cared for me, that you didn’t see me as a colossal, shameful failure, and that you’d pray for me and let me call you on the phone this week for support.”

Janice’s eyes began watering. Something about her friend’s empathic statement touched her in a place she couldn’t herself touch. And she allowed the comfort that comes from others who have been comforted to take its place inside her (2 Cor. 1:4).

Janice’s story illustrates the second fruit of boundary development in our children: the ability to take ownership of, or responsibility for, our own needs. God intends for us to know when we’re hungry, lonely, in trouble, overwhelmed, or in need of a break—and then to take initiative to get what we need. The Scriptures present Jesus as understanding this point when he left

a crowd of people in a boat in a time of great ministry and need: “because so many people were coming and going that [he and his disciples] did not even have a chance to eat” (Mark 6:31).

Boundaries play a primary role in this process. Our limits create a spiritual and emotional space, a separateness, between ourselves and others. This allows our needs to be heard and understood. Without a solid sense of boundaries, it becomes difficult to filter out our needs from those of others. There is too much static in the relationship.

When children can be taught to experience their own needs, as opposed to those of others, they have been given a genuine advantage in life. They are able to better avoid the burnout that comes from not taking care of one’s self.

How can we help our children experience their own individual needs? The best thing a parent can do is to encourage verbal expression of those needs, even when they don’t “go with the family flow.” When children have permission to ask for something that goes against the grain—even though they might not receive it—they develop a sense of what they need.

Below are some ways you can help your children:

- Allow them to talk about their anger.
- Allow them to express grief, loss, or sadness without trying to cheer them up and talk them out of their feelings.
- Encourage them to ask questions and not assume your words are the equivalent of Scripture (this takes a pretty secure parent!).
- Ask them what they are feeling when they seem isolated or distressed; help them put words to their negative feelings. Do not try to keep things light for a false sense of cooperation and family closeness.

The first aspect of taking ownership over one’s needs, then, is to identify them. That’s where our spiritual radar comes in. Janice’s radar was broken and undeveloped, and she wasn’t able to identify her needs.

The second aspect of taking ownership is to initiate responsible caretaking for ourselves—as opposed to placing the burden on someone else. We must allow our children to experience the

painful consequences of their own irresponsibility and mistakes. This is the “training” of Hebrews 5:14 and the “discipline” of Hebrews 12. By the time they are ready to leave home, our children should have internalized a deep sense of personal responsibility for their lives. They should hold these convictions:

- My success or failure in life largely depends on me.
- Though I am to look to God and others for comfort and instruction, I alone am responsible for my choices.
- Though I am deeply affected by my significant relationships throughout my life, I can’t blame my problems on anyone but myself.
- Though I will always fail and need support, I can’t depend on some overresponsible individual to constantly bail me out of spiritual, emotional, financial, or relational crises.

This sense of “my life is up to me” is founded in God’s concern that we take responsibility for our lives. He wants us to use our talents in productive ways, as Jesus discussed in the parable of the talents (Matt. 25:14–30). And this sense of responsibility will follow us all through our adult lives—and even beyond the grave, at the judgment seat of Christ.

You can imagine how well not taking ownership over our lives will come across to the Lord then: “But I had a dysfunctional family.” “But I was lonely.” “But I didn’t have much energy.” The rationalizing “buts” will have as much impact as the excuses of the servant in the parable of the talents did. This isn’t to say that we aren’t deeply influenced for better or worse by our backgrounds and our various stressors. We certainly are. But we are ultimately responsible for what we do with our injured, immature souls.

Wise parents allow their children to undergo “safe suffering.” “Safe suffering” means allowing a child to experience age-appropriate consequences. Allowing a six-year-old to go outside after dark isn’t training her for adulthood. She is making decisions that she doesn’t have the maturity to make. She shouldn’t be placed in a position of making these choices in the first place.

Pat's parents allowed their daughter to experience safe suffering. At the start of senior high, they gave Pat an entire semester's allowance. Pat was responsible for paying for her school meals, clothing, social outings, and extracurricular activities. The amount was enough for this and a little more. On the surface it looked like a teenager's dream—all this money and no restrictions on how she spent it!

The first semester Pat bought some beautiful outfits. She went out to lots of functions with her friends. And she even treated them several times. That lasted for about one month out of the three and a half. The next two and a half months were lean ones. Pat stayed home a lot, saving her remaining money for school lunches, and she wore her new outfits over and over again.

The next semester was better—and by the beginning of her sophomore year, she had established a bank account and a workable budget. Pat was developing boundaries. Normally a budding shopping addict, she began saying no to clothes, CDs, food, and magazines that normally would have been a minimum requirement for her. She began learning to take responsibility for her own life. And she didn't end up like many college graduates who, after years of having someone else bail them out, can't cook, clean, or keep a checkbook balanced.

It's important to tie consequences as closely to the actions of the child as possible. This best replicates real life.

Homework projects are another area in which parents can either help the child take on responsibility—or create the illusion of the eternal, omnipresent parent who will always take up the slack. It's difficult when your child comes to you tearfully, saying, "I have a ten-page report due tomorrow—and I just started." Our impulse, as loving parents, is to bail them out by doing the research, or the organization, or the typing. Or all three.

Why do we do this? Because we love our kids. We long for the best for them just as God longs for the best for us. And yet, just as God allows us to experience our failures, we may need to let our kids mar a good report card with a bad grade. This is often the consequence of not planning ahead.

Having a Sense of Control and Choice

"I won't go to the dentist—and you can't make me go!" Pamela stamped her eleven-year-old feet and scowled at her father, Sal, who was waiting at the front door.

There had been a time when Sal would have reacted in a knee-jerk fashion to Pamela's power move. He would have said something like, "Well, we'll see about that!" and physically dragged the screaming child into the car.

However, lots of family counseling and reading up on these issues had prepared Sal for the inevitable. Calmly he said to her, "You're absolutely right, Honey. I can't make you go to the dentist. If you don't want to go, you don't have to. But remember our rule: if you choose not to go, you're also choosing not to go to the party tomorrow night. I'll certainly respect either decision. Shall I cancel your appointment?"

Pamela looked perplexed and thought a minute. Then, slowly, she replied, "I'll go. But I'm not going because I have to." Pamela was right. She was choosing to go to her appointment because she wanted to attend the party.

Children need to have a sense of control and choice in their lives. They need to see themselves not as the dependent, helpless pawns of parents, but as choosing, willing, initiative-taking agents of their own lives.

Children begin life in a helpless, dependent fashion. Godly parenting, however, seeks to help children learn to think, make decisions, and master their environment in all aspects of life. This runs the gamut of deciding what to wear in the morning to what courses to take in school. Learning to make age-appropriate decisions helps children have a sense of security and control in their lives.

Anxious and well-meaning parents attempt to prevent their children from making painful decisions. They shield them from fouling up and skinning their knees. Their motto is, "Here, let me decide that for you." The result is that kids become atrophied in a very important part of the image of God that should be developing in their character: their assertion, or change-making abilities. Children need a sense that their lives, their destinies are largely theirs to determine, within the province of

God's sovereignty. This helps them weigh choices, rather than avoid them. They learn to appreciate the consequences of choices made, rather than resenting the choices made for them.

Delaying Gratification of Goals

The word *now* was made for young children. It's where they live. Try telling a two-year-old she can have dessert tomorrow. She doesn't buy it. That means "never" to her. Newborns, in fact, don't have the capacity to understand "later." That's why a six-month-old panics when Mom leaves the room. He is convinced that she is irrevocably gone forever.

Yet, sometime in our development we learn the value of "later," of delaying one good for a greater good. We call this skill *delay of gratification*. It's the ability to say no to our impulses, wishes, and desires for some gain down the road.

The Scriptures place great value on this ability. God uses this skill to help us see the benefits of planning and preparing. Jesus is our prime example, "Who for the joy set before him endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God" (Heb. 12:2).

Generally, this skill isn't relevant until after the first year of life, as bonding needs take precedence during that time. However, teaching delay of gratification can begin quickly by the beginning of the second year. Dessert comes after carrots, not before.

Older children also need to learn this skill. The family can't buy certain clothes or recreational items until later in the year. Again, the boundaries developed during this process are invaluable later in life. They can prevent a child from becoming an adult who is a broken, chaotic, impulse-driven slave to Madison Avenue. Our children can become like ants, who are self-sufficient, instead of sluggards, who are always in crisis (Prov. 6:6–11).

Learning how to delay gratification helps children have a goal orientation. They learn to save time and money for things that are important to them, and they value what they have chosen to buy. One family I know had the son save up his money for his first car. He began with a plan, with Dad's help, when he was thirteen. When all his weekend and summer jobs finally paid off

in a car when he was sixteen, he treated that car like it was fine china—you could eat lunch off the hood. He had counted the cost, and valued the result (Luke 14:28).

Respecting the Limits of Others

From an early age, children need to be able to accept the limits of parents, siblings, and friends. They need to know that others don't always want to play with them, that others may not want to watch the same TV shows they want, and that others may want to eat dinner at a different restaurant than they do. They need to know that the world doesn't revolve around them.

This is important for a couple of reasons. First, the ability to learn to accept limits teaches us to take responsibility for ourselves. Knowing that others are not always available for us, at our beck and call, helps us to become inwardly directed instead of externally driven. It helps us carry our own knapsack.

Have you ever been around a child who can't hear no, who keeps whining, cajoling, throwing a tantrum, or pouting till he gets his way? The problem is, the longer we hate and resist the limits of others, the more dependent we will be on others. We expect others to take care of us, rather than simply taking care of ourselves.

At any rate, God has constructed life itself to teach us this law. It's the only way we can live on this planet together. Sooner or later, someone will say a no to us that we can't ignore. It's built into the fabric of life. Observe the progression of nos in the life of the person who resists others' limits:

1. the no of parents
2. the no of siblings
3. the no of schoolteachers
4. the no of school friends
5. the no of bosses and supervisors
6. the no of spouses
7. the no of health problems from overeating, alcoholism, or an irresponsible lifestyle
8. the no of police, the courts, and even prison

Some people learn to accept boundaries early in life, even as early as stage number one. But some people have to go all the way to number eight before they get the picture that we have to accept life's limits: "Stop listening to instruction, my son, and you will stray from the words of knowledge" (Prov. 19:27). Many out-of-control adolescents don't mature until their thirties, when they become tired of not having a steady job and a place to stay. They have to hit bottom financially, and sometimes they may even have to live on the streets for a while. In time, they begin sticking with a career, saving money, and starting to grow up. They gradually begin to accept life's limits.

No matter how tough we think we are, there's always someone tougher. If we don't teach our children to take a no, someone who loves them far less may take on the job. Someone tougher. Someone stronger. And most parents would much rather spare having their children go through this suffering. The earlier we teach limits, the better.

A second, even more important, reason why accepting the limits of others is important for kids is this: *Heeding others' boundaries helps children to love*. At its heart, the idea of respecting others' boundaries is the basis for empathy, or loving others as we'd like to be loved. Children need to be given the grace of having their no respected, and they need to learn to give that same grace to others. As they feel empathy for the needs of others, they mature and deepen in their love for God and others: "We love because he first loved us" (1 John 4:19).

Say, for example, that your six-year-old accidentally but carelessly bonks you on the head hard with a softball. To ignore it, or act like it didn't hurt, is to give the child the feeling that his actions have no impact. He can then avoid any sense of responsibility or awareness of others' needs or hurts. However, telling him, "I know you didn't do it on purpose, but that ball really hurt me—try to be a little more careful" helps him see, without condemnation, that he can hurt people he loves and that his actions do matter.

If this principle isn't taught, it's difficult for children to grow up as loving people. Frequently, they become self-centered or controlling. At that point, God's program of maturity is more difficult. A client of mine had been trained by his family to ignore others' limits. His subsequent manipulation had landed him in jail for stealing. Yet this process, painful though it was, taught him empathy.

"I really never knew that other people had needs and hurts," he once explained to me. "I was raised to concentrate on Number One. And when I began getting confronted on my lack of respect for others' needs, something happened inside. A space opened up inside my heart for others. I didn't ignore my own needs—but for the first time, I saw progress. I actually started feeling guilty about how my actions have hurt my wife and family."

Did he have a long way to go? Absolutely. But he was on the right road. Learning boundaries later in life was a start to becoming an authentically, biblically loving person.

Seasonal Boundaries: Age-Appropriate Limits Training

If this was the first chapter you turned to when you glanced over the table of contents, chances are you're a parent. Chances are also that you may be experiencing boundary difficulties with your children. Perhaps you're reading this simply in an effort to prevent problems. But more likely you're in some pain from which you need relief: Your newborn won't stop shrieking. Your toddler runs the household. Your elementary school student has behavioral problems at school. Your junior high kid smarts off. Your high schooler is drinking.

All of these issues indicate possible boundary problems. And this section provides an outline on the age-appropriate boundary tasks your children should be learning. As parents, we need to take into consideration our children's developmental needs and abilities to avoid asking them to do something they can't do, or to avoid asking too little of them.

Below are the basic tasks for the different stages of childhood. For more detailed information on birth to age three, refer to Chapter 4 on how boundaries are developed in childhood.

Birth to Five Months

At this stage, the newborn needs to establish an attachment with Mother, Dad, or the primary caregiver. A sense of belonging, of being safe and welcome are the tasks the child needs to accomplish. Setting limits is not as much an issue here as providing security for the infant.

The only real boundary here is the soothing presence of the mother. She protects the infant. Mom's job is to help her newborn contain intense, frightening, and conflicting feelings. Left by themselves, infants are terrorized by their aloneness and lack of internal structure.

For centuries mothers—including Mary, Jesus' mother—have swaddled their babies, or wrapped cloths tightly around them. While swaddling keeps the baby's body heat regulated, the tight wrappings also help the infant feel safe—a sort of external boundary. The baby knows where he or she begins and ends. When newborns are undressed, they often panic about the loss of structure around them.

Some well-meaning Christian teachers call for infant training theories that schedule the feeding and holding of infants. These techniques try to teach an infant not to cry or demand comfort because “the child is in control instead of the parent,” or because “that demand is evidence of the child’s selfish, sinful nature.” These theories can be horribly destructive when not understood biblically or developmentally.

The screaming four-month-old child is trying to find out whether the world is a reasonably safe place or not. She is in a state of deep terror and isolation. She hasn’t learned to feel comfort when no one is around. To put her on the parents’ schedule instead of her own for holding and feeding is to “condemn the innocent,” as Jesus said (Matt. 12:7).

These teachers say their programs are biblical because they work. “When I stopped picking her up from her crib at night, my four-month-old stopped crying,” they’ll say. That may be true. But another explanation for the cessation of crying is infant depression, a condition in which the child gives up hope and withdraws. “Hope deferred makes the heart sick” (Prov. 13:12).

Teaching delay of gratification shouldn't begin until after the first year of life, when a foundation of safety has been established between baby and mother. Just as grace always precedes truth (John 1:17), attachment must come before separation.

Five to Ten Months

As we learned in Chapter 4, children in the last half of the first year of life are in the “hatching” phase. They are learning that “Mother and I aren’t the same.” There’s a scary, fascinating world out there that babies literally crawl toward. Though they have tremendous dependency needs, infants are beginning to move out of their oneness with their mom.

To help their children develop good boundaries during this stage, parents need to encourage attempts at separateness, while still being the anchors the child clings to. Allow your child to be fascinated with people and objects other than you. Make your home a safe place for your baby to explore.

Helping your children hatch, however, doesn’t mean neglecting the deep attachment necessary for their internal foundation, their rootedness and groundedness. This is still an infant’s primary work. You need to carefully tend to your child’s needs for bonding and emotional safety, while at the same time allowing the child to look outward, beyond you.

Many mothers find this transition from their child’s love affair with them to the big wide world difficult. The loss of such a deep intimacy is great, especially after the time spent in pregnancy and childbirth. The responsible mother, however, will strive to get her own closeness needs met by other adults in her life. She will encourage the “hatching” of her baby, knowing she is preparing him or her to be equipped to “leave and cleave.”

At this point, most infants don’t yet have the ability to understand and respond appropriately to the word *no*. Keeping them out of danger by picking them up and removing them from unsafe places is the best route.

Ten to Eighteen Months

At this “practicing” stage, your baby begins not only talking, but also walking—and the possibilities stretch out before her. The world is this child’s oyster—and she spends a lot of time finding ways to open it up and play with it. Now she has the emotional and cognitive ability to understand and respond to the word *no*.

Boundaries become increasingly important during this stage, both having and hearing limits. Allowing the no muscle to begin developing is crucial at this age. No is your child’s way of finding out whether taking responsibility for her life has good results—or whether no causes someone to withdraw. As parents, learn to rejoice in your baby’s no.

At the same time, you have the delicate task of helping your child see that she is not the center of the universe. There are limits in life. There are consequences for scribbling on doors and screaming in church. Yet you need to do this without quenching the sense of excitement and interest in the world that she has been developing.

Eighteen to Thirty-six Months

The child is now learning the important task of taking responsibility for a separate yet connected soul. The practicing child gives way to the more sober child who is realizing that life has limits, but that being separate does not mean that we can’t be attached. In this phase, the following abilities are goals:

1. The ability to be emotionally attached to others, without giving up a sense of self and one’s freedom to be apart.
2. The ability to say appropriate nos to others without fear of loss of love.
3. The ability to take appropriate nos from others without withdrawing emotionally.

At eighteen to thirty-six months the child needs to learn to be autonomous. She wants to be free of parental rule, but this desire is conflicted by her deep dependence on her parents. The wise parent will help her gain a sense of individualism and accept her loss of omnipotence, but without losing attachment.

To teach a child boundaries at this stage, you need to respect her no whenever appropriate, yet maintain your own firm no. It's easy for you to try to win all the skirmishes. But there are simply too many. You will end up losing the war because you've lost the big picture—the attachment. Don't waste your energy trying to control a random whirlwind. Pick your battles carefully and choose the important ones to win.

Wise parents will rejoice in children's fun times, but will consistently and uniformly keep solid limits with the practicing child. At this age, children can learn the rules of the house as well as the consequences for breaking them. One workable process of discipline is listed below:

1. *First infraction.* Tell the child not to color on the bedsheet. Try to help the child meet her need in another way—using a coloring book or a pad of plain paper to crayon on instead of a bedsheets, for example.

2. *Second infraction.* Again, tell the child no, and state the consequence. She will need to take a time out for one minute or lose the crayons for the rest of the day.

3. *Third infraction.* Administer the consequences, explaining why, then give the child a few minutes to be angry and separate from parents.

4. *Comfort and reconnection.* Hold and comfort the child, helping her reattach with you. This helps her differentiate between consequences and a loss of love. Painful consequences should never include a loss of connection.

Three to Five Years

During this phase, children move into a period of sex-role development. Each child identifies with the same-sex parent. Lit-

tle boys want to be like Dad, and little girls like Mom. They also develop competitive feelings toward that same parent, wishing to marry the opposite-sex parent, defeating the same-sex parent in the process. They are preparing for adult sex roles later in life.

Boundary work by parents is important here. Gently but firmly, mothers need to allow their daughters to identify and to compete. They must also deal with the possessiveness of their sons, letting them know that “I know you’d like to marry Mom, but Mom’s married to Dad.” Fathers have to do the same job with their sons and daughters. This helps children learn to identify with the opposite-sex parent and take on appropriate characteristics.

Parents who fear the budding sexuality of their children will often become critical of these intense longings. Their own fear may cause them to attack or to shame their child, causing her to repress her sexuality. At the other extreme, the needy parent will sometimes emotionally, or even physically, seduce the child of the opposite sex. The mother who tells her son that “Daddy doesn’t understand me—you’re the only one who can” is ensuring years of confusion about sex roles for her son. Mature parents need to keep a boundary between allowing sex role typing to emerge—and keeping the lines between parent and child clear.

Six to Eleven Years

During what is called latency, or the years of industry, the child is preparing for the upcoming thrust into adolescence. These years are the last true years of childhood. They are important for learning task orientation through schoolwork and play, and for learning to connect with same-sex peers.

An extremely busy time for work and friends, this period carries its own boundary tasks for parents. Here, you need to help your kids establish the fundamentals of tasks: doing homework, house chores, and projects. They need to learn planning and the discipline of keeping at a job until it’s finished. They need to learn such boundary work as delay of gratification, goal orientation, and budgeting time.

Eleven to Eighteen Years

Adolescence, the final step before adulthood, involves important tasks such as sexual maturation, a sense of solidifying identity in any surrounding, career leanings, and love choices. It can be a frightening yet exciting time for both child and parents.

By this point, the “de-parenting” process should have begun. Things are beginning to shift between you and your youngster. Instead of controlling your child, you influence her. You increase her freedom, as well as responsibility. You renegotiate restrictions, limits, and consequences with more flexibility.

All of these changes are like the countdown of a NASA space shuttle. You are preparing for the launching of a young adult into the world. Wise parents keep the imminent catapulting of their teens into society in the back of their minds at all times. The question they must always struggle with is no longer, “How can I make them behave?” but rather, “How can I help them survive on their own?”

Teens need to be setting their own relational, scheduling, values, and money boundaries as much as possible. And they should suffer real-life consequences when they cross their boundaries. The seventeen-year-old who is still disciplined with TV and phone restrictions may have real problems at college in one year. Professors, deans, and residence hall assistants don’t impose these kinds of restrictions; they resort to tactics such as failing grades, suspension, and expulsion.

If you are the parent of a teen who hasn’t had boundary training, you may feel at a loss about what to do. You need to begin at whatever point your teens are. When their ability to say and hear no is deficient, clarifying house rules and consequences can often help in the last few years before the youth leaves home.

Symptoms such as the following, however, may indicate a more serious problem:

- Isolation of the teen from family members
- Depressed mood
- Rebellious behavior

- Continual conflict in family
- Wrong type of friends
- School problems
- Eating disorders
- Alcohol use
- Drug use
- Suicidal ideas or behavior

Many parents, observing these problems, react with either too many boundaries, or too few. The too-strict parent runs the risk of alienating the almost-adult from the home connection. The too-lenient parent wants to be the child's best friend at a time the teen needs someone to respect. At this point, parents should consider consulting a therapist who understands teen issues. The stakes are simply too high to ignore professional help.

Types of Discipline

Many parents are confused by how to teach children to respect boundaries. They read countless books and articles on spanking, time-outs, restrictions, and allowances. While this question is beyond the scope of this book, a few thoughts may help organize the searching parent.

1. *Consequences are intended to increase the child's sense of responsibility and control over his life.* Discipline that increases the child's sense of helplessness isn't helpful. Dragging a sixteen-year-old girl to class doesn't build the internal motivation she'll need in two years when she's in college. A system of rewards and consequences that help her choose school for her own benefit has much better possibilities for success.

2. *Consequences must be age-appropriate.* You need to think through the meaning of your discipline. Spanking, for example, humiliates and angers a teenager; however, administered correctly, it can help build structure for a four-year-old.

3. *Consequences must be related to the seriousness of the infraction.* Just as the penal system has different prison stays for different crimes, you must be able to distinguish between minor

and severe infractions. Otherwise, severe penalties become meaningless.

A client once told me, “I got whippings for little things and for big things. So I started getting more involved in big things. It just seemed more efficient.” Once you’ve been sentenced to death, you don’t have much to gain by being good!

4. The goal of boundaries is an internal sense of motivation, with self-induced consequences. Successful parenting means that our kids want to get out of bed and go to school, be responsible, be empathic, and be caring because that’s important to them, not because it’s important to us. It’s only when love and limits are a genuine part of the child’s character that true maturity can occur. Otherwise, we are raising compliant parrots who will, in time, self-destruct.

Parents have a sober responsibility: teaching their children to have an internal sense of boundaries and to respect the boundaries of others. It’s sober because the Bible says it’s sober: “Not many of you should presume to be teachers, my brothers, because you know that we who teach will be judged more strictly” (James 3:1).

There are certainly no guarantees that our training will be heeded. Children have the responsibility to listen and learn. The older they are, the more responsibility they have. Yet as we learn about our own boundary issues, take responsibility for them, and grow up ourselves, we increase our kids’ chances to learn boundaries in an adult world in which these abilities will be sorely needed—every day of their lives.

Boundaries and Work

In Sunday school we were studying Adam and Eve and the Fall. I learned that the Fall was the beginning of everything “bad.” That day I went home and said to my mother, “I don’t like Adam and Eve. If it weren’t for them, I wouldn’t have to clean up my room!”

Work at age eight wasn’t fun, and because it wasn’t fun, it was bad. Because it was bad, it was Adam’s fault. A simple theological theory for a youngster, but it was youthful heresy. Work existed before the Fall; it was always part of God’s plan for humanity. He planned for people to do two things. They would subdue and they would rule (Gen. 1:28). They would bring the earth under their domain, and they would manage it. That sounds a lot like work!

But because Eden was paradise, our difficulties with work came later, after the Fall. God said to Adam: “Cursed is the ground because of you; through painful toil you will eat of it all the days of your life. It will produce thorns and thistles for you, and you will eat the plants of the field. By the sweat of your brow you will eat your food until you return to the ground, since from it you were taken; for dust you are and to dust you will return” (Gen. 3:17–19).

Other aspects of the Fall also affected our work. The first is the tendency toward disownership. We talked in earlier chapters about the boundary problem of not taking responsibility for what is ours. This started in the garden when Adam and Eve tried to pass the blame on to another for their original act of sinning. Adam blamed Eve; Eve blamed the serpent (Gen. 3:11–13). They were disowning their responsibility and blaming

another. Their theme was “Get the attention off of me.” This tendency to blame another is a key work problem.

The Fall also divided love from work. Before the Fall, Adam was connected to the love of God and from that loved state, he worked. After the Fall, he was not motivated out of perfect love, but he had to work as a part of the fallen world’s curse and the law. The love-motivated “want to” became a law-motivated “should.”

Paul tells us the law’s “should” increases our wish to rebel (Rom. 5:20); it makes us angry at what we “should” do (Rom. 4:15); and it arouses our motivations to do the wrong thing (Rom. 7:5). All of this adds up to the human race being unable to take responsibility and work effectively by owning its behaviors, talents, and choices. No wonder we have work problems.

In this chapter, we want to look at how boundaries can help resolve many work-related problems, as well as how they can help you to be happier and more fulfilled at the work you do.

Work and Character Development

Christians often have a warped way of looking at work. Unless someone is working “in the ministry,” they see his work as secular. However, this view of work distorts the biblical picture. All of us—not only full-time ministers—have gifts and talents that we contribute to humanity. We all have a vocation, a “calling” into service. Wherever we work, whatever we do, we are to do “unto the Lord” (Col. 3:23).

Jesus used parables about work to teach us how to grow spiritually. These parables deal with money, with completing tasks, with faithful stewardship of a job, and with honest emotional dealings in work. They all teach character development in the context of relating to God and others. They teach a work ethic based on love under God.

Work is a spiritual activity. In our work, we are made in the image of God, who is himself a worker, a manager, a creator, a developer, a steward, and a healer. To be a Christian is to be a

co-laborer with God in the community of humanity. By giving to others we find true fulfillment.

The New Testament teaches that jobs offer more than temporal fulfillment and rewards on earth. Work is the place to develop our character in preparation for the work that we will do forever. With that in mind, let's look at how setting boundaries in the workplace can help us to grow spiritually.

Problems in the Workplace

A lack of boundaries creates problems in the workplace. In consulting for corporations, I have seen lack of boundaries as the major problem in many management squabbles. If people took responsibility for their own work and set clear limits, most of the problems for which I get consulted would not exist.

Let's see how applying boundaries can solve some common problems in the workplace.

Problem #1: Getting Saddled with Another Person's Responsibilities

Susie is an administrative assistant in a small company that plans training sessions for industry. She's responsible for booking the training sessions and managing the speakers' schedules. A co-worker, Jack, is responsible for the training facilities. He takes the materials to the site, sets up the equipment, and orders the food. Together, Susie and Jack make the events happen.

After a few months of really liking her work, Susie began to lose energy. Eventually, her friend and co-worker, Lynda, asked her what was wrong. Susie couldn't put her finger on the problem at first. Then she realized: The problem was Jack!

Jack had been asking Susie to "pick this up for me while you're out," or "please bring this box of materials to the workshop." Slowly, Jack was shifting his responsibilities onto Susie.

"You have to stop doing Jack's work," Lynda told Susie. "Just do your own work and don't worry about him."

"But what if things go wrong?" Susie asked.

Lynda shrugged. "Then they'll blame Jack. It's not your responsibility."

"Jack will be angry with me for not helping," Susie said.

"Let him," said Lynda. "His anger can't hurt you as much as his poor work habits can."

So Susie began to set limits on Jack. She told him, "I will not have time to bring the materials for you this week." And when Jack ran out of time to do things himself, Susie said, "I'm sorry that you have not done that before now, and I understand that you are in a bind. Maybe next time you will plan better. That's not my job."

Some trainers were angry that their equipment was not set up, and customers were angry that no food was provided for the break. But the boss tracked down the problem to the person who was responsible—Jack—and told him to shape up, or find another job. In the end, Susie began to like work again, and Jack began to get more responsible. All because Susie set boundaries and stuck to them.

If you are being saddled with another person's responsibilities and feel resentful, you need to take responsibility for your feelings, and realize that your unhappiness is not your co-worker's fault, but your own. In this as in any other boundary conflict, you first must take responsibility *for* yourself.

Then you must act responsibly *to* your co-worker. Go to your co-worker and explain your situation. When he asks you to do something that is not your responsibility, say no and refuse to do whatever it is that he wants you to do. If he gets angry at you for saying no, be firm about your boundaries and empathize with his anger. Don't get angry back. To fight anger with anger is to get hooked into his game. Keep your emotional distance and say, "I am sorry if this upsets you. But that job is not my responsibility. I hope you get it worked out."

If he continues to argue, tell him that you are finished discussing it; he can come and find you when he is ready to talk about something else. Do not fall into the trap of justifying why you can't do his work for him. You will be slipping into his thinking that you should do his work if you are able to, and he will try

to find a way that you can. You owe no one an explanation about why you will not do something that is not your responsibility.

Many overresponsible people who work next to underresponsible people bear the consequences for their co-workers. Always covering for them, or bailing them out, they are not enjoying their work or their relationships with these people. Their lack of boundaries is hurting them, as well as keeping the other person from growing. If you are one of these people, you need to learn to set boundaries.

Sometimes, however, a co-worker will genuinely need some extra help. It is perfectly legitimate to bail out a responsible co-worker, or to make special concessions to a colleague who uses those concessions responsibly to get well. This is love, and good companies operate lovingly.

In our work as psychologists at the same hospital, we often cover hospital duty for each other or take each other's "on call" time. But if one of us started taking advantage of the other, we would need to stop that. Covering for the other at that point would not be helpful, but would enable a bad pattern.

Favors and sacrifices are part of the Christian life. Enabling is not. Learn to tell the difference by seeing if your giving is helping the other to become better or worse. The Bible requires responsible action out of the one who is given to. If you do not see it after a season, set limits (Luke 13:9).

Problem #2: Working Too Much Overtime

When I first went into practice, I hired a woman for twenty hours a week to run my office. On her second day in the office, I gave her a pile of things to do. About ten minutes later, she knocked at my door, stack of papers in hand.

"What can I do for you, Laurie?" I asked.

"You have a problem," she told me.

"I do? What is it?" I asked, not having the vaguest idea what she was talking about.

"You hired me for twenty hours a week, and you have just given me about forty hours of work. Which twenty would you like done?"

She was right. I did have a problem. I had not managed my workload very well. I was either going to have to spend more on help, cut back on projects, or hire someone else. But she was right: it was *my* problem, not hers. I had to take responsibility for it and fix it. Laurie was telling me what that everpresent sign says: “Poor planning on your part does not constitute an emergency on my part.”

Many bosses aren’t so lucky. Their employees take responsibility for their lack of planning and never set limits on them. They are never forced to look at their lack of boundaries until it’s too late, until they have lost a good employee to exhaustion or burnout. Such bosses need clear limits, but many employees are afraid to set them, as Laurie did, because they need the job or they fear disapproval.

If you are in a situation in which you’re doing lots of extra work because you “need the job” and because you are afraid of being let go, you have a problem. If you are working more overtime than you want to, you are in bondage to your job. You are a slave, not an employee under contract. Clear and responsible contracts tell all parties involved what is expected of them, and they can be enforced. Jobs should have clear descriptions of duties and qualifications.

As hard as it sounds, you need to take responsibility for yourself and take steps to change your situation. Here are some suggested steps you may wish to take:

1. *Set boundaries on your work.* Decide how much overtime you are willing to do. Some overtime during seasonal crunches may be expected of you.

2. *Review your job description,* if one exists.

3. *Make a list of the tasks you need to complete in the next month.* Make a copy of the list and assign your own priority to each item. Indicate on this copy any tasks that are not part of your job description.

4. *Make an appointment to see your boss to discuss your job overload.* Together you should review the list of tasks you need to complete in the next month. Have your boss prioritize the tasks. If your boss wants all the tasks done, and you cannot complete

these tasks in the time you are willing to give, your boss may need to hire temporary help to complete those tasks. You may also wish to review your job description with your boss at this time if you think you are doing things that fall outside your domain.

If your boss still has unreasonable expectations of you, you may wish to take a co-worker or two along with you to a second meeting (according to the biblical model in Matthew 18), or you may wish to discuss your problem with the appropriate person in your personnel department. If even then he remains unreasonable about what he thinks you can accomplish, you may need to begin looking for other job opportunities within your company or outside.

You may need to go to night school and get some further training to open up other opportunities. You may need to chase down hundreds of employment ads and send out stacks of resumes. (Consult the book *How to Get a Job* by James Bramlett for information on job searches.¹) You may wish to start your own business. You may wish to start an emergency fund to survive between quitting your present job and starting a new one.

Whatever you do, remember that your job overload is your responsibility and your problem. If your job is driving you crazy, you need to do something about it. Own the problem. Stop being a victim of an abusive situation and start setting some limits.

Problem #3: Misplaced Priorities

We have talked about setting limits on someone else. You also need to set limits on yourself. You need to realize how much time and energy you have, and manage your work accordingly. Know what you can do and when you can do it, and say no to everything else. Learn to know your limits and enforce them, as Laurie did. Say to your team or your boss, “If I am going to do A today, I will not be able to do B until Wednesday. Is that okay or do we need to rethink which one I need to be working on?”

Effective workers do two things: they strive to do excellent work, and they spend their time on the most important things. Many people do excellent work but allow themselves to get sidetracked by unimportant things; they may do unimportant things

very well! They feel like they are doing a great job, but their boss is upset because essential goals are not being met. Then they feel unappreciated and resentful because they have put out so much effort. They were working hard, but they weren't placing boundaries on what they allowed to take up their time, and the really important things did not get their attention.

Say no to the unimportant, and say no to the inclination to do less than your best. If you are doing your best work on the most important things, you will reach your goals.

In addition to saying no to the unimportant, you need to make a plan to accomplish the important things, and erect some fences around your tasks. Realize your limits, and make sure you do not allow work to control your life. Having limits will force you to prioritize. If you make a commitment to spend only so many hours a week on work, you will spend those hours more wisely. If you think your time is limitless, you may say yes to everything. Say yes to the best, and sometimes you may need to say no to the good.

One man's ministry required a lot of travel, so he and his wife put their heads together and decided that he would spend no more than one hundred nights a year on the road. When he gets an offer he has to check his time budget and see if this is something he wants to spend some of his nights on. This plan forces him to be more selective in his travel, thereby saving time for the rest of his life.

A company president who was allowing work to keep him away from home too much made a commitment to spend only forty hours a week in the office. At first, he really struggled because he wasn't used to budgeting his time and commitments so closely. Slowly though, when he realized that he only had so much time, he began to spend it more wisely. He even got more accomplished because he was forced to work smarter.

Work will grow to fill the time you have set aside for it. If a meeting does not have an agenda with time limits, discussion could be endless. Allot time for certain things, and then keep your limits. You will work smarter and like your work more.

Take a lesson from Jethro, Moses' father-in-law, who, seeing Moses' lack of boundaries, asked him why he was working so hard (Exod. 18:14–27).

"Because the people need me," Moses said.

"What you are doing is not good," Jethro replied. "You and these people who come to you will only wear yourselves out. The work is too heavy for you; you cannot handle it alone" (vv. 17–18). Even though Moses was doing good work, Jethro saw that he was going to burn himself out. Moses had allowed good work to go too far. Limits on good things keep them good.

Problem #4: Difficult Co-workers

A personnel counselor will often send someone to our hospital program because of stress at work. When these situations are unraveled, the "stress at work" often turns out to be somebody at the office who is driving the stressed-out person crazy. This person in the office or workplace has a strong influence over the emotional life of the person in pain, and he or she does not know how to deal with it.

In this case you need to remember the Law of Power: *You only have the power to change yourself. You can't change another person.* You must see yourself as the problem, not the other person. To see another person as the problem to be fixed is to give that person power over you and your well-being. Because you cannot change another person, you are out of control. The real problem lies in how you are relating to the problem person. *You* are the one in pain, and only *you* have the power to fix it.

Many people have found immense relief in the thought that they have no control over another person and that they must focus on changing their reactions to that person. They must refuse to allow that person to affect them. This idea is life changing, the beginning of true self-control.

Problem #5: Critical Attitudes

Stress is often caused by working with or for someone who is supercritical. People will get hooked into either trying to win

over the critical person, which can almost never be done, or by allowing the person to provoke them to anger. Some people internalize the criticism and get down on themselves. All of these reactions indicate an inability to stand apart from the critical person and keep one's boundaries.

Allow these critical people to be who they are, but keep yourself separate from them and do not internalize their opinion of you. Make sure you have a more accurate appraisal of yourself, and then disagree internally.

You may also want to confront the overly critical person according to the biblical model (Matt. 18). At first tell her how you feel about her attitude and the way it affects you. If she is wise, she will listen to you. If not, and her attitude is disruptive to others as well, two or more of you might want to talk to her. If she will not agree to change, you may want to tell her that you do not wish to talk with her until she gets her attitude under control.

Or you can follow the company's grievance policy. The important thing to remember is that you can't control her, but you can choose to limit your exposure to her, either physically or emotionally distancing yourself from her. This is self-control.

Avoid trying to gain the approval of this sort of person. It will never work, and you will only feel controlled. And avoid getting in arguments and discussions. You will never win. Remember the proverb, "Whoever corrects a mocker invites insult; whoever rebukes a wicked man incurs abuse. Do not rebuke a mocker or he will hate you; rebuke a wise man and he will love you" (Prov. 9:7–8). If you allow them to draw you in, thinking that you will change them, you are asking them for trouble. Stay separate. Keep your boundaries. Don't get sucked into their game.

Problem #6: Conflicts with Authority

If you are having trouble getting along with your boss, you may be having "transference feelings." Transference is when you experience feelings in the present that really belong to some unfinished business in the past.

Transference happens frequently with bosses because they are authority figures. The boss-employee relationship can trigger authority conflicts you might have. You can begin to have strong reactions that are not appropriate to the current relationship.

Suppose your supervisor tells you that he wants something done differently. Immediately you feel “put down.” You think, *He never thinks I do anything right. I'll show him.* Your supervisor may have made the comment in passing, but the feelings it triggered were very strong indeed. The reality is that the interaction may be tapping into unresolved hurt from past authority relationships, such as parents or teachers.

When a transference relationship starts, you may begin to act out all the old patterns you did with parents. This never works. You become a child on the job.

To have boundaries is to take responsibility for your transference. If you find yourself having strong reactions to someone, take some time and look inside to see if the feelings are familiar. Do they remind you of someone from the past? Did Mom or Dad treat you like that? Do they have the same personality as this person?

You are responsible for working out these feelings. Until you face your own feelings, you can't even see who others really are. You are looking at them through your own distortions, through your own unfinished business. When you see others clearly without transference, you will know how to deal with them.

Another example would be strong feelings of competition with a co-worker. This may represent some competitive relationship from the past, such as sibling rivalry, that has not been worked through. Whenever you experience strong feelings, see them as part of your responsibility. This will lead you to any unfinished business and healing, as well as keep you from acting irrationally toward co-workers and bosses. Leave the past in the past, deal with it, and do not allow it to interfere with present relationships.

Problem #7: Expecting Too Much of Work

People increasingly come to the workplace wanting the company to be a “family.” In a society where the family, church, and

community are not the support structures they once were, people look to their colleagues for the emotional support a family once provided. This lack of boundaries between the personal and work life is fraught with all sorts of difficulties.

The workplace ideally should be supportive, safe, and nurturing. But this atmosphere should primarily support the employee in work-related ways—to help her learn, improve, and get a job done. The problem arises when someone wants the job to provide what her parents did not provide for her: primary nurturing, relationship, self-esteem, and approval. Work is not set up this way, nor is it what the typical job asks of someone. The inherent conflict in this set-up is this: The job expects adult functioning, and the person wants childhood needs met. These differing expectations will inevitably collide.

Health comes from owning unmet childhood needs and working them out. The problem is that the workplace is not the place to do that. There are expectations at work. They will ask from you without giving because they are going to pay you for your work. They are not obligated to provide all the emotional support you need.

You need to make sure you are meeting your needs for support and emotional repair outside of work. Plug into supportive and healing networks that will help you to grow out of your emotional hurts and unmet needs, and build you up so you can function well at the job, in the adult world that has adult expectations. Get your relationship needs met outside of work, and then you will be able to work the best without getting your needs mixed up with what the company needs from you. Keep your boundaries firm; protect those hurt places from the workplace, which is not only not set up to heal, but also may wound unintentionally.

Problem #8: Taking Work-Related Stress Home

Just as we should keep good boundaries on our personal issues and keep them out of the workplace, we need to keep some boundaries on work and keep it out of the home. This generally has two components.

The first is emotional. Conflicts at work need to be dealt with and worked through so they do not begin to affect the rest of your life. If denied, they can cause major depressions and other illnesses that begin to spill over into other areas of life.

Make sure you understand work issues and face them directly so that work does not emotionally control your life. Find out why a certain co-worker is able to get to you, or why your boss is able to control the rest of your life. Find out why your successes or failures on the job are able to bring you up or down. These important character issues need to be worked through. Otherwise, the job will own you.

The second component is finite things such as time, energy, and other resources. Make sure that the job, which is literally never done, does not continue to spill over into personal life and cost you relationships and other things that matter. Put limits on special projects that are going to take more time than usual, and make sure overtime does not become a pattern. One company we know has such a high value for family that they dock people for working overtime! They want them to put limits on their work and be home with the family. Find out your own limits and live by them. These are good boundaries.

Problem #9: Disliking Your Job

Boundaries are where our identity comes from. Boundaries define what is me and what is not me. Our work is part of our identity in that it taps into our particular giftedness and the exercise of those gifts in the community.

However, many people are unable to ever find a true work identity. They stumble from job to job, never really finding anything that is “them.” More often than not, this is a boundary problem. They have not been able to own their own gifts, talents, wants, desires, and dreams because they are unable to set boundaries on others’ definitions and expectations of them.

This happens with people who have not separated from the family they grew up in. A pastor was having great difficulty with his church and the board of elders. Finally, right in the middle

of a consistory meeting, he said, “I never wanted to be a pastor anyway. It was my mother’s wish, not mine.” He did not have good enough boundaries with his mother to define his own career path. As a result, he had fused with her wishes and was miserable. His heart had not been in it from the start.

This can happen also with friends and culture. Others’ expectations can be very strong influences. You must make sure that your boundaries are strong enough that you do not let others define you. Instead, work with God to find out who you really are and what kind of work you are made for. Romans 12:2 speaks of having boundaries against these kinds of pressures from others: “Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God’s will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will.” You should have a realistic expectation of yourself based on who you really are, your own true self with your own particular giftedness. You can only do this with boundaries that stand up and say, “This is me, and that is not me.” Stand up against others’ expectations of you.

Finding Your Life’s Work

Finding your life’s work involves taking risks. First you need to firmly establish your identity, separating yourself from those you are attached to and following your desires. You must take ownership of how you feel, how you think, and what you want. You must assess your talents and limitations. And then you must begin to step out as God leads you.

For God wants you to discover and use your gifts to his glory. He asks only that you include him in the process: “Delight yourself in the LORD and he will give you the desires of your heart. Commit your way to the LORD; trust in him and he will do this” (Ps. 37:4–5).

God also, however, calls you to be accountable for what you do: “Follow the ways of your heart and whatever your eyes see, but know that for all these things God will bring you to judgment” (Eccl. 11:9).

As you develop your talents, look at your work as a partnership between you and God. He has given you gifts, and he wants you to develop them. Commit your way to the Lord, and you will find your work identity. Ask him to help.

12

Boundaries and Your Self

Sarah heaved a long sigh. She'd been working on major boundary issues in her therapy for a while now. She was seeing progress in resolving responsibility conflicts with her parents, her husband, and her kids. Yet today she introduced a new issue.

"I haven't told you about this relationship before, though I guess I should have. I have tremendous boundary problems with this woman. She eats too much, and has an attacking tongue. She's undependable—lets me down all the time. And she's spent money of mine and hasn't paid me back in years."

"Why haven't you mentioned her before?" I asked.

"Because she's me," Sarah replied.

Sarah was echoing the conflict most of us have. We learn that boundaries are biblical. We begin setting limits on others. We begin moving from taking too much responsibility to taking just enough. But how do we begin to set limits on ourselves? As Pogo Possum, cartoonist Walt Kelly's popular swamp character, says, "We have met the enemy, and he is us."

In this chapter, instead of looking at the control and manipulation of others, we'll be looking at our responsibility to control our own bodies (1 Thess. 4:4). Instead of examining outer boundary conflicts with other people, we will be looking at our own *internal boundary conflicts*. This can get a little touchy. As the disgruntled country church member told his pastor as he left after the Sunday sermon, "You done stopped preachin', and you done started meddlin'!"

Instead of this defensive posture, we are much better off to look humbly at ourselves. To ask for feedback from others. To listen to people we trust. And to confess, “I was wrong.”

Our Out-of-Control Soul

Eating

Teresa’s secret shame was becoming more difficult to keep a secret. Her five-foot-four frame could hide a little extra weight, but over the past few months she’d gradually moved into the mid-hundred mark. She hated it. Her dating life, her stamina, and her attitude toward herself were all affected.

She was out of control. In her successful but stressful career as an attorney, cookies and candy were the only place she could go when everything was falling down around her. Twelve-hour days meant lots of isolation, and absolutely nothing filled the void like fatty foods. *No wonder they call it comfort food*, Teresa would think.

What makes overeating especially painful is that overweight is visible to others. The overweight person feels enormous self-hate and shame about her condition. And, like others who suffer from out-of-control behaviors, the overweight person feels overwhelming shame for her behavior, which drives her away from relationship and back to food.

Both chronic and bingeing overeaters suffer from an internal self-boundary problem. For overeaters, food serves as a false boundary. They might use food to avoid intimacy by gaining weight and becoming less attractive. Or they might binge as a way to get false closeness. For bingers, the “comfort” from food is less scary than the prospect of real relationships, where boundaries would be necessary.

Money

A now-famous bumper sticker reads, “I can’t be overdrawn—I still have checks left!” People have tremendous problems in many different areas dealing with money, including the following:

- impulse spending
- careless budgeting
- living beyond one's means
- credit problems
- chronically borrowing from friends
- ineffectual savings plans
- working more to pay all the bills
- enabling others

God intended for money to be a blessing to us and others: “Give, and it will be given to you” (Luke 6:38). In fact, the Bible says that the problem isn’t money, it’s the love of money that is “a root of all kinds of evil” (1 Tim. 6:10).

Most of us would certainly agree that we need to be in control of our finances. Saving money, keeping costs down, and shopping for discounts are all good things. It’s tempting to see money problems as simply a need for more income; however, the problem often isn’t the high cost of living—it’s the cost of high living.

The problem of our financial outgo exceeding our input is a self-boundary issue. When we have difficulty saying no to spending more than we should, we run the risk of becoming someone else’s servant: “The rich rule over the poor, and the borrower is servant to the lender” (Prov. 22:7).

Time

Many people feel that their time is out of control. They are “eleventh-hour people,” constantly on the edge of deadlines. Try as they might, they find the day—every day—getting away from them. There just aren’t enough hours to accomplish their tasks. The word *early* doesn’t seem to be part of their personal experience. Some of the time binds these strugglers deal with are these:

- business meetings
- luncheon appointments
- project deadlines
- church and school activities
- holiday mailings

These people breeze into meetings fifteen minutes late and breathlessly apologize, talking about traffic, overwhelming job responsibilities, or kid emergencies.

People whose time is out of control inconvenience others whether they mean to or not. The problem often stems from one or more of the following causes:

1. *Omnipotence*. These people have unrealistic, somewhat grandiose expectations of what they can accomplish in a given amount of time. “No problem—I’ll do it” is their motto.

2. *Overresponsibility for the feelings of others*. They think that leaving a party too early will cause the host to feel abandoned.

3. *Lack of realistic anxiety*. They live so much in the present that they neglect to plan ahead for traffic, parking the car, or dressing for an outing.

4. *Rationalization*. They minimize the distress and inconvenience that others must put up with because of their lateness. They think, “They’re my friends—they’ll understand.”

The person with undeveloped time self-boundaries ends up frustrating not only others, but himself. He ends the day without the sense that a “desire realized is sweet to the soul” (Prov. 13:19 NASB). Instead, he is left with unrealized desires, half-baked projects, and the realization that tomorrow will begin with him running behind schedule.

Task Completion

A first cousin to the time boundary problem, task completion deals with “finishing well.” Most of us have goals in the love and work areas of life. We may wish to be a veterinarian or a lawyer. We may wish to own our own business or own a home in the country. We may wish to start a Bible study program or an exercise regimen.

We all would like to say about our tasks, whether large or small, what Paul said: “I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. Now there is in store for me the crown of righteousness” (2 Tim. 4:7–8). More eloquent in their simplicity are Jesus’ words on the cross: “It is finished” (John 19:30).

Though they may be great starters, many Christians find themselves unable to be good finishers. For one reason or another, creative ideas don't pan out. A regular schedule of operations becomes bogged down. Success looms, then is suddenly snatched away.

The problem with many poor finishers lies in one of the following causes:

1. *Resistance to structure.* Poor finishers feel that submitting to the discipline of a plan is a putdown.

2. *Fear of success.* Poor finishers are overconcerned that success will cause others to envy and criticize them. Better to shoot themselves in the foot than to lose their buddies.

3. *Lack of follow-through.* Poor finishers have an aversion to the boring "nuts and bolts" of turning the crank on a project. They are much more excited about birthing the idea, then turning it over to other people to execute it.

4. *Distractibility.* Poor finishers are unable to focus on a project until it's done. They have often never developed competent concentration skills.

5. *Inability to delay gratification.* Poor finishers are unable to work through the pain of a project to experience the satisfaction of a job well done. They want to go directly to the pleasure. They are like children who want to eat dessert before they eat the well-balanced meal.

6. *Inability to say no to other pressures.* Poor finishers are unable to say no to other people and projects. They don't have time to finish any job well.

Those with task completion problems often feel like two-year-olds in their favorite toy area. They'll bang a hammer for a bit, vroom with a toy car, talk to a puppet, and then pick up a book. All in two minutes or less. It's easy to see the boundary problems inherent in those with task completion problems. Their internal no hasn't been developed enough to keep them focused on finishing things.

The Tongue

In a therapy group I was leading, a man held the floor for some time. He'd go off on tangents, change the subject, and

spend inordinate amounts of time on irrelevant details. He couldn't seem to get to the point. Other members were spacing out, dozing off, or becoming restless. Just as I was about to speak to the man's struggle with getting to the point, a woman in the group spoke up, saying bluntly, "Bill, talk net, will ya?"

"Talking net," putting a net or boundary on their words, can be a struggle for many. How we use language can deeply affect the quality of our relationships. The tongue can be a source of both blessing and curse (James 3:9–10). It can be a blessing when we use our tongue to empathize, identify, encourage, confront, and exhort others. It can be a curse when we use it to:

- Talk nonstop to hide from intimacy
- Dominate conversations to control others
- Gossip
- Make sarcastic remarks, expressing indirect hostility
- Threaten someone, expressing direct hostility
- Flatter, instead of authentically praise
- Seduce

Many people who have difficulty setting verbal boundaries on themselves aren't really aware of their problem. They are often genuinely surprised when a friend says to them, "Sometimes it seems like you interpret my commas as periods."

I knew a woman who was desperately afraid that others would get to know her. She asked questions and talked quickly so that no one could turn the conversation toward her. She had only one problem: she had to take breaths to continue talking, and the breath created a space for someone else to say something. The woman resolved her problem, however, in an ingenious way; she drew her breaths in the middle of her sentences, rather than at the end. That kept people sufficiently off-balance so that she was rarely interrupted. An effective strategy, with only one problem: she had to keep finding new people to talk to. After a few rounds with her, people disappeared.

The Scriptures tell us to treat our words carefully: "When words are many, sin is not absent, but he who holds his tongue is wise" (Prov. 10:19). "A man of knowledge uses words with

restraint” (Prov. 17:27). According to *The Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*, the Hebrew word for “restrain” refers to “the free action of holding back something or someone. The actor has the power over the object.”¹ It’s a boundary-laden term. We have the power to set boundaries on what comes out of our mouths.

When we can’t hold back, or set boundaries, on what comes from our lips, our words are in charge—not us. But we are still responsible for those words. Our words do not come from somewhere outside of us, as if we were a ventriloquist’s dummy. They are the product of our hearts. Our saying, “I didn’t mean that,” is probably better translated, “I didn’t want you to know I thought that about you.” We need to take responsibility for our words. “But I tell you that men will have to give account on the day of judgment for every careless word they have spoken” (Matt. 12:36).

Sexuality

As Christians are finding more safe places in the church to be honest about spiritual and emotional conflicts, sexual problems, especially for men, have emerged as a major issue. Such problems include compulsive masturbation, compulsive heterosexual or homosexual relationships, pornography, prostitution, exhibitionism, voyeurism, obscene phone calls, indecent liberties, child molestation, incest, and rape.

The individual caught up in an out-of-control sexual behavior generally feels deeply isolated and shameful. This keeps what is broken in the soul sequestered in the darkness—out of the light of relationship with God and others, where there can be neither help nor resolution. His sexuality takes on a life of its own, unreal and fantasy-driven. One man described it as a “not-me experience.” It was, for him, as if the real him was watching his sexual actions from across the room. Others may feel so dead and detached that sexuality is the only way they feel alive.

The problem, however, is that, as in most internal boundary conflicts, sexual boundarylessness becomes a tyrant, demanding

and insatiable. No matter how many orgasms are reached, the desire only deepens, and the inability to say no to one's lusts drives one deeper into despair and hopelessness.

Alcohol and Substance Abuse

Probably the clearest examples of internal boundary problems, alcohol and drug dependencies create devastation in the lives of addicts. Divorce, job loss, financial havoc, medical problems, and death are the fruits of the inability to set limits in these areas.

Most tragic are the increasingly younger children who are experimenting with drugs. Drug addiction is difficult for adults, who have some semblance of character and boundaries; for the child, whose boundaries are delicate and forming, the results are often lifelong and debilitating.

Why Doesn't My "No" Work?

"I'm throwing my no away," Burt told me. "It works fine for setting limits on other people, but every time I try to complete my tasks on time, it breaks down. Where can I trade it in?"

Where indeed? As you read about the out-of-control areas above, you may have felt defeated and frustrated with yourself. You probably could identify with one or more of the problem areas, and you probably are no stranger to the discouragement of not having mature boundaries in these internal areas. What's the problem? Why doesn't our no work on ourselves?

There are at least three reasons for this.

1. *We are our own worst enemies.* An external problem is easier to deal with than an internal one. When we switch our focus from setting limits on other people to setting limits on ourselves, we make a major shift in responsibility. Previously, we were only responsible to, not for, the other party. Now we have a great deal more involvement—we *are* the other party. We *are* responsible for ourselves.

When you are around a critical person, the kind who finds fault with everything, you can set limits on your exposure to this

person's constant criticism. You can change subjects, rooms, houses, or continents. You can leave. But what if this critical person is in your own head? What if you are the person with the problem? What if you have met the enemy, and he is you?

2. We withdraw from relationship when we most need it.

Jessica came to me for treatment of an eating disorder. She was thirty years old, and she had been bingeing since she was a teenager. I asked her about her previous attempts to solve this internal boundary problem.

"I try to work out and eat right," she said. "But I always fall back."

"Who do you talk to about this?" I asked.

"What do you mean?" Jessica looked confused.

"Who do you tell about your eating problem when you can't take it anymore?"

Tears welled up in Jessica's eyes. "You're asking too much. This is a private problem. Can't I do this without anyone knowing?"

Since the Fall, our instincts have been to withdraw from relationship when we're in trouble, when we most need other people. (Remember how Adam and Eve hid from God after they ate the forbidden fruit?) Due to our lack of security, our loss of grace, our shame, and our pride, we turn inward, rather than outward, when we're in trouble. And that's a problem. As the Preacher in Ecclesiastes puts it: "Woe to one who is alone and falls and does not have another to help" (4:10 NRSV).

Such withdrawal happens in our hospital program time after time. Hurting people will begin to make attachments with staff or other patients. For the first time, they begin coming forth with their need for connection. Like a rose lifting its petals after a hard rain, they begin to relate and connect in the light of the grace of God and his people.

Then an unexpected difficulty will occur. Sometimes their depression will temporarily worsen as their pain inside is exposed. Sometimes traumatic memories will surface. Sometimes severe conflict will occur with family members. Instead of bringing these painful and frightening feelings and problems to

their newfound relationships, these people will often retreat to their rooms to work out the problem. They'll spend several hours or a day doing everything possible to get back under control. They'll talk positively to themselves or read Scriptures compulsively to try to make themselves "feel better."

It is only when this attempt at a solution breaks down that they finally realize that these spiritual pains and burdens need to be brought out of themselves to the body of Christ. To the isolated person, nothing feels more frightening, unsafe, or unwise. Such a person needs to feel very secure before she will risk taking her spiritual and emotional problems to other people.

And yet the Bible doesn't recognize any other answer to our problems. Grace must come from the outside of ourselves to be useful and healing. Just as the branch withers without the vine (John 15:1–6), we can sustain neither life nor emotional repair without bonding to God and others. God and his people are the fuel, the energy source from which any problem is addressed. We need to be "joined and held together by every supporting ligament" (Eph. 4:16) of the body of Christ to heal and to grow up.

Whether our boundary issue is food, substances, sex, time, projects, the tongue, or money, we can't solve it in a vacuum. If we could, we would. But the more we isolate ourselves, the harder our struggle becomes. Just like an untreated cancer can become life-threatening in a short time, self-boundary problems will worsen with increased loneliness.

3. We try to use willpower to solve our boundary problems. "I've got it solved!" Pete was excited about his newfound victory over his overspending. A dedicated Christian and a leader in his church, he was intensely concerned about his out-of-control finances. "I made a vow to God and myself that I'll never spend beyond my budget again! It's so simple, but so true!"

Not wanting to burst Pete's bubble, I adopted a wait-and-see attitude. I didn't have to wait long. The next week he came in, feeling discouraged and hopeless.

"I just couldn't stop myself," he lamented. "I went out and bought sports equipment; then my wife and I purchased new fur-

niture. It was just what we needed. The price was right. The only problem was that we couldn't afford it. I guess I'm hopeless."

Pete wasn't hopeless, but his philosophy, popular among Christians, certainly was. He had been trying to use willpower to solve his boundary problems, probably the most common approach to out-of-control behavior.

The willpower approach is simple. Whatever the problem behavior is, just stop doing it. In other words, "just say no." Imperatives such as "Choose to stop," "Decide to say no," and "Make a commitment to never do it again" abound in this approach.

The problem with this approach is that it makes an idol out of the will, something God never intended. Just as our hearts and minds are distorted by the Fall, so is our power to make right decisions. Will is only strengthened by relationship; we can't make commitments alone. God told Moses to encourage and strengthen Joshua (Deut. 3:28); he didn't tell Moses to tell Joshua to "just say no."

If we depend on willpower alone, we are guaranteed to fail. We are denying the power of the relationship promised in the cross. If all we need is our will to overcome evil, we certainly don't need a Savior (1 Cor. 1:17). The truth is, willpower alone is useless against self-boundary struggles:

Why do you submit to [the world's] rules: "Do not handle! Do not taste! Do not touch!"? These are all destined to perish with use, because they are based on human commands and teachings. Such regulations indeed have an appearance of wisdom, with their self-imposed worship, their false humility and their harsh treatment of the body, but they lack any value in restraining sensual indulgence. (Col. 2:20–23)

The King James Bible translates the Greek word for "self-imposed worship" as "will-worship." In other words, these self-denying practices that appear so spiritual don't stop out-of-control behavior. The boundaryless part of the soul simply becomes more resentful under the domination of the will—

and it rebels. Especially after we make statements such as, “I will never” and “I will always,” we act out with a vengeance. Jessica’s indulgence in food, Pete’s indulgence in money, someone else’s indulgence in foolish or slanderous conversation, or still another’s determination never to be late on a project again will not be healed by “white-knuckling it.”

Establishing Boundaries with Yourself

Learning to be mature in self-boundaries is not easy. Many obstacles hinder our progress; however, God desires our maturity and self-control even more than we do. He’s on our team as an exhorter, encourager, and implorer (1 Thess. 2:11–12). One way to begin developing limits on out-of-control behavior is to apply a modified version of the boundary checklist we used in Chapter 8:

1. *What are the symptoms?* Look at the destructive fruit you may be exhibiting by not being able to say no to yourself. You may be experiencing depression, anxiety, panic, phobias, rage, relationship struggles, isolation, work problems, or psychosomatic problems.

All of these symptoms can be related to a difficulty in setting limits on your own behavior. Use them as a road map to begin identifying the particular boundary problem you’re having.

2. *What are the roots?* Identifying the causes of your self-boundary problems will assist you in understanding your own contribution to the problem (how you have sinned), your developmental injuries (how you have been sinned against), and the significant relationships that may have contributed to the problem.

