



Five+ Steps to Brilliant Boundaries *For those feeling leaky, run over, or a bit door-mat-ish*

One of the critical courses that we all take – usually over and over again – in our personal *Mystery School of Life* is one about boundaries. It's a challenge for many of us to know where we end and another begins, or what is ours and what is another's, or how to be firm and clear about what we do want and what we don't want. Although we each have our unique version of busted boundaries, this is a universal part of our human experience, and so we have many teachers and resources to help us with this often-grueling course in our *Mystery School of Life*. Here is some of what I've learned about how to have brilliant personal boundaries.

What's this *Mystery School of Life*? Through the ages mystery schools were often secret schools where select people came to learn about the profound mysteries of life, like who we are and why we're here and what mighty powers we have. The mostly hidden or occult teachings of these schools required years of devotion and study to master, but once mastered the graduate emerged with wisdom and powers far beyond those of the uninitiated masses. In my mind we are all at our own individual *Mystery Schools of Life* because we're all just trying to do our best and figure out both why we're here and how to do a good job of being here. And all of the most important things are hidden from us – we have to blunder our way through them and figure them out as we go. If you're like me you've had classes in the mystery school of relationships, of work, of how to speak your truth, of how to feed yourself, and so on. Just because we didn't get the nifty initiatory ritual and robes doesn't mean we aren't knee deep in the grueling and mysterious course of figuring out how to live a good life.

What do we mean when we talk about personal boundaries? Most of us know boundaries by the lack of them. When we feel run over, when our desires are dismissed or our voices are completely ignored, we get a sense that we need more firm boundaries. Or when we feel we have been manipulated into committing to something, yet again, that we don't really want to do, our boundary alarm can start blaring. Sometimes we realize that we take on all kinds of thoughts and feelings from others, so much so that we can't be sure if the feelings we're having and the thoughts we are thinking belong to us or someone else.

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Humans are social animals. Alone we would never survive.

Having strong personal boundaries includes knowing what we want or need, and being able to clearly and strongly articulate our desires and needs. Brilliant boundaries also involve our ability to be with others' responses to our needs while staying true to ourselves.

What is the purpose of having personal boundaries?

- For us to live our unique desires, contribution, self-expression, and creativity
- For our safety and that of others
- For energy recharge, rest, relaxation, recovery, health, and sustainability
- For our personal evolution and growth
- So we can exercise both choice and responsibility

Brilliant boundaries = clarity, ownership, CHOICE, articulation, and responsibility to be in alignment with our true selves.

Sounds simple when put this way, so why the whole boundary bug-a-boo?

Humans are social animals. Alone we would never survive. The need to belong, to be loved, and to be treasured is hardwired into us. No, we're not being overly needy. We have survived so well as a species because of our sociability, our need for each other, and the way we can work well together.

And because we need each other to survive, we need love and acceptance. Growing up we learn all kinds of ways to get love and acceptance, some better for us than others. We learned that when others' needs are met we are more likely to get the love and acceptance we want at best or at least that things will be less chaotic. When we genuinely love others we want them to be happy. So it's perfectly understandable that we would want to make others happy, or that we would want to please others.

While we are each vibrant and discreet individuals we are also part of a whole – whether that whole is a couple or family or friendship or team or country or world or species. We are able to hold the polarity of separateness and oneness, sometimes more aware of our individuality and sometimes more focused on our oneness. Some of us are very good at dissolving our sense of separateness into oneness. Think of mothers and babies. Think of new love relationships. Think of close-knit teams forged in the fire of extreme challenges.



As part of this exquisite planet we are, like all of nature around and within us, in a state of evolution. We are growing, changing, learning, adjusting, becoming. Our survival depends on our ability to be flexible and adapt, even when our brains would much prefer to stick with what's familiar.

