



# BOUNDARIES



by Carolyn Spring

It was 2005 and I was about to have a breakdown.

First there was the pressure of decades of dissociated trauma, pushing relentlessly at the seams of my mind. And then there was the very real and practical issue of looking after five small children. My then-husband and I were full-time, professional foster carers and we were good at what we did. But however many children we took in, there was always another duty social worker on the other end of the phone. There was always another sob story and another child, another family and another crisis. I found it almost impossible to say no. How could I when there was so much need? I felt the pain of these children keenly, as well as the responsibility to alleviate it.

I had no boundaries, and as a result I was continually victim to other people's emotions, demands and needs.

The breakdown that ensued was catastrophic. I had been competent, professional, capable. Now I had a panic attack just trying to get out of bed. I was consumed by the flashbacks and red raw emotion of unprocessed trauma of 17 years of childhood abuse. The boundary that my mind had held in place between my traumatised life and my apparently normal life had collapsed, and chaos ensued. Self-harm and suicidality. Dissociative identity disorder. Body memories. Terror.

'Dissociative parts of the personality' grabbed the headlines, but my inability to



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set boundaries was the silent assassin destroying me from the inside. The powerlessness of trauma had left me without a sense of autonomy. For too long I had mindlessly enacted the relational templates of my upbringing, unable to choose when to say yes and when to say no, and enmeshed in a destructive morass of compulsive care-giving alongside chronic self-neglect. I said yes to everyone else, and no to myself. Other people mattered; I did not. And so, breakdown.

Through therapy, I began to explore the concept of boundaries. I had always assumed that a boundary was a rule, but I began to understand it instead as an edge, a marker, a distinguishing line, a perimeter. We can develop a rule based on the boundary, but the boundary itself is not the rule; it's just the context for it. A boundary instead is like an invisible line that defines who we are and who we are not; where we start and where we end; what is ours and what is not; and what we're responsible for and what we're not.

In literal terms, it is easy enough to understand a boundary in terms of the actual perimeter of our property: it is what we pay solicitors hundreds of pounds to check when we are buying a house. We need to know exactly where our property starts and ends, which fences we're responsible for, what rights of way run

through our land, and if there are plans for a flyover through our back garden. So the title deeds for our house show a plan of our property, often with a thick, red line around it that defines what is ours and what is our neighbour's.

The boundaries of a property can be demarcated with a fence; the boundaries for us as people are defined – in part at least – by our skin. Everything that takes place within my skin, everything that my body does, or my brain thinks, constitutes 'me' – however much I feel that I am a 'we', however much I lose touch with my body and, when stressed, float up to the ceiling. This is the legacy of the boundary-breaking of abuse, not a natural state of affairs. But I can begin to define 'me' better if I understand that the boundary for 'me' exists mostly within my skin.

Are boundaries negative? No. They are neutral, a statement of fact or identity or property. And observing them can be intrinsically liberating, because when we know how far we can go, we can push right up to that limit. When I know that I own all the way down to the fence by the apple tree, I can pick the apples and eat them in safety because I know that they are mine. Boundaries can make us feel safe and give us the confidence to explore right up to their limits. But when we feel 'limitless', we constantly



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assess if what we're doing is okay, and it actually reduces our exploratory behaviour. Knowing our boundaries can enable us to make the most of life. If we use a metaphor and say that our life is like a garden, then I need to know where my garden starts, and where it ends. *Which is my garden, and which is my neighbour's? Where does it begin, and where does it finish?* This information is vital, because I need to take responsibility for my grass, my trees, my fences, and my shrubs. I don't need to mow my neighbour's lawn, but I do need to mow my own.

As infants we are born needing help with every aspect of our life, but we develop from babyhood into childhood and eventually adulthood, and that journey takes us on a process of becoming – in theory, at least – an autonomous individual with free will and responsibility for ourselves. It's when that process of maturing and attaining autonomy is interfered with that we run into difficulties.