Some possible roots of self-boundary conflicts include:

Lack of training. Some people never learned to accept limits, to pay the consequences of their actions, or to delay gratification when they were growing up. For example, they may never have experienced any consequences for dawdling as a child.

Rewarded destructiveness. People who come from families in which the mom or dad was an alcoholic may have learned that

out-of-control behavior brings relationship. The family came together when the alcoholic member drank.

Distorted need. Some boundary problems are legitimate, God-given needs in disguise. God gave us sexual desire both to reproduce ourselves and to enjoy our spouses. The pornography addict has diverted this good desire; he feels real and alive only when acting out.

Fear of relationship. People really want to be loved but their out-of-control behavior (i.e., overeating, overworking) keeps others away. Some people use their tongues to keep other people at bay.

Unmet emotional hungers. We all need love during the first few years of life. If we don't receive this love, we hunger for it for the rest of our lives. This hunger for love is so powerful that when we don't find it in relationships with other people, we look for it in other places, such as in food, in work, in sexual activity, or in spending money.

Being under the law. Many Christians raised in legalistic environments were not permitted to make decisions for themselves. When they try to make their own decisions, they feel guilty. This guilt forces them to rebel in destructive ways. Food addictions and compulsive spending are often reactions against strict rules.

Covering emotional hurt. People who are injured emotionally, who were neglected or abused as children, disguise their pain by overeating, drinking too much, or working too much. They may abuse substances to distract from the real pain of being unloved, unwanted, and alone. If they were to stop using these disguises, their isolation would be intolerable.

3. *What is the boundary conflict?* Take a look at your particular self-boundary problems in relation to eating, money, time, task completion, the tongue, sexuality, or alcohol and substance abuse. These seven areas aren't exhaustive, though they cover a great deal of territory. Ask God for insight into what other areas of your life are out of control.

4. *Who needs to take ownership?* At this point, take the painful step of taking responsibility for your out-of-control behavior. The behavior pattern may be directly traceable to fam-

ily problems, neglect, abuse, or trauma. In other words, our boundary conflicts may not be all our fault. They are, however, our *responsibility*.

5. *What do you need?* It's useless to try to deal with your boundary conflicts with yourself until you're actively developing safe, trusting, grace-and-truth relationships with others. You are severely hampered in gaining either insight into or control over yourself when you are disconnected from God's source of spiritual and emotional fuel.

Plugging in to other people is often frustrating for "do-it-yourself" people who would like a how-to manual for solving out-of-control behaviors just as they would buy to teach themselves piano, plumbing, or golf. They wish to get this boundary-setting business over with quickly.

The problem is that many people with self-boundary struggles are also quite isolated from deep relationships. They have no "rootedness" in God or others (Eph. 3:17). Thus, they have to take what they think are steps backward to learn to connect with others. Connecting with people is a time-consuming, risky, and painful process. Finding the right people, group, or church is hard enough, but after joining up, admitting your need for others may be even more difficult.

Do-it-yourself people will often fall back into a cognitive or willpower approach, simply because it's not as slow or as risky. They'll often say things like, "Attachment is not what I want. I have an out-of-control behavior, and I need relief from the pain!" Though we can certainly understand their dilemma, they're heading toward another quick-fix dead end. Symptomatic relief—trying to solve a problem by only dealing with the symptoms—generally leads to more symptoms. Jesus described this process in a parable:

When an evil spirit comes out of a man, it goes through arid places seeking rest and does not find it. Then it says, "I will return to the house I left." When it arrives, it finds the house swept clean and put in order. Then it goes and takes seven other spirits more wicked than itself, and they go in and live there. And the final condition of that man is worse than the first. (Luke 11:24–26)

Evil can take over the empty house of our souls. Even when our lives seem to be in order, isolation guarantees spiritual vulnerability. It's only when our house is full of the love of God and others that we can resist the wiles of the Devil. Plugging in is neither an option, nor a luxury; it is a spiritual and emotional life-and-death issue.

*6. How do I begin?*⁹ Once you have identified your boundary problem and owned it, you can do something about it. Here are some ways to begin practicing setting boundaries on yourself.

Address your real need. Often, out-of-control patterns disguise a need for something else. You need to address the underlying need before you can deal with the out-of-control behavior. For example, impulsive eaters may discover that food is a way to stay separate and safe from romantic and sexual intimacy. Their fear of being faced with those kinds of emotionally laden situations may cause them to use food as a boundary. As their internal boundaries with the opposite sex become firmer, they can give up their destructive food boundary. They learn to ask for help for the real problem—not just for the symptomatic problem.

Allow yourself to fail. Addressing your real need is no guarantee that your out-of-control behavior will disappear. Many people who address the real issue underneath a self-boundary problem are often disappointed that the problem keeps recurring. They think, “Well, I joined a support group at church, but I still have problems being on time, or viewing pornography, or spending money, or talking out of turn. Was all this for naught?”

No. The recurrence of destructive patterns is evidence of God’s sanctifying, maturing, and preparing us for eternity. We need to continue to practice to learn things. The same process that we use to learn to drive a car, swim, or learn a foreign language is the one we use for learning better self-boundaries.

We need to embrace failure instead of trying to avoid it. Those people who spend their lives trying to avoid failure are also eluding maturity. We are drawn to Jesus because “he learned obedience from what he suffered” (Heb. 5:8). People who are growing up are also drawn to individuals who bear battle scars, worry furrows, and tear marks on their faces. Their

lessons can be trusted, much more than the unlined faces of those who have never failed—and so have never truly lived.

Listen to empathic feedback from others. As you fail in setting boundaries on yourself, you need others who will let you know about it in a caring way. Many times, you are unaware of your own failures. Sometimes you may not truly understand the extent of the damage your lack of boundaries causes in the lives of those you care about. Other believers can provide perspective and support.

Keith had a difficult time returning money to others when they had loaned it to him. He wasn't broke. He wasn't selfish. He was just forgetful. He had little awareness of the discomfort he caused those who lent him money.

One afternoon a friend who had loaned him money several months before dropped by his office.

"Keith," his friend said, "Several times I've asked you about the money I lent you. I still haven't heard from you. I don't think you're intentionally ignoring my requests. At the same time I wanted to let you know that your forgetfulness has been hard on me. I had to cancel a vacation because I didn't have the money. Your forgetfulness is hurting me, and it's hurting our friendship."

Keith was astonished. He hadn't had a clue that such a little thing to him might mean so much to a close friend. Deeply remorseful over the loss his friend had suffered, he wrote a check immediately.

In a non-condemning, non-nagging manner, Keith's friend had helped him become more aware of his self-boundary problem. He used the empathy Keith felt for him as a close friend. True godly remorse for causing his friend pain was a powerful motivator for Keith to become more responsible. When others in our support system let us know how our lack of self-boundaries hurts them, we are motivated by love, not by fear.

Biblically based support groups, which provide empathy and clear feedback, keep people responsible by letting them see the effect their actions have on another. When one member tells another, "Your uncontrolled behavior makes me want to stay away from you. I don't feel that I can trust you when you act like that,"

the out-of-control person isn't being parented or policed. He is hearing truth in love from a peer. He's hearing how what he does helps or damages those he loves. This kind of confrontation builds an empathy-based morality, a love-based self-control.

Welcome consequences as a teacher. Learning about sowing and reaping is valuable. It teaches us that we suffer losses when we aren't responsible. The impulsive overeater has medical and social difficulties. The overspender faces bankruptcy court. The chronically late person misses plane flights and important meetings, and loses friendships. The procrastinator faces losses of promotions and bonuses. And on and on.

We need to enter God's training school of learning to suffer for our irresponsibility. Not all suffering should be embraced;² however, when our own lack of love or responsibility causes the suffering, pain becomes our teacher.

Learning how to develop better self-boundaries is an orderly process. First, we are confronted about the destructiveness of our behavior by others. Then consequences will follow if we don't heed the feedback. Words precede actions and give us a chance to turn from our destructiveness before we have to suffer.

God doesn't glory in our suffering. Just as a loving father's heart breaks when he sees his children in pain, God wants to spare us pain. But when his words and the feedback of his other children don't reach us, consequences are the only way to keep us from further damage. God is like the parent who warns his teenager that drinking will cause a loss of car privileges. First, the warning: "Stop drinking now. It will have bad consequences for you." Then, if it's not heeded, car privileges are yanked. This painful consequence prevents a possible serious catastrophe: a drunk-driving accident.

Surround yourself with people who are loving and supportive. As you hear feedback and suffer consequences, maintain close contact with your support network. Your difficulties are too much to bear alone. You need others who will be loving and supportive, but who will not rescue.

Generally speaking, friends of people with self-boundary problems make one of two errors:

(1) They become critical and parental. When the person has failed, they adopt an “I told you so” attitude, or say things like, “Now, what did you learn from your experience?” This encourages the person to either look elsewhere for a friend (no one needs more than two parents), or simply avoid the criticism, instead of learning from consequences. “Brothers, if someone is caught in a sin, you who are spiritual should restore him gently” (Gal. 6:1).

Replace this parental position with gentle restoration, understanding that “there but for the grace of God go I.”

(2) They become rescuers. They give in to their impulse to save the person from suffering. They call the boss and tell them their spouse was sick when he or she was drunk. They lend more money when they shouldn’t. They hold up the entire dinner for the latecomer, instead of going ahead with the meal.

Rescuing someone is not loving them. God’s love lets people experience consequences. Rescuers hope that by once again bailing out the out-of-control person, they’ll reap a loving, responsible person. They hope to control the other person.

It’s far better to be empathic, but at the same time refuse to be a safety net: “I’m sorry you lost another job this year, but I won’t lend you any more money until you’ve paid back the other loan. However, I’m available to talk to for support.” This approach will show people how serious you are about developing self-boundaries. The sincere searcher will value this approach and will take you up on your offer of support. The manipulator will resent the limits and quickly look for an easier touch somewhere else.

This five-point formula for developing self-boundaries is cyclical. That is, as you deal with real needs, fail, get empathic feedback, suffer consequences, and are restored, you build stronger internal boundaries each time. As you stay with your goal and with the right people, you will build a sense of self-restraint that can truly become part of your character for life.

If You Are a Victim

Establishing boundaries for yourself is always hard. It will be especially difficult if your boundaries were severely violated in childhood. No one who has avoided childhood victimization can truly understand what these individuals go through. Of all the injuries that can be endured, this type causes severe spiritual and emotional damage.

A victim is a person who has, while in a helpless state, been injured by the exploitation of another. Some victimization is verbal, some is physical, some is sexual, and some is satanically ritualistic. All cause extreme damage to the character structure of a child, who then grows up to adulthood with spiritual, emotional, and cognitive distortions. In each case, however, three factors remain constant: helplessness, injury, and exploitation.

Some results of victimization are these:

- depression
- compulsive disorders
- impulsive disorders
- isolation
- inability to trust others
- inability to form close attachments
- inability to set limits
- poor judgment in relationships
- further exploitation in relationships
- deep sense of pervasive badness
- shame
- guilt
- chaotic lifestyle
- sense of meaninglessness and purposelessness
- unexplainable terror and panic attacks
- phobias
- rage attacks
- suicidal feelings and thoughts

Victimization has long-lasting and far-reaching effects on the lives of adult survivors. Healing for victims is difficult because

their developmental processes have been damaged or interrupted by abuse. The most primary damage done is that the victim loses a sense of trust. Trust, the ability to depend on ourselves and others in times of need, is a basic spiritual and emotional survival need. We need to be able to trust our own perceptions of reality and to be able to let significant people matter to us.

Our ability to trust ourselves is based on our experience of others as trustworthy. People who are “like a tree planted by streams of water” (Ps. 1:3) feel firm because of the streams of love coming from God and others in their life.

Victims often lose a sense of trust because the perpetrator was someone they knew as children, someone who was important to them. When the relationship became damaging to them, their sense of trust became broken.

Another damaging effect of abuse or molestation is the destruction of a sense of ownership over the victim’s soul. In fact, victims often feel that they are public property—that their resources, body, and time should be available to others just for the asking.

Another injury due to victimization is a deep, pervasive sense of being “all-bad,” wrong, dirty, or shameful. No matter how affirming others are of their loveableness and their attributes, victims are convinced that, underneath it all, there is no good inside themselves. Because of the severity of their injuries, many victims have overpermeable boundaries. They take on badness that isn’t theirs. They begin believing that the way they were treated is the way they should be treated. Many victims think that, since they were told they were bad or evil thousands of times, it certainly must be true.

Boundaries as an Aid to the Victim

Boundary work as described in this book can be extremely helpful in moving victims toward restoration and healing. However, in many cases the severe nature of the need is such that the victim will be unable to set boundaries without professional help. We strongly urge abuse victims to seek out a counselor who can guide them in establishing and maintaining appropriate boundaries.

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Boundaries and God

When some people read the Bible, they see a book of rules, do's and don'ts. When others read it, they see a philosophy of life, principles for the wise. Still others see mythology, stories about the nature of human existence and the human dilemma.

Certainly, the Bible contains rules, principles, and stories that explain what it is like to exist on this earth. But to us, the Bible is a living book about relationship. Relationship of God to people, people to God, and people to each other. It is about a God who created this world, placed people in it, related to people, lost that relationship, and continues to heal that relationship. It is about God as creator: this is his creation. It is about God as ruler: he ultimately controls his world and will govern it. And it is about God as redeemer: he finds, saves, and heals his loved ones who are lost and in bondage.

When a lawyer asked Jesus which was the greatest commandment in the Law, Jesus said to him, “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.’ This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’ All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments” (Matt. 22:37–40). The entire Scripture communicates a message of love. “Love God, and love your neighbor as yourself.”

But how do we do that? Well, that's why there are so many other passages! Loving God and our neighbor is difficult. One

of the main reasons it's so difficult is because of boundary problems, which are essentially problems of responsibility. We do not know who is responsible for what, where we end and someone else begins, where God ends and we begin. The Bible clarifies those boundaries so that we can begin to see who should do what in this labor of love.

Respecting Boundaries

We have personal boundaries, personal property lines, in our relationship with God. God has designed the world so that boundaries are to be respected. He respects ours, and we need to respect his.

God respects our boundaries in many ways. First, *he leaves work for us to do that only we can do*. And he allows us to experience the painful consequences of our behavior so that we will change. He is not willing for any of us to perish and takes no pleasure in our destruction (2 Peter 3:9; Ezek. 18:23), but he wants us to change for our own good and his glory. It hurts him deeply when we don't. But at the same time, he does not rescue us; he wants us to work it out for our own good. He will not violate our wish to be left alone, although he will plead with us to come back to him.

Second, *he respects our no*. He tries neither to control nor nag us. He allows us to say no and go our way. Think of the parable of the prodigal son, the story of the rich young ruler, or the story of Joshua and his people. In all of these examples, God gives a choice and allows the people involved to make up their minds. When people say no, he allows it and keeps on loving them. He is a giver. And one of the things he always gives is a choice, but like a real giver, he also gives the consequences of those choices. He respects boundaries.

Many people are not as honest as these biblical characters were, however. The prodigal son was direct and honest: "I do not want to do it your way. I'm going to do it my way." We are more often like the second son in the parable of the two sons in the vineyard (Matt. 21:28–31). We say yes, but we act out no.

God prefers honesty. "It is better not to vow than to make a vow and not fulfill it" (Eccl. 5:5). We would be much better off if we would say an honest no to whatever God is asking, for the next step could be repentance. An honest no will lead us to the discovery of how destructive it is to say no to God and to a real hungering and thirsting for righteousness.

Jerry was a member of a support group I was leading. He was cheating on his wife, but he kept saying that he was sorry and that he really didn't want to be an adulterer. He really wanted to obey God; however, as much as he said that, he didn't change. He wanted to believe that he wanted to change without doing the work of change.

Tired of hearing how much he wanted to be different, I suggested that he tell God and the group the truth. He really did not want to change, he enjoyed his affairs, and his real wish was that God would take his rules and go somewhere else.

Jerry was taken aback, but gradually began to see how true this was. Finally, he told the truth about his lack of love for God and how he really wanted to do his own thing. At first this admission scared him. He was giving up the falsehood of seeing himself as a Christian who cared about holiness. But his honesty felt better to him than all the lies, and something began to happen.

In the safety of grace, which was allowing him to see himself as he really was, he began to regret who he was. He began to see the emptiness of his heart. When he owned who he really was from his heart, he did not like himself. He was developing godly sorrow, the kind that leads to repentance, and he began to change. He told his lover that he was not going to see her any more, and he made a new commitment to his wife. This time he meant it. Whereas for years he had been saying yes and acting out no, he finally owned his no to God directly and honestly. Only then was change possible.

Until we can own our boundaries with God, we can't ever change them or allow him to work with them. They are hidden and not communicated. They need to be honestly owned, exposed, and made a part of us. Then, we and God can face the problem.

Anger

In our deeper honesty and ownership of our true person, there is room for expressing anger at God. Many people who are cut off from God shut down emotionally because they feel that it is not safe to tell him how angry they are at him. Until they feel the anger, they cannot feel the loving feelings underneath the anger.

Job wanted to fully express his anger and disappointment with God to God (Job 13:3). But before he did this, he had to be sure of two things. He wanted God (1) to withdraw his hand of punishment and (2) to start communicating with him (v. 21). Job knew that if he were secure in the relationship, he could tell God what he really felt.

We often fear being honest because it was not safe to express honesty in our earthly relationships. With Job we fear both abandonment and retaliation. People abandoned us or attacked us when we told them how we really felt.

Rest assured, however, that God desires truth in our “inner parts” (Ps. 51:6). He is seeking people who will have a real relationship with him (John 4:23–24). He wants to hear it all, no matter how bad it seems to us. When we own what is within our boundaries, when we bring it into the light, God can transform it with his love.

Respecting His Boundaries

God expects his boundaries to be respected as well. When he makes choices, or says no to us, that is his right, his freedom. If we are to have a real relationship with him, we need to respect that freedom. When we try and put him into binds where he “has to do something,” we are testing his freedom. When we are angry with him for what he does not do, we are not allowing him the freedom to be who he is.

The basic problem in human relationship is that of freedom. We call people bad because they do not do what we want them to do. We judge them for being themselves, for fulfilling their wishes. We withdraw love from them when they do what they feel is best for them, but it is not what we want them to do.

We do the same thing with God. We feel entitled to God's favor, as if he has to do what we want him to. How do you feel when someone asks you for a favor but does not give you a free choice? This childish entitlement gets many people dissatisfied with God the same way that they are dissatisfied with others in their lives. They hate the freedom of others.

God is free from us. When he does something for us, he does it out of choice. He is not "under compulsion" or guilt or manipulation. He does things, like dying for us, because he wants to. We can rest in his pure love; he has no hidden resentment in what he does. His freedom allows him to love.

Many Bible characters ran into God's freedom and learned to embrace it. Embracing his freedom and respecting his boundaries, they always deepened their relationship with God. Job had to come to accept the freedom of God to not rescue him when he wanted. Job expressed his anger and dissatisfaction with God, and God rewarded his honesty. But Job did not "make God bad," in his own mind. In all of his complaining, he did not end his relationship with God. He didn't understand God, but he allowed God to be himself and did not withdraw his love from him, even when he was very angry with him. This is a real relationship.

In the same way, Paul accepted the boundaries of God. When he planned trips that didn't work out, Paul accepted the sovereignty of God. He asked God repeatedly for a certain kind of healing that God would not give him. God said, "No. I do not choose to love you in the way that you want right now. I choose to love you with my presence." Paul did not reject God for setting that boundary.

Jesus was perfected through his suffering (Heb. 5:7–10). In the Garden of Gethsemane, he asked that his cup of suffering pass from him, but God said no. Jesus accepted God's wishes, submitted to them, and through that "became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him" (Heb. 5:9). If Jesus had not respected God's boundaries and God's no, we would all be lost.

In the same way that we want others to respect our no, God wants us to respect his. He does not want us to make him the bad guy when he makes a choice. We do not like others trying to manipulate or control us with guilt, and neither does he.

“I Respectfully Disagree”

Then again, God does not want us to be passive in our relationship with him either. Sometimes, through dialogue, he changes his mind. We can influence him because ours is a real relationship of the kind Abraham had with God (Gen. 18:16–33). God said that he would destroy Sodom, yet Abraham talked him out of it if he could find ten righteous people.

When we make our feelings and wishes known, God responds. We do not often think of God this way, but the Bible is clear. It is as though God says, “If it really means that much to you, it’s okay with me.” One of the most astounding teachings of the Bible is that we can influence God. It wouldn’t be a real relationship if we couldn’t. “‘Come now, let us reason together,’ says the LORD” (Isa. 1:18). Like a real friend, or a real father, he says, “Let me hear your side of things and I will consider them. They matter to me. Maybe you can convince me to change my mind.”

Consider Jesus’ parables about prayer. In one story a judge who “neither feared God nor cared about men,” for some time refused to grant a widow her request for justice. But because the widow kept bothering him, he changed his mind and granted her wish (Luke 18:1–8). Jesus told them this parable so “that they should always pray and not give up” (v. 1). In another story, a neighbor who persistently asks for bread is granted the request because of his continuing boldness (Luke 11:5–9). Other people Jesus decided to heal after they persisted in asking for healing.

God wants us to respect his boundaries; he doesn’t want us to withdraw our love when he says no. But he has nothing at all against our trying to persuade him to change his mind. In fact, he asks for us to be tenacious. Often he says, “Wait,” seeing how much we really want something. Other times, it seems he

changes his mind as a result of our relationship with him. Either way, we respect his wishes and stay in relationship.

Respecting His Own

In addition to our respecting God's boundaries and his respecting ours, he is a good model for how we should respect our own property.

God is the ultimate responsibility taker. If someone else causes him pain, he takes responsibility for it. If we continue to abuse him, he is not masochistic; he will take care of himself. And for our own sakes, we do not want to suffer the consequences of his boundaries.

The parable of the wedding banquet shows us God taking responsibility (Matt. 22:1–14). A king who was planning a banquet invited many people to come. When they said no, he pleaded with them. They continued to say no and went about their own business. Finally, the king had had enough. Taking responsibility for the situation, he said to his servants, “The wedding banquet is ready, but those I invited did not deserve to come. Go to the street corners and invite to the banquet anyone you find” (vv. 8–9).

Whenever God decides that “enough is enough,” and he has suffered long enough, he respects his own property, his heart, enough to do something to make it better. He takes responsibility for the pain and makes moves to make his life different. He lets go of the rejecting people and reaches out to some new friends.

God is a good model. When we are hurting, we need to take responsibility for the hurt and make some appropriate moves to make things better. This may mean letting go of someone and finding new friends. It may mean forgiving someone and letting them off the hook so we can feel better.

A Real Relationship

We started this chapter talking about relationship. Relationship is what the gospel is about. It is a gospel of “reconciliation”

(Rom. 5:11; Col. 1:19–20). This gospel brings hostile parties together (Col. 1:21) and heals relationships between God and humanity, and between people.

The gospel brings things back to their created order, the truth and order of God. In terms of relationships, we think that God's order of relationship is himself and the way he works. And that is why we think boundaries are so important, because he has them and we are to be redeemed into his image.

Boundaries are inherent in any relationship God has created, for they define the two parties who are loving each other. In this sense, boundaries between us and God are very important. They are not to do away with the fundamental oneness or unity that we have with him (John 17:20–23), but they are to define the two parties in unity. There is no unity without distinct identities, and boundaries define the distinct identities involved.

We need to know these boundaries between us and him. Boundaries help us to be the best we can be—in God's image. They let us see God as he really is. They enable us to negotiate life, fulfilling our responsibilities and requirements. If we are trying to do his work for him, we will fail. If we are wishing for him to do our work for us, he will refuse. But if we do our work, and God does his, we will find strength in a real relationship with our Creator.

PART THREE

DEVELOPING HEALTHY BOUNDARIES

Resistance to Boundaries

We have talked about the necessity of boundaries and their wonderful value in our lives. In fact, we have all but said that life without boundaries is no life at all. But establishing and maintaining boundaries takes a lot of work, discipline, and, most of all, desire.

The driving force behind boundaries has to be desire. We usually know what is the right thing to do in life, but we are rarely motivated to do it unless there's a good reason. That we should be obedient to God, who tells us to set and maintain boundaries, is certainly the best reason. But sometimes we need a more compelling reason than obedience. We need to see that what is right is also good for us. And we usually only see these good reasons when we're in pain. Our pain motivates us to act.

Even with the desire for a better life, we can be reluctant to do the work of boundaries for another reason: it will be a war. There will be skirmishes and battles. There will be disputes. There will be losses.

The idea of spiritual warfare is not new. For thousands of years, God has given people the choice of living lives of ruin, or possessing what he has secured for them. And it has always involved battles. When he led the Israelites out of Egypt toward the promised land, they had to fight many battles and learn numerous lessons before they could possess the land.

We have to fight for our healing as well. God has secured our salvation and our sanctification. In position and principle he has healed us. But we have to work out his image in us.

Part of this process of healing is regaining our boundaries. As we become like him, he is redeeming our boundaries and our limits. He has defined who we are and what our limits are so that he can bless us: “LORD, you have assigned me my portion and my cup; you have made my lot secure. The boundary lines have fallen for me in pleasant places; surely I have a delightful inheritance” (Ps. 16:5–6).

But we are the ones who have to do battle. The battles fall into two categories: outside resistance and inside resistance—the resistance we get from others and the resistance we get from ourselves.

Outside Resistance

Julie had had a difficult time with boundaries most of her life. As a child, she had a domineering father and a mother who controlled her with guilt. She had been afraid to set boundaries with some people because of their anger and with others because of the guilt she would feel for “hurting them.” When she wanted to make a decision for herself, she would listen to other people’s anger or pouting and let their reactions affect her decision.

Coming out of this family, she married a very self-centered man who controlled her with his anger. Throughout her adult life, she alternated between being controlled by her husband’s anger and by her mother’s guilt trips. She was unable to set limits on anyone. After many years, depression caught up with her, and she ended up in one of our hospitals.

After a number of weeks of therapy, she was beginning to understand that she was miserable because she lacked boundaries. She finally decided to take a risk and set some limits with her husband.

One day in a joint session with her therapist and her husband, she confronted him. She returned to her support group in tears.

“How did it go?” one group member asked.

“Terrible. This boundary stuff doesn’t work,” she said.

“What do you mean?” the group therapist asked her.

“I told my husband that I was tired of being treated that way and that I was not going to put up with it any more. He got

angry and started yelling at me. If the therapist had not been there, I don't know what I would have done. He's never going to change."

She was right. It was a good thing that the therapist was there and that she was in the hospital. She needed a lot of support in learning to set boundaries, for she would encounter a lot of resistance from both her husband and herself.

She learned through the next few weeks that others were going to fight hard against her limits and that she needed to plan how she was going to fight back. If she did that, the chances of their changing were pretty good. In fact, that is exactly what happened. Her husband finally learned that he could no longer "have it his way" all the time and that he needed to consider other people's needs as well as his own.

Angry Reactions

The most common resistance one gets from the outside is anger. People who get angry at others for setting boundaries have a character problem. Self-centered, they think the world exists for them and their comfort. They see others as extensions of themselves.

When they hear no, they have the same reaction a two-year-old has when deprived of something: "Bad Mommy!" They feel as though the one who deprives them of their wishes is "bad," and they become angry. They are not righteously angry at a real offense. Nothing has been done "to them" at all. Someone will not do something "for them." Their wish is being frustrated, and they get angry because they have not learned to delay gratification or to respect others' freedom (Prov. 19:19).

The angry person has a character problem. If you reinforce this character problem, it will return tomorrow and the next day in other situations. It is not the situation that's making the person angry, but the feeling that they are entitled to things from others. They want to control others and, as a result, they have no control over themselves. So, when they lose their wished-for control over someone, they "lose it." They get angry.

The first thing you need to learn is that the person who is angry at you for setting boundaries is the one with the problem. If you do not realize this, you may think you have a problem. Maintaining your boundaries is good for other people; it will help them learn what their families of origin did not teach them: to respect other people.

Second, you must view anger realistically. Anger is only a feeling inside the other person. It cannot jump across the room and hurt you. It cannot “get inside” you unless you allow it. Staying separate from another’s anger is vitally important. Let the anger be in the other person. He will have to feel his anger to get better. If you either rescue him from it, or take it on yourself, the angry person will not get better and you will be in bondage.

Third, do not let anger be a cue for you to do something. People without boundaries respond automatically to the anger of others. They rescue, seek approval, or get angry themselves. There is great power in inactivity. Do not let an out-of-control person be the cue for you to change your course. Just allow him to be angry and decide for yourself what you need to do.

Fourth, make sure you have your support system in place. If you are going to set some limits with a person who has controlled you with anger, talk to the people in your support system first and make a plan. Know what you will say. Anticipate what the angry person will say, and plan your reaction. You may even want to role-play the situation with your group. Then, make sure your support group will be available to you right after the confrontation. Perhaps some members of your support group can go with you. But certainly you will need them afterward to keep you from crumbling under the pressure.

Fifth, do not allow the angry person to get you angry. Keep a loving stance while “speaking the truth in love.” When we get caught up in the “eye for eye” mentality of the law, or the “returning evil for evil” mentality of the world, we will be in bondage. If we have boundaries, we will be separate enough to love.

Sixth, be prepared to use physical distance and other limits that enforce consequences. One woman’s life was changed when

she realized that she could say, “I will not allow myself to be yelled at. I will go into the other room until you decide you can talk about this without attacking me. When you can do that, I will talk to you.”

These serious steps do not need to be taken with anger. You can empathize lovingly and stay in the conversation, without giving in or being controlled. “I understand that you are upset that I will not do that for you. I am sorry you feel that way. How can I help?” Just remember that when you empathize, changing your no will not help. Offer other options.

If you keep your boundaries, those who are angry at you will have to learn self-control for the first time, instead of “other control,” which has been destructive to them anyway. When they no longer have control over you, they will find a different way to relate. But, as long as they can control you with their anger, they will not change.

Sometimes, the hard truth is that they will not talk to you anymore, or they will leave the relationship if they can no longer control you. This is a true risk. God takes this risk every day. He says that he will only do things the right way and that he will not participate in evil. And when people choose their own ways, he lets them go. Sometimes we have to do the same.

Guilt Messages

A man telephoned his mother, and she answered the phone very weakly, with hardly any voice at all. Concerned, thinking she was sick, he asked her, “Mother, what’s wrong?”

“I guess my voice doesn’t work very well anymore,” she replied. “No one ever calls me since you children left home.”

No weapon in the arsenal of the controlling person is as strong as the guilt message. People with poor boundaries almost always internalize guilt messages leveled at them; they obey guilt-inducing statements that try to make them feel bad. Consider these:

- “How could you do this to me after all I’ve done for you?”
- “It seems that you could think about someone other than yourself for once.”

- “If you really loved me, you would make this telephone call for me.”
- “It seems like you would care enough about the family to do this one thing.”
- “How can you abandon the family like this?”
- “You know how it’s turned out in the past when you haven’t listened to me.”
- “After all, you never had to lift a finger around here. It seems like it’s time you did.”
- “You know that if I had it, I would give it to you.”
- “You have no idea how much we sacrificed for you.”
- “Maybe after I’m dead and gone, you’ll be sorry.”

Sometimes guilt manipulation comes dressed up in God talk:

- “How can you call yourself a Christian?”
- “Doesn’t the Bible say ‘Honor your parents?’”
- “You’re not being very submissive. I’m sure that grieves the Lord.”
- “I thought Christians were supposed to think of others.”
- “What kind of religion would teach you to abandon your own family?”
- “You must really have a spiritual problem to be acting this way.”

People who say these things are trying to make you feel guilty about your choices. They are trying to make you feel bad about deciding how you will spend your own time or resources, about growing up and separating from your parents, or about having a life separate from a friend or spiritual leader. Remember the landowner’s words in the parable of the workers in the vineyard: “Don’t I have the right to do what I want with my own money?” (Matt. 20:15). The Bible says that we are to give and not be self-centered. It does not say that we have to give whatever anyone wants from us. We are in control of our giving.

Probably everyone is able to some degree to recognize guilt messages when they hear them. But if you feel bad about your

boundaries, maybe you have not looked specifically at the ones your family or other people are using. Here are a few tips about dealing with these external messages:

1. *Recognize guilt messages.* Some people swallow guilt messages without seeing how controlling they are. Be open to rebuke and feedback; you need to know when you are being self-centered. But guilt messages are not given for your growth and good. They are given to manipulate and control.

2. *Guilt messages are really anger in disguise.* The guilt senders are failing to openly admit their anger at you for what you are doing, probably because that would expose how controlling they really are. They would rather focus on you and your behavior than on how they feel. Focusing on their feelings would get them too close to responsibility.

3. *Guilt messages hide sadness and hurt.* Instead of expressing and owning these feelings, people try to steer the focus onto you and what you are doing. Recognize that guilt messages are sometimes an expression of a person's sadness, hurt, or need.

4. *If guilt works on you, recognize that this is your problem and not theirs.* Realize where the real problem is: inside. Then you will be able to deal with the outside correctly, with love and limits. If you continue to blame other people for "making" you feel guilty, they still have power over you, and you are saying that you will only feel good when they stop doing that. You are giving them control over your life. Stop blaming other people.

5. *Do not explain or justify.* Only guilty children do that. This is only playing into their message. You do not owe guilt senders an explanation. Just tell what you have chosen. If you want to tell them why you made a certain decision to help them understand, this is okay. If you wish to get them to not make you feel bad or to resolve your guilt, you are playing into their guilt trap.

6. *Be assertive and interpret their messages as being about their feelings.* "It sounds like you are angry that I chose to..." "It sounds like you are sad that I will not..." "I understand you are very unhappy about what I have decided to do. I'm sorry you

feel that way.” “I realize this is disappointing to you. How can I help?” “It’s hard for you when I have other things to do, isn’t it?”

The main principle is this: Empathize with the distress people are feeling, but make it clear that it is *their* distress.

Remember, love and limits are the only clear boundaries. If you react, you have lost your boundaries. “Like a city whose walls are broken down is a man without self-control” (Prov. 25:28). If other people have the power to get you to react, they are inside your walls, inside your boundaries. Stop reacting. Be proactive. Give empathy. “Sounds like life is hard right now. Tell me about it.” Sometimes people who give guilt messages just want to tell someone how hard it is. Be a listener, but don’t take the blame.

Remember the mother who tried to make her son feel guilty. A man with good boundaries would empathize with his mother: “Sounds like you are feeling lonely, Mom.” He would make sure she hears that he hears the feeling beneath the guilt message.

Consequences and Countermoves

Brian was having difficulty with his father, a wealthy man who had always used his money to control other people, even his family. He had taught his children to obey by threatening to cut off his financial support or cut them out of his will.

As Brian got older, he wanted more freedom from his father, but he found himself addicted to the family money and the pleasures it afforded him. He liked being able to take his wife on vacations to the family summer home. He liked the tickets to the Big Ten basketball games and the membership in the country club.

But Brian didn’t like what his father’s control was costing him emotionally and spiritually. He decided to make some changes. He started saying no to some of his father’s requests that were disruptive to him and his immediate family. He declined to go on some of the holiday trips when his children wanted to do other things. His father did not like that.

Predictably, he started to cut Brian off from the resources that he had had access to. He used him as an example to the siblings. He began to lavish more privileges onto Brian's brothers and sister to show Brian his mistake. Lastly, he changed his will.

This was hard for Brian. He had to cut down on his lifestyle and do without some of the things he was used to. He had to make different plans for the future as he had always planned on inheriting his father's money. In short, he had to deal with the consequences of his choice to free himself from his father's control. But, for the first time in his life, he was free.

This scenario is common. It is not always a family fortune that's at stake, but it may be parents' financial support for college. Or it may be a mother's availability to be babysitter. Or a father's help in business. Or it may be as serious as the loss of the relationship. The consequences of setting boundaries will be countermoves by controlling people. They will react to your act of boundary setting.

First, figure out what it is that you are getting for your lack of boundaries and what you stand to lose by setting boundaries. In Brian's case it was money. For others, it may be a relationship. Some people are so controlling that if someone starts to stand up to them, they will not relate to them any more. Many people are cut off by the family they grew up in when they stop playing the family's dysfunctional games. Their parents or their "friends" will no longer speak to them.

You face a risk in setting boundaries and gaining control of your life. In most instances, the results are not drastic, for as soon as the other person finds out that you are serious, they start to change. They find the limit setting to be something good for them. As Jesus says, you have "won them." The rebuke of a friend turns out to be good medicine.

Good, honest people need discipline, and they respond, however reluctantly, to limits. Others have what psychologists call "character disorders"; they don't want to take responsibility for their own actions and lives. When their friends and spouses refuse to take responsibility for them, they move on.

When you count the cost of the consequences, as difficult or as costly as they seem, they hardly compare to the loss of your “very self.” The message of the Bible is clear: Know the risk and prepare.

Second, decide if you are willing to risk loss. Is the “cross you must pick up” worth it to you for your “very self?” For some, the price is too high. They would rather continue to give in to a controlling parent or friend than to risk the relationship. Intervention specialists caution the family to think hard about whether they are ready to enforce the consequences they agreed on if the alcoholic does not get treatment. Boundaries without consequences are not boundaries. You must decide if you are willing to enforce the consequences before you set the boundaries.

Third, be diligent about making up for what you have lost. In Brian’s case, he had to plan to find a way to make more money. Others may need to find new child care arrangements, make new friends, or learn to deal with loneliness.

Fourth, do it. There is no way of dealing with the power moves of others and the consequences of our boundaries other than setting the boundaries and going through with your plan. When you have a plan, do like Peter: Get out of the boat and make your way toward Jesus. Fix your eyes on Jesus, “the author and perfecter” of your faith (Heb. 12:2). The first step will be the hardest. Go out and do it, and look for his help. Remember, “he trains my hands for battle; my arms can bend a bow of bronze” (Ps. 18:34).

Fifth, realize that the hard part is just beginning. Setting the limit is not the end of the battle. It is the beginning. Now is the time to go back to your support group and use them to spiritually nourish you so that you will be able to keep your stand. Keep working the program that got you ready to set your boundaries.

Countermoves to your boundary setting are tough to battle. But God will be there to match your efforts as you “work out your salvation.”

Physical Resistance

It is sad that we have to include this section, but some people can't maintain their boundaries with another person because they are physically overpowered. Abusive spouses and boyfriends will not take no for an answer; often women who try to set limits are physically abused.

These abused individuals need help. They are often afraid to tell anyone about what has happened, or what is continuing to happen, for many reasons. They are trying to protect their spouse's reputation with friends or the church. They are afraid to admit that they allow this treatment. They are often afraid that they will get beaten worse if they tell. They must realize the seriousness of the problem and get outside help. The problem will not go away, and it could get a lot worse.

If you are in this situation, find other people to help you set limits on the abuse. Find a counselor who has dealt with abusive spouses before. Arrange to call people in your church if your spouse or friend gets violent. Arrange for a place to stay overnight if you are threatened, no matter what the hour. Call the police and an attorney. Get a restraining order on such an individual if he will respect no other limit. Do it for yourself and for your children. Do not allow this to go on. Seek help.

Pain of Others

When we begin to set boundaries with people we love, a really hard thing happens: they hurt. They may feel a hole where you used to plug up their aloneness, their disorganization, or their financial irresponsibility. Whatever it is, they will feel a loss.

If you love them, this will be difficult for you to watch. But, when you are dealing with someone who is hurting, remember that your boundaries are both necessary for you and helpful for them. If you have been enabling them to be irresponsible, your limit setting may nudge them toward responsibility.

Blamers

Blamers will act as though your saying no is killing them, and they will react with a “How could you do this to me?” message. They are likely to cry, pout, or get angry. Remember that blamers have a character problem. If they make it sound as though their misery is because of your not giving something to them, they are blaming and demanding what is yours. This is very different from a humble person asking out of need. Listen to the nature of other people’s complaints; if they are trying to blame you for something they should take responsibility for, confront them.

Susan had to confront her brother, who wanted her to lend him money to get a new car. They were both adults. She was responsible and worked hard; he was irresponsible and never saved enough of what he made. For years he hit her up for loans; for years, she forked over the money. He seldom paid her back.

Finally, after attending a workshop on boundaries, she saw the light and said no to his latest request. He responded as though she had ruined his life. He said that he would not be able to advance in his career “because of her,” because he could never attract business unless he had a new car. He said that he would not be able to get dates “because of her” with his old car.

Having learned to hear the blame, she confronted him. She said that she was sorry his career was not going well but his career was his problem. These responses were good for her and good for him.

Real Needs

You may need to set boundaries on people in real need. If you are a loving person, it will break your heart to say no to someone you love who is in need. But there are limits to what you can and can’t give; you need to say no appropriately. These are not cases of giving “reluctantly or under compulsion” (2 Cor. 9:7). These are the instances in which your broken heart wants to give, but you would burn out if you did.

Remember the story of Moses' impending burnout in Exodus 18. Moses' father-in-law, Jethro, saw all that he was doing for the people and told Moses to delegate some of the work so that he could better meet the needs of the people.

Learn what your limits are, give what you have "decided in your heart" to give, and send other people in need to those who can help them. Empathize with these people's situations. They often need to know that you see their needs as valid and that they really do need help. And pray for them. This is the most loving thing you can do for the pain and needs around you that you can't meet.

Forgiveness and Reconciliation

Many people have a problem determining the difference between forgiveness and reconciliation. They fail to deal with external resistance because they feel that they have to give in to the other person again or they are not being forgiving. In fact, many people are afraid to forgive because they equate that with letting down their boundaries one more time and giving the other person the power to hurt them again.

The Bible is clear about two principles: (1) We always need to forgive, but (2) we don't always achieve reconciliation. Forgiveness is something that we do in our hearts; we release someone from a debt that they owe us. We write off the person's debt, and she no longer owes us. We no longer condemn her. She is clean. Only one party is needed for forgiveness: me. The person who owes me a debt does not have to ask my forgiveness. It is a work of grace in my heart.

This brings us to the second principle: we do not always achieve reconciliation. God forgave the world, but the whole world is not reconciled to him. Although he may have forgiven all people, all people have not owned their sin and appropriated his forgiveness. That would be reconciliation. Forgiveness takes one; reconciliation takes two.

We do not open ourselves up to the other party until we have seen that she has truly owned her part of the problem. So

many times Scripture talks about keeping boundaries with someone until she owns what she has done and produces “fruit in keeping with repentance” (Matt. 3:8). True repentance is much more than saying “I’m sorry”; it is changing direction.

You need to clearly communicate that, while you have forgiven her, you do not trust her yet, for she has not proven herself trustworthy. There has not been enough time to see if she really is going to change.

Remember, God is your model. He did not wait for people to change their behavior before he stopped condemning them. He is finished condemning, but that does not mean that he has a relationship with all people. People must choose to own up to their sin and repent, then God will open himself to them. Reconciliation involves two. Do not think that because you have forgiven that you have to reconcile. You can offer reconciliation, but it must be contingent upon the other person owning her behavior and bringing forth trustworthy fruits.

Internal Resistances

We have to have good boundaries, not only externally, as we have seen in the last section, but also internally, to say no to the flesh as it wants to have dominion over us. Let’s look at boundaries in regard to our internal resistance to growth.

Human Need

Jane was in therapy because of her pattern of picking destructive men. She quickly fell in love with men who were very smooth and charming. In the beginning it was always “great.” They would seem to be “what she always wanted” and to fulfill some missing part within her.

She would coast along for a while in this state, then she would slowly “lose herself” in the relationship and find herself giving in to things she did not want to give in to, doing things she did not want to do, and giving things she did not want to give. The men she had fallen for would turn out to be very self-

centered and unable to see her needs and respect her boundaries. Before long she would be miserable.

She would talk with friends, who would tell her what she already knew: the guy is a jerk, and you should tell him to take a hike. But she would not act on this knowledge, and she would be in bondage to the relationship, unable to leave. She lacked boundaries. She could not say no.

As we began to look at this pattern in Jane's life, we discovered that the drive to stay with these men was motivated by Jane's desire to ward off the depression she would feel if she separated. We further discovered that the depression was rooted in a very empty place inside Jane that had never been filled by her father. Jane's father had been very much like the men she would pick, unavailable to her emotionally and unwilling to show love to her. She was trying to fill the space her father should have filled with destructive people who would never fulfill this need. Jane's internal resistance to setting the boundaries was this unmet developmental need from childhood.

God has designed us with very specific needs from the family we grew up in. We have talked about these before and have written extensively about them elsewhere.¹ When we have unmet needs, we need to take inventory of these broken places inside and begin to have those needs met in the body of Christ so that we will be strong enough to fight the boundary fights of adult life.

These unmet developmental needs are responsible for much of our resistance to setting boundaries. God has designed us to grow up in godly families where parents do the things he has commanded. They nurture us, they have good boundaries, they forgive and help us resolve the split between good and bad, and they empower us to become responsible adults. But many people have not had this experience. They are psychological orphans who need to be adopted and cared for by the body of Christ; to differing extents, this is true of all of us.

Unresolved Grief and Loss

If the “unmet needs” resistance has to do with getting the “good,” grief has to do with letting go of the “bad.” Many times

when someone is unable to set boundaries, it is because they cannot let go of the person with whom they are fused. Jane kept trying to get her need for a caring and loving father met. But to get this need met, Jane was going to have to let go of what she could never have: her father's love. This was going to be a huge loss to her.

The Bible is full of examples of God asking people to "leave behind" the people and lives that are not good for them. He asked the Israelites to leave Egypt to have a better life, but many of them kept looking back, holding on to what they thought was better. When Lot and his wife left Sodom, the warning was to not look back, yet she did, and turned to salt.

The basic rule in biblical recovery is that the life before God is not worth holding on to; we must lose it, grieve it, and let go so that he can give us good things. We tend to hold on to the hope that "someday they will love me" and continue to try to get someone who is unable to love us to change. This wish must be mourned and let go so that our hearts can be opened to the new things that God wants for us.

Many times to set boundaries with someone is to risk losing the love that you have craved for a long time. To start to say no to a controlling parent is to get in touch with the sadness of what you do not have with them, instead of still working hard to get it. This working hard keeps you away from the grief and keeps you stuck. But accepting the reality of who they are and letting go of the wish for them to be different is the essence of grief. And that is sad indeed.

We play the "if onlys," instead of having boundaries. We say to ourselves, unconsciously, "if only I would try harder instead of confronting his perfectionistic demands, he will like me." Or, "if only I would give in to her wishes and not make her angry, she will love me." Giving up boundaries to get love postpones the inevitable: the realization of the truth about the person, the embracing of the sadness of that truth, and the letting go and moving on with life.

Let's look at the steps you need to take to face this internal resistance:

1. *Own your boundarylessness.* Admit that you have a problem. Own the fact that if you are being controlled, manipulated, or abused, the problem is not that you are with a bad person and your misery is their fault. The problem is that you lack boundaries. Don't blame someone else. You are the one with the problem.

2. *Realize the resistance.* You may think, "Oh, I just need to set some limits," and that you are then on the road to getting better. If it were this easy, you would have done it years earlier. Confess that you do not want to set boundaries because you are afraid. You sabotage your freedom because of inside resistance (Rom. 7:15, 19).

3. *Seek grace and truth.* As in every other step in the process, you cannot face these hard truths in a vacuum. You need the support of others to help you own up to your internal resistance and also to empower you to do the work of grief. Good grief can only take place in relationship. We need grace from God and others.

4. *Identify the wish.* Behind the failure to set limits is the fear of loss. Identify whose love you are going to have to give up if you choose to live. Place a name to it. Who are you going to have to place on the altar and give to God? Your strong tie to that person is keeping you stuck. "You are not restrained by us, but you are restrained in your own affections" (2 Cor. 6:12 NASB). Like the Corinthians who could not open up to Paul's love, you get stuck in your "affections," your ties to people you need to let go of.

5. *Let go.* In the safety of your supportive relationships, face what you will never have from this person, or who this person symbolizes. This will be like a funeral. You will go through the stages of grief: denial, bargaining, anger, sadness, acceptance. You may not necessarily go through these stages in this order, but you will probably feel all these emotions. This is normal.

Get with your supportive people and talk about your losses. These wishes run very deep and may be very painful to face; you may need to see a professional counselor. To let go of what you never had is difficult. But in the end you will save your life by losing it. Only God can fill the empty place with the love of his people and himself.

6. *Move on.* The last step in grieving has to do with finding what you want. “Seek and you will find.” God has a real life out there for you if you are willing to let go of the old one. He can only steer a moving ship, though. You have got to get active and begin to seek his good for you.

You will be amazed how much can change in your life when you finally begin to let go of what you can never have. All of your attempts to preserve the old life were taking a lot of energy and opening you up to a lot of abuse and control. Letting go is the way to serenity. Grief is the path.

Internal Fears of Anger

Three partners of a management team of one company were working on a big project with another company. In the course of negotiations, the president of the other company got very angry with the trio because they wouldn’t do something he wanted them to do.

Two of the three partners lost sleep, worried, and fretted about the breakdown of negotiations; they wondered what they would do if the president of the other company no longer liked them. They finally called a meeting with the third partner to talk about a strategy. They were prepared to change all of their plans to appease the angry man. When the two told their third partner of their plans to “give away the store,” he just looked at them and said, “What’s the big deal? So he’s angry. What else is on the agenda?”

They all began to laugh as they saw how silly they were being. They were acting like children with an angry parent, as if their psychological survival depended on this president’s being happy.

Each of the two partners who had feared the anger of the other man came from homes where anger was used to control; the third partner had never been exposed to that tactic. As a result, the latter had good boundaries. They elected him to meet with the president of the other company. He confronted the man, saying that if he was able to get over his anger and wanted to work with them, fine. But if not, they would go somewhere else.

It was a good lesson. The first two looked at the man from a dependent child’s perspective. They acted like he was the only

person in the world that they could depend on, and so his anger frightened them. The other one saw it from an adult's eyes and knew that if this man could not get his act together, they could move on.

The problem was internal for two of the three partners. The same angry man got two different responses. The first two resisted setting limits; the third did not. The determining factor was inside the man with the boundary skills, not with the angry man.

If angry people can make you lose your boundaries, you probably have an angry person in your head that you still fear. You will need to work through some of the hurt you experienced in that angry past. A hurt, frightened part of you needs to be exposed to the light and the healing of God and his people. You need love to allow you to let go of that angry parent and stand up to the adults you now face.

Here are the steps you need to take:

1. Realize it is a problem.
2. Go talk to someone about your paralysis. You will not work this out alone.
3. In your support relationships, find the source of your fear and begin to recognize the person in your head that the angry person represents.
4. Talk out your hurts and feelings regarding these past issues.
5. Practice the boundary-setting skills in this book.
6. Don't go into automatic pilot and give up your boundaries either by fighting or by being passive. Give yourself time and space until you can respond. If you need physical distance, get it. But don't give up your boundaries.
7. When you are ready, respond. Stick to self-control statements. Stick to your decisions. Just reiterate what you will do or not do, and let them be angry. Tell them that you care for them; maybe ask if you can do anything else to help. But your no still stands.
8. Regroup. Talk to your support people about the interaction and see if you kept your ground, lost ground, or were attacking. Many times you will feel mean when you were not,

and you may need a reality check on that. You may have thought that you kept your boundaries when you gave away the farm. Get feedback.

9. Keep practicing. Role play, continue to gain insight and understanding about the past, and grieve your losses. Continue to gain skills in the present. After a while, you will think, “I remember when angry people could control me. But I’ve dealt with the things inside that allowed that. It’s nice to be free.” Remember, God does not want angry people to control you. He wants to be your master, and does not want to share you with anyone. He is on your side.

Fear of the Unknown

Another powerful internal resistance to setting boundaries is the fear of the unknown. Being controlled by others is a safe prison. We know where all the rooms are. As one woman said, “I didn’t want to move out of hell. I knew the names of all the streets!”

Setting boundaries and being more independent is scary because it is a step into the unknown. The Bible has many stories about people called by God out of the familiar to an unknown land. And he promises them if they will step out on faith and live his way, he will lead them to a better land. “By faith Abraham, when called to go to a place he would later receive as his inheritance, obeyed and went, even though he did not know where he was going” (Heb. 11:8).

Change is frightening. It may comfort you to know, that if you are afraid, you are possibly on the right road—the road to change and growth. One businessman I know says that if he is not totally frightened at some point in every day, he is not stretching himself far enough. He is very successful at what he does.

Boundaries separate you from what you have known and what you do not want. They open up all sorts of new options for you. You will have mixed emotions as you let go of the old and familiar and venture out into the new.

Think for a moment about the new and frightening developmental boundary steps that have opened up bigger and better worlds for you. As a two-year-old you stepped away from

your mom and dad to explore the world. As a five-year-old you left home to go to school, opening up possibilities of socialization and learning. As an adolescent, you stepped further away from your parents as new competencies and possibilities emerged. As a high school graduate, you left for college or got a job and learned to live on your own.

These steps are scary indeed. But, along with the fear, you stretched to new heights, possibilities, and realizations of God, yourself, and the world. This is the two-sided nature of boundaries. You may lose something, but you gain a new life of peacefulness and self-control.

Here are some ideas that may prove helpful:

1. *Pray.* No better antidote to anxiety about the future exists than faith, hope, and the realization of the one who loves us. Prayer gets us in touch with the one in whom our security lies. Lean on God and ask him to lead your future steps.

2. *Read the Bible.* God continually tells us in the Bible that he has our future in his hands and that he promises to lead us. The Bible is full of stories about how he has proven himself faithful to others as he led them into the unknown. When I was a college student faced with the uncertainty of the future, my favorite verse was “Trust in the LORD with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding; in all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make your paths straight” (Prov. 3:5–6).

Memorizing Scripture verses will give you comfort when you face the unknown. It will remind you that God is trustworthy.

3. *Develop your gifts.* Boundaries create independence of functioning. We cannot feel good about our independence if we are not developing skills and competencies. Take classes. Gain information. Get counseling. Get more training and education. And practice, practice, practice. As your skills develop, you will have less fear of the future.

4. *Lean on your support group.* Just as the child who is learning boundaries needs to look back and check in with mother for refueling, so do adults. You need your support group to help comfort you in the changes you are going through. Lean on them, gain strength from them. “Two are better than one,

because they have a good return for their work: If one falls down, his friend can help him up” (Eccl. 4:9–10). Remember, as the disciples were about to embark on the unknown, Jesus prayed for their unity, oneness, and love for each other and God (John 17).

5. *Learn from the witness of others.* Research and experience has shown that it is very helpful to get with other people who are struggling and who have gone through what you have gone through. This is more than support. It is being able to hear the stories of people who have been there, who have been scared, but who can witness to the fact that you can make it. Listen to their trials, how they have been in your shoes, and how God was faithful to them (2 Cor. 1:4).

6. *Have confidence in your ability to learn.* There is nothing that you are presently doing that you did not have to learn. At one time the things you are now able to do were unfamiliar and frightening. This is the nature of life. But the important thing to remember is that *you can learn*. Once you realize that you are able to learn new things and handle new situations, you cease fearing the future. People who have strong fears about the unknown have a strong need to “know everything” beforehand, and no one ever knows how to do something before they do it. They go and learn it. Some people have confidence in their ability to learn, and others don’t. If you can begin to *learn that you can learn*, future unknowns look totally different.

Many depressed people suffer from a syndrome called “learned helplessness,” in which they have been taught that whatever they do will make no difference on the outcome. Many dysfunctional families caught in destructive cycles reinforce this in their children. But when you grow up and see other options that will make a difference, you do not have to stay stuck in the helplessness you learned at home. You can learn new patterns of relating and functioning; this is the essence of the personal power God wants you to have.

7. *Rework past separations.* Often when you have to make a change or go through a loss, you find that your fear or sadness seems greater than the situation warrants. Some of these heightened emotions may come from past separations or memories of change.

If you had some serious losses in the past, such as losses of friends through frequent moves, you may be tapping into what was not resolved in the past.

Make sure that you find someone with wisdom and begin to see if the fear and pain you are feeling as you face the present is coming from something unresolved in the past. This will help you get into perspective what you feel and perceive. You may be seeing the world through the eyes of a six-year-old, instead of the thirty-five-year-old that you are. Rework the past and do not let it become the future.

8. *Structure*. For many people life changes are unbearable because of the loss of structure they entail. In such changes, we often lose both internal and external structures. Things we used to depend on inside are no longer there, and people, places, and schedules that made us secure on the outside have disappeared. This can leave us in a state of chaos.

Creating internal as well as external structure will help in these times of reorganization. Internal structure will come from creating boundaries, following the steps in this book. In addition, gaining new values and beliefs, learning new spiritual principles and information, having new disciplines and plans and sticking to them, and having others listen to your pain are all structure building. But while you are doing this, you may also need some strong external structure.

Set a certain time every day to call a friend, schedule weekly meeting times with your support group, or join a regular Bible study or a twelve-step support group. In chaotic times, you may need some structure around which to orient your new changes. As you grow, and the change is not overwhelming, you can begin to give up some structure.

9. *Remember what God has done*. The Bible is full of God's reminding his people of the things he has done in the past to give them faith for the future. Hope is rooted in memory. We remember getting help in the past and that gives us hope for the future. Some people feel so hopeless because they have no memory of being helped in the past.

Remind yourself of what God has done and who he is. If you have been a Christian for a long time, look back into your life and remember how he has intervened, the situations from which he has delivered you, the ways that he has come through for you. Listen to others. Remember the grace he has shown us in his Son. He did not do that for nothing; he did it for our redemption and future.

If he has let you down or it seems that he has never done anything for you, allow him to start now. Many times God allowed terrible things for a long time before delivering his people. We do not know God's timing, but if you have started in recovery now, he is moving in your life. The time of your deliverance is near. Hang on and let God do for you what he has done for so many. "So do not throw away your confidence; it will be richly rewarded. You need to persevere so that when you have done the will of God, you will receive what he has promised" (Heb. 10:35–36).

Unforgiveness

"To err is human, to forgive is divine." And to not forgive is the most stupid thing we can do.

Forgiveness is very hard. It means letting go of something that someone "owes" you. Forgiveness is freedom from the past; it is freedom from the abusive person who hurt you.

The Bible compares forgiving people to releasing them from a legal debt. When a debt is incurred, when people trespass on your personal property, real "owing" occurs. You have on the "books" of your soul an accounting of who owes you what. Your mother controlled you and owes you to make it right. Your father dominated you and owes you to make it right. If you are "under the law," you are motivated to collect these debts from them.

Attempts at collection may take many forms. You may try to please them to help them pay you back. You think that if you do a little something more, they will pay their bill and give you the love they owe. Or you may think that if you confront them enough, they will see their wrong and make it right. Or you may feel that if you convince enough people of how bad you've had

it and how bad your parents were, that will somehow clear the account. Or you could “take it out” on someone else, repeating the sin they did to you on someone else—or on them—to even the score. Or you could continue to try and convince them of how bad they are. You think that if they just understood, they would make it better. They would pay what they owe.

Nothing is wrong with wanting things to be resolved. The problem is that things will get resolved in only one way: with grace and forgiveness. An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth does not work. The wrong can never be undone. But it can be forgiven and thereby rendered powerless.

To forgive means to write it off. Let it go. Tear up the account. It is to render the account “canceled.” “Having canceled the written code, with its regulations, that was against us and that stood opposed to us; he took it away, nailing it to the cross” (Col. 2:14).

To forgive means we will never get from that person what was owed us. And that is what we do not like, because that involves grieving for what will never be: The past will not be different.

For some, this means grieving the childhood that never was. For others it means other things, but to hang on to the demand is to stay in unforgiveness, and that is the most destructive thing we can do to ourselves.

Warning: *Forgiveness and opening up to more abuse are not the same thing.* Forgiveness has to do with the past. Reconciliation and boundaries have to do with the future. Limits guard my property until someone has repented and can be trusted to visit again. And if they sin, I will forgive again, seventy times seven. But I want to be around people who honestly fail me, not dishonestly deny that they have hurt me and have no intent to do better. That is destructive for me and for them. If people are owning their sin, they are learning through failure. We can ride that out. They want to be better, and forgiveness will help. But if someone is in denial, or only giving lip service to getting better, without trying to make changes, or seeking help, I need to keep my boundaries, even though I have forgiven them.

Forgiveness gives me boundaries because it unhooks me from the hurtful person, and then I can act responsibly, wisely. If I am not forgiving them, I am still in a destructive relationship with them.

Gain grace from God, and let others' debts go. Do not keep seeking a bad account. Let it go, and go and get what you need from God and people who can give. That is a better life. Unforgiveness destroys boundaries. Forgiveness creates them, for it gets bad debt off of your property.

Remember one last thing. Forgiveness is not denial. You must name the sin against you to forgive it. God did not deny what we did to him. He worked through it. He named it. He expressed his feelings about it. He cried and was angry. And then he let it go. And he did this in the context of relationship. Within the Trinity, he was never alone. Go and do the same. And watch out for the resistance that will want you to stay in the past, trying to collect what will never be.

External Focus

People tend to look outside of themselves for the problem. This external perspective keeps you a victim. It says that you can never be okay until someone else changes. This is the essence of powerless blame. It may make you morally superior to that person (in your own thinking, never in reality), but it will never fix the problem.

Face squarely the resistance to looking at yourself as the one who has to change. It is crucial that you face yourself, for that is the beginning of boundaries. Responsibility begins with an internal focus of confession and repentance. You must confess the truth about the ways you are keeping your boundarylessness going, and you must turn from those ways. You must look at yourself and face the internal resistance of wanting the problem to be on the outside of you.

Guilt

Guilt is a difficult emotion, for it is really not a true feeling, such as sadness, anger, or fear. It is a state of internal condemnation. It is the punitive nature of our fallen conscience saying, "You

are bad.” It is the state Jesus died for, to put us into a state of “no condemnation.” Biblically, it is something legal, not emotional.

Scripture teaches that we are to be out from under condemnation and that guilt should not be a motivator of our behavior. We are to be motivated by love, and the resulting emotion that comes out of love when we fail is “godly sorrow” (2 Cor. 7:10). This is contrasted with “worldly sorrow,” which is guilt, and “brings death.”

