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## Boundaries

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I first recall hearing the word "boundaries" in about 1981. I finally thought I understood them in about 1995. Fourteen years of confusion and struggle resulted in this paper. If you are puzzled, I offer you my sympathy. If you want to learn about boundaries, I offer you what I have learned.

I've found there are two ways to look at boundaries: from the point of view of an individual, you and me; and from the point of view of a relationship, with two or more people.

This paper is about boundaries from the point of view of an individual. In it, I try to answer the following questions:

1. What are boundaries?
2. Why do I need boundaries?
3. How do I know my boundaries are invaded?
4. What does it mean to "set your Boundary?"
5. Who's responsible for your boundaries?
6. What are the different types of boundaries?
7. How do I learn to handle my boundaries better?

I have written another paper on [boundaries from the framework of a couple](#). In it, I try to answer your questions:

1. Why my partner drives me crazy at times? And why I drive my partner crazy at times?
2. What to do when I get upset with my partner – when I lose it?
3. What to do when my partner gets upset – when they lose it?
4. What to do to help from losing it and help them from losing it?

### Definitions

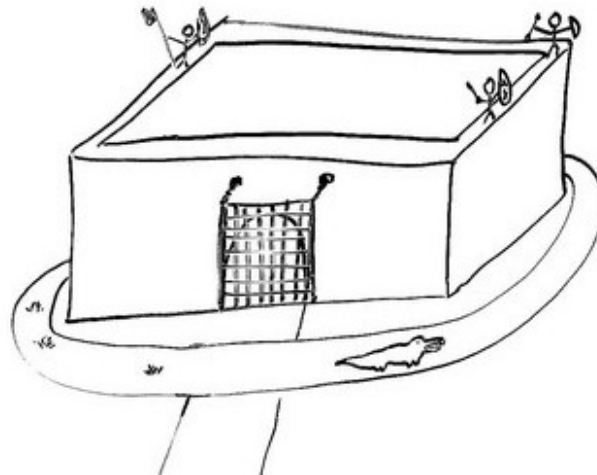
There are so many uses for the word Boundary that I want to give you my definitions right up front. In the rest of this paper I will explore and reinforce these definitions.

- A Boundary is an imaginary line that separates my stuff from yours. On one side of this line are my possessions and on the other side are yours.
- All boundaries have sides: my side and your side. A Boundary is personal and is a necessary part of integrity and self-esteem. I like the idea that a Boundary is not a tool of selfishness, but is a critical element of SELF-ishness.

- Setting Boundaries takes place when I establish in my mind where my Boundary line is or when I tell you where my Boundary line lies. Example: "This toothbrush is mine." "I'd like you to know I consider that toothbrush mine."
- A Boundary Invasion takes place when you are doing something I don't want with things that are on my side of my Boundaries. "You picked up and used my toothbrush."
- Defending my Boundaries is when I spend some effort keeping you on the other side of my boundaries. "Put down my toothbrush." "I am locking my toothbrush in this cabinet."

### The Castle

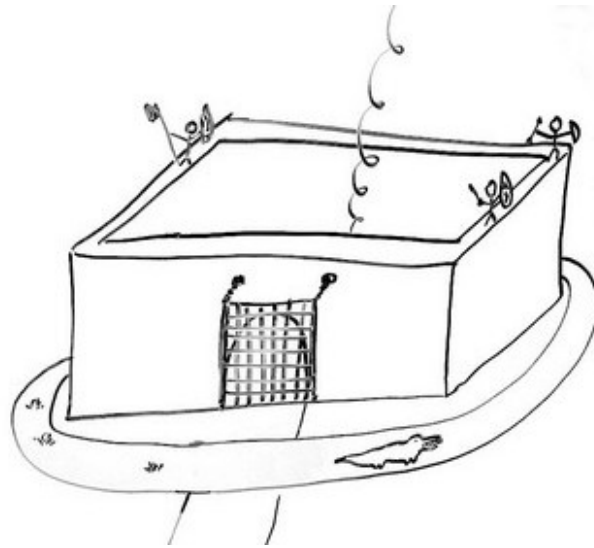
Over the years I have come to draw a picture whenever I start to teach the subject of Boundaries. I think each of us lives in a castle. Our Selves, the things we treasure are inside. This is kind of like a village inside the castle's walls. Our Boundaries (the walls, the moat, the drawbridge, the great gate, the Soldiers and the alligator) are there to establish, set aside and protect our village, our selves. If our wall does its job, we can live a peaceful and enjoyable life.



### Boundary Invasions: Getting Upset

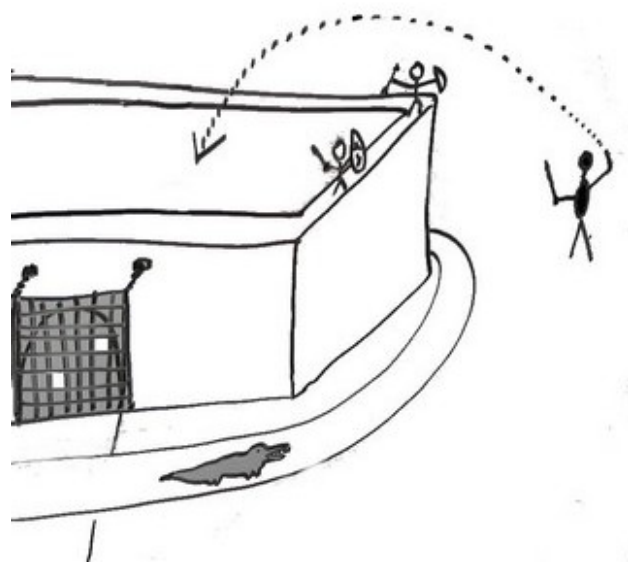
Whenever my boundaries are invaded, I will get upset. My "upset" is an expression of feeling invaded. If I watch my level of upset, I can be aware of the invasions in my life. If I watch my level of upset, I can begin to identify my boundaries that I am not setting or defending well. The smoke in my castle picture represents "feeling upset." When I get upset, I believe that somehow I have let fire get into my village. **My village, my self is on fire!** At the moment, I don't necessarily know how I've let this happen. I just know I am upset – on fire. The principle is

"Your Boundaries are Invaded when you are Upset", and, as you will see later, you have let someone invade your boundaries.



