CHAPTER 1

Boundary Basics: A Primer

Remember the *Seinfeld* episode about the "close talker" who got right in people's faces without noticing how uncomfortable he made them? He had no sense of their spatial boundaries and seemed to have none of his own. Spatial boundaries define the invisible bubble around the body anthropologists call proxemics, or the distance people keep from one another. Proxemics has found that personal space varies not only from person to person but also according to context and culture; what's too close for comfort in Tokyo may be a nodding acquaintance in Naples, while the right amount of space between two people at an American cocktail party might be inappropriate at a business meeting. Even when we have limited control over our physical distance from others—jammed up against a stranger in the subway, for instance, or as far away as we can get from that person on the other side of the bed who's suddenly become one—we can communicate our other external boundaries not only with our overall body language but also by the quality of our attention and the directness of our gaze; our gestures, actions, and expressions of emotion; and our words—all the interpersonal processes of relationship.

Boundaries define what goes on in our minds as well as in the psychological space between us and other people, which is why they

are the single most important influence on all our relationships—including the one we have with ourselves. Here is a basic primer that outlines what you need to know about boundaries in order to start managing yours.

Boundaries in the Mind, Boundaries in the World

While boundaries are primarily psychological phenomena, a lot of what we know about the brain suggests that inner (also known as intrapsychic) boundaries may have biological correlates: several theories of the mind based on neuroscience as well as observational evidence point in that direction.

Many theories imply the existence of some type of cellular boundaries between regions of the brain. The triune brain theory, which has been around since 1952 and was first put forth by the evolutionary biologist Paul MacLean at the Laboratory of Brain Evolution and Behavior at the National Institute of Mental Health, distinguishes between the reptilian, limbic, and neocortical brains, in ascending order of evolutionary development, differentiation, and complexity. The reptilian brain, which regulates life itself by managing brain, lung, and heart functions, is concerned with fundamental needs like survival, dominance, preening, hoarding, and mating. While the limbic brain generates and archives emotions, the neocortex with its two cerebral hemispheres controls logic, language, creativity, and thought. Melanie, who is about to turn forty and never wanted a baby until recently, swears it's a signal from her reptilian brain, since she's certainly not in love (a condition generated by the limbic brain) and knows that having a child at this stage of her life and career makes no sense at all (something her neocortex is quite certain about).

Twenty years after MacLean put forth his theory, Roger Sperry at the University of California proposed the left brain/right brain

model, which further refined the workings of the cerebral cortex, whose lateral lobes function differently from each other although both sides of the brain are involved in every human activity. According to Sperry's model, one side of the brain processes words while the other handles images; one gets the details accurately while the other sees the whole picture; one analyzes information in a linear, sequential manner while the other absorbs and synthesizes it all, including sensory data. While most people have a distinct preference for one of these styles of knowing, some are more "whole brained" than others and are equally adept at both modes. This model explains why a meal with Kate, who's a left-brained luncher, involves a painstaking analysis of the entrée's ingredients, a thoughtful allocation of the day's calories, and a consideration of what she plans to eat for dinner, while dinner with Peggy, who's as methodical and analytical as Kate but more in touch with her inner sensualist, is punctuated by deep sighs of pleasure and an almost erotic appreciation of the meal's taste, texture, and presentation.

A decade after Sperry, the cognitive psychologist Howard Gardner proposed a theory of multiple intelligences, a label he gave to what most of us knew already, which is that while many people are quite smart in some ways, in certain others they may be less than brilliant. Along with verbal, mathematical, spatial, kinesthetic, and musical intelligences, Gardner identified two other kinds of competencies: intrapersonal intelligence, which is the ability to recognize, manage, and master one's own emotions as they're happening, and interpersonal intelligence, which is the same constellation of skills but involving the emotions of others. These kinds of abilities don't necessarily go together. Lila, who rarely takes her own emotional temperature, isn't particularly self-aware, although she's very responsive to her friends' and colleagues' moods and emotions, while Cecily, who's quite tuned into and sensitive about her own feelings, has little understanding and even less interest in anyone else's.