Standard Operating Procedures for humans that can obscure boundaries:

1. We all need to be loved and feel like we belong. We are predisposed to do what we can to get love and acceptance.
2. We all have some form of an Inner Critic that wants to convince us that we aren't lovable unless we behave in various ways that diminish us.
3. We are really good at dissolving our sense of our individual selves. We, as women especially, are really good at feeling the feelings of others or imagining ourselves in others' shoes.
4. We are called to be of service, to those we feel need us or we those whom we really want to help. Many times the needs of others we are called to serve are well beyond our resources to meet.
5. As much as we might be drawn to a sense of oneness, being a discreet individual is part of being in these bodies at this time. We all have powerful individual needs and desires that we are driven to meet.
6. Confusion about individuality and oneness is natural because not only are we pulled to be both our unique selves and part of oneness in some way, we are also naturally flexible and adaptable.

One of the reasons I had so much confusion around this concept of boundaries in the past is because I didn't like the rigidity that seemed to come with this concept. Even the term personal boundary has such a "razor wire and 12 foot fence" quality to it. I began to realize that a fixed sense of a line in the sand didn't work for me, and didn't work for most women I know.

Over the years of working with this concept I began to understand that what we call boundaries is a process, not an end product. There's way more going on here than putting up a fence and, by God, holding it no matter what. We don't arrive at a place of boundaries built in stone, of a finished product that we no longer have to concern ourselves with. (Bummer!) Rather we can notice if we are in more or less alignment with our own desires, need, and truth.

Boundaries reflect the way we see our selves and the world around us. They aren't fixed and absolute. Just like us they are organic, vibrant, and evolving. And one of the surprising things about them is the more we are true to ourselves and our boundaries, then the more capacity we build for dissolving into oneness when the timing is ripe to do so.



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So, given our humanness and the challenges to even understanding and defining this thing process called boundaries, how do we begin to improve them?

1. First Step to Brilliant Boundaries

We have to believe that we get to thrive. We have to be able to believe, deep in our bones, that we get to not only survive but to THRIVE. It is OK for us to make choices that help us thrive. It is our birthright, just as it is everyone else's.

Most of us start down the quite slippery slope of boundary-less-ness with some kind of cockamamie story that has as its punch line "we don't get to thrive".

Some truly boundary-busting story lines I've heard are:

If I say what I'm thinking (usually "No" in some form) I won't be loved.

I just have to do this because no one else can or will.

I'll rest/sleep/eat later. I don't have time for that now.

If I don't do what you want you'll make my life so difficult it isn't worth it.

It's easier to just give in and do what you want or do it myself than it is to argue.

I have no choice in this.

This isn't really so bad. It's just a little bit uncomfortable (as you're screaming inside).

Someone else will die and it will be my fault if I do what I really want to.

Oh, she's so nice, she doesn't really mean to hurt me.

If you loved me, you would see how hard I'm working and you would help me.

Can't you just read my mind and know what I want?

This one more thing will just take a minute (NOT) so I'll just do it.

Their (usually endless) need is more important than mine.

I prove my love to you by constant sacrifice.

It's not perfect yet so I have to keep working no matter what.

Any of these sound familiar or close to your boundary-less thinking? If so, then it's time for you to create a new story for yourself, a story that is based in the belief that you get to THRIVE. How about one like this:

I am a lovable, conscious being who not only gets to choose what is life affirming for me, it is my responsibility to do so. Choice is my birthright (this is what is meant by free will). Choice is my responsibility. It is my job to say "Yes" and "No" to requests made of me. If situations are hurtful or dangerous or demeaning or disempowering or not in alignment with my values or not within the best timing for me, it is up to me to say "NO" to them. I get to make choices that will help me THRIVE. It's my job to make choices that are good for me.



Come up with an image of yourself that is big enough to begin to recognize your many facets of body, mind, emotions, spirit, energetic signature, and personality.

So the very first step to brilliant boundaries is to revisit the stories you are telling yourself (and maybe others are telling you, too). Write them out so you can see them in black and white. What are you thinking that is keeping you from knowing or expressing your wants and needs? What are the stories you're telling yourself that are foundational to you making choices that don't feel right to you? What is it you would really, really (if only you could) want to say or do in the situations that are draining you?

As part of this new story that includes permission for you to thrive, it's quite helpful to have an image of what your personal boundaries are for you, especially if you gag even attempting to say the word boundaries! Take the charge or resistance out of the word and concept by discovering for yourself a powerful metaphor for your container of self.