This guilt comes mainly from how we have been taught in our early socialization process. Therefore, our guilt feelings are not inerrant. They can appear when we have not done anything wrong at all, but have violated some internal standard that we have been taught. We have to be careful about listening to guilt feelings to tell us when we are wrong, for often, *the guilt feelings themselves* are wrong. In addition, guilt feelings are not good motivators anyway. It is hard to love from a condemned place. We need to feel not condemned, so that we can feel “godly sorrow” that looks at the hurt we have caused someone else, instead of how “bad” we are. Guilt distorts reality, gets us away from the truth, and away from doing what is best for the other person.

This is particularly true when it comes to boundaries. We have seen over and over in this book how the Bible tells us to have good boundaries, to enforce consequences, to set limits, to grow up and separate from families of origin, and to say no. When we do these things, we are doing right. These boundaries are loving actions to take. Even though they are painful, they are helpful to others.

But our fallen consciences can tell us that we are bad or doing something mean when we set boundaries. The people with whom we are setting boundaries will often say things to reinforce our guilty consciences. If you have been raised in a family that said implicitly or explicitly that your boundaries are bad, you know what I am talking about. When you say no to a request, you feel guilty. When you do not allow someone to take advantage of you, you feel guilty. When you separate from the family to create a life of your own, you feel guilty. If you do not

rescue someone who is irresponsible, you feel guilty. The list goes on.

Guilt will keep you from doing what is right and will keep you stuck. Many people do not have good boundaries because they are afraid of disobeying the internal parent inside their heads. There are several steps you can take to avoid this guilt, but you must begin with one realization: the guilt is your problem. Many people without boundaries complain about how “so and so makes me feel guilty when I say no,” as if the other person had some sort of power over them. This fantasy comes from childhood, when your parents seemed so powerful.

No one has the power to “make you feel guilty.” A part of you agrees with the message because it taps into strong parental messages in your emotional brain. And that is your problem; it is on your property, and you must gain control over it. See that being manipulated is your problem, and you will be able to master it.

1. Own the guilt.
2. Get into your support system.
3. Begin to examine where the guilt messages come from.
4. Become aware of your anger.
5. Forgive the controller.
6. Set boundaries in practice situations with your supportive friends, then gradually set them in more difficult situations. This will help you to gain strength as well as gain the supportive “voices” you need to rework your conscience.
7. Learn new information for your conscience. This is where reading books like this and reading what God says about your boundaries will give you new information that will become the new guiding structures in your head instead of the old voices. Learning God’s ways can restore your soul and make your heart rejoice instead of feeling that controlling, parental guilt.
8. Acquire guilt. That may sound funny, but you are going to have to disobey your parental conscience to get well. You are going to have to do some things that are right but make you feel guilty. Do not let the guilt be your master any longer. Set the boundaries, and then get with your new supporters to let them help you with the guilt.

9. Stay in your support group. Guilt is not resolved by just retraining your mind. You need the new connections to internalize new voices in your head.

10. Do not be surprised by grief. This will be sad, but let others love you in that process. Mourners can be comforted.

Abandonment Fears: Taking a Stand in a Vacuum

Remember from the developmental section in Chapter 4 that boundaries come after bonding. God designed the learning process this way. Babies must be secure before they learn boundaries so that learning separateness will not be frightening, but new and exciting. Children who have good connections naturally begin to set boundaries and move away from others. They have enough love inside to risk setting boundaries and gaining independence.

But if one does not have secure bonding, setting boundaries is too frightening. Many people stay in destructive relationships because they fear abandonment. They fear that if they stand up for themselves, they will be all alone in the world. They would rather have no boundaries and some connection than have boundaries and be all alone.

Boundaries are not built in a vacuum. They must be undergirded by strong bonding to safe people, or they will fail. If you have a good support group to go to after setting boundaries with someone you love, you will not be alone.

Being “rooted and grounded” in love in the body of Christ and with God will be the developmental fuel you need to risk boundary setting. People often vacillate between compliance and isolation. Neither is healthy or sustainable for very long.

Over and over in our hospital program we have seen people in destructive patterns unable to set limits because they were working in a vacuum. They repeatedly say that the understanding support they received in the program fueled them to do the hard things they had never been able to do.

If It Were Easy, You Would Have Done It By Now

This chapter is about trouble, the kind Jesus warned about. “In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have

overcome the world” (John 16:33). When you begin to do things Jesus’ way, you will encounter troubles—from both outside *and* inside. The world, the Devil, and even your own flesh will resist you and pressure you to do it the wrong way.

But the wrong way is not working. To do it right will be difficult, but he warned us about that. “Narrow [is] the road that leads to life” (Matt. 7:14). To hammer out a godly identity takes a lot of courage and a lot of work. And a lot of battles.

Running into resistance is a good sign that you are doing what you need to do. It will be worth it. Remember the clear message of the Scriptures: when you encounter resistances, persevering to the end will bring great reward, “receiving the goal of your faith, the salvation of your souls” (1 Peter 1:9). As James puts it, “Consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance. Perseverance must finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything” (James 1:2–4).

These resistances will surely come. I promise you. If they didn’t come, you would have established boundaries a long time ago. But as they come, see them in their biblical perspective. They are part of a long history of your sisters and brothers—people who have encountered many trials as they ventured out on the road of faith, seeking a better land. This journey is always riddled with trouble, but also with the promises of our Shepherd to carry us through if we do our part. Go for it.

How to Measure Success with Boundaries

Jean sat at her kitchen table, teacup in hand, amazed. It was an unfamiliar sensation, but a pleasant one. Her mind wandered back to the events of the morning.

Her eight-year-old son Bryan had begun the day with his usual waking-up shenanigans. He sulked and pouted his way to the breakfast table, announcing, “I’m not going to school—and no one’s going to make me!”

Normally Jean would have either tried to talk Bryan into attending school, or blown up at him in frustration. However, this morning was different. Jean simply said, “You’re right, Honey. No one can make you go to school. That has to be something you choose to do. However, if you don’t choose to go to school, you *are* choosing to stay in your room all day with no TV. But that’s something you’ll have to decide for yourself, like you did last week.”

Bryan hesitated in his tantrum. He was thinking about when Mom had made him stay in his room and miss dinner when he had refused to set the table. Finally, he said, “Well, I’ll go—but I don’t have to like it!”

“Absolutely,” Jean agreed. “You don’t have to like a lot of things like school. But I’m sure you’ve made the right choice.” She helped Bryan on with his jacket and watched him walk to the carpool ride outside.

Not ten minutes later, Jean had received a call from her husband, Jerry, who had driven to work early. “Honey,” he said. “I just found out I have a meeting after work. The last time I

showed up late for dinner, there wasn't any. Think you could save some this time?"

Jean laughed. "Last time, you never called me to let me know. I really appreciate your telling me in advance. I'll feed the kids, and you and I'll eat together later."

My son makes it to school, even with a cranky attitude. My husband calls me to inform me about schedule changes. I'm dreaming, aren't I, Lord?

Jean wasn't dreaming. She was, for the first time in her life, experiencing the rewards of setting and maintaining clear boundaries in her life. A great deal of hard work and risk-taking had gone into them. But it was worth it. She rose up from the table and began to ready herself for work.

Jean saw visible, demonstrable proof that her boundary work was bearing fruit in her life. Things were different. But how did she get from Point A (boundarylessness) to Point B (mature boundaries)? Can we measure our boundary development?

Yes. Specific, orderly changes herald the emerging of mature boundaries. It's helpful to be aware of them. The following eleven steps allow you to measure your growth—to see where you are in your development. Use this chapter as a guide to the next step in your growth.

Step #1: Resentment—Our Early-Warning Signal

Randy had never before felt irritated at his best friend Will's sarcastic digs. Resentment was a new sensation for him. Being the butt of the jokes had always been easy for him. "Good-natured Randy" could roll with the punches.

But when Will came up to him at church and said in front of several observers, "Are you buying smaller clothes—or putting on weight?" Randy didn't laugh it off. He said nothing to his friend, but the remark stuck inside him. He was embarrassed and hurt. He couldn't shake it off as he had for so many years.

This never got to me before, Randy thought to himself. Why is it getting to me this time? Maybe I'm getting too sensitive.

One of the first signs that you're beginning to develop boundaries is a sense of resentment, frustration, or anger at the

subtle and not-so-subtle violations in your life. Just as radar signals the approach of a foreign missile, your anger can alert you to boundary violations in your life.

Randy had come from a family who largely avoided conflict and disagreement. Arguments were replaced by compliance. When Randy was in his thirties, he sought therapy for a long-standing eating disorder. To his surprise, instead of discussing diet and exercise plans, the therapist had asked him about how he reacted to controlling people in his life.

At first, Randy couldn't think of a controlling person. But after some consideration, he thought of Will. Will teasing Randy. Will humiliating Randy in front of friends. Will taking Randy for granted. Will taking advantage of Randy.

Those memories were not simply intellectual pictures in Randy's mind. They carried hurt, anger, and resentment. They were the seeds of boundaries in Randy's life.

People who can't get angry when they are being violated, manipulated, or controlled have a genuine handicap. No "warning light" alerts them to boundary problems. This light, when functioning properly, should turn on quickly when you are being attacked. The Bible describes anger in terms of heat: "Then the LORD's anger burned against Moses" (Exod. 4:14); "Therefore the LORD's anger burned against this land" (Deut. 29:27). Anger is like a fire that shoots up within your heart, letting you know there's a problem to confront.

Our inability to get angry is generally a sign that we are afraid of the separateness that comes with telling the truth. We fear that saying the truth about our unhappiness with someone will damage the relationship. But when we acknowledge that truth is always our friend, we often give ourselves permission to be angry.

So before you say anything confrontive, even before you set that first boundary, examine your heart. Ask yourself, "Do I have permission to feel angry when I'm controlled by others? Am I aware when I'm being violated? Can I hear my early-warning signal?" If so, you're on the right track. If not, this is a good time to work on finding a safe place to tell the truth. As you are

better able to be honest about differences and disagreements, you will be better able to allow your anger to help you.

Step #2: A Change of Tastes—Becoming Drawn to Boundary-Lovers

It had been a full twelve months since Tammy and Scott had changed churches. They were reflecting back on the last year.

They had attended their former church since their marriage several years ago. It was a doctrinally correct and active fellowship. But one problem that didn't go away was the church members' attitude toward attendance at church functions. They placed a great premium on being present at each and every gathering, from choir specials to night-time services to weekly Bible studies.

When Scott and Tammy had to miss meetings, conflicts arose. They recalled the night old friends from out-of-town came to visit them. Tammy had called Janice, her Bible study leader, to tell her they'd be missing that evening's meeting.

"I think there's a problem in commitment here, Tammy," Janice had replied. "If we really meant something to you, you'd be here. But you just go and do what you have to do."

Tammy was furious—and hurt. Janice had shamed her for wanting to have a night off with her friends. It was this inability of her group to understand the word no that subsequently fueled the couple's move to another church.

Now, a year later, she and Scott were pleased with their decision. Though their present fellowship was also conservative and active, stressing lots of involvement, they didn't become critical or judgmental when members needed time off for some reason or another.

"How's this for a contrast?" Scott said to Tammy. "I called Mark, our men's prayer breakfast leader yesterday—I'd just flown in on a red-eye flight from L.A. I told him I'd be shot if I went to the breakfast. What do you think he told me? 'What are you doing on the phone with me?' he said. 'Get yourself in bed and catch some Z's!' That sort of understanding makes me want to be there next time."

At one time both Scott and Tammy thought their first church's attitude was correct. They weren't even aware that others could understand their no. Now, a year later, they couldn't conceive of returning to that situation.

People with immature limit-setting abilities often find themselves involved with "boundary-busters." These may be family members, colleagues, spouses, church members, or friends. The boundary confusion seems normal to them—so they aren't very aware of the destruction it causes for themselves and others.

As boundary-injured individuals begin developing their own boundaries, however, a change occurs. They become attracted to people who can hear their no without being critical. Without getting hurt. Without personalizing it. Without running over their boundaries in a manipulative or controlling fashion. People who will simply say, "Okay—we'll miss you. See you next time."

The reason for this shift is hidden in the way we have been constructed by God. We were created free for one basic purpose: to love, to be meaningfully close to God and to others: "And over all these virtues put on love, which binds them all together in perfect unity" (Col. 3:14). This fundamental truth underscores the deepest parts of our hearts. And when we find relationships in which we have freedom to set limits, something wonderful happens. In addition to the freedom to say no, we find the freedom to say a wholehearted, unconflicted, gratitude-driven yes to others. We become attracted to boundary lovers, because in them, we find permission to be honest, authentic, loving individuals.

To a boundary-injured person, people who can say a clear no sometimes seem curt and cold. But as the boundaries become more firm, curt and cold people change into caring, refreshingly honest people.

We need to join with boundary lovers in deep, meaningful attachments. Boundaries can't develop in a vacuum. As we make connections involving asking for support and understanding with these people, God gives us, through them, the grace and power to do the hard work of limit setting. This drawing to boundaried individuals extends to God. Some people will begin finding out

that the holy, just God about whom they read in the Old Testament isn't so bad or scary. He just has very clear boundaries: "As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts" (Isa. 55:9).

Step #3: Joining the Family

As we find our tastes changing, from boundary-muddled relationships to more clearly defined people, we begin developing close and meaningful connections with people who have clear boundaries. We begin either growing in boundaries in our present relationships, or finding new attachments in which to invest, or both. This is a crucial phase in boundary development.

Why is it so important to join the boundaried family? Mainly because as with any spiritual discipline, boundaries can't be worked on in a vacuum. We need others with the same biblical values of limit setting and responsibility to encourage us, practice with us, and stay with us. That's what Wayne discovered.

Wayne couldn't believe the change. Over the past few months, he'd become aware of his lack of boundaries at work. While other employees went home on time, he was frequently asked to stay later. He wanted to stand up to his boss and let him know that his work limits were going to become tighter and more realistic. But every time he approached his superior, his anxiety kept him tongue-tied and silent.

Wayne despaired of ever developing mature work boundaries. About this time, he joined a support group at church. His relationships in the group deepened, and he began to trust the members. Finally, he was able to emotionally "take them with him" to work the day he sat down with his boss and worked out the overtime conflict. It was the safety and support of the group that gave Wayne the strength he needed to tell the truth at work.

Jesus defined fellowship as two or three people gathered in his name, saying that he would be there in their midst (Matt. 18:20). It is this very combination of his Spirit and the emotional memories of those who believe in us that helps us keep firm boundaries. Why? Because we know we have a spiritual and

emotional home somewhere. No matter how caustic the criticism, or how severe the rejection of the one we're in conflict with, we aren't alone. And that makes all the difference in the world in boundary setting.

Step #4: Treasuring Our Treasures

After you feel safe being around people who believe that grace and truth are good (John 1:17), your values will start to change. You will begin to see that taking responsibility for yourself is healthy, and you will begin to understand that taking responsibility for other adults is destructive.

When people are treated as objects for long enough, they see themselves as someone else's property. They don't value self-stewardship because they relate to themselves the same way that significant others have related to them. Many people are told over and over again that nurturing and maintaining their souls is selfish and wrong. After a while, they develop a deep conviction that this is true. And at that point, they place little value on taking care of the feelings, talents, thoughts, attitudes, behavior, body, and resources God entrusted to them.

This principle is taught in Scripture: "We love because he first loved us" (1 John 4:19). In other words, we learn to be loving because we are loved. Grace must come from the outside for us to be able to develop it inside. The opposite side of this truth is that we can't love when we aren't loved. And, taking the thinking further, we can't value or treasure our souls when they haven't been valued or treasured.

This is a key principle. Our basic sense of ourselves, of what is real and true about us, comes from our significant, primary relationships. That's why many people who were unloved in childhood can be inundated by caring people in their adult years, yet not be able to shake a deep sense of being worthless and unloveable, no matter how much people try to show them their loveability.

Helen's father sexually abused her in her early years. She was terribly traumatized by the molestation, but tried to keep the secret and protect the family from being upset. By her

teenage years, however, Helen inadvertently began to “tell the truth” about her family problem, in nonverbal ways. She became sexually promiscuous at a very early age.

As an adult, Helen reflected in therapy on her tumultuous teen years. “I can’t even remember the boys’ faces. All I knew was that someone wanted something from me, and I felt it was my duty to give it to them—for no other reason than that they wanted it! I felt that I had no say-so in the matter.”

Helen had not been treasured by one of the people who should have treasured and cherished her most. As a result, she did not treasure herself. She provided sexual services to just about anyone who requested them. She had no sense that her body and feelings were a “pearl of great value” (Matt. 13:46), given to her by God, which she was to protect and develop.

When Christians begin to value getting well, recovering, and developing themselves into the image of God (all of which are different ways of saying the same thing), a shift occurs. They begin desiring a return on God’s investment (remember the parable of the talents in Matthew 25:14–30). Taking care of themselves becomes important.

Steve walked up to me excitedly one day. As he wasn’t given to emotional outbursts, I knew something important was going on. He showed me his Bible, where he had been reading 1 Corinthians 8:11: “So this weak brother, for whom Christ died, is destroyed by your knowledge.”

“Something is happening inside of me,” he said. “For years, I felt guilty about reading that passage. I thought it was condemning me for leading weaker Christians into sin.”

“Well, it does say that,” I replied. “But you’ve noticed something else.”

“I have,” said Steve. “I’m seeing that I’m also a ‘brother for whom Christ died.’ That means I need to be as careful and concerned about myself as I am about others. There’s no difference between what God thinks of him and what God thinks of me.”

Steve had realized an important theological point. For years, Christians have been taught that protecting their spiritual and emotional property is selfish. Yet God is interested in people

loving others, and you can't love others unless you have received love inside yourself.

Have you had Steve's experience? Is getting help and learning self-protection and biblical boundaries important to you? If it isn't, it will be difficult, if not impossible, to go through the hard work of developing good limits. You may need to spend some time around people who have a mature understanding of healthy boundaries and learn from their modeling.

This principle is illustrated when the psalmist says, "Above all else, guard your heart, for it is the wellspring of life" (Prov. 4:23). When we "watch over" our hearts (the home of our treasures), we guard them. We are to value our treasures so much that we keep them protected. Whatever we don't value, we don't guard. The security around a bank is significantly tighter than that around a junkyard!

Begin a list of your "treasures": your time, money, feelings, and beliefs. How do you want others to treat them? How do you want others to not treat them?

Step #5: Practicing Baby No's

The group was silent. After many sessions of considering the prospect, Shareen was about to set a limit with another group member for the first time in her life. Praying silently, the group waited to see if she could become a truthteller.

I had asked Shareen to mention to a group member one thing that had rubbed her the wrong way in the past few sessions. Though she was terrified, she agreed to try. At first she said nothing, obviously gathering up courage. Then, slowly, she turned to a woman sitting next to her and said, "Carolyn, I don't know how to say this, but here goes. It bothers me when you always take the good chair at group." Quickly, she ducked her head, waiting for the rebuttal.

There was none, at least not what Shareen had expected.

"I've been waiting for you to say something," Carolyn explained. "I knew you were acting distant toward me, but I didn't know why. It helps to know, and I feel closer to you now."

You took a risk to confront me. Who knows—I may even arm wrestle you for the chair!"

Does this sound trivial? It isn't. Given her family background of a mother who made her feel guilty for setting limits and a father who had rage attacks when she dared disagree, Shareen was taking a genuine plunge. For her, boundaries were out of the question until her anxiety and depression wrenched her life out of control. That's why the best possible place for Shareen to begin her boundary work was in her therapy group.

Growth in setting emotional boundaries must always be at a rate that takes into account your past injuries. Otherwise, you could fail massively before you have solid enough boundaries.

"This boundary teaching doesn't work," complained Frank in a therapy session.

"Why not?" I asked.

"Well, as soon as I understood that I don't set good limits with people, I called my father the same day and gave him what for. Can you believe what he did? He hung up on me! This is great, just great. Boundaries have made things worse for me, instead of better."

Frank is like the overeager child who is too impatient for training wheels on his new bicycle. It's only several falls and skinned knees later that he begins to entertain the possibility that he skipped some steps in his training.

Here's an idea to help you navigate this step. Ask your support group or your good friends if you could work on boundaries with them. They will show you their true value in their response to your truthtelling. Either they'll warmly cheer you on in being able to disagree with and confront them, or they'll resist you. Either way, you'll learn something. A good supportive relationship cherishes the no of all parties involved. The members know that true intimacy is only built around the freedom to disagree: "He who conceals his hatred has lying lips" (Prov. 10:18). Begin practicing your no with people who will honor it and love you for it.

Step #6: Rejoicing in the Guilty Feelings

As strange as it may seem, a sign that you're becoming a boundaried person is often a sense of self-condemnation, a sense

that you've transgressed some important rules in your limit setting. Many people experience intense critical self-judgment when they begin telling the truth about what is and isn't their biblical responsibility. Why is that? Let's look at the answer in terms of slavery and freedom.

Boundary-injured individuals are slaves. They struggle to make value-based decisions on their own, but they most often reflect the wishes of those around them. And even though they can be surrounded by supportive boundary lovers, they still experience trouble setting limits.

The culprit here is a weak conscience, or an overactive and unbiblically harsh internal judge. Though we need our internal "evaluator" to help us know right from wrong, many people carry around an extremely self-critical—and inaccurate—conscience. They feel that they are transgressing when they aren't.

Because of this overactive judge, the boundary-injured individual often has great difficulty setting limits. Questions such as, "Aren't you being too harsh?" and "How can you not attend the party? What a selfish thought!" are raised.

You can imagine the havoc when the struggler actually sets a limit or two, even a small one. The conscience moves into overdrive, as its unrealistic demands are being disobeyed. This rebellion against honest boundaries is a threat to the parental control of the conscience. It attacks the soul with vigor, hoping to beat the person into submitting again to its untruthful do's and don'ts.

In a funny way, then, activating the hostile conscience is a sign of spiritual growth. A signal that you may be protesting unbiblical restraints. If the conscience were silent and providing no "how could you?" guilt-inducing messages, it might mean that you were remaining enslaved to the internal parent. That's why we encourage you to rejoice in the guilt. It means you are moving ahead.

Step #7: Practicing Grownup No's

Think for a minute about this question: Who is your number-one "boundary buster"? Who is the foremost person in your life with whom it's difficult to set limits? More than one person may

come to mind. This step deals with those extremely complicated, conflictual, frightening relationships. Straightening out these relationships is a major goal in becoming a boundaried person.

The fact that this is the seventh, and not the second, step underscores the importance of making sure we've done our painstaking homework and practice before now. Setting important limits with significant people is the fruit of much work and maturing.

It's important not to confuse our goals here. Often, Christians who have been boundary injured think that the objective is to set limits on those important areas, and get life stabilized again. They may be living for the day when "I can tell Mom no." Or when "I can set limits on my husband's drinking." While these sorts of confrontations are very important (Jesus spoke of them in Matthew 18:15–20), they aren't the ultimate target of learning boundaries.

Our real target is maturity—the ability to love successfully and work successfully, the way God does. This is the goal of becoming more like Christ:

Dear friends, now we are children of God, and what we will be has not yet been made known. But we know that when he appears, we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is. (1 John 3:2)

Boundary setting is a large part of maturing. We can't really love until we have boundaries—otherwise we love out of compliance or guilt. And we can't really be productive at work without boundaries; otherwise we're so busy following others' agendas that we're doubleminded and unstable (James 1:8). The goal is to have a character structure that has boundaries and that can set limits on self and others at the appropriate times. Having internal boundaries results in having boundaries in the world: "For as he thinks within himself, so he is" (Prov. 23:7 NASB).

Developing a well-defined, honest, and goal-oriented character structure produces this step. By this time, those frightening major no's have been prepared for over time, with lots of work and practice.

Sometimes the large no will precipitate a crisis. Someone important to you will be angry. Or hurt. Or abusive. The truth will expose the divisions in relationships. The conflicts and disagreements already exist. Boundaries simply bring them out to the surface.

Prayerfully make a list of your significant relationships. Now add to that what specific treasures are being violated in these relationships. What specific boundaries need to be set to protect these treasures?

Step #8: Rejoicing in the Absence of Guilty Feelings

Step #6 involved understanding that your first steps into a boundaried existence will most likely be met by the harsh resistance of an overactive and weak conscience. With consistent work and good support, however, the guilt diminishes. We become more able to “keep hold of the deep truths of the faith with a clear conscience” (1 Tim. 3:9).

You can take this step now that you have shifted allegiance spiritually and emotionally. You have changed from listening to your internal parent to responding to the biblical values of love, responsibility, and forgiveness. And these values have been internalized in the heart by many, many relational experiences with people who understand these values. The heart has somewhere to go for self-evaluation besides a critical conscience. The heart rests in the emotional memories of loving, truthful people.

Evelyn knew something was different inside when she confronted her husband on his critical tirades. “That’s it, Paul,” she said, without raising her voice. “If you’re not using a civil voice with me in ten seconds, I’ll be spending the evening at my friend Nan’s house. Make your choice, because I’m not bluffing.”

Paul, ready to launch another verbal attack, closed his mouth. He, too, sensed that Evelyn was serious this time. He sat down on the couch and waited for her next move.

What surprised Evelyn was the absence of her self-recriminations after setting limits. Usually, she would say to

herself, “You didn’t give Paul enough chances,” or, “You’ve just got to stop being so thin-skinned,” or “But he works hard and he’s good with the kids.”

Her group had worked. Her practicing had paid off. And her conscience had begun growing up.

Step #9: Loving the Boundaries of Others

A client once asked me, “Is there any way I can set boundaries with my wife—but not have her set limits with me?” Though I admired his candor, the answer, obviously, was no. If we expect others to respect our boundaries, we need to respect theirs for several reasons.

Loving others’ boundaries confronts our selfishness and omnipotence. When we are concerned about protecting the treasures of others, we work against the self-centeredness that is part of our fallen nature. We become more other-centered.

Loving others’ boundaries increases our capacity to care about others. It isn’t difficult to love the agreeable aspects of others. It’s another story, however, when we encounter another’s resistance, confrontation, or separateness. We may find ourselves in conflict, or not getting something we might want from the other.

When we can love and respect the boundaries of others, we accomplish two things. First, we genuinely care for another person because we gain nothing by helping someone tell us no. It just helps him or her deprive us better!

The second advantage in loving others’ boundaries is that it teaches us empathy. It shows us that we need to treat others as we would like to be treated: “The entire law is summed up in a single command: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself’” (Gal. 5:14). We should fight for the no of others just as we should fight for our own no—even if it costs us something.

Step #10: Freeing Our No and Our Yes

“I love you, Peter,” said Sylvia to her boyfriend as they sat over dinner. It was an important moment. Peter had just pro-

posed marriage to Sylvia. And she was attracted to him; they seemed to be compatible in so many ways. There was only one problem: they had only been dating a few weeks. Peter's impulsive proposal was pushing it a little for Sylvia's tastes.

"And though I love you," she continued, "I need more time for us to be together before we get engaged. So, because I can't say yes to you, I'm saying no."

Sylvia shows the fruit of maturing boundaries. She wasn't sure, so she said no. People with undeveloped limit-setting abilities do the opposite. They say yes when they are unsure. Then, when they have committed themselves to someone else's schedule, they realize that they don't want to be in that particular situation anymore. But, by then, it's too late.

I worked as a house parent in a children's home for a time. In our training for the job of living in the same cottage with several active adolescents, one experienced professional told us, "There are two ways you can start off with kids: first, you can say yes to everything. Then, when you start putting limits on them, they'll resent you and rebel. Or you can begin with clear and strict limits. After they get used to your style, you can loosen up a little. They'll love you forever."

Obviously, the second method worked better. Not only did it clarify my boundaries for the kids, it taught me to free up my own no. This principle is at the heart of this yardstick: our no becomes as free as our yes. In other words, when you are as free to say no to a request as you are to say yes, you are well on the way to boundary maturity. There's no conflict, no second thoughts, no hesitation in using either word.

Think for a second about the last time you were asked for something from someone. Perhaps it was for some of your time that you weren't sure you had to give. Suppose the person asking is not selfish, manipulative, or controlling. Reasonable people can make reasonable requests sometimes.

So you were asked for something you weren't sure you had left over to give. You weren't sure you could do it with a "cheerful heart" (2 Cor. 9:7). What happened next is what this particular boundary yardstick is all about. You probably did one of two things:

1. Since you were unsure, you said yes.
2. Since you were unsure, you said no.

Which is the more mature of these? In most cases, the second. Why? Because it is more responsible to give out of our resources than to promise that which we might not be able to deliver. Jesus said that we are to “calculate the cost” of our endeavors.

Suppose one of you wants to build a tower. Will he not first sit down and estimate the cost to see if he has enough money to complete it? For if he lays the foundation and is not able to finish it, everyone who sees it will ridicule him. (Luke 14:28–30)

Boundary-injured individuals make promises and then do one of two things: (1) They resentfully make good, or (2) they fail on the promise. Boundary-developed people, however, make good freely and gladly. Or they don’t promise at all.

Following up on guilt-ridden or compliant responsibilities can be quite costly, painful, and inconvenient. The lesson you need to learn is not to promise too much before you have done your spiritual and emotional calculations.

Step #11: Mature Boundaries—Value-Driven Goal Setting

Ben placed his pen down on the desk and looked over at his wife, Jan, satisfied. They had just spent a day together reviewing the last year and planning for the next one. This annual tradition had been developed over the past several years. It was a way for them to feel that their lives had some direction, some purpose.

Before they had begun setting goals together, life had been chaotic. Ben had been controlling and impulsive. They hadn’t been able to save much money because of his spending habits. Though she was good with money, Jan had been compliant and nonconfrontive. So the more Ben spent, the more she withdrew and busied herself outside the house in volunteer missions.

Finally, after a great deal boundary work with a marriage therapist, Jan began setting limits on Ben’s out-of-control behavior.

She became more honest, less blaming, and much less resentful. Ben, in his turn, began developing more of a sense of responsibility toward the family. He even felt more tender toward his wife—even after she nailed him to the wall several times about his irresponsibility!

Ben smiled. “Honey,” he said to her, “this last year has been a one-hundred-eighty degree change from the one before. We saved some money. We achieved some financial goals. We’re more honest with each other. We like each other better. And you’re not running off helping every committee in town who needs a volunteer!”

Jan responded, “Well, I don’t need to anymore. I’ve got what I want here, with you, the kids, our church support group, and the ministries we work in. Tell you what. Let’s plan what we want to do—with ourselves, with the Lord, with our money, and with our friends—and make next year even better!”

Ben and Jan were reaping the fruit of years of work. Their maturing boundary-setting abilities were paying off in all sorts of ways. After all, the ultimate goal of learning boundaries is to free us up to protect, nurture, and develop the lives God has given us stewardship over. Setting boundaries is mature, proactive, initiative-taking. It’s being in control of our lives.

Individuals with mature boundaries aren’t frantic, in a hurry, or out of control. They have a direction in their lives, a steady moving toward their personal goals. They plan ahead.

The reward for their wise boundaries is the joy of desires fulfilled in life. Their investments in the years God has given pay off for them. It’s a lot like Paul reflected at the end of his life:

The time has come for my departure. I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith.
(2 Tim. 4:6–7)

But does life interrupt the process of the person with mature boundaries? Won’t there be trials, complications, and people wanting me on their track and not God’s? Absolutely. The days truly are evil. There will be all sorts of resistances to our boundaries and goals.

But the person with mature limits understands that, makes room for that, allows for that. And he or she knows that, should it be needed, a no is waiting inside the heart—ready to use. Not for an attack. Not to punish another. But to protect and develop the time, talents, and treasures that God has allocated to us during our threescore and ten years on this planet (Ps. 90:10).

A Day in a Life with Boundaries

Remember Sherrie from chapter one? She stumbled through the day in a haphazard, out-of-control fashion. Imagine, now, that Sherrie has read this book. She's decided to restructure her life within the clear boundaries we've outlined. Her day is now characterized by freedom, self-control, and intimacy. Let's take a peek in on her life with boundaries:

6:00 A.M.

The alarm sounded. Sherrie reached over and turned it off. *I'll bet I can do without this alarm*, she thought to herself. I've been awake for five minutes already. Getting seven or eight hours of sleep had long been a fantasy of Sherrie's—one which she'd always felt was unrealistic with a family.

Yet, it had begun to happen. The kids went to bed earlier now that she and Walt had begun setting better time limits with them. She and Walt even got a few minutes to relax together before bed.

The sleep goal didn't come without its price, however. Like the other night when Sherrie's mother had once again made her unexpected surprise visit. This time, she showed up at a time when Sherrie had to work on a science fair project with her son, Todd.

It had been one of the hardest things Sherrie ever had to say. "Mom, I want to visit with you. But this is a really bad time. I'm helping Todd finish up his solar system project, and he needs my

full attention. You could come in and watch if you'd like, or I could call you tomorrow and plan a time for us to get together."

Sherrie's mother hadn't reacted well. The martyr syndrome had kicked in full force: "It's just as I've always known, Dear. Who'd want to spend time with a lonely old lady? Well, I'll just go home and be by myself. Like every other night."

At one time Sherrie would have folded under such a masterful onslaught of the "guilties." But Sherrie had, after lots of practice with her support group, decided how to handle her mom's unexpected visits. And she didn't feel so guilty anymore. Mom would be fine the next morning—and Sherrie would have had a good evening.

6:45 A.M.

Sherrie slipped into her new dress. It fit perfectly—two sizes smaller than she had worn a few months ago. *Thanks, God for my new self-boundaries*, she prayed. Her diet and exercise program had finally worked, not because she learned any new secrets about food and working out, but because she saw taking care of herself not as selfishness, but stewardship. She'd stopped feeling guilty about taking the time away from other things to work on her body. Getting in shape made her a better wife, mom, and friend. And she liked herself better.

7:15 A.M.

Amy and Todd were finished with breakfast and were taking their plates to the sink to rinse them and place them into the dishwasher. Sharing household tasks had become a comfortable habit for all members of the family. Sure, the kids and Walt had resisted, but then Sherrie stopped preparing breakfast until she got help with cleaning up. A miracle had happened with the kids and Walt. A light had gone on inside, saying, "If I don't work, I don't eat."

Even more satisfying was watching the kids get to their school rides on time, with a couple of minutes to spare. Beds made. Homework done. Lunches packed. Incredible.

Of course, the path to that place had been rocky. In the beginning, Sherrie had called the carpool parents and told them to wait a maximum of sixty seconds for her kids, then leave for school. And they did. When Amy and Todd missed their ride, they had accused Sherrie of betraying and humiliating them. “You just don’t care about our feelings!” Tough words for a loving mother trying to learn boundaries.

Yet, with a fervent prayer life and a good support group, Sherrie held to her boundaries. After a few days of having to walk and being several hours late to school, the kids had begun setting their own alarms.

7:30 A.M.

Sherrie put her makeup on in front of her dresser. She was still not used to this after all those years of applying eyeliner in the car’s rearview mirror. But she enjoyed the peacefulness—and left for work with a few minutes to spare.

8:45 A.M.

Walking into the conference room of McAllister Enterprises where she worked as a fashion consultant supervisor (the promotion had been for “leadership effectiveness”), Sherrie glanced at her watch. The meeting was about to start—with herself as chairperson.

Glancing around the room she noted that three key people weren’t here yet. She made a note to chat with those colleagues. Maybe they were having boundary problems she could assist them with.

Sherrie smiled. She remembered the days—not too long ago—when she would have been grateful for someone at work to help her with the same problems. *Thank you, God, for a church that teaches a biblical view of boundaries*, she prayed. And began the meeting. On time.

11:59 A.M.

Sherrie's extension rang. She picked it up: "Sherrie Phillips," she said, waiting for the answer.

"Sherrie, thank goodness you're there! I don't know what I'd have done if you'd been at lunch!"

There was no mistaking that voice. It belonged to Lois Thompson. It was unusual for Lois to call these days. She didn't call much at all since Sherrie had begun addressing the imbalances in the relationship. She had confronted Lois over coffee:

"Lois, it seems as though you always want to talk to me when you're hurting. And that's fine. But when I'm struggling, you're either unavailable, distracted, or uninterested."

Lois had protested that this wasn't at all true. "I'm a true friend, Sherrie," she said.

"I guess we'll find out. I need to know if our friendship is based on what I do for you—or on true friendship. And I want you to be aware of some boundaries I'm setting with us. First, I won't always be able to drop everything for you, Lois. I love you, but I simply can't take that kind of responsibility for your pain. And second, there will be times when I'm really hurting—and I'm going to call you and ask for support. I actually don't know if you know me and my pain at all. So we both need to find out."

Over the next few months, Sherrie had found out a great deal about this friendship. She found out that when she couldn't console Lois during her chronic emergencies, Lois would withdraw, hurt. She found out that when Lois was doing all right, she would ignore Sherrie. Lois never called just to see how Sherrie was doing. And she found out that when Sherrie herself called Lois with problems, Lois could only talk about herself.

It was sad to find out that a childhood connection had never really flourished into a mutual attachment. Lois simply couldn't come out of her self-centeredness enough to want to understand Sherrie's world.

But back to the phone call. Sherrie answered, "Lois. I'm glad you called. But I'm out the door. Can I call you back later?"

"But I need to talk to you now," came the sullen response.
"Lois, call back if you want to. Here are some better times."

They said their good-bys and hung up. Maybe Lois would call back, maybe not. More likely Lois's other friends were all busy, and Sherrie's name had come up next on the call list. *Well, I'm sad that Lois isn't happy with me, Sherrie thought to herself. But people probably weren't too happy with Jesus when he withdrew from them to be with his Father. Trying to take responsibility for Lois's feelings was trying to own something God never gave me.* With that thought, she went to lunch.

4:00 P.M.

Sherrie's afternoon passed fairly uneventfully. She was on the way out of the office when her assistant, Jeff Moreland, flagged her down.

Without stopping her pace, Sherrie said to him, "Hi, Jeff—can you leave me a message? I need to be on the road in thirty seconds." Frustrated, Jeff left to write the message.

What a shift in the last few months. For Sherrie's boss to be her assistant wasn't something she had expected. Yet, when she had begun setting limits in her job and not covering Jeff's bases for him, Jeff's productivity had dropped dramatically. Jeff's irresponsibility and lack of follow-through emerged. His own superiors had, for the first time, become aware that he was the problem.

They had discovered that Sherrie was the driving force behind the design department. She was the one who made things happen. While Jeff took credit for all the work, he let her do it while he talked to friends on the phone all day.

Sherrie's boundaries had done their job: they had exposed his irresponsibility. They had clarified where the actual hole in the wall was. And Jeff had begun changing.

At first, he had been angry and hurt. He'd threatened to leave. But finally things had settled down a bit. And Jeff had actually begun being more punctual. He'd buckled down. The

demotion had woken him up—let him see that he'd been riding on the coattails of others.

Sherrie and Jeff still had their problems. He had a hard time hearing no from her. And it was difficult for Sherrie to tolerate the resentment. But there was no way she'd trade problems with the Sherrie who'd had no boundaries.

4:30 P.M.

The session with Todd's fourth-grade teacher went well. For one thing, Walt had attended with Sherrie. Knowing he was supportive made a lot of difference. But more important, the hard boundary work that Sherrie and Walt were doing at home with Todd was beginning to pay off.

"Mrs. Phillips," said the teacher, "I'll admit, I took Todd with some reservations after consulting with Mrs. Russell, his third-grade teacher. But there is a significant improvement in your son's ability to respond to limits."

Walt and Sherrie smiled at each other. "Believe me," Walt said, "there was no magic formula. Todd hated doing homework, minding us, and taking responsibility for household chores. But consistent praise and consequences seem to have helped."

The teacher agreed. "They really have. Not that Todd's a compliant angel—he'll always speak his mind—and I think that's good in a child. But there's no major struggle in getting him to behave. It's been a good year so far. Thank you for your support as parents."

5:15 P.M.

As Sherrie fought the afternoon rush-hour traffic, she felt strangely grateful for it. *I can use this time to thank God for my family and friends—and plan a fun weekend for us.*

6:30 P.M.

Amy walked into the family room right on time. "Mother-daughter time, Mom," she said. "C'mon outside."

Leaving the house, they started on their pre-dinner walk around the block. It mainly consisted of Sherrie's listening to Amy chatter about school, books, and friends. All the things she'd yearned to be able to discuss with her daughter. The walk was always too short.

It hadn't always been like that. After a Christian therapist had seen Amy and the family about her withdrawal, he'd noticed that Todd's misbehavior monopolized the family's attention. Amy wasn't a squeaky wheel, so she received less time with Sherrie and Walt.

Gradually, she'd withdrawn into herself. There just wasn't anyone in the house to give her anything. Her world had become her bedroom.

Noting the problem, Sherrie and Walt had made special attempts to make sure Amy was encouraged to talk about her issues—even if they weren't the crises Todd was in.

Over time, like a flower opening up to the light, Amy began interacting with her parents once again. She was beginning to connect like a normal little girl would. The boundary work that Sherrie and Walt did with Todd was part of Amy's healing process, too.

7:00 P.M.

Halfway through dinner, the phone rang. After the third ring, the answering machine screened the caller. "Sherrie, this is Phyllis, from church. Can you pitch in for the retreat next month?"

The answering machine was the answer to dinner's disruptions. The family's boundary was "no phone conversations until dinner is through." And the family time at the table was richer for it.

Sherrie made a mental note to call Phyllis later that evening and regretfully decline. She and Walt were having a couple's weekend during those days. It helped keep them honeymooning.

Interestingly enough, when Sherrie's boundary work had first begun, she'd started backing off from church commitments to sort out her chaotic life. Now, however, she was sensing more

of a desire to be involved in a couple of ministries to which she felt called. *It's like comforting as I've been comforted*, she thought to herself. But she realized that she'd probably never be as available to Phyllis as Phyllis wanted. But that was between Phyllis and God. Sherrie was out of that particular loop.

7:45 P.M.

The kids and Walt cleared the table. They didn't want to miss the next night's dinner any more than they had breakfast!

9:30 P.M.

The kids were in bed with their homework assignments done. They had even had some play time before bed. Walt and Sherrie sat down together with a cup of coffee. They talked quietly about each other's day. They laughed over the goofups, commiserated over the failures, planned the weekend, and talked about the kids. They looked into each others' eyes—glad the other one was there.

A miracle of miracles. And a hard-won one. Sherrie had had to go to therapy herself, along with joining a church support group. It had taken a long time to move out of her "Loving Walt Out of His Anger" modality. Her boundaries had needed much practice with safe people before she was ready to confront her husband.

And it had been a scary time. Walt hadn't known what to do with a wife who could set limits, who would say to him, "Just so you'll know in advance. It hurts me and distances me from you when you cruelly criticize me in public. If you continue, I'll confront you on it immediately. And I'll take a cab home. I won't live a lie anymore. And I will protect myself from now on."

Here was a wife who would no longer take responsibility for Walt's tantrums and withdrawal, who would say, "If you won't talk to me about your unhappiness, I'll back off. I'll be with a couple of my friends if you want to talk." This was a difficult adjustment, for Walt was used to Sherrie's drawing him out, soothing his ruffled feathers, and apologizing for being imperfect.

Here was a wife who confronted his emotional distance with, “You’re my first choice for intimacy. I love you, and want to make you first in my heart. But if you won’t spend time being close, I’ll spend that time in support groups, at church, and with the kids. But I won’t be in the den, watching you watching TV anymore. You’ll have to microwave your own popcorn from now on.”

He’d threatened. He’d sulked. He’d withdrawn.

But Sherrie stuck to her guns. With help from God, her friends, her therapist, and her church support group, she’d withstood Walt’s blusterings. He began to experience what it was like not to have her around and underfoot all the time.

And he missed her.

For the first time, Walt actually experienced his dependency on Sherrie. How much he needed her. How much fun she was when she was around. He began to slowly, gradually, fall in love with his wife again—this time a wife with boundaries.

She changed, too. Sherrie stopped playing the victim with Walt. She found herself blaming him less. She was less resentful. Her boundaries helped her develop a full life that didn’t need Walt to be as perfect as she’d wished.

No, it wasn’t an ideal marriage. But it felt more solid now, like an anchor in the storms. They were more like a team, with mutual love and mutual responsibility. They were not afraid of conflict, they forgave each other’s mistakes, and respected each other’s boundaries.

10:15 P.M.

Lying in bed, snuggled next to Walt, Sherrie reflected over the past months of boundary work. She felt warm and grateful for the second chance God had given her.

A passage of Scripture came to her mind, one which she had read many times and knew well. It was the words of Christ from the Sermon on the Mount:

“Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be

comforted. Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.” (Matt. 5:3–5)

I'll always be poor in spirit, she thought. But my boundaries help me find the time to receive the kingdom of heaven. I'll always mourn the losses I suffer in this lifetime. But setting limits helps me find the comfort I need from God and others. I'll always be meek and gentle. But being a separate person helps me take the initiative to inherit the earth. Thanks, God. Thank you for the hope you gave me. And for taking me—and those I love—along your path.

It's our prayer that your biblical boundaries will lead you to a life of love, freedom, responsibility, and service.

Henry Cloud, Ph.D.
John Townsend, Ph.D.
Newport Beach, California 1992

Notes

Chapter 3: Boundary Problems

1. An introduction to the four categories can be found in *Secrets of Your Family Tree*, by Dave Carder, Earl Henslin, John Townsend, Henry Cloud, and Alice Brawand (Chicago: Moody Press, 1991), 176–79.

Chapter 4: How Boundaries Are Developed

1. The following structure was developed by Margaret Mahler, and described in *The Psychological Birth of the Human Infant* by Margaret Mahler, Fred Pine, and Anni Bergman (New York: Basic Books, 1975). A researcher, Mahler observed the operationalizing of these biblical concepts in general revelation.
2. For more information on a biblical perspective on bonding and attachment, see chapters 3–5 of *Changes That Heal* by Henry Cloud (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992) and chapters 4 and 13 of *Hiding from Love* by John Townsend (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 1991).

Chapter 6: Common Boundary Myths

1. Francis Brown, S. R. Driver, and Charles A. Briggs, *A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1977), 60; Merrill C. Tenney, ed., *The Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopedia of the Bible*, Vol. 1 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1977), 166–68.
2. James Dobson, *Love Must Be Tough* (Waco, Texas: Word, 1983).

Chapter 11: Boundaries and Work

1. James Bramlett, *How to Get a Job* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1991).

Chapter 12: Boundaries and Your Self

1. R. Laird Harris, Gleason L. Archer, and Bruce K. Waltke, eds., *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament* (Chicago: Moody, 1980), 329.
2. See chapter 8, "Helpful Hiding: Dealing with Suffering," from John Townsend, *Hiding from Love: How to Change the Withdrawal Patterns That Isolate and Imprison You* (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 1991).

Chapter 14: Resistance to Boundaries

1. See Henry Cloud, *Changes That Heal: Understanding Your Past to Ensure a Healthier Future* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992); and John Townsend, *Hiding from Love: How to Change the Withdrawal Patterns That Isolate and Imprison You* (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 1991).

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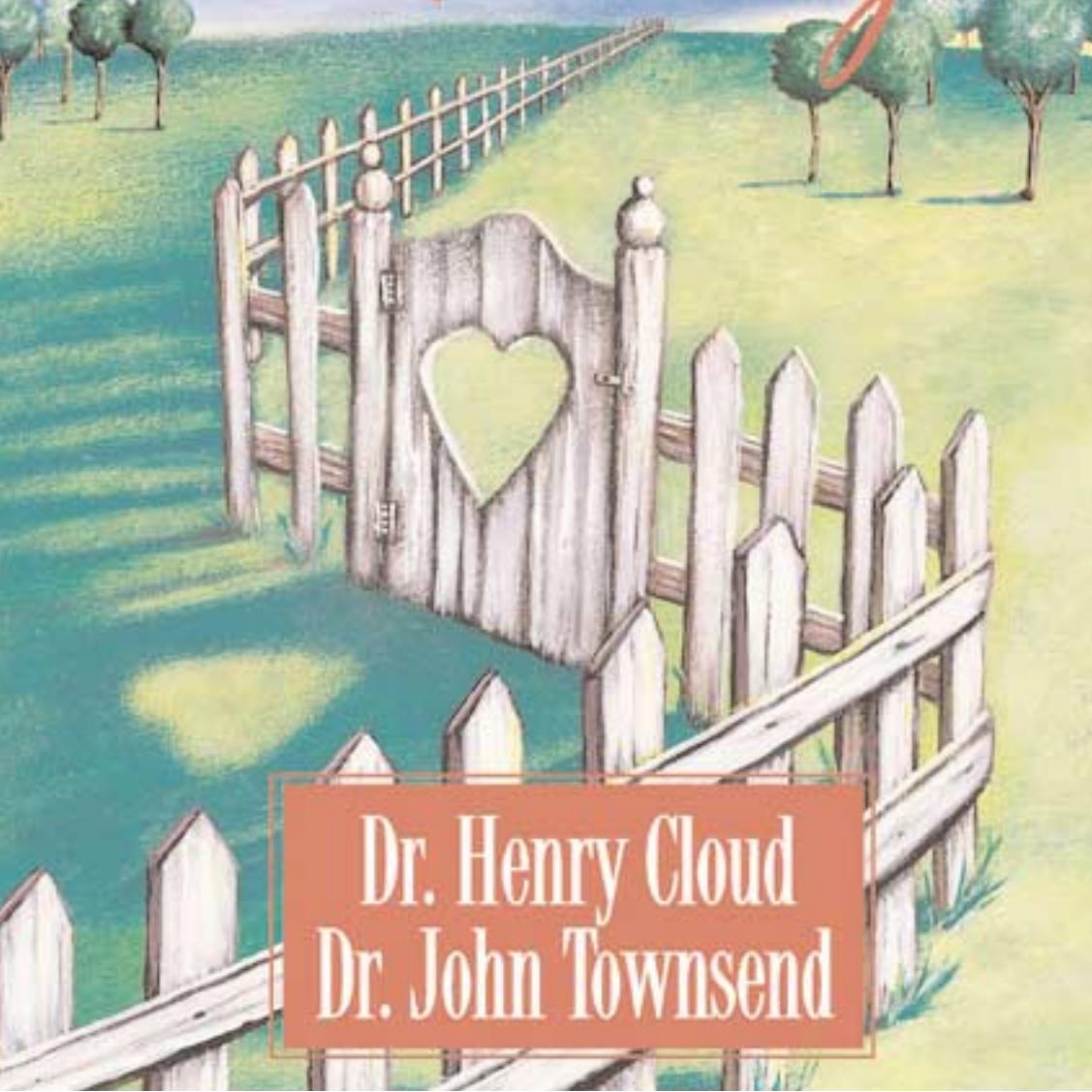
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Townsend

BOUNDARIES

in Marriage



Dr. Henry Cloud
Dr. John Townsend

— Chapter 1 —

What's a Boundary, Anyway?

Stephanie sat in front of the fireplace drinking her cup of herbal tea and reflecting upon the evening. Her husband, Steve, had gone to bed an hour earlier, but the gnawing feeling in her stomach prevented her from joining him. In fact, the feeling was propelling her away from him. She was relieved when he had said that he was tired, for she didn't know what she would have done if he had wanted to make love to her. The feeling of relief scared her. She knew that it was not a good sign for their relationship.

As she thought about the night, she found herself connecting her feelings not only with what had happened this evening, but with what had gone on in their relationship in the last few years. She was pulling away from Steve more and more. She knew that she loved him and always would love him. She just didn't know how to get past the lack of attraction to him. She had a negative feeling about their relationship that she could not shake.

"Get specific. What is it?" she could hear her friend Jill asking her. Jill was much better at sorting out thoughts and feelings than Stephanie.

As she sorted through answers to Jill's question in her mind, the answer came surprisingly quickly in a movie-like collage of memories. Times and conversations she and Steve had had passed through her mind as though she were a detached observer. First, she recalled this evening, when he had ignored

her wishes for where they would go to dinner. And several times during the meal he had ignored what she was saying. It was as if he did not really hear her.

Then there was their vacation. She had wanted a nice quiet mountain setting where they could be alone together. He had wanted a big city with "lots of action." As usual, they had followed his wishes.

Then there was her desire to go back to school and finish her degree. They had agreed on that when she had dropped out of college her senior year to put him through law school. But every time she brought it up, he explained why it was not a good time right now for them. Stephanie had a hard time understanding that. What he really was saying was that it was not a good time *for him*.

Many other scenes came to her mind, but that phrase—"for him"—seemed to encapsulate all of them: Their relationship was more "for him" than it was "for them," or even "for her." As she thought about it, her detachment gave way to anger and contempt. Quickly, she retreated from such a negative feeling.

Get a grip, she told herself. *Love is filled with sacrifice*. But, as much as she tried to see herself sacrificing for love, she felt as if she were sacrificing a lot, yet experiencing very little love.

With that thought, she stared into the fire awhile longer, gulped her last sip of tea, and headed for bed, hoping Steve would be asleep.

The Importance of Boundaries

How had Stephanie, after several years of marriage, found herself in such a state? What had gone wrong? She and Steve had begun so strong. He was everything she had always wanted. Kind, strong, successful, and spiritual, Steve seemed to embody it all. But as time went on, their relationship lacked depth and intimacy. She could not understand how she could love someone so much and experience such little love along the way.

The issues are different for many couples, but the perplexity is often the same. One spouse feels something is missing, but

she can't figure out what it is. She tries to do the right things. She gives, sacrifices, honors the commitment, and believes the best. And yet she doesn't achieve intimacy, or worse than that, she doesn't avoid pain.

In some cases, the confusion hides itself behind the simplistic explanations that problems such as addiction, irresponsibility, control, or abuse provide. "If he just weren't so controlling." Or, "If she just would stop spending." Partners think that they can explain why their relationship lacks intimacy by the presence of "the problem." They are surprised to find that even when the "problem" goes away, the person with whom they can't connect or find love remains.

In other cases, there may be no "problems," but the marriage does not live up to the promise that one or both of the partners had in the beginning. Commitment may be strong, but love, intimacy, and deep sharing are not present. Why does this happen with two people who are so committed to the relationship?

In our work with couples over the years, we have observed that, while many dynamics go into producing and maintaining love, over and over again one issue is at the top of the list: boundaries. When boundaries are not established in the beginning of a marriage, or when they break down, marriages break down as well. Or such marriages don't grow past the initial attraction and transform into real intimacy. They never reach the true "knowing" of each other and the ongoing ability to abide in love and to grow as individuals and as a couple—the long-term fulfillment that was God's design. For this intimacy to develop and grow, there must be boundaries.

So, with that in mind, in this chapter we are going to take a big-picture look at what boundaries are. We will give an introductory course for those of you who have never read our book *Boundaries* and a refresher course for those of you have.

What *is* a boundary? In the simplest sense, a boundary is a property line. It denotes the beginning and end of something. If, for example, you go down to the county courthouse and look up your address, you can probably get a plot map showing your

property lines. You can see where your property begins and your neighbor's ends—a prerequisite for being good neighbors to each other.

Ownership

If you know where the property lines are, you can look up who *owns* the land. In physical property, we say that Sam or Susie "owns" the land and the things on the land.

In relationships, ownership is also very important. If I know where the boundaries are in our relationship, I know who "owns" things such as feelings, attitudes, and behaviors as well. I know to whom they "belong." And if there is a problem with one of those, I know to whom the problem belongs as well. A relationship like marriage requires each partner to have a sense of ownership of himself or herself.

I (Dr. Cloud) witnessed this lack of ownership in a couple recently. Caroline and Joe came in for marriage counseling saying that they could not stop arguing with one another. When I asked her what the arguments were about, Caroline replied, "He is just so angry all the time. He gets so mad at me that it really hurts; he is so mean sometimes."

I turned to Joe and asked, "Why do you get so mad?"

Without having to think for a second, he replied, "Because she always tries to control me and my life."

Sensing that this could become a game of Ping-Pong, I looked to the other side of the table and asked Caroline, "Why do you try to control him?"

Again, in a millisecond, she replied, "Because he is so into his own things that I can't get his time or attention." Each of them blamed their own behavior on the other person.

Sensing that they might see the humor in what they were doing if I continued, I asked, "Why do you not pay attention to her?"

"Because she is so nagging and controlling—I just have to get away from her," he instantly shot back.

Trying one last time to have someone take ownership for his or her own behavior, I asked her why she nags. Without missing a beat, she answered, "Because he won't do anything I want."

I wanted them to see my head moving back and forth whenever I asked the question “Why do you . . . ?” The answer given was always something about the other person. The ball of ownership was hit back over the net each time it landed in one of their courts. Neither one ever took personal ownership of his or her behavior. In their minds, their behavior was literally “caused” by the other person.

I longed for Joe to say, for example, “I get angry at her because I’m too immature to respond to her more helpfully. I’m deeply sorry for that and need some help. I want to be able to love her correctly no matter what her behavior is. Can you help me?” This response would be music to a counselor’s ears. But, with this couple, we were a long way from the symphony.

I felt as if I were in the bleachers in the Garden of Eden when God confronted Adam after he had sinned (see Genesis 3:1–13). Adam had chosen to disobey God’s command not to eat of the tree of knowledge of good and evil. There was no doubt about it, Adam had done it. When God asked what had happened, he got the same lack of ownership we saw with Caroline and Joe.

“Who told you that you were naked?” God asked. “Have you eaten from the tree I commanded you not to eat from?”

“The woman you put here with me—she gave me some fruit from the tree,” Adam said, “and I ate it.” Adam blamed his behavior on his wife. Just like Joe; just like all of us. “I did _____ because of you.” And God ran into the same problem with Eve. When he asked her about her behavior, look what happened:

“What is this you have done?” God asked.

“The serpent deceived me, and I ate,” Eve replied. Eve’s behavior and disobedience get explained away on account of the serpent. “If it weren’t for the serpent. . . .”

In essence, Caroline and Joe, like Adam and Eve, and like you and me, were saying, “If it were not for you, I would be a more loving, responsible person.”

So the first way in which clarifying boundaries helps us is to know where one person ends and the other begins. What is the

problem, and where is it? Is it in you, or is it in me? Once we know the boundaries, we know who should be owning whichever problem we are wrestling with. For example, Joe was not taking ownership of his feelings, and Caroline, of her behavior. This issue of “ownership” is vital to any relationship, especially marriage.

Responsibility

Boundaries help us to determine who is responsible for what. If we understand who owns what, we then know who must take responsibility for it. If I could get Joe to see that his reactions were his problem and not Caroline’s, then I could help him to take responsibility for changing his reactions. As long as he blamed Caroline for his reactions, then she had to change for his reactions to change. In his mind, if she were not so controlling, for example, he would not be so angry.

If we can discover who is responsible for what, we have an opportunity for change. If we can see that the problem is our problem and that we are responsible for it, then we are in the driver’s seat of change. For the first time, we are empowered. When Caroline got a sense that she was responsible for the misery she thought Joe was causing, she was empowered to change that helpless, powerless feeling of misery, *no matter what Joe was doing*. Once she began to take responsibility for her reactions to Joe, she could work on changing them. For example, she learned not to let his anger affect her and to respond to him more directly. She also learned to stop nagging him to do things, and instead to ask him to do something and give him choices.

Responsibility also involves action. If something is going to happen, it’s going to happen because we take action. We need to change some attitudes, or behaviors, or reactions, or choices. We must actively participate in the resolution of whatever relational problem we might have, even if it is not our fault.

Once Joe saw that his anger was his problem and not Caroline’s, he took responsibility for it. He learned he was not going to be “not angry” because Caroline changed. He was going to be

“not angry” because he grew and responded differently to what she did. He learned what Proverbs teaches us—that a lack of boundaries and anger go hand in hand: “Like a city that is broken into and without walls is a man who has no control over his spirit” (Proverbs 25:28 NASB). He learned not to react, but to think through his choices, to find where his anger and feelings of being threatened by her were coming from. Many other new things became part of his growth, but they all began with boundaries, with clarifying what he had to take responsibility for.

Each spouse must take responsibility for the following things:

- Feelings
- Attitudes
- Behaviors
- Choices
- Limits
- Desires
- Thoughts
- Values
- Talents
- Love

Responsibility tells us we are the ones who must work through our feelings and learn how to feel differently. *Our* attitudes—not those of our spouse—cause us to feel distressed and powerless. How we behave and react is part of the problem, and we have to change these patterns. We allow ourselves to get pushed beyond certain limits and then become resentful or powerless. We do not turn desires into accomplished goals, or we do not deal with our sick desires.

Responsibility empowers us to have a good life. To give Adam and Eve the responsibility God gave them was to empower them to have the life all of us desire—one filled with love, wonderful surroundings, and lots of opportunities to use our abilities and talents. He gave them the ability and the opportunity to make the life they chose. When they did not choose in a life-giving

way, they also bore the responsibility for that choice as well, just as we do.

But the good news of boundaries is that God's plan of responsibility has not changed. We are not at the mercy of our spouse's behavior or problems. Each spouse can act both to avoid being a victim of the other spouse's problems and, better yet, *to change the marriage relationship itself*. Later in this book we will show you how to change your marriage for the better, even if your spouse is not interested in changing. But the process always begins with taking responsibility for your own part in the problem.

Freedom

"His irresponsibility is making my life miserable," Jen began. She then went on to tell me a terrible story of how her husband had successfully avoided adulthood for many years at her expense. She had suffered greatly at the hands of his behavior, both financially and sexually.

As I listened, though, I could see that her deep sense of hopelessness kept her in prison. I could see countless ways she could be free from her husband's patterns of behavior. She could make numerous choices to help both herself and the relationship. But the sad thing was that she could not see the same choices that were so clear to me.

"Why don't you stop paying for his mistakes and bailing him out? Why do you keep rescuing him from the messes he gets himself into?" I asked.

"What are you talking about?" Jen asked, alternating between muffled sobs and a scornful expression. "There's nothing I can do. This is the way he is, and I just have to live with it."

I could not tell if she was sad about what she perceived as a hopeless case or angry with me for suggesting she had choices.

As we talked further, I discovered an underlying problem that kept Jen from making such choices. *She did not experience herself as a free agent*. It never occurred to her that she had the freedom to respond, to make choices, to limit the ways his

behavior affected her. She felt that she was a victim of whatever he did or did not do.