Boundary intelligence, though, is a meta-ability comprising two different ways of knowing, the rational and emotional, and is expressed not just in thinking and feeling but also in relating; it is intrapsychic and also interpersonal.

Almost everyone has at least a modicum of boundary intelligence; we generally know where we end and others begin, both physically and psychologically. Our bodies are distinct from theirs, and so, most of the time, are our thoughts, emotions, fantasies, and impulses, which have their own unique, distinct mental "signature" because they're internally generated. But what we're largely unaware of is how the contents of our own minds are influenced, changed, or rearranged by those of others, and vice versa. While keeping an open mind is essential for growth and learning, so is being able to discriminate the good from the bad, the wise from the stupid, the truth from the lie, the constructive from the destructive, and especially the toxic from the healthy.

When she was a teenager, Hallie took up with Chloe, who'd recently moved onto her block. Within a month Hallie was "totally under her sway," as she puts it now. "It was like, everything I believed was wrong; suddenly my old friends seemed like losers, doing well in school was a waste of time, obeying my parents was juvenile, being considerate of other people was being a patsy, wanting to be a cheerleader was ridiculous, while shoplifting, cutting school, and sneaking out of the house to go joyriding with some kids who'd 'borrowed' a car were the things to do. In a matter of weeks, I'd totally lost sight of who I was; I completely changed myself into a clone of Chloe. Have you seen that movie *Thirteen*? Well, that was me; that was my life after I met Chloe."

When Chloe lost interest in Hallie, Hallie was devastated. "I saw myself through Chloe's eyes—this naive, stupid, ugly girl who couldn't think for herself. And she was right about that last thing—I couldn't, which is probably why I was so vulnerable to her. I'd alienated all my other friends, I was close to flunking out, my par-

ents were at their wits' end, and I had a reputation as a slut so nobody decent would date me."

Lonely, miserable, and friendless, Hallie spent the next few years looking for someone to fill Chloe's place in her life. She found it at a coffee shop frequented by a group of attractive young men and women who sensed her vulnerability and took advantage of it, recruiting her into a cult—the Moonies—that for a while provided a sense of belonging, a code of conduct, and a regimen that almost succeeded in obliterating the last vestiges of her own thoughts, beliefs, and values. "Then one night a new girl came to dinner. She'd been recruited by the same couple who picked me up at the coffee shop almost a year before," Hallie remembers. "I watched how they indoctrinated her—first bombarding her with all this love, and then convincing her that they were the only people who really understood her, the same way they had with me. It was like déjà vu—she was me; she even looked like me! I wanted to scream at them to stop, to leave her alone, and tell her to get up and walk out. But I didn't. Instead, I left myself—that very same night, without telling anyone. And for weeks after, I'd see that girl in my dreams. I still wonder what happened to her."

Hallie wasn't ready to return home: "I felt like I'd burned my bridges, and I wouldn't go back until I'd made something of myself." She found a job at a shelter for abused women: "I hadn't been physically abused by a husband the way they had, but I could relate to many of their feelings. I went to the group meetings the residents had and listened to their stories, and somehow their courage gave me enough to turn my life around. To this day, whenever someone tells me they know what's best for me, or they know what I'm thinking or feeling, or what I want or need, I pull back from them until I'm sure whose voice I'm really hearing. I've gotten pretty good at keeping the bad stuff out . . . but I'm still working on letting the good stuff in." That's a pretty good description of what psychological boundaries do, and Hallie's increasing ability to use both her cognitive abilities and her emotional awareness to hear,

heed, and protect her true self from the psychological influence of others—even well-meaning others—is what boundary intelligence is all about.

The Serpent Made Me Do It, but My Amygdala Was Sorry

If Freud, who was trained as a neurologist in the nineteenth century, had ever seen twenty-first-century neuroscientists actually scanning and mapping the brain and its neural circuitry, he'd have jumped up and shouted "Eureka!" (or its Viennese equivalent). Then he would have located the id, "that cauldron full of seething excitation," as he put it, in the amygdala, an almond-shaped cluster of interconnected cells in the limbic ring where emotions are generated and stored.