How did the fire get inside? Well, staying with the castle picture, somebody threw a flaming torch or shot a flaming arrow over my wall. Something that somebody did outside me got past my defenses and into my special place. The proof is in the "upset" - the flames.

Someone pulls into the lane in front of me and I get upset. Someone says something about my looks, and I get upset. Someone asks me a question and I get upset. I think about someone hurting my dog and I get upset. Each of these are Boundary Invasions as indicated by the "upset."



Sometimes I feel upset around "nice" people. What I have come to realize is that some people

can “magically” make their attempted attacks seem innocent to me. These “magicians” may not even be aware they are doing anything. Still the proof is in the “upset” - the flames and the smoke from the village in my castle.



I’ve found that not all upset’s are from just today’s “Boundary Invasions”. I can feel upset when I recall previous Boundaries Invasions. For example, my name, Turtle, is quite funny to many people. When I was a kid, other kids would tease me a lot. It hurt. When I remember today hiding from other kids, I get upset at the memory of my lack of courage to stand up. I can get upset just thinking about people invading my boundaries.

I can even get upset when I am invading someone else’s boundaries. An example would be that I want my brother’s comic books. He won’t share them. I get upset. Sometimes I want my wife to listen to my thoughts. She doesn’t want to, and I get upset. This calls for discussion. I will share more about this later. Still the idea is that boundaries are being invaded.

### The Components of Boundaries

Take a look at my picture of the castle. There are five different parts to Boundaries: 1) the Moat, 2) the Alligator, 3) the Gate and Drawbridge, 4) the Wall, and 5) the Soldiers.

#### The Moat

When I want peace and quiet sometimes I go take a walk in the woods. A moat is like a physical distance. Sometimes I need lots of distance – a wide moat. Sometimes I don’t need so much distance – a narrow moat. I recall one Christmas as a little kid feeling embarrassed (upset) on Christmas day when all the people were watching me open presents. I decided to take all my unopened presents to my room upstairs. That was like putting a large Moat between me and the people whose eyes seemed to be invading me. Working with clients, I often meet people who seem to have almost no sense of self. Perhaps they come from a family where no one had boundaries skills. I sometimes suggest a period of time living alone away from the family for a while – 500 miles for a year. This would be a very large Moat. I think of the Moat as the passive portion of my boundaries that I can take advantage of to protect myself from upset.

### **The Alligator**

In that Moat are some powerful critters. They will do things, on their own, to help me stay away from upset.

I often work with Domestic Violence situations. Clearly the victim wants some peace and quiet. A restraining order activates the police who will often strongly act to keep the perpetrator away from the victim. I think of the police as Alligators, helpful for a person needing a larger Moat. I work with Domestic Violence so often I actually visualize the police as helpful alligators, when they drive by.

### **The Wall**

Another part of my boundaries are things I have built or bought. I think of the wall of my house, the walls of my bedroom, work room, office, the sides of my car as castle walls. The fence around my property is a kind of wall. The program on my computer that gets rid of bad email is a kind of wall. The term "firewall" is a computer word for a program that keeps other people outside my house from using my computer. Walls can be more or less effective and may be strong in some directions and may be weak and have large holes in other directions.

### **The Gate and the Drawbridge**

I think of the Gate and the Drawbridge as controllable parts of my Walls and my Moat. When I take a walk away from my wife, I think that I am raising my Drawbridge and putting more Moat between us. When I come back, I think I am lowering the Drawbridge, letting her come across my Moat – I am closer. When I close and lock my doors, when I hang up the phone, I think I am closing the Gate. When I open my door, when I answer the phone, I am opening the Gate. When I don't answer the phone, I am leaving the Gate shut.

### **The Soldiers: Boundary Skills**

Each of us has active power to control and change our boundaries. I visualize this active component as "Soldiers walking the walls." These Soldiers open and close the doors. They raise and lower the drawbridge. They feed, or call up, the Alligators. They are the ones who put out the fire in my Castle – they soothe my upset. Like the other components of Boundaries, they protect me from invasion or upset. They do things. If they are well trained they don't need to be told their job. They will do the right thing automatically. They just need to be well trained. I think of these Soldiers as my Boundary Skills.

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### **Training**

A skill is a behavior that becomes largely automatic over time. 10-finger typing is a skill that must be learned through careful practice. Boundary Skills are learned through

practice.

### **Peasants**

Our active protection starts off untrained, just as other parts of us start off as untrained. I believe babies start training their Boundary skills around age one and a half.

In my picture of the castle, Soldiers are recruited from the sons and daughters of farmers. These are peasants. A peasant doesn't know how to hold a sword, and is apt to stab himself in the foot. I recall the phrase, "The wise man does not hand an automatic weapon to a peasant." You give them a stick, and you start the training. As training progresses, you get them to practice with more effective weapons. Peasants are often no use in protecting their castle, and indeed sometimes get in the way.

Years ago my "untrained" Peasants were often of no help in protecting me from upset. My poor skills often opened up the very gates that could have protected me had I left them closed. For example I was taught to be polite and listen to someone talking to me. And so when I was in a verbally abusive situation, I would stand still and listen and be upset. To this day I may answer a phone ring when I am upset at something else, and thus open myself to additional Boundary Invasions.

### **Soldiers**

After much training, Peasants graduate to being Soldiers. To me a Soldier is an active Boundary Skill that is trained enough to function - under constant supervision. Soldiers lives are divided into three sections: eating/sleeping, standing on guard, and further training.

When Soldiers are on guard, they are always under the direction of more trained drill instructors. Soldiers, while they can handle weapons, are apt to use too much or too little force. They are apt to use a small tactical nuclear device when a tennis racket is the appropriate defensive tool.

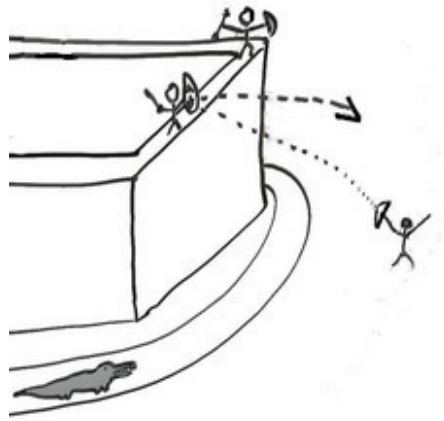
I think this is like using divorce because you are arguing - to big a tool. Another example is saying "no" over and over to your teenage kids while they continue to smoke marijuana in your house - to small a tool. While these actions are in the right direction, I think they are clumsy and inefficient - overkill or under kill.