This was the same problem troubling Joe and causing him to react so severely to Caroline. She would attempt to control him, and he would experience her attempts as *actually* controlling him. In reality, Caroline had no control over Joe whatsoever, and had he understood that, he would not have been so reactive to her. He did not see himself as a free agent.

God designed the entire creation for freedom. We were not meant to be enslaved by each other; we were meant to love each other freely. God designed us to have freedom of choice as we responded to life, to other people, to God, and to ourselves. But when we turned from God, we lost our freedom. We became enslaved to sin, to self-centeredness, to other people, to guilt, and to a whole host of other dynamics.

Boundaries help us to realize our freedom once again. Listen to the way that Paul tells the Galatians to set boundaries against any type of control and become free: “It was for freedom that Christ set us free; therefore keep standing firm and do not be subject again to a yoke of slavery” (Galatians 5:1 NASB). Jen felt herself enslaved by her husband’s patterns of behavior and did not see the choices available to her. Joe saw himself as subject to Caroline’s nagging attempts to control him. But God tells us to not be subject to any kind of enslaving control at all.

When someone realizes the freedom he or she has from a spouse or anyone else, many options open up. Boundaries help us to know just where someone’s control begins and ends. As with the property lines above, so it is with relationships. Just as your next-door neighbor can’t force you to paint your house purple, neither can any other human being make you do anything. It violates the basic law of freedom God established in the universe. For love to work, each spouse has to realize his or her freedom. And boundaries help define the freedom we have and the freedom we do not have.

Marriage is not slavery. It is based on a love relationship deeply rooted in freedom. Each partner is free *from* the other

and therefore free *to love* the other. Where there is control, or perception of control, there is not love. Love only exists where there is freedom.

The Triangle of Boundaries

Three realities have existed since the beginning of time:

1. Freedom
2. Responsibility
3. Love

God created us free. He gave us responsibility for our freedom. And as responsible free agents, we are told to love him and each other. This emphasis runs throughout the whole Bible. When we do these three things—live free, take responsibility for our own freedom, and love God and each other—then life, including marriage, can be an Eden experience.

Something incredible happens as these three ingredients of relationship work together. As love grows, spouses become more free from the things that enslave: self-centeredness, sinful patterns, past hurts, and other self-imposed limitations. Then, they gain a greater and greater sense of self-control and responsibility. As they act more responsibly, they become more loving. And then the cycle begins all over again. As love grows, so does freedom, leading to more responsibility, and to more love.

This is why a couple who has been married for fifty or more years can say that the marriage gets better and better as time goes on. They become more free to be themselves as a result of being loved, and the love relationship deepens.

One woman said it this way: “Before I married Tom, I was so caught up in my own insecurities and fears to really even know who I was. I have been so blessed by the way he loved me. When I was afraid or irresponsible in the early years, he was patient, not reactive. He was strong enough to love me and require more of me at the same time. He did not let me get away with being like I was, but he never punished me for how I was, either. I had to begin to take responsibility for working

through my barriers to love. I could not blame him for my faults. As he loved me more and more, I was able to change and let go of the ways that I was.”

The really neat thing was that as I talked to this woman’s husband, he said basically the same thing. Both had become a catalyst for growth for the other and for the relationship as well.

In this description we can see the three legs of the triangle. The spouses were free to not react to the other, they each took responsibility for their own issues, and they loved the other person even when he or she did not deserve it. She worked on her insecurities and changed them. And as they were both free from the other, they gave love to each other freely. And that love continued to transform and produce growth.

Remember, where there is no freedom, there is slavery, and where there is slavery, there will be rebellion. Also, where there is no responsibility, there is bondage. Where we do not take ownership and do what we are supposed to do with our own stuff, we will be stuck at a certain level of relationship, and we will not be able to go deeper.

Love can only exist where freedom and responsibility are operating. Love creates more freedom that leads to more responsibility, which leads to more and more ability to love.

Protection

The last aspect of boundaries that makes love grow is protection. Think of your house for a moment. You probably have some protection around your property somewhere. Some of you have a fence with a locked gate, for example, to protect your property from trespassers. Some people, if they were able, would come in and steal things that matter to you. As Jesus said, “Do not give dogs what is sacred; do not throw your pearls to pigs. If you do, they may trample them under their feet, and then turn and tear you to pieces” (Matthew 7:6). You need to be careful and to protect yourself from evil.

Some of you do not have a fence, but you lock your doors instead. However you do it, you have a protective boundary

available when needed to keep “bad guys” out. But your locked gate or door is not a wall, either. You need to be able to be open the gate or door when you want to invite “good guys” onto your property or into the house. In other words, boundaries need to be permeable. They need to keep the bad out and allow the good in.

As it is with your house, so it is with your soul. You need protective boundaries that you can put up when evil is present and can let down when the danger is over.

Regina had had enough. Married to Lee for nineteen years, she had tried to be loving until it had almost killed her emotionally. Lee had a long-standing problem with alcohol and also with anger. Sometimes the two problems would come together and make life unbearable for her. In addition, he would pick at her in an emotionally devastating way with biting, sarcastic remarks. “Nice dress—didn’t they have it in your size?” was the kind of thing he would say. He would not help her with the kids either, seeing it as the “wife’s job.”

She was an adapting, loving person who had always tried to avoid conflict and to win people over with love. When people were mean, she would become nicer and try to love them more. The problem with Lee was that her love only gave him more and more permission to be unloving himself. His drinking and other behaviors continued to get more and more pronounced, and she finally could not take it anymore.

She discovered that it was not good to be the silent sufferer. Some people at her church encouraged her to speak up to Lee about how his problems affected her. She took some courses on assertiveness and began to confront him.

Sadly, Lee did not listen. Sometimes he ignored her confrontations, at other times he apologized without changing, and at still other times he grew angry and defensive. But at no time did he take her words to heart, see how he was hurting her, and change.

Regina finally gave Lee a choice to own his problem and take responsibility for it, or to move out. She would no longer

allow his drinking and anger to affect her and the children. She would take protective steps to “guard the good” and not let evil destroy it.

At first he did not believe her, but she stood her ground. Finally, he moved out. Had he not done so, she might have moved out herself or gone to court. But, seeing for the first time that his behavior had consequences, Lee took his problem seriously. He obtained some help and turned his life around. He and Regina were reconciled a year and a half later, and their marriage was saved.

Regina was happy that they were back together and that the marriage was doing well. This was a fruit of the protective stance she had so painfully taken. She had set some limits and boundaries to protect herself, her children, and ultimately her marriage from a destructive cycle.

Self-Control

There is a lot of misunderstanding about boundaries. Some people are against boundaries because they see them as selfish; other people actually use them to be selfish. Both are wrong. Boundaries are basically about self-control.

A client once said to me, “I set some boundaries *on my husband*. I told him that he could not talk to me that way anymore. And it did not work. What do I do now?”

“What you have done is not boundaries at all,” I replied.

“What do you mean?”

“It was your feeble attempt at controlling your husband, and that never works.” I went on to explain that boundaries are not something you “set on” another person. Boundaries are about yourself.

My client could not say to her husband, “You can’t speak to me that way.” This demand is unenforceable. But she could say what she would or would not do if he spoke to her that way again. She could set a boundary “on herself.” She could say, “If you speak to me that way, I will walk out of the room.” This

threat is totally enforceable because it has to do with *her*. She would be setting a boundary with the only person she could control: herself.

When you build a fence around your yard, you do not build it to figure out the boundaries of your neighbor's yard so that you can dictate to him how he is to behave. You build it around your own yard so that you can maintain control of what happens to your own property. Personal boundaries do the same. If someone trespasses your personal boundaries in some way, you can take control of yourself and not allow yourself to be controlled, or hurt, anymore. This is self-control.

And ultimately, self-control serves love, not selfishness. We hope that when you take control of yourself, you will love better and more purposefully and intentionally so that you and your spouse can have the intimacy you desire.

Examples of Boundaries

In the physical world, many boundaries define property and protect it. Fences surround homes. Homes are built in gated communities. Most homes have doors and locks. In the old days, people even had moats with alligators.

In the immaterial world of souls and relationships, boundaries are different. You would look funny with a moat around your heart, and the alligators would require a lot of maintenance. So God has equipped us with special boundaries for the interpersonal realm. Let's look at some.

Words

The most basic boundary is language. Your words help define you. They tell the other person who you are, what you believe, what you want, and what you don't. Here are some examples of words being used as boundaries:

- No, I don't want to do that.
- No, I won't participate in that.
- Yes, I want to do that.

- I will.
- I like that.
- I don't like that.

Your words, or lack of them, define you to another person. Remember Stephanie, the wife in the opening illustration of this chapter who was pulling away from her husband, Steve? Stephanie slowly lost ground on her property by not saying what she wanted and what she did and did not like about how Steve was acting. Her silence was like a trampled-down fence.

Truth

Truth is another important boundary. God's truth and principles provide the boundaries of our existence, and as we live within this truth, we are safe. Here are some truths that help define the structure of how we are to relate:

- Do not lie.
- Do not commit adultery.
- Do not covet.
- Give to others.
- Love one another.
- Be compassionate.
- Forgive.

As we structure our relationships around God's eternal truths, our relationships succeed and thrive. When we cross these boundaries, we lose the security that truth provides.

In addition, being honest and truthful about ourselves and what is going on in a relationship provides boundaries. Not being truthful to one another gives a false impression of where we are, as well as who we are. For example, when Regina was adapting to Lee's hurtful behavior, she wasn't being honest with him about what was really going on inside of her. She was acting happy and loving, but in reality she was miserable inside and hurting deeply.

As Paul says, “Each of you must put off falsehood and speak truthfully to his neighbor, for we are all members of one body” (Ephesians 4:25). If we are not being truthful with each other, our real relationship goes into hiding. Then, instead of one real relationship, we have two relationships: the outside relationship, which is false; and the inside, hidden relationship, which is true. Intimacy is lost, and so is love. Love and truth must exist together.

Consequences

When Regina had had “enough,” she finally set the boundary of consequences. She said she would no longer live with Lee while he drank. This consequence defined the boundary of what she would allow herself to be exposed to. Where her words failed to communicate, her actions did. She kicked him out.

God has given us the Law of Sowing and Reaping (see chapter 2 for a fuller explanation of this law) to communicate what is acceptable and what is not. If we just use words, others sometimes do not “get the message.” In fact, people in denial are deaf to words of truth. They only respond to pain and loss. Consequences show where our boundary line is.

Some spouses need severe consequences like separation. Others need less severe ones, like the following, to define important boundaries:

- Canceling a credit card
- Leaving for the party alone when the perpetually late partner doesn’t come home by the agreed upon departure time
- Going ahead and eating dinner when a spouse is late for the thousandth time
- Ending an abusive conversation
- Refusing to bail someone out of a jam because of perpetual irresponsibility, like overspending or not completing work on time.

Emotional Distance

Sometimes one of the partners in a hurtful relationship is not willing to change. The partner continues to do hurtful things. Or, sometimes a spouse may have betrayed a trust or had an affair, and even though he has repented, not enough time has passed for the spouse to prove himself trustworthy.

In these situations, trust may not be wise. But it is prudent to continue to interact in the relationship and to work the problem out. In such instances, one partner might have to follow the advice of Proverbs to avoid further injury: "Above all else, guard your heart, for it is the wellspring of life" (Proverbs 4:23). Guarding one's heart might include saying the following:

- I love you, but I don't trust you. I can't be that close until we work this out.
- When you can be kind, we can be close again.
- When you show you are serious about getting some help, I will feel safe enough to open up to you again.
- I can't share deep feelings if you are going to punish me for them.

In these instances, the couple has a commitment to work on things along with the wisdom to guard the heart with some emotional distance until it is safe and prudent to move closer. This prevents further hurt and deterioration of the relationship.

We caution you, however, that you must take this stance only with a pure heart. Impure hearts use boundaries to act out feelings such as revenge and anger. Because none of us is pure, we have to search our motives for establishing boundaries to make sure that they serve love and not our impure motives. Using distance or withdrawal of love, for example, to punish the other is a sign that we are setting boundaries not to resolve the conflict, but to get revenge.

Physical Distance

Sometimes, when all else fails, people must get away from each other until the hurt can stop. Distance can provide time to

protect, time to think, time to heal, and time to learn new things. In severe cases, protective separation prevents actual danger. Physical distance can be minimal, or more significant:

- Removing oneself from an argument or heated situation
- Taking some time away from one another to sort things out
- Moving out to get treatment for an addiction
- Separating from physical abuse or substance abuse
- Moving into a shelter to protect children

These boundaries protect the marriage and the spouse from further harm. As Proverbs tells us, “The prudent see danger and take refuge, but the simple keep going and suffer for it” (Proverbs 27:12). Physical distance at times provides space for healing as well as safety to preserve partners and the marriage itself. Although usually a last resort, it is sometimes the thing that saves.

Other People

Sandy could not stand up to Jerry alone. Every time she tried to set boundaries with him, she folded in the heat of conflict. She did not yet have the spine she needed. He was always able to overpower her.

I suggested that she talk about certain issues with him only while I was present. At first she saw that as a cop-out and would not give herself permission to do it. But after a few more failures, she agreed that she was just unable.

Sandy limited herself to discussing the difficult topics only in their counseling sessions. Slowly she was able to depend upon me to monitor and intervene when Jerry got out of hand. As that happened, the boundaries I provided in structuring the sessions gave the marriage a new path. He began to respond.

Later, she went to her support group for the rest of the structure she needed to gain her own boundaries. Other people were the “spine” she did not have in the beginning. Slowly she internalized their care, support, teaching, and modeling. God has always provided help from his family to those who need it. Here are some ways:

- Use a third party to help you resolve conflict.
- Use a third party to help you protect and support yourself.
- Use a group for healing and strengthening.
- Use others to teach you boundaries.
- Use counselors, friends, or pastors to provide the safe place to work on difficult issues.
- Use shelters in extreme situations.

Take care, however, that other people are helping and not hurting. Other people may be unhelpful if they help you hide from conflict instead of trying to resolve it. We will cover this point in chapter 11 on protecting your marriage from intruders.

Time

Time is another boundary that structures difficulties in relationships. Some people need time to work out a conflict or to limit the conflict itself:

- Give yourself an allotted time to talk about certain things: “We will discuss our budget for one hour, and then we will leave it alone until next week.”
- Set a certain time to work on a particular issue instead of discussing it in the heat of the moment.
- Establish seasons for certain goals: “This summer we will work on our communication, and in the fall work on our sexual difficulties.”

Just as the physical world has different kinds of boundaries, the interpersonal world has different ones as well. Just as sometimes a fence is appropriate and a door is not, sometimes confrontation and truth are important and physical distance is not. Later in this book, in Part III, we will guide you through how to know when to do what.

Stephanie

Stephanie, with whom we opened this chapter, was not experiencing the more serious problems with Steve that some of our

other couples have revealed. She was suffering, however, from the emotional distance that being on the wrong end of a one-sided relationship creates. In some ways her story is more revealing of the need for good boundaries in a marriage. She was unhappy in the face of no overt problems. This can sometimes be the worst kind of misery.

Her story has a good ending. And it incorporates all the principles we have looked at in this chapter.

Stephanie first figured out where she ended and where Steve began. When she did, she found that there was really very little of her at all in the marriage. She had adapted to him and had complied with his wishes so much that she barely existed at all. She could no longer even remember what it felt like to be herself. Her desires for school and some meaningful work of her own were long forgotten as he pressured her to continue to go on as they were. And she had given in over and over until she lost herself.

When she thought about what was hers and what was his, she realized that she could not blame him for her loss of herself. She was the one who had complied with his wishes. She was the one who was afraid of conflict and so chose to adapt to what he wanted. She had to take ownership of her passivity.

At this point in her journey Stephanie made a mature decision. She took responsibility for her own misery and began to *work on it in the relationship*. Instead of doing what many compliant people do when they wake up and find themselves lost, she didn't leave the relationship "to find herself." Many times a marriage will break up as the passive spouse decides she wants to have "a life of her own." And she leaves. Sometimes she may even call this move "getting some boundaries." Nothing could be further from the truth.

Boundaries are only built and established in the context of relationship. To run from a relationship as the first step of boundaries is not to have boundaries at all. It is a defense against developing boundaries with another person. The only place boundaries are real is within relationship.

Stephanie did not run. She took ownership of all of her feelings, attitudes, desires, and choices, and then she took them to Steve. And they had lots of conflict at first. But in the end, he grew as well. Steve found out that life was not about just him and that, if he continued to live that way, he was going to lose some things very important to him, like closeness with Stephanie. As she took responsibility for her life, he was forced to take responsibility for his own, and the marriage improved.

They both owned their sides of the equation. Stephanie saw that she was free from Steve and that the slavery she had always felt was coming from inside of her. She expressed her feelings and opinions more. She would not just give in to Steve's desires immediately. When he did not hear her, she let him know. And Steve learned to love her freedom and relish it. He began to feel attracted to her independence instead of threatened by it. As they did these things, love grew. And they grew as individuals as well.

But it had all started with Stephanie doing some serious boundary work: defining herself, taking ownership and responsibility for what was hers, realizing her freedom, making some choices, doing the hard work of change in the relationship and not away from it, and learning to love instead of comply.

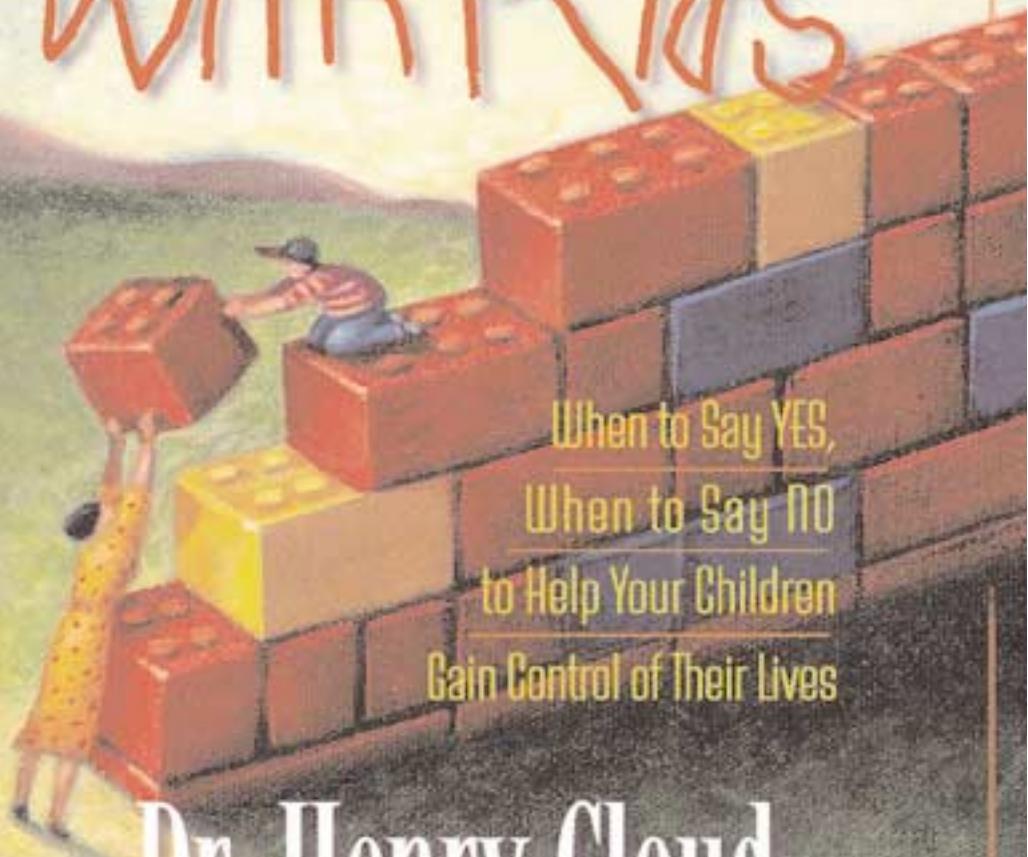
Stephanie's relationship with Steve grew more and more intimate. They learned how to be separate people who were free to love each other. The missing ingredient all along had been a deep sense of intimacy, something the Bible refers to as "knowing" someone. But without clear boundaries, they could not know each other, and without knowing each other, they could not truly love each other.

As they each became more defined, they became two people who could love and be loved. They began to know and enjoy one another. They began to grow.

This is what we would like for you and your spouse. In this book we will help you become better defined, more free and responsible, and more in a position to love and be loved. This is the high calling God created marriage to be.

BOUNDARIES

with Kids



When to Say YES,
When to Say NO
to Help Your Children
Gain Control of Their Lives

Dr. Henry Cloud
Dr. John Townsend

The Future Is Now

It was a normal day, but one that would forever change my friend's parenting.

We had finished dinner, and I (Dr. Cloud) was visiting with my friend, Allison, and her husband, Bruce, when she left the dinner table to do some chores. Bruce and I continued to talk until a phone call took him away as well, so I went to see if I could lend Allison a hand.

I could hear her in their fourteen-year-old son Cameron's room. I walked in to a scene that jolted me. She was cheerfully putting away clothes and sports equipment and making the bed. She struck up a conversation as if things were normal: "I can't wait for you to see the pictures from our trip. It was so much—"

"What are you doing?" I asked.

"I'm cleaning up Cameron's room," she said. "What does it look like I'm doing?"

"You are what?"

"I told you. I'm cleaning up his room. Why are you looking at me like that?"

All I could do was to share with her the vision in my head. "I just feel sorry for Cameron's future wife."

Allison straightened up, froze for a moment, and then hurried from the room. I walked into the hall to see her standing there motionless. Not knowing what to say, I said nothing. After a few

moments, she looked at me and said, "I've never thought about it that way."

Nor have most of us. We parent in the present without thinking about the future. We usually deal with the problems at hand. Making it through an afternoon without wanting to send our children to an eight-year camp in Alaska seems like a huge accomplishment! But one goal of parenting is to keep an eye on the future. We are raising our children to be responsible adults.

Parents interact with their children in a way that comes naturally to them. For example, Allison was by nature a "helper," and she gladly helped her son. Others have different parenting styles. Some, who are more laid back and uninvolved, leave their son's room alone. Those who are stricter inflict heavy punishment for a less than regulation-made bed.

Certainly, child rearing requires many different interventions. There are times for helping, for not getting involved, or for being strict. But the real issue is this: *Is what you are doing being done on purpose?* Or are you doing it from reasons that you do not think about, such as your own personality, childhood, need of the moment, or fears?

Remember, parenting has to do with more than the present. You are preparing your child for the future. *A person's character is one's destiny.*

A person's character largely determines how he will function in life. Whether he does well in love and in work depends on the abilities he possesses inside. In a world that has begun to explain away people's behavior with a variety of excuses, people are left wondering why their lives do not work. *Most of our problems result from our own character weakness.* Where we possess inner strength, we succeed, often in spite of tough circumstances. But where we do not possess inner strength, we either get stuck or fail. If a relationship requires understanding and forgiveness and we do not have that character ability, the relationship will not make it. If a difficult time period in work requires patience and delay of gratification and we do not possess those traits, we will fail. Character is almost everything.

The word *character* means different things to different people. Some people use *character* to mean moral functioning or integrity. We use the word to describe a person's entire makeup, who he is. Character refers to a person's ability and inability, his moral makeup, his functioning in relationships, and how he does tasks. What does he do in certain situations, and how does he do it? When he needs to perform, how will he meet those demands? Can he love? Can he be responsible? Can he have empathy for others? Can he develop his talents? Can he solve problems? Can he deal with failure? How does he reflect the image of God? These are a few of the issues that define character.

If a person's character makeup determines his future, then child rearing is primarily about helping children to develop character that will take them through life safely, securely, productively, and joyfully. Parents—and those who work with children—would do well to keep this in mind. A major goal of raising children is to help them develop the character that will make their future go well.

It wasn't until Allison saw this future reality that her parenting changed. She loved helping Cameron. But in many ways her helping was not "helping" Cameron. He had developed a pattern in which he felt entitled to everyone else's help, and this feeling of entitlement affected his relationships at school and at church. Allison had always been glad to help Cameron through the messes he was creating. Another undone project was another opportunity to love him.

Yet Allison was not only a mother, but also a grown woman and a wife. When she looked into the future and saw a time when Cameron would be leaving responsibilities for others to do, she became concerned. What a mother doesn't mind doing, others deplore. She glimpsed the reality of character destiny. And she changed how she interacted with Cameron to help him develop a sense of responsibility, to help him think about how his behavior affected others and whether or not others would want to be a part of his future.

It is in this sense that we say the future is now. When you are a parent, you help create a child's future. The patterns children establish early in life (their character) they will live out later. And character is always formed in relationship. We can't overestimate your role in developing this character. As Proverbs says, "Train a child in the way he should go, and when he is old he will not turn from it" (Proverbs 22:6).

Preventive Medicine

In 1992 we wrote *Boundaries*, a book about taking control of one's life. In *Boundaries* we talked about how to repair the brokenness in character caused by a lack of boundaries. Since that time, through workshops and on radio and television, we have spoken to more than a million people about creating boundaries in their lives. Thousands have told us that creating boundaries has enabled them to love and to live better, some for the first time. Nothing is more exciting than to see people grow and change.

But from our own experience and that of our audiences and readers, one thing became obvious to us. Adults with boundary problems had not developed those problems as grown-ups. They had learned patterns early in life and then continued those out-of-control patterns in their adult lives, where the stakes were higher. They had learned the following boundary problems as youngsters:

- Inability to say no to hurtful people or set limits on hurtful behavior from others
- Inability to say no to their own destructive impulses
- Inability to hear no from others and respect their limits
- Inability to delay gratification and accomplish goals and tasks
- Tendency to be attracted to irresponsible or hurtful people and then try to "fix" them
- Taking responsibility for other people's lives
- Ability to be easily manipulated or controlled

- Struggles with intimacy and maintaining closeness with others
- Inability to be honest with those they are close to
- Inability to confront others and resolve conflicts productively
- Experiencing life as a victim instead of living it purposefully with a feeling of self-control
- Addictions and compulsions
- Disorganization and lack of follow-through

So we began to think preventively. We love helping adults with boundary problems that have gone on for years, but we also want to help children avoid experiencing what many of us had to go through to repair boundary deficits. This realization led us to write this book on boundaries with kids. Most of the adults we encountered had had well-intentioned parents. But many times these parents had had no clue about how to build boundaries into their children; thus they passed on their own limited boundary functioning. Had many of these parents known how to raise a child with good boundaries, much pain could have been prevented. We hope this book will help you to develop the kind of character in your children that will prevent many problems with which adults struggle.

In addition, parents began to ask for this book. They knew the pain they had been through and did not want their children to go through the same kind of learning curve. It is better for a child to lose privileges than for an adult to lose a marriage or a career. In addition, they realized that boundaries are a key to making any relationship work, and they wanted to know how to live out the principles of boundaries with their children. Their questions can be grouped into three basic areas:

- How do I teach boundaries to children?
- How do I enforce my own boundaries with my children in appropriate ways?
- How can I ensure that my children will not have the problems with boundaries that I have had?

We want to help you answer those questions and to help your children develop the character that will lead them into the life that God created them to have.

Children Are Not Born with Boundaries

A boundary is a “property line” that defines a person; it defines where one person ends and someone else begins. If we know where a person’s boundaries are, we know what we can expect this person to take control of: himself or herself. We can require responsibility in regard to feelings, behaviors, and attitudes. We have all seen couples, for example, arguing with each other about “who’s to blame,” each avoiding responsibility for oneself. In a relationship with someone, we can define what we expect of each other, and then we can require each other to take responsibility for our respective part. When we each take ownership for our part of a relationship, the relationship works, and we all accomplish our goals.

A child is no different. A child needs to know where she begins, what she needs to take responsibility for, and what she does not need to take responsibility for. If she knows that the world requires her to take responsibility for her own personhood and life, then she can learn to live up to those requirements and get along well in life.

But if she grows up in a relationship where she is confused about her own boundaries (what she is responsible for) and about others’ boundaries (what they are responsible for), she does not develop the self-control that will enable her to steer through life successfully. She will grow up with confused boundaries that lead to the opposite: *trying to control others and being out of control of herself*. In fact, an accurate description of children is that they are little people who are out of control of themselves and attempting to control everyone around them. They do not want to take control of themselves to adapt to the requirements of Mom and Dad; they want Mom and Dad to change the requirements!

You can see why parenting is so difficult. Children are not born with boundaries. They internalize boundaries from external relationships and discipline. In order for children to learn who they are and what they are responsible for, their parents have to have clear boundaries with them and relate to them in ways that help them learn their own boundaries.

If boundaries are clear, children develop several qualities:

- A well-defined sense of who they are
- What they are responsible for
- The ability to choose
- The understanding that if they choose well, things will go well, and if they choose poorly, they will suffer
- The possibility for true love based in freedom

The essence of boundaries is self-control, responsibility, freedom, and love. These are the bedrock of the spiritual life. Along with loving and obeying God, what could be a better outcome of parenting than that? But the question is, how does that happen?

The Three Roles of a Parent

Parenting can be looked at in many different ways. Some see a parent as a coach, some as a police officer, some as a friend, some as God. In part, all of these roles have some truth to them.

In our view, the parent or caretaker role consists of these three main functions:

- Guardian
- Manager
- Source

Guardian

A guardian is legally responsible for a child and, in that capacity, protects and preserves the child. Why does a parent need to provide protection and preservation?

The Bible says that children are “under guardians and managers” until the appropriate time (Galatians 4:2 NASB). Children

do not possess the wisdom for protecting and preserving their own lives. They do not know right from wrong, dangerous from safe, good from better, life from death. They think not about the outcome of their actions, but about immediate gratification. Therefore, as they explore and discover their limits, they put themselves in danger. Wisdom comes only from experience—the big thing a child is short on.

A guardian provides the child with a safe environment for learning and gaining wisdom. Too little freedom to gain experience, and the child forever remains a child. Too much freedom, and the child is in danger of hurting himself. So balancing freedom and limits becomes a major task in child rearing. Parents must guard children from danger, protect them from harm, and preserve their lives.

This protective guardian steps in with appropriate boundaries and limits to guard children from several sources of danger:

1. Dangers within themselves
2. Dangers in the outside world
3. Inappropriate freedoms that they are not ready to handle
4. Never appropriate or evil actions, behaviors, or attitudes (such as serial killing or using LSD)
5. Their own regressive tendency to remain dependent and avoid growing up

Parents, in their role as guardian, keep the child safe, growing, and healthy. More often than not, they use boundaries to perform this function. They set limits to freedom, and then enforce them for the child's protection. Through this process, the child internalizes the limits as wisdom and slowly begins to be able to take care of herself.

Manager

A manager makes sure things get done—goals are reached, demands and expectations are met. Children are not born with self-discipline; therefore they have to have “other-discipline.” Managers provide this other-discipline by making sure the child

does the tasks at hand to meet the expectations important for her growth.

Managers provide this discipline by controlling resources, teaching, enforcing consequences, correcting, chastising, maintaining order, and building skills. They oversee the day-to-day hard work of reaching goals.

When Allison decided that she was going to guard Cameron from his wish to avoid being responsible for himself, she had to manage that process. As you may suspect, Cameron did not immediately sign up for the new plan! Allison had to set some goals, control the resources, and manage the consequences until her son developed the discipline that he would eventually need to get along well with someone other than Mom. In short, she had to manage his immaturity. For instance, she gave him time lines to learn to take care of his belongings and perform jobs around the house. She outlined what would happen if he did not, and she stuck to the consequences that she promised to impose. He lost many privileges and learned the cost of being a slacker.

Boundaries play an important role in managing. Setting limits and requiring the child to take ownership (embracing the problem as his own) and responsibility (taking care of what he has embraced) entail a clear understanding of boundaries. We will talk more about this later.

Source

Children come into the world without resources. They don't know where the food is, how to get shelter, or how to obtain the money they need for basic supplies. They have immaterial needs as well, without knowing how to meet them. They need love, spiritual growth, wisdom, support, and knowledge, all of which are out of their reach.

Parents are the source of all good things for a child. They are the bridge to the outside world of resources that sustain life. And in giving and receiving resources, boundaries play a very

important role. Children need to learn how to receive and use responsibly what is given them and gradually take over the role of meeting their own needs. In the beginning, parents are the source; they progressively give the child the independence to obtain what they need on their own.

Being the source for children is fraught with blessing and difficulty. If parents give without boundaries, children learn to feel entitled and become self-centered and demanding. Ungratefulness becomes a character pattern. If parents hold resources too tightly, children give up and do not develop the hope of reaching goals that have gratifying rewards. We will see how boundaries help structure the resources and how they play an important role in parenting.

Learning to Take Responsibility

When Cameron was first enlisted in the process of learning how to take responsibility for cleaning up, he was lacking several things:

- He did not feel the need to clean up. Mom felt that need.
- He did not feel motivated to clean up. Mom felt motivated.
- He did not plan for or take the time to clean up. Mom did.
- He did not have the skill to organize. Mom did.

So how did he learn to take responsibility for himself? There was a slow transfer of these qualities from the outside of Cameron to the inside. Whereas Mom possessed all the qualities inside of her and Cameron did not, boundaries reversed all that. In the end, Mom did not feel the need or the motivation, and she did not take the time or use her skills. Instead, Cameron did. Boundaries facilitated the process of having the child internalize things that were external to him. And in the final analysis, building boundaries in a child accomplishes this: *What was once external becomes internal.*

In the rest of this book we will talk about the process by which kids internalize the structure they do not naturally possess. As

you take a stance of good clear boundaries with children, they will have a better chance of gaining the motivation, the need, the skill, and the plan to live a loving, responsible, righteous, and successful life unto God and others. And this is what character is all about.

In the next chapter we will take a closer look at the kind of character we want to develop in our children.

Dr. Henry Cloud & Dr. John Townsend



Making Dating Work

BOUNDARIES

in Dating

Chapter 1

Why Boundaries in Dating?

So what do I do, set a bomb underneath his chair?" Heather exploded, only partly in jest. She was having lunch with her best friend, Julie. The conversation focused on her ongoing frustration with Todd, Heather's boyfriend for the past year. Heather cared deeply for him and was ready to pursue marriage. Though he was loving, responsible, and fun, Todd had shown no sign of making any real commitment to the relationship. The couple enjoyed being together, yet anytime Heather tried to talk about getting serious, Todd would make a joke or skate around the issue. At thirty-three, Todd valued his freedom and saw no reason for anything in his life to change.

Heather's outburst was a response to something Julie had said: "You really need to help Todd get moving forward." Heather's words were tinted with frustration, hurt, and a good deal of discouragement. Frustration because she and Todd seemed to be on different tracks. Hurt because her love felt unrequited. And discouraged because she had invested so much of her heart, time, and energy into the relationship. For the past year, Heather had made Todd a high emotional priority in her life. She had given up activities she enjoyed; she had given up relationships she valued. She had tried to become the kind of person she thought Todd would be attracted to. And now it looked like this investment was going nowhere.

No Kids Allowed

Welcome to dating. If you have been in this unique type of relationship, you are probably familiar with Heather and Todd's scenario.

Two people are genuinely attracted to each other and start going out. They are hopeful that the relationship will become something special that will lead to marriage and a lifelong soul mate. Things look good for a while, but somehow something breaks down between them, causing heartache, frustration, and loneliness. And, more often than not, the scenario repeats itself in other relationships down the line.

Some people blame dating itself for all of this, thinking that it's not a healthy activity. They would rather find an alternative, such as group friendships until two people have selected each other to court exclusively. Though dating has its difficulties, we would not take this view. We believe in dating. We did it a lot personally, having been single a combined total of seventy-five years. And we think it offers lots of good things, such as opportunities to grow personally and learn how to relate to people, for starters.

However, dating does have its risks. That is why we say, *no kids allowed*. That doesn't mean teens shouldn't date, but it does mean one's maturity is very important here. By its very nature, dating is experimental, with little commitment initially, so someone can get out of a relationship without having to justify himself much. Putting lots of emotional investment into a relationship can be dangerous. Thus, dating works best between two responsible people.

Problems in Freedom and Responsibility

This book is not about the nature of dating, however. You cannot do a lot about that. Rather, we are writing about the problems people have in how they conduct their dating lives. There is a great deal you can do about that.

Simply put, many of the struggles people experience in dating relationships are, at heart, *caused by some problem in the areas of freedom and responsibility*. By freedom, we mean your ability to make choices based on your values, rather than choosing out of fear or guilt. Free people make commitments because they feel it's the right thing to do, and they are wholehearted about it. By responsibility, we mean your ability to execute your tasks in keeping the relationship healthy and loving, as well as being able to say no to things you shouldn't be responsible for. Responsible people shoulder their part of the dating relationship, but they don't tolerate harmful or inappropriate behavior.

Dating is ultimately about love. People seek it through dating. When they find it, and it matures, they often make deep commitments to each other. Freedom and responsibility are necessary for love to develop in dating. When two individuals allow each other freedom and take ownership of the relationship, they are creating an environment for love to grow and mature. Freedom and responsibility create a safe and secure environment for a couple to love, trust, explore, and deepen their experience of each other.

Actually, these two elements are necessary for any successful relationship, not just dating. Marriage, friendship, parenting, and business connections depend on freedom and responsibility in order for the attachment to flourish. God designed love so that there can be no fear (loss of freedom) in love, for perfect love casts out fear (1 John 4:18). We are to speak the truth in love to each other (Ephesians 4:15), taking responsibility to protect love by confronting problems.

We believe that healthy boundaries are the key to preserving freedom, responsibility, and ultimately love, in your dating life. Establishing and keeping good limits can do a great deal to not only cure a bad relationship, but make a good one better. So, before we take a look at the ways that dating problems arise from freedom and responsibility conflicts, let's take a brief look at what boundaries are and how they function in your dating relationships.

What Are Boundaries?

You may not be familiar with the term *boundary*. For some people, *boundaries* may bring up images of walls, barriers to intimacy, or even selfishness. Yet that is not the case, especially in the dating arena. If you understand what boundaries are and do, they can be one of the most helpful tools in your life to develop love, responsibility, and freedom. Let's take a look at what a boundary is, its functions and purpose, and some examples.

A *Property Line*

Simply put, a boundary is a *property line*. Just as a physical fence marks out where your yard ends and your neighbor's begins, a per-

sonal boundary distinguishes what is your emotional or personal property, and what belongs to someone else. You can't see your own boundary. However, you can tell it is there when someone crosses it. When another person tries to control you, tries to get too close to you, or asks you to do something you don't think is right, you should feel some sense of protest. Your boundary has been crossed.

The Functions of Boundaries

Boundaries serve two important functions. First, they *define* us. Boundaries show what we are and are not; what we agree and disagree with; what we love and hate. God has many clear boundaries. He loves the world (John 3:16); he loves cheerful givers (2 Corinthians 9:7). He hates haughty eyes and a lying tongue (Proverbs 6:16–17). As people made in his image, we also are to be honest and truthful about what we are and are not.

Dating goes much better when you are defined. When you are clear about your values, preferences, and morals, you solve many problems before they start. For example, a woman may tell a guy she is going out with that she is serious about her spiritual life, and desires that in people she is close to. She is letting him know about something that defines her, and it is out front between them, so that he will know who she is.

The second function of boundaries is that they *protect* us. Boundaries keep good things in, and bad things out. When we don't have clear limits, we can expose ourselves to unhealthy and destructive influences and people. Prudent people see danger and hide from it (Proverbs 27:12). For example, a man and woman who are getting closer in their relationship may want to set some limits on dating other people, so as to protect each other's hearts from unnecessary harm. Boundaries protect by letting others know what you will and will not tolerate.

Examples of Boundaries

There are several kinds of limits we can set and use in dating, all depending on the circumstances. Here are a few:

- Words: telling someone no and being honest about your disagreement

- The truth: bringing reality to a problem
- Distance: allowing time or physical space between two people to protect or as a consequence for irresponsible behavior
- Other people: using supportive friends to help keep a limit

Sometimes you will use these boundaries to simply let your date know your heart: “I am sensitive and wanted you to know that, so that we can be aware that I might get hurt easily.” At other times, you may need to use boundaries to confront a problem and protect yourself or the relationship: “I will not go as far as you want sexually, and if you continue pushing, I will not see you again.” Either way, boundaries give you freedom and choices.

What’s Inside Your Boundaries

Remember that boundaries are a fence protecting your property. In dating, your property is your own soul. Boundaries surround the life God has given you to maintain and mature, so that you can become the person he created you to be. Here are some of the contents of your self that boundaries define and protect.

- Your love: your deepest capacity to connect and trust
- Your emotions: your need to own your feelings and not be controlled by someone else’s feelings
- Your values: your need to have your life reflect what you care about most deeply
- Your behaviors: your control over how you act in your dating relationship
- Your attitudes: your stances and opinions about yourself and your date

You and only you are responsible for what is inside your boundaries. If someone else is controlling your love, emotions, or values, they are not the problem. Your inability to set limits on their control is the problem. Boundaries are the key to keeping your very soul safe, protected, and growing.

You will find many, many examples and situations in this book about how to apply boundary principles in your dating life. Just

remember that you are not being mean when you say no. Instead, you may be saving yourself or even the relationship from harm.

How Boundary Problems Show Themselves

There are lots of ways that dating suffers when freedom and responsibility are not appropriately present. Here are a few of them.

Loss of Freedom to Be Oneself

Sometimes, one person will give up her identity and lifestyle to keep a relationship together. Then, when her true feelings emerge, the other person doesn't like who she really is, having never been exposed to her real self. Heather, in the introductory illustration, had lost some of her freedom in this way.

Being with the Wrong Person

When we have well-developed boundaries, we are more drawn to healthy, growing people. We are clear about what we will tolerate and what we love. Good boundaries run off the wackos, and attract people who are into responsibility and relationship. But when our boundaries are unclear or undeveloped, we run the risk of allowing people inside who shouldn't be there.

Dating from Inner Hurt Rather Than Our Values

Boundaries have so much to do with our values, what we believe and live out in life. When our boundaries are clear, our values can dictate what kinds of people fit the best. But often, people with poor boundaries have some soul-work to do, and they unknowingly attempt to work it out in dating. Instead of picking people because of their values, they react to their inner struggles and choose in some devastating ways. For example, the woman with controlling parents may be drawn to controlling men. Conversely, another woman with the same sort of background may react the opposite way, picking passive and compliant men so as to never be controlled. Either way, the hurt part inside is picking, not the values.

Not Dating

Sadly, some people who really want to be dating are on the sidelines, wondering if they will ever find anyone, or if anyone will find

them. This is often caused by boundary conflicts, when people withdraw to avoid hurt and risk, and end up empty-handed.

Doing Too Much in the Relationship

Many people with boundary problems overstep their bounds and don't know when to stop giving of themselves. They will put their lives and hearts on hold for someone, only to find out that the other person was willing to take all that, but never really wanted to deeply commit. Good boundaries help you know how much to give, and when to stop giving.

Freedom without Responsibility

Freedom must always be accompanied by responsibility. When one person enjoys the freedom of dating, and takes no responsibility for himself, problems occur. Someone who is "having his cake and eating it too" in his dating relationship is in this category. This is Todd's situation. He enjoyed Heather but didn't want to take any responsibility to develop the relationship, though a great deal of time had passed.

Control Issues

More often than not, one person wants to get serious sooner than another. Sometimes in this situation, the more serious person attempts to rein in the other person by manipulation, guilt, domination, and intimidation. Love has become secondary, and control has become primary.

Not Taking Responsibility to Say No

This describes the "nice guy" who allows disrespect and poor treatment by his date, and either minimizes the reality that he is being mistreated, or simply hopes that one day she will stop. He disowns his responsibility to set a limit on bad things happening to him.

Sexual Impropriety

Couples often have difficulty keeping appropriate physical limits. They either avoid taking responsibility for the issue, or one person is the only one with the "brakes," or they ignore the deeper issues that are driving the activity.

There are many more ways that dating can become misery because of freedom and responsibility problems. We will go over many of them in the book. And, as you will see, understanding and applying boundaries in the right ways can make a world of difference in how you approach the dating arena.

In the next chapter, we will look at the first and foremost boundary line of any relationship: truth.

Take-Away Tips

- Dating involves risks, and boundaries help you navigate those risks.
- Boundaries are your “property lines” which define and protect you.
- Learn to value what your boundaries protect, such as your emotions, values, behaviors, and attitudes.
- Boundaries help you be yourself, instead of losing yourself in someone else.
- You want the person you date to take responsibility for his life, as you do.
- Good boundaries will help you choose better quality people because they help you become a better person.

From the Best-Selling Authors of *Boundaries*

Dr. Henry Cloud
Dr. John Townsend

THE

MOM
FACTOR

*Dealing with the Mother You Had,
Didn't Have, or Still Contend With*

What About Mom, Anyhow?

Beth hung up the phone, frustrated, confused, and discouraged. She had just spent ninety minutes talking to her mother—ninety minutes of wasted time. As a working mother, Beth didn't have that kind of time to spare.

She had tried to explain to her mom that their vacation plans wouldn't include a visit to see her. "You know we'd love to see you," Beth said, trying to reason with her mom, "but this vacation we really wanted to see the Grand Canyon."

The silence that followed was too familiar to Beth. Hurt, distance, and coldness were the hallmarks of saying no to her mother. Beth tried to scramble and make some connection with her. "Mom, we'll make a real effort to see you on the next trip."

"That won't be necessary. I'm sure you'll be too busy for me then too." Her mother hung up, and the dial tone accented that ache in Beth's stomach that she knew too well. Again, she realized that her mother couldn't be pleased; Beth was always "not enough," or "too much" something. It was confusing: Was she really an ungrateful, selfish daughter, or did her mother have too many expectations?

Beth loved her mother deeply and desired more than anything to have a close, respectful relationship with her. She remembered the commandment to "honor thy father and mother," and thought, *This is impossible. If I honor her, I dishonor my family, and if I*

honor my family, I dishonor her. She resigned herself to the way things always had been and went back to planning the vacation. However, emptiness now surrounded the entire project.

WHAT'S WRONG?

This scene repeats itself millions of times daily around the world. Every six seconds, another adult alternates between resentment, anger, guilt, fear, and confusion about ongoing interaction with a mother.

Most people want a comfortable, mutually satisfying friendship with that very significant person in our life—our mother. But the reality falls short of the ideal. You may experience “mother trouble” in several areas. You may feel:

- unable to communicate with her
- her lack of respect for your choices and values
- her refusal to accept your own family and friends
- a lack of freedom to have a separate life without losing her love
- disconnected from and misunderstood by her
- difficulty in saying no and confronting her
- you have to hide your real self and be perfect
- responsible to make her think that she is perfect
- guilt when you don't take care of her as she wants you to
- disillusionment and conflict over her interactions with your spouse
- guilt over not living up to her expectations and wishes
- sorrow that she can't seem to comprehend your pain
- childlike in her presence
- frustration over her seeming self-absorption
- like cringing when she treats your children in familiar hurtful ways
- discouraged that this list is so long

The list could go on, but it points to a fundamental truth: Our relationship with our mother either in the past or present hasn't left us where we want to be. You may wish you and your mom were closer. And you may wish she had better prepared you for other aspects of life.

For not only does the quality of your relationship with your mother dictate how things go between the two of you, it also drastically impacts all areas of your life. Not only do we learn our patterns of intimacy, relating, and separateness from mother, but we also learn about how to handle failure, troublesome emotions, expectations and ideals, grief and loss, and many of the other components that make up our "emotional IQ"¹—that part of us that guarantees whether or not we will be successful at love and work. In short, the following two realities largely determine our emotional development:

1. How we were mothered
 2. How we have responded to that mothering
-

Dave got out of the car in the flower shop parking lot. It was another apology bouquet day. His wife, Cindy, had been in tears last night when she had staged a special evening alone with him without the kids. Dinner had gone well, and she had been looking forward to an evening of intimacy and vulnerability. Yet when she looked into his eyes and asked him how he was feeling about their marriage and life in general, Dave had shut down inside. As usual he was at a loss for words and could not bridge the emotional gap between himself and his wife.

"Maybe I just don't deserve her . . . a husband is supposed to love his wife, so why don't I even desire this closeness that's so important to her? What's wrong with me?" he wondered, as he

plunked down another bill for the flowers. “Are flowers the best I’ll ever do?”

Dave’s dilemma would seem at first glance to have little to do with mothering problems. He just knew he had a problem with his wife. But the reality is that Dave’s pattern of relating was working exactly as God planned: we learn from our parents about relationship. In his relationship with his mother, Dave had learned that closeness could be dangerous. For example, when he was scared or hurt, his mother would become anxious and fuss over him to the point that he felt smothered. As a result, any time his wife moved toward him in an emotional way, his walls went up, and he braced himself against emotional overinvolvement. He found himself in a lose-lose situation. While he did not like being cut off from his wife, he did not like being close either. Either position left his wife feeling unfulfilled. Until Dave dealt with his fears of intimacy, this pattern would continue.

Dave’s struggle illustrates the major point of this book: What we learned in our relationship with our mother deeply affects every area of our adult life.

DOES IT HAVE TO BE THIS WAY?

Just as God’s plan for us to learn patterns of relating from our mothers can end up wreaking destruction in our adult lives, so can his plan of repair bring change and growth.

As a single man, Mark had noticed patterns in his relationships similar to Dave’s pattern with his wife: He couldn’t sustain long-term, intimate relationships. He’d get close to an eligible woman, even consider marriage, and then inexplicably back off from the relationship, complaining that she was “too demanding,” or “too serious,” or “not serious enough,” or whatever. For years he simply told himself that he just couldn’t find the “right one,” until a friend suggested that the problem might be *him*. In response to his friend’s suggestion, Mark joined a support group that dealt with issues of intimacy and trust. It was hard work at first as those were the very

dynamics in which he felt the most deficient. Yet, as he opened himself to the consistent nurturing and confrontation of the group members, something began to change in him. As they held him accountable for his own fears and deficits, *as well as gave him what he missed with his own mother*, he began to notice that he avoided intimacy less. In fact, he even began to long for it. And his long list of requirements for a partner became much more realistic.

As Mark continued on his growth path, he found “the right one.” But in reality, Mark had become “the right one” because he had allowed his friends to provide the mothering he needed and thus learned the patterns of relating he had missed the first time around. When we aren’t mothered perfectly, God will provide others to fill in the gaps. He can redeem our early experience, either building on the good our mother did, or providing basic essentials our mother may have missed.

TWO CONSIDERATIONS

Many people suffer under the delusion that their mother is the real problem. Many modern pop psychology approaches promote the following:

- blaming parents for all of the client’s problems
- focusing only on dredging up “pain from the past” and “getting the pain out,” thinking that catharsis cures
- identifying the client as a victim and commiserating with how bad “Mom” or someone else was
- excusing behavior, lack of performance, and failure in love or work because of what mother failed to provide
- encouraging the client to live more in the past than in the present
- arranging sessions with mom, thinking that reconciling with mom or having mom “own” how bad she was will finally fix the hole in the client’s heart

This thinking focuses on the mother of the past, not on the process of mothering in the present. Thinking that resolution will come from blaming parents, trying to get them to change, or continuing to process the events of the past, they miss out on the necessary character change that leads to real healing.

While we believe that working out one's relationship with one's mother is very important in the growth process, it is not the whole picture. We must also look at the process of mothering in the present as well.

Therefore, the two considerations that we will be focusing on in this book are *your relationship with your mother* and *the process of mothering itself*. Let's look at each one of those issues for a moment.

YOUR MOM

When we talk about "dealing with the past," we aren't saying to "go back into the past." You cannot go back to 1950, 1960, 1970, or even yesterday to deal with mother. But, dealing with mother is possible because, whether you like it or not, she lives with you every day in the present.

Two very important issues are at work every day that result from unresolved aspects of our relationship with mother. The first issue has to do with the feelings we have for our mother, the injuries we felt from her, and the needs that she didn't meet. The second issue is the dynamics and patterns of relating that we learned in our relationship with mom. The first deals with how we feel today about the past; the second deals with how we repeat patterns from the past.

Leftover Feelings

Let's look at the first issue—the feelings that we have toward our mother.

Jim and Debbie were preparing for a trip. She was packing, and he was getting the car ready when Debbie suddenly remembered that it was time to change the oil in her car. She walked out

into the garage. "Jim, did you get the oil changed?" she asked. Maybe he had remembered and taken the car in earlier in the day.

"Will you get off my back?" Jim screamed. "What do you think I am, an idiot? Of course I got the oil changed. I told you I would take care of the car, and you don't ever believe anything I tell you." He stared at her with such contempt and hatred that an icy feeling moved down her spine. Debbie, not ever knowing what to do when Jim reacted in this way, withdrew to her room and cried.

Debbie had asked an innocent question. But Jim reacted as if she thought he was an "idiot," and he was prepared to fight and defend himself against her.

Why? Jim grew up with a mother very unlike Debbie. A domineering and controlling woman, Jim's mother did not trust Jim to do things on his own, nor did she believe him when he told her he had done his jobs. He grew up trying to please her and at the same time resenting her.

One reason Jim had fallen in love with Debbie in the first place was because she was so unlike his mother. Although not consciously thinking about his mother at all, he was drawn to Debbie's warmth and lack of domination. He felt close to her almost from the first time they met. She was his ultimate fantasy woman.

As time went on, the relationship naturally deepened—and then the problems emerged. Jim began to lose his warm, tender feelings toward Debbie, and instead began to feel a growing resentment resulting in angry outbursts like the one above.

The sad thing was that Debbie hadn't changed. She was still the same warm, noncontrolling person he had loved.

What had happened? As Jim's attachment to his wife increased, his unresolved feelings about his mother began to emerge and interfere with how he experienced Debbie. His anger toward his mother and his feelings of being controlled, mistrusted, and dominated by his mother got displaced onto Debbie. He experienced Debbie as an adversary, as he had his mother. In reality, he could no longer

even see Debbie for the woman she was, because of his feelings about his mother. He actually began to experience Debbie as if she were his mother.

Psychologists call this phenomenon “transference.” It is our tendency to direct feelings toward people in the present that should really be directed toward people in our past. It’s the old “burned dog dreads the fire” routine. If someone hurts us, and we fail to work through our wounded feelings, we will distort future relationships that appear even close in character to the one in which we were hurt. If we have unresolved feelings toward our real mothers, we need to deal with that relationship.

The Bible calls this process forgiveness. Forgiveness involves looking honestly at problems in a relationship, facing them, letting them go, and grieving our losses. It frees us from our past. We name what went wrong, look at it, feel the feelings, and let them go. The goal is to get to the place where we are “finished with mother” and ready to see people as they are.

Patterns of Relating

The second issue related to our mother has to do with *understanding the dynamics and patterns of relating that we learned in our relationship with mom*. Let’s go back to Dave for a moment. He had learned some patterns in his relationship to his mother that he was exhibiting now with his wife. These patterns of relating, called “dynamics,” are like maps laid down in our brains; they determine how we will operate in different kinds of relationships. Dave’s map of closeness worked this way: When he became intimate, he feared he would be smothered and overwhelmed, losing himself. In order to regain his own space that he feared his wife (like his mother before her) was about to take away from him, he withdrew.

Dave is living out the *pattern of relating* that is familiar to him, and until he changes it, he will continue to “walk in the ways of

[his] elders.” The Bible tells us that we repeat unhealthy patterns of relating until we take ownership of them and work through them (see Mark 7:8–9). Dave needs more insight into the patterns that he had learned in his relationship with his mother, so that he can turn from them and begin to create healthier ones with his wife.

We need to look at the patterns that we learned in our relationship with our mother. Patterns of avoidance, control, compliance, dominance, passivity, aggressiveness and overcontrol, mistrust, and a host of others can get hardwired into our brains. We were made to take in those patterns and to live by them. That is what parenting is about. We internalize the ways of our parents, and then live by them.

Thus, we are destined to repeat troublesome internalized patterns of relating or performing until we become aware of them and change. In this way, our relationship with mom needs more than forgiveness: We need to become aware of dynamics and patterns and change them into more helpful ones.

THE MOTHERING PROCESS

Jordan was a diligent mother of two, and she loved her children very much. But her children were disorganized, as children often are; they would leave their toys lying around and generally create chaos. When this happened, Jordan would grow more and more irritated, until finally through clenched teeth, she would yell, “Put your toys away.” Fearing her blowups, her children were beginning to show signs of anxiety. Whenever she would yell at them, or respond harshly, she would feel like a “horrible mother” and be overcome with guilt.

Jordan began to talk to a trusted friend, Susan, about her problem; it was the first time she had ever openly shared a shortcoming with a friend. Susan responded with empathy and understanding, so Jordan began to admit other imperfections.

Over time, Jordan began to notice the difference between Susan and some of the other women she hung around with. The others talked about their wonderful lives, their successful children, and their incredible spiritual growth. There was nothing wrong with sharing successes, but these women never shared failures. Susan was open not only to the good things Jordan had going but also to her struggles.

Jordan was changing. As she continued to share all of herself—the good and the bad—with Susan, she was becoming a more relaxed person. The little things she did not have “all together” did not bother her as much. And she found she was less bothered by what her children were doing. She found that she was able to just be with them in their imperfections in a whole new way. Susan’s acceptance of her was being passed on in her mothering.

What was happening here? Jordan was getting restored to the *process of mothering*. Susan was providing Jordan with empathy and containment, a basic aspect of mothering Jordan had not received from her own mother. For us to become comfortable with ourselves, all of ourselves, we need someone with whom we can be ourselves. We need acceptance and understanding, so that we can contain and integrate all parts of ourselves. A good mother does this. She listens to and accepts the negative, contains it, and helps her child not feel overwhelmed. She is comfortable with her child’s imperfections. The child takes her comfort into his personality, and he becomes comfortable with imperfections as well. The mothering process of acceptance integrates the child.

Some people, however, do not receive this empathy and understanding from their own mothers. They experience the “uncomfortable with imperfections” mothering that Jordan first gave to her children. This was the kind of mothering she had received from her own mother, and the only kind she knew how to pass on to her children. Her mother had failed to give her empathy and understanding, and so she did not have it inside to give to herself and to her children.

God has designed several ingredients into the growing up process that a “good-enough mother” provides. Our aim here is to help you understand that you may not have received everything you needed from your mother, and only when someone gives you those ingredients can your life work correctly. This is what Susan did for Jordan; she gave her what her mother failed to give her. This is what friends do for each other every day. This is what it means to be restored to the mothering process.

So, not only do we need to resolve things with one real person in our past as we mentioned above, but we must get from others what we did not get completely from our mother.

In the rest of the book, we will outline the major aspects of the mothering process so that you can understand why some areas of your relationships and your performance are not working, and so you can know what you need for it to change. Just as Jordan discovered that she lacked empathy and was restored to that aspect of mothering through Susan, you will find what it is that you have missed.

RESPONDING TO MOTHERING

Remember the two issues we identified above that determine who we are as people: (1) the kind of mothering we had—both from our own mothers and from our significant relationships since then—and (2) our response to the mothering process.

When we have gotten negative mothering, we can begin a pattern of mistrusting for the rest of our lives. We hide our needs and vulnerability. We become combative and aggressive. To show that we can’t be controlled, we control others. And the list goes on. We respond to mothering in defensive and reactive ways, as did Jim, which, in turn, like Jim above, prevents us from getting what we need, thus perpetuating our own problems.

Jordan had not received the acceptance that she needed from her mother. As a result, she had also developed a pattern of avoiding the acceptance that was available to her later in life. Others,

even before Susan, would have listened to Jordan and accepted her. But she was so caught up in her efforts to be perfect that she was not responding to the good mothering that was around her at all times.

Jordan's rejection of good mothering is in contrast to what the Bible calls responding to the light. Things of light—like honesty, vulnerability, trust, responsibility, acceptance, forgiveness—are around us all the time. Our part is to open up and respond to them.

OUR ASSUMPTIONS

In this book, we are making three assumptions:

Our first assumption is that there is no such thing as the “good child” and the “bad mom.” Sometimes people in recovery and psychological movements encourage “parent bashing”; every negative thing is the fault of one or both parents. Mothers do fail in being all that they need to be. Some fail in being almost anything that they needed to be. Still others do a pretty good job and just leave a few things undone or in need of fixing. But, children have defensive and inappropriate responses as well, and as adults they often continue in inappropriate patterns. Consequently, adult children need to shoulder much of the responsibility.

As you begin to see and understand the missing elements in the mothering you received, your responsibility is to grieve and forgive so that way you may be healed of whatever your mother might have done wrong. Then, as you see and take responsibility for your side of the problem, you will be able to receive what you did not get, gain control, and change those areas where life has not worked for you thus far. In this twofold process of forgiveness and responsibility, you will find unlimited growth.

Our second assumption is that there are preordained tasks of mothering and responses to mothering. We will outline the universal and predictable process that all children need to go through with their mother. We will take you through that process and help

you understand how that process relates to you, your history with your mother, and your current life. We will start with basic issues like the importance of making emotional connections and proceed to leaving your mother and cleaving to your spouse.

Our third assumption is that you need love and limits along each step. Your mother needed to be loving so that you learned to bond with others, and your mother needed to set limits so that you learned to shoulder your own responsibilities. If your mother neglected to provide love and limits, or if she provided one but not the other, you will need to find a way of completing what is missing.

So, join us on the wonderful, difficult, and challenging process of dealing with mom and mothering.

About the Publisher

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*This book is dedicated
to the wisdom within us all.*

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Author's Preface

to the Revised Edition



L*iving in the Light* was first published in 1986. Since that time, it has sold over a million copies, and has been translated into many languages all over the world. Today, it continues to sell steadily and I receive continuous feedback that it is touching people's lives in a meaningful way.

Not long ago, I revised and updated my first book, *Creative Visualization*, and ever since that time, I've been feeling that I'd like to do the same for *Living in the Light*. The basic message of the book seems to be as timely and relevant as ever. Over the years since I wrote it, however, my understanding has developed and (hopefully) deepened through my own life experience and my work

with others. I felt that there were many things I would say somewhat differently now, and that perhaps it would be valuable to my readers to hear more of my ongoing story as well as some of my “older and wiser” perspective.