So as adults we become responsible for what grows and takes place within our garden. I can prune my shrubs however I want to, as long as they are in my garden. I may ask for some neighbourly advice over the fence about the best place to plant perennials, but I don't have to follow that advice, and nor do I have the right to place a water feature in the middle of my

neighbour's lawn. My garden, as my life, is my responsibility.

But abuse messes all that up. Abuse teaches us from a very young age that our property doesn't really begin at our skin. Abuse teaches us that the 'no fly zone' around our skin that we call 'personal space' can be invaded or ignored. Abuse teaches us that our boundaries don't matter. Abuse strips up of our privacy. It teaches us that other people can walk right into our gardens and dig over our pansies, and we can't stop them. It teaches us that our gardens don't really belong to us and that we don't have ownership or control. It teaches us that our gardens are worthless and lacking in beauty.

That's the process we have to repair as adults.

When we were children, there was nothing – absolutely nothing – that we could do about abuse, or even neglect. We were totally powerless to stop adults, people bigger and stronger than us, coming into our gardens and defacing them. And many of us are left believing that this situation still persists: that our gardens are public property, rather than private places. That we can't keep other people out. And that we're not able to be responsible for our own gardens ourselves.



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I grew up feeling ashamed that I couldn't manage my feelings, that I couldn't even manage my body, which from the age of fifteen was crippled by Chronic Fatigue Syndrome. I had a deep sense of my own incompetence. I saw the green fingers of others, and I felt reliant on them to help me. I was chronically disempowered, and heading into my twenties my garden became a tangle of weeds. I fundamentally believed that I was utterly dependent on the kindness of others to help me manage my garden. Yet at the same time, I was competent and dependable and skilled – at managing other people's gardens. The strangest thing was that I wasn't even struck by this paradox: it was just the way it was.

Recovery for me has meant figuring out where my boundary lines are – drawing around my 'garden' on a mental map in a big, thick, red marker pen and being able to say 'this is mine'. The flipside to that has also involved me saying 'this isn't yours' and so telling people who want to desecrate my garden that they're not welcome any more. It has also involved me figuring out that I alone am responsible for my own garden. The NHS isn't going to mow my lawn for me, although it would be nice if it could lend me a lawnmower. Recovery has involved me realising that the people who defaced my garden in the first place aren't going to come and make

it any better – however much I wish they would. I've had to accept that it's actually jolly hard work keeping my garden, my life, in order – especially when other people have dumped so much rubble in it.

It's not fair that I'm the one with the responsibility to clear it out when I didn't cause the problem in the first place. It's not fair – but as my therapist is fond of saying, 'It is what it is.' I'm very grateful both to her and my husband for encouraging me, and lending me a hand, and helping me cut back huge swathes of undergrowth. But ultimately it's my garden, and it's my responsibility, and they can't do it for me.

I've also had to learn to get my nose out of other people's gardens. I've found that, when your own garden is a mess, a great distraction is to go and help someone else with theirs. I used to be ever so 'helpful' to other people, getting stuck in, sorting their gardens out. I took in homeless single mothers as lodgers. I set up community projects. I helped women caught in domestic violence. But what I began to realise over time was that the more digging I did in someone else's garden, the less I did in my own. And the less they seemed to do in their own garden too! By helping them in the way I was, I was actually just perpetuating the idea that they weren't capable of managing their own gardens themselves. I was digging and mowing



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and chopping and strimming and by doing so I was in effect saying, 'You can't do this yourself! You're too damaged, too weak, too mad! That's why I'm having to do it for you.' And that was pretty arrogant of me given the state of my own garden. That message was not my intention, but actions speak louder than words.

And instead their gardens were overrun partly because they weren't tending to them themselves. Again, like me, many of them were off helping someone else with their garden. And so this whole cycle of 'proxy gardening' was in place. We were looking to other people to tidy up our gardens because we couldn't face them ourselves. We were too ashamed, too helpless, too overwhelmed. And so partly to avoid those unbearable feelings, and partly to feel better about ourselves and win the favour and approval of others, we were off digging away in someone else's garden and clinging to the idea that we were really nice people for helping out like that.