The amygdala scans incoming sensory data, "challenging every situation, every perception, with . . . the most primitive question: Is this something I hate? That hurts me? Something I fear?" as the author Daniel Goleman writes in his lucid description of the emotional brain. When aroused, the amygdala floods the entire body with neurochemical signals that leave behind a vivid and indelible trace of fear, anger, grief, happiness, surprise, or shame—whatever feeling triggered it.

The amygdala stores not only the feeling but also the context and meaning provided by the hippocampus, another limbic structure: recounting his conversation with the pioneering neuroscientist Joseph LeDoux, Goleman writes, "As he [LeDoux] put it to me, 'The hippocampus is crucial in recognizing a face as that of your cousin. But it is the amygdala that adds you don't really like her." And all this activity occurs in the limbic system a kazillionth of a second before the neocortex wakes up, smells the coffee, analyzes the feeling, and initiates a more nuanced reaction.

It's in the intricate neural circuitry between the emotional and

the rational brains—the limbic ring and the neocortex—that impulses meet reason, feelings and thoughts connect, fantasy and reality collide, and split-off. Repressed, or disavowed aspects of the self drift in and out of the unconscious, which hovers in the hidden corners of the mind, sometimes breaking through into awareness and other times making its presence known in dreams, symbols, enactments, or projections. The thinner or more permeable the boundaries between these mental states are, the more accessible they are to one another. That's why in some particularly emotional situations we literally can't think straight; a powerful surge of feeling hijacks the rational mind, so the more carefully calibrated response from the neocortex barely registers. This will come as no surprise to anyone who's ever fallen in love at first sight, tried to focus on an intellectual task while in the throes of depression, or blown up in anger for what seems like no reason at all.

What Inner Boundaries Do, and Why They Do It

Inner boundaries are shaped by genetic inheritance (individual neurochemistry, the sensitivity of the amygdala, and the connections between various parts of the brain, among other things); our psychic adaptation very early in life to the loss of that common skin the French psychoanalyst Didier Anzieu calls the *moi-peau*, or ego-skin, between mother and baby; and the effect of early environment on psychological as well as physical development.

Temperament, neurochemistry, and habits of mind determine the extent to which our inner boundaries connect or separate our thoughts and feelings, distinguish our mental experiences from those of other people, and absorb or deflect the influence of their thoughts, moods, and voices on our own. They also distinguish among the three aspects of the mind Freud called the id, the ego, and the superego: the id represents all of our instincts, unregulated by

conscience or judgment, which are the province of the superego, and unfettered by the ego, which is the conviction of selfhood.

Inner boundaries give our various states of awareness—the conscious, unconscious, and preconscious contents of our minds—their distinct properties. According to Dr. Ernest Hartmann, whose pioneering work on nightmare sufferers led to his conception of boundaries as an aspect of personality, inner boundaries separate the contents of different states of consciousness, each of which has its own characteristic mode of functioning. In the unconscious or dream state, logical connections are missing, contradictions abound, time seems not to exist, nothing is prohibited, and one idea or image can symbolize or condense others. But in normal waking consciousness, these dreams and fantasies are inhibited; the mind is aware of both external events and inner or mental phenomena and is governed by the reality principle, which is represented by logical thought in verbal language form.

When, How, and Why Inner Boundaries Change

Inner boundaries change not only from sleeping to waking states but also as a result of life experiences as varied as falling in love, in which we project our inner fantasies on an external reality and view them both as the same thing (which is why love can often be both blind and dumb), and having a baby, which women often describe as opening a door in their hearts they never knew was there. The psychiatrist Donald Winnicott, in less poetic terms, calls this a "special psychiatric condition of the mother," a state of primary maternal preoccupation characterized by profound attachment and identification with her baby. This merged state is that primal union from which the infant eventually emerges as his or her own mental boundaries develop. Winnicott calls it a "normal sickness" from which mothers recover a few months after giving birth.

Inner boundaries tend to thicken with age as we lose some of the spontaneity, imagination, playfulness, and creativity of early life; while thin inner boundaries allow greater sensitivity to emotional experiences and access to states of awareness such as inspiration and intuition, thicker ones enable us to focus our attention, marshal our thoughts, mobilize our emotions in pursuit of desired goals, make and keep commitments, abide by social rules, deal more productively with stress, and make decisions based more on logic than on gut feelings.