Soldiers get tired a lot. They are inefficient and use more effort than they need to. My Boundary efforts often used to exhaust me and I was tired a lot. I recall saying that I could handle my parents visiting me for about 2 days and then I couldn't handle their presence any more.

Soldiers must continue their training. To do this they need increasingly more and more realistic experiences. An example is the skill called "hanging up the phone." First, I had to learn to hang up. Then I had to practice hanging up on sales people. Later, I worked

on being able to hang up on my ex-wife. This learning process may take a long time. I think I can now determine whether I want to hang up and can do it in almost all circumstances when I choose. My training took about 20 years.

When Soldiers know exactly what tool and how much force to use in all situations, then they graduate and become Warriors.



### Warriors

A warrior knows exactly how to use all tools. A warrior knows exactly how much force is the right amount. A warrior operates without supervision. Warriors don't get exhausted since they are efficient. Warriors can easily, confidently and gracefully dance while they protect their castles. I have found that well trained Boundary Skills are not only a joy, but they don't take much effort. They work smoothly.

I used to admire someone who could answer the phone from a soliciting sales person, smile, say something kind, hang up, and go on with what they were doing. Now I do this. I admire people who remain cheerful when someone cuts them off in traffic. I am getting better.

### Practice – practice

I think that until you live a life free from upset, you will need to train your Boundary Skills, your Soldiers. I remind people that one rarely gets upset when one is alone. It is when others are around that a person needs Boundaries. Living on a desert island or living alone doesn't prepare you for living with others. And I firmly believe that humans are not designed to live alone. When someone is around and we get upset, I think the thing to do is enter what I call a training cycle.

### Step 1: Upset

Real-life training starts with the awareness that smoke is rising from inside my castle. I am upset. Somebody did or said something. I think the first step of building boundaries is to NOTICE when you are upset.

### **Step 2: Withdraw**

The next step is to get that fire out. Unfortunately, the same Soldiers who defend my walls, are the ones who put out fires. If my Soldiers are busy, who is watching the wall? And so during the time I put the fire out, and if I think I don't have enough Soldiers to do both jobs, I need to withdraw from other humans. This helps to prevent further "attacks" while I am vulnerable. I take a break from society. I sometimes visualize this as putting large wheels on my castle and driving it away for a while. I think it is important to signal other people that I will come back when my upset is over and when I have worked on training my Soldiers.

I've learned that quiet time (Time Outs) helps get the fire out.

### **Step 3: Analyze**

Next, look at the situation that occurred. What was going on? Who was around? What did the upset feel like? Have I had this upset before? If it did happen before, who was around then? What was going on then? I am looking for patterns both within myself and in the situation. Is it the same person? Is it a similar person? Is it a particular type of situation? I try putting my hand on the part of my body that feels the most upset: my chest, my stomach, my back, etc. Then I try recalling the oldest memory I have in my life of that feeling in my body. The way I see it, I am trying to locate holes in the wall of my castle, in my Boundaries. My focus is on me, not on "the other." The question is "why am I so upset" and not "why did they do that."

### **Step 4: Planning**

Now I start asking myself, "What can I do about this upset? How long can I stand it without getting upset? Do I have to be around this person?" I look for things I can do that will keep me calm and relaxed. I do not try to change the other person. Using the picture of the castle, trying to change them means attacking their castle and shifting from defensive to offensive tactics. I've learned it doesn't work. They will get upset and just use their Boundary skills to defend against me. I remind you - all boundaries tactics are defensive. For example I think it is typical to ask telephone solicitors not to call again. And that is fine. But they still call. If I focus on my skills, I can remain relaxed even if they do. More about examples of Boundary Skills later.

### **Step 5: Practice**

Do you remember fire drills when you were a kid? These were practice sessions. All Soldiers, sailors and pilots in the military service spend their time in practice sessions. The idea is to build automatic and wise habits, so that in an emergency the first reaction,

the automatic one, will be a wise and helpful one. And so in this step I practice the tool that I have come up with in Step 4. I practice until the behavior comes easily.

### **Step 6: Return**

After some practice I come back to the original situation and try out my new skills. If I remain relaxed in the same situation, then my Soldiers are trained. If I remain somewhat tense, but can handle the situation, I continue practicing. If I get upset again, I repeat the whole process again looking for a new tools to use. Sometimes I ask friends or a professional for suggestions on how to handle the situation.

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### **The Energy of Boundaries: Anger**

Amazingly almost all of us have seen cats practicing Boundary skills. Most cats have great Boundary skills. You will never see two cats sleeping together where one is being boss. Watch them. They have warriors. Watching cats is a fascinating way to learn. The energy behind good boundaries and all Boundary skills is ANGER. If you have been taught to suppress your anger, you have also been taught to have no boundaries.

Little kids of 18 months start practicing Boundary skills. They also start practicing both expressing anger and getting adults to express anger. They are trying to learn. I believe teaching little kids to never get angry is the same as teaching them to let people abuse them. I think kids should be shown and taught how to express anger appropriately. Any expression of anger that leaves the you in a worse situation than before is inappropriate. This is a bit tricky, so listen to this example. If I express my anger by yelling and breaking a window and cutting my hand, I am in trouble. I now have to deal with the broken window and my damaged hand. If I express my anger by yelling, no one is hurt and nothing damaged. If I express my anger by hitting a punching bag, no one is hurt and nothing damaged. Sometimes when I yell someone else gets upset. But that upset is about their lack of boundary skills not mine. (I believe that if you were taught to not upset other people, then you were not trained in boundary Skills.)

I repeat, Anger is the power behind boundaries. Anger is an emotion, and all emotions have intensity. Feelings and their expression come in any amounts from 0% to 100 percent. 0% anger means all is really fine. 100% anger I call murderous rage. I think all humans are capable of all levels of anger. The thing that makes cats into warriors is that they tend to use exactly the amount of energy, of anger, that is necessary to get their point across. They can regulate how much anger they use to a fine degree. They rarely use too much They rarely use too little. They just increase the energy until it works and then they stop. I think of them as natural warriors. I once watched a cat that was being mauled by a 7-month old boy. The cat grabbed the little boy's hand in its teeth. The boy looked startled and backed away. I looked at his hand – not a scratch. The cat remained relaxed. That's warrior behavior.

