

Shift Your Barriers To Boundaries, Love – Our Hearts Are Stronger Than We Think

[BY KERI MANGIS](#)

“All I’m saying is, kindness don’t have no boundaries.”

~ Kathryn Stockett, The Help

Some years ago, caught up in a hopeless personal dispute that was taking up far too much of my life, I began sharing my thoughts and feelings on the issue with a trusted friend. Our time together felt both safe and challenging, and she helped me enormously as I sought to address not just the surface issues of the disagreement, but to dig to the root of the problem. I’ll call this friend Nancy.

Nancy also knew the other person in the dispute. I soon learned that the other person was in her ear as well. Nancy started to feel responsible for both of us, and, stuck in the middle, she needed a way to protect herself.

Smartly, Nancy decided she needed boundaries. Her decision was completely understandable.

But she didn’t just put up a boundary that we could navigate with caution and discernment. Nor did she set up rules for which we both, as mindful and thoughtful human beings, could respect. Rather, she suddenly and with force cut me out of her life with the finality of castle gates closing. Nancy had not set up a boundary. She had erected an impenetrable, permanent barrier.

I have another story of a friend who, when I asked her thoughts on what’s happening with the immigrant children at the border, or sought her feelings about the increased hate

crimes against marginalized groups in America brought on by the election of a man whose disdain for these groups is palpable, told me that politics “hurt her heart” and that she needed boundaries to stay healthy and safe.

That meant she could not look at pictures, she could not read articles – she erected a sound-proof wall around herself. Her human heart, she believed, was too frail and gentle to be exposed to the harsh realities that others were experiencing in real time.

***This, too, was not a healthy boundary.
This was insulation. This was a barrier.***

I share these stories as examples of what can and often does go wrong with the teaching and practice of boundaries. As it turns out, putting healthy, breathable, mindful, adjustable, malleable boundaries up in our lives requires much more skill than we might initially think.

Here are a few thoughts about why this might be so.

We live in a black-and-white culture. Everything from people to ideas to lifestyles falls into categories of left or right, good or evil, wrong or right, yes or no, all or nothing. Rarely do we visit the gray zone as it is confusing and troubling when we are not able to label something or someone with confidence.

So, well-intentioned as we may be, when receiving a teaching that at its heart requires nuance – and self-help teachings are all about nuance (see also: non-judgment, unconditional love, letting go) – we understand them through the black-and-white lens we are accustomed to.

In this world and through this lens, the idea of boundaries translates into dichotomies. We are besties with someone or we

never call them again. We either lose ourselves completely in the emotional responses triggered by news cycles or we won't watch anything at all. Middle roads are fairy tales in an all-or-thing society.

But for us to experience the spiritual growth and human evolution we undoubtedly came to this planet to experience, then we must realize that the highest spiritual practice we can possibly engage in is one of subtlety, nuance, and degrees of separation led by awareness and mindfulness. Otherwise, our relationships with others, and our relationship with the world, will always be divided.

As if to mirror these divisions in our personal lives, never before has our entire world been so divided. Never before have we been so separate from one another, and the Us vs. Them construct that fuels our black-and-white thinking (or is it the other way around?) so clearly visible. But also, never before have we been called to erase those lines in the name of oneness, compassion, and courage. I can't think of a more crucial time to start practicing seeing ourselves and the world in gradient shades of gray.

How did we get here, to a world where neighbors don't know each other, where we don't really understand what's going on in the lives of even our closest friends?

We could blame social media, and the pretend relationships that masquerade as real relationships. We could blame the independent, boot-strap mentality of Americans, in which our sense of pride revolves around us believing that we "made it" to wherever we are with no help from anyone.

But whether we place blame on our political environment, the social media landscape, or the American mindset, until we start to see behind the curtain of the cultural rules we all (largely unconsciously) subscribe to, the more we will confuse healthy boundaries for rigid barriers. In this way, the boundaries that were designed to be used with wisdom, compassion, and nuance become just one more way we isolate our true selves.

Besides, there's a lot to be said for a life lived with fewer boundaries, to live a more "porous" life. There is nothing that brings us closer together as human beings than sharing emotional truths with one another. Letting people in to see all of who we are helps them make peace with their shadow and light, too, as they watch us embrace our wholeness.

Being seen this way, with our messy and complex issues, helps us feel more truly human, and often lets the other person feel less guarded, too. What we need in our world is more connection, more empathy, more humanness, and letting people in can reward us with these things.

However, it takes cultivated discernment and earned wisdom to know what to share with others, who to let in, and when to do so. If we don't, our vulnerable sharing can end up leaving us in a compromised position, one in which barriers become our last resort solution. I have stories about this, too, though you probably already have your own.

So the need for having and utilizing boundaries in our world is real (as is the occasional barrier; especially in abuse situations). But it matters that we understand when boundaries serve us and let us be even greater stewards in the world, and when they are cutting us off and shutting us down.

A few more distinctions:

Boundaries are discerning, thoughtful, and discretionary.

Barriers are impenetrable, rigid, and often final.

Boundaries are mindfully placed, and can be adjusted as the situation calls for.

Barriers are often much more unconscious, and thus frozen into place, regardless of the situation.

Boundaries are employed with our intuition and compassion for ourselves and others.

Barriers are erected out of fear of one another and belief in our limitations.

Boundaries are about authenticity.

Barriers are about facades.

Boundaries are about a willingness to feel and a knowing when to heal.

Barriers are a resistance to ever getting hurt or breaking down.

Boundaries allow us to spontaneously express a range of emotions.

Barriers force us to conjure up happiness, joy, laughter, and sadness, which often comes across as fake – because they are.

Boundaries are about our faith in ourselves to see, experience, and hold the pain and suffering of the world as well as draw in its beauty and joy.

Barriers are a lack of faith in ourselves, a belief that if we feel too much from others, or if we reveal too much of ourselves, we will fall apart, and this masquerade we've been playing will crumble at our feet.

Boundaries are about self-love, and a desire to grow, to serve, to be an active and knowledgeable contributor in this

world.

Barriers are about lack, and a desire to protect, to shield, to coast along invisibly, trying to remain untouched.

We are stronger than we think we are. We are more resilient than we imagine. We can hold more than we have ever tried to hold. Our hearts are stronger than we give them credit for. We have the capacity to feel, and we should use it every single day, not leave our homes in bubble wrap like fine china.

Serita Colette says, "In my work, I have started moving from self-care to collective care." I, too, am ready to make this shift. I believe we are all ready to make this shift. And we can do it, if we apply our boundaries with wisdom, compassion, and nuance.

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