Develop a sense of your own boundaries that is big enough to hold you and that you can use to monitor your boundary health. We each need to have an image or metaphor or strong sense of our selves and our boundaries that works for us. Use the channel that works for you, so for example, if you're visual create a good image in your mind's eye. If you're auditory, you might have a sound or song or vibration that can hold your sense of your self. If you're body oriented maybe there's a body posture that you can get into that captures your essence of your self and your boundaries.

Some sense themselves as a container or vessel that they can use their inner knowing to check to see if the vessel has leaks or not. Some imagine themselves as a boat on the sea so they can recognize if their hull is strong and they are moving forward under their own power in the direction they want to go. Some know themselves as a particular note or song in the choir of creation and they can sense if they are singing their unique sound or if they are being silenced or pulled off key by others. Take some time in quiet reflection to create a metaphor that works for you.

You want to end up with a strong metaphor or image of your self so that you can use it to understand and sense the vibrancy of your boundaries. Because this is such a personal understanding, we each have to find the image that works best for us.

Once you have this metaphor, then you can develop the practice of using your mind's eye, your dreams, your emotions, and your body experiences to monitor your boundary health. We are always getting messages, some loud and clear and some quite subtle, from our body-mind regarding our boundaries. Yes, we do



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have built in alarms that go off when our boundaries have been transgressed. The problem is that we have gotten so used to the blaring alarms going off all the time that we have, in effect, turned them off to our awareness. We've learned how to sleep through the alarms, much to our own detriment. Now we have to relearn and redevelop our sensitivity to the alarms that are there for our own safety.

How? Using our boundary metaphor we can reconnect with our intuition and instincts. Imagine your vessel or be in your boat or sing your song and ask yourself about your boundaries. You will get powerful answers – if you're willing to listen to your wise self.

We can use our body symptoms to speak to us about our boundaries, too. If you're starting to sense some boundary issue, check in with your body. If some part of your body hurts or is tight or wants your attention, ask that aching muscle or nervous stomach or twitching eye what about this is connected to choices you need to be making to tend your brilliant boundaries.

As long as we are stuck in those old and limiting stories that have us believe we don't get to thrive or it's not OK for us to thrive . . . it's pretty hard for us to make life affirming choices for ourselves. And as long as we think of boundaries as being mean or being selfish or being un-spiritual, then we'll keep getting stepped on.

2. Second Step to Brilliant Boundaries

We have to do our inner work. Uncovering and rewriting the hurtful stories we tell ourselves is part of our sacred inner work. (Yes, inner work is holy work. It is the work we do with and for ourselves as we find our way through this *Mystery School of Life*.)

I learned this quite clearly from our dog.

Our last dog, Pepper, was never very well behaved. I took him to obedience class three times and he still never was a "good" dog. Oh, he was lovable and fun (most of the time) but he didn't do what I wanted him to do. And he would do things like eat anything in sight and lick you silly and chew up important things (like homework, really).

For the longest time I thought it was his fault. Finally one of the trainers got me to the ah-ha moment where I saw that it was really all about me. For my lovable Labrador to be well behaved I had to be firm, consistent, sure, and strongly committed to training techniques continually. It was my job to set the behavior parameters and stick to them. It was my job to set the boundaries. He was only responding to what I allowed.



Damn it! I couldn't blame him. He was just being a dog.

Bottom line: we can't blame anybody for our boundaries, not the pushy neighbors, not the won't-take-no-for-an-answer Ex, not the sweetly begging best friend, not the rude co-worker, not nobody. **Our boundaries are our responsibility. Getting and keeping brilliant ones is completely up to us.**

We have to look at ourselves and ask all those questions that really matter like:
What am I longing for?
What am I afraid of?
How can I muster my courage?
Who will I be if I stay powerless?
What am I getting out of staying stuck?
How can I hang onto my desires and thrive in relationships?

Ok, I get it. This inner work project takes a lifetime. But we don't have to wait a lifetime to get better with boundaries. Personal life coaching can get you on a fast track to the boundary work questions. Therapy can help us especially if our boundaries got badly blown up in our early lives.