### **Low Anger: Signaling**

As I watched cats, I saw that low anger is expressed as a kind of signaling – sending a message. They look annoyed. If that doesn't work, they lash their tails. If that doesn't work they growl with their mouths closed. If that doesn't work they open their mouths and hiss, teeth bared. I like to think of this as slowly turning up the volume level of the signal: 5% a dirty look, 10% a lash of tail, 15% a growl, 20% a hiss, 25% a swipe of a paw with claws closed, and 30% a swipe of a paw with claws out, etc. The whole action is about sending a signal of a Boundary being crossed.

### Hi Anger: Withdrawing

Our culture might tell us that the next level up is "attacking." But I remind you that all Boundary skills are defensive. I believe that aggressive behavior is that of bullies who are invading other people's boundaries. We need Boundary skills to protect us from their efforts.



Watching cats, I noticed that as their anger gets larger they automatically switch from "signaling behaviors" to "leaving behaviors." Humans and mammals are social beings. Being abandoned or rejected hurts. Still it is the right of anyone to go where they want with their body. Thus I have come to see that "the act of withdrawing" is a useful message to tell people that my boundaries are being invaded. It will cause some pain to others and at the same time doesn't invade their boundaries. And it works.

Cats start with low level "leaving behaviors" and increase the distance and the length of time of leaving until at the extreme they simply move out. First they walk 3 steps away. If that doesn't work, they walk across the room. If that doesn't work, they go under a chair or out of reach somewhere. If that doesn't work, they leave the room. If that doesn't work they leave the house. At each level they also use "how long" they leave. I mean they walk three steps away and then come back in a minute, or 5 minutes, or an hour, etc. The highest expression of anger is that of moving out of the house, permanently.

### How much energy to you need?

When I am looking for an appropriate Boundary skill, the principle is to use the lowest energy level that works; i.e. that stops the Boundary Invasion and that keeps you calm. I think "Boundary competence/confidence" comes from having many levels of Boundary skills, and having higher energy skills than the current situation needs. "I have more than I need." I think one of the training challenges for each of us, is that we have been poorly taught in expressing different levels of anger. Most people whom I see in my office can express certain levels of anger. For example:

- 0% anger (keep silent),
- 10% anger ("that doesn't feel good"),
- 25% anger ("Dammit! Stop that."),
- 35% anger (walk off for a while) and
- 80% anger ("I'm divorcing you.").

But those specific levels seem to be their only choices. If they need a tool between say 10% and 25%, they don't have it. Thus their partner is startled at what appears a sudden escalation.

Peasants have no skills. Soldiers use too much or too little. Warriors use just enough and no more. Warriors have such confidence that they swagger and even dance, while on the walls of the castle! Remember, low level skills are about communication or signaling. Higher level skills are about leaving for further and further distances and for longer and longer times. Handling children really requires excellent Boundary skills. Many parents know how to say, "No" to their kid, but have no idea what to do if the kid continues. All they need is an ability to increase the "no" until it reaches the level that stops the kid.

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### **Attack Awareness**

This may seem repetitious, but I want to be clear that you only need Soldiers or Boundary Skills when an attack occurs – when your castle is invaded. And I have learned that many people do not recognize when an attack has occurred.

**Upset means a failure of defenses and training is required.**

The general rule of thumb is that if you are upset, and another person is around, your boundaries have been attacked.

Note: There is another interesting possibility. That is: that you want to control their behavior and are using "your dramatic upset" to try to punish them. I alluded to this before. I suggest you don't worry too much about this situation for now. If you are doing this, your are trying to invade their boundaries, being a bully, and this is a chance for them to practice Boundary skills on you.

**I identify who is around when you get upset.**

This is useful information. Since signaling or withdrawing are your tools, it is nice to know to whom you will need to signal and from whom you will need to withdraw. Usually patterns will emerge.

**I identify the triggers**

A useful hint is that people cannot get into your castle unless you let them. They can send you signals by their actions. No matter how disguised the signals are, you do not have to let them in to your castle. I call these signals triggers. This is so important I will tell a story.

In old India, power was expensive and scarce. In many parts of the country they used water buffalo for heavy chores. But a water buffalo is a picky animal and will be obedient to only one master who it accepts as "boss." That means for every water buffalo there is set aside one keeper. So that, too, becomes expensive manpower. Well, as an old culture they solved this problem. They use a 42 lb boy to control a 1200 lb water buffalo.

How do they do this? Well, first they capture a water buffalo and over a period of weeks, using a sharp stick and salt, they create a wound, an open ulcer on the animal's rear hip. The wound is about the size of a half dollar. Like a giant canker sore in your mouth, this wound is very sore to the touch.

Next they take a little boy and tell him, "That is your water buffalo. For the next month, your entire job is to get it to stand, and to move it around the compound for 20 minutes, three times a day. If it doesn't do what you want, use this stick to poke that wound." So the little boy wanders over and stands in front of the peacefully chewing water buffalo lying in the dust. He talks to it. It ignores him. He yells at it. It chews on. Then he takes the stick and tries to poke the wound. He misses and the animal continues to ignore him. Finally his stick finds the wound, and with a great bellow the beast stands up. The boy is pleased; the animal is wary. The two of them practice this routine. Day by day, the boy becomes more accurate. Day by day the water buffalo gets wiser. Pretty soon all the boy has to do is point the stick at the spot and the animal jumps. Later all the boy has to do is flip his wrist in the right direction and the great animal moves.

Then finally the trainers take the stick away. The boy doesn't need it, and can always get one if the water buffalo forgets. Hand gestures or words work fine.

I think of us humans as "water buffaloes" with about 4 to 10 sores on us. These sores were created in our childhood. Just walking through the forest is risky because random sticks (triggers) may dig into our wounds. So we avoid forests. But we meet people who, thrashing around, poke/trigger our wounds. So we try to stop them. I call this behavior "blaming the stick," and I don't find it to work. One reason is that the behavior they do that triggers us makes sense to the person doing it. If I now order them around, I am invading their boundaries. Another reason it doesn't work is that I am trying to make them responsible for my upset, when more accurately, I am responsible for my upset. I think this is kind of dumb. Avoiding sticks/triggers is not the way to go.

Restructure the situation. Heal the wound. Put a bandage on it. Get some nice salve. Then you can walk through the forest with ease. So I teach myself to take every chance, when I get upset, to notice more and more where my wounds are located. On what part of my great body do I carry an open ulcer? I withdraw from the wounding situation temporarily, and then I start applying healing to that spot. Sometimes I visit a doctor/friend/my partner for some comforting and for help at applying the healing remedy. When the wound is healed I don't have to worry about sticks/triggers.