Inner boundaries also change, at least temporarily, when people feel connected to a divine presence—to God, nature, the creative spirit, or what Jung called the collective unconscious. It's what happens to Frances when she's having a particularly good day at her easel: "I feel taken over by this force; it feels like someone or something else is mixing my palette, guiding my brush strokes, as if it knows what a stray thought or a concept or an image ought to look like and is trying to tell me just to let it happen. Sometimes I don't even know what my paintings mean until much later; I sort of sink into them and then feel the presence of that same force again." For Nancy, being in her beloved mountains often engenders a similar feeling: "It's more spiritual than I've ever felt in church—like I'm one with this supreme being who created everyone and everything."

These are often considered right-brain experiences, although regardless of where they actually occur, they may have a more enduring effect on inner boundaries once the brain's entire mental apparatus has analyzed, interpreted, and contextualized them. That's what turns instances of spiritual transcendence into an abiding faith, existential loneliness into a sense of connection with the universe, and flashes of inspiration into works of art. Certain drugs also alter inner boundaries, not only the psychopharmaceuticals used in the treatment of mental illnesses but other substances, legal and illegal, that change the brain's chemistry and promote or inhibit its effects on neuronal activity. Peyote and mescaline have long been used in religious ceremonies to invoke the holy spirit,

and hallucinogens such as LSD are used to open what the novelist Aldous Huxley called the "doors of perception." And rituals like chanting and drumming, meant to heighten sensitivity to spiritual experiences, have been associated with increased neurological activity between various regions of the brain. Sue, who's been participating in a women's drumming group for years, likens the experience to "opening up another channel through which the whole world enters my being."

Trauma, fear, loss, or even repeated experiences of emotional trespass may thicken inner boundaries in order to wall feelings off from thoughts, split off unacceptable emotions from consciousness, repress painful memories by keeping them out of awareness, or deny a reality that's too difficult to accept. These psychological defenses are not themselves boundaries—they are the means by which inner boundaries are maintained.

Is That a Cell Phone in Your Pocket, or Are You Hearing Voices?

Inner boundaries serve many important functions. They protect us from the primitive agonies of going to pieces, falling forever, and having no relation to our bodies and no orientation in time or space. They separate the parts of us we can accept from those that are too shameful or scary to bring to awareness. A person with faulty or missing inner boundaries can't tell the difference between what's inside himself and what's outside. He has no protection against his own or even other people's thoughts, fears, and fantasies, no control over sensory input, and no grounding in reality. Conversely, someone whose inner boundaries are so fixed, rigid, and impenetrable that his body, mind, and emotions are inaccessible to one another can't take in anything at all and may suffer from a mental illness on the obsessive-compulsive continuum: mild to severe autism or even catatonia.

In much of the psychiatric literature, firm, thick intrapsychic boundaries are considered healthy and adaptive. They have been associated with a strong superego or conscience; a memory bank with an excellent "retrieval system" that gets from the past only what's necessary to deal with the present and the future; and a sense of personal identity that is firm and constant rather than flexible or situational. By contrast, thin, permeable inner boundaries are often viewed as weak or defective. Those judgments, however, reflect both a clinical population of severely disturbed individuals and the gender bias that stems from the finding that overall, women have thinner boundaries, and norms and standards of psychological development have traditionally been based on male models.

The Meaning of What Happens

When inner boundaries are doing what they're supposed to do, they make it possible for us to relate to our inner world rather than being taken over by it. If that's confusing, think of a two-year-old in a high chair. You can almost see it happening an instant before he tosses his Cheerios happily on the floor; at two, he doesn't *have* that impulse, he *is* it. If it's been awhile since you were around a two-year-old, remember the intensity of your first love affair: you didn't *have* that romance, you *were* it. And you had as much trouble managing your moods and emotions as that two-year-old because, like him, you weren't in control, your feelings were.