Having updated these two books, I now realize that revising a classic book is a delicate and difficult art form quite different from writing one. The challenge is this: How do I bring it up to date and into alignment with my present understanding while respecting and honoring the integrity and power of the original work, which in a sense is a living entity unto itself?

When I sat down to revise *Living in the Light*, I hadn’t read it for a number of years. As I went through it, I had two distinct reactions. One response was, “Wow! This is really good! I forgot that I was saying this stuff so clearly way back then.” The other response was an embarrassed wince when I felt I had said something a little too simplistic or grandiose, or found something I no longer agreed with.

I have not made major changes to the book. I have extended and updated my story in the Introduction, and reorganized a little, adding a chapter and taking out two others that no longer fit well. Otherwise, I have simply reworked it a bit — adding, subtracting, and editing to bring it more into alignment with my current views. I have only modified it where I strongly felt it could be improved or made more accurate.

At times, I had to fight the temptation to simply write a whole new book on the same subject! I comforted myself with the thought that readers interested in a more complete view of how my

ideas have evolved can easily find it in one of my newer works, such as *The Path of Transformation* or *Creating True Prosperity*.

Those of you who have read *Living in the Light* in the original version may notice a slightly different tone to the revised edition. At the time I wrote the book, I was filled with youthful enthusiasm for the power I was finding in these ideas and practices. A dozen years later, I'm as enthusiastic and committed to these ideas as ever, but I now have a healthy respect for the ongoing challenge of integrating them into our daily lives. So you may notice a somewhat humbler approach, acknowledging and honoring the complexities of life and the human journey.

Probably the greatest difference for me between then and now is my understanding of the necessity and importance of acknowledging, working with, and embracing our disowned energies, our "shadow side." At this point, the phrase *living in the light* has a deeper and subtler meaning for me than before. It refers to the consciousness and balance that comes into our lives as we become aware of, accept, and express the many aspects of who we are, including the parts that we may have feared and rejected.

When I wrote this book, the millennium change was still years away. Now it is at hand, and the idea that we are creating a new world seems more relevant than ever.

Whether you have read *Living in the Light* before and are curious to read the revised version, or are a first-time reader, welcome! I hope you enjoy the book and find inspiration on your journey of self-discovery.

Introduction



The Beginning of My Journey

I have always had a burning desire to understand how the universe works, what life is all about, and the meaning and purpose for which I am here. In retrospect, I can see that my entire life has been devoted to my search for truth and understanding.

I was brought up in a very intellectual, well-educated, non-religious family. My parents were essentially atheists, and very early on, I remember having the attitude that a belief in God was a human fabrication, a fantasy, a superstition created to help people

feel better about the totally unexplained, and unexplainable, predicament we seem to find ourselves in. Human existence, or any other kind of existence, was simply an accident of nature and had no particularly fathomable meaning. I preferred to admit that I didn't know how we got here or why, rather than to adopt a simplistic explanation merely to gain a sense of security. I believed that truth was rational and anything that couldn't be proved scientifically didn't exist. I also felt somewhat condescending toward people who were weak enough to have to make up a god to believe in.

The positive side of this upbringing was that I didn't get a lot of the rigid dogma and deeply negative messages about right and wrong, heaven and hell, and sin that so many people receive in their early religious training. On the other hand, I had no conscious concept or experience of the spiritual dimension of life, and no answers for the questions I had about the meaning and purpose of my life.

My parents really wanted a child, and were very loving to me. Unfortunately they were unable to work out their own relationship and were divorced when I was two years old. Although I don't remember it clearly, I know this event had a major impact on my life and affected my later patterns in relationship. After the divorce, I lived with my mother who never remarried or had any other children. My father did remarry, and I often visited my father and his other family.

My mother developed a successful career as a city planner in the days when there were few women in that field. She dealt with the usual challenges of single parenting — trying to balance the needs of her child with the demands of her work. Being the only child of

a working mother, I developed a strong sense of responsibility and self-sufficiency quite early.

My mother is a very adventurous person. She loves to try new things, and for me, she was a great role model of fearlessness and pioneer spirit. She had been one of the first educated American women in her generation to have natural childbirth. I was the first baby her doctor had ever delivered without an anesthetic. I was blessed with a very fortunate birth. (On September 30, 1948, at 9:10 p.m. in Trenton, New Jersey, for all you astrologers!)

My mother loves to explore new places and we traveled a lot when I was a child — all over the United States, to the West Indies, Mexico, Hawaii, Europe. We also moved frequently whenever my mother changed jobs. Until I was about fifteen, I had never lived in one place longer than two or three years.

My mother's family had been Quakers and we still used the "plain language" when speaking to my grandmother (saying "thee" rather than "you" for the Quakers is an acknowledgement of the god within each person). So, on a deep level, I absorbed the profound respect for spirit and concern for humanity that is woven into the fabric of the Quaker religion, which I feel had a strong influence on me later in my life.

When I was fourteen years old I went through an enormous emotional crisis. Triggered initially by the collapse of my first romance (with an "older" man of nineteen — I was sure no one would ever compare), it snowballed into a deep and long-lasting existential despair. I took a long hard look at life and recognized that there was really no point or meaning to it. I could see that all

the things that were supposed to provide significance in life — education, success, relationships, money — were in themselves ephemeral, meaningless, and empty. There didn't seem to be anything else to fill the void. I was deeply disillusioned and depressed, and basically remained in that state for several years.

In retrospect, I can see that I was going through an experience that all of us must pass through at one time or another (or many times) — what mystics call the piercing of the veil of illusion. It's the point where we begin to recognize that our physical world is not the ultimate reality and we turn inward to discover the spiritual aspect of our existence. At these times, we usually feel, emotionally, that we are hitting bottom, but as we actually hit bottom it's as if we fall through a trap door into a new place — the inner realm of the soul, where we can begin to explore our connection to life in a whole new way. When we can face our fears and move through such a "dark night of the soul," we are greeted by the dawn of a profound new adventure.

New Experiences

Over the next few years, I began to have new experiences, openings, a growing awareness that did not fit into my former rational framework. In college, I studied psychology and got involved in some encounter groups and sensitivity training groups that, in addition to allowing me to release old emotional pain, led me to new feelings of love, joy, and oneness with all. I studied dance and discovered that when I was dancing, I would often have an exhilarating feeling, as if

some higher force had taken over and was moving me in an abandoned and thrilling way.

I had always been interested in Eastern philosophy, so I read books about Buddhism and Hinduism. I practiced yoga and meditation and found that they helped me feel more centered, relaxed, and in tune with myself. After graduating from college I spent two years traveling around the world, living for several months in India, where I gained a deep awareness of the eastern mystical tradition. My travels were a powerful experience for me because with little money and no real plans, I lived by following my intuition. I had set off originally for a vacation in Italy and ended up making a two-year journey around the world. I learned that I could live happily with virtually no possessions and move safely into unknown places. This was one of my earliest experiences of the synergistic things that happen when we trust our inner guidance and follow the flow of our energy.

Getting Conscious

When I returned to the United States, I was hooked on something called “consciousness.” I couldn’t have defined what it was but I knew that I wanted more of it and that for me, nothing else mattered as much as my process of personal growth. I felt that if I pursued external goals such as career, money, or relationships, they would ultimately feel empty, whereas if I devoted myself to my own development I would ultimately have the things that my heart desired such as loving relationships, meaningful work, and a

sense of abundance, and that it would all come about in a more satisfying way.

I was motivated not only by my yearning to find greater fulfillment in my own life, but by a strong desire to make a contribution toward positive change in the world and in other people's healing and happiness.

I moved to the San Francisco Bay area, which I recognized as the forefront of the so-called "human potential movement," and plunged into the earnest pursuit of knowledge, wisdom, healing, and transformation. I took classes and workshops, avidly read new books, meditated, and talked constantly to others involved in the same process. After reading *Handbook to Higher Consciousness* by Ken Keyes, I went to live at his center in Berkeley where we worked on our growth intensely, day and night, for a year. After that, I continued to live communally for several years with others who were involved in an intensive personal development process. During this time, I did whatever I could to make enough money to live on — housework, office work, odds and ends — while I focused on my real work.

Since that time, over twenty-five years ago, my life has been dedicated to my growth and evolution as a conscious being. I gradually came to understand that becoming more conscious meant becoming more aware of all that was taking place within me and around me, how my inner world affected my outer world and vice versa. I realized that the more *awareness* I have, the more *choice* I have in how I create or respond to the circumstances of my life. When we are relatively unconscious, we simply do what we've

always done, not realizing there is any other way. As we gradually become more aware, we begin to recognize that other options exist and we can make other choices in how we live.

At first, I imagined that this process involved a straight line from A to B, A being the darkness of ignorance, and B being full “enlightenment.” The goal was to move from A to B as directly as possible. If we were dedicated and fortunate enough to achieve enlightenment, we would have completed the process; we would be radiant beings, always filled with light, love, and wisdom.

Eventually, I understood that consciousness is an ever-unfolding, deepening, and expanding process with no end point. We are infinite and complex beings, and our human journey involves not just a spiritual awakening, but the development of *all* levels of our being — spiritual, mental, emotional, and physical — and the integration of all these aspects into a healthy and balanced daily life.

I’m getting ahead of myself, however, so back to my story.

My Name

People often ask me about my name so I thought I’d pause here and tell you about it.

While in India, I became very fascinated with the Hindu religion and began to study it. I had not been raised as a Christian, and that religion had never held much interest for me. I liked some of the ideas in Buddhism a lot, but it seemed a bit intellectual to me. The myths, symbols, and deities in the Hindu religion touched

me in a deeper place in my soul. It is a very complex religion and I don't even pretend to understand it, but I grasped a few things.

In the Hindu religion there is a trinity of three main deities that symbolize three aspects of life. Brahma is the creator, Vishnu is the preserver, and Shiva is the destroyer. Shiva represents the constant changing of the universe, the fact that everything must constantly be destroyed in order to be reborn. He reminds us that we must constantly let go of everything we hold on to, in order to flow with the motion of life. Many of his fervent devotees give up home and possessions and wander freely, abandoning themselves to following and trusting the energy of the universe. Shiva is also known as Nataraj — the Lord of the Dance (literally, the Lord of Rhythm). They say that it is his dance that keeps the universe in motion. He is depicted as a very beautiful and powerful man with long flowing hair. (It is said that out of his hair flows the holy Ganges river.) I felt irresistibly drawn to him.

Shakti is the feminine aspect of Shiva. The word “shakti” means “energy” — the energy that everything in the universe is made of. It is the energy of life — the life force running through our bodies. It also means “female energy.” In the Hindu practice of Tantra, there are techniques for enlightenment through channelling one’s sexual energy. In this practice, the man is referred to as Shiva and the woman as Shakti.

When I returned from India I met, and for several years lived with, my friend Marc Allen. He didn’t think my previous name fit me and, knowing of my “love affair” with Shiva, he began calling me Shakti. I liked it and began using it. At the time, I don’t think

I realized how powerful the name was, but I certainly realize it now. I feel that the vibration of the name has helped me to emerge into my power.

Gawain is the last name I was born with. It is the same name as Sir Gawain in the King Arthur legends. According to one dictionary definition, it means “battle hawk,” which I think is a wonderful image. To me, Shakti represents my feminine aspect, and Gawain, my masculine aspect.

Creative Visualization

One of the earliest workshops I took was the Silva Mind Control Course. At that time, I was still rather skeptical about this sort of thing and probably would never have gone to it except that my mother had taken the course and highly recommended it to me. I will never forget her description of a technique in which you can imagine what you want to have happen and it will very often come about. My mind felt doubtful about this but my heart made a leap and I remember thinking, “Ever since I was a child, I always *knew* that there was magic — that somehow, somewhere, magic really exists. This sounds like the closest thing to it that I have ever heard of.”

I took the course and I was amazed! We started slowly and easily with simple techniques that anyone could accept and do, and gradually, we worked our way into more unexplainable, but very powerful, processes. After five days, I had a strong psychic experience in which, for a period of several hours, I was able to consistently pick

up specific information that I had no way of knowing except through my intuition. That experience began to dissolve some of my former limits on what I thought was possible.

The most important technique I learned in that course was the basic technique of creative visualization — relaxing deeply and then picturing a desired goal in your mind exactly the way you want it to be. I started to practice this technique and found that it was amazingly effective. Quite often the things I pictured came true quickly and in unexpected ways. I became fascinated with the possibilities and took some other classes and workshops on similar subjects. I began to use creative visualization techniques in my life regularly and to teach them to my friends. I read *The Nature of Personal Reality* by Jane Roberts and was powerfully affected by the idea that we all create our own reality. Soon, I began to lead workshops and do private counseling, and eventually wrote *Creative Visualization*.

When I got the idea to write the book, I just wanted to gather all the ideas and techniques I had learned from various sources and put them down on paper in a comprehensive way. I thought I would write a little booklet I could give to friends and perhaps sell to my clients and a few interested people. As I wrote it, I was filled with self-doubt: "Who am I to be writing a book like this? I'm no expert." Some force inside of me kept pushing me to do it, however, so I did. I used creative visualization techniques to help create the book. I got an artist friend to design the cover. Then, I hung the cover up on my wall and kept imagining and affirming that the book was already finished. I found writing it was fairly effortless (except for my nagging doubts) and before I knew it, it had turned

into a real book that some friends and I published together.

What I didn't fully realize at the time was that the book was coming from a higher creative source within me. On a personality level, I had doubts and fears, but because of my inner commitment to myself, I was willing to go ahead and follow the creative energy anyhow. Because I had a natural ability to think and write clearly, was really interested in these ideas, had a good background in the subject, and was willing to take some risks, the universe could use me as a creative channel.

The publishing process was similar. My friends, Marc Allen and Jon Bernoff, and I knew very little about business or publishing, and had no money at all, but we had a desire to write and publish our own books. By trusting our feelings and being willing to risk acting on them, we found that we were led, step by step, in what we needed to do. We made many mistakes in the process (mostly when we *didn't* follow our inner guidance) and some of them were painful and extremely expensive, but, eventually, we created a successful publishing company, originally named Whatever Publishing, Inc., now called New World Library.

Creative Visualization has been successful far beyond any wild fantasy I might have had at the time I wrote it. Although it was never marketed or publicized in any significant way, other than through word of mouth, at the time of this writing it has sold nearly three million copies and has been translated into over twenty-five foreign languages. Twenty years after its original publication in 1978, the revised edition is still selling steadily. Through the years, I have received countless letters and calls from people all over

the world saying it has helped them transform their lives. Of course, this has been quite gratifying to me, especially because I can see that it is the higher power of the universe at work. I have felt like a proud mother, watching my child out there in the world, doing its work and making its fortune, knowing that it is mine and yet not mine. It came through me and I helped to form it, and yet it is a being, an entity of its own, with its own destiny and its own connection to the creative source.

Listening to Inner Guidance

When I first discovered the techniques of creative visualization and found that they worked, I was excited because I felt that through using them I could create whatever I wanted in my life. I was elated by the feeling that I could have everything I desired!

This was an important step for me as it took me out of the essentially powerless attitude that I had had previously — the attitude that life is something that happens to you and that all you can do is make the best of it. It was in some ways a victim position — giving power to people and things outside of myself. Using creative visualization, I began to realize that the power rested in me, that I could choose to create my life the way I wanted it to be. It was very empowering and very freeing.

As I explored the process of creating my own reality, I gradually began to realize that the creative power I was feeling was coming from a source other than just my personality. For one thing, some of the things I *thought* I wanted didn't manifest; and,

in retrospect, I could see that it was for my highest good that they didn't happen. Other things occurred so miraculously that it was as if some unseen force was putting everything in place. Sometimes I would have flashes of insight and awareness, or future visions, that were highly accurate and seemed to come from a source deep within myself. I became more and more interested in discovering what this creative force was all about and how it worked. I began to realize that "it" (my soul, or higher self) seemed to know more than "I" (my personality self) did about a lot of things. I saw that it would probably be smart to try to find out what that inner guidance was telling me, and follow it. Every time I did that, it seemed to work.

Eventually, I lost interest in trying to control my life, to make things happen in a way that I thought I wanted them to happen. I began to practice surrendering to the higher power of the universe within me and finding out what "it" wanted me to do. I discovered that, in the long run, it really wasn't that different. The universe always seems to want me to have everything I truly want, and it seems to know how to guide me in creating it more effectively than I would know how to create it myself. The emphasis is different, though. Instead of figuring out what I wanted, setting goals, and trying to control what happened to me, I began to practice tuning in receptively to my intuition and acting on what it told me without always understanding why I was doing what I was doing. It was a feeling of letting go of control, surrendering, and allowing the higher power to be in charge.

About this time, I met a woman named Shirley Luthman who

became a very important teacher to me. She led a group each week and I began to go to it faithfully and continued to do so for five years. She taught me a great deal about how to trust and follow my own intuitive sense. Many of the ideas in *Living in the Light*, including the concept of male and female in the way I use it, were inspired by Shirley, and I am deeply grateful for what she taught me.

Trusting Myself

After several years with Shirley, I had to confront the fact that there were things that were happening in the group that didn't feel right to me, and that I couldn't find a way to give my input that was received. I found myself confronting the age-old problem of how to let go of the "guru." I respected Shirley so much, and what I had received from her had been so valuable, that it was very difficult to face the time when I knew that I could not look to her for answers anymore. In a sense, Shirley was the metaphysical mother who had given me the support and security I needed until I was ready to trust myself.

Eventually, my inner guidance told me I had to stop relying on her. The time had come for me to trust the power of my own inner guidance. It was both terrifying and liberating to realize that I had my own path and there was no one ahead of me who had all the answers.

Living in the Light

Once *Creative Visualization* became popular, many people began

asking me to write another book. About two years after *Creative Visualization* was published, I began to have strong feelings that I would do so. One day as I was walking in the woods, I was thinking about my new book and I wondered idly what I should call it. Suddenly, my attention was drawn to a patch of woods near the path where a ray of sunlight was filtering brightly through the trees and shining on the green leaves. It was a beautiful sight and as I gazed, the words "*living in the light*" came to me. I knew immediately that it was the title of my next book and I remember the feeling that I hadn't really thought of it myself but that I had "received" it. I even had the impression that I didn't have much choice about it . . . that I was being directed to use that name!

I felt very inspired, began to make some notes, and told people that I was working on my new book. My publishing company had a cover designed and began to do some preliminary promotion. But after a while, I noticed that I hadn't actually written anything! I kept thinking it was going to happen, but it didn't. The truth was, I was not feeling the energy to actually sit down and write, and no amount of thinking that I "should" do it was making it happen. By this time in my life, I was quite committed to the philosophy that life doesn't have to be a struggle. I felt that when it was ready to happen, it would happen naturally. I wasn't willing to do it if it felt like too much of a push; I sensed that the moment would come when the energy would be so strong that I wouldn't be able *not* to write.

Several years went by, and I became involved in many other things. People continued to ask for my new book and I kept reassuring them that it would be along eventually. Privately, I sometimes

had my doubts, and I had to accept the fact that it was possible that it wouldn't happen. Still, I felt that it would.

Writing this book was a little like being pregnant. I could feel something forming and growing inside of me and I knew that I was creating even though nothing seemed to be happening externally. The baby would emerge when it was fully formed and ready.

Finally, seven years after the publication of *Creative Visualization*, the time had come to write *Living in the Light*. At this point in my life, I was extremely busy and had little time to devote to writing. Still, this book would not be stopped!

Laurel King, a friend who had been working for me for a few years, helped me get my notes and ideas gathered together and down on paper, and contributed her own creative ideas and exercises. I found a few days or a few hours here and there to write. I was spending a lot of time flying all over the world to lead workshops, so much of *Living in the Light* was written on airplanes.

As in writing my first book, I had to deal with fears and doubts that occasionally besieged me. This time, instead of worrying whether I had the right or credibility to share my knowledge, I had the opposite problem. With *Creative Visualization* proving to be wildly successful, I wondered whether my second book would live up to that standard, or would perhaps be a total flop! I now understood one aspect of the difficulties that can accompany fame, and the pressure that all successful creative people face to keep producing successful work.

In spite of the obstacles, the book seemed to flow from that deep creative source within me. It was published in 1986, by our

company, New World Library. By this time, we knew a lot more about publishing! Still, we didn't do a great deal of publicity or marketing. This book, however, seemed to have a life and a destiny of its own. Like *Creative Visualization*, it sold mainly through word of mouth. Along with *Creative Visualization*, it has become known as a classic in the field of personal growth.

Naturally, I am very pleased by the fact that *Living in the Light* has reached so many people and encouraged them in their personal growth process. Some of my most precious moments have been when someone approaches me at a workshop and tells me, with tears in their eyes, that this book has been like a good friend to them, helping them through a particularly dark or challenging time in their life. I feel so grateful that the universe has guided me on a path where by sharing my own learning process, I have been able to make a contribution to other people's lives.

My Journey Continues

Meanwhile, the success of my second book had made me busier than ever. I was spending most of my time leading workshops. I had found that passing along to others what I was learning was a very important and challenging part of my own growth process. My workshops continued to evolve and change as I did, since I was always teaching what I was learning. I love working with people on deep levels of change, growth, and transformation, and I devoted myself to my work.

Eventually, I found that I had become a workaholic, and my

work was consuming my life. Much as I loved my career, I began to feel an increasing sense of imbalance in my life. I was great at giving to the world, but had a hard time creating enough space for receiving, so I began to burn out. I longed for more quiet time, time for myself and my own personal needs. Yet, I had a hard time saying “no” to all the exciting work opportunities that came my way.

For quite some time, I had been longing to find the right man to be my partner in life. I had been visualizing him ever since I learned that technique, but somehow he hadn’t shown up! I was almost always in a relationship; they were all deep learning/healing experiences for me, and all were wonderful in certain ways. For one reason or another, however, they weren’t quite right for a long-term commitment. I couldn’t understand why I felt so ready for a committed relationship and yet it wasn’t happening for me.

It took me a long time to realize that I wasn’t really ready at all. In fact, I had deep conflict and ambivalence about commitment, and a lot of emotional healing to do in the area of relationships, going back to my parents’ divorce, and even before that, to old family patterns. I went through a period where I devoted myself to my emotional healing process, including deep work in therapy.

At this time, some wonderful teachers came into my life — a couple named Dr. Hal and Dr. Sidra Stone. They had both been therapists for many years and had developed a body of work called the Psychology of Selves, and a very powerful technique called Voice Dialogue. From the Stones’ teachings, I began to understand more clearly that we all have many different energies, or selves, within us. Voice Dialogue provides an amazing way

to get directly in touch with these different selves, become more conscious of them, and bring them into greater balance. Through this work, I discovered many fascinating things about myself and became much more aware of what was going on inside of me. This brought me tremendous healing and growth.

The Stones have a very developed understanding of the dynamics of human relationship and how our relationships mirror our consciousness. Using their work enabled me to resolve many aspects of my own relationship issues. Hal and Sidra Stone have become good friends and I consider them my mentors. I highly recommend their books, tapes, and workshops (which are listed in the Recommended Resources section of this book) and I have integrated their work into my own writing and workshops.

After doing a great deal of deep work, I began to feel a major shift taking place within me. I was more aware than ever of the different parts of myself and I felt increasingly comfortable with all of them. I was aware of my power and independence, but also of my vulnerability and need. I felt more able to love all aspects of who I am, and more able to be *with* myself in a whole new way.

At this point, I had a *knowingness* that I was ready for a committed partnership (I was still unable to use the “m” word — marriage — however!). This felt very different than the experience I had had for so long of *thinking* I was ready. Now I sensed that my partner would be coming along soon.

Less than a month later, I connected with Jim Burns, a bright, handsome, and loving man whom I had met a couple of years before but hadn’t seen in the interim. Actually, I had met him

because of this book! He had read *Living in the Light* while living in Minnesota, and came out to California to one of my workshops. To make a long and romantic story short, we fell in love and were married within a year.

Being in a committed relationship has been a powerful experience of growth for me. I truly understand now that deep relationship is the clearest mirror we have, and therefore, the greatest path to consciousness. This, however, is a topic for another book.

I now divide my time between our home and office in California, our beautiful home on the island of Kauai, and traveling to lead workshops around the world. I am most excited about the in-depth work that takes place in the intensive programs I conduct in Hawaii and California, and my two-year mentoring program.

The primary focus of my work now is on becoming conscious of the many different aspects of who we are, and learning to develop and express the infinite energies within us. This involves a great deal of what is often called “shadow” work — becoming aware of the parts of ourselves that we have denied or repressed because we feel they are unacceptable, and learning to value them and make them part of our lives. This healing work brings us into a greater and greater sense of balance and wholeness.

I understand, better than ever now, that “living in the light” involves traveling into the darker places within ourselves, and shining the light of our consciousness into them so that we can truly love and express all that we are.

On this amazing human journey of ours, the strongest guiding force we have is right within us. We gain access to it through our

intuitive sense, our “gut feelings” about what is right and true for us. The development of our relationship with our inner guidance is what this book is all about. May it serve you well. . . .

With love,
Shakti Gawain



PART ONE

The Principles

Chapter One

A New Way of Life



We are living in a very exciting and powerful time. On the deepest level of consciousness, a radical transformation is taking place. As the evolution of human consciousness gains greater and greater momentum, we are being challenged, on a planetary level, to let go of our present way of life and create a new one. In a sense, our “old world” is dying, and a new world is coming into being.

For many of us, the old world was based on an external focus — having lost our fundamental spiritual connection, we have believed that the material world is the only reality. Thus, feeling essentially lost, empty, and alone, we have continually attempted to

find happiness and fulfillment through external “things” — money, material possessions, relationships, work, fame, food, drugs, and so on.

The new world is being built as we open to the higher power of the universe within us and consciously allow that creative energy to move through us. As each of us connects with our inner spiritual awareness, we learn that the creative power of the universe is inside of us. We also learn that we can create our own experience of reality and take responsibility for doing so. The change begins within each individual, but as more and more individuals are transformed, the mass consciousness is increasingly affected.

My observation that a profound transformation of consciousness is taking place in our world at this time is based on the changes I see within myself, those around me, and in our society. It is affirmed by feedback I receive from thousands of people I work with all over the world.

Living in the Light is about this transformation of consciousness, within each individual and in the world. My use of the terms “old world” and “new world” throughout the book refer to the old way of living that we are relinquishing, and the new one that we are creating.

For many people, this time may be distressing, because the world situation and/or our personal lives may seem to be going from bad to worse. It’s as if many things are falling apart and will continue to do so with even greater intensity, but on the deepest level, I do not feel this is negative. It is upsetting to us to the degree that we are emotionally attached to our old way of living

and steadfastly follow old patterns, rather than trying to open our eyes to the profound changes that are occurring.

Paradoxical as it may seem, these changes are the greatest blessing that any of us could possibly imagine. The truth is that the way of life that we have been following for centuries no longer works. While appropriate for its time, it cannot take us where we need and desire to go. The focus on materialism and the external world was necessary in a time when our primary challenge was physical survival. Our patriarchal values and the traditional roles of men and women may have been necessary in order to ensure the protection of our families for a certain period of time in our evolutionary process.

At this time, many human beings (and other species as well) on the earth are still struggling for physical survival. Yet there are an increasing number of us who no longer have to be preoccupied primarily with sheer survival. We have the opportunity, and thus the responsibility, to begin looking for deeper fulfillment on spiritual, mental, and emotional levels. We are searching for greater meaning and purpose in our lives, and for ways to live more responsibly and harmoniously on our planet.

While some people throughout history have led relatively meaningful and satisfying lives, I'm afraid that most of us have never found the fulfillment that we have yearned for. Our cultural conditioning has not given us the tools to develop a healthy connection with our inner realms of soul, intuition, and feeling, and to integrate them with our external world.

In a way, it's as if we've been in school for our entire lives,

receiving an education that teaches the exact opposite of the way the universe actually functions. We try to make things work as we've been taught, and we may even enjoy some degree of success, but for most of us things never seem to work out as well as we had hoped. That perfect relationship never materializes, or if it does, it soon sours or fades away. Or it may seem as though there is never quite enough money; we never feel truly secure or abundant. Perhaps we don't get the appreciation, recognition, or success that we want. Even if we do achieve some of these things, we still may suffer from a vague sense that there must be something more, some deeper meaning. Some of us may actually connect with that deeper meaning and feel increasingly fulfilled and expanded by a growing spiritual awareness. Nevertheless, there are stubborn and sometimes puzzling old patterns and areas of life where we experience great pain and confusion.

Thus, our first task in building the new world is to admit that our "life education" has not necessarily taught us a satisfying way to live. We must learn a way of life that is very different from the way we approached things before. This may not be easy for us, and it will take time, commitment, and courage. Therefore, it's very important to be compassionate with ourselves, to continually remind ourselves what a tremendous task we are undertaking. It will not be accomplished overnight; in fact, it is a lifelong process.

Just as a baby learns to walk by falling down repeatedly, we must remember that we are babies in the new world. We will learn by making lots of mistakes and often we may feel ignorant, frightened, or unsure of ourselves. But we would not get angry at a baby every

time he fell down (if we did, he'd probably never learn to walk with full confidence and power), so we must try not to criticize ourselves if we are not able to live and express ourselves as fully as we wish immediately.

We are now learning to live more fully in accordance with the laws of the universe. We are challenged to explore all aspects of our human experience and to develop all levels of our being — the spiritual, mental, and emotional as well as the physical.

As we do this work, we experience an increasing sense of wholeness, empowerment, aliveness, and a feeling of being "on purpose" in our lives. So, although letting go of the old world may seem difficult at times, it is well worth the commitment and hard work it takes to gradually make this transition into the new world.

Meditation

Sit or lie down, relax, close your eyes, and take a few deep breaths. As you exhale, imagine that you are letting go of everything that you don't want or need. Easily, without effort, let any frustrations, tiredness, or worries melt away. This is a time to release an old way of life that no longer works for you. Imagine that your old ways, your old patterns, and all the obstacles to achieving what you truly want are gently dissolved and leaving your body with each breath. Every time you exhale, and release a little of your old limitations, you create more space inside of you for something new.

After doing this for a few minutes, begin to imagine that every

time you inhale you are breathing in life energy, the life force of the universe. Within this life energy is everything you need and desire — love, power, health, beauty, strength, abundance. Breathe it in with each inhalation. Imagine a new way of life opening up, filling you with aliveness, vitality, and energy. Pretend your life is exactly the way you want it to be. Imagine this new life is here, now, and savor it.

When the meditation feels complete, gently open your eyes and come back into the room. See if you can retain that sense of newness in yourself. Remember that you are now in the process of creating a new life for yourself.

Chapter Two

The Higher Power Within Us



The foundation for life in the new world is built on the understanding that there is a higher intelligence, a fundamental creative power or energy in the universe that is the source and substance of all existence. The words and concepts that have been used to describe this power are innumerable. Here are just a few:

God	Spirit	Inner Guidance
Goddess	Essence	Higher Self
Higher Power	Being	The Universe
Source	Soul	Life Force

The Tao	The Force	Cosmic Intelligence
Buddha Nature	The Light	Christ Consciousness
Great Spirit	I Am	All That Is

These terms are attempts to express an experience or knowingness that is difficult to convey in words and rational concepts. Each of us has this experience within us; the words we choose to describe it are merely the labels that suit us best.

I seldom use the word God, as it has so many confusing connotations for so many. Frequently, people associate it with early religious training, which is no longer meaningful to them. Some may think of God as *someone or something outside of themselves*: the “old man in the sky with the long white beard.” I prefer terms such as higher power, the universe, spirit, or inner guidance. In this book, I will use some of these terms interchangeably to refer to our spiritual source, the essential creative intelligence and power within us. If any of these terms are not particularly meaningful to you, please feel free to substitute whatever word you prefer.

For the first twenty years of my life, my connection to the spiritual aspect of my being was largely undeveloped. I had no conscious experience of, or belief in, a higher power of any sort. I have had to move through many levels of doubt, skepticism, disbelief, and fear in order to arrive at the great trust I now have in the higher power of the universe that is within me and within everyone and everything that exists. I have not accepted anything on blind faith, so in a sense I have had to “prove” everything to myself through my life experiences. As I’ve learned to place my

trust in the higher power of the universe and to live in accordance with universal principles, the changes I have felt and seen in my life are truly miraculous.

Those of you who have felt deep spiritual awareness throughout your lives already have a solid foundation to build upon. For those of you who have felt spiritually “disconnected” as I have, I hope my words will support and encourage you to find this inner connection for yourself. There is no specific way to do this; everyone’s experience is different. If this is something that you desire, ask within yourself that you be guided into an experience of your own spiritual nature. This may take some time, but if you desire it, it will happen. The words and exercises in this book may help you with this.

The universe has both personal and impersonal aspects; as I surrender and trust more, I find my relationship with this higher power becoming more personal. I can sometimes sense a presence within me, guiding me, loving me, teaching me, encouraging me. In this personal aspect, the universe can be teacher, guide, friend, mother, father, lover, creative genius, or fairy godmother. In other words, many of my needs and desires can be fulfilled through this inner connection. I often find the most powerful communion with the universe when I am alone, especially out in nature. At such times, the places inside of me that sometimes feel empty are filled with the energy of spirit. Here I find a guiding presence that nudges me in the direction I need to go, and helps me to learn the lesson that lies in taking each step along my path.

Meditation

Sit or lie down in a comfortable position. Close your eyes and take a few deep breaths. Each time you exhale, relax your body more and more. Then take a few more deep breaths and, each time you exhale, relax your mind. Let your thoughts drift by without holding onto any of them. Allow your mind to go out of focus. Relax your awareness into a deep place within you.

Imagine that there is a very powerful presence within you. This presence is totally loving, strong, and wise. It is nurturing, protecting, guiding, and caring for you. At times it can be very strong and forceful. It can also be very light, joyful, and playful. As you get to know and trust it, it will make your life exciting, meaningful, and fulfilling.

You may get an image or a feeling or a physical sensation that represents this higher presence. Even if you don't see or feel a thing, assume it is there regardless.

Relax and enjoy the feeling or thought that you are being totally taken care of by the universe. Say this affirmation to yourself silently or aloud, "*I feel and trust the presence of the universe in my life.*"

Chapter Three

Intuition



Once we acknowledge the higher power of the universe, the obvious question arises: “How can we contact this power and gain access to it?” After all, if there is within us a superior wisdom or a deeper knowledge than we normally experience, by tapping into it, we should be able to receive valuable guidance in how to live well in this confusing world. This realization began to dawn on me many years ago as I undertook my journey of consciousness. I have since discovered that the knowingness that resides in each of us can be accessed through what we usually call our intuition. By learning to contact, listen to, and act on our intuition, we can directly connect to this inner wisdom and allow it to become our guiding force.

This is where we find ourselves in opposition to life as most of us have been taught to live it in the old world. In modern western civilization, we have learned to respect and even worship the rational, logical aspect of our being, and to dismiss, deprecate, or deny our intuition. We do acknowledge the ability of animals to seemingly understand things that are way beyond their rational capacity; we call this instinct. But it's a mystery that defies *logical* explanation, so we shrug our shoulders and dismiss it as something vastly inferior to the magnificent human ability to reason.

Our culture's entire value system is firmly based on the belief that the rational principle is superior and, in fact, constitutes the highest truth. The western scientific tradition has become our religion. We are taught from a young age to try to be reasonable, logical, and consistent, to avoid emotional, irrational behavior, and to suppress our feelings. At best, feelings and emotions are considered foolish, weak, and bothersome. At worst, we fear they may threaten the very fabric of civilized society.

Our established religious institutions often support this fear of the intuitive, nonrational self. Once based on a deep awareness of the universal spiritual principle in every being, many religions only pay lip service to that idea now. Instead, they seek to control the behavior of their devotees, using elaborate rule structures purported to save people from their deep, irrational, and basically "sinful" natures. And according to many psychological disciplines, the dark and dangerous instinctual nature of man must be controlled. From this perspective, it is only the rational part of us that is capable of harnessing this mysterious force and channeling it

into healthy, constructive modes.

In our worship of the rational and fear of the nonrational, we deny not only our emotions and our instinctual energies such as sexuality and aggression, but also our natural intuitive sense, which is meant to be a primary guiding force in our lives.

Generally, less technically developed societies approach life with a deep awareness of, and respect for, the intuitive element of existence. Every moment of their daily lives is guided by a strong sense of connection with the creative force. However, it is their very lack of technical development that has contributed to their gradual destruction or subversion by modern civilization. Two examples relevant to most Americans are the Native American and African cultures. Both of these groups were devastated by their contact with European/American culture. However, a deep curiosity, respect, and appreciation for Native Americans has begun to surface in our awareness in recent years. And the African culture, forcibly brought to this continent, has probably done more than any other culture to keep the intuitive power alive in our country through its strong and soulful connection to spirit.

In human evolution, it seems that as our rational capacity has evolved, we've grown increasingly fearful of the other aspects of our natures. We've attempted to control these "dark forces" by creating authoritative rule structures that define right and wrong, good and bad, and appropriate and inappropriate behavior in a very heavy-handed way. We justify this rigid approach to life by blaming everything on nonrational nature — from our personal emotional dramas to social ills such as drug and alcohol addiction,

crime, violence, and war.

The truth is that all aspects of our being are integral, important, and valuable parts of us. The more we distrust and suppress these energies, the more likely they are to eventually burst out in distorted ways. In other words, our problems are not necessarily caused by our emotional, nonrational nature running wild and uncontrolled; instead, both personal and social problems are more likely to be the result of fear and the suppression of our emotions, instinctual nature, and intuition. In this book, we are focusing on how we can reclaim the power of our intuitive sense.

Once we accept the reality of a higher power that is channeled to us through our intuition, it becomes clear that many of our personal problems and the ills of the world are actually caused by *not* following our intuition.

Our rational mind is like a computer — it processes the input it receives and calculates logical conclusions based on this information. The rational mind is finite; it can only compute the input it has received directly. In other words, our rational minds can only operate on the basis of the direct experience each of us has had in this lifetime.

The intuitive mind, on the other hand, seems to have access to an infinite supply of information. It appears to be able to tap into a deep storehouse of knowledge and wisdom — the universal mind. It is also able to sort out this information and supply us with exactly what we need, when we need it. Though the message may come through a bit at a time, if we learn to follow this supply of information piece by piece, the necessary course of action

will be revealed. As we learn to rely on this guidance, life takes on a flowing, effortless quality. Our life, feelings, and actions interweave harmoniously with those of others around us.

It is as if each of us played a unique instrument in a huge symphony orchestra, conducted by a universal intelligence. If we play our part without regard for the conductor's direction or the rest of the orchestra, we will have total chaos. If we try to take our cues from those around us, rather than the conductor, it will be impossible to achieve harmony — there are too many people, all playing different things. Our intellect is not able to process so much input and decide on the best note to play at each moment. However, if we watch the conductor and follow his direction we can experience the joy of playing our unique part, which can be heard and appreciated by everyone, and at the same time experience ourselves as part of a greater harmonious whole.

When we apply this analogy to our lives, we see that most of us have never realized a conductor was present. We have lived the best we can, using only our intellect to understand our lives, to figure out the best course of action. If we are honest with ourselves, we will readily admit that we are not making great music under the guidance of our rational mind alone. The dissonance and chaos in our lives and in the world certainly reflects the impossibility of living this way.

By tuning into the intuition and allowing it to become the guiding force in our lives, we allow our inner “conductor” to take its rightful place as the leader of the orchestra. Rather than losing our individual freedom, we receive the support we need to effectively

express our individuality. Moreover, we will enjoy the experience of being part of a larger creative process.

I don't fully understand how the intuition functions in such an amazing way, but I definitely know, through direct experience and through observation and feedback from the many people I have worked with, that it does. And I find that the more I trust and follow this inner intuitive "voice," the easier, fuller, and more exciting my life becomes.

Meditation

Sit or lie down in a comfortable position in a quiet place. Close your eyes and relax. Take several slow, deep breaths, relaxing your body more with each breath. Relax your mind and let your thoughts drift, but don't hold onto any thought. Imagine that your mind becomes as quiet as a peaceful lake.

Now focus your conscious awareness into a deep place in your body, in the area of your stomach or solar plexus. It should be the place in your body where you feel that your "gut feelings" reside. This is the physical place where you can easily contact your intuition.

Imagine that you have a wise being living inside there. You might have an image of what this wise being looks like, or you might just sense that it is there. This wise being is really a part of you — your intuitive self. You can communicate with it by silently "talking" to it, making requests, or asking questions. Then relax, don't think too hard with your rational mind, and be open to

receiving the answers. The answers are usually very simple, they relate to the present moment (not the past or future), and they *feel right*.

If you don't receive an immediate answer, let go and go about your life. The answer will come later, whether from inside of you in the form of a feeling or idea, or from outside through a person, a book, an event, or whatever.

For example, you might say, "Intuition, tell me what I need to know here. What do I need to do in this situation?"

Trust the feeling that you get and *act* on it. If it is truly your intuition, you will find that it leads to a feeling of greater aliveness and power, and more opportunities begin to open up for you. If it doesn't lead to these things, you may not have been truly acting from your intuition but from some other voice in you. Go back and ask for clarification.

It takes practice to hear and trust your intuition. The more you do it, the easier it will become. Eventually you will be able to contact your intuition, ask yourself questions, and know that in that wise being within you, an incredible source of power and strength is available to answer your questions and guide you. As you grow more sensitive to this guidance you will gain a sense of knowing what you need to do in any situation. Your intuitive power is always available to guide you whenever you need it. It will open to you as you become willing to trust yourself and your inner knowledge.

Chapter Four

Becoming a Creative Channel



To whatever degree you listen to and follow your intuition, you become a “creative channel” for the higher power of the universe. When you willingly follow where your creative energy leads, the higher power can come through you to manifest its creative work. When this happens, you will find yourself flowing with the energy, doing what you really want to do, and feeling the power of the universe moving through you to create or transform everything around you.

In using the word channel, I am *not* referring to the psychic process of trance channeling. Trance channeling involves a medium who goes into a trance state and allows another being to speak

through him or her. By channeling, I mean being in touch with and bringing through the wisdom and creativity of *your own* deepest source. Being a channel is being fully and freely yourself and consciously knowing that you are a vehicle for the creativity of the universe.

Every creative genius has been a channel. Every masterwork has been created through the channeling process. Great works are not created by the personality alone. They arise from a deep inspiration on the universal level, and are then expressed and brought into form *through* the individual personality.

A person may have great technical skill, but without the ability to connect with a deeper source, his work will be uninspiring. The difference between a technician and a channel was clearly demonstrated in the movie *Amadeus*. The composer Salieri knew how to write music but he didn't know how to tap into the creative source. Mozart wrote music that was both technically perfect and wonderfully inspired, and he did so easily, spontaneously, without thought or effort. From his early childhood on, music just seemed to bubble up and overflow from within him. I'm sure he had no idea how it happened and could not have explained to anyone else how to do it.

Such genius has always seemed mysterious and unexplainable, a God-given talent possessed by only a few. It seems to come and go at will — sometimes it's there, sometimes it's not. Because of this, many creative people fear their talent will suddenly disappear. They don't know how they got it so they have no idea how to recover it if it vanishes.

Creative people often function as channels in only one area of their lives (such as one of the arts, science, or business) and may have no idea how to do it in other areas of their lives. Thus, their lives can be terribly out of balance. (See the section on Highly Intuitive People in the chapter on Trusting Intuition.) This is one reason why we often equate genius with emotional instability.

I believe we are all geniuses — each in our own unique way. We will discover the nature of our particular genius when we stop trying to conform to our own or other people's models, learn to be ourselves, and allow our natural channel to open. Through trusting and acting on our intuition, it's possible to bring our natural creative inspiration into every moment, in every area of our lives.

When I speak of a channel, I have an image of a long round pipe with energy flowing through it. It's somewhat like the pipe in a pipe organ, with the music coming through.

This channel image has three important features:

1. It is open and unobstructed inside so that the energy can move through freely.
2. It has a definite physical form; a structure surrounds the open space so that the energy is directed in a particular way. Without this structure, the energy would be free-floating, without any focus.
3. It has a power source — something that moves energy through the channel.

In a pipe organ, the power source (the organ) sends energy through the open pipes. The particular combination of open space

inside each pipe and the structure — the size and shape of the pipe — causes a certain note to be sounded. The power source is the same for all the pipes and the energy moving through them is the same, but because each one is a different shape, each one makes a unique sound.

We can think of ourselves as channels similar to these pipes. We have a common power source (the universal life force) and the same creative energy flows through each of us. Our body and personality form the structure that determines the unique direction and function of each of us as a channel. It is up to us to keep our channel open and clear and to build and maintain a strong, healthy, beautiful body/personality structure as a vehicle for our creative energy. We can do this by constantly tuning in, asking where the energy wants to go, and moving with it.

A strong body/personality structure is not created by following anybody else's rules or good ideas about what you should eat, how you should exercise, or anything else. *It is created primarily by trusting your intuition and learning to follow its direction.* When deciding what to eat, how to exercise, or anything else, gather information from reliable sources, then check in with yourself to see what feels intuitively right for you, and do your best to follow your own inner guidance.

Most of us have had occasional experiences of trusting our intuition and having things work out in amazing ways. The following true story is a good example of this. A few years ago, my editor, Becky, had achieved what many people think of as the “American dream.” She had a husband and daughter, a good job,

money in the bank, and owned her own home. Yet she felt an emptiness inside.

She felt an inner prompting to leave her job and pursue a career in publishing. Her husband did not support this idea. In fact, he pointed out that she didn't have the "formal education necessary" to obtain a position in a publishing house.

Becky and her husband eventually separated, and she decided to make a move. She had been reading many books, including *Living in the Light*, and knew that she wanted to work for a publisher in the field of personal growth. Her intuitive feeling was that she needed to move to Northern California.

It was the most difficult and courageous step she had ever taken. She found herself in a new community with no friends, no job, and no money. She had no luck, at first, obtaining a publishing job, and so she looked for any kind of work that would enable her to survive. Many times she questioned her choice to take such a risk, yet she kept feeling a deep sense that she was on the right track.

Finally, she found work in another field. She was able to get back on her feet financially and she regained her confidence. She continued her search for a publishing job, and this time she was successful. She happily took a cut in pay and position to take an entry-level job at New World Library — the company she had always hoped to work for. Finally, she felt, she was at home. As of this writing, Becky has been with New World Library for six years. She has her dream job as the editorial director.

By following her inner guidance, even through very difficult times, she found the perfect place to express her creativity and

make her contribution to the world.

You may have had a similar experience, where listening to your intuition about something proved so fruitful and fulfilling. If so, the next step is to become more conscious of the process so you can recognize when you are following the flow of energy, as opposed to blocking, fighting, or trying to control it. The more willing you are to surrender to the energy within you, the more power can flow through you.

I know most of us have had experiences at certain times when we've felt life energy, wisdom, and power flow through us, when we have felt momentarily "enlightened." We have a brief moment of clarity and power and then it goes away again. When it goes away, we feel lost and unsure of ourselves.

The more you practice trusting and following your intuition, the more consistently you will feel that sense of "flow." At these times you may find yourself right where you want to be at every moment. You'll be where the energy is the greatest for you, doing what you want to do, and watching miracles being accomplished. Your energy may have a transformational effect on others, as well.

As you strengthen the commitment to trusting yourself, everything in your life may change. At first, as you begin to let go of your old patterns, it may appear that things in your life are falling apart. You may find that you have to let go of certain things you've been attached to. Some relationships in your life may dissolve or simply "fizzle out" from lack of energy. Old pastimes may no longer interest you. You may even lose your job or decide to leave it.

Of course, these changes can be upsetting and frightening. Over time, however, you will find that this is all part of the transformation you are going through. As you learn to be true to yourself, you will find that you attract people, work, and other circumstances that reflect your evolution and development.

Maintaining Your Focus

In order to live fully and creatively, it's important to stay focused on following your own energy. This focus allows your channel to remain open to the energy flowing through. It's so easy to lose your focus, to get lost in other people, external goals, and desires. And the problem is, we do exactly that: we lose our connection with ourselves. As long as we are overly focused on the outside there will always be an empty, hungry, lost place inside that needs to be filled.

If I'm in love with someone and begin to think of him as my source of joy, then I lose myself. I have to remind myself that the source of joy and love is already within me, that I am experiencing love externally only because it is inside me. I try to keep the focus on the universe within and at the same time feel the universe coming through my lover to me.

For me, it's a constant discipline to remember to go back inside to connect with my intuition. I'll remind myself regularly during the day to do this. If I find myself getting lost in my outer activities, I'll check back inside to see if I'm being true to my feelings. This keeps the flow of the universe moving through me.

As we learn to pay attention to our intuitive feelings, follow our own energy and live our truth, we find that we feel more and more of the life force moving through us. That feeling of greater aliveness is so wonderful that it becomes our major focus and source of fulfillment.

We feel less attached to the externals of our lives. Whether or not things go as we have planned seems less important when we feel that our satisfaction is coming primarily from sustaining our connection to our own life energy. Ironically, when we stay true to ourselves in this way, the externals of our lives reflect our inner integrity. We attract to us and create around us exactly what our hearts and souls truly desire.

Living as a Channel

Channeling works in two ways: energy either flows through you to others, or from others to you. For example, as I write my book, I focus on the energy flowing from the universe through me to others. Then, when people say to me, “I just love your books; they’ve changed my life,” I am conscious of appreciation coming from them to me, and through me, back to the universal source.

As you become increasingly conscious of the flow of life moving through you and through everything and everyone else, your body will become capable of channeling more energy. The more energy you are willing to receive, the more you’ll be able to give.

To become a clear channel for the universe presents the highest challenge and offers the greatest potential joy and fulfillment

for every human being. Being a channel means living fully and passionately in the world, having deep relationships, playing, working, creating, enjoying money and material possessions, being yourself, yet maintaining your profound connection with the power of the universe within you, learning and growing from every experience that you have.

Then you can watch the universe create through you; it can use you to do its work. Living as a channel is an ongoing learning process that's available to anyone who is willing to make the inner commitment.

Group Channeling

As we develop the ability to trust and follow our intuition, we learn to open and strengthen our individual channel so we can bring more power, creativity, and love through us. When we come together in a relationship or in a group, each individual channel becomes part of a bigger channel. A group channel is created that is more powerful than any of us can be individually.

When many bodies and minds are willing to surrender, open up, and grow, these combined energies create a very strong, open structure that allows a lot more energy to come through from the universe. The process intensifies tremendously and everyone gets a powerful "boost" from the energy, which is capable of pushing each of us to the next level of our growth. Even though we may all be in somewhat different places and going through different things, each person receives the inspiration, the support, the push,

or whatever is needed to enable them to take the next step on their journey. A group channel can open us up to a deeper level of awareness, and in the process, we share more of ourselves and find that we are healed of things that have held us back.

This is one reason I love teaching workshops and working with groups. My friends call me an “energy junkie” because I’m always attracted to situations where the energy is most intense and expansive. I love the way my personal growth process is accelerated by the intensification that happens in groups.

I have found that in leading a group, I usually need to start with a certain amount of structure and take responsibility to clearly maintain the leader position. As the group continues, I can let go of the structure more and more and gradually allow the spontaneous energy of the group to take over.

As everyone surrenders and opens up, the group channel is formed. This process can be confusing and chaotic at times because, as the leader, I am no longer “in control” in the usual sense of the word. It can arouse my fears and everyone else’s, but I find that when I’m willing to move through the fears, something powerful and beautiful emerges through the group channel. The universe leads us into new places and new discoveries that we would not have had an opportunity to experience if we had stayed within a more formal structure. I find the process of group channeling very exciting and rewarding.

In a sense, everyone living on this planet is a part of a gigantic group channel — the mass consciousness of humanity. This world, as it is now, is the creation of the group channel. As each one of us,

individually, surrenders to the power of the universe and allows that power to transform and enlighten us, the group channel is affected accordingly. The mass consciousness becomes more and more evolved. This is how I see our world being transformed.

Meditation

Sit or lie down in a comfortable position. Close your eyes. Take a deep breath and relax your body. Take another deep breath and relax your mind. Continue to breathe slowly and deeply and let go of all tension or anxiety. As you relax, you find yourself in a deep, quiet place inside. Allow yourself to just rest in that place for a few moments, with nothing you need to do or think about.

From this deep, quiet place, begin to sense the life force within you. Imagine that you are following your own energy, feeling it, trusting it, moving with it in every moment of your life. You are being completely true to yourself, speaking and living your truth. You feel alive and empowered. Imagine that you are expressing your creativity fully and freely, and let yourself enjoy that experience. By being who you are and expressing yourself, you are having a healing and empowering effect on everyone you encounter and on the world around you.

Chapter Five

Exploring Our Many Selves



We are all born with an infinite number of different qualities or energies within us. One of our most important tasks in life is to discover and develop as many of these energies as possible, so that we can be well-rounded, and experience the full range of our potential.

We can think of these energies as different archetypes, subpersonalities, or selves within us. In a way, it's as if there are many different characters living inside of us, each with its own task and purpose.

Since the physical world is a plane of duality, for each of these energies within us, there is an opposite energy. In order to experience wholeness and balance, we need to develop and inte-

grate both sides of every polarity.

Most of us, however, are not accustomed to thinking in this way. We have been taught to think in a linear, exclusive fashion — good/bad, right/wrong. So if one quality is good or desirable, its opposite is bad, or undesirable.

For example, many of us have been taught that it is virtuous and admirable to give to others; a person who gives a lot is a good person. Therefore, taking is thought to be selfish; a person who takes a lot for himself might be judged as less worthy than a giving person.

Someone else with different values might think of this in an opposite way. He might admire a person who knows how to take a lot for himself and think of that person as smart and successful, while looking down on someone who is less aggressive and more giving as being foolish and easily taken advantage of.

Either way, one polarity is honored while the opposite is devalued. In reality, both giving and receiving are equally important and valuable. If we give too much and aren't able to take or receive equally, we become depleted and resentful. If we take too much and are unable to give, we lose the satisfaction of making a contribution, and incur the resentment of others. If we can give and receive more or less in balance, we experience a healthy sense of satisfaction.

From the time we are born, we begin to experiment with expressing the different energies within us. At that time we are completely dependent on our parents or caretakers for our survival and well-being, so we are extremely sensitive to their reactions to

us. If we express an energy that invokes approval and positive attention, we are likely to continue to develop that quality. On the other hand, if something we do draws disapproval, criticism, or punishment, we are likely to discontinue it (unless that is the only form of attention we can get, in which case we may continue it).

Fairly soon, we have a pretty good sense of which energies help us get our needs met and which ones seem to cause us more problems than they are worth. This varies greatly according to each individual, family system, time period, and culture.

As we grow up, we continue to develop the energies that seem to work best to meet our needs. We become very identified with these qualities; that's who we think we are. These dominant energies become our *primary selves* — the inner characters whose job it is to take care of us and make our lives work as well as possible.

There are usually a group of primary selves who work together as a team, making most of our decisions for us. For example, some of my primary selves are the super-responsible one, the pleaser (who wants to make everyone happy so they will like me), the pusher (who wants me to work hard and accomplish a lot), the caretaking mother (who takes care of the child in other people so that they'll feel good with me), the consciousness teacher/healer. There are a number of others on the team as well. They have all worked very hard to make me a worthy, well-loved, and successful person.

For every primary self, there is an opposite energy, which oftentimes has been repressed or denied because one way or another we got the message that it was not okay, or because it simply has-

n't had space to develop. These energies become our *disowned selves*. They are usually buried within our psyche and we either don't know about them at all, or we are aware of them and try to hide them from the world. The disowned selves make up our shadow side, the parts of ourselves that we are embarrassed about, ashamed of, fearful of, or uncomfortable with. Our primary selves are usually working hard to make sure that we don't show these disowned selves to the world, since they are convinced that this would invite criticism, rejection, abandonment, or some form of disaster.

The problem is that each of these disowned selves carries an essential energy that is an important part of us. In fact, we are often in desperate need of these qualities in order to bring healing and balance into our lives. As long as we fear our shadow side, however, we can't access the energies that we need.

For example, if one of your primary selves is *power*, and you are very identified with being strong, competent, and independent, it is very likely that you have disowned your vulnerable side, the part of you that feels dependent on others and has needs for love and support. From the point of view of your power primary self, your vulnerable side might seem disgusting, and way too dangerous to show to the world for fear of being hurt. You might be completely unconscious of having a vulnerable side, or you might be aware of it but not want others to see it for fear of their judgment. Strangely, you will find that you are constantly attracting vulnerable people into your life, and you may at times feel very judgmental toward them for being so "weak."

Believe it or not, you need to consciously accept and "own" your vulnerable side. Without it, you cannot have real intimacy and

closeness with others, and you can't really receive. You are out of touch with a very important part of your human experience.

Life has an amazing way of confronting us with, and reflecting to us, the exact energies that we need to discover within ourselves and integrate into our lives. This happens through our dreams, where we are often shown symbolically the relationships between our primary selves and disowned selves. It happens constantly in our relationships, where others reflect to us the various different selves within us. Our imbalances show up in every area of our lives from our health to our finances.

How do we become conscious of the many selves within and bring them into balance in our lives?

The first and most important step is to begin to recognize and become aware of our primary selves. What qualities and energies are you most identified with? Can you begin to notice the selves within you that automatically make most of your decisions and run your life?

We want to honor and appreciate our primary selves for how much they've done for us, while separating a bit from being totally identified with them. As soon as we become conscious of them as *energies within us* rather than *who we are*, we are beginning to develop what is called "aware ego."* Aware ego is the ability to recognize and hold all the different selves within us, so that we

*The ideas and terminology in this chapter, including the concepts of primary selves, disowned selves, and aware ego are derived from the work of Drs. Hal and Sidra Stone — the Psychology of Selves and the Voice Dialogue technique. For more information of their work, I highly recommend their books and tapes, listed in Recommended Resources.

can have conscious choice about which ones we bring through at any given moment.

Once we have some awareness in relation to our primary selves, the disowned selves start to come forth. The primary selves usually remain our strongest qualities, but we begin to feel more balanced and our lives begin to work better as we begin to integrate the energy from previously disowned selves. The disidentification with the primary selves, the development of aware ego, and the acknowledging of the disowned selves is a gradual process that happens over a lifetime. Every step we take in this process, however, can make a big difference in our lives.

Our intuitive wisdom is one of the energies or selves within us. If we were encouraged to trust our intuition at an early age, or had an intuitive parent figure as an early role model, our intuition may be a primary self. Since our culture tends to deny or devalue the intuitive function, however, for most of us it is a disowned or relatively underdeveloped self, while rationality is usually one of the primary selves.

If rationality is a primary self, and intuition is disowned, in order to get in touch with our inner guidance, we may need to separate from over-identification with our rational side. We do this by recognizing it as *one aspect* of who we are, and beginning to notice how it operates in our lives. Once we become more aware of it in this way, we are no longer so identified with it and we can begin to have more conscious choice about how and when we use it. This creates space to explore our intuitive side as well.

If intuition is a primary self, we may have difficulty thinking logically or dealing with practical matters in a grounded way. In

this case, we may need to develop our rational, practical side in order to ground our intuition in the physical world.

Owning Our Shadow Side

There is a simple universal principle: Everything in the universe wants to be accepted. All aspects of creation want to be loved, appreciated, and included. So, any quality or energy that you are not allowing yourself to experience or express will keep coming up inside of you or around you until you recognize it as a part of you, until you accept it and integrate it into your personality and your life.

Many people who are involved in personal growth become very identified with the energies and qualities that they think of as being “spiritual” — peaceful, loving, giving, and so on. In attempting to develop these aspects of themselves, they often deny and disown other aspects that they consider to be “unspiritual” — aggression, assertiveness, gut-level honesty, human vulnerability. Unfortunately, this simply creates a huge shadow side within them, which contributes to the collective shadow of denied energies in our world.

For some, it can be quite shocking to realize that if we over-identify with peace and love, and disown our inner warrior, we are not contributing to world peace. Quite the opposite, in fact. If we don’t own our inner warrior and channel him in a constructive way in our lives, he retreats into the shadows of our individual and collective psyche, and actually contributes to the perpetuation of war on our planet.

If we truly want inner peace and world peace, we must do the difficult but fascinating work of owning and appreciating all aspects of who we are — truly making peace with ourselves. Real consciousness involves holding both sides of any polarity, not identifying with one. Exploring and embracing our darkness is the only way we can truly live in the light.

Meditation

Get in a comfortable position in a quiet place. Bring to mind one of your main personality characteristics or primary selves. Get a sense in your body of how that energy feels. Now imagine an opposite energy, which may be disowned or less developed in you. Imagine what that energy would feel like. What would be the positive benefits of developing more ability to contact that energy? How could that bring more balance into your life?

See if you can feel a balance of both of those energies at the same time. For example, if you are an outgoing person, you might balance that with a quieter, more introspective energy. If you are hardworking, you might balance that with the energy of relaxation or playfulness.

Chapter Six

The World as Our Mirror



The physical world is our creation: we each create our own version of the world, our particular reality, our unique life experience. Because I am creating my life, I can look at my creation to get feedback about myself. Just as an artist looks at his latest creation to see what works well and what doesn't, and thereby improves his skills, we can look at the ongoing masterwork of our lives to appreciate who we are and to recognize what we still need to learn.

We're creating our lives as we go along; therefore, our experiences give us an instant, ongoing reflection of ourselves. In fact, the external world is like a giant mirror that reflects our consciousness clearly and accurately. Once we have learned how to look into that

mirror and perceive and interpret its reflection, we have a fabulous tool for self-awareness.

Understanding that the world is our mirror can help us see our lives as a reflection of our beliefs, attitudes, and emotional patterns. Viewed in this way, the external world can teach us about hidden aspects of ourselves that we can't see directly. The process is based on two premises:

1. I assume that *everything* in my life is my reflection, my creation; there are no accidents or events that are unrelated to me. If I see or feel something, if it has any impact on me, then my soul has attracted or created it to show me something. If it didn't mirror some part of myself, I wouldn't even be able to see it. All the people in my life are reflections of the various characters and energies that live inside of me.