So I suggest, "Forget about blaming the stick." That works under the age of 8, when you have caretakers who are supposed to be responsible. Now that I am an adult, "healing my wound" seems the way to go, as I am responsible for myself now.

### Identify your open wounds

By studying your patterns of upset, I think you can eventually identify the wounds you carry. Heal those wounds.

### Identify your responsibility

Simply put, your wounds are your problem, now. When you were a kid you might not have been able to do much about them. But after the age of 8 or so, I think it is all your responsibility. No one else is responsible for your happiness or your boundaries. If you are upset, what are you going to do about it? If you think your boundaries are being attacked, you need Boundary skills.

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## Boundary Position Statements

People often speak about "setting their boundaries." But what is meant by this? I believe that the perfect Boundary skill involves two elements: a) a statement of the line you are drawing, and b) a statement of the level of energy you are ready to put into defending this line. I call this two part message a Boundary Position Statement or a Position for short.

"That is my desk. Please leave it alone." "Touch my arm like that one more time and I'll leave." "Say one more word on that subject tonight and I will sleep in the living room." "Don't rush me. If you push one more time, I will not talk about this for a week." "Break one more glass and I will call 911."

Notice the two parts of a Boundary Position Statement: your line drawn and your specific warning.

### The Boundary line

This is no more that a statement of what I think is on my side of my Boundary: "my desk" "my arm" "my hearing" "my time" "my property or my space." I will talk about the general rules of all Boundary lines later. Just notice that the Boundary line is often physically clear and the clearer you state that line the better.



My general rule is to state my Boundary lines simply and clearly.

### The Boundary energy – defensive weapon size

The second part of setting a Boundary is to communicate the energy behind your request as a warning of what the other person can expect. Leaving this out tends to make things very confusing for all concerned.

Remember the goal is to find the level of energy that is optimum to achieve your Boundary goal. You don't want to use too much, but you don't want to use too little. My general rule is to use enough energy to make sure you get the attention of the "invader" and then watch to see if you've used enough energy. If you need more, raise the level.

### **Low Energy Skills – Sending Signals**

The signals we adults use come in a wide variety. They tend to move from low signal levels (polite) to high levels (quite impolite). Low levels are often simple requests for people to stop. As the level increases I think the requests should get clearer and clearer, simpler and simpler, noisier and noisier. Think of just using the word "stop." "Please stop." "What part of stop don't you understand?" "Stop now." "Stop right now!" "STOP!!!!" yelled or written on the walls with a marker.

I recall a friend who was trying to get her husband to stop. She sat up in bed, yelled "stop" and tore the bed sheet in half. Even that ripping ( a great sound!) was just a gesture. And it was her side of the sheet. Ripping his side of the sheet would have invaded his space.

### **High Energy Skills – Withdrawal**

Withdrawing is an art form and comes in many levels. Low level skills are often gestures of pulling away. Not looking at someone, turning away, changing the subject. Higher levels involve actually moving further and further away for increasingly longer and longer periods of time.

One place we are different from animals is in our ability to imagine. So an important component of the "signal of leaving" is signaling that you will come back after a finite period of time. Leaving the room and saying nothing to your partner can easily initiate in them the fear of divorce and thus is often like using too big a weapon, too soon. With humans it is important to leave for "20 minutes," for an hour, a day, etc.

People ask me what to do when someone won't let them leave. I say, remember that it is a crime in most states to restrain an adult. You have a very large tool, calling 911, and getting a restraining order in your hands. The alligators are waiting. However, I believe you probably would not need this tool if you had used lower level tools effectively. I suggest you do not use withdrawing until you have exhausted signaling possibilities.

### **Exhaustion – Shift to other tools**

Using Boundary skills, making Boundary position statements and supporting them with energy can be exhausting. Learn to gauge how much energy you have and how long you can keep it up. If you have to use many low energy level tools, you may find it wise to more quickly shift to higher energy level tools. Or you may have to shift to "leaving" before you get completely exhausted.

I have found that many people say to themselves, "I can handle this for another 2

hours." And then at the end of those 2 hours they have no energy to make a graceful exit. I suggest that you keep some energy in reserve. If you think you can handle it for two hours, speak up and tell them, "I can handle this for about 30 more minutes." I find it better to err on the lower side.

### **Success means your Soldiers are trained**

You have good skills, if you remain relaxed. All Boundary Skills are defensive. Remember. Look at the castle. You, your self, live inside those walls. Others may try to attack, but in those walls you are safe – unless you let them in.

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### **Type of Boundaries: A Primer**

Now that I've covered the concepts behind Boundary skills, let me spend some time on the walls, the boundary lines. What are these lines between people, the actual boundaries. I have found it useful to think of Boundaries lines in six ways: physical, property, feelings, thinking, worth or value, and time. Each Boundary type has a phrase that I think best describes its rule. I have also given examples of Boundary Position Statements that fit each type of Boundary.

### **Physical Boundaries**

#### **Rule: All people's bodies belong to them.**

The first type of Boundary refers to each person's body. Touching my body is a potential invasion of my boundaries. My body is mine. Your body is yours. While this seems a simple rule, many people are taught in childhood to let other people touch them and to never ever think of stopping this.

I think this is a very hard lesson to teach children that their body belongs to them. On the one hand, I want them to learn to not let anyone touch them when it is "inappropriate." On the other hand I, as a parent, feel free to wipe their faces, clean their dripping nose, and examine the dirt behind their ears whenever I please. What do I do when my child doesn't want their nose wiped? Do I over-rule their wishes? Does that make me a kind, teaching parent or a bully?

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| <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>✓ Touch me and I am leaving.</li><li>✓ Check with me before you touch me, please.</li><li>✓ This is my body. I will do with it as I please, thank you.</li></ul> |
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I have a friend psychologist who works with children who have been physically and sexually abused. She tells me to tell all parents, "Make sure that some of the time, when your kid doesn't want to be touched, that you respect their wishes. Make sure that you let them know that their wishes are important."

In adulthood, my partner's body belongs to them, too. I find it very useful to always honor their requests to not be touched and also to frequently check out whether they want to be touched or not.