And here are a few key questions that might help you DIY-ers jump a few grade levels in the boundary setting class in your *Mystery School*, like:

In this situation, what do I really want to do/say/be?

What is the cost to me to not make the choice I want to make?

Who am I blaming for this?

What is the risk to both of us and our relationship for me to blame rather than act?

What would it take for me to ask for what I really want in this situation?

So many more questions are possible! And these few will crack you open and get you thinking differently. Thinking differently is just what the boundary doctor ordered. Because that's what we need when we've been living in old stories that got us to dis-ease, heartache, and exhaustion. Thinking differently leads to acting differently and from there much is possible.

3. Step three to Brilliant Boundaries

We've got to repair our broken enough-ness meter. Really. Not a single one of us has a superbly running and finely tuned enough-ness meter. You know what I mean – that inner sense of knowing how much is enough in any number of situations.



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For both inner and outer reasons we have no idea how much is enough – enough money, enough food, enough work, enough play, enough clothes, enough sex, enough clients, enough friends, enough time, enough toys, enough experiences, enough of you name it.

We are constantly bombarded with messages of not enough-ness. In our outer world we have been saturated by the most sophisticated brain washing sales messages for so long. We truly don't know how white our teeth really need to be unless someone tells us. Need I mention the saying, "There's no such thing as being too thin or too rich"?

All of us, too, has an inner critic who constantly reminds us we are not enough – not good enough, not smart enough, not loving enough, not pretty enough, not worthy enough.

With relentless inner and outer messages of not enough, that inner meter that would let us know what enough feels like is well and truly out of calibration.

Our personal boundaries are one way that we say enough and no farther. But if our enough-ness meters are broken, how do we know when it's time to say enough?

Here's one way: We can remember that *Yes* and *No* are two sides of the same coin. What I mean by this is that *Yes* and *No* always come together. They don't live alone. Any time I say *Yes* to something I am, at the very same time, saying *No* to other things. And any time I say *No* to something or someone, I am saying *Yes* to something or someone else.

Yes does not live on her own. She always comes with No.

No matter how generous and open minded, no matter how much I choose to live in the land of both/and rather than either/or, *Yes* does not live on her own. She always comes with *No*.

Example: When I say *Yes* to sleeping in late I'm saying *No* to getting up to exercise before work. When I say *No* to a new client's request to meet today, I'm saying *Yes* to an existing client's appointment. When I say *No Thank You* to those trendy new shoes, I'm saying *Yes* to my savings plan. Saying *Yes* to donating to the food bank, I'm saying *No* several cups of iced chai. When I say *No* to the lovely gathering of friends I'm saying *Yes* to time with my children and in my garden.

Where those of us with slippery boundaries often get hooked is in thinking we can just keep saying *Yes* indefinitely. Our broken enough-ness meters get us thinking we can say *Yes* to everything without realizing that every *Yes* is automatically coming with a *No*.



*The more you
Know, the
more you No.*

Yes to more work = *No* to sleep or fun or meditation.
No to immediate distractions = *Yes* to long-term plans.
Yes to your drama = *No* to my peace of mind.

One way back from the abyss of your broken enough-ness meter is to ask yourself what you are saying *No* to whenever you say *Yes* to something that really doesn't feel right to you. Whether your schedule is way over full or you're feeling overwhelmed or walked all over, take some time to get really clear about what you are saying *No* to as you say *Yes* to so very much. You'll start to get a better sense of what is enough.

There's a really big reason why we have to recognize that *Yes* and *No* are inseparable. Our lives are so very full and abundant now there is absolutely no possible way we can say *Yes* to everything that comes our way. My nifty reminder phrase about this is: **The more you Know, the more you No.** This means that the more people, books, opportunities, things, money, food, experiences, and wonder we are exposed to, the more we will have to choose and say *No*, even to some fantastically delightful possibilities. It simply comes with the territory of abundance. So it's critical that we get good at making choices and recalibrating our enough-ness meters.