2. I always try to avoid putting myself down for the reflections I see. I know that nothing is negative. Everything is a gift that brings me to self-awareness — after all, I'm here to learn. If I was already perfect I wouldn't be here. Why should I get angry at myself when I see things I've been unconscious of? It would be like a first grader getting frustrated because she wasn't in college yet. I try to maintain a compassionate attitude toward myself and my learning process. To the extent that I can do this, the learning process becomes fun and really quite interesting.

I am learning to view my life as a fascinating and adventurous movie. All the characters in it are parts of me played out on the big screen so that I can clearly see them. Once I see them and recognize

their various feelings and voices inside myself, I can understand that they are all important and valuable parts of me that I need for my full expression in this life.

If the movie portrays problems, hassles, or struggles, I know I must check inside to find out where I'm not being true to myself or have more learning and healing to do. I also know that when I'm trusting and being myself as fully as possible, everything in my life reflects this by falling into place easily and working smoothly.

Problems Are Messages

If there are problems in your life, the universe is trying to get your attention. It's saying, "Hey, there's something you need to be aware of, something that needs to be changed here!" If you pay attention to the small signals, you will learn from them, but if you don't, the problems will intensify until you get the message and start to pay attention. If you accept that every time a problem occurs the universe is showing you something, you will make rapid progress on your journey of self-discovery.

When something "negative" happens, it's tempting to say, "Why does this happen to me? I'm doing the best I can but nothing seems to be going right. I can't understand why I keep having this problem." If you find yourself doing this, try to open up to another way of looking at things. Go inside and say to the universe, "I know you're trying to show me something. Help me understand what it is."

After you do this, let go of focusing on it, and go about your

life, but stay open to the message that will be coming through. It may come in the form of an inner feeling or awareness, some words from a friend, or something unexpected that happens to you. The message may come through immediately or it may take quite a while. One of my clients was fired, quite unexpectedly, over two years ago. At first, he was devastated, but after a few months of “getting his bearings,” he went into business on his own. His business is now doing very well, but it was only a few weeks ago that he understood the message that his firing reflected. As he was talking to a friend about working for other people, he suddenly realized that the firing incident was trying to tell him that he was ready to be in business for himself, rather than working for other people. For him, this realization not only affirmed his present course in life, but it also finally resolved the sense of failure about being fired that had lingered with him since the incident.

Interpreting the Reflection

The trickiest part of using the mirror process is learning how to interpret the reflection you see. Once you do get a message, but you’re not quite sure what it is, how do you find out?

It will not help to over-analyze or obsess about it with your rational mind. It is far more effective to turn to your intuitive self, to ask the universe for help. Simply sit quietly, take a few deep breaths, and focus your awareness within — to the wise part of you that is in touch with the wisdom of the universe. Ask this part, either silently or out loud, for guidance or help in understanding

the message. As you tune into your gut feelings and get a sense of what feels right in the moment, act on this feeling.

After acting on the feeling, try to be aware of the external and internal feedback from your actions. The external feedback is how well things work. Do things seem to fall into place and work easily? Then you're surely in tune with your inner guidance. If you're struggling to do something that doesn't happen easily, it's a message to let go and check back in to find out what you really want to be doing.

Internal feedback will come to you as feelings. If you feel empowered, more alive, then it's right. The ultimate key is *aliveness*. The more the universe moves through you, the more alive you feel. Conversely, every time you don't follow your inner guidance you feel a loss of energy, loss of power, a sense of spiritual or emotional deadness.

In being true to yourself you will feel more alive, but you may also feel uncomfortable. This is because you are risking change! As you undergo certain changes, you may experience various intense emotions such as fear, grief, or anger. Allow these emotions expression; after all, your inner guidance has to move through years of accumulated unconsciousness, denial, doubt, and fear. So let your feelings come up and wash through you — you are being cleaned out and healed.

At times like this, it is very important to have emotional support and a safe place to explore your feelings and do your healing process. If possible, I recommend finding a good therapist or support group — an environment where you are encouraged and

supported in experiencing your own feelings and needs, expressing yourself honestly, and trusting your own sense of what's right for you.

When you are growing and changing rapidly, your inner doubts and fears will often be reflected in the reactions of those around you. If your friends and family question or judge the changes in you, recognize that they are simply mirroring the doubting, fearful voices in you, such as, "What if I'm doing the wrong thing? Can I really trust this process?"

Respond to such feedback from others in whatever way you feel is appropriate: reassure them, ignore them, argue with them, whatever. The important thing is to recognize that you are *really* dealing with your own inner fears. The conflicts you may experience with others are mirroring the conflicts within yourself, between the parts of you that want to grow and change, and those that feel safer to do things the way you've always done them. Affirm that you are learning to trust yourself more and more. You will be amazed to see how frequently others will begin to mirror your increasing self-trust and confidence by responding to you with trust and confidence.

Here are some ways that the mirror of life reflects us:

If you judge and criticize yourself, others will judge and criticize you.

If you hurt yourself, others will hurt you.

If you lie to yourself, others will lie to you.

If you are irresponsible to yourself, others will be

irresponsible in relation to you.

If you blame yourself, others will blame you.

If you do violence to yourself emotionally, others will do violence to you emotionally, or even physically.

If you don't listen to your feelings, no one will listen to your feelings.

If you love yourself, others will love you.

If you respect yourself, others will respect you.

If you trust yourself, others will trust you.

If you are honest with yourself, others will be honest with you.

If you are gentle and compassionate with yourself, others will treat you with compassion.

If you appreciate yourself, others will appreciate you.

If you honor yourself, others will honor you.

If you enjoy yourself, others will enjoy you.

Changing Old Patterns

It's very important to realize that you may not be able to change your old patterns overnight. Sometimes things seem to change rapidly, once you've recognized the message, but sometimes it seems like you keep doing the same thing and getting the same unpleasant results long after you feel you know better. It takes time for the personality to change its habits, so you may have to watch the same old movie repeat itself a few more times.

If you feel your progress is too slow, ask the universe for help,

and reach out for human help as well, by finding a therapist or support group. Change happens not by trying to *make* yourself change but by becoming conscious of what's *not* working. You can then ask your higher self for help in releasing the old and bringing in the new pattern. Remember, the darkest hour is just before the dawn — change often occurs just when you've given up, or when you least expect it.

Using the Mirror Process

In using the world as your mirror, you must deal with the external realities of your life in whatever way you need to handle them. But as soon as possible, before, during, or after you deal with the externals, check inside to find out what is being shown to you.

For example, if someone is angry at you and blames or criticizes you, you may need to say to them, "Stop blaming me. I don't want to hear your judgments and criticisms of me. If you can talk about your own *feelings*, I'll be glad to listen, but if you keep attacking me, I'm going to leave." If they take more responsibility for their feelings (for example, "I felt hurt and angry when you didn't call me yesterday"), then you will probably be able to continue the conversation on a more productive level. If they continue to blame you and focus on your faults, you may need to support yourself by walking out of the room and refusing to continue the conversation until they stop their attack.

Either way, you have handled the *external* situation. Now, as soon as you get a chance, check inside yourself and ask, "I wonder what this person's anger is mirroring in me?" You may realize that

you have been feeling very angry and critical toward yourself lately. Or perhaps you will discover that a part of you is upset because you haven't been paying enough attention to yourself. *When other people want more from you, it's usually an indication that you want more from yourself.* It may in fact be a signal that it's time to show up and be more present with your own needs and feelings. Interestingly, other people in our lives often start feeling better when we become more present with *ourselves*.

A friend of mine discovered that her boyfriend had been seeing another woman and lying to her about it. She was very hurt and angry, particularly to discover the dishonesty. They had a long talk in which she was able to express her feelings to him. Then she took some time alone for a while to sort things out on her own.

When she was alone, she asked herself, "Is there some way I'm lying to myself, some way I'm not being totally truthful and honest with myself, that would cause me to attract a dishonest man?" She let go of thinking about it and went to work. By the end of the day she realized she had often felt this man was not fully present with her, was not being real with her. But in the past, she had denied and covered up these feelings because she was afraid to confront him with what she felt and intuitively knew. Thus, she effectively lied to herself and supported him in his deceptions as well.

She realized this was a lesson in learning to trust her feelings more and to have the courage to express and support them. She started to do this more with her boyfriend, and they eventually worked out a more honest, communicative relationship. She might also have chosen not to continue the relationship. What matters is that she received the gift from it — learning to trust and

express her feelings.

If you are emotionally triggered by something a person does, the two of you are probably mirrors for each other. It may appear that you have opposing viewpoints, but internally you are probably similar. One of you is acting out one side of the internal conflict, while the other plays out the other side.

For example, one person may want more commitment in a relationship, while the other wants more freedom. They become extremely polarized on this issue and truly believe they want opposite things. However, if one person suddenly switches her position (the one who wanted commitment suddenly wants freedom), the other person often swings to the opposite polarity. The reason for this is that they are attempting to resolve an inner conflict they *both* have — the desire for closeness and security and the need for independence and autonomy (which may feel like the fear of loneliness versus the fear of entrapment).

Once people look inside and become more aware of their feelings, they often recognize that they have simply projected their inner conflict onto the outside world so that they could recognize and deal with it. If a person truly and unequivocally wants a committed relationship, he will simply attract another person who wants the same thing. If someone feels completely clear about wanting to explore being with many partners, he simply does it. By using the mirror process, you can recognize what you really feel and learn to be more honest with yourself. Once you recognize an internal conflict, you can acknowledge that both polarities are really within you and find ways to honor both of the energies. For

example, we all contain the polarities of desiring closeness in relationships while also desiring independence and autonomy. As conscious beings, we must learn to satisfy *both* these needs. By honoring both of these energies within us, we can learn to create relationships in which we have both closeness and independence.

Seeing the world as your mirror also gives you wonderful opportunities to receive positive feedback. Think of everything that you like and enjoy about your life right now. You created these things — they are also your mirrors. Think of the people you know whom you love, enjoy, respect, and admire. They are your mirrors. They couldn't even be in your life if they didn't reflect you: you would not be able to recognize their positive qualities if you didn't have similar ones. Think of the people and animals that love you. They are a mirror of how you love yourself. If you have a home that you love, or a particular spot in nature that is very beautiful to you, it is a mirror of your own beauty. When you see beauty anywhere, it's a reflection of yourself.

There are mirrors everywhere. Whoever you have a connection with is a mirror for you, and the deeper the connection, the stronger the mirror. Part of the fascination in using the mirror process is discovering who we are through these external reflections. The key is to always go back inside to discover the meaning of the reflection for you. The more you are willing to do that without either rationalizing away what you see or blaming yourself for it, the faster you can develop and express the multifaceted potential within you.

Meditation

Relax and close your eyes. Take a few deep, slow breaths and move into a deep place inside of you. Bring to your mind an important person or thing in your life and ask him/her/it what it is mirroring to you. Stay open to receiving the answer, whether it comes in words, feelings, or images. It may come immediately or some time later.

Exercises

1. Think of a person you especially love and admire. List all their positive qualities. Think about how those qualities mirror you. In some cases, they may be qualities you have not fully developed in yourself. Recognize that this person is here to teach and inspire you by his or her example.

2. Make a list of the things and people in your life that you especially like. Praise and appreciate yourself for creating and attracting these mirrors.

3. Think of someone whom you judge or feel uncomfortable with. Try to figure out exactly what quality they have that you dislike. Is it possible that this is a quality within yourself that you deny or judge, and that your life could be enhanced if you made peace with, and were able to express, that part of yourself?

For example:

If you dislike someone who appears very selfish, they may be reflecting the disowned part of you that wants you to pay more attention to taking care of your own needs. Perhaps you are overly identified with taking care of others.

Chapter Seven

Spirit and Form



Spirit is the essence of life, the energy of the universe that creates all things. Each one of us is a part of that spirit — a divine entity. So the spirit is the higher self, the eternal being that lives within us.

Form is the physical world. As an individual, my form is my physical body and my personality, which includes my mind and my emotions. It is also my self-concept — my ego/identity structure: “My name is Shakti Gawain. I was born on September 30, 1948. I’m 5’9” tall. I’m intelligent and have a generally outgoing personality.” This is all information about my form.

We, as spiritual beings, created the physical world as a place to

learn. It's our school, our playground, our artist's studio. I believe that we're here to master the process of creation and to learn how to integrate all levels of our being — spiritual, mental, emotional, and physical — so that we can live in the physical world in balance and wholeness.

Physicists are now discovering what metaphysicians have claimed for thousands of years: seemingly solid physical matter is, in reality, made of energy. If we look through a powerful microscope at anything "solid," we see an infinite number of little vibrating particles. If we closely examine one of these particles, we discover that it is made of even smaller particles, and so on. The fact is that everything physical is made of "energy" — which we can also call "life force," or "spirit." So modern science supports the ancient metaphysical truth that form is created out of spirit.

When our spirit decides to manifest as physical form, the first thing it creates is a physical body in which to house itself. We choose a life situation and create a body in accordance with what we feel will best serve and teach us in this lifetime. Ultimately, our goal is to create a body/personality that can fully express our divine creative spirit, a form that can do everything our spirit wants to do easily, skillfully, and beautifully.

However, our physical form (body/personality) has an important job of its own to do. Its main responsibility is to make sure that we survive physically, and once that is assured, that we actually *thrive* physically and emotionally in this life. So our forms have a certain consciousness that revolves around making sure we get enough food and shelter, protecting ourselves from danger, gaining

a sense of security by making sure reproduction takes place and offspring survive, creating family and community in which we can give and receive the emotional nurturing we need, and finding a sense of belonging.

The energy of our spirit is very different from that of our form. Our spirit has a very expanded vision and perspective, but very little understanding of what it means to be in a human form. Our form carries our human experience, with all its limitations and vulnerabilities, and also with the knowledge of how to live in the physical world.

After we are born into the body, most of us forget who we are on the spiritual level and why we came here. We take on the “survival” consciousness of the physical world and we get lost in the world of form. We forget that we are souls, believing we are just our personalities. We lose touch with our source of power and feel lost and helpless. Life becomes a tremendous struggle to find meaning and satisfaction.

We may spend many lifetimes caught up in this cycle. Certainly, most of us have spent many years in this lifetime looking outside ourselves, trying to find fulfillment in the world of form. Eventually we realize that it's not working; no matter what we do in the world, we don't find profound happiness. We become unwilling to spend one more lifetime, one more year, or even one more minute in futile struggle. In frustration and hopelessness, we give up.

This is usually a painful and frightening place in a person's life — it feels like hitting bottom. It is a kind of death of our old

identity when the form recognizes the hopelessness of trying to live this way and surrenders its fight. It would rather die than keep trying. At this time a person often has thoughts and feelings of death, or may experience the death of a close friend or family member (or several of them). Some people create a serious illness, accident, or other major crisis at this time, and some contemplate or even attempt suicide.

But the darkest hour is truly just before the dawn. When we finally give up the struggle to find fulfillment “out there,” we have nowhere to go but within. It is at this moment of total surrender that a new light begins to dawn. When we give up our old way of doing things, we create space for a new energy to come through.

This is like being reborn. We are infants in this new world and have no idea how to live since none of our old ways work here. We feel uncertain and out of control. Yet hope is reborn in us, and a new power and vision start to come through. This can be the beginning of developing a form that is conscious of, and integrated with, our spirit.

Ram Dass has a beautiful analogy for this process. He likens it to a clock, where 12:00 is the starting point. From 12:00 to 3:00 life is totally lost in the world of form. From 3:00 to 6:00 is gradual “disillusionment” with the world, and 6:00 is where you hit bottom. You feel that you lose everything, but as you pass through 6:00 you are actually waking up to reconnecting with spirit. From 6:00 back up to 12:00 is ever-increasing integration of spirit and form. As individuals, we are at various stages in this process. I have a sense that we each have one major cycle of this type lasting over

many physical lifetimes, and we also have an infinite number of minor cycles — sometimes almost daily!

When we, as individuals, first rediscover our spirit, we are usually drawn to nurture and cultivate this awareness. This often involves withdrawing from the world to one degree or another, and going within. For some people this takes the form of spending time in nature; for some it involves practicing meditation, going to retreats, and so forth; for some it may be simply finding time to be alone and quiet. Often it's a time of partial or complete withdrawal from relationships, work, and/or other attachments that tend to pull us outside of ourselves. For some, this phase may last only a few weeks or months. Each of us is unique, so we all experience this shift within in different ways. In one way or another, we learn to go inside and be in that quieter place in ourselves for a while. There we find a deeper and deeper connection with our spirit.

While we are deeply connected with ourselves in this way, we often find that we have a feeling of clarity, vision, wisdom, power, and love. This is because in that moment, we are connected with the expansive energy of spirit, and not distracted by the problems and responsibilities of dealing with the world of form.

If we choose to follow one of the traditional spiritual paths we may remain more or less withdrawn from the world. In this way we can be true to our spirit and avoid dealing with the attachments and patterns of our form. Unfortunately, we never have the opportunity to fully integrate spirit and form.

In order to create the new world, we are being challenged to

move out into the world of form with full spiritual awareness. We need to recognize the differences between our spirit and our form and learn to integrate them.

Integrating Spirit and Form

The first step in the process of consciously integrating form and spirit is to be able to *recognize* and *feel* both the consciousness of your spirit and the consciousness of your form. You may be accustomed to feeling only one of them most of the time, with occasional flashes of the other. Or you may flip back and forth frequently between the two perspectives. It's as if one takes control of the body for a while and you see things from that viewpoint. Then the other one takes over and suddenly everything looks quite different.

This understanding can explain a lot of things that many of us are experiencing in our lives. Why is it that we have wonderful moments of consciousness and clarity, and then find we have completely lost our perspective and become immersed in fear and pain again? How is it that we can feel so loving, wise, and accepting one day and the next day feel so angry, foolish, and judgmental? Why did we feel like we'd really "gotten it" at a workshop and then seem to "lose it" the next day? How is it that we can feel so peaceful and unattached when we are meditating, yet often our relationships seem like a worse mess than ever? And how come we have such trust in the abundance of the universe but we're still having financial problems?

The answer is simple — we are dealing with the discrepancies between spirit and form. This is a very difficult thing to confront, and we are facing a real challenge. Many people reach this point and have a hard time going any further.

For example, I frequently get inspiring, creative ideas for a new project I want to do. I get a very strong vision of how wonderful it will be and how it can work. All this is coming from my spirit, of course. I get very excited and jump into the project, making all kinds of plans and initiating many actions in that direction. A few days or weeks later I find myself feeling totally overwhelmed, over-worked, frustrated, and ready to throw the whole thing out the window. My spirit had a true vision, but I was trying to achieve it without regard to the needs of my human form. At this point I have to stop and consider what's realistic for me, then set the project aside for a while, or allow it to take longer and develop more slowly. My spirit tends to race ahead, so it has to learn to go at the pace my form can handle.

The second step is to *love* and *accept* both aspects of yourself. They are both beautiful and vital parts of you. Without your spirit you wouldn't be alive — you'd only be a dead body! Without your form you wouldn't be able to be in this world — you'd be existing in some other realm of consciousness.

It may be frustrating at times to see that your form can't live up to all the ideals that your spirit may have. It's important to recognize that our form has its own wisdom and the spirit can learn from the form just as the reverse is true. After all, we chose to come to this plane of existence in order to experience being

human!

For example, many years ago I was living with a man and we had an “open relationship” — in other words, we were free to be with other lovers. I had a strong spiritual ideal that I could love someone deeply and allow him to be free to follow energy he might feel with someone else, while I was free to do likewise. Sometimes I was able to do this, briefly, and I had some beautiful moments where I felt an expansive and exhilarating unconditional love. But most of the time I was overwhelmed with jealousy and emotional pain. I finally realized that my spiritual ideal simply did not fit the reality of my human feelings and needs. It became very clear to me that I could only experience the kind of emotional intimacy that I wanted in a monogamous relationship.

One important key to integrating spirit and form is learning to listen to your intuition and act on it. Your inner guidance will always move you in the direction of greater balance and integration between form and spirit. Even in the process of learning to trust your inner guidance, however, you can’t move faster than your form is ready to go.

Here is a very important point: You cannot force your form to trust and follow intuition through *will*. You must allow it to educate itself through conscious observation.

In other words, you can’t force yourself to always follow your intuitive feelings, even though you desire to live that way. Sometimes it may seem like too big a risk; even though your spirit knows it would work out, your form is too afraid to do it. Don’t push yourself past what you are ready to do. Simply observe the process

and be honest with yourself about how it feels and what happens. Then, the change will happen naturally and spontaneously.

For example, suppose you are with a friend and there's something you want to say but you are afraid to do so for fear your friend will get hurt or angry and reject you. If you find you do have the courage, go ahead and say what you feel. Then, observe what happens and how you feel as a result. Chances are good that you will feel energized and empowered by the experience.

If, on the other hand, you are too afraid to speak the truth, don't try to push yourself past your fear. Again, simply observe yourself being with your friend and not being totally yourself. Notice that you feel deadness and loss of energy; you may also feel resentful toward your friend. *Try not to judge yourself for your lack of action. Remember, this is a learning process.*

The spirit usually tends toward expansiveness, risk-taking, and change. The form often tends toward what it perceives to be safety, security, and the status quo, because its basic task is to make sure we survive and it fears that change might mean disaster or death.

If you are able to observe yourself without rationalization or judgment, you will begin to notice that when you trust yourself and follow your energy fully, you feel better. Conversely, when you are controlled by old patterns of fear and holding back, you feel worse. After a while, your form gets the message clearly and begins to *spontaneously* follow the energy instead of the old pattern because it knows it will feel better. Eventually you have a form that automatically goes for the most alive energy in every situation, without having to think about it and control it.

In this process of learning to trust yourself, many old feelings and deep emotional patterns will come to the surface to be healed and released. This is a very important part of it, and must be allowed to happen. Old memories and experiences may be triggered. Feelings of sadness, fear, pain, guilt, and rage may come up. Allow yourself to feel all of it, allow it to wash through you; it will be released. It is being cleared out of your form. As the light of spirit penetrates every cell of your body, it dispels the darkness.

As you learn to consciously observe the transformation process, you will watch yourself repeating a lot of old patterns long after you seemingly know better. Spiritually and intellectually, you realize there is another way, but emotionally, you are still clinging to the old habits. This is a difficult time. Try to be patient and compassionate with yourself. When you recognize the futility of an old pattern so clearly, it's about to change! A short time later, you will suddenly begin to respond differently, in a more positive way.

As you do the work of integrating spirit and form you may see your physical body change and become lighter, stronger, more clearly defined, healthier, and more beautiful. Because your life is your creation and the mirror of your transformation, all the forms in your life — your work, money, car, house, relationships, community, the world — will increasingly express the power and beauty of your spirit.

Meditation

Get comfortable, relax, and close your eyes. Take a few deep

breaths and relax your body and mind completely. Allow your conscious awareness to move into a deep, quiet place within you.

Imagine that there is a beautiful golden light radiating from a place deep within you. It begins to grow and expand until it fills your entire body. It's very powerful, and as it fills you, it penetrates into every cell of your body, literally waking up each molecule to the light. Imagine your entire body glowing and radiating with this light. Then, see and feel your body being transformed — becoming healthier, stronger, and more beautiful. Imagine everything else in your life being similarly transformed.

Exercise

See if you can observe yourself nonjudgmentally and notice when you are able to listen to your intuitive feelings and act on them, and when you are not. Observe how you feel and what happens in each of these situations. Ask your higher power to help you learn to trust and follow your energy more and more.

Chapter Eight

The Male and Female Within



Each of us has male and female energies within us. I believe that one of the most important challenges we have in this world is to develop these energies fully, so they can interact in harmony with each other.

The eastern philosophies have always included the concept of yin (feminine/receptive) and yang (masculine/active) and have said that everything in the universe is made up of these two forces. In the west, Carl Jung did pioneering and exciting work with his concept of the anima and the animus. He explained that men have a feminine side (anima) and women have a masculine side (animus), that most of us have strongly repressed these aspects of our-

selves, and that we must learn to come to terms with them. He and his followers have done wonderful work using dreams, myths, and symbols to help men and women reclaim the lost, denied parts of themselves. Many other philosophers, psychologists, poets, playwrights, and artists have expressed the ideas of masculine and feminine energies within ourselves and within everything.

As I mentioned in the introduction, the person who helped me the most to understand the male and female within was Shirley Luthman. Her ideas in this area were so clear, simple, and profound they literally began to revolutionize my life. I found that this concept provided me with a powerful tool — I could look at just about anything in my life, or in the world, from the perspective of male/female energies and understand what was really going on so much better! I began to adapt and reinterpret the ideas I'd learned from eastern philosophy, Jung, and Luthman in my own way and incorporate them into my own metaphor. I have found that wherever I go, when I start to share this metaphor with people, they really light up. They have the same reaction I did — it makes so many things so clear.

Some people have resistance to the words “female” and “male,” because in our culture we have so many preconceived ideas about what those words mean, so much emotional “charge” associated with them. If it’s more comfortable for you, substitute the words yin and yang, active and receptive, dynamic and magnetic, or any other words that appeal to you.

Male and Female

I think of our female aspect as our intuitive self. This is the deepest, wisest part of ourselves. This is the feminine energy, for men or women. It is the *receptive* aspect, the open door through which the higher intelligence of the universe can flow, the receiving end of the channel. Our female communicates to us through our intuition — those inner promptings, gut feelings, or images that come from a deep place within us. If we don't pay conscious attention to her in our waking life, she attempts to reach us through our dreams, our emotions, and our physical body. She is the source of higher wisdom within us, and if we learn to listen carefully to her, moment by moment, she will guide us perfectly.

The male aspect is action — our ability to do things in the physical world — to think, to speak, to move our bodies. Again, whether you are a man or a woman, your masculine energy is your ability to act. It is the outflowing end of the channel. The feminine receives the universal creative energy and the masculine expresses it in the world through action — thus, we have the creative process.

Our female is inspired by a creative impulse and communicates it to us through a feeling, and our male acts on it by speaking, moving, or doing whatever is appropriate.

For example, an artist might awaken with an inspired idea for a painting (an image communicated from his female) and immediately go into his studio, pick up his brush, and begin painting (action taken by his male).

A mother might feel sudden concern for her child (a warning from her inner female), and run into the other room and pull the child away from a hot stove (action taken by her male).

A businessperson might have an impulse to contact a certain associate (guidance from his or her female), make a call (action taken by his or her male), and put together a new deal.

In each case, where the male and female within were in creative union, there was a creative result — a painting, saving the child, a business enterprise. Even the simple sequence of feeling hungry, going to the kitchen, and fixing a meal illustrates the same process.

The union of feminine and masculine energies within the individual is the basis of all creation. Our female intuition plus our male action equals creativity.

In order to live a harmonious and creative life, you need to have both your inner female and male energies fully developed and functioning correctly together. To fully integrate the inner male and female, you need to put the female in the guiding position. This is her natural function. She is your intuition, the door to your higher intelligence.

Your male listens to her and acts on her feelings. The true function of male energy is absolute clarity, directness, and a passionate strength based on what the universe inside of you, coming through your female, tells you.

The female says, "I feel this." He says, "I hear your feelings. What would you like me to do?" She says, "I want that." He says, "You want that? Okay great, I'll get it for you." And he goes directly to get it for her, trusting that in her desire is the wisdom of the

universe.

Remember now that I am talking about an *internal* process in each of us. Sometimes people externalize this idea and think I'm saying that men should let women tell them what to do! What I'm actually saying is that we *each* need to let our intuition guide us, and then be willing to follow that guidance directly and fearlessly.

The nature of the feminine is wisdom, love, and clear vision expressed through feeling and desire. The male nature is all-out risk-taking action in service to the feminine, much like the chivalrous knight and his lady.

Through his surrender to her and his action on her behalf, our male energy builds a personality structure within us that protects and honors the sensitive energy of our intuitive female. I often imagine my male as standing behind my female — supporting, protecting, and “backing her up.” For a man, the image might be reversed — you might see your female as within or behind you, guiding, empowering, nurturing, and supporting you. When these two energies are thus in harmony and working together, it's an incredible feeling: a strong, open, creative channel, with power, wisdom, peace, and love flowing through.

The Old Male and the Old Female

Unfortunately, most of us have not yet learned how to allow our male and female energies to function naturally, in the proper relationship with each other.

In our patriarchal culture, we have used our male energy (our

ability to think and act) to suppress and control our feminine intuition, rather than to support and express her. I call this traditional use of the male energy the “old male,” and it exists equally in men and women, although it is often more obvious and external in men, more subtle and internal in women.*

The old male is that part of us that wants to keep control. He is terrified of our feminine power because he doesn’t want to surrender to the power of the universe. He is afraid that if he surrenders, he will lose his individual identity. He holds onto individuality and separateness at any cost. Therefore, he denies the power of the feminine, which is a force moving toward union and oneness.

In relationship with the old male, the female is helpless in the world. Her power cannot move directly into the physical world without the support of the male’s action. Her power is suppressed, and must come out indirectly through manipulative patterns or physical illnesses, or in sudden, unfocused ways — such as emotional outbursts.

You can see that men and women have played out these roles externally. In the traditional male role, men are taught to deny and suppress their inner female, to be machine-like, unemotional, totally in control, and suppressive toward women (secretly, they may be terrified of women because women remind them of the power of their inner feminine side, which they are busy denying). Because

*Sidra Stone has written a fascinating book exploring the hidden patriarchal voice in women, called *The Shadow King*. See Recommended Resources.

they are cut off from their internal power source, they really feel very alone and lost.

In the traditional female role a woman also learns to use her male energy to deny and suppress her feminine power. This leaves her helpless, dependent on men, and able to express her power only indirectly, through manipulation. (She may be afraid that if men found out how powerful she is, they would abandon her, so she carefully keeps her power hidden — perhaps even from herself.)

It's important to realize that *both* the old male and the old female exist in each sex. A woman who is expressing herself in the traditional way described above has a controlling, macho, old male inside her, suppressing her. She will tend to attract men who mirror this male personality and will act it out in their behavior toward her. This behavior may range from paternalistic and chauvinistic to verbally and physically abusive, depending on how the woman treats herself and what she believes she deserves. Once she begins to trust and love herself more and starts to use her internal male energy to support herself, the behavior of the men in her life will reflect that shift. They will either change dramatically and continue to change as she does, or they will disappear from her life, to be replaced by men who are supportive and appreciative of her, who will mirror her new attitude toward herself. I've seen this happen many times.

The traditional macho man has a helpless female voice inside of him desperately trying to be heard. He will tend to attract women who have a low self-image and are clingy and needy, or who express their power indirectly through manipulation — little girl

cuteness, sexual seductiveness, cattiness, or dishonesty. These women reflect his lack of trust and respect for his inner female by not trusting and respecting themselves. By opening to, and trusting, his own feminine nature, he'll find within himself the nurturing, support, and connection he's been lacking. The women in his life will mirror this shift by becoming stronger, more independent, more direct and honest, and more genuinely loving and nurturing.

The New Male and the New Female

The feminine power, the power of the spirit, is always within us. It is up to our male energy to determine how we relate to that power. We can either fight it, block it, attempt to control it, and try to keep ourselves separate from it, or we can surrender and open to it, learn to support it, and move with it.

Individually and collectively, we are shifting from a position of fear and control into surrender and trust of the intuitive. The power of the feminine energy is on the rise in our world. As she emerges within us and we acknowledge and surrender to her, the old male within us is transformed. He re-emerges, birthed through the female, as the new male — the one who goes all out in his trust and love for her. He must grow to become her equal in power so that they can be the *partners* they are meant to be.

I believe that the new male has been truly birthed in our consciousness only within the last few years. Before that, we had little experience in our bodies of the true male energy. Our only concept of male was the old patriarchal male — an energy divorced

from the feminine.

The birth of the new male is synonymous with the birth of the new age. The new world is being built within us and mirrored around us as the new male (physical form) emerges in all his glory from the feminine power (spirit).

An Image

Every now and then I do a visualization process in which I ask for an image of my male and female. Each time I do it, I receive something a little different that teaches me something new. I'm sharing with you one of the most powerful images, because it is such a dramatic illustration of one aspect of the relationship between inner female and male.

My female energy appeared as a beautiful, radiant queen, overflowing with love and light. She was being carried through the streets on a litter borne by several carriers. The people were lining the streets, waiting for an opportunity to see her. She was so beautiful, open, and loving that as she passed by, waving, smiling, and throwing kisses to people, they were instantly healed of any pain or limitation.

By her side walked a samurai warrior carrying a sword. This was my male energy. It was well understood by everyone that if anyone made a threatening move toward the queen, he would instantly raise his sword and ruthlessly cut down the offender. Knowing this, naturally, no one dared to harm her.

He was willing to be absolutely unhesitating in his trust of his

own judgment and his own response, which left her completely safe and protected. Feeling totally safe, having no need to hide or defend herself, she was free to be completely open, soft, and loving and to give her gifts freely and generously to all around her.

Meditation

Sit or lie down in a comfortable position and close your eyes. Take a few deep breaths and relax your body and mind completely. Allow your conscious awareness to move into a quiet place within you.

Now bring to your mind an image that represents your inner female. This image could be an actual person, an animal, or it could be something more abstract — an energy, a color or shape, or simply a feeling. Spontaneously take whatever comes to you.

Take a look at your female and get a sense or a feeling of what she represents to you. Notice some of the details of the image. Notice the colors and textures. Notice how you feel about her.

Ask her if she has anything she would like to say to you right now. Allow yourself to receive her communication, which may or may not be in words. You may also ask her any questions you have. There may be something you want to know from her. Again, receive her communication to you, whether it comes in words, a feeling, or an image.

Once you have allowed yourself to receive her communication, and you feel complete for this moment, take a deep breath and release her image from your mind. Come back to a quiet, still place.

Now draw to mind an image that represents your male self. Again, take what image comes to you. It could be an image of an actual man or it could be some abstract symbol or color. Explore this image. Begin to notice the details of it. Notice its colors and texture. Notice how you feel about him. Then, ask him if he has anything to communicate to you at this time. Be receptive to receiving his communication, whether it is in words or some other form. If you have anything you want to ask him, do this now. Be open to any words or images you may receive. If an answer doesn't come to you immediately, know that it will come later.

Once you feel complete with your communication with him, release his image from your mind. Come again to a quiet place inside.

Now, ask for the images of both your male and female to come to you at the same time. See how they relate to one another. Are they in relationship to one another or are they separate? If they are in relationship to one another, how do they relate? Ask them if they have anything they would like to communicate to one another or to you. Stay open to what comes to you in words, images, or feelings. If you have anything you'd like to say to them or ask them, do that now.

When you feel complete, once again take a deep breath and release their images from your mind. Come back to a quiet, still place inside.

Exercise

Close your eyes and contact your female intuitive voice. Ask

her what she wants — is there a gift she desires or something she wants to say or do? When she has told you what she wants, imagine your new male supporting her desire. See him taking whatever necessary action to honor her need and desire.

When you open your eyes, do your best to follow whatever you feel your intuition wants you to do.

Chapter Nine

Men and Women



We all instinctively understand the basic functions of feminine and masculine energies, but we may not realize that they both exist in each person. More often we tend to associate male and female energies with their respective body types.

Thus, women have become the symbols of female energy. Traditionally, women have developed and expressed receptivity, nurturing, intuition, sensitivity, and emotion. In the past, many women more or less repressed assertiveness, direct action, intellect, and the ability to function effectively and strongly in the world.

Likewise, men have become the symbols of male energy. Traditionally, they have developed their ability to act in the world

strongly, directly, assertively, and aggressively. Many men repressed and denied their intuition, emotional feelings, sensitivity, and nurturing.

As we cannot live in the world without the full range of masculine and feminine energies, each sex has been helplessly dependent on the other half for its survival. From this perspective, each person is only half a person, dependent on their other half for its very existence. Men have desperately needed women to provide them with the nurturing, intuitive wisdom, and emotional support without which they unconsciously know they would die. Women have been dependent on men to take care of them and provide for them in the physical world, where they haven't known how to take care of themselves.

It might seem like a perfectly workable arrangement — men help women, women help men — except for one underlying problem: as an individual, if you don't feel whole, if you feel your survival depends on another person, you are constantly afraid of losing them. What if that person dies or goes away? Then you die, too, unless you can find another such person who is willing to take care of you. Of course, something might happen to that person also. Thus, life becomes a constant state of fear in which the other person is merely an object for you — your supply of love or protection. You must control that source at any cost: either directly, by force or superior strength, or indirectly using various manipulations. Generally, this happens subtly — "I'll give you what you need so you will be just as dependent on me as I am on you, so you will keep giving me what I need."

So our relationships have been based on dependency and the need to control the other person. Inevitably, this leads to resentment and anger, most of which we repress because it would be too dangerous to express it and risk losing the other person. The repressing of all these feelings leads to dullness and deadness. This is one reason why so many relationships start off exciting (“Wow! I think I’ve found someone who can really fulfill my needs!”), and end up either filled with anger or relatively dull and boring (“They aren’t fulfilling my needs nearly as well as I had hoped, and I’ve lost my own identity in the process, but I’m afraid to let go for fear I’ll die without this person.”).

Finding the Balance

In recent times, of course, the strongly separated roles of men and women have begun to shift. In the last two generations, increasing numbers of women are exploring and expressing their abilities to act in the world. At the same time, a growing number of men have been looking within themselves and learning to open to their feelings and intuition.

I believe this is happening because we have reached a dead-end street with our “old world” relationships and externalized concepts of masculine and feminine. The old models and ways of doing things are too limiting for us now, and we have not yet evolved effective patterns to take their place. It’s a period of chaos and confusion, pain and insecurity, but also of tremendous growth. We *are* making a leap into the new world. I believe that

every form of relationship, from the most traditional marriage to homosexual or bisexual relationships, represents each person's attempt to find their feminine/masculine balance within.

Women have traditionally been in touch with their female energy but they haven't backed her up with their male energy. They have not acknowledged what they know inside. They have always acted as if they were powerless when they are really very powerful. They have gone after external validation (from men especially), rather than internally validating themselves for what they know and who they are.

Many women, like myself, have had strongly developed male energy but have used it in the "old male" way. I was very intellectual, very active, and drove myself very hard to shoulder the responsibilities of the world. I also had a very strongly developed female, but I didn't put her in charge. In fact, I ignored her a lot of the time. I basically protected my sensitive, vulnerable feelings by erecting a tough outer shell.

I've had to learn to take that powerful male energy and use it to listen to, trust, and support my female. This allows her the safety and support to emerge fully. I feel and appear softer, more receptive, and more vulnerable, but I am really much stronger than before.

Women are now learning to back themselves up and validate themselves, instead of abandoning the responsibility and trying to get a man to do it for them. However, it's a deep-seated pattern that has endured for centuries, and it takes time to change it in the deepest layers. The key is to just keep listening to, trusting, and

acting on our deepest feelings.

The qualities that women have looked for in men — strength, power, responsibility, caring, excitement, romance — must be developed inside of ourselves. A simple formula is this: just treat yourself exactly the way you would want to be treated by a man!

The interesting thing is that what we create within us is always mirrored outside of us. This is the law of the universe. When you have built an inner male who supports and loves you, there will always be a man, or even many men, in your life who will reflect this. When you truly give up trying to get something outside yourself, you end up having what you always wanted!

For men, of course, the principle is exactly the same. Men are, traditionally, disconnected from their female energy, thereby disconnected from life, power, and love. They've been out there in the world secretly feeling helpless, alone, and empty, although they pretend to be in control and powerful. (War is a good example of the old male energy lacking the wisdom and direction of the female.) Men seek nurturing and internal connection through women but once they have connected with their own inner female, they will receive her incredible love from within themselves.

For men, all the qualities you've wanted from a woman — the nurturing, softness, warmth, strength, sexuality, and beauty — already exist in your inner female. You will feel this when you learn to listen to your inner feelings and support them. You need to totally respect and honor your inner female energy by acting on your feelings for her. Then, every woman — every person — in your life will mirror that integration. They will have the qualities

you've always wanted, and they will also receive love, warmth, nurturing, and strength from you.

Many men, especially in recent times, have chosen to connect deeply with their feminine energy and, in doing so, have disconnected from their male. They've rejected the old macho image and have no other concept of male energy to relate to. These men are usually so afraid of their male energy, fearing that it will burst forth with all the old mindlessness and violence they equate with maleness, that they reject the positive, assertive male qualities as well.

I feel it's very important for these men to embrace the concept of the new male — one who allows his spontaneous, active, aggressive male energy to flow freely, knowing that the power of his feminine is in charge, wisely directing him. This requires a deep trust that the inner female knows what she's doing and won't allow anything destructive or harmful to happen.

New World Relationships

A new idea of relationships is emerging that is based on each person developing wholeness within him- or herself. Internally, each person is moving toward becoming a fully balanced feminine/masculine being with a wide range of expression, from softest receptivity to strongest action.

Externally, most people's style of expression will certainly be determined strongly by which type of body they are in — male or female.

When people hear these ideas they sometimes express the fear

that we will all become outwardly androgynous — men and women all appearing pretty much the same. The reverse is actually true. The more women develop and trust their male aspect to support them and back them up internally, the safer they feel to allow their soft, receptive, beautiful feminine aspect to open up. The women I know who are going through this process (myself included) seem to become more feminine and beautiful even while they are strengthening their masculine qualities. Men who are surrendering and opening fully to their female energy are actually reconnected with the inner feminine power which enhances and strengthens their masculine qualities. Far from becoming effeminate, the men I know who are involved in this process become more secure in their maleness.

In the new world, when a man is attracted to a woman, he recognizes her as a mirror of his feminine aspect. Through her reflection he can learn more about his own female side and move through whatever fears and barriers he may have to come to a deeper integration within himself. When a woman falls in love with a man, she is seeing her own male reflected in him. In her interactions with him she can learn to strengthen and trust her masculine side.

If you know on a deep level that the person you're attracted to is a mirror of yourself, you cannot be overly dependent on him or her because you know that everything you see in your partner is also in you! You recognize that one of the main reasons you're in the relationship is to learn about yourself and deepen your connection with the universe. So, healthy relationships are based on the passion and excitement of sharing the journey into becoming

a whole person.

This might sound like we are evolving to a place where we are so whole within ourselves that we no longer need relationships at all! The paradox is this: as human beings, we are social, interdependent creatures. We *do* need one another. Part of experiencing wholeness is accepting the parts of us that need love, closeness, and intimacy with one another. So, creating conscious relationships involves honoring both our dependence and our interdependence.

Gay Relationships

My own experience in relationships is heterosexual, so I can hardly consider myself much of an expert on gay relationships. However, from talking and working with quite a few gay and lesbian friends and clients, I do have a strong sense that on a spiritual level, homosexual and bisexual relationships are a powerful step that some beings take to break through old, rigid roles and stereotypes to find their own truth.

For some people, being in a close, intense relationship with a person or persons of the same sex is the most powerful mirroring process they can find. Two women, for example, often seem to find a depth of connection with each other that they don't find with a man. They use this intuitive feminine connection to create a strong foundation and safe environment for each of them to practice building their internal male. They totally reflect and support each other in becoming whole and balanced.

A man sometimes seems to find a matching male intensity with

another man — an ability to go all out that he wouldn't find with a woman. He may also find in another man a support for moving into and exploring his feminine self without feeling he has to fulfill the old, stereotyped male role.

I think many of these things are mysteries that we will understand only in retrospect. I believe that every being chooses the life path and relationships that will help him or her to grow the fastest.

As we continue to evolve, I believe we will gradually stop categorizing ourselves and our relationships with any particular labels such as gay, straight, and so on. I foresee a time when each person can be a unique entity with his or her free-flowing style of expression. Each relationship will be a unique connection between two beings, taking its individual form and expression. No categories are possible because each one is so different and follows its own flow of energy.

Exercise

Think of some of the most important women in your life. What are their strongest or most attractive qualities? Be aware that they mirror some aspects of your own female energy (whether you are a woman or a man).

Now think of some of the most important men in your life. What qualities do you most like, admire, or appreciate about them? Recognize that they reflect similar aspects of your own male energy (again, this applies to you whether you're a man or a woman).

If you have trouble seeing that some of the things you admire

in others are in you as well, it may be because you have not yet developed those qualities in yourself as strongly as they have. In this case, try the following meditation.

Meditation

Get in a comfortable position. Close your eyes, relax, take a few deep, slow breaths and move your consciousness into a deep, quiet place inside.

Bring to mind one person whom you admire or are attracted to. Ask yourself what qualities you find most attractive in this person. Do you see those same qualities in yourself? If not, try imagining that you possess those same qualities. Imagine how you would look, talk, and act. Picture yourself in a variety of situations and interactions.

If you feel these are qualities you want to further develop within yourself, continue to do this visualization regularly for a while.

Chapter Ten

East and West: A New Challenge



I have a strong feeling that in my last life I was a spiritual ascetic, perhaps in India, and probably living in meditation on a mountaintop somewhere. That way of life has a comfortable familiarity to it, and there is a longing somewhere within me to continue to live in that blissful simplicity! However, I know that this time I have chosen to take it to the next level — to integrate the spiritual, mental, emotional, and physical aspects of my being and learn to live in balance in the world.

It is interesting to look at the world from the perspective of male and female, or spirit and form; in doing so I have discovered some fascinating things. In a sense, the East can be seen to

represent the feminine polarity. Many of the Eastern cultures have an ancient and powerful spiritual tradition. Until recently, their strength and development have been primarily in the intuitive and spiritual realms, at least in comparison with the Western world. They have lacked development in the physical realm and, as a result, they have experienced a great deal of poverty, chaos, and confusion.

The energy in the West (Europe and the United States) is more masculine. In modern history it has focused primarily on developing the physical realm while paying little attention to spiritual development. As a result, we have made incredible technological progress but we are experiencing a terrible poverty of spirit, a feeling of disconnection from our source.

These two worlds are drawn to one another just as men and women are — with a certain amount of fear and distrust, but an overwhelming attraction nonetheless. Eastern spiritual teachings are flooding the West, and Western technology is gravitating toward the East. We are each hungry for what the other has.

One of my favorite mental pictures of my travels in India is this: I was standing in a bazaar. In front of me were two booths. One booth had beautiful traditional handcrafted items for sale. A group of Europeans and Americans were crowded around it, eagerly bargaining for the lovely treasures. The other booth proudly displayed a variety of plastic items — bowls, kitchen utensils, even plastic shoes. A long line of Indians patiently waited their turn to purchase these precious things. Naturally, neither one of the groups cast even a second glance at the other booth!

East and West can learn from each other, but like women and

men, they must ultimately find within themselves that which they admire in each other. Hopefully, the developing Third World countries will learn from our mistakes and develop a technology that is more harmoniously attuned to the spirit and the environment. And we in the West must develop a spiritual path that helps us to deal with the physical world.

The Eastern spiritual traditions (and our Western spiritual traditions, as well, for that matter) are based on removing oneself as much as possible from the world in order to connect more deeply with the spirit. The world, with its temptations and distractions, is a very difficult place to maintain a focus on, and commitment to, inner truth.

Thus, most serious traditional spiritual paths have involved some degree of renunciation of the world — relationships, money, material possessions, pleasures, and luxuries have been given up. The ideal has been to withdraw to a monastery or mountaintop and pursue a life of quiet contemplation, giving up all attachment to the world. Even those who choose to remain householders with families and jobs have usually followed strong rules and restrictions that are designed to keep them as separate from the world as possible.

This contemplative spiritual orientation has been a necessary and powerful step, but it is reflective of the split we have maintained between spirit and form, between the female and male within us. To be a spiritual seeker, we have had to leave the physical world. “Enlightenment” has been the reason for reclaiming spirit by denying the body — transcending form by leaving it. Thus, individual beings have become “enlightened” in the sense that they

have fully realized their spiritual nature, but they have not fully integrated that enlightenment into their form. When they have eventually left their bodies, the world remained largely untransformed. These masters have supported and preserved the intuitive principle in our world and have paved the way for us to take the next step — the integration of feminine and masculine, spirit and form, and the subsequent transformation of our world.

Those of us who choose to be spiritual seekers and transformers must now move *into* the world *with the same degree of commitment* to our spiritual selves as we would have if we renounced the world. This path is much more difficult! We are now challenged to surrender to the universe, to follow its guidance and to do so *while* having deep, passionate relationships, dealing with money, business, family, creative projects, and so many other “worldly” things. Rather than avoiding our attachments to the world, the time has come to acknowledge and work with them. We must move *into* the challenging situation, move into, recognize, and own all the feelings and attachment, and learn to embrace the full range of our experience.

Meditation

Relax, close your eyes, and take a few deep breaths. With each breath, drop more deeply into a quiet place inside yourself. From this place of calm, start to see a new image of yourself in the world. Your focus is on the universe and you follow its guidance. You trust yourself. You feel strong and courageous. You carry a

sense of knowingness with you into the world. Because of this trust and focus within yourself, what you create on the outside is beautiful. Your world is nourishing to you and others. You are having deep, passionate relationships, and are dealing with people, money, your career, your body, and everything else around you.

You are able to be in the world and enjoy all worldly things, yet keep your commitment to the universe within yourself. This commitment is reflected in the light and power you feel.



PART TWO

Living the Principles

Chapter Eleven

Trusting Intuition



Most of us have been taught from childhood not to trust our feelings, not to express ourselves truthfully and honestly, not to recognize that at the core of our being lies a loving, powerful, and creative nature. We learn easily to try to accommodate those around us, to follow certain rules of behavior, to suppress our spontaneous impulses, and to do what is expected of us. Even if we rebel against this, we are trapped in our rebellion, doing the opposite of what we've been told in a knee-jerk reaction against authority. Very seldom do we receive any support for trusting ourselves, listening to our own sense of inner truth, and expressing ourselves in a direct and honest way.

When we consistently suppress and distrust our intuitive knowingness, looking instead for authority, validation, and approval from others, we give our personal power away. This leads to feelings of helplessness, emptiness, a sense of being a victim, and eventually to anger and rage — and, if these feelings are also suppressed, to depression and deadness. We may simply succumb to these feelings, and lead a life of quiet numbness. We may over-compensate for our feelings of powerlessness by attempting to control and manipulate other people and our environment. Or we may eventually burst forth with uncontrolled rage that is highly exaggerated and distorted by its long suppression. None of these are very positive alternatives.

The true solution is to re-educate ourselves to listen to and trust the inner truths that come to us through our intuitive feelings. Following our inner guidance may feel risky and frightening at first, because we are no longer playing it safe, doing what we “should” do, pleasing others, following rules, or deferring to outside authority. To live this way is to risk losing everything that we have held onto for reasons of external (false) security, but we will gain integrity, wholeness, true power, creativity, and the real security of knowing that we are in alignment with the power of the universe.

In suggesting that our intuition needs to be the guiding force in our lives, I am not attempting to disregard or eliminate the rational mind. The intellect is a very powerful tool, best used to support and give expression to our intuitive wisdom, rather than as we often use it — to suppress our intuition. Most of us have

programmed our intellect to doubt our intuition. When an intuitive feeling arises, our rational minds immediately say, "I don't think that will work," "nobody else is doing it that way," or "what a foolish idea," and the intuition is disregarded.

As we move into the new world, it is time to re-educate our intellect to recognize the intuition as a valid source of information and guidance. We must train our intellect to listen to and express the intuitive voice. The intellect is by nature very disciplined and this discipline can help us to ask for and receive the direction of the intuitive self.

What does it mean to trust your intuition? How do you do it? It means tuning in to your "gut feelings" — your deepest inner sense of personal truth — in any given situation, and acting on these feelings, moment by moment. Sometimes these "gut messages" may tell you to do something unexpected or inconsistent with your previous plans; they may require that you trust a hunch that seems illogical; you may feel more emotionally vulnerable than you are used to feeling; you may express thoughts, feelings, or opinions foreign to your usual beliefs; you may follow a dream or fantasy, or take some degree of financial risk to do something that feels important to you.

At first you may fear that trusting your intuition will lead you to do things that seem somewhat hurtful or irresponsible to others. For example, you may hesitate to break a date, even though you need time for yourself, because you fear hurting your date's feelings. I've found that when I really listen to and trust my inner voice, in the long run, everyone around me benefits as much as I do.

People may sometimes be temporarily disappointed, irritated, or a bit shaken up as you change your old patterns of relating to yourself and others. But this is usually because as you change, the people around you are automatically pushed to change as well. If you trust, you will see that the changes are also for their highest good. (If you do break that date, your friend may end up having a wonderful time doing something else.) If they don't want to change, they may move away from you, at least for a while; therefore, you must be willing to let go of the forms of relationship you have with people. If there is a deep connection between you, chances are good that you will be close again in the future. Meanwhile, everyone needs to grow in their own way and their own time. As you continue to follow your path, you will increasingly attract people who like you as you are and relate to you in a way that feels honest, supportive, and appreciative.

Practicing a New Way of Living

Learning to trust your intuition is an art form, and like all other art forms, it takes practice to perfect. You don't learn to do it overnight. You have to be willing to make "mistakes," to try something and fail, then try something different the next time — and sometimes, perhaps, even embarrass yourself or feel foolish. Your intuition is always correct, but it takes time to learn to hear it correctly. If you are willing to risk acting on what you believe to be true, and risk making mistakes, you will learn very fast by paying attention to what works and what doesn't. If you hold back out

of fear of being wrong, learning to trust your intuition could take a lifetime.

It can be hard to distinguish the “voice” of our intuition from the many other “selves” that speak to us, from within — the different parts of ourselves that have their own idea of what’s best for us.

People frequently ask me how to differentiate the voice or energy of intuition from all the others. Unfortunately, there’s no simple, sure-fire way at first. Most of us are in touch with our intuition whether we know it or not, but we’re actually in the habit of doubting or contradicting it so automatically that we don’t even know it has spoken. The first step in learning is to pay more attention to what you feel inside, to the “inner dialogue” that goes on within you.

For example, you might feel, “I’d like to give Jim a call.” Immediately, a rational, doubting voice inside says, “Why call him at this time of day? He probably won’t be home,” and you automatically ignore your original impulse to call. If you had called, you might have found him at home, and discovered he had some important information for you.

Another example: you might get a feeling in the middle of the day that says, “I’m tired, I’d like to take a rest.” You immediately think, “I can’t rest now, I have a lot of work to do.” So you drink some coffee to get yourself going and work the rest of the day. By the end of the day you feel tired, drained, and irritable, whereas if you had trusted your initial feeling, you might have rested for half an hour and continued about your tasks, refreshed and efficient,

finishing your day in a state of balance.

As you become aware of this subtle inner dialogue between your intuition and your other inner voices, it's very important not to put yourself down or diminish this experience. Try to remain a somewhat objective observer. Notice what happens when you follow your intuitive feelings. The result is usually increased energy and power, and a sense of things flowing. Now, notice what happens when you doubt, suppress, or act against your feelings. Usually, you will observe decreased energy; you may feel somewhat disempowered or depressed. You may even experience emotional or physical pain.

Whether or not you act on your intuitive feelings, you'll be learning something, so try not to condemn yourself when you don't follow your intuition (thus adding insult to injury!). Remember, it takes time to learn new habits; the old ways are deeply ingrained. I've been working intensively on my own re-education for many years, and while the results I'm enjoying are wonderful, there are still times when I don't yet have the courage or awareness to be able to trust myself completely and do exactly what I feel. I'm learning to be patient and compassionate with myself as I gain the courage to be true to myself.

Suppose you are trying to decide whether to change jobs. You might have a conservative self that feels it would be safest to stay where you are, an adventurous self that is eager to do something different, a self that is concerned about what other people will think, and so on. One way to handle this is to "listen" to each of these voices and write down what each has to say (perhaps using a

different color pen for each one). Then, just let yourself sit with all the conflicting viewpoints for a while without trying to resolve them or make a decision. Eventually, you will start to get an intuitive sense of what your next step needs to be.

As you get to know the different selves within you, you will discover that your intuitive self has an energy or a feeling that is different from the other voices. In time, you will learn to recognize it quite easily.

One important step in learning to hear and follow your intuition is simply to practice “checking in” regularly. At least twice a day, and much more often, if possible (once an hour is great), take a moment or two (or longer, if you can) to relax and listen to your gut feelings. Cultivate this habit of talking to your intuitive self. Ask for help and guidance when you need it and practice listening for answers that may come in many forms: words, images, feelings, or even through being led to some external source such as a book, a friend, or a teacher who will tell you just what you need to know. Your body is a tremendous helper in learning to follow your inner voice. Whenever you feel your body is in pain or discomfort, it is usually an indication that you have ignored your feelings. Use it as a signal to tune in and ask what you need to be aware of.

As you learn to live from your intuition, you give up making decisions with your head. You act moment by moment on what you feel and allow things to unfold as you go. In this way, you are led in the direction that is right for you, and decisions are made easily and naturally. If possible, try not to make big decisions concerning future events until you are clear about what you want.

Focus on following the energy in the moment and you'll find that it will all be handled in its own time and way. When you must make a decision related to something in the future, follow your gut feeling about it at the time the decision needs to be made.

Remember, too, that although I sometimes speak of following your inner intuitive voice, most people do not literally experience it as a voice. Often it's more like a simple feeling, an energy, a sense of "I want to do this" or "I don't want to do that." Don't make it into a big deal, a mysterious mystical event, a voice from on high! It's a simple, natural human experience that we have lost touch with and need to reclaim.

The main sign that you are following your intuition in your life is increased aliveness. It feels like more life energy is flowing through your body. Sometimes it may even feel a little overwhelming, like more energy than your body can handle. You may even have the experience of feeling tired from too much energy coming through you. You won't bring through more energy than you can deal with, but it may stretch you a little! Your body's expanding its capacity to channel the universal energy. Relax into it and rest when you need to. Do things that help you stay grounded, such as physical exercise, being in nature, emotional self-nurturing, and eating healthy, substantial foods. Soon, you'll feel more balanced and you'll even begin to enjoy the increasing intensity.

At first you may find that the more you act on your intuition, the more things in your life seem to be falling apart — you might lose your job, a relationship, certain friends, or your car might even stop working! You're actually changing rapidly and shedding the things in your life that no longer fit. As long as you refused to let

go of them, they imprisoned you. As you continue on this new path, following the energy moment by moment as best you can, you will see new forms begin to be created in your life — new relationships, new work, a new home, a new form of creative expression, or whatever. It will happen easily and effortlessly. Things will just fall into place, and doors will open in a seemingly miraculous way. You may have times when you will just go along, doing what you have energy to do, and not doing what you don't have energy to do, having a wonderful time, and you will, literally, be able to watch the universe creating through you. You're starting to experience the joy of being a creative channel!

Specific Examples

Here are a few examples from my life, and the lives of my friends and clients, of the types of situations you might be confronted with in following your intuition. Notice that the words in parentheses are the thoughts and feelings that might have held you back or stopped you from trusting your intuition in the past.

— Leaving a party or meeting because you realize you really don't want to be there (even though you're afraid of what others might think or you don't want to miss something good).

— Telling someone that you are attracted to him, or that you would like to get to know him, or that you love him, or whatever it is that you're feeling, because it feels good to be open and tell the truth (even though you're afraid of being rejected, and it makes you feel very vulnerable, and one part of you says, "You're just not supposed to do that").

— Deciding not to write your thesis because you really don't feel very interested in it; every time you think about it, it feels like a terrible chore (even though you spent five years working toward it, and your parents will be upset if you don't get your degree, you'd really like to have the prestige, and you think you could get a better job with it).

— Taking singing lessons, music lessons, a dance class, or whatever interests you, because you have a fantasy that you would love to be able to sing, play an instrument, or dance (even though you don't think you have any talent, you're too old to learn now, or you might look foolish).

— Not going to work one day because you feel like you want a quiet day to yourself to hang around home, lie in the sun, take a walk, or even just lie in bed (even though you always go to work and think it's terribly irresponsible not to if you're not sick, or you're afraid you might lose your job, or you think it's silly or frivolous).

— Quitting your job because you hate it and you realize that you don't really need to do something that you don't like (even though you're not really sure that what you're going to do next and you'll only have enough money to last you for a few months, and you feel scared about not having the security of a regular income).

— Not doing a favor for someone who's asked you to because you really don't want to and you know you'd feel resentful if you did (even though you're afraid you're selfish, or you might lose a friend or antagonize a co-worker).

— Spending a little money on something special for yourself

or someone else, on impulse, just because it makes you feel good (even though you're normally very frugal, and you really feel maybe you can't afford it).

— Telling someone your opinion about something because you're tired of pretending to agree with others (even though you normally wouldn't dare express yourself that way).

— Telling your family that you're not cooking dinner because you just don't feel like it (even though you're afraid you're being a bad wife and mother and they all might find out they don't need you anymore and your whole identity will be shot).

— Not making a decision about something because you're not sure yet what you really feel about it (even though it makes you feel uncomfortable and off-balance to be in a state of indecisiveness).

— Starting your own business because you have a strong feeling inside that you can do it (even though you've never done anything like that before).

Well, you've got the idea. Trusting your intuition means tuning in as deeply as you can to the energy you feel, following that energy moment to moment, trusting that it will lead you where you want to go and bring you everything you desire. It means being yourself, being real and authentic in your communications, being willing to try new things because they feel right, and doing what turns you on.

Highly Intuitive People

Many people are already highly developed intuitively. Some are very much in touch with their intuition, but are afraid to act on it

in the world. Often, these people will follow their intuitive promptings in one specific area of their lives, but not in others. Many artists, musicians, performers, and other highly creative people fall into this category. They strongly trust and spontaneously act on their intuition within the bounds of their art form; thus, they are extremely creative and often very productive, but they don't have the same degree of self-trust and willingness to back their feelings with action in other areas of their lives, particularly in their relationships and in matters of business and money. Thus, we have the classic case of the artistic type who is chaotic and unbalanced emotionally, and/or inept or even exploited financially.

A classic example of this problem was seen in the movie *Lady Sings the Blues*, based on the life of the great singer Billie Holiday. In one scene, she is traveling with her show on a grueling tour of the country. She is feeling exhausted and depleted and yearns to go home to see her husband and to rest. She resolves to cancel her tour and follow her heart. However, her business managers succeed in convincing her that this move would ruin her career, that she must continue on the road. Shortly after giving in to their arguments, she begins to indulge heavily in drugs. From that point on, her life takes a downward and tragic course.

