

good fences...

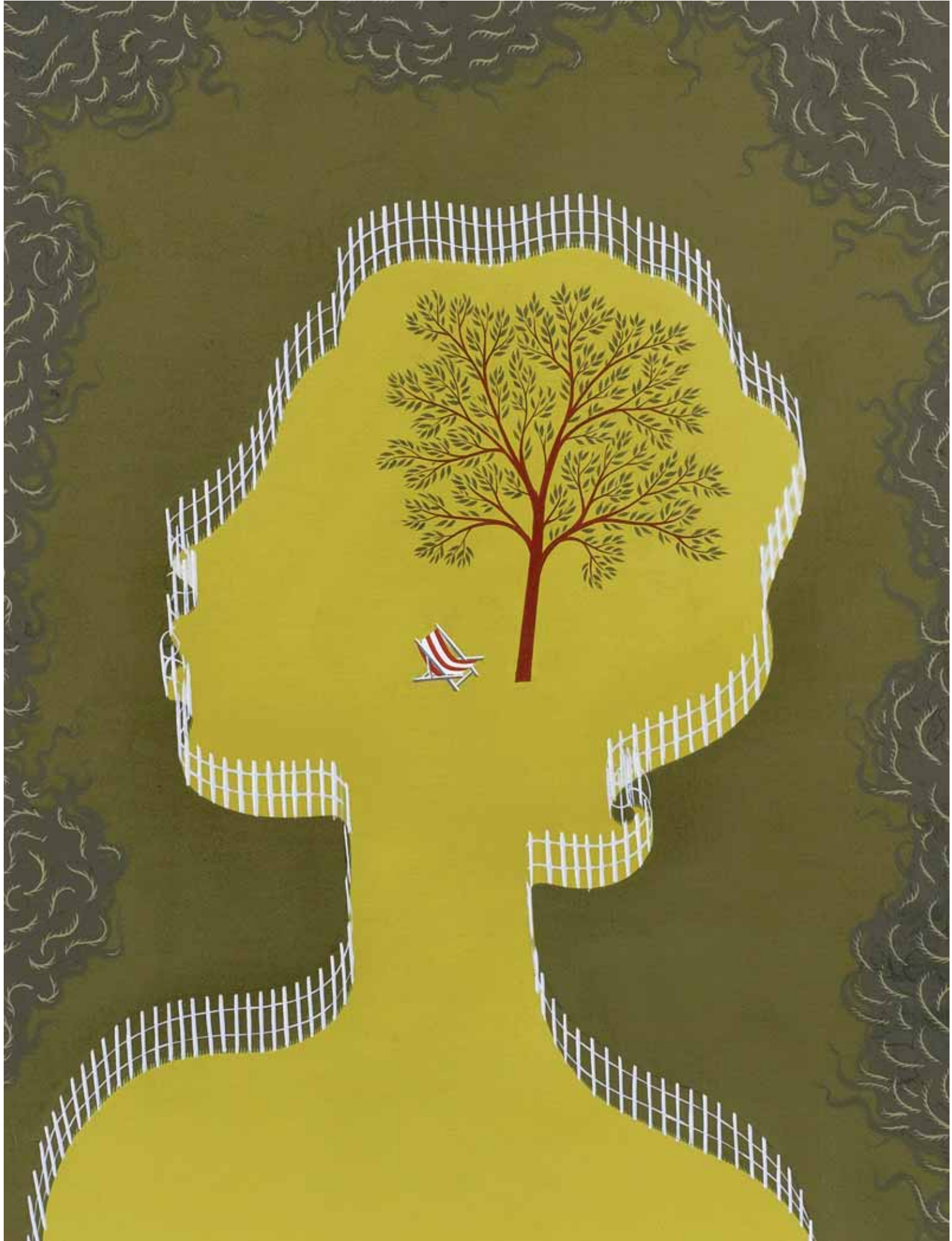
make for good relations.

Once you have strong personal boundaries, they become more porous, and love and caring flow more easily between you and others.

Sophie, a professional woman in her mid-30s and a member of my weekly mindfulness meditation class, repeatedly feels taken advantage of. After listening to her describe a painful episode in which a friend had acted inappropriately during a visit, I told her, "You need to work on improving your emotional boundaries." She was surprised by my comment. "But the teachings of Buddha say we aren't separate," Sophie said. "So why would I need boundaries? What am I protecting? Isn't the whole idea to not be attached to the needs of my ego?"