4. Step four to Brilliant Boundaries

Believe it or not, boundaries are all about love. Yes, it's true. Brilliant, vibrant, life-affirming, protective, co-creative boundaries are all about love. I am able to make conscious and responsible choices when I have a healthy love for myself and for others. Key word here is healthy love – not enabling love, or never ending needy love, or “prove that you love me and I'll prove I love you” love.

Hard to believe, isn't it, that words we use so often can be the ones we are the most confused about? Healthy self-love does not equal selfishness or narcissism. Healthy love of others does not include the need to diminish or deny or disown our selves.

Healthy self-love is one where I know I am a unique and precious spark of creation with gifts to give, joy to share, and needs to be met. You are the same. Your needs and joy are important to me – and so are mine. We both get to thrive. Any equation where, with choices over time, only one of us gets to thrive is not love. Whether that only one who gets to thrive is me or you, it is not love if either of us gets trampled.



Unconscious oneness is not sacred or holy or to be sought after. It's a fast track to the land of enabling, toxicity, and depletion.

Love and Oneness Clarification: Many of us are good at feeling the feelings and needs of others. We're good at merging with others in a way that can feel like the oneness of romantics, poets, and spiritual seekers. This level of compassion or empathy or understanding is remarkable and beautiful. It is what many of us aspire to become – at one with others and this magnificent planet. A feeling of oneness is what makes mother-infant bonding or passionately close relationships better than any drug. It blows our minds and fills us with bliss. For brilliant boundaries, though, and for our own mental health, we have to commit to conscious oneness only. Unconscious oneness is when we merge with others without our awareness of it, getting entangled in the feelings and enmeshed in the lives of others in a way that we lose ourselves. Unconscious oneness is not sacred or holy or to be sought after. It's a fast track to the land of enabling, toxicity, and depletion. So commit right now to conscious oneness only. You choose the who, what, when, where, and why to be in the bliss place of oneness.

Often our leaky boundaries come from confusion about love – what it looks like, how we live it, what we must do to give it and get it. If love feels sticky, feels off, feels hurtful or diminishing or out of balance, then it's time for some reflection and conversation.

Abuse, either from inner or outer sources, shatters self-love and the ability to nurture and protect the self. If you were abused as a little one or you had to grow into adult responsibilities way too soon, your boundaries got blasted wide open. It wasn't your fault. So quit making it your fault by trying to handle it on your own. Love yourself by getting the healing you need.

Often love gets replaced by fear. Instead of remembering the love that we are, that is showered upon us, and that we want to give abundantly, we get scared. One of the big fears many of us have is that we don't have what it takes to set some limits or take a stand for ourselves. We fear we can't do what's needed for our own well-being. We fear that if we ask for what we need we will be unloved and abandoned. All of this is understandable. And we're not young little pumpkin-doodles anymore. As adults it's our job to do our inner work (see step 2 above). We have to see through those old limiting stories (see step 1 above) and realize that any love in which we don't get to thrive is not love or as author Chuck Spezzano says, "If it hurts, it isn't love."

5. Which gets us to step five to brilliant boundaries.

We have to choose healthy relationships. Key words here: choice and healthy.



If we continually choose to be in relationships that are boundary busting, then that's not healthy for us or the other person. If our thriving is not essential to the relationship, especially our intimate ones, then the design of the relationship is not good for us.

Refer back to the SOP for humans: We need to be loved and to feel like we belong. That's just who we are.

Sometimes, though, we attempt to get that love and sense of belonging and acceptance in relationships that are hurtful to us. Or we behave in hurtful ways because we genuinely care for others and we don't think they can change their hurtful behaviors. Sometimes we can't imagine we have any choice at all in our relationships – say with an immature boss or a well-connected co-worker or an obnoxious relative. Ninety nine percent of the time I believe we do have choices we can make in our relationships – we just may not like the effort or the change that will be required of us to make those hard choices.

Do your own work for sure – remember it's your *Mystery School* – and then choose the relationships in which everyone's thriving is important, including yours. There are no extra credit points for remaining powerless, beat up, and door-mat-ish in our mystery schools. Quite the opposite – there's no ditching this class until we've got what we need to make good choices for ourselves and others.