And then, one day I realised, in a sickening thump of revelation, that I had to face the mess of my own garden myself. And I also had to let other people face the mess of their gardens themselves. My garden wasn't magically going to right itself because of the work I'd done for others. I wasn't going to get out of debt just by

endlessly, continually giving. I wasn't going to feel better about myself by soothing others' charred self-images.

I began to understand that the 'grass' in our gardens is like our 'feelings'. Like feelings, grass grows all on its own, even when we're not looking, even when we're asleep. Feelings spurt up outside our control – no one wakes up and decides to be in a bad mood. And environmental factors – things that happen to us – like water and sunlight, like abuse and redundancy, illness and divorce, so often cause our feelings, our 'grass', to grow more quickly.

But this 'grass' – this 'emotion' of ours – grows in our garden. And therefore we are responsible for it. We can sit there and protest that we didn't make it grow and blame it all on photosynthesis, but if it's in our garden then it's our responsibility to manage it. It's our responsibility to mow our lawns and keep the moss in check. It's not our next door neighbour's responsibility to come and mow our lawn, and nor is it our responsibility to go and mow their lawn. We're each responsible for our own grass.

For many of us, when we were children, the people who should have been training us and helping us learn how to manage our gardens didn't do that. Some of them just weren't much good at being parents



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or caregivers, and having neglected their own gardens they failed to teach us how to mow and trim and prune. But some of them were also outright abusive – they burst into our gardens, took them over as their own, urinated in our ornamental ponds and crapped in our hyacinths. And what we have found is that other people’s ‘crap’ acts as fertiliser – it makes our grass grow a lot. Before we know it, we’ve got meadows of out-of-control, wavy, waist-high, wild grass to deal with – while other people have neat, stripy lawns. That, unfortunately, is the way that life is: it’s not fair, but again ‘it is what it is’.

As children, many of us experienced upbringings where not only did our abusers barge into our gardens and trample our flower beds, but they also, in effect, made us do their gardening for them. They insisted that we look after their lawns, their borders, their shrubbery – in other words, we had to take care of their feelings. We had to be careful never to upset them (don’t walk on the grass!) and we had to make them feel good about themselves. They used us to manage their feelings and meet their needs, whilst destroying our shrubbery. And for many of us, as we’ve entered adult life, we’ve just assumed that everyone else has the right to order us about and make us do their gardening, because that’s the pattern we had as children. We were not taught

that our gardens are precious places that should be protected and tended.

This manifested in me in frequent overwork. Write just another email, help just another person, take in just another child. Give, give, give. It didn’t matter that I was exhausted. My only justification for being alive was to be a gardener for others. That’s what I believed at a profound level within myself, although I never consciously thought it. The boundary violations of my childhood had squashed my sense of self and here I was, an empty shell, an empty me, living for others because it was easier than dying. Many people took advantage of me and that just deepened my shame, reinforcing that core belief that I was worthless and undeserving. They would complain that I hadn’t mowed their lawn well enough, even though I was doing it for free. I was even useless at that.

With powerlessness as a key experience of trauma, we can end up feeling that we can’t stop people invading our gardens even though now we are adults. We can’t say no to people who want to live in our gardens, or people who want us to live in theirs. It’s a difficult thing to get to the point where we realise that we can now start to erect fences and walls around our gardens, and that we can (and we must) as adults learn to say ‘no’. Much of the work of therapy in recovery from trauma is in gaining the



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confidence to mow our own lawns and to value our gardens enough to stop people using it as a public rights of way.