### Property Boundaries

**Rule: All people's property belongs to them.**

Humans have the capacity to treat objects as if the objects were part of their bodies. This is the issue of ownership. My wallet belongs to me, just as much as my hand, ears, or head. When someone reaches for my wallet I often react as if they were touching a part of my body.

I think this is very difficult to teach to children. We give them a room (their property) and then we tell them to keep their room clean. I think this is kind of crazy making. They know it. I think it much better to tell them that the room is ours and loaned to them until they leave home.

- ✓ That belongs to me. If you want it, please ask.
- ✓ Touch that again, and I will move it far from where you are tempted.
- ✓ I will not hesitate to involve the police if you take that. Just letting you know.
- ✓ If you want that, please let's negotiate on a price.

Then we give children a toy and order them to share it. What the heck is this! Is the toy theirs? How would we feel if the police arrived and told us we have to share our car with the neighbors? Again, I think sharing is very important, but I don't think it is taught this way.

Sharing is a powerful Boundary issue and I believe should never be expected. I think that if you are telling me "I have to share something," that you are invading me and I need some Soldier work. Sharing my stuff is my decision.

This gets even more complicated when ownership is unclear. How do I let someone share "our" car, "our" books, "our" house? In my experience this becomes a major issue with couples. Here are two examples.

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## Feeling Boundaries

### Feelings are not Thoughts

I experience that most people do not use the word "feel" very accurately. And so I would like to add a word of clarification before I write on the boundaries around feelings.

A feeling is an event in the body, which usually has hormonal secretions marking its existence. Feelings have intensity. People can have feelings without being aware of them, and often when they talk about their feelings they mislabel them. The phrases "I feel that...." or "I feel like...." usually are not about feelings. They are used to describe thoughts. "I feel that you are picking on me," is a nice sentence. But the feeling is left out. A better way to say that would be "I feel scared when I think you are picking on me." Now the feeling has been introduced into the sentence and the thought "I think you are picking on me" has been correctly labeled.

Feelings are anger, fear, sad, joy, hungry, alert, lonely, etc. These are single words, sometimes many of them. "I am feeling very hungry, thirsty, and a bit lonely."

If you can replace the phrase "I feel" with "I think" then I believe you are speaking of a thought. More on thoughts later.

### **Rule 1: All people's feelings belong to them.**

My feelings are my feelings. I make them. I have them. I report on them, if I choose. I own them. Therefore, if you ask me what I am feeling, you may be invading my property. I have the right to say, "I'd rather not tell you." "That is my business." Etc.

- ✓ I am reacting quite a bit. I'd rather take a quiet time and figure this out before I talk about it.
- ✓ I don't want to share my feelings right now.
- ✓ Whenever you figure out what you are feeling, I would like to know about it.
- ✓ My feelings are mine. Yours are yours.

But since feelings are pretty visible from the outside where other's stand, I think it useful to be aware that people can often pretty accurately guess at other people's feelings.

I think to tell someone what they are feeling based on what you see, tends to be an invasion. I think it much wiser to tell someone what you imagine they are feeling when you see their face, etc.

One fascinating example of this is what I call "Accusing with the Truth." This occurs when I look at someone, see anger in their face, and then point at them and say, "You're angry at me!" The tone of accusation will, in most people, trigger a defensive reaction of denial, "No, I am not!" At that point I, the accuser, can smile in a mean sort of way, as I have tricked them into lying. I think it is better to respond to any sort of accusation like this with, "Of course I am - at least somewhat."

## **Rule 2: No one can make anyone feel anything.**

Feelings are the body and brain's responses to fragments of thought processes – words or symbols. When I think of something or observe something, my brain examines that and decides to create certain feelings. Feelings originate inside the self, inside the castle.

The sound of a fire engine does not excite me. The sound hits my ears, my ears and brain process the experience, and then my brain decides to raise my level of excitement.

- ✓ You can't make me feel anything.
- ✓ You are not responsible for my feelings.
- ✓ Please don't try to fix my feelings.
- ✓ I'm sorry you feel that way. What can I do to help you with your feelings.
- ✓ I cannot make you feel anything. But I sure can do things that trigger your feelings. What did I do? And do you have an idea why that triggers you so much.

Thus no one and nothing can make you have a feeling. I believe a feeling is a very personal experience.

I experience the very common phrase, "You made me feel...." as all wrong. Blaming other people for our feelings is to me both a mistake and an attempt to invade their boundaries. Most commonly it is an attempt to avoid taking responsibility for myself and trying to get other's to be responsible for me. I've never found it to work.

You may do something. Shortly I may have a feeling. But you doing that thing did not cause my feeling. I did.

### **Rule 3: All feelings are valid.**

Feelings arise from normal processes in our brains, processes that involve remembered or even forgotten memories. If you were to become familiar with all the memories evoked by a situation, I believe you would appreciate the feeling as the logical outcome of those memories that were evoked.

- ✓ Of course, my feelings make sense.
- ✓ I don't know why I'm feeling this way right now, but I am sure it makes sense.
- ✓ I have a perfectly good reason for this feeling.
- ✓ My feeling may not make sense to you, but it does to me. And I'm the one with the feeling.

As I begin to take responsibility for my own feelings, I begin to discover that my feelings make sense - all the time.

If I am frightened, something frightened me. It may be something I see, something I thought of, or something I remembered. Still it is there and my feeling is going on. Fear is the experience of adrenalin in your bloodstream. You can wake up out of a nightmare full of fear. Adrenalin takes about 20 minutes to be metabolized and thus go away. Your fear, the feeling of adrenalin, will continue for quite a time even after you have awakened. Your fear is valid.

## Thinking Boundaries

While I understand feelings have a strong connection with facticity, thoughts don't. Thoughts are linking together of individual ideas. And the ideas contain symbols, words, images. And these symbols, words, images can trigger feelings.

I like to think that 95% of what goes on in my head (your head?) is invisible to everyone around me and is based on the vast histories of our lives stored in our magnificent brains. I believe that no one can truly eavesdrop on what is going on in our heads. But we do try to understand each other.

### Rule 1: My thoughts belong to me.

Just as with your body, your property, and your feelings, so your thoughts are yours. People do not have an automatic right to your thoughts. They can ask, but not expect.

- ✓ Sorry, but I plan to keep this to myself.
- ✓ I have my ideas. I don't have to share them. If you ask, I may leave.
- ✓ When you figure out what you want to say, I'll be listening.
- ✓ I haven't formed my thoughts yet. I'll let you know when I am ready to talk about this.
- ✓ I recollect that. But I don't want to talk about it now. I'll get back to you tomorrow morning.