More ways to tend and nurture our brilliant boundaries follow.

Failure is part of life, is part of success, is part of the ebb and flow of a natural process.

Watch out for the “overs”. Whenever you're feeling overwhelmed, over tired, over worked, over extended, over stimulated, in over drive, over your head, like you're over eating or over drinking or over thinking or over sexed, over done, or just plain over it (whatever it is) – be on the look out for your busted boundaries. The overs scream loudly of trashed boundaries. Now don't start beating yourself over the head when you realized this, wise woman! Just take a breath, get your bearings, and find your way back to sustainability, because the overs indicate the seriously unsustainable conditions that come from trampled boundaries.

Often failure is the only option. One very good reason, or at least we think so, for ripping open our boundaries, is because most of us want to succeed. We want to do a good job and be known as someone who can be counted on to do a good job. We've all heard that the winners – those who succeed – know that failure is not an option. Wrong! Failure is a part of life and all of us will fail many times in our lives (likely several times today and this week and in whatever we are doing right now). Failure is part of life, is part of success, is part of the ebb and flow of



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a natural process. We get to choose where and when we want to fail. Sometimes. Just like *Yes* and *No* are always together, success and failure are always connected. None of us can succeed at all things all the time, so there is no reason to tear ourselves apart trying to.

A subset of failure is the only option is **you will make others cry sometimes**. As women we often shatter our boundaries with our compulsive need to please others – all the time. Having healthy boundaries means that some times our choices will not please others, may even make them cry, or horrors, make them not like us. Just as we can not succeed at all things all the time, we can not make all people happy all the time. Wild thoughts, heh?

If you are worn out by “the overs”, check to see if you have forgotten to let yourself fail in some areas so that you can succeed in the really important ones or if you are still hooked into needing to please others. Wild and wise women know that they can handle failure – whether it’s a messy house, undone e-mail, the not so trendy outfit, the blown deadline – and making others unhappy, even if it is really challenging to do so.

Self-care is a radical act of self-responsibility, not selfishness. The bright, capable, dedicated, busy, involved, loving, successful, and generous women I know are mostly terrified of radical self-care. We are terrified of taking care of ourselves at a deep level because we’ve learned well that being selfish is the cardinal sin for women and we’ve made the connection that taking care of ourselves is selfish. There are just so very many things that need to get done before there are resources (time, space, money) available for us to use for our personal self-care.

Actually, my guess is the first and deepest place we learn to blow right past all our boundaries is in relationship to our bodies. All day long we get messages from our bodies regarding its needs and we ignore every single one of these messages, soldiering on to get the job done. Got a headache? Need a rest? Need to get up and stretch or go to the bathroom? Forget it! Stay working, stay in the meeting, stay cleaning up, keep doing what you’re doing until the messages make you so uncomfortable you go eat or drink something or in some other way stimulate your body back into high productivity mode. All day long we ignore the messages from our bodies, our emotions, and our sweet spirits. You have needs? They are simply not important now because there is work to be done and people to save or please.



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When we do imagine self-care we equate it with getting a manicure or buying new jewelry or a going on a girls' night out. Sure, those things can be recreational and make us feel good for a while. I'm all for enjoying friends and being beautiful and well adorned. Radical self-care, though, can make us sweat. For radical self-care involves self-responsibility. We accept that we are the ones responsible for our physical and mental health. Eating well and sleeping well and getting the exercise our bodies crave and the solitude that renews us is up to us. It is our responsibility.

Yes, our lives are off-the-charts busy. Yes, we love our families and want them well cared for. Yes, when our children are very young, their needs have to come first. Yes, we are fantastic team players and want to do right by our colleagues, bosses, customers, and friends. Yes, yes, yes. That is all true. And, at the very same time, a hold over of patriarchal disenfranchisement of women and the incessant tirade of the inner critic have us believing that the care of our bodies, minds, and spirits has no value until everything else has been taken care of. This is simply not true. It is an ugly lie that keeps us separated from our own very real needs.