The recovery process is one where we begin to learn to get our gardens under control and where we learn to ask for help with it, rather than insisting that others do it for us, or giving up on it entirely. We can ask people to help but we cannot ask them to come and do it for us. Sometimes we treat therapists as contracted landscape gardeners: we want to pay them to do the hard work and absolve us of responsibility. But if it's our garden, it's our responsibility. We will only get on top of our own garden if we say no to other people's. Some of us like to play at 'gardening neighbourhood watch' and point out to everyone around us when they need to mow their lawns and how they should prune back their hedges. We may do this to be liked, but if we don't respect other people's boundaries and we are invading their gardens to rescue them, then we are doing a passive version of what abusers do. We are still taking over. If I walk into your garden and start mowing your lawn for you, you might be grateful today, but I will be disempowering you tomorrow.

The one word that is more effective than any other at erecting a boundary is 'no'. And yet 'no' can be the hardest word for us to use. 'No' is what we wanted to be

able to say when we were children, but so often we couldn't. It may have been ignored even if we had said it. It might have exacerbated the abuse. And in most cases the freeze response in us made any protest impossible. Whatever the reason, 'no' is a word that many of us find very difficult to say. But unless I learn to use the word 'no' and have it mean something, then I cannot in fact meaningfully use the word 'yes'. When we cannot say 'no', we end up saying 'yes', not because we want to, but out of coercion. Our 'yes' isn't really our 'yes' and our 'no' isn't really our 'no'. That's confusing not just to other people, but to ourselves as well.

Many of us were taught in childhood, either implicitly or explicitly, that 'no' is rude or wrong. But far from it - 'no' means that our 'yes' when given is freely given - it really does mean something. So we can trust people when they say 'yes' if at other times we know that they are willing to say 'no'. And we need to understand that 'no' just means 'no'. It doesn't mean withdrawal of relationship, or withdrawal of love. It doesn't mean anger or fury or rage or rejection. It just means, 'I don't want that in my lawn, thank you ... but you are free to put it in your lawn if you want to.'

It took me a very long time to realise that everything that exists within my garden has a right to be there. I can have



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my own feelings, my own thoughts, my own opinions, my own hopes, my own fears. Growing up, I believed that I had to think the same as my parents, feel only the feelings they allowed me to feel, and share their opinions. The rejection and disapproval when I disagreed with them was too much to bear. According to their worldview, I shouldn't ... shouldn't have feelings, shouldn't have opinions, shouldn't do anything other than tend their garden – supporting their avoidance and denial of feelings, like a trellis holding up ivy, supporting their exclusion of my reality, my feelings and my trauma.

It took me a long time to realise that if I was ever going to establish my own garden, and thrive within it, then I would have to back out of their garden. And I would have to put up big 'no trespassing' signs. When I did, for a short time it felt as if all hell had broken loose. They protested with a vicious attack on my right to autonomy, my 'selfishness' at refusing to mow their lawn, my 'cruelty' at removing from them the right to control my garden. It was a difficult time.

But the end result, several years later, is that I am free now to live in and enjoy my own garden. And I am free to do things – like writing – that was forbidden in the old system. I am free to deal with the weeds and the moss that have grown in the damp places in my garden. I no longer have to

live in order to please others, and manage their emotions for them. I am not lobbing bricks into their garden; I'm just relocating to my own plot of land, and closing the gate to people who won't respect my flowers. I've eventually realised that the guilt that they tried to put upon me for 'upsetting' them is not my guilt. Their feelings are in their garden and are their responsibility. I have nothing to feel guilty about.

In the past, our gardens have been used as public play spaces or arenas for war by our abusers. But we need to start to see them as precious, private sanctuaries. We need to work hard at dealing with the undergrowth that has accumulated through years of abuse and neglect. We need to ask others to come alongside us in this, to lend us some shears, to help with a bit of heavy digging. But at the same time we need to recognise that we alone are responsible for our own gardens and that if other people say 'no' to helping with ours, then that is okay. We need to respect their boundaries as much as we want them to respect ours.

The powerlessness of trauma will tell us that none of this is possible, but it is. If we are responsible just for our own garden, not the gardens of our entire neighbourhood – and certainly not the gardens of our abusers – then we can begin to make them places of safety and beauty. We can recover. •