Many times your thinking is still going on and you have not settled on what you want to say. You don't have to share it until you are ready.

### Rule 2: My reasons/motives belong to me.

Thoughts and feelings often add up to our motives for doing something. If I were to understand all the components of my reasoning, I would know why I do everything all the time. Some of those components are hidden even from me. Sometimes I "don't understand myself." But those factors are still present. I recall

a behavioral psychologist suggesting that the factors that go into a rat's choice in a maze probably number over 20,000. How much more complicated are we! For me, reasons always come in multiples.

Thus, why I do something is the sum of a bunch of factors inside of me.

- ✓ I have my reasons. I'd rather not share them right now.
- ✓ That is a good question. Why do I do that? Well some of the reasons might be .....
- ✓ Practice:
- ✓ I'm not answering any "Why" questions this month. Please bear with me.
- ✓ I don't answer "Why" questions in the morning, sorry.
- ✓ I've numbered all my reasons to make things faster. The reason I did that is #45. And the reason I've numbered my reasons is #22.

Some of those factors are triggered by what I sense or see in the outside world. If I want someone to "understand" me, I will have to share the most significant factors in my thinking that lead to my behavior. If I don't tell them, they can only guess. But the principle rule here is that I don't have to tell someone why I do something. I am not accountable to others. I recall a brain researcher telling me that "what, who, when, where" questions, take about 5 units of brain power. "How" questions take about 25 units of brain power. "Why" questions take anywhere from 500 units up. Just because someone asks "why?" do I have to give them an answer? Remember, "How come" is a "Why" question.

People ask "why" all the time.

Sometimes they are wanting to get information so that they can predict what you are going to do next. The goal is to make them feel more secure. Sometimes they are planning to argue with you and tell you their reasons for doing something else. Sometimes they are trying to shame you.

### **Rule 3: All persons make sense all the time.**

A person's sense, the complex formulae of factors that lead them to act, is within them. Whether they decide to tell others about it, their acts always are the results of inner decisions known to them or not.

- ✓ I hear you think I don't make sense. If you would like to know my sense, I am right here. You can ask.
- ✓ I'd prefer you ask me about my sense than judge it.
- ✓ Try walking in my shoes and you might see why that makes sense to me.

I like this rule because it directly confronts the vicious and often unconscious habit of judging other people's "sense."

### Worth Boundaries

Personal worth is for me an amazing issue. In my experience, so few people value themselves. And so the Boundary rules around "worth" are very important.

#### **Rule 1: All people are of equal value before God.**

The general rule is that only God can judge people's worth. "Judge not." Thus the rule is to leave that valuing up to God, and to get on with the work of living. No one is closer to God.

- ✓ I understand you think you are better than others. I think someday you may see we are all equal.
- ✓ Are you having fun on that silly pedestal you seem to have erected.
- ✓ Humans are pretty cool when you really get to see them.
- ✓ We are all doing our best, all the time.

#### **Rule 2: All people make mistakes.**

Some people try to "never make mistakes." This seems more an effort to hide from the humanness of life. We all learn. We all make mistakes.

- ✓ Thanks for pointing out my error. I think that is mistake #201 for this week. I think I am doing better. How are you doing?
- ✓ Darn, I sometimes wish I were perfect, but I guess I have to settle for being human.

I have found it useful to say, "I'll either have a nice time, or learn something." Mistakes are awareness of improving yourself. If I refuse to admit my mistakes, I tend to distance myself from others and I miss the opportunity to grow.

**Rule 3: All people were put upon this earth to be different from all others.**

Humans are not born to be copies of each other. Certainly we learn by emulating others, but we still do it in our unique ways.

I learned that in indigenous tribes of Western Africa, people believe that all humans are born geniuses. Each person has the kernel of a unique genius inside. It is the responsibility of the community to help fertilize this genius so that all can benefit.

- ✓ Of course I do this. It is what I am built for.
- ✓ I don't need to quote an authority. I am quoting myself.
- ✓ I like this. That's who likes it.
- ✓ Of course we don't agree. I wasn't born to agree. I am learning to be agreeable.
- ✓ I'm unique. I guess you'll have to live with it. I do.

### Time Boundaries

Most books on boundaries seem to leave this one out. Each human does their thinking, their processing, their decision-making at their own speed. When two people come together this difference may show itself. Impatience is a childhood trait that can really be un-useful.

**Rule 1: All people answer questions at their own pace.**

I remember a friend saying that she had two answers to every question: the quick answer and the true answer.

**The quick answer was always a lie.**

It had nothing to do with the question. Nor did it have anything to do with her real thoughts or values. It had one purpose: to get the questioner to go away.

My friend had been brought up in a family of impatient, alcoholic parents. They would demand answers to their questions, but later forget that they had asked those questions.

And so the quick answer served to placate the impatient questioner.

**The true answer takes time.**

This friend told me that she needed time to come up with a good "quality" answer. I asked her, "How long?" She said that it might take several days or weeks or longer.

Thus, if I wanted a "true" answer from her, I had to be prepared to wait. Worse was that, if she gave me the "quick answer" and I believed it, she would not start working on the true answer.

**Don't ask questions. State your curiosity.**

Eventually what she taught me was to avoid asking questions. I would still get curious, but would not "rush" her. I learned to state my curiosity, give my reasons for wanting to know, invite her response at some later time and change the subject.

- ✓ That's a great question. I'll get back to you on it.
- ✓ Back off or I'll never give you an answer on that.
- ✓ It takes time for me to get myself clear on that. You'll just have to wait.

"I saw you do this the other day. It puzzled me. I am curious. If you know or ever figure out why you did that, I'd love to know. In the meantime, how about dinner?"

**Rule 2: All people decide what they want to do at their own pace.**

I've learned that all people act at their own pace. Trying to speed them up often produces the opposite result.

- ✓ It may take me a while to figure out what I want to do. Why don't you take a break?
- ✓ I don't know what I want to do about that. Why don't you go on without me.
- ✓ Push me and you'll get nothing.

Some people, when they feel pressured, go blank. Increased pressure makes them remain in blankness longer.

And when they are blank they tend to make poorer quality decision or freeze and make no decisions.