Instead of the lie of "self-care only after everything else is complete," brilliant boundaries are based on the airline safety training of "put the oxygen mask on yourself first" before putting it on the children or other loved ones around you. Think about it. What if your needs were an equal part of the equation concerning what has to get done and how success is measured? This doesn't mean your needs have to be paramount or come first all the time. It does mean that your needs matter, just as everyone else's needs matter.

In relationship coaching every person in the relationship, or system (family, work team, organization, circle), is a unique part or voice of that system. For the system to thrive, all the voices of the system need to be heard. To begin with, you have to know what you need and want and then your needs and wants can be heard as part of those of the system. Not all of the systems you are a part of will be eager to hear, let alone meet, your needs. That's understandable. For you to thrive, though, you need to be a part of a few systems that do recognize and honor your needs and desires.

Some situations or people provide built in boundary busters. Work situations where the needs always exceed the resources are one example of a built to bust situation. Those people who won't take no for an answer are another. Sometimes people are emotionally immature and don't know how to soothe themselves or be with discomfort. Sometimes people whose boundaries have been blasted way open



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perpetrator triangle.*

have no idea what reasonable boundaries are or how to be with someone who has clear boundaries. When mental illness is involved – like addiction, narcissism, anxiety disorders, depression, and the like – standard boundary messages can be ignored or not understood.

In case of built in boundary busters, you may have to repeat yourself frequently to get your message across.

Get out of the victim, rescuer, perpetrator triangle. There is a twisted way our good intentions keep us busting our boundaries and those of others. The Karpman Drama Triangle is a social and psychological model of how humans often interact with each other that comes out of transactional analysis (TA). This way of interacting keeps us stuck in limiting beliefs and busted boundaries. The triangle describes three people or roles, that of the victim, the perpetrator who coerces or persecutes or pressures the victim, and the rescuer or savior who steps in to help the victim. These roles can be inhabited by different people or we can be all three of them ourselves.

For example, suppose in a work situation there is a great deal to be done in a short amount of time. As the rescuer I might work long hours, attempting to handle as much as possible myself because I see my co-workers as not being able to do the work (victim). I do this for several days until I feel exhausted and as if I am the victim of this bad situation. Then I can get so angry that I lash out at others around me (persecutor/perpetrator).

Another example can be that I step in as the responsible one (rescuer or savior) because I imagine my partner is struggling and unable to help herself. She is comfortable in this role of victim and so we continue to trample each other's boundaries because we are familiar with this dynamic and, at least in some ways, it meets our individual needs.

One of the basic premises in personal life coaching is that each individual is creative, resourceful, and whole. Each one of us is resilient and capable of facing huge challenges by accessing our inner wisdom and strength. Sure, we all can sometimes use the help of a mentor or coach or consultant or therapist or spiritual counselor. That is very different from living our daily lives as if we need to rescue people or be rescued by them.

But, you ask, what about my loved one who is sick, or who was deeply wounded as a child, or who means well but just doesn't have people skills, or who works



hard and just needs me to make things easier for them, or who people just misunderstand, or any number of other excuses? Stop it! The best way you can love someone is to see them in their strength and full capacity. When we make excuses for people, excuses that blow apart our boundaries and/or theirs, then it's time for us to do some soul searching to find out what we get out of this situation. Behind or underneath every rescuer is another story that is all about the need to rescue. Start digging and find out more about your motivation to make sure this is a conscious choice that is in both of your best interests.

Every role in the Drama Triangle is about busting boundaries. The victim lacks the strong container of self that allows one to access strength, wisdom, and courage to face challenges. The rescuer often over-extends herself (look out for the overs!) and her boundaries, allegedly for the sake of the victim. The perpetrator tramples the victim's boundaries with her pressure, coercion, or persecuting. So for all of us to have brilliant boundaries we have to quit playing this no-win game with ourselves and others!

Anybody can use bullying tactics. There's been a lot of attention given these days to bullies and for good reason. Together we are addressing the impact of bullying on our children and our systems. One thing, though, that can be misleading, is that we often tend to think of a bully as one bad person. What we forget is that all of us can and have used bullying tactics. You do not have to be an all bad bully to use bullying tactics. Some of the nicest, most respected, basically kind-hearted women and men I know have used bullying behavior. The persecutor/perpetrator from the Drama Triangle often uses bullying behaviors to get her way. You can name the behavior and step out of it and the whole triangle without having to call the person a bully.