This prompted Russell, another student, to reveal that he and his ex-wife, who share custody of their child, were working on boundary issues with a counselor. "We never worked this out while we were married," he said. "We thought being in love meant you weren't supposed to have boundaries." After class, my students shared stories about boundaries being violated—sometimes unknowingly.

by Phillip Moffitt | illustrations by Nick Dewar



In my observation from leading meditation and yoga retreats around the country, poorly defined or inappropriate boundaries are the cause of much suffering—and that suffering is compounded for some people by confusion regarding the teachings of oneness, selflessness, and non-separateness. If you're struggling with these questions, you're in good company. After all, you're part of a culture that isn't always clear about boundaries. Moreover, your sense of them changes dramatically as you mature and your spiritual life deepens.

Even if you've done a lot of spiritual work, you may still allow others to violate your boundaries or you may violate those of others. You may know people who chronically disrupt boundaries but have never realized it or deny it. You may even be enabling their behavior. Fortunately, you can dramatically improve in this area through conscious practice, honesty, and patience.

Beware, though, of underestimating the challenge of setting and maintaining healthy limits. Boundary issues are more complex than just inappropriate language or action, and their complexities are revealed only after you have some clarity. Mastering the issue of boundaries does not happen all at once; it's a gradual process that eventually leads to a more authentic and powerful you.

Evolving Boundaries

The language of personal boundaries mirrors that of property rights. The word *boundary* is used to define a parcel of land that can be bought, sold, insured, or taxed. Likewise, when used to describe emotional "space," it most commonly defines the self, which has unique rights that others should respect. Abuse counselor Pia Melody, in her book *Facing Codependence* (Harper San Francisco, 2003), refers to boundaries as "symbolic 'force fields'" that allow you to have a sense of self.

Today we take for granted the right to have our physical body remain inviolate, but throughout much of history many people—children, women, prisoners, serfs, slaves—did not enjoy that right because they "belonged" to a parent, spouse, or ruler who "owned" certain access rights to their bodies. We now view physical and even some emotional boundaries as part of a person's innate dignity and sanctity. This "human right" is considered more intrinsic than a constitutional right. But this view has only recently come into existence (and not all cultures share it), and it continues to evolve.

It can take years for what may seem like an obvious personal boundary to be accepted as a civil right. For example, only recently has unwelcome touch by a boss



1 Recognize

Practice being mindful of your emotional body. This is how you learn to recognize when something is wrong or potentially wrong, even if you can't identify what it is. When you experience a major boundary violation, you may go into a kind of shock, feeling disassociated, confused, powerless, or at fault. This is your internal alarm going off.

phenomena requires that you be present in the moment. Once you're in your body, you can feel the physical sensations associated with your emotions, which then helps you be emotionally present.

2 Discern

Consciously acknowledge that a boundary is being breached and that you have the right to protect

3 Act

Now you're ready to take action, to protect yourself verbally or physically as skillfully as possible. Mindfulness meditation and asana practice are helpful in building your capacity to recognize and recollect. Therapy that uses mindfulness is also excellent in honing these skills.

When you act, it's essential to honor your own boundary. What you

may be more effective at a later time. It doesn't mean getting on your high horse and tormenting those you perceive as violators. It's almost always better to protect yourself in the moment without assuming you're right; wait until you can clearly identify a pattern before you confront directly.

You must also look at your own role in boundary violations. Did you

set this up by going outside the normal boundary, only to have someone else go even further beyond your limit? Did you make a series of appease-

ments that led to a major intrusion? Are you using boundaries to manipulate someone? Do you "prefer" being a victim in relationships? Do you use boundaries to avoid intimacy? Remember to ask yourself these questions in a curious rather than judgmental way. It's all part of your growth and development. P.M.

Boundary Lessons

If you don't know how or where to draw the line, try this four-step boundary practice.

2 Recollect

Bring mindfulness to your physical body, so you can be fully present with a clear mind. This helps you recollect yourself. Recollection returns you to your physical body, to the moment, and to your own authenticity. To recollect, feel your feet on the floor, feel your hands, and find your breath. Making specific observations about these physical

yourself. At this point, you know that something feels wrong emotionally, you are present in your body, and you've confirmed that you don't have to feel this way. Sometimes you will be able to name the violation, other times you won't; you just know that something is not right.

do may or may not be effective in the moment, but you're changing how you relate internally to a pattern of external intrusions, and in the long run that's what will influence your self-esteem, effectiveness, and feeling of empowerment. You act rationally, not reactively. This may mean walking away, changing the subject, or confronting the situation directly, which

or coworker been defined as illegal sexual harassment. It's still being debated whether the air around your body is protected and, if so, if you have the right to be protected from secondhand smoke. And now there's a debate about public cell phone use being an intrusion on our individual and collective space—a boundary that involves the right to peace and quiet.