Naturally, one such incident does not ruin an entire life, but this movie provides a graphic illustration of the way many artists and performers give away their authority to other influences around them and suffer the resulting inner conflict, pain, and loss of power. In order to come into balance, these people must learn to trust their intuition and assert themselves in all areas of their lives.

Many psychics also experience this problem. They are very open, receptive, and intuitive, and do not block these qualities as many of us have done. They may even give their intuition free reign in their work or under certain conditions. Once again, they may not fully trust and back their intuition in every moment of their lives, especially in the area of personal relationships. They may be too wide open to other people's energies and often do not know how to stay connected to their own individual feelings and needs, how to assert themselves, and how to set boundaries. From my experience, these highly sensitive people often have problems with their bodies — either weight problems or chronic illness. These problems are healed when they learn to balance their receptive, intuitive nature (feminine energy) with an equally developed willingness to act on their feelings and assert themselves in personal relationships (masculine energy).

Many spiritual seekers who have spent a good deal of time meditating, becoming very sensitive and attuned to their energy, also have problems of imbalance. The seeker has a strong mental image of what it is to be "spiritual" — loving, open, and centered. He or she wants to act out this model at all times and thus is afraid to act spontaneously or express feelings honestly for fear that what comes out may be harsh, rude, angry, selfish, or unloving.

Since we are human, as we risk expressing ourselves more freely and honestly, some of what comes out will be unpolished, distorted, foolish, or thoughtless. As we learn to act on our inner feelings, all the ways in which we've blocked ourselves in the past are cleared out, and in that process, a lot of old "stuff" comes to the

surface and is released. Many old beliefs and emotional patterns are brought to light and healed. In this process, we have to be willing to face and reveal our unconsciousness. (By the time we can see it, it's already changing anyway.) If we pretend to be more "together" than we really are, we will miss the opportunity to heal ourselves. I have found this to be a very vulnerable and out-of-control feeling. I can't worry too much about how I'm presenting myself or how I look to others or whether I'm doing the right thing. I just have to be myself as I am now, as best I can, accepting the mixture of enlightened awareness and human limitation that is what I am right now.

It isn't necessary to be perfect to be a channel for the universe. You just have to be real — be yourself. The more authentic, honest, and spontaneous you are, the more freely the creative force can flow through you. As it does so, it cleans out the remnants of old blockages. What comes out may sometimes be unpleasant or uncomfortable, but the energy moving through will feel great! The more you do this, the clearer your channel gets, so that what comes through is an increasingly perfect expression of the universe.

Remember, too, that some of our spiritual models reflect our "good ideas" more than they reveal an accurate picture of enlightenment. The picture that many people have of wanting to be mellow, positive, and loving all the time is really an expression of their need to feel in control, good, and right. The universe has many colors, moods, speeds, styles, and direction; furthermore, they are all constantly changing. Only by letting go of some of our control and risking moving fearlessly with this flow will we get to experience the ecstasy of being a true channel.

Exercise

1. Write down all the reasons you can think of for not trusting and following your intuition. Include on the list any fears you have about what might happen to you if you trust your intuition and act on it all the time.
2. Review the meditation at the end of the third chapter (the chapter on Intuition, see page 42).
3. At least twice a day (more often if you can remember), take a minute to relax, close your eyes, and “check in” with your gut feeling to see if you are doing what feels right, or if there’s anything you need to be aware of.
4. For one day, or one week, assume that your intuitive feelings about things are always 100 percent right, and act as if that is so.

Chapter Twelve

Feelings



One of the most common problems I encounter in my work is that so many people are out of touch with their feelings. When we have suppressed and closed off our feelings, we cannot contact the universe within us, we cannot hear our intuitive voice, and we certainly can't enjoy being alive.

It seems that many people did not get enough real emotional support when they were growing up. Our parents didn't know how to support their own feelings, much less ours. Perhaps they were too overwhelmed with the difficulties and responsibilities in their lives to be able to give us the emotional response and care we needed.

Whatever the causes, if we don't feel anyone is there to listen

to us and care about our feelings, or if we get a negative response when we do express ourselves, we soon learn to suppress our emotions. When we bottle up our feelings, we close off the life energy flowing through our bodies. The energy of these unfelt, unexpressed feelings remains blocked in our bodies, causing emotional and physical discomfort and eventually illness and disease. We become numb and somewhat deadened.

In every workshop I give, I encounter people who have been repressing their feelings throughout their lives. Many people are afraid to feel their so-called “negative” emotions — sadness, hurt, anger, fear, despair. They are afraid that if they open up to experiencing these feelings, the emotions will be overwhelming. They are terrified that if they get into the experience, they’ll remain stuck forever.

In fact, the opposite is true. When you are willing to fully experience a particular feeling, the blocked energy releases quickly and the feeling dissolves. When counseling someone who has blocked emotion, I support them in moving into the feeling and allowing it to overwhelm them. Once they’ve felt it completely and expressed it, it usually dissipates within a few minutes. It’s amazing to watch people who have suppressed a painful feeling for thirty, forty, or fifty years release it within a few minutes and experience peace in its place. (It may be important to have the support of a therapist or support group during this process.)

Once you have experienced and released blocked emotion from the past, a greater flow of energy and vitality will enrich your life. It is important to learn to be in touch with your feelings as they

arise: in this way, they can continue to move through and your channel will remain clear.

Emotions are cyclical in nature and, like the weather, they are constantly changing. In the course of an hour, a day, or a week we may move through a wide range of feelings. If we understand this, we can learn to enjoy all our feelings and simply allow them to keep changing. But when we are afraid of certain feelings, like sadness or anger, we put on our emotional brakes when we start to feel them. We don't want to feel it completely, so we get stuck halfway into it and never get through it.

Often, people come to my workshops who want to learn how to "think positively" so they won't feel so stuck in their negative feelings. They are surprised when I urge them to feel more of their negative feelings, not less! It's only by loving and accepting all parts of ourselves that we can be free and fulfilled.

We tend to think of certain feelings as "painful" and therefore wish to avoid them. The experience of pain, however, is actually resistance to a sensation. Pain is a mechanism in our physical body that helps us avoid physical harm or notifies us that a part of us has been injured and needs care. If you touch a hot stove, you will feel pain; this is resistance to the sensation of heat that you are experiencing. It causes you to pull your hand away and thus avoid damaging your body. If you do touch something hot for too long and burn yourself, the subsequent pain lets you know that your body needs healing.

So, on the physical level, pain is a useful mechanism in that it lets us know that we are in danger. However, if a sensation isn't

really dangerous, you can relax into it and the pain will diminish and dissolve. For example, if you stretch a muscle farther than usual, it will at first feel painful, but as you continue to relax gently and steadily into the stretched position, the pain will be released. In childbirth, if a woman resists the intense sensation she is experiencing, she will have great pain. The more she is able to relax into the sensation, the less painful it will be.

On the emotional level, it is our resistance to a feeling that causes us pain. If, because we are afraid of a certain feeling, we suppress it, we will experience emotional pain. If we allow ourselves to feel it and accept it fully, it becomes an intense sensation, though not a painful one.

There are no such things as “negative” or “positive” feelings — we make them negative or positive by our rejection or acceptance of them. To me, all feelings are part of the wonderful, ever-changing sensation of being alive. If we love all the different feelings we experience, they become so many rainbow colors of life.

Here are some emotions that people seem to be most afraid of, with a suggestion of one way you might handle them:

Fear: It's important to acknowledge and accept your fears. If you accept yourself for feeling afraid, and don't try too hard to push past your fears, you will start to feel more secure, and the fear will lessen. Take risks when you feel ready to do so, but don't force yourself to do things you aren't ready for yet.

Sadness: Sadness is related to the opening of your heart. If you allow yourself to feel sad, especially if you can cry, you will find that your heart opens further and you can feel more love. If possible,

reach out for comfort and support from someone who accepts you and your sadness and can just be with you.

Grief: This is an intense form of sadness, related to the death or ending of something. It is our way of releasing the old so that we can be open to the new. It is very important to allow yourself to grieve fully and not to cut this process short. Grief comes in waves, at first close together, then gradually, further apart. Grief can sometimes last a long time, or recur periodically for a very long time. It's necessary to accept it and give yourself as much support as you need to get through it, whenever it comes up.

Hurt: Hurt is an expression of vulnerability. We tend to mask it with defensiveness and blame so we won't have to admit how vulnerable we really feel. It's important to express feelings of hurt directly and, if possible, in a nonblaming way (in other words: "I felt really hurt when you didn't ask me to go with you," as opposed to "You don't care about my feelings. How could you be so insensitive," and so on).

Hopelessness: This can be the result of not trusting ourselves, honoring our feelings and needs, nor taking proper care of ourselves. We may need to be more true to ourselves and more assertive. Hopelessness can also be a stage we go through when we are letting go of our old patterns of control, and learning to surrender to our higher power.

Anger: When we disown our true power and allow other people to have undue power over us, we become angry. Usually we suppress this anger and go numb. As we start to get back in touch with our power, the first thing we feel is the stored-up anger. So, for

many people who are growing more conscious, it's a very positive sign when they begin to get in touch with their anger. It means they are reclaiming their power.

If you have not allowed yourself to get angry much in your life, you will start to set up situations and people that trigger your anger. Don't focus too much on the external problem when this happens, just allow yourself to feel the anger and recognize that it is your power. Visualize a volcano going off inside of you and filling you with power and energy.

Often people are very frightened of their anger — they fear it will cause them to do something harmful. If you have this fear, see if you can create a safe situation where you can allow yourself to feel it fully and express it — either alone, or with a therapist or support group. Allow yourself to rant and rave, kick and scream, throw a temper tantrum, throw or hit pillows — whatever you feel like doing. Once you've done this in a safe environment (you may need to do it regularly), you will no longer be so afraid of doing something destructive and you will be able to handle the situations in your life more effectively.

If you are a person who has felt and expressed a lot of anger in your life, you need to look for the hurt that is underneath it and express that. You are probably using anger as a defense mechanism to avoid being vulnerable.

An important key in transforming anger into an acceptance of your power is learning to assert yourself. Learn to ask for what you want and do what you want to do without being unduly influenced by other people. When you stop giving your power away to other

people, you won't feel angry any more.

Acceptance of your feelings is directly related to becoming a creative channel. If you don't allow your feelings to flow, your channel will be blocked. If you've stored up a lot of emotions, you have a lot of blocked energy or erupting emotions inside of you which don't allow you to hear the more subtle voice of your intuition.

Often people need help in experiencing and releasing old emotional blocks and learning to live in a more *feeling* way. If you believe you need some help with this, find a good counselor, therapist, or support group. In seeking a therapist, ask people you know for referrals and don't hesitate to interview several until you find one that you like. Try to find one who seems to be in touch with his or her own feelings, relates to you in a real and honest way, and supports you in experiencing and expressing your own feelings, and in trusting yourself.

Whether you seek professional help or not, make a practice of asking yourself frequently throughout the day how you are feeling. Try to learn to distinguish between what you are thinking and how you are feeling (many people have difficulty with this). As much as possible, accept and enjoy your feelings, and you will find that they open the door to a rich, full, and passionate life.

E x e r c i s e

When you wake up in the morning, close your eyes and put your attention in the middle of your body — your heart, your

solar plexus, and your abdomen. Ask yourself how you are feeling emotionally right now. Try to distinguish your feelings from the thoughts you are having in your head. Are you feeling peaceful, excited, anxious, sad, angry, joyful, frustrated, guilty, loving, lonely, fulfilled, serious, playful?

If there seems to be an anxious or upset feeling inside of you, go into that feeling and give it a voice. Ask it to talk to you and tell you what it's feeling. Make an effort to hear it and listen to its point of view. Be sympathetic, loving, and supportive toward your feelings. Ask what you can do to take care of yourself at this time.

Repeat this exercise before you go to sleep at night, and at any other time during the day that feels appropriate.

Chapter Thirteen

Balancing Being and Doing



As channels for the universe, we must have available a full range of expression and emotion. If the higher power tells us to leap, we must be able to leap without stopping to ask questions. If it tells us to wait, we must be able to relax and enjoy a space of nonactivity until the next message comes. We will always be pushed by our inner guidance to explore aspects of ourselves that are less developed, to express and experience ourselves in new ways. If we ignore these inner impulses, we will be forced by external life circumstances to explore the opposite polarities from the ones we are most comfortable with. One way or another, our higher self makes sure that we get the message of what we have to do. At times we

may swing from one polarity to the other until we come into balance.

You can expect that your intuition will lead you in directions that are new and different for you. If you are comfortable in one type of personality or pattern, you will probably be asked to start expressing the opposite. It's good to know this, especially when you're in the process of learning to hear your inner guidance. A good rule might be to "expect the unexpected."

One of the most important sets of polarities that we need to develop and balance are the energies of being and doing. Most of us are more identified with one of these energies, and disown the other.

The two types could be called the "doers" and the "be-ers." They roughly correspond to "type A" and "type B" personalities in common psychological terminology.

The doers are people who are primarily action-oriented. They know how to get things done, and they usually aren't afraid to put themselves out there and take risks in expressing themselves or trying new things. Basically, they are good at expressing their outgoing energy. They have trouble receiving. They don't like feeling vulnerable. The most difficult thing for them is doing nothing—not being engaged in some type of constructive activity. Unstructured time makes them uncomfortable and they usually fill it up with lots of activity. They tend to be driven and have a hard time really relaxing. Their male, active energy is more developed, and they may be somewhat uncomfortable with their female, receptive side.

Be-ers are mainly oriented toward inner attunement. They know how to relax and take it easy. They enjoy the subtle pleasure of life and often know how to nurture themselves and others, and how to play. They are usually flexible, and are happy to “hang out” with unstructured time. They may have trouble with action. They fear putting themselves out in new or unusual ways and tend to hold back a lot. They aren’t very assertive and sometimes have trouble expressing feelings or opinions. They worry about what others will think of them. They may be uncomfortable in the world and lack the confidence to deal with people, business, money, and so on. Their female, receptive energy is more developed and they may be uncomfortable or distrustful of their male, outgoing side.

If you are primarily a doer, your intuition will almost surely lead you in the direction of doing less. Your feelings will tell you to stop, to relax and take a day off (or a week, or six months!), to spend more time alone with yourself, to spend time in nature, to spend time with no plan and no list, and just practice following the energy as you feel it. If you consistently ignore these inner messages to slow down, you may develop a minor or major illness. This may be the way the universe forces you to become more balanced.

The hardest thing for a doer is getting no message at all, having to hang out and wait and “do nothing” until further guidance comes. I am primarily a doer, a list-maker, a very active person, and one of the hardest things for me has been when the universe has forced me to do nothing! Yet, I find that those times are the most powerful and inspirational of all because that’s when I can really

stop long enough to feel my spirit. In fact, I finally realized and had to admit that I kept busy all my life in order to avoid feeling that power. I was afraid of “empty” time and space because it was actually so full of the universal force.

If you are more comfortable with being you will undoubtedly be pushed by your inner self into more action, more expression, more risk-taking in the world. The key for you is to follow your impulses and to try doing things you wouldn’t normally do on impulse. You don’t have to know why you’re doing something or see any particular result from it at first. It’s important to simply practice acting spontaneously on your feelings, especially when it comes to dealing with people, expressing your creative energy in the world, making money, or anything else you might normally avoid. Don’t push yourself harder or farther than you are ready to go. It’s very important to respect your own boundaries and rhythms for growing. Make sure the voice isn’t coming from your inner authoritarian self, saying, “*You should* put yourself out in this way.” (If it’s a *should*, it’s seldom the voice of the universe.) Rather, follow the feelings you have that guide you to practice expressing yourself and building your confidence in a supportive way.

Meditation

Get comfortable and close your eyes. Take a few deep breaths and each time you exhale, relax your body and mind into a deep, quiet level of consciousness. Imagine yourself as a very balanced person. You are able to relax, play, and nurture yourself frequent-

ly, and you enjoy having time and space in your life when there is nothing special you have to do. Yet you act on your feelings and impulses spontaneously, express yourself strongly and directly, and risk trying new things whenever you are inspired to do so. You live in the full range of being and doing, so you can follow your inner guidance in whatever direction it leads you.

Exercise

If you are primarily a “doer,” spend one day consciously doing as little as possible. Take note of how you feel and what happens.

If you are better at being than doing, take a day to practice acting on any impulse or inspiration you have, without expecting any particular results. Try several new and unusual things, especially things that involve making contact with people or putting yourself out in the world in new ways. Notice how you are feeling before, during, and after you do this.

Chapter Fourteen

Authoritarian and Rebel



The authoritarian and the rebel are two parts of the personality that many of us have in one form or another. If they are strong voices in us, they can make it difficult to sense and follow our intuition. If we are unconscious of them, they may control our behavior in a way that interferes with our ability to get in touch with our true desires. The battle between them can create tremendous conflict within us, as well.

As in dealing with all of our inner selves, the first and most important step is becoming conscious of them. Once we become aware of them, we are already separating from being identified with them. We recognize them as part of us, and we begin to have

conscious choice about how much power we give them. We can appreciate them for the ways in which they've tried to help us, and for what they still have to offer us.

The inner authoritarian carries our need for order and structure and the rules we have learned about how we should behave. People who grow up in a home with a strong authoritarian parent figure, or in a very authoritarian religion, always develop a powerful inner authoritarian self who carries all the values and rules of the external authority figures. It tries to protect you and keep you safe by making sure that you follow the rules, maintain order, and behave as a good, responsible person.

If you have a strong authoritarian self, you usually make one of two choices: you strive to follow its rules or you rebel against them. If you follow them faithfully, you are likely to be a responsible, law-abiding person and oftentimes a high achiever. You may, however, lose touch with your spontaneous, free-spirited, creative energies and eventually, you may even feel that you've lost your soul.

Some people react to their authoritarian upbringing and their own internalized authoritarian by developing a strong rebellious self. They become identified with the rebel and disown the authoritarian self, but it remains in the shadow of their unconscious, trying to control their behavior and constantly triggering the rebel into action.

The rebel usually develops in childhood or adolescence, in an attempt to maintain a sense of self and find some freedom in an overly oppressive rule structure. This can literally be a life saver at the time. Unfortunately, the rebel is just a knee-jerk reaction to the

authoritarian's rules. It reacts in rebellion to any controlling influence from inside or out. It will automatically do the opposite of whatever it thinks it's supposed to do.

Thus, it is really no freer than the authoritarian; it's just the flip side of the same coin. It has little to do with the person's true desires; it just does the opposite of what it's told. Eventually, it becomes a self-sabotaging force, often inclined toward addictive and self-destructive behavior.

Many people who identify with the rebel were the "black sheep" of their families, acting out the disowned energies of the other family members. They may continue this pattern in later life, always becoming the scapegoat or shadow carrier in every relationship.

The rebel will fight against any energy it fears will control it, including legitimate authority figures, or your own internal attempts to create positive structure in your life. For example: your boss might make a reasonable request, and you become angry and resist doing what she asks; you decide to eat a healthier diet and your rebel immediately eats three pieces of chocolate cake; you decide to exercise in the morning and you find you've slept until noon.

As always, when we are overly identified with an energy, we attract its opposite in our relationships. If you are identified with your authoritarian voice, you will probably have a rebellious mate, rebellious children, and/or rebellious employees. If you are identified with the rebel, you will constantly attract authoritarian energies into your life — the police, the IRS, your mate, your boss, etc.

Whether we become overly identified with the authoritarian or

with the rebel, these identifications are unconscious, so there is no real choice or freedom. When your authoritarian self is dictating your every move, or is constantly battling with your rebel, it is almost impossible to get in touch with your intuitive feelings or true desires.

The key then is to become aware of, and learn to recognize, both of these energies. Try to notice when one or the other takes over, or when they are locked in conflict. Once you become aware of them, acknowledge them for trying to help and protect you. Then see if you can drop in a little deeper to intuitively sense what it is that you really need and want in this situation.*

A client of mine was frustrated with her career and saw that she was bringing about her firing. She was working in an office, doing administrative work for a salesperson. Although she had great organizational abilities, she found herself forgetting to do things. Her boss would come to her and remind her of what hadn't been done and she would fume with anger. She realized she was getting angry anytime her boss told her to do something, however reasonable. She felt she could not afford to lose the job, but she did not want to stay there either. She felt trapped. As we talked, she started to identify the rebel side of herself. She saw she was fighting with the authoritarian, who said she had to stay at that job, and

*The best way that I have found to become conscious of the different selves within us and work with them is The Voice Dialogue technique of Hal and Sidra Stone's (see Recommended Resources).

against her boss, who was in a “controlling” position. She went back to her childhood and examined when she first developed a rebel inside. She saw that she’d had trouble with authorities at other jobs and in school. She realized she was being triggered by old patterns.

When she saw this, she immediately wanted to change these parts of herself. I explained to her that she could not force change. If she tried to change or fix her rebel, she’d be activating it, and the rebel would continue to fight. She needed to become willing to watch herself react, to accept that this was the pattern she was acting out. Once she had really grasped what I was saying to her, I asked her to close her eyes and drop into a deeper place inside herself. She needed to ask her intuition what she really wanted.

It turned out she wanted to be a saleswoman, but was afraid to try. She was growing angry at herself for sitting behind a desk when she knew there was something else she was meant to do.

After realizing what she wanted to do, she was able to come up with several steps she could take to support her goal. She decided to keep her job for the interim and enlist her boss’s help in her goal. She decided to conduct several informational interviews at sales companies to get ideas of places she might want to work. Having seen clearly what she wanted and discussed the action she could take to help herself, she felt much better.

A month later she called me and said that although her authoritarian and rebel continue to fight it out, they seemed to have less power. She had continued to support her goal to do sales work and was feeling much better about her life and less reactive to her boss.

Exercise

Identify some of your rules and behaviors that feel demanding and controlling (overly authoritarian) to you. Use the categories below, in addition to any of your own. I have given some examples in each category.

Work: *I must work forty to sixty hours per week; I must work hard to get anywhere; I can't make money doing what I want.*

Money: *I'm never going to have enough money; I must save money in case something happens; I must not be frivolous with money.*

Relationships: *I have to find a mate; I must please my mate; I have to be monogamous; I'd better be satisfied with what I've got.*

Sex: *I have to have an orgasm every time I have sex; I have to be in love with someone to have sex; I have to be the greatest, most sensual lover.*

Now write down any corresponding rebel thoughts you may have. For example, *Who needs work; I'm going to quit my job; or Who cares about money anyway, I don't need it; or I'll just do what I want behind my mate's back.*

After you've written out the authoritarian and rebel dialogues, drop into a deeper place and ask yourself what you most want; discover what is true for you. Write down any thoughts or feelings that come to you.

Chapter Fifteen

Relationships



Relationships in the old world have often had a primarily external focus — we try to make ourselves whole and happy by getting something from outside ourselves. Inevitably, this expectation results in disappointment, resentment, and frustration. Either these feelings build up constantly and cause continual strife, or they are suppressed and lead to emotional numbness. Still, we cling to relationships out of emotional insecurity, or go from one to another searching for that missing piece that we haven't yet found.

We've been in this tragic predicament for at least a few thousand years; now we seem to be approaching a crisis point. Relationships and families as we've known them seem to be falling apart at a

rapid rate. Many people are panicky about this; some try to re-establish the old traditions and value systems in order to cling to a feeling of order and stability in their lives.

It's useless to try to go backward, however, because our consciousness has already evolved beyond the level where we were willing to make the sacrifices necessary to live that way. In the past, many people were willing to hang on to an essentially dead relationship for an entire lifetime because it gave them physical and emotional stability.

Now, more and more of us are realizing that it is possible to have deeper intimacy and ongoing aliveness and passion in a relationship. We're willing to let go of old ideas about relationship in order to search for these ideals, but we don't know where to find them. Many of us are still looking outside ourselves, sure that if we just find the right man or woman to be with, we'll be blissfully happy — or thinking that if only our kids or our parents would behave the right way, then we'd be fine. We're confused and frustrated, our relationships seem to be in chaos, and we don't have the old traditions to lean on or anything new to take their place. Yet, we can't go back, we must move forward into the unknown to create new kinds of relationship.

In order to do this, it's important to understand that our external relationships reflect our internal relationships with ourselves. My primary relationship is my relationship with myself — all others are mirrors of it. As I learn to love myself, I automatically receive the love and appreciation that I desire from others. If I am committed to myself and to living my truth, I will attract others

with equal commitment. My willingness to be intimate with my own deep feelings creates the space for intimacy with another. Enjoying my own company allows me to have fun with whomever I'm with. And feeling the aliveness and power of the universe flowing through me creates a life of passionate feeling and fulfillment that I share with anyone I'm involved with.

Taking Care of Ourselves

Because many of us have never really learned how to take good care of ourselves, our relationships have been based on trying to get someone else to take care of us.

As babies, we are very aware and intuitive. From the time we are born, we perceive our parents' emotional pain and neediness, and immediately begin to develop the habit of trying to please them and fulfill their needs so that they will continue to take care of us.

Later on, our relationships continue along the same lines. There is an unconscious telepathic agreement: "I'll try to do what you want me to do and be the person you want me to be if you will be there for me, give me what I need, and not leave me."

This system doesn't work very well. Other people are seldom able to fulfill our needs consistently or successfully, so we get disappointed and frustrated. Then, we either try to change the other people to better suit our needs (which never works), or we resign ourselves to accept less than we really want. Furthermore, when we're trying to give other people what they want, we almost invariably do things we don't really want to do and end up resenting

them, either consciously or unconsciously.

At this point, we may realize that it doesn't work to try to take care of ourselves by taking care of others. I'm the only one who can actually take good care of me, so I might as well do it directly and allow others to do the same thing for themselves. This doesn't mean we can't care for and give to others; it just means that we make a conscious choice to give or not, based on what we truly feel rather than out of fear or obligation. In fact, the better we take care of ourselves, the more we have to give.

What does it mean to take care of yourself? For me, it means trusting and following my intuition. It means taking time to listen to all my feelings — including the feelings of the child within me that is sometimes hurt or scared — and responding with care, love, and appropriate action. It means putting my most important inner needs first and trusting that as I do this, everyone else's needs will get taken care of, and everything that needs to be done will get handled.

For example, if I'm feeling sad, I might crawl into bed and cry, taking time to be very loving and nurturing to myself. Or I might find someone caring to talk to until some of the feelings are released and I feel lighter.

If I've been working too hard, I'm learning to put the work aside no matter how important it seems, and take some time to play, or just to take a hot bath and read a novel.

If someone I love wants something from me that I truly don't want to give, I'm learning to say no as clearly and lovingly as possible, and trust that he or she will actually be better off than if

I did it when I didn't want to. This way, when I say yes, I really mean it.

There is a very important point I want to make here — it concerns something I was confused about for a long time and finally understood. Taking care of yourself does not mean "doing it all alone." Creating a good relationship with yourself is not done in a vacuum, without relationship to other people. If it were, we could all become hermits for a few years until we had a perfect relationship with ourselves, and then just emerge and suddenly have perfect relationships with others.

It is important that we are able to be alone, of course, and some people do need to withdraw from outside relationships to a certain degree, until they feel really comfortable with themselves. Sooner or later, though, we need the reflection that a relationship offers us. We need to build and strengthen our relationship with ourselves in the world of form through interaction with other people.

The difference in these approaches is the focus. In the old world of relationships, the focus was on the other person and on the relationship itself. We communicated for the purpose of trying to get the other person to understand us and give us more of what we needed. In new world relationships, the focus is on building our relationship with ourselves and the universe. We communicate to keep our channel clear and to give ourselves more of what we need. The words we speak may even be the same, but the energy is different, and so is the result.

For example, suppose I'm feeling lonely and want my partner

to spend the evening with me although I know that he is planning to do something else. Previously, I might have been afraid to ask for what I wanted directly. I probably would have stayed home alone and focused on learning to enjoy being alone. Later when I talked with him, I would feel some resentment, though I wouldn't admit it, either to myself or him. Nevertheless, he would feel this resentment and become guilty and resentful toward me. None of this would come out in the open until later when we were having an argument and I might say, "Well you don't care about my feelings anyway; you never want to be with me." At this point, I'm communicating to him, telepathically, my underlying feeling that he is responsible for my happiness.

Now (hopefully), I would be more direct from the beginning. I'd say, "I know you have other plans, but I'm feeling a need for connection right now and I would love it if you would spend the evening with me." I'm taking responsibility for asking for what I want, and in doing so, I'm actually taking care of myself even though I'm asking for something from him. The key here is that my focus is on myself — this is what I'm feeling and this is what I want. I have to be willing to make myself vulnerable to do this. But I have found that it is the willingness to say what I feel and want that makes me feel whole. In a sense, I'm already feeling more fulfilled because I was willing to back myself up.

Everything is out in the open, and he's free to respond honestly. Hopefully, he will check inside to find out what's true for him. If he wants to fulfill my request, that's icing on the cake! If he doesn't, I may feel sad or hurt. I'll communicate my feelings (again,

I'm doing it for my own sake, to keep myself clear) and then let go. I'll use that evening as a time to go deeper within myself and strengthen my connection with the universe.

I've found a very interesting thing. When I communicate truthfully and directly, in a nonblaming, nonjudgmental way, and say everything I really want to say, it doesn't seem to matter so much how the other person responds. They may not do exactly what I want, but I feel so clear and empowered from taking care of myself that it's easier to let go of the result. If I keep being honest and vulnerable with my feelings to my partner, family, and friend, I won't end up with hidden needs or resentment.

When you take care of yourself this way, more often than not, you do get what you ask for. If not, the next step is to let go. Go inside yourself and tune in to what your intuition is telling you to do next. Always let it take you to a deeper connection with yourself and the universe.

Thus, an important part of creating a loving relationship with yourself is to acknowledge your needs and to learn to ask for what you want. We're afraid to do this because we're afraid to appear too needy. It's the hidden, unacknowledged needs, however, that cause us to seem too needy. They aren't coming out directly so they come out indirectly or telepathically. People feel them and back away from us because they intuitively know they can't help us if we aren't acknowledging our need for help!

It's paradoxical that as we recognize and acknowledge our own needs and ask for help directly, we are actually becoming stronger. It's the male within supporting the female. People find it easy to

give to us, and we feel more and more whole.

Following Energy

I have found that when I'm willing to trust and follow my energy, it leads me into relationships with the people from whom I have the most to learn. The stronger the attraction (or reaction), the stronger the mirror. So, the energy will always lead me to the most intense learning situation.

It can be frightening at first to try to live this way. We have always been terrified to trust our own feelings, especially in the realm of relationships and sexuality. Because this energy is so intense, so changeable and unpredictable, we fear that utter chaos will reign. We're terrified of being hurt or hurting someone else. We don't trust that the universe knows what it's doing, or else we don't trust ourselves to be able to accurately follow our inner guidance. And there's good reason for this. In the area of relationships, we have so many old patterns and addictions that it is often difficult to accurately hear our intuitive inner voice.

Following your energy does not mean acting out every impulse, feeling, or fantasy that you have — that would be the road to chaos. In order to follow your energy constructively, it's important to be aware of the various selves or voices within you, which may at times have conflicting feelings and needs. Through this kind of awareness, you can begin to sense the deeper intuitive feeling of where the life force is trying to take you, while honoring important agreements, boundaries, and commitments you may have with others.

Until now, most of us have avoided dealing with our fears by

constructing stringent rule structures for all our relationships. Every relationship is fitted into a certain category, and each category has a list of rules and appropriate behaviors attached to it. This person is a friend, therefore I behave this way; this person is my husband, therefore he is supposed to do these things; this person is in my family, so this is how we act with each other; and so on. There's very little space left to discover the truth of each relationship.

Some people rebel against these rule systems and purposely create relationships that go counter to our established cultural norms — sometimes this is the case with nonmonogamous relationships, homosexual and bisexual relationships, and so on. If motivated mainly by rebellion, these relationships may be largely reactions against the rules, and still may not involve a true attunement to our real needs.

Just as every being is a unique entity, unlike anyone else, every connection between two or more beings is also unique. No relationship is exactly like any other. Furthermore, the nature of the universe is constant change. People change all the time and so do relationships.

So when we try too hard to label and control relationships, we destroy them. Then, we spend a lot of time and energy fruitlessly trying to bring them to life again.

We must be willing to let our relationships reveal themselves to us. If we tune into ourselves, trust ourselves, and express ourselves fully and honestly with each other, the relationship will unfold in its own unique and fascinating way. Each relationship is an amazing

adventure; you never know exactly where it will lead. It keeps changing its mood, flavor, and form from minute to minute, day by day, year to year. At times, it may take you closer to one another. At other times, it may take you farther apart.

Commitment and Intimacy

When we discuss the idea of trusting and following our energy, people often ask where the concept of commitment fits into this picture.

Because we have been so focused on externals, most of us have attempted to make a commitment to an external relationship. What we are really committing to is a certain set of rules — “I agree to behave in such and such a manner so that we can feel secure about this relationship.” Usually these rules are not spelled out clearly, they are assumed. People say they are in a committed relationship but seldom clarify to themselves, or each other, what exactly they are committed to doing or not doing.

Generally, in a romantic relationship, one assumption is that the partners are agreeing not to have sex with anyone else. Even that is rather vague, though, as no one defines what “having sex” is. Often the implied agreement is not to feel sexual attraction toward anyone else. Yet, how can you make an agreement not to feel something? Feelings aren’t under our conscious control. We can make commitments about how we will behave, since we do have conscious control of our actions. Most people find that a commitment to monogamous behavior is a necessity in order to

preserve the sense of intimacy they desire in a primary relationship. The important question is, do we make that commitment as a way of controlling our partner ("I'll be monogamous so you will have to be, too") or from our own integrity ("I choose to be monogamous because I want the depth of intimacy that it will create in my primary relationship").

The real problem with many of the commitments we make or assume is that they don't allow room for the inevitable changes and growth of people and relationships. If you promise to behave by a certain set of rules that come from outside of you, eventually you are going to have to choose between being true to yourself and being true to those rules. When you stop being honest and real, there's not much left of you to be in the relationship. You end up with an empty shell — a nice commitment, but no real people in it!

Because this type of commitment attempts to keep the *form* of the relationship from changing, more often than not, it simply doesn't last. The fact is that relationships *do* change form and no commitment can guarantee that they won't. No external form can give us the security that we seek. You could be married for fifty years and the fifty-first year your spouse could decide to leave you!

If we only realize this, it can save us so much pain. People who divorce almost inevitably feel that they have failed, because they assume all marriages should last forever. In many cases, however, the marriage has actually been a success — it's helped each person to grow to the point where they no longer need the same form.

What causes the pain in many cases is that we don't know how to allow the form to change *while still honoring the underlying love*

and connection. When you are deeply involved with another human being, the soul connection often lasts forever. The intensity of energy in the relationship, however, increases or decreases in accordance with how much there is to be learned from it at any given time. When you've learned a great deal from being with someone, the energy between you may eventually diminish to the point where you no longer need to interact on a personality level as much, or at all. Sometimes, the energy renews itself again later on another level.

We don't understand this, so we feel guilty, disappointed, and hurt when our relationships change form. We don't really know how to share our feelings effectively with each other, and so we often respond to these feelings by cutting off our connection with the other person. This causes us real pain, because we are actually cutting off our own deep feelings. I have found that changes in relationships can be less painful, and at times even beautiful, when we can communicate honestly and trust ourselves in the process.

Most people believe that sacrifice and compromise are necessary in order to preserve a relationship. The need to sacrifice and compromise is based on a misunderstanding of the nature of the universe. We fear that there is not enough love for us and that the truth may be hurtful. In fact, the universe is filled with love, and the truth, when we can see it, is always healing.

When I'm willing to be honest and ask for what I want, to continue sharing my feelings openly, I find that the underlying truth in any situation is the same for all concerned. At first it may seem that I want one thing and the other person wants something else. If we

both keep telling the truth as we feel it, sooner or later it works out so that we both see that we can have what we truly want.

For example, a couple who are clients of mine were experiencing a great deal of conflict about their work. They were partners in a very successful business. She was tired of the business and wanted to do something else. He loved the work and wanted to continue but did not want to do it without her. They fought constantly about whether to sell the business (her desire) or continue and expand it (his desire).

Once they began to communicate on a deeper level, they uncovered their fears. She yearned to express herself creatively in new ways, but was terrified that she would not be able to successfully step out on her own without his constant support. She was also afraid that she would not be able to make as much money, and he would feel resentful about her diminished contribution to the family income. He was afraid that he would be unable to handle the business successfully without her; he depended heavily on her creative input and did not trust his own intuitive capacity. Also, he feared that his working life would be dull and drab without her warmth and humor.

Having expressed their feelings fully, they were able to see that they were both at the point of making a leap into a new level of independence and creativity. They were ready to let go of some of their dependency on one another and develop more trust in themselves. She gradually withdrew from the business and started a new and very different career, which she ultimately found very exciting

and rewarding. He continued to run the business and developed it in new and interesting directions. Their relationship was enhanced by their increased independence and self-confidence.

For me, commitment in relationship needs to be based on a commitment to myself — to love, honor, obey, and cherish my own being. My commitment in relationship is to respect my own truth and do my best to honor the other person's truth as well. To anyone I love, I promise to do the best I can to be honest, to share my feelings, to take responsibility for myself, to honor the connection I feel with that person, and to maintain that connection.

While we may have a strong desire and intention to maintain a certain form of relationship (a marriage for example), we can't have any absolute guarantees about a relationship's form. Real commitment allows for the fact that form is constantly changing, and that we can trust that process of change. It opens the door to the true intimacy that is created when people share deeply and honestly with one another. If two people stay together on this basis, it's because they really want to be together. They continue to find an intensity of love and learning with each other as they change and grow.

Monogamy or Not

People often ask me if I think monogamy is necessary in a primary relationship. I usually answer by sharing my own experience. As I mentioned earlier in this book, at one time in my life I experimented with nonmonogamous romantic relationships. I

found that while I had wonderful ideals of love and freedom, emotionally, it was way too painful for me. I also realized that one of my underlying motivations was my fear and ambivalence about commitment in relationship.

Once I learned about the many different selves within me, I realized that some of my inner selves are monogamous and some aren't! In fact, I found this to be fairly universal. We all have certain selves who would love to be free to relate sexually to others spontaneously, whenever they feel like it. We have other selves who need and desire the security and exclusivity of a monogamous relationship. The vulnerable child within us, in particular, will not really open up in a nonmonogamous relationship.

Since showing our deep vulnerability to another is a key to intimacy, if the vulnerable child is not present in a relationship, we will not experience the depth of closeness most of us yearn for in sexual partnership.

That level of intimacy is very important to me, so I came to the understanding that for me, a mutual commitment to monogamous behavior is an important element in my relationship with my partner. We understand that attractions to others are an inevitable part of being alive. We can feel and even enjoy those attractions while maintaining appropriate boundaries. If we are honest with ourselves and each other, these experiences can be part of our per-

*For more information on this issue, I recommend the book *Embracing Each Other* and the tapes *Affairs* and *Attractions* by Drs. Hal and Sidra Stone.

sonal growth and the growth of our relationship.*

Romance

When we meet someone who is a particularly strong mirror for us, we feel an intense attraction (or we may experience it initially as a repulsion or dislike; either way, there's a strong feeling). If that person is of the sex we prefer and has certain characteristics, we may experience the feeling as a sexual attraction. When the energy is particularly strong we have an experience we call "falling in love."

Falling in love is actually a powerful experience of feeling the universe move through you. The other person has become a channel for you, a catalyst that triggers you to open up to the love, beauty, and passion within you. Your own channel opens wide, the universal energy comes through, and you have a blissful moment of "enlightenment" very similar to the experiences some people have after long periods of meditation.

This is the most thrilling and passionate experience in the world and, of course, we want to hold onto it. Unfortunately, we don't realize that we are experiencing the universe within ourselves. We recognize that the other person has triggered this experience and we think it is him or her that is so wonderful! At the moment of falling in love, we are accurately perceiving the beauty of that person's spirit, but we may not recognize it as a mirror of our own. We just know that we feel this great feeling when we're with them. So, we often begin to give our power away to them, and start to put our source of happiness outside of ourselves.

The other person immediately becomes an object — some-

thing we want to possess and hold onto. The relationship becomes an addiction: as with a drug, we want more and more of the thing that gets us high. The problem is that we get addicted to the person's form, not recognizing that it's the energy we want. We focus on the personality and the body, and try to grab onto it, to keep it. The minute we do this, the energy gets blocked. By grabbing hold of the channel so tightly we are actually strangling it and closing off the very energy we seek.

True passion brings us together but our neediness often takes over shortly thereafter. The relationship starts to die almost as soon as it blooms. Then we really panic and usually hold on even tighter. The initial experience of falling in love was so powerful that we sometimes spend years trying to recreate it; but often, the more we try, the more it eludes us. It's only when we give up and let go that the energy may start to flow again and we can experience that same feeling.

Such is the tragic nature of romance in the old world. We've spent thousands of years trying to work this one out. Our favorite songs, stories, and dramas reflect and reinforce the externally addicted nature of our relationships and the resulting pain and frustration.

In the new world, we are discovering something simple and beautiful that can heal much of our pain: the greatest romance of all can be our love affair with life.

A Love Affair

I am finding that being alive is a love affair with the universe.

I also think of it as a love affair between my inner male and female, and between my form and my spirit.

As I build and open my channel, more and more energy flows through. I feel greater intensity of feeling and passion. Being in love is a state of being that is independent of any one person. Certain people, however, seem to intensify or deepen my experience of the life force within me. I know that those people are mirrors to me and that they are also channels for special energy in my life.

I move toward them because I want the intensification that I experience with them. I feel the universe moving through me to them, and moving through them to me. This could happen through any form of exchange. The energy itself lets me know what is needed and appropriate. It's a mutually satisfying and fulfilling exchange because the universe is giving each of us what we need. It may be a brief, one-time experience, a glance or a short conversation with a stranger. Or, it may be an ongoing contact, a profound relationship that lasts for many years. I see it more and more as the universe coming to me constantly, through many different channels.

What I have just written is an ideal scene. I certainly am not living it fully at every moment. Many times I am caught up in my fears and insecurities. However, I *am* experiencing it more and more frequently, and when I do, it feels wonderful!

Exercises

1. Take yourself on a romantic date. Do everything as if you

were going out with the most loving and exciting partner you can imagine. Take a luxurious hot bath, dress in your best clothes, buy yourself flowers, go to a lovely restaurant, take a moonlight stroll, do anything else that strikes your fancy. Spend the evening telling yourself how wonderful you are, how much you love yourself, and anything else that you would like your hear from a lover. Imagine that the universe is your lover and is giving you everything that you want.

2. The next time that you feel a romantic or a sexual “charge” with someone, remember that it’s the universe you are feeling. Whatever you do, whether you act on it or not, just remember that it’s all part of your true love affair with life.

Chapter Sixteen

Our Children



Living as a channel for the universe applies to parenting as much as to every other area of our lives. While I don't have children myself, I have a number of friends who are using these principles in relating to their children. It certainly isn't easy to transform our old concepts and patterns of raising children, but the results are wonderful to see: bright light radiating from these children, satisfaction and fulfillment for their parents, and the depth of closeness and sharing between them.

Our old ideas of parenting usually involve feeling totally responsible for the welfare of our children and trying to follow some behavior standard to be a "good parent." As you learn to

trust yourself and be yourself spontaneously, you may find yourself violating many of your old rules about what a good parent does. Nevertheless, the energy and aliveness that is coming through you, your increasing sense of satisfaction in your life, and your trust in yourself and the universe, will do far more to help your child than anything else possibly could.

In a sense, you don't have to "raise" your children at all! The universe is the true parent to your children; you are simply the channel. The more you are able to follow your energy and do what is best for you, the more the universe will come through you to everyone around you. As you thrive, your children will, too.

When babies are born, they are powerful, intuitive beings. Newly arrived in the physical world, they spend their first years learning to live in a body. Their *forms* are younger and less experienced than ours, but their *spirits* are just as developed as ours. In fact, I believe that we often have children who are spiritually more developed than we are, so that we can learn from them.

Our children come into the world as clear beings. They know who they are and what they are here to do. I believe that on some level of consciousness, parents and children have made an agreement. The parents have agreed to support and assist the child in developing his form (body, mind, and emotions) and learning how to operate in the world. The child has agreed to help the parents be more in touch with their intuitive selves. Because children have not yet lost their conscious connection to their spirit, they provide us with considerable support in reconnecting with our own higher selves.

Our children essentially need two things from us:

1. They need to be recognized for who they really are. If we see and know that they are powerful and sophisticated spiritual beings and relate to them that way from the beginning, they will not need to hide their power and lose touch with their soul, as many of us have. Their being will receive the support and acknowledgment they need to remain clear and strong.
2. They need us to create an example for them of how to live effectively in the world of form. As we do this, they watch how we live and imitate us. Being very perceptive and pragmatic, they copy what we actually *do*, and not what we *say*.

In return for taking responsibility for these two things, we receive from our children endless amounts of vibrant energy. Unless they are shut down at a very early age through lack of support, children are very clear and powerful channels. Because they have not yet developed much rational censorship, they are almost totally intuitive, completely spontaneous, and absolutely honest. From watching them, we can learn a great deal about how to follow energy and live creatively.

Most parents have not been able to fulfill their responsibilities as successfully as they would have wished. In general, parents have been confused about their roles and responsibilities. They haven't had any clear models or guidelines. Until very recently in human history, no one did much research on parenting, and there are still very few resources for educating oneself about how to be a parent. Most people parent in a rather hit-or-miss fashion. So, everyone has made plenty of mistakes.

I've met a lot of parents who, now that they have become more conscious, feel tremendous guilt and sadness in looking back on how they've raised their children. It's helpful to remember that children are powerful, spiritual beings who are responsible for their own lives — they chose you as a parent so that they could learn the things they needed to work out in this lifetime.

Also, it helps tremendously to know that as you grow and evolve, they will be positively affected and supported by your transformation. They will change as you change, even if they are grown and live far away from you. All relationships are telepathic, so no matter what the physical distance, they will continue to reflect you.

Because we have not been sufficiently attuned to our own being, it's been hard to recognize and trust the spirit within our children. Because they were physically undeveloped and rationally unsophisticated, we thought they were less aware and less responsible than they really are.

I've observed in many people the underlying attitude that children are somewhat helpless or untrustworthy and that parents are responsible for controlling and molding them into responsible beings. Children, of course, pick up this attitude and reflect it in their behavior. If you recognize and treat them as powerful, spiritually mature, responsible beings, they will respond accordingly.

Children as Mirrors

Because young children are relatively unspoiled, they are our clearest mirrors. As intuitive beings, they are tuned in on a feeling level and respond honestly to the energy as they feel it. They haven't

learned to cover up yet. When adults do not speak or behave according to what they are actually feeling, children pick up the discrepancy immediately and react to it. Watching their reactions can help us become more aware of our own suppressed feelings.

For example, if you are trying to appear calm and collected when inside you are feeling upset and angry, your children may mirror this to you by becoming wild and disruptive. You are trying to maintain control, but they pick up the chaotic energy inside of you and reflect it in their behavior. Oddly enough, if you express directly what you are truly feeling without trying to cover it up ("I'm feeling really upset and frustrated because I've had a rotten day. I'm mad at the world and at myself and at you! I want you to be quiet so I can have peace and quiet to try to sort out my feelings. Will you please go outside for a few minutes?"), they will usually calm down. They feel comfortable with the truth and the congruity between your feelings and your words.

Many parents think they have to protect their children from their (the parents') confusion or so-called negative feelings. They think that being a good parent means maintaining a certain role — always being patient, loving, wise, and strong. In fact, children need honesty — they need to see a model of a human being going through all the different feelings and moods that a human being goes through and being honest about it. This gives them permission and support to love themselves and allow themselves to be real and truthful.

Sharing your feelings with your children does not mean dumping your anger on them or blaming them for your troubles. It also

does not mean you can expect them to be your partner or therapist and help you with your problems. The more you practice expressing your feelings honestly as you go along, the less likely you are to do these things. Being human, however, you probably will dump your anger or frustration on them from time to time. Once you see that you've done it, tell them you realize that you dumped on them and that you are truly sorry, and then let it go. It's all part of learning to be in close relationships.

Children also serve as our mirrors by imitating us from a very young age. We are their model for behavior, so they pattern themselves after us. Thus, we can watch them to see what we are doing! Children often reflect either our primary selves (in the ways they are similar to us), or our own disowned selves (in the ways they are different from us). When they behave in ways that we find upsetting or mystifying, they are usually acting out one or more of our disowned selves — our shadow side. For example, a woman friend of mine is a very sweet, loving person who is a committed pacifist. She was shocked and horrified to discover that her little boy loved playing with toy guns; of course, he was reflecting her disowned aggressive side!

When your child does something you don't like, tell him or her how you feel about it and deal with it directly, but, also ask yourself in what way that behavior mirrors you or how you might be supporting it in your own process.

For example, if your children are being secretive and hiding things from you, ask yourself if you have been really open and honest about all your feelings with them. Is there something you

are hiding from someone or from yourself? Is there some way you don't trust yourself and therefore don't trust them? If your children are being rebellious, take a look at the relationship between your own inner authoritarian and rebel. If your inner authoritarian has a lot of control in your life, your children may be acting out your suppressed rebellious side. Or, if you've acted out the rebel a lot in your life, they may be imitating you.

Take a good look at how these problems reflect your inner process. If you learn from your experiences and grow, so will your children. Externally, a lot of these problems can be worked through by deeply and sincerely sharing your feelings and learning to assert yourself, and by encouraging your children to do the same. You may want to get support from a professional counselor or family therapist to help the whole family change its old patterns.

I have found that, for many people, parenting has been a convenient excuse not to do their own learning and growing. Frequently, parents spend most of their time focusing on their children, trying to make sure that the children learn and grow properly. In taking responsibility for their children's lives, they abandon responsibility for their own lives. This has the unfortunate result of making the children feel, unconsciously, that they have to take responsibility for their parents (because their parents are sacrificing for them). Children may imitate their parents' behavior by taking responsibility for other people, or they may rebel against the pressure to conform to their parents' expectations by acting out the opposite of what their parents want.

Parents need to shift the focus of their responsibility from

their children back to themselves, where it belongs. Remember that children learn by example. They will tend to do what you do, not what you tell them to do. The more you learn to take care of yourself and live a fulfilling, happy life, the more they will do the same.

This doesn't mean you should abandon or ignore your children. It doesn't mean that you let them do whatever they want. You are in a deep relationship with them and like any other relationship, it takes a lot of caring and communication. It's important for all of you to express feelings, make needs known, and set clear boundaries. Furthermore, you have accepted certain responsibilities to care for them physically and financially. You have a right to require their co-responsibility and cooperation in that process.

The key is in your attitude. If you truly see your children as powerful, responsible entities and treat them as equal to you in spirit (while acknowledging that they are less experienced than you in form), they will mirror that attitude back to you.

From the time they are born, assume that they know who they are and what they want, and that they have valid feelings and opinions about everything. Even before they can talk, ask them for their feelings about things they are involved in and trust your intuition and the signals they give you to know what their answers are. For example, ask them if they'd like to be included in an outing or if they'd rather stay home with a babysitter. Trust your feelings about which choice they are making and proceed accordingly. Then pay attention to the signals they give. If you take them on an outing and they cry the whole time, next time try leaving them with the babysitter.

As they grow older, continue to include them in family decisions and responsibilities. As much as possible, allow them to make their own decisions about their personal lives. This means they may sometimes have to deal with the consequences of making certain decisions. Offer them your love, support, and advice, but let it be understood that their lives are basically their own responsibility. Be sure you set your own boundaries clearly — what is okay and what isn't. Making their own decisions does not include the right to take advantage of you. Above all, try to communicate your honest feelings to them and ask them to let you know how they are feeling. Almost all family problems arise from lack of communication. Your children certainly aren't going to know how to communicate clearly if you don't know how.

It seems to be terribly difficult for parents to give up living their children's lives for them and start living their own. In order to do this, parents have to be willing to admit how dependent they really are on their children and how frightened they feel about letting go of them. These feelings are usually masked by a reverse projection — parents will tell themselves that their children are dependent on them and won't be okay if their parents start focusing on fulfilling their own needs.

I have found that this is a false issue. The real issue is the parents' feelings of dependency on their children, which they usually aren't even conscious of! Children are so alive and exciting, parents often secretly fear that their lives will be drab and dull without their children. Or, perhaps they are just afraid to face themselves. Once they recognize and acknowledge these feelings, they will

begin to deal with the emptiness within themselves and their lives. They will begin to look at what they want and how they can satisfy themselves. They will begin to trust their own gut feelings about things and act on them.

At this point, the children really start to flourish. They are finally liberated from the unconscious task of trying to take care of their parents; they are freed to make their own lives worthwhile! The children start doing what they really need to do for themselves. They can now become the channels they truly are.

One couple who are close friends of mine have a beautiful daughter. Since before she was born, her parents were aware of her as a powerful being and felt that they were in communication with that being. I was present at her home birth — a wonderful event. A few minutes after she was born, I was holding her and she looked strongly and directly into my eyes (I had previously heard that babies can't focus at such an early age). It was quite apparent to me that she was well aware of what was happening.

She has been raised much as I have described. She has always been afforded the respect that she deserved and was treated as a highly conscious entity. As a result, she is a truly remarkable child. Wherever she goes, people remark on her strong presence. It's easy to see that she is an open channel for the universe.

Meditation

Get comfortable, relax, and close your eyes. Take a few deep breaths and move your awareness into a deep, quiet place within you.

Picture or imagine your child in front of you. Look into his or her eyes and sense the powerful being within. Take a little time just to be with this experience and receive any feelings, ideas, or impressions about who your child really is. Communicate to him or her, in your own words, your respect and appreciation. Imagine that your child is communicating to you his or her respect and appreciation.

If you have more than one child, do this with each one of them. This meditation is effective in opening the love and communication between you and your children, whether they are infants or adults.

Exercise

Practice telling the truth to your children and expressing your feelings honestly with them even if you feel vulnerable and uncomfortable about not being in control. Ask them how they feel about things and try to really listen to what they have to say. If you are tempted to give advice, ask them if they want to hear it first. If they don't, tell them your *feelings* instead.

Chapter Seventeen

Work and Play



Our culture is obsessed with achievement and productivity. As a result we have an epidemic of workaholism in which most of us push ourselves much harder than is necessary or healthy. We need to learn to relax, nurture ourselves, and have fun. Some people carry the opposite polarity — they know how to relax and play, but have difficulty focusing and working hard enough to accomplish things.

When you're following your energy and doing what feels right to you, moment by moment, the distinction between work and play tends to dissolve. Work is no longer what you *have* to do and play what you *want* to do. When you are doing what you love, you

may work harder and produce more than ever before, but you will experience such enjoyment and pleasure in your work that at times it may feel like play.

Each one of us has a true purpose and each one of us is a unique channel for the universe. We make a contribution to the world just by being ourselves every moment. There need not be rigid categories in our lives — this is work, this is play. It all blends into the flow of following the universe, and money flows in as a result of the open channel that's created. Work is no longer something you have to do in order to survive and sustain life. You no longer work just for the sake of making money. Instead, the delight that comes from expressing yourself becomes the greatest reward. The money comes along as a natural part of being alive. For some, working and getting money may no longer even be directly related to each other; you may experience that you are doing whatever you have the energy to do and that money is coming into your life. It's no longer a matter of, "You do this and then you get money for it." The two things are simply operating simultaneously in your life but not necessarily in a direct cause-and-effect relationship.

In the new world, it's difficult to pin life's work and true purpose down to any one thing. In terms of looking for a career, our old world concept told us that when we became adults, we had to decide what our career would be and then pursue an education or other steps to achieve that career. The career would then be pursued for most, or all, of our life.

In the new world, many of us are channels for a number of things that may come together in fascinating combinations.

Perhaps you haven't found your career because it doesn't exist yet. Your particular and unique way of expressing yourself has never existed before and will never be repeated again. As you practice following the energy in your life, it may lead you in many directions. You may express yourself in a variety of areas, all of which will begin to synthesize in some surprising, interesting, and very new, creative way. You will no longer be able to say, "I'm a writer (or a fireman or a teacher or a housewife)." You may be a combination of all of those things. You'll be doing what you love, what you're good at, what comes easily to you and has an element of challenge and excitement to it. Whatever you do will feel satisfying and fulfilling to you. It will no longer be a matter of doing things now for later gratification: "I will work hard now so that I can get a better job later. I will work hard now so that I can retire and enjoy my life. I will work hard now in order to have enough money and time to have a vacation where I can have fun." It's the fulfillment of what you're doing at this very moment that counts. In being a channel, everything you do becomes a contribution; even the simplest things are significant.

It is the energy of the universe moving through us that transforms, not just the specific things we do. When I write a book that has a certain impact on a reader's life, it's because of the energy of the universe that comes through me and connects to the reader's deeper levels of awareness. The words and ideas are the icing on the cake. They are the things that enable our minds to grasp what has already been changed. It is not so important that I wrote a book. What is important is that I expressed myself, opened up, and

allowed the creative energy to flow through me. That creative energy is now penetrating other people and things in this world. I had the joy of that energy moving through me and other people had the joy of receiving that energy. That's the transformational experience.

Whether you are washing the dishes, taking a walk, or building a house, if you're doing it with a sense of being right where you want to be and doing what you want to be doing, that fullness and joy in the experience will be felt by everyone around you. If you're building a house and somebody walks by and sees you doing it, they will feel the impact of the fullness of your experience. Their lives will be transformed to the degree that they are ready to allow the energy's impact. Though they may not know what hit them, they will start to experience life differently. It's the same when you're just being. If you walk into a room, feeling whole, and expressing yourself in whatever way feels right to you, then everyone in the room will be affected and catalyzed in their own growth process. Even though they may not recognize it or know anything about it consciously, you may at times be able to see the direct result of your channel operating. You will see proof of it in watching the changes in people. It is an incredibly exciting and satisfying experience.

You can see that it may no longer be an issue of focusing on one lifelong career. At times in your life, you may be led to focus and build structure in one particular area of knowledge or expertise. You may choose to learn certain skills that you will use to allow your channel to function in a way that it wants to function. If you

do this, you will be led through the learning experience easily and naturally. The process of learning will be just as satisfying as the doing. In other words, it is no longer necessary to sacrifice in the moment so that in the future you will be able to have what you want. The learning process can be fun, joyful, and exciting. You'll experience it as being exactly what you want to be doing at that time. Practicing, learning skills, going to school — all of this can be fun and fulfilling when you are following your intuitive guidance.

The work you do as a result will also be a learning experience. For example, I teach workshops, not because I've mastered the information and I am the expert, but because I love to share myself in this way. This sharing deepens my learning experience. Again, there is no strong boundary between learning and teaching, just as there is no wall between work and play. It all begins to blend and weave into one integrated and balanced experience.

Most people do have some sense, at least deep inside, of what they would love to be doing. This feeling is often so repressed, however, that it is experienced only in the form of some wildly impractical fantasy, something you could never do. I always encourage people to get in touch with these fantasies. Observe and explore thoroughly your most incredible fantasy of how you'd like to be and what you'd like to be doing. There is truth in this desire. Even if it seems impossible, there is at least a grain of truth in the image. It is telling you something about some part of you that's wanting to be expressed.

Your fantasies can tell you a great deal about yourself. Many

times, I've found that people have a strong sense of what they would like to do, yet they take up a career that is very different from their desire. Sometimes they go for the opposite because they feel it is practical or will gain the approval of their parents or the world. They figure it is impossible to do what they really want, so they might as well settle for something else that comes along. I encourage people to risk exploring the things that really turn them on. The following are examples of people I've worked with and their exploration of their true purpose:

1. A brilliant and talented woman I know had been working with sick and dying people for many years. Although she was a great nurse and a powerful healer, it became evident to her that she needed to be where she could express herself more creatively. With encouragement, she started working fewer days as a nurse and began leading workshops and counseling people. Because she's doing this, she feels more fulfilled and those around her feel her fulfillment, as well.

2. Joseph was a young man in his early twenties. Following family tradition, he went into business with his father and brothers. He was very successful in real estate and contracting. The problem was, he knew there was something else he wanted to do with his life. After lots of encouragement from the group in one of my workshops, he admitted that he wanted to work in the arts, but knew his family would frown on it. He most wanted to be a dancer. The first step was admitting to himself what he wanted to do. Eventually, he mustered the courage to take dance classes. He had a lot of talent and immediately attracted the attention of the teacher. He contin-

ued to explore this form of artistic expression. When he supported his desires, he actually found that his family was equally supportive.

3. A close friend of mine had three children, no college education, and was living on welfare. Her desire was to get into business. She intuitively felt she was going to handle large amounts of money, but considering her situation, this didn't make sense. Nevertheless, she decided to explore some possibilities in the financial district of San Francisco. She was immediately hired as a receptionist; she went on to be an administrative assistant and continued to rise to higher levels of skill and responsibility. She eventually reached her goal of being a stockbroker. She loves what she's doing and her children are flourishing as well.

4. A woman who came to a recent workshop of mine shared that she'd been a talented pianist with hopes of becoming a concert pianist. Then, for several reasons, the most predominant being a lack of faith in herself, she had given up her dream. She started working in an office and found that between work and her children, she had little time for her music. After fifteen years, she felt it was simply too late to ever go back to the piano. She felt the time she had lost in not playing rendered hopeless any chance of being great. Despite all her doubts, we encouraged her to at least start playing again. I assured her that if she was doing what she loved, it would come back to her easily. As she opened to this idea, she started opening to herself. Her sense of hopelessness was replaced by a renewed sense of power. She called later to say she had been

playing the piano and feeling great about it. A friend had asked her to play accompaniment for a choral group and she was feeling very excited about the musical possibilities starting to happen for her.

Meditation

Sit or lie down in a comfortable position. Close your eyes and relax. Take several slow, deep breaths, relaxing your body more deeply with each breath. Take several more breaths and relax your mind. Release and relax all the tension in your body. If you want, imagine that your body is almost sinking into the floor, bed, or chair.

From this very relaxed place inside, imagine that you are doing exactly what you want in your life. You have a fabulous career that is fun and fulfilling for you. You are now doing what you've always fantasized about and getting well paid for it.