### Tricky Stuff

Now I am ready to speak of the very confusing situation of overlapping boundaries. It is clear when I take your toothbrush or you take mine. But what happens with the family picture album? Who owns that? And what is going on when I get upset when you are late. I need to talk about "shared property" and expectations.

### Shared Property

When my wife and I divorced, splitting up our property was easy until it came to the stuff we both thought was ours. We had two picture albums of the kids and of our early days together. Who owns this? The only solution I know of is to enter into discussion and to redefine our Boundary lines.

- ✓ Let's talk about dividing this between us.
- ✓ Before you walk off with that, I'd like to work out who owns what.
- ✓ I'd like to work out some way of splitting this up so that we both feel it is fair.

Fortunately, we are all capable of moving our walls. One day I can say that chair is mine – it is in my castle. And then I can decide that it is outside my walls. We do this normally when we are giving gifts or selling and buying property. I think the general principle is that two people can share something only as long as mutual generosity, trust, and goodwill are present. This takes a lot of regular work and is a subject for another paper.

### Expectations

This is the other tricky situation where I end up acting as if I own you. What I have

learned is that an expectation is a situation where I believe I own the thing I am expecting. I have come to see "expectations" and "wants/desires" as very different things. The difference seems to be one of "ownership." When I want something, I don't feel I own it. When I expect it, I do feel I own it. When I want to see you at 5:00 and you don't come, I feel sad and perhaps frustrated. When I expect you to meet me at 5:00 and you don't come I feel robbed, betrayed, etc. Clearly the one with the expectation seems in the tough position. I have heard the Hindu speak of living "expectation less." Sounds like a good idea.

- ✓ All people are chronically disobedient. Learn to live with it.
- ✓ I don't own your behavior. Thanks for reminding me.
- ✓ I hear what you were expecting. Sorry it didn't happen the way you wanted.

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## Mistakes Using Boundaries

Lately I have heard these complaints.

### **"He (she) doesn't respect my boundaries!"**

People don't have to respect your boundaries. People don't have to do anything. If they want to be a felon, they can. It is up to you to set your boundaries and to keep such people comfortably outside your castle, your space. It is up to you to make it sufficiently uncomfortable for them so that they will respect your boundaries.

Generally speaking, if someone is not respecting your boundaries it is because you haven't set them and have, in the past, allowed them to invade your world.

Train your soldiers, practice, and keep the invaders out.

### **"He (she) set a boundary that I have to give up smoking!"**

In a way, setting a boundary can be a little like giving an order. The difference is that the outsider is given choices about whether they want to meet the requirements of the person setting boundaries.

Example: I don't let people smoke cigarettes in my house. I am not telling them they can't smoke. I am just saying that they can't in my house. If they want to smoke they have a choice: out of my house.

### **"I have no boundaries!"**

I think all people have boundaries, but they may not set them nor defend them. If people walk all over you, that is your choice. The challenge, I think, is to take responsibility for your own happiness and peace of mind.

A person who complains that "I have not boundaries" is usually waiting for someone else to take care of their boundaries for them. No one can do this.

**"If you had boundaries, you would not get upset."**

This was stated by a person who would not set his boundaries and was complaining that his partner had not boundaries. His partner was getting upset often at all sorts of things. He recognized that as a lack of boundaries, but then complained about it. This wasn't working for him.

Your partner doesn't have to set boundaries if they don't want to. You have to set boundaries. If they determine to get upset, you need to set your boundaries about being with them, so that their habit of getting upset doesn't ruin your peace and quiet.

### **Tending your Garden**

Inside your castle walls is your world. I think it is just as important to keep other invaders out as it is to tend the gardens inside your castle.

Building self-esteem (the habit of liking and admiring yourself even when "they" hate you) means effort. True, this is not possible unless you have good boundaries. But, I've found that as your boundaries get better and better, it is really healthy to start understanding yourself and to start admiring how you handle life.

It helps to have friends who admire you. They can give you lots of new plants and fertilizer for your garden.

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## **Summary**

### **"Just Try My Boundaries!"**

I see boundaries as the effective walls around your life and your self-hood. I see them as a first step toward good self-esteem. I think of self-esteem as "I like myself even when people around me are angry at me."

Learning boundary skills is essential for good relationships.

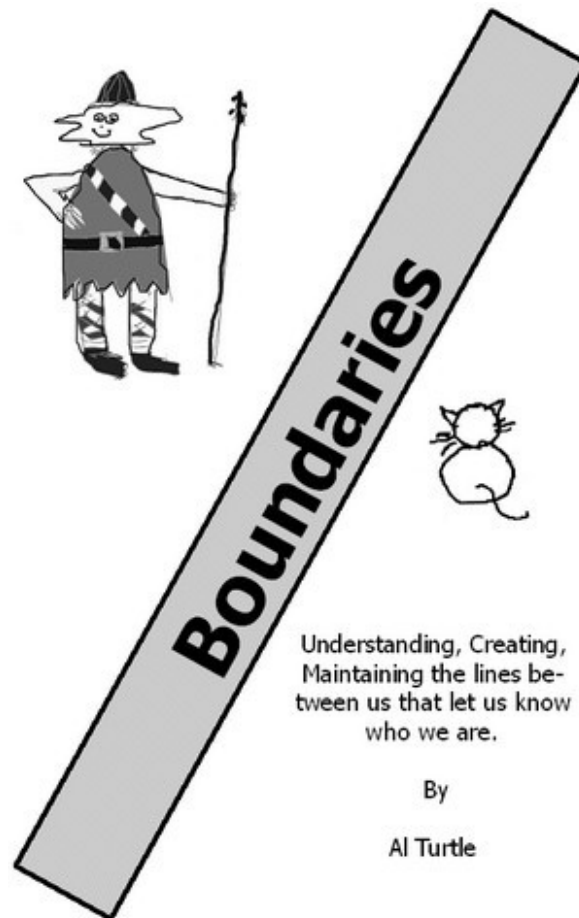
"Upset" is the clue to needing to learn more about boundaries. I hear people say, "He can push

my buttons." I think, "Well, have you considered improving your boundary skills and keeping those buttons of yours away from him."

A boundary is not just a line, but also the skills to assure that no one crosses it. Boundary skills are always defensive and never aggressive.

You know you have great boundary skills when you have so much confidence in your boundaries that you can dare others to try to push your buttons.

Have a nice day.



Understanding, Creating,  
Maintaining the lines be-  
tween us that let us know  
who we are.

By

Al Turtle