Physical boundaries represent the right to be free from intrusion by others, and only when they are fully respected can emotional boundaries be dealt with. Violations of this physical right include torture of prisoners of war and criminals, rape, child abuse, and physical assault. In each

instance there is also an undeniable emotional violation, which underscores the fact that emotional boundaries are as tangible as—and are fundamentally linked to—physical ones. Honoring physical boundaries is essential. Otherwise, justifying mistreatment of someone's body implies that such boundaries are conditional, not innate. This slippery slope leads to abuse by all sorts of violators, including police, governments, corporations, and those acting in the name of God. Eventually, you and those you love will be affected. Any time our culture is complacent about such violations, all our personal boundary rights are under threat.

continued on page 120

continued from page 77

Opinion varies as to what constitutes physical violation in a given situation. In yoga class, for instance, one yogi may feel offended by a teacher's touch, while another doesn't find it the least bit objectionable. I've seen teachers slap or kick a body part when adjusting students' poses, and those students remained unfazed.

Given this lack of clear consensus about physical boundaries, it's no surprise that emotional boundaries are even more complicated. That means *it's up to you to define and maintain your boundaries* and to honor those of others. For several years, I studied at an ashram with an Indian teacher I found verbally abusive. Had he spoken to me the way he did to others I would have confronted him instantly, but the other students never did.

If you're unclear about physical boundaries, you may have trouble developing reasonable emotional boundaries; you may engage in or subject yourself to verbal abuse, emotional intimidation, or intrusive behavior; or you may be inappropri-

ately insistent or assertive. On a more subtle level, you may not realize that you have the right to psychological sanctity—that it's inappropriate for others to ask certain things of you, and that you have the right to say no to them. No wonder so many of us don't feel entitled to our own emotional

If you can't maintain your own boundaries, you risk getting pulled into other people's dramas.

boundaries—probably few of us have ever consciously explored these boundaries.

CROSSING THE LINE

You may become entangled in boundary issues in two ways. One is trespassing—when someone intrudes on your space without invitation. The other is enmeshment—the failure to honor the psychological autonomy of another.

Although having your boundaries trespassed is disturbing, it's a problem that's easily recognized—and, with goodwill, can

be negotiated. People may try to bully or intimidate you, but your willingness to stand up and fight for your space will prevent further abuse. This can happen at work or in relationships, especially divorce.

Far more treacherous and confusing is enmeshment—an inappropriate merging of identities. It can take many forms: Your spouse tells you what to think; your sister-in-law shares inappropriate details about her sex life; your

mother corrects the way you speak to your children—in front of the kids; your best friend tells you whom you should date; your coworker asks you to “help” with her work, but she's really asking you to do it for her; your boss calls you at home to ask you to do the task he has neglected. In each instance, if you can't maintain your boundary, you acquiesce and are pulled into someone else's drama.

Enmeshment is prevalent in our culture. The concept became popular when psychologist Salvador Minuchin discussed

it in *Psychosomatic Families* (Harvard University Press, 1978), a book he coauthored for use in family therapy. The term applies in so many situations because we tend to replicate the family dynamics of our childhood in most of our adult interactions.

Enmeshment gets even more complicated if you become codependent, either by inappropriately involving others in getting your needs met or by acting inappropriately to fulfill others' needs, thus robbing them of their independence. Because codependency is so widespread, many people are equally, mutually enmeshed—a situation that can be very difficult to change.

Russell and his ex-wife are a good example. Their feelings of love were driven away because they began treating each other as an extension of themselves. Unfortunately, intimate love is often misunderstood as a merger without boundaries. This phenomenon helps explain why you might divorce one person only to marry someone else who is very similar. Either this new spouse maintains better boundaries and the relationship works, or you re-

create the same enmeshment patterns in your new marriage and it may eventually fail. Love is not sharing everything, but sharing what fosters growth and wonderment. Love honors boundaries through restraint and avoiding “dumping” on the other person or acting out.

DRAWING THE LINE

You can learn to recognize trespassing and enmeshment, but avoiding or extricating yourself from them takes discipline and patience. To start, I suggest using a four-step boundary practice in which you first *recognize* the feeling of wrongness, then *recollect* or return to your boundary before *discerning* or acknowledging the truth of the situation, and finally, *acting*. (For more detail on this practice, see “Boundary Lessons,” page 77.) This works for both trespassing and enmeshment, although for enmeshment you’ll probably have to repeat these steps many times.

Enmeshment is insidious because you often feel compelled or imprisoned by it. You can’t imagine doing anything but tak-

ing care of the other person. Although you may initially feel awful, once you’re clear of it you’ll feel much more authentically yourself. Sometimes your partners in enmeshment are better off as well; other times they simply move on to another codependent situation. Be careful not to do the same yourself once you’re free.

Enmeshed boundaries are trickier to resolve than ones that involve trespassing, but both situations are subject to improvement. The discomfort you may feel when creating healthy boundaries is part of the journey—it tests the earnestness of your quest to be truly autonomous and meet someone else as an independent, sacred other.