Use COIN, a non-toxic and non-violent way to set boundaries and ask for what you want. COIN – Context, Observation, Impact, Next Steps - is a frequently used coaching communication tool that provides a way to engage in all manners of difficult conversations without getting toxic or nasty. Here's how it works:

Context. Start with setting the context or the reason for the conversation. You can be open and honest and heartfelt if you like or brief and to the point. Example: *I'd like to talk with you about something that is difficult for me to address. Because we are work partners and I care very much for you, it's important that we clear the air and avoid future conflict.*



*Anybody can use
bullying tactics.*

Observation. State what you have observed without interpretation or judgment. Example: *We agreed to complete the project together by last Friday, each working on our pieces, communicating frequently, and then working together to finish the project by noon. I sent you 2 e-mails and left one phone message regarding our project and the need for us to work together but did not hear back from you until after our deadline had passed.*

Impact. Name the impact of what you observed on you, on your team, on your relationship, on your customers or any involved parties. Example: *I got anxious when I didn't hear from you. Our customer is disappointed we missed our promised deadline. I am angry and feeling a lack of trust in our relationship. It is difficult for us to work together when communication breaks down.*

Next steps. Design together what you will do in the future based on each of your needs. What will you do more of or less of? Who will be accountable to whom? How will you return to this conversation later if necessary? Make the requests you need to, remembering that a demand is not a request. Make room for a response of yes, no, or a counter offer. Example: *What is the best way for us to keep in communication when working with tight deadlines? How can we make work commitments that we can keep? Will you let me know where you are with the project even if you are behind our time line? How can we best support each other when in a time crunch? For our next project will you agree for us to meet on the phone for 10 minutes at the end of each day so we can adjust our plan as time requires?*

Notice the strong statements that didn't involve finger pointing, blame, criticism, stonewalling, defensiveness, or contempt. We can ask for what we want in clear, powerful ways without being toxic. If those people with whom we are in relationship prefer to stay in either toxic communication or boundary busting, then it is up to us to step out of the victim/rescuer/bully triangle and move on.

To be of service, to live our purpose, to contribute and thrive and enjoy our beautiful lives, we need to be able to live our heart truth. Having brilliant boundaries is one way that we live our heart truth – the loving truth of our deepest core. We have to be able to recognize our desires and needs and then be able to take steps to achieve these. We need the space and time to know ourselves. We need spacious relationships that also want us to thrive. We need the opportunity and language and tools to ask for what we need, and then we have to be able to consciously choose sacrifice and oneness, not just be in them without choice. We are a part of all the systems/relationships we inhabit and if we can't thrive, the system can't thrive. We are responsible for our own well-being. We do not have

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to be rescued or to rescue others. Nor do we have to pressure others to do our bidding. Brilliant boundaries are our birthright as individual sparks of this divine creation.

Healthy boundaries are built on:

- Self reflection: Understanding yourself, your emotions and your emotional intelligence, your thoughts, your needs, your desires, your ways of operating and how you thrive.
- Belief in human resiliency: For yourself and others, stepping out of the victim, rescuer, and perpetrator triangle.
- Accepting the responsibility to be in choice: Being conscious and intentional about your choices, being clear about Yes and No.
- Non-toxic and non-violent communication: You get to ask for what you want and need without being toxic or giving mixed signals.
- Creating strong alliances: Choosing healthy relationships that make room for each other's needs/desires/processes/dreams, letting go of the need to control, trusting and being vulnerable, drawing on inner and outer allies.
- Love: It's all about love that includes you and your thriving as part of the whole, choosing conscious oneness rather than the blurred boundaries of unconscious fusion.

So good luck, wise woman, in this course in your *Mystery School!* It's disgustingly hard work, this boundary stuff, and well worth all the effort. We'll keep supporting each other along the way.

Creating Brilliant Boundaries

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