You feel relaxed, energized, creative, and powerful. You are successful at what you do because it is exactly what you want to be doing.

You follow your intuition moment to moment and are richly rewarded for it.

Exercises

I. Follow any impulses you have in the direction of your true work/play/creative desires. Even if it seems totally unrealistic, follow the impulse anyway. For example, if you're sixty-five years old and have always wanted to be a ballet dancer, go to a ballet class

and observe; or, if you want, take a beginning class. Watch some ballet and imagine that you're a dancer. While alone at home, put on some music and dance. This will get you in touch with the part of yourself that wants to be expressed that way. You may end up dancing much more than you thought possible, and you may be led to other forms of expression that will feel as good.

2. List any fantasies you've had around work, career, or creativity, and beside that, list the action you plan to take to explore this.

3. Write an "ideal scene" — a description of your perfect job or career exactly as you would like it to be. Write it in the present tense, as if it were already true. Put in enough description and details to make it seem very real. Put it away somewhere, and look at it again in a few months or even a year or two. Unless your fantasy has changed completely in that time, chances are that you will find you have made significant progress in the direction of your dream.

Chapter Eighteen

Money



Money is a symbol of our creative energy. We have invented a system whereby we use pieces of paper or metal to represent a certain unit of creative energy. For example, you earn money by using your energy, then you trade that money to me in exchange for the energy I put into writing this book or leading a workshop, and so forth. Because the creative energy of the universe in all of us is limitless and readily available, so, potentially, is money. When we follow our inner guidance and move with the flow of energy in our lives, we find we have enough money to do the things we truly need and want to do. A shortage of money often mirrors the fact that our energy is blocked in other ways.

Your ability to earn and spend money abundantly and wisely is based on your ability to be a channel for the universe. The stronger and more open your channel is, the more will flow through it. The more you are willing to trust yourself, and take the risks to follow your inner guidance, the more likely you are to have all the money you need. The universe will pay you to be yourself and do what you really love!

Money in the Old World

The old world is based on our attachment to the external, physical world. We look for satisfaction from external things. Because we believe that survival depends on getting things, we may think that fulfillment can be found in material wealth.

In the old world, you can build a strong financial structure and earn lots of money by learning how to act effectively in the world (the old male energy). However, because your actions are not based on the guidance of the universe that comes from the inner female, building your financial structure will often involve fear, competition, and struggle, and you will pay a high price for the money. You can earn money, but find that you are ruled by it. You think the money itself is important: "If I have enough money, I can do these things and then I'll be happy," or "If I have enough money, then I'll feel good about myself and I'll be happy," or "Other people will like me if I have enough money and that will make me happy." From this point of view money is seen to be the important thing, but as long as it is valued in this way, money is always a problem.

If you have too little money, you're always struggling to get more money and always afraid there won't be enough. There's always that terrible pain inside that you don't have enough of what you need. On the other hand, from this perspective, even if you have a lot of money, it's painful because you're always afraid you're going to lose it. You can never have enough money to ensure that you won't be afraid.

People with little money seldom realize that people who have a lot of money are also frightened. They are basically insecure because they never know if they might lose their money. Circumstances out of their control might arise — they might make a foolish investment or somebody might steal their money. If security is based on having money, it doesn't matter whether you have a little or a lot, you're going to be afraid.

If we don't realize that money is a symbol of infinite energy, and we think there is only a limited amount of it in the world, we're stuck with two options: we can choose to have a lot of money and feel guilty, or we can choose to do without and resent those who have more. If you chose to have money, you will live with the knowledge that others have less than you. You may fear that your having more causes others to have less. You may choose to deal with the guilt by trying to deny or ignore the feeling, or you may choose to ease your conscience by attempting to help those who are less fortunate.

On the other hand, you can choose to say, "I won't carry that guilt. I won't take more than my share. I don't care about money anyway. Therefore, I will keep what I have to a minimum. I'll make sure that I am not taking from somebody else." The problem with

this attitude is that you may end up feeling deprived. You see all the beautiful, wonderful things in the world that you would like to have and enjoy, but you can't. You see other people who have more than their share of money and you resent them. Basically, in this old world framework, we must choose either guilt or resentment.

The old world structure demands we do things out of our individual strength, instead of allowing the universe to do it. We think we have to work really hard to get what we want — the work ethic that says, "Work hard. Sacrifice and struggle." Most of us have that so deeply embedded in us that we don't allow ourselves to succeed financially or in any other way, except through hard work, struggle, and sacrifice. If you are succeeding and making money, you are also paying a price emotionally, and often physically. People frequently drive themselves to the point of sickness or death. They struggle and sacrifice emotionally, and in the end, even though they have achieved worldly success, they still feel deprived and empty.

Or, people refuse to go after it at all. "Look what it leads to: struggle, sacrifice, pain, and deprivation of oneself, so I simply won't deal with it. I'll get by on the absolute minimum amount of money in my own life." Often, more sensitive, spiritually inclined people choose this route so they can focus on more "meaningful" things. The problem with this is you're actually depriving yourself of dealing with one of the most exciting and beautiful things in life. If you're denying money, you're also denying a big part of the energy of the universe and the way the world works. People who choose the denial route usually don't know how to handle money and refuse to learn anything about it.

Money in the New World

The new world is based on trust of the universe within us. We recognize that the creative intelligence and energy of the universe is the fundamental source of everything. Once we connect with this and surrender to it, everything is ours. Emptiness is filled from the inside.

We realize that money is a reflection of the energy moving through our channel. *The more we learn to operate in the world based on trust in our intuition, the stronger our channel will be and the more money we are likely to have.* The money in our life is based on our ability to listen to our inner guidance and risk acting on it. When you let go of trying to control and you learn how to listen to the universe and act on it, money increasingly comes into your life. It flows in an easy, effortless, and joyful way because there is no sacrifice involved. You're no longer attached to it. Instead, you can experience the joy of learning how to follow the energy of the universe. Money is an extra bonus in the process.

You know that the money is not really yours — it belongs to the universe. You act as a caretaker or steward for the money. You use it only as you are directed by the universe through your own intuition. There is no fear of loss because you know you are always taken care of. The money may come or go, but you can't lose the joy and fulfillment in your life. When you feel this secure and free, you often attract more and more money, so that you are continually pushed to deepen your trust at more intense levels with higher stakes. Ultimately, as channels, many of us will be called upon to

handle large amounts of money from this place of surrender and commitment to the higher power. This is one of the ways that the power of the universe can be wielded effectively to transform the world.

Active and Receptive

There are active and receptive aspects of the process of channeling money, as in every other creative process. The masculine or active way of making money is to go out after something. You see something you want and go for it. The feminine or receptive way of making money is to attract what you want to you.

We have to be able to do both. We need to release the outgoing energy that wants to move toward a certain goal and risk fearlessly acting on it. We also need to practice nurturing ourselves, appreciating ourselves, and becoming attuned to our inner selves so that we can attract and receive what we want. Many people are developed on one side or the other. They either know how to go after things, but have a hard time attracting things to them, or they know how to attract things but are afraid to go out after them. Often a balancing process is necessary. You may need to learn to receive the gifts, appreciation, love, and energy coming to you. Or you may need to practice outflowing your energy into the world, which keeps it flowing through your channel. This way, the energy doesn't get blocked on either end.

This means, on a practical level, you have to be willing to take some risks in the area of work and money. If you do only what you

think you *should* do in order to make money and be secure, then you won't listen to the intuitive voice that tells you what you really *need* to do.

This can be very scary when it entails your job and your money. People often want to know, "What do I do if my intuition tells me not to go to work one day? What do I do then? Will I lose my job?" If taking off a day from work seems too risky, it may not be the best choice for you yet. You may need to strengthen your channel by following your impulses in smaller ways at first. You may call in and take half a day off or you may plan for a three-day weekend. One day though, you may wake up and know, "I just don't want to go to work," and you will follow through with this and feel good about it. Usually, when my insides tell me to take time off, I need some nurturing, some peace and quiet, some creative time for inspiration to come through, or time to simply feel old feelings stirring up inside, feelings that need to be felt and released.

If you risk following your impulse, you'll find, maybe a few hours or days later, your energy will actually be renewed. You'll be able to go back and do what needs to be done in a fourth of the time. You'll do it in a much more inspired and creative way. Anything can happen if you risk and trust yourself. While home, you may receive a phone call from a person offering you a better job that pays much more money (that happened to a friend of mine). You may get a creative inspiration that will open up a fun, prosperous opportunity for you or you may get an inspiration to go visit someone who will give you a lead to a great adventure. If

you hate your job, though, your energy for it won't come back. Also, because your true creative energy is blocked, you'll continue to feel blocked financially. Eventually, you will probably leave your job because you cannot stay stuck in such a place for long.

Basically, the whole issue of money is doing what you really want to do as much of the time as possible. The universe will reward you for taking risks on its behalf. It's important, though, that the risks you take are proportionate to the level of structure you're building. In other words, if you're just beginning to learn how to trust and follow your intuition, you probably don't want to make a million-dollar deal on a gut feeling. You probably don't want to leap off a building and hope that you can fly. It is important that you build small things first. Practice following your intuition in everyday things. Say no, even though you're feeling pressured to say yes. Do the thing you want to do even though you don't know why. Do it on an impulse. Make that call. Enroll in that class. Think of the things you love to do, and do them. This will strengthen you to the point where you can make the big leaps.

Balance

Once you understand the basic process of learning how to follow your intuition and act on it, you have your groundwork for channeling money. There are, though, some aspects of relating more specifically to money that are important to know.

Balance is an important quality to develop in building the structure of your channel. If you have been extreme in one direction, you may have to go to the extreme in the other direction in order to inte-

grate and balance both aspects of everything. For example, if you have been very careless and casual about money, or if you have been a person who has denied the existence or importance of money in your life, you may need to build structures specifically related to money. These include: learning to balance your checkbook, budgeting money, and gaining an understanding of the rules that govern how money works in the world. You will find these practices interesting, even fascinating. They are no longer something that will block you from the spirit; they will open the way for you to have more spirit flowing through you.

People who have little understanding of money have usually chosen to avoid structure on one level or another because they feel rules, regulations, and details will keep them from experiencing the magic of life. They're afraid they'll spend all their time in their rational mind, instead of following their flow. If you have this fear, tune in and ask the universe for guidance. You'll want to do this in a way that makes you feel good. Perhaps it would help to hire someone to show you how to organize your finances. It does not have to be a painful process. You'll find it to be energizing and supportive in your life, as opposed to painful and boring.

Those who have already applied a great deal of structure to working with money in the world may need to let go and relax that structure. It's time to stop following your rules and allow the inspired aspect of the spirit of money to work in your life. Trust your intuition to guide you, and take more risks in doing things differently than usual.

Similarly, if you've been a person who has saved your money

and been very careful about spending it, you need to learn to spend more impulsively based on your intuition. Spend on the basis of a gut feeling of wanting something. Learn to follow these impulses and you'll find you won't end up broke. In fact, it actually creates a greater flow of money in your life. You're able to release and give it out, based on your intuition.

If you have been a spendthrift and always spent more than you actually have, you will probably need to plan more and budget. Again, do it in accordance with an inner feeling. If you're open to it, your intuition will tell you, "Hey, learn something about planning. Learn something about budgeting." It will support and help you. It won't make you feel restricted. If you follow your intuition about this, you will be led to people who can show you how to do it, and it will be an interesting process. Again, it will support your channel.*

Focus

Another important thing to know about how money works is that it will always flow into whatever you've created in your life to receive it. Because it's energy, it will be attracted to what you need or want or envision. If you have always operated on a survival level with money, having only enough money to take care of your basic needs, that's where your money will go. If you start to attract more money into your life, you may have the tendency to increase your

*If you have serious chronic money problems or debts, I recommend getting help from Debtors Anonymous, one of the Twelve-Step programs.

basic needs and still only make enough to survive.

That's what happened to me for a long time. I had an underlying program that said, "I can only have as much money as I need. It's not okay to have more than I need. Consequently, I created more needs, and ones that weren't particularly rewarding. My car would break down and I'd have expensive repair bills, or my cat would get sick and I'd have an expensive vet bill. Any extra money that came in would go toward something that was an emergency or a basic need. There was still nothing extra for fun and creative play or greater luxury.

I found that I needed to create a budget that included what I wanted as well as what I needed. I started at a reasonable level: "I'd like to buy at least one item of clothing each month that's fun or more luxurious. I'd also like to do some activity that would be fun." I would include these in my budget and the money for them would then flow in. That's the power of budgeting. A budget is like a blueprint. If you create a list, a picture in your mind of what you want to have in your life, you will create the necessary money. You can just keep expanding step by step.

My Money History

For most of my adult life I had very little money. I never focused much on money; I wasn't particularly interested in it. Essentially, I did whatever I had to do to pay my rent and bills, but I put most of my time and attention into my education and my pursuit of consciousness and creative expansion.

I always did whatever I needed to get the money — various projects, housework, odd jobs, even my own business. Only one time in my entire life did I have a nine-to-five job — for six months!

I was used to living on the edge without much sense of where my money was coming from. In those years, I learned to trust that somehow the money would be there. Sometimes I would get down to my last dollar and then, somehow or other, more money would come. I was always cared for.

Then, gradually, as I began to use this process more and more, learning to trust my intuition and act on it, learning to listen to my inner guidance and risk putting myself out in the world, I developed a career counseling people, teaching workshops, writing, and publishing books. As I followed my passion, I began to earn more money and to lead a more abundant lifestyle. It continued to the point where I was actually making a good income and living in a beautiful apartment, doing most of the things that I wanted to do. I came to count on that amount of money, although it was never a secure thing. I was still living from month to month, but money always seemed to keep flowing. I constantly affirmed my trust in the universe to take care of me, and I tried to follow its guidance.

But a time came, all of a sudden, when I had no money. Some unexpected things happened and I was caught short. I paid my rent and my bills, and I looked in my checkbook and there was nothing left. I didn't have any savings or other resources to fall back on. That was a very startling experience because by that time, I was used to having a certain amount of money.

What amazed me about this experience is that I had only five minutes of fear. I thought, "Oh my god, what am I going to do?" Then, I felt totally calm. I had to have that five minutes of fear — and then, it was as if there were no more fears about money left after that. I knew I was going to be okay.

A key point to this is that I knew I would be willing to do whatever the universe asked me to do. I remember thinking, "Well, I love my apartment, but I could give it up. I love all the things I have, but I could give them up. If the universe wants me to go live in a tent in someone's backyard, I'll do that. It will probably be wonderful."

There was an incredible feeling of trust and knowing that none of the things I might lose were that important. Whatever I did next, even though it might be totally different, would be wonderful, too. I would be taken care of. It wasn't just an intellectual knowing, because I had already known this *intellectually* for a long time. Living through those five minutes of fear left me with a feeling of fearlessness. Emotionally, I knew that I was okay. It was a very profound experience.

I ended up cutting back a little bit on my expenses and lifestyle. That felt fine and I didn't feel deprived at all. In fact, it was a nice discipline for a while. Everything I needed was provided. Money came in to cover my expenses and I had a feeling of relief. I knew I had come to the level of income my form could currently handle. I wasn't ahead of myself in any way and from then on, it was as if I came to earth and was building from a solid foundation. At that moment, I felt I was standing on a strong base of trust in the universe. From then on, I knew the amount of money in my life would keep expanding, and I would never go back to not having.

After that happened, there was an increasing flow of money in my life. I moved to a new level of business and finance that I had never dealt with before. I had become really good at learning how to follow the universe on one level, but the new challenge was learning to trust at a more expanded level where the stakes were higher.

In confronting this new level of prosperity, I felt at first rather ignorant and helpless. I knew I needed help, so I asked the universe to send me the right people to teach and guide me in this area. After interviewing a number of different financial advisors, I was led to both an accountant and a business manager who were perfect for me and who helped me learn what I needed to know.

Like most people, I have found that as my income expands, my expenses and responsibilities seem to expand right along with it! Interestingly enough, it seems to work in reverse as well; I always seem to create exactly as much money as I need to support the lifestyle I have created. Sometimes, when I'm confronted with a large unexpected expense, I wonder how it's going to get handled. One way or another, it always does, often in surprising and unexpected ways.

It frequently seems as if some higher power within me is watching over me and making the whole thing work. My job is to keep learning more on a practical level about managing my business and financial situation, while continuing to do my inner work of learning not to push myself so hard, and how to relax and receive more easily. The more I bring myself into balance, the more smoothly money flows in my life.*

*For more of my ideas and practical techniques about money and prosperity, please read *Creating True Prosperity* and *The Creating True Prosperity Workbook*.

Here is a wonderful story that illustrates the miraculous way the universe works when we trust and follow our intuition. In the original edition of *Living in the Light*, I wrote about buying a piece of property in Hawaii because I had a strong intuitive feeling that it was the right thing to do. Logically, it did not make sense, and my financial advisors were not in favor of it. Still, I went ahead because it felt right to me. One factor in this decision was the fact that this beautiful land was about to be bought by an unscrupulous and exploitive developer. At the time I wrote the book, I wasn't quite sure what would happen next, but felt very empowered by trusting myself that much.

Subsequently, I had many moments of doubting that decision. I wanted to create a home and a retreat center in Hawaii, but I soon realized this piece of land was not large enough. Also, this land was on Maui and I felt strongly that I needed to be on Kauai. I eventually decided to sell this property. It took quite some time before it was sold, however, and ultimately resulted in a moderate financial loss for me. Since the sale was handled by an agent, I didn't meet the purchasers of the property. I chalked the whole thing up to a learning experience and eventually bought the property I really wanted on Kauai (where I still live).

A few years later, my mother, who lives on Maui, happened to meet the two men who had bought my property. They told her this amazing story:

They had been living in Los Angeles, working hard and longing for a big change in their lives. They read my book *Creative Visualization* and decided to move to Hawaii. They began visualizing the ideal property they would like to find there, and got a very

vivid image and feeling about it.

They took a trip to Maui and looked at many pieces of property, but none was right. Just as they were about to leave, they went to see one last piece, and it was exactly as they imagined! Someone else had put in an offer, but that offer fell through, and they were able to buy it. Only when they signed the papers did they realize that they were buying my property!

We eventually became friends. They developed the property beautifully, creating a lovely flower farm and bed and breakfast, and have lived there happily for many years. I now feel that I was guided to buy that property in order to make sure that it got to the people who were meant to care for it. I may have lost some money, but I gained enormous satisfaction.

Meditation

Sit or lie down in a position that is comfortable for you. Close your eyes and begin breathing in an easy, natural way. With each breath, you are becoming more deeply relaxed.

Begin to notice how you're feeling. How do you feel emotionally? How does your body feel? Notice the energy in your body. What does it feel like? See yourself taking in more energy with each breath. You are energized and alive.

Start to imagine this energy as money. As you open to your own energy, you open to abundance.

Imagine having all the money you need to do the things that are most important to you, and to create a lifestyle that is in har-

mony with your being and with the earth.

Exercise

Lack of money may mirror the energy blocks within you. Write down all the ways in which you limit your desires and creativity. In what ways are you not doing what you want to do?

Some examples of this are:

1. I'm doing administrative work in an office when I'd rather be working with children.
2. I want to meditate, but there's never time.
3. I'd like to explore my art more, but I have no time; I have to earn a living.
4. I want to tell my mother (friend, partner) how I'm feeling, but am afraid I'll hurt her (him).

Now imagine yourself doing exactly what you want to do in each of these areas.

Chapter Nineteen

Health



Our body is our primary creation, the vehicle we have chosen to express us in the physical world. By looking at our bodies, listening to them, and feeling them, we can read a great deal about our spiritual, mental, and emotional energy patterns. The body is our primary feedback mechanism that can show us what is and isn't working about our way of thinking, expressing, and living.

Any normal child, who has had a reasonably positive environment, has a beautiful, lively body filled with vitality. That beauty, aliveness, and vitality are simply the natural energy of the universe flowing freely through, unimpeded by negative habits. Small

children in a supportive environment are totally spontaneous beings. They eat when they are hungry, fall asleep when they are tired, and express exactly what they feel. Therefore, their energy doesn't get blocked, and they are constantly renewed and revitalized by their own natural energy.

But because none of us have had even a close to perfect upbringing, very early we begin to develop habits that run counter to our natural energy. These habits are designed to help us survive in the neurotic world in which we find ourselves. We pick these patterns up from our families, friends, teachers, and the community in general.

As we follow the behavior we have observed in others, or as we attempt to follow the rules laid down by others, we may move in ways that are counter to our own natural flow. We stop acting on what we know physically and emotionally; we no longer say and do what we really feel. We stop listening to the signals our body gives us about the food, rest, exercise, and nurturing it needs. It becomes too risky to follow our own energy, so we block that flow and gradually begin to experience less and less energy and vitality. As the energy flow diminishes, the body is not physically revitalized as quickly; thus, it begins to age and deteriorate. As we repeat chronic negative behaviors, our bodies begin to reflect these patterns, such as hunching over to express the inner pattern of making one-self small and powerless.

If you are willing to allow the energy of the universe to move through you by trusting and following your intuition, you will increase your sense of aliveness and your body will reflect this

with increasing health, beauty, and vitality. Every time you don't trust yourself and don't follow your inner truth, you decrease your aliveness and your body will reflect this with a loss of vitality, numbness, pain, and eventually physical disease.

Dis-ease is a message from our bodies, telling us that, in some way, we are not following our true energy or supporting our feelings. The body gives us many such signals, starting with relatively subtle feelings of tiredness and discomfort. If we don't pay attention to these cues and make the appropriate changes, our bodies will give us stronger signals, including aches, pains, and minor illnesses. If we still don't change, a serious or fatal illness or accident may eventually occur. The stronger messages can often be avoided by paying attention to the subtler ones. But once a strong message has come, it is never too late to be healed, if that is what we truly desire. At this point, however, many beings do not choose the healing. They decide to leave their bodies and start over with a new one (or move to another realm) rather than trying to work their way through all the old patterns in this one.

If you are suffering from dis-ease, rest. Your body always wants rest and ease if it's sick. Then, when you've become quiet, ask your body what the message in your illness is. Your body will always attempt to tell you what you need in order to heal yourself.

One of my friends had been having severe pain on the right side of her face. Intuitively, she felt the pain would ease if she'd open her mouth and state more of what she wanted and more of what she knew. She did this and the pain eased some, but it still wasn't gone. One night, in a mood of surrender, she told the uni-

verse she was sick of the whole thing and she asked for an answer. Then, she let go of thinking about the problem and went to sleep. In her dreams that night, her intuition told her to stop taking brewer's yeast. She immediately discounted the entire message as bizarre and continued to take yeast. Then a few days later, after continued prodding from her intuition, she stopped taking yeast. Two days later, her face pain cleared up.

When you ask for a healing, you never know what your body is going to tell you. It may tell you to stop or start eating something, express some feelings to a friend, quit your job, or go see a doctor. The key is to ask and then listen for a response.

A client came to me who had been suffering from severe back pain for a year and a half. During the session, I asked him to contact the pain and ask his body what it was trying to tell him. In doing this, he realized he had not yet grieved his mother's death or expressed the anger he felt toward his father. He was holding both anger and sadness in his back. Recognizing this relieved some of the pain. After more talking, he was able to cry about his mother's death. Shortly after this, he became willing to express his anger toward his father. He started by talking to me about it, as well as writing out all his feelings. His back pain went away. His back pain has continued to be a barometer of suppressed feelings: he knows now that if he's in pain he needs to "back himself up" by expressing some feelings.

Once we've developed a symptom, it can recur if the behavior recurs. Our bodies serve us by accurately informing us of any blocked energy. Below I've listed some common causes of pain or

illness in the body. These may or may not be accurate for you. Each is accompanied with a healing affirmation. Use them if they feel right for you, or make up your own.

Headache: two conflicting energies or feelings within; allow both sides to have a voice.

I am now willing to hear all my feelings.

Cold: the body needs rest, a clearing out of the old; the body needs to get back into balance.

I am now willing to let go of the old. I now have rest and ease in my life. My body is in perfect harmony.

Complexion problems: held back male energy; a need to take action and/or express yourself more directly.

I go all out for what I feel and what I want. I express my feelings clearly and directly.

Skin rashes: wanting to break out and take action; ask yourself, “What am I itching to do?”

I act on what my intuitive tells me. I am willing to try new things. I do what I want to do.

Allergies: a lack of trust in the intuitive or instinctual energies; repressed feelings; allergies related to watery eyes are often indicative of suppressed sadness.

I trust and express my feelings. It's safe to feel and express my sadness and anger.

Back pain: a feeling that you have to support others, the world. A need to express and support your feelings; lower back pain is

often suppressed sadness; upper back pain is often suppressed anger.

I support all my feelings. I take care of myself. I express and trust my feelings. I trust others to take proper care of themselves.

Menstrual cramps: not fully listening to and honoring your female aspect; a need to be quiet and go within.

I honor my female completely and act on what she tells me to do. I relax, rest, and nurture myself regularly.

Vision problems: not wanting to look at certain things within yourself or in the world. Often there is a decision early in life not to look at what you are intuitively “seeing” because it is too painful; when the inner vision is shut down, the external vision is impaired as well.

I am now willing to see everything in my life clearly.

Hearing problems: needing to shut out external voices and influences; needing to listen more to your inner voice.

I don't have to listen to anyone else. I listen to, and trust, my own inner voice.

Addiction

The more uncomfortable we are about trusting our natural energy, the more likely we are to use drugs such as coffee, cigarettes, alcohol, unwholesome foods or too much food, marijuana, speed, cocaine, or whatever, to attempt to manipulate our energy. We thereby deplete and denigrate the body further.

Most people are afraid of their energy and power. They're either afraid of being too much or too little; they're afraid of having too much energy or not enough. The truth is, if people would be willing to let go of using addictive substances, they'd find their own perfect flow of energy. By doing this, they'd tap their true source of power and creativity.

I see addiction as a means people use to pace (control) this power. Many powerful and creative people become addicts because they do not have an internal strength to support their energy. Without a trust in the universe, one's power and creativity can seem overwhelming. With substances, you can force your natural energy or you can dampen it, but either way, you're stopping the natural flow of the universe coming through.

You don't have to be a full-blown addict to realize you're using a substance to manipulate your energy. You may realize you're drinking three cups of coffee to energize yourself then discover you're depleted later. (We are a nation addicted to coffee, which I consider a strong drug because it seriously impairs your ability to trust and follow your energy.)

The key is to notice what you're doing. Become aware of when and why you use coffee. Notice how it changes your energy. Eventually, you will find that you don't need to pay that price anymore.

Realize that we all use some form of addiction to pace ourselves. The cure for this is to build trust in ourselves and the universe. Become increasingly willing to experience your own power and strength. This is the true healing.

For those who have a drug or alcohol addiction, noticing that you're pacing yourself is not enough. It may make you more aware of your problem and how shut down you are, but generally the physical craving takes over any awareness. Because of this, I encourage people to get help and support through a group such as Alcoholics Anonymous or Narcotics Anonymous to recover from alcohol or drug addiction. This gives the body a chance to heal and the spirit and emotions a chance to be heard.

For more information about self-healing, you may wish to read my book *The Four Levels of Healing: A Guide to Balancing the Spiritual, Mental, Emotional, and Physical Aspects of Life*.

Meditation

Sit or lie down, close your eyes, and take a few deep breaths. With each breath, feel your body letting go into a deeply relaxed place. Relax your mind and let your thoughts drift. Try not to attach yourself to any thoughts you're having. Feel yourself relax into a quiet place within.

This deep place is a source of nourishment and healing for you. Know that you can go here and find anything you need to know to heal yourself. If you've been having a problem with your health or you have a question you want to ask your intuition about your body, take the opportunity to do this now.

Ask, "What do I need to do to heal myself now? What does my body need?" When you've asked, stay open to any answers that will come to you. An answer or an intuitive feeling may come right

away, or it may come in the next couple of days. It may come to you in a direct solution or you may be guided to a person or place that will give you the answers you need.

Know that you can heal yourself and that limitless wisdom lies within you.

Say these affirmations silently or aloud, "*I am now healing myself. I am energized, alive, and filled with radiant health.*"

Alternative Meditation

If there is a particular part of your body that is sick or in pain, try this meditation. Get comfortable, take a few deep breaths, completely relax your body and mind. Now, put your consciousness into that place and ask it what it is feeling and what it is trying to tell you. Then, be receptive to feeling and hearing what its message to you is. Ask that part of your body what you need to do to heal yourself. Pay attention to, and follow, whatever it tells you.

Chapter Twenty

Your Perfect Body



Having a beautiful body starts with following the natural flow of your energy. Trust yourself. Express yourself physically in ways that feel good. Sleep as much as you need to. Stay in bed if you feel you need more rest. Eat what your body truly desires and follow your heart. If you're willing to trust your body, you'll learn what's best for you.

It sounds simple enough. The problem is that we've been taught to distrust our bodies and see them as needing to be controlled. Some religions even suggest that the spirit is good and the body is a weak, sinful tool of the devil. Although we have evolved to the point where these beliefs are not generally expressed openly,

we still respond to our bodies with mistrust. As a culture, we're accustomed to ignoring our bodies and their needs. Our minds tell our bodies what to do. We decide that a nine-to-five workday, with three meals a day, is a "reasonable" way to live; then, we expect our bodies to cooperate, even if this doesn't feel good. We've also developed, intellectually, theories for what's good for us and what isn't, what foods we should and shouldn't eat.

As children, we usually adopt parental and societal rules and habits regarding food. Even if you want to eat something else for dinner or want to eat at a different time, you're most likely expected to conform to the norms of the system. The body can tell you one thing and society another. Many of us learn to distrust ourselves at an early age. This distrust causes internal conflict and an imbalance in our system. It can set up a lifelong battle between the authoritarian and rebel voices within us. When we rebel, we may find ourselves craving all kinds of things we would not normally desire if left to our natural flow. We may develop the habit of going for the quickest available high. Our bodies may react to this imbalance by gaining weight, becoming hyperkinetic, losing weight, or developing food addictions and allergies. Then, to solve these problems, we may try even harder to control ourselves by following a rigid, restrictive diet. This causes us to feel deprived, so eventually, the rebel takes over again and brings on the very foods we were trying to avoid.

We may play out this same conflict in regard to physical exercise. Many people believe the only way they can keep their bodies in shape is to push themselves to exercise in a very driven way. We

may resist this by becoming lethargic and never exercising at all.

Our society fosters this struggle and profits from it. We are constantly shown what a beautiful body should look like, and are sold ways of getting there. We are sold diets, miracle weight-loss plans, low calorie or fat-free foods, and health club memberships. We are constantly beating our bodies into some new idea of health and beauty. The problem with the external pictures and "shoulds" we adapt from outside of ourselves is that we are constantly dissatisfied with the way we look or the way we feel.

The way to a healthy, strong, and beautiful body is to learn to trust and love yourself. You can begin this process by becoming aware of all the rules and ideas you have about how you should look and feel. What you should eat, how you should exercise, and so on. It can help to write these down, adding more to the list whenever you become aware of another belief or rule. The process of writing down these ideas can help you become less identified with them, so that you can begin to have more choice about which ones, if any, you want to follow. In the process of doing this, you may discover more of your inner primary selves, such as the perfectionist (who has very high ideals it wants you to live up to), the pusher (who drives you to accomplish the perfectionist's goals), and the critic (who constantly reminds you of how you are failing).

Once you gain some awareness of these ideas and energies, and are not so unconsciously controlled by them, you can begin to ask yourself what you truly want and tune into your own intuitive feelings about what is really right for you.

Your own body and your intuition are, ultimately, the best guides about what is good for you and how to take care of yourself.

You may find that once you are paying attention, your body will spontaneously let you know what it needs to eat and how it wants to move and exercise. Some people find that just by following their energy, they develop their own personal diet and exercise program that is exactly what their body needs, and this may change from time to time. For example, at certain times, their body may want to exercise vigorously, in which case it feels wonderfully exhilarating and satisfying. At other times, it may want to rest, or exercise very gently.

Many people find that they need additional information and structure, in which case their inner guidance leads them to the appropriate books, nutritionist, exercise coach, doctor, or teacher. It is perfectly fine and can be very helpful to follow someone else's diet or exercise program as long as it feels right for you.

The process of healing your relationship to your body may take some time and require some help and support. Our feelings about our bodies are usually connected to very deep issues related to our self-esteem, our identities, our families, our sexuality, and so on. It can be helpful to have the support of a therapist while exploring these core issues.

If you have chronic weight problems, food addictions, or an eating disorder and are not currently in therapy, I strongly recommend seeking help from a therapist, support group, or treatment program that specializes in these issues. Fortunately these days, there are many excellent programs and counselors in this field. Many people also find help in this area through Overeaters Anonymous, one of the twelve-step programs, which are free and available in most cities.

Assertion

One of the most important keys to creating a healthy, beautiful body is learning to assert yourself consistently in your life. I have found that many people with body issues have a pattern of doubting themselves, of being afraid to trust their feelings and act on them. They especially need to learn how to say “no” to others when they don’t want to do something. Many overweight people I’ve worked with don’t have strong personal boundaries; they try to please and take care of others and allow others to intrude on them and take advantage of them. Thus, they need to use extra weight as a buffer, a way of creating some distance from others.

Women, in particular, may fear that by becoming slim, they will be too sexually attractive. They are afraid of attracting unwanted attention or energy, and don’t trust themselves to know how to deal with it. Some people are afraid of feeling too sensitive and vulnerable and not knowing how to protect themselves. Others are afraid of being too “spaced out;” they use their weight to ground them. If you have these fears, you can diet forever and you will not lose weight or keep it off because you are unconsciously needing it.

This is why the process of assertion is so vital. When you learn to back up your feelings with action, you create an internal strength and protection. You feel safe to move into new situations and attract attention and energy, knowing that you will be able to say “no” to anything that doesn’t feel good to you. You know that you will be true to yourself and take good care of yourself. Your female aspect feels safe and supported, knowing that your inner male will back her up.

My experience has been that once people learn assertion, they are able to lose weight more easily and naturally without deprivation. The increased energy circulation in their bodies dissolves the blocked energy and the extra weight gradually melts away. They no longer need it for strength or protection, so they release it effortlessly. If any particular diet is needed, they are guided to the appropriate nutritionist or diet plan; or, they feel intuitively what they need to be eating, and find it appropriate and enjoyable to do so.

Waiting = Excess Weight

If you're always waiting to be, do, or have what you want, your energy gets blocked and your body may reflect this in excess weight. By expressing yourself directly and doing what you want when you want (asserting yourself), energy will move freely through your body and this circulation will dissolve excess weight. The more you're willing to be yourself, the less you'll need to use food as a substitute nurturer; you'll be receiving the natural nurturing of the universe.

The key to self-assertion is to take action on your feelings and intuition. I've seen people lose weight simply by doing something they've been afraid to do or by expressing some feeling they've suppressed. By continuing to do this, you dissolve blocks and your weight balances out.

At first, the prospect of asserting yourself moment to moment can be frightening. We're not used to stating what we need and taking action to give it to ourselves. It takes a conscious effort to tune into how we feel and risk doing it. Once you start doing this

though, it feels so good that you'll want to keep doing it. You'll lose weight, have more energy, and look more alive and beautiful. There really is no turning back. The alternative is numbness and death. Every time I follow my inner voice, I feel more life energy flowing through me. Every time I go against it, I can feel a struggle in my body, and a heaviness and tiredness. If I continue to push myself past what my body wants, I become increasingly tired and lifeless.

One of my clients was about eighty pounds overweight when she started working with me. She tried every conceivable weight-loss program in an effort to lose weight but had not successfully solved her problem. Then, as she learned how to trust and take care of herself, she began to heal herself by expressing her suppressed feelings. At a weekly support group that I led, she was encouraged to express herself directly, saying what she felt and what she wanted. She began to trust her body and started eating only what she really wanted. She grew physically and spiritually lighter, and after a few months, she had lost about forty pounds.

At this point, she thought she'd gotten all she needed from the group and wanted to drop out, even though she was still carrying a lot of excess weight. I felt that she was still holding back a lot of feelings, however, so I encouraged her to express what she was still "waiting" to say. She shared that three members in the group had started to bother her and she didn't feel safe in sharing her feelings with them. They reminded her of people and painful events from her past. In them, she saw her husband, her son, and herself mirrored. They reminded her of things she had not said or done. They reminded her of self-betrayal. Because of this, she felt angry every

time she looked at them.

I encouraged her to work with me privately on these issues, and if she was willing, to come back to the group and express her feelings with group members. She needed to say what she had not said in the past. She did do this. Because of this, she began to heal her old emotional wounds and forgive herself for the past. Her energy is no longer tied to the past, so it can move more freely through her body. She continued to lose weight without overly restrictive dieting.

Pacing with Food

People use food to pace their natural energy level. If you're a person who has too much nervous energy, you may use it to slow yourself down, or if you feel a need for a pick-up, you may use it for that. Both ultimately lead to a partial suppression of your true energy.

People are generally frightened of their power and energy, so they feel the need to pace the degree to which it flows through them. Some people use food to do this. Others use drugs, alcohol, relationships, work, or various other addictions. As people become more willing to experience and express their natural energy, the need to use food or other substances in this way will lessen.

Appreciating Your Body

Appreciate the beauty in your body and in yourself, today. Focus on what you do like about yourself. The more willing you are to do this, the easier it will become. Your body will respond to

this appreciation and grow increasingly beautiful.

It's become a habit to see what needs to be changed about ourselves. We're waiting for perfection before we'll love ourselves completely. You can change these self-critical tapes by looking at what you like about yourself and giving yourself positive feedback.

If you have trouble appreciating yourself, start by looking at others who have the same qualities you have and admire them.

A friend of mine who considered herself twenty pounds overweight was continually putting herself down for the way she looked. She felt the only way she could possibly like herself would be if she were thin. Because she could not see her own beauty, she thought she'd start by looking at women who had a similar body type and learn to appreciate them. She started to see how beautiful other "overweight" women were and noticed how sensual and alive they looked. She started complimenting others on their looks. By doing this, she could look at her own body in a new way. She began to accept and appreciate herself. Her body responded to this approval with more life and energy. She gradually lost a few pounds and has continued to appreciate her body as it is.

Ritual for Loving Your Body

Stand naked in front of a full-length mirror. Send positive thoughts to every part of your body. Even if you don't like your body, or don't approve of certain parts of your body, look for something of beauty in every part of yourself. Realize that your body has been serving you for years. Thank your body for its ser-

vice.

For example, you might say to yourself, “You have beautiful, thick, shiny hair.” Then look in the mirror at your hair and see its beauty, its shine and glow — even if it isn’t shining and glowing as much as you’d like. Continue to appreciate yourself as you are, saying, “I love the way you look. You have beautiful hands. You have strong healthy legs. You have clear skin. You have shining eyes.”

Run through each part of your body in this way and really send it love and appreciation. Find a way to appreciate every part of yourself. And thank your body for being with you for however many years, following your desires and serving you. It has been doing for you what you have asked of it. If you like, you can play music that you love, and use candles or flowers while performing this ritual. Do this ritual once or twice a day for at least a week. This ritual shows your body how much you appreciate and respect it. Your body has been criticized, judged, and rejected by you for years. It will respond quickly to love and energy. You will feel lighter and more energized. You will start looking more beautiful. The lines in your face will relax. You will start to glow with strength and health. You will be amazed at the results of loving your body.

Exercise

1. List all the ways you see yourself waiting (weighting). What are you waiting to say, do, have, or become?
2. Next to each item on your list, write how you can take action. What can you do to change the waiting into saying, doing,

or having what you want now?

Chapter Twenty-One

Life and Death



Life is the choice to follow the flow of energy within us. Death is the choice to block or go against this life energy. We are faced with this life-or-death choice every moment of our lives.

Each time that we choose to trust and follow our intuition, our channel opens more, and more of the life force flows through. The cells of our body actually receive more energy and are renewed and revitalized faster. Physically, emotionally, and mentally we feel more alive, and more of our spiritual light can shine through. Our body stays young, healthy, and beautiful, and radiates vitality.

When we choose not to follow our intuitive promptings, we

close off our channel and our cells receive less energy. The body begins to deteriorate faster. When we aren't following the flow of energy, life becomes a struggle. Stress and strain take their toll on the physical form and we can see the struggle in our faces and bodies. Lines of worry form and the body begins to bend with the effort it is making. If we continue to choose to close off the energy moment after moment, day after day, year after year, eventually the body will age, deteriorate, and die. If we change our pattern and begin to trust ourselves more, the body will begin to be renewed.

A part of all of us wants life, wants to make the commitment to live, and is willing to trust our intuition and follow it from moment to moment. There's also a part of us that doesn't trust ourselves: "I can't do this; it's too much, too intense; I don't want to surrender." When we go against ourselves, we experience only effort and struggle; when we surrender to life, we feel passion, aliveness, and flow.

Any time somebody dies, they are consciously or unconsciously choosing to leave this physical body. It may appear that they're victims of a disaster or a deadly disease, but on a soul level, they are in charge of their own journey. Their spirit knows what it's doing, although the personality may not. Some souls come in to physical form to accomplish a specific purpose and having accomplished it, they leave; or, failing to accomplish it, they may decide to move on to another realm, or perhaps come back to this one in another life. Some beings feel they've gotten stuck and it's not working. They feel like they're not learning fast enough. "This life

started with too many negative odds against me. I don't want to deal with this anymore. I'd rather start over."

By consciously making a choice for life, you influence the choice of those around you. Moment by moment, if you choose to trust your intuition and act on it, you're choosing aliveness rather than death, and you're increasing the aliveness that radiates from you. Anybody who is connected with you will feel this and it will strengthen the choice they make to live.

The more we choose to follow the life force, the healthier and more vital our bodies will become. By living as channels for the universe, it's possible to become more energetic, alive, and beautiful as we get older, rather than less so. We will no longer leave our bodies unconsciously, through accident or illness. We will stay in the physical body as long as we desire, and will make the conscious choice to leave at whatever time we desire to do something else. Death, when we choose it, will not be a tragedy, but a conscious transition into another realm.

Meditation

Sit or lie in a comfortable position. Close your eyes. Take several deep breaths and relax your body. With each breath, let go of everything in the way of being with yourself. Slowly relax into that core place within.

Recall a recent situation where you chose not to follow your energy, when you did not do what you wanted to do. Replay this scene in your mind. See yourself going against what you knew to

be true for you. Then, notice how you looked and felt physically, mentally, emotionally, and spiritually.

Now, go back to that same situation and see yourself doing exactly what you want to do; see yourself choosing to follow the energy. Then, notice how your body feels, notice how you look and feel about yourself. Spend a few minutes feeling what it's like to trust yourself and act on what you want.

Exercise

Keep a journal of some of the decisions you made during the day. Notice when you did what you wanted and when you chose not to. Then, write how you felt about the choices you made. Notice how you felt physically and emotionally.

As you become more aware of when you follow your energy, when you go against it, and the results of each, you'll increasingly choose life and aliveness in each moment.

Chapter Twenty-Two

Transforming Our World



Transformation begins on an individual level and moves out into the world. The more I'm learning to trust my intuition and act on it, and the more I'm willing to experience and accept all my feelings, the more the energy of the universe can move through me. As it comes through, it heals and transforms me and everyone and everything around me.

This is true for each one of us. The more you are willing to trust and be yourself, the more life energy will move through you. Everyone around you will benefit from your energy and begin to trust and be more themselves. In turn, they become powerful channels for everyone in their sphere of influence. And so, transformation spreads rapidly throughout the world.

You may have heard of the “hundredth-monkey syndrome.” In Japan, in 1952, scientists were studying the behavior of wild monkeys. The principle food of these monkeys was sweet potatoes. One day, they noticed one monkey do something they had never seen before — she washed her potato before she ate it. She repeated this behavior on subsequent days, and soon they noticed several other monkeys washing their potatoes before eating them. More and more monkeys began to do this. Then, in 1958, after all monkeys on the island were exhibiting this new behavior, scientists on nearby islands began to report that monkeys on their islands were also beginning to wash their potatoes. There was no physical connection between the islands, and no one had transported any monkeys from one island to another.

This study illustrates something of overwhelmingly powerful importance for the human race and for our planet. Washing potatoes was a new level of evolution for these monkeys, and when enough of them had accepted it, it was apparently transferred to the monkeys on surrounding islands without any physical contact or direct communication.

This is how the evolution of consciousness takes place. Every individual’s consciousness is connected to, and is a part of, the mass consciousness. When a small but significant number of individuals have moved into a new level of awareness and significantly changed their behavior, that change is felt in the entire mass consciousness. Every other individual is then moved in the direction of that change. And the whole thing may have started with one individual who first made the leap.

So often we look at the world around us and feel terribly helpless to effect any significant positive change. The world seems so

big, and in such a mess, and we feel so small and powerless. The hundredth monkey story helps us to see how powerful one individual, or a few individuals, can be in transforming the world.

Because the world truly is our mirror, as we change, it must change. You can see this easily in your personal life. As you develop the habit of trusting and taking care of yourself, you will gradually release your old patterns. Soon, you notice that your friends, family, and business associates all seem to be feeling and acting differently, as well. Things that previously frightened and upset you seem to have lost their emotional “charge.” Even the serious problems of the world, while they still concern you, may not seem quite as scary as before.

The reason for this shift is that you are beginning to feel the power of the universe inside of you. To the degree that you experience the presence of the universe in your own body, you don’t feel afraid. Of course, every time you open up to more power, more of the old fear gets flushed to the surface and released, so in the healing process, you will experience alternating states of power and fear. Gradually, however, a solid base of trust will be established within you. Others will feel this and in it will find the support to open up to more of their own power and truth. The people and things around you will reflect you in increasingly positive ways. The more light you allow within you, the brighter the world you live in will be.

Creating the Change

One idea I frequently encounter, especially in groups of spiritually oriented people, is that all we have to do to change the world

is think more positively about it and visualize the change we desire. Visualization and affirmation are powerful tools. I use them often and strongly recommend them as part of this process. (After all, I wrote *Creative Visualization* and I deeply believe in the effectiveness of the techniques it describes.) There is another part of the process that is frequently ignored, however, yet it is just as important.

If the world is our mirror, then whatever we see out there in some way reflects what is in us. We must take responsibility for it and be willing to transform it *within ourselves* if we want to see it change on the outside. So, when we look at the world and see poverty, pain, violence, and chaos, we must be willing to say to ourselves, “What is the poverty, pain, violence, and chaos within me that this is reflecting? I know that my world is my mirror and, in a sense, my creation. If the things I see weren’t in me, they couldn’t exist in the world.”

The trick here is not to take on *blame* or *guilt* for the world’s problems. None of us is truly responsible for other people’s lives; we are all co-creating this world together. And we are all doing the best we know how. We are here to learn from what is not perfect rather than blame ourselves for it. We need to adopt a positive attitude of responsibility, saying, “I am willing to learn to trust and follow my own inner truth, knowing that as I do, I will release the pain and fear within me and thus heal the pain and fear in the world.”

Such a vow is very powerful and to follow through on it is no easy task. To do so, we must be willing to move through the deepest layers of our consciousness and recognize not only our own personal fears, but also centuries-old negative beliefs of humanity

that exist in our bodies. To move through these layers, we need to be willing to recognize and experience all the fears, knowing that the light is healing and dissolving them.

When people ask me what they can do about the problems of the world, I suggest that they start by recognizing and affirming that as they sincerely do their own inner work, the world is being transformed. I tell them to look at the social problems that frighten or disturb them and determine what fear or pain it touches within them and how it reflects their personal situation.

For example, if they are disturbed by reports of violence, I ask them to look at how violence has played a part in their lives. Has someone been violent toward them in their early years? Have they had violent thoughts and feelings? Have they repressed or disassociated from their own violent feelings? In what way have they done violence to themselves internally (harshly criticizing themselves, and so on)?

It has been my experience that many of us need help, in the form of supportive therapy or counseling, to deal with deep levels of emotional healing. For some people, there's a certain reluctance to seek such help, perhaps because they fear it's an indication of sickness or craziness. Our culture tells us that we should be totally self-sufficient and that needing help is a sign of weakness. In reality, we all need support at times, and it is a sign of strength to reach out for appropriate help. Personally, I have sought therapy of various types at many times in my life and it has helped me greatly, as long as I trusted my own intuition about who to work with.

If you are deeply touched by the poverty in which much of the

world's population is currently living, you may feel moved to make some external gestures to help alleviate someone's pain (i.e., contribute some money, do some social or political work). At the same time, look within yourself to see in what way you believe in, or support, poverty or scarcity in your own life. This may not be a question of money — you may be living in some form of emotional or spiritual poverty while surrounded by material luxury. Or, you may be at peace spiritually and emotionally but holding onto a belief that money is evil, thus keeping yourself in a state of financial poverty.

Poverty, on both a personal and worldwide level, is supported by our mass consciousness belief in scarcity. We deeply fear that there is *not enough to go around* of whatever we need — money, food, love, energy, appreciation. So, we create a world that supports that belief. There have been studies that show that there is plenty of food produced in this world to amply feed everyone. Yet, because of our underlying belief in poverty, we allow food to be thrown away in one place while millions are starving to death elsewhere.

If you are concerned by environmental issues, consider this point of view: Mother Nature is symbolic of the nurturing, feminine aspect of ourselves. Disrespect and lack of harmony with nature are only possible in a society of individuals who disrespect and disregard their own feminine, intuitive nature. If you are attuned to your inner guidance, there is no way you can become severely out of balance with your natural environment.

Just as our bodies are the manifestation of our consciousness

in physical form, the earth is the manifestation of our mass consciousness. In a sense, the earth is our collective “body.” The way we treat her mirrors the way we treat our own bodies.

The lack of respect and attunement afforded to our bodies is demonstrated on a global level by the way we treat our earth. Until we learn to love and trust our bodies, to listen to their signals, to give them the food, rest, and nurturing they need, to stop polluting them with drugs and unwholesome food, and to stop trying to control them with our ideas about what’s right, I believe we will continue to mistreat our “earth body.”

We must be willing to recognize and heal any form of violence, poverty, and imbalance within ourselves as individuals if we hope to eradicate these problems from our world. Healing does not take place on a personal or planetary level as long as we hide or deny our feelings. All feelings, beliefs, and emotional patterns must be brought to the light of consciousness in order to be transformed. When the light shines into the darkness, the darkness disappears.

World Healing

People frequently talk about what terrible shape the world is in. In many ways, things seem to be going from bad to worse, and this can be very frightening. It has helped me considerably to recognize that the world is currently going through a major healing crisis, very similar in form to what many individuals are experiencing.

When we as individuals begin to wake up to the light, we also

begin to become aware of the darkness in which we have been living. The patterns of living which formerly seemed “normal” begin to look crazier and crazier from the perspective of our newly acquired sanity. Fears and distortions that have been denied and ignored because they were too painful to look at begin to come into our consciousness in order to be released. Problems that were “swept under the rug” come forth to be solved.

This is what I see happening on a worldwide level today. If we recognize the seeming chaos and pain in the world as a giant manifestation of our individual healing process, we can see that it’s a very positive step. Rather than feeling like victims, we can recognize the power of the universe at work. We can appreciate ourselves as channels through which the world’s healing is being manifested.*

Social and Political Action

Some who have heard these ideas become angry because they believe I am endorsing a narcissistic self-absorption that denies the problems of the world and negates the necessity of social and political action. Upon further discussion, I am usually (though not always!) able to make them understand that this is not the case. Being willing to deal internally and individually with the original source of the problem is simply the most practical and powerful

*For more of my thoughts on this topic, read *The Path of Transformation: How Healing Ourselves Can Change the World*.

way to effect real change. It does not deny the necessity of external action on a large scale.

The issue for me is the source and motivation for that action. I find that people are frequently moved by their own "good ideas" more than by their inner guidance. Often they are motivated by their feelings of pain, fear, and guilt into wanting to "do something to make it better." They are coming from a position of helplessness and fear, struggling vainly to do something to eradicate these feelings. Unfortunately, this approach only perpetuates the problem it is trying to solve.

The underlying cause of the world problems is the pain, fear, and ignorance we experience from being disconnected from the power of the universe. If we continue to project our problems outside of ourselves and fail to recognize the inner power we actually have, I believe we will support the very evils we are fighting.

On the other hand, if we are willing to take responsibility for our fears and deal with them, we will clear the way for being able to hear the voice of the universe within us. If it tells us to take action, we can be sure the action will be powerful and truly effective.

For example, a woman friend of mine became very active in the nuclear disarmament movement. When she talked about the issue and her work, it was obvious that she was feeling absolutely terrified of the possibility of nuclear war. This is actually a reasonable reaction, given the world situation. The problem, as I saw it, was that she was not recognizing her own terror and the issues of powerlessness and death that she was struggling with internally. So, her actions and words had a frantic quality — almost like a drowning

person clutching vainly for something to hold onto.

Gradually, over several years, I saw her work through this phase of her process. I believe that she reached a deeper level of trust in the universe. She continued her anti-nuclear activity because it was something she deeply believed in, and found great satisfaction in doing so, but the energy was quite different. There was power and strength in her involvement, which I'm certain made her more effective in her work.

The same principles hold true in the social and political arena as in every other area of life: If you are doing what you think you "should" do, if you are motivated primarily by fear and guilt, then no matter how good your actions, you are probably not being as effective as you'd like to be, and you may even be hindering more than you are helping.

On the other hand, if you are trusting your intuition and following your heart — going where your energy takes you and doing what you really want to do — you will see that *everything* you do has a positive effect in changing the world. You will be able to recognize the transformational nature of your actions. For many, this will include direct social and political action, and you'll be doing it because you love it! People around you will also be affected by your energy and vitality even more than they are affected by your words and actions.

For now, my inner guidance had told me that living my life as I do — writing books, leading workshops, exploring my creativity, being myself — is what I personally need to be doing to effect maximum change in my life and the world. I've also gotten a strong feeling that I may someday be actively involved in politics (as I was

earlier in my life) — perhaps even occupy a political office of some sort! Although I have no particular desire to do this at this time, I know that if that's what I'm meant to do, I'll find it an exciting adventure. I'm curious to see what the universe has in store for me.

The Media

I was once informed by my inner guidance that television would be the savior of the world! I resisted this idea because I am not a TV buff. I did recognize, however, that as mindless and idiotic as much television programming may appear at this time, television is obviously an extraordinarily powerful tool for reaching millions of people instantaneously. I think it is no accident that it has been developed at this time and is to be found in most homes in the world.

Although currently controlled primarily by people whose consciousness is thoroughly embedded in the old world, there are, even now, occasional flashes of awareness. It is only a matter of time until new world consciousness begins to penetrate television programming in a regular and significant way.

Television is undoubtedly a major educational tool. With the universe in charge, it can literally become a "channel." It could provide a "network" for instantaneously reaching a majority of the world population with conscious and creative new ideas.

Can you imagine housewives watching soap operas in which people go through all the usual human dramas, but instead of the typical doom and despair, there is an attitude of learning and

growing through life's changes? It could be highly entertaining, with all the usual sex and romance, birth and death, drugs and disease, marriage and divorce, but the characters could be seen to use their trials and tribulations in a positive way to evolve in consciousness, just as we are learning to do. Once the housewives get it, it's certain that children and husbands will get it in short order!

It's obvious that the power of the media — movies, radio, newspapers, magazines, and books, as well as television — is unmatched in its potential for fast positive change once our mass consciousness is ready for that shift.

A Five-Step Process for Personal and Planetary Healing

1. Affirm to yourself: *The power of the universe is healing and transforming me. As I am healed and transformed, the whole world is healed and transformed.*

2. Notice the social, political, and environmental issues around you. Pay particular attention to those that trigger the most emotional reaction in you. Ask to see how they may reflect your personal issues, fears, beliefs, and patterns. You may not immediately see any connection, but stay open to receiving this information through your intuitive channel.

3. Ask for the higher power of the universe to release and heal the ignorance, fear, and limitation within you and in the world. Be open to any inner guidance you may receive to seek support in your healing process through a counselor or therapist, friends, a work-

shop or group, or in any other form.

4. Regularly visualize your life and the world as you would like them to be (see the meditation at the end of this chapter).

5. Ask your inner guidance to let you know clearly if there is any specific action you need to take toward your own, or the world's, healing. Then, continue to trust and follow your intuition, knowing that you will be led to do whatever is necessary.

Meditation

Sit or lie in a comfortable position. Take a few deep breaths and relax your body. Feel yourself dropping into a deep, quiet place within. Feel yourself contacting that place of power and creativity, your source of strength.

From this source of strength, project yourself into the future, a few years or more, and in this projection, imagine your life exactly the way you want it to be.

Start by noticing how you feel spiritually and emotionally. Feel the strength and power within you. You trust your intuition and act on your inner guidance. Because of this, your life is unfolding in a wonderful way.

Get a sense of your body. How do you look and feel physically? You now have a body that matches your spirit — strong, courageous, beautiful, filled with life and energy. Experience what that feels like. How do you take care of your body? What do you eat and how do you nurture yourself?

Imagine yourself dressed exactly the way you want to be

dressed. Your clothes express who you are. When you open your closets and drawers, you have just the clothes you want there.

What is your home like? See yourself living exactly where you want to be. You have created your environment as you want it. Feel what it's like to live in a way that suits you perfectly.

You have found the perfect job and creative outlet. Imagine expressing yourself in a way that brings you fulfillment and satisfaction. You receive an abundance of money for doing what you most love.

You now have relationships that are honest, alive, passionate, and creative. People love and nurture you. If you have (or want to have) a special partner in your life, imagine that relationship as you would like it to be.

Now, remember that the world is your mirror. As you are growing and changing, so is the world around you. In fact, you are part of the mass consciousness that is creating the world. So let yourself imagine the world healing and transforming, coming into balance, wholeness, and harmony, just as you are.

Chapter Twenty-Three

A Vision



From the window of my apartment, I look across the San Francisco Bay at the beautiful city of San Francisco. The light on the water and on the city skyline is constantly changing. Sometimes it is cloudy and misty, sometimes bright and shining, but it always looks mystical. Perhaps this view inspired an image that I frequently have:

I see an ancient city, gray and decaying. It is literally disintegrating, the old structures crumbling into piles of rubble. But it is being pushed aside because in its place, a beautiful new city is arising. This new city is magical — it seems to shimmer delicately with every color in the universe. I know that it is being built inside

of us. It is created from the light.

Recommended Resources



Books

Gawain, Shakti. *Creative Visualization*. Nataraj/New World Library, 1978.

Gawain, Shakti. *Return to the Garden*. Nataraj/New World Library, 1989.

Gawain, Shakti. *The Path of Transformation: How Healing Ourselves Can Change the World*. Nataraj/New World Library, 1993.

Gawain, Shakti. *The Four Levels of Healing: A Guide to Balancing the Spiritual, Mental, Emotional, and Physical Aspects of Life*. Nataraj/New World Library, 1997.

Gawain, Shakti. *Creating True Prosperity*. Nataraj/New World Library, 1997.

Gawain, Shakti. *Creating True Prosperity Workbook*. Nataraj/New World

- Library, 1998.
- Roberts, Jane. *The Nature of Personal Reality*. Amber-Allen Publishing/New World Library, 1994.
- Stone, Hal and Sidra. *Embracing Our Selves: The Voice Dialogue Manual*. Nataraj/New World Library, 1993.
- Stone, Hal and Sidra. *Embracing Each Other: Relationship as Teacher, Healer, and Guide*. Nataraj/New World Library, 1993.
- Stone, Sidra. *The Shadow King*, Nataraj/New World Library, 1997.

Audio Tapes

- Gawain, Shakti. *Living in the Light: Book on Tape*. Revised version. Nataraj/New World Library, 1998.
- Gawain, Shakti. *Creative Visualization: Book on Tape*. Nataraj/New World Library, 1995.
- Gawain, Shakti. *Creative Visualization Meditations*. Nataraj/New World Library, 1996.
- Gawain, Shakti. *The Path of Transformation: Book on Tape*. Abridged version. Nataraj/New World Library, 1993.
- Gawain, Shakti. *The Four Levels of Healing: A Guide to Balancing the Spiritual, Mental, Emotional, and Physical Aspects of Life*. Nataraj/New World Library, 1997.
- Gawain, Shakti. *Creating True Prosperity: Book on Tape*. Nataraj/New World Library, 1997.
- Stone, Hal and Sidra. *Meeting Your Selves*. Delos, 1990.
- Stone, Hal and Sidra. *The Child Within*. Delos, 1990.
- Stone, Hal and Sidra. *Meet Your Inner Critic*. Delos, 1990.
- Stone, Hal and Sidra. *Meet the Pusher*. Delos, 1990.

Stone, Hal and Sidra. *The Dance of Selves in Relationship*. Delos, 1990.

Stone, Hal and Sidra. *Understanding Your Relationships*. Delos, 1990.

Stone, Hal and Sidra. *Affair and Attractions*, Delos, 1990.

Stone, Hal and Sidra. *Decoding Your Dreams*. Delos, 1990.

(All of Hal and Sidra Stone's tapes are available through Delos. See address below.)

Workshops

Shakti Gawain gives talks and leads workshops all over the United States and in many other countries. She also conducts retreats, intensives, and training programs. If you would like to be on her mailing list and receive workshop information, contact:

SHAKTI GAWAIN, INC.

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FAX: (415) 388-7196

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WWW.SHAKTIGAWAIN.COM

Shakti and her husband, Jim Burns, rent rooms and a guests cottage at their beautiful estate on the Hawaiian island of Kaua'i. For information or to make a reservation, contact:

KAI MANA

P.O. Box 612, KILAUEA, HI 96754

TELEPHONE: (808) 828-6670 OR (800) 837-1784

FAX: (808) 828-6670

For information about Drs. Hal and Sidra Stone's workshops and trainings, contact:

DELOS

P.O. Box 604, ALBION, CA 95410

TELEPHONE: (707) 937-2424

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Photo by Max O’Neil

A leader in the world consciousness movement, Shakti Gawain has taught popular workshops for over 20 years and is the author of several bestselling books, including *Creative Visualization*, *The Path of Transformation*, *The Four Levels of Healing*, and *Creating True Prosperity*. She lives in Mill Valley, California, and on Kaua’i.



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