Try to develop a gut feeling about your intrinsic emotional and physical boundaries by being curious, staying mindful, avoiding self-judgment, and being compassionate with yourself. Healthy, resilient boundaries feed upon themselves, so that the more vibrant they are, the more they develop. Paradoxically, once you become strong in your boundaries, they become

more porous; love and caring flow more easily between yourself and others. In a fully mature state, your being can seem almost transparent to others.

TRANSCENDING THE LINE

This brings us to Sophie's question: "The teachings of Buddha say we aren't separate, so why would I need boundaries?" This is an incisive question about a confusing issue. If the tradition teaches that you are not separate, that you abide in

unity, then why worry about boundaries? Don't they create and even glorify the very self you're trying to transcend?

More than 20 years ago, psychologist and mindfulness meditation teacher Jack Engler tried to address this question when he wrote, "You have to have a self in order to let go of a self." This points to the importance of being mentally healthy—having a functional reasoning and integrating faculty—in order to develop the skills and insights that allow you to let go

of greed and aversion and clear your mind of delusion. As Engler wrote more recently in *Psychoanalysis and Buddhism* (Wisdom, 2003), "It takes certain ego capacities just to practice meditation or any spiritual practice." Maintaining healthy boundaries is one such capacity.

Developing and maintaining healthy boundaries is vital to your spiritual development in two ways. The first is in your relationships with your teacher and fellow yogis. In both relationships, strong boundaries are imperative. Weak boundaries can lead to financial, emotional, or sexual exploitation by teachers and can possibly alienate you from your spiritual path. You may either misunderstand the idea of "surrendering to the teacher," or your teacher may not have sufficiently strong boundaries to resist exploiting you.

If you have strong boundaries, you will not allow a teacher to trespass them. And, paradoxically, the confidence from your healthy boundaries will allow you to "surrender" in the way that your journey truly asks of you—by abandoning your habitual concepts about a "you" and how your spiritual life is to unfold. If you have healthy boundaries with your fellow students, you're less likely to become enmeshed in their emotional dramas (and they in yours) or sexually involved in a way you may regret later. You also have the necessary balance to stay mindful of what is your practice and what is theirs.

Healthy boundaries can also facilitate spiritual growth once you're clear about the role of ego and freedom. As Engler points out, it's a mistake to think that first you solve your ego problems and then you begin spiritual work. It's equally erroneous to think that if your ego becomes sufficiently healthy, you will automatically become enlightened and your spiritual work will then be complete.

Psychological growth and spiritual liberation unfold separately and on a different continuum, but they can be mutually supportive. Meditation practice can be very beneficial for developing your ego. Likewise, a healthy ego helps with the frustration, uncertainty, and pain of spiritual practice and greatly aids in transforming humiliation into humility. And at each step

of your enlightenment, whether it comes all at once or gradually, you still have to integrate what you've learned into daily life, which requires a healthy ego with good boundaries.

BEYOND BOUNDARIES

Through my own practice, I now see boundaries as being about *stewardship*, which means I have a responsibility for caring for this body and these mental and emotional states. If I'm a good steward, opportune conditions for both psychological development and spiritual freedom will arise, and I'll cause less suffering for myself and others. Good boundaries are not about "me" or my ego. Nor is there a feeling of "me" or "mine." Rather, there is harmony and possibility, or there is not. Likewise, being a good steward means showing the same respect for the boundaries of others. I may not always be able to experience boundaries this way, but that's how I organize and work with my view. Only gradually has it become a natural state, through repetition and habit.

I often urge students to think less about killing their ego and more about not identifying with what it wants. It's not your ego that causes your suffering, it's believing that life is all about meeting its endless wants. Treat your ego kindly and help it develop as best you can. Of course, it isn't easy letting go of attachment. You may have a crossover moment when you cease to be organized around the ego but the ego soon reappears. What is different is that you're no longer identified with it. You recognize that this ego is neither "me" nor "mine."

Once you experience a degree of freedom, you'll also realize that you still have a personality. But you're not so caught in your desires or so deluded as before. You'll discover that it's possible to live in the moment instead of shrinking into thoughts about the past or the future—although you'll still have thoughts about both. You simply are, the mind resting in freedom—which is a state of being.

When you work with mature spiritual teachers, you may find comfort in knowing they have an acute awareness that you, in your illusion of separateness, suffer

anguish and stress, much of which comes from being obsessed with past and future. These teachers understand that you aren't yet able to be within your boundaries, that you may still be imprisoned by the wants and fears arising from your ego's unease.

Because these teachers don't identify with their own ego self, they experience no such anxiety; their boundaries are fluid and flexible. They are so open that their hearts tremble with your pain, celebrate your joy, and never need you to be other than who

you are. Such teachers are modeling and mirroring your own true nature for you. Creating healthy boundaries, understood in this way, is part of the journey toward realizing that true nature. ■

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