Inner boundary structure is the single most important influence on boundary style because it reflects the mind's ongoing process of meaning making, which is not just thinking about an experience but organizing it—perceiving, selecting, interpreting, labeling, and classifying it. We organize our thoughts, feelings, beliefs, fantasies, and associations according to principles that become increasingly more complex as our minds mature. But the most elemental meaning we assign to our mental experience is not whether it's good or bad, true

or false, logical or irrational, but whether it belongs in and to the self; as the Harvard psychologist Robert Kegan writes, whether we *are* it or *have* it—whether it feels inside or outside, whether we're embedded in it or can relate to it. This distinction, or boundary, between self and other, subject and object, Me and Not Me, is always in flux. It's always evolving, in a process we call psychological individuation and Buddhist philosophers express as a movement toward higher consciousness; the capacity to relate to what we were previously attached to or embedded in, a capacity that the two-year-old who's a creature of his impulses hasn't yet developed, or that someone whose emotional brain has been hijacked by love won't be able to exercise until after the rapture fades.

The Connection between Inner Boundaries and Addiction

Much of what has been said and written about boundaries derives from the recovery movement, which isn't surprising, since boundary distortion, dysfunction, and confusion are symptomatic of problems with drugs, alcohol, food, sex, spending, and other substances and activities that are, or are considered to be, addictions. But while the addiction and recovery literature touches on boundaries, generally it gives short shrift to inner boundaries and focuses instead on interpersonal ones—not necessarily the addict's, but those of his or her "enablers" or "codependents," people whose even well-meaning attempts at helping the addict often make the addict's problems—and problem behaviors—worse.

As Allie, a twelve-stepper in recovery for a ten-year alcohol problem, says, "They don't tell you that trying to understand why you drink is unimportant, but they're pretty dismissive about the psychology of it—they think all you need to do is admit you don't have control over the drug and turn your will over to your higher power and work the steps; that's what it's all about, everything else

is denial or justification. The issues that underlie the addiction—like the need to stay in an abusive relationship, which have a lot to do with mine—they don't come in for much examination."

In the psychiatric literature, addiction is a disorder of self-regulation, particularly in the areas of emotion, self-care, self-esteem, and relationships, although some theorists view it as an attachment disorder, which offers insight into why some vulnerable people need to substitute chemical connections or solutions for human ones. Clinical approaches based on this view of addiction focus on interpersonal as well as inner boundaries.

Is It a Symptom or a Disease?

Addiction is a dependency on something that stimulates, suppresses, erases, or substitutes for whatever is unwanted or missing in our inner or interpersonal lives: control, rage, emptiness, shame, boredom, drama, power, love, panic, or perfection, for example. Addiction may be a neurotic stand-in for legitimate suffering or emotional pain, desperate mental states for which the desired process (as in eating disorders, sexual compulsivity, overspending, even exercise) or substance (alcohol, drugs, food) holds out the promise of fulfillment or release.

Most approaches to treating addictions ignore the consideration of inner boundaries; they focus on behavioral therapies that prevent relapse, offer strategies for coping with cravings, and teach addicts ways to avoid drugs, alcohol, and what Allie calls "occasions of sin." These approaches are often directly related to recovery and rarely to the root cause. Addictions can take many forms, and the line between acceptable and problem behaviors isn't always clear. But the one definite, even simplistic indicator of an addiction is that the addict keeps going back to whatever the substance or the behavior is, even though he doesn't want to do it again, or when even more copious amounts of whatever he craves don't satisfy the craving.

The boundaries of addiction are constantly redrawn in our culture, as a variety of types of self-destructive behavior are relabeled as addictive; many professionals concur that it's the strength of the desire that defines addiction. Judy, who lives to shop, has enough self-control to avoid a 50 percent off sale at Loehmann's when her credit cards are maxed out, but that wouldn't stop Elaine, who doesn't, despite lawsuits, bankruptcies, and the loss of her house and her car. Judy's addiction to cigarettes, though, is another matter—she's tried and failed to quit so many times that this January her New Year's resolution is to stop trying.

Simple addiction is superficial dependence that involves physical craving and withdrawal symptoms when the substance is removed. In many cases it can be modified without in-depth approaches like psychotherapy or twelve-step or professional rehabilitation programs. It's reversible by means of willpower and individual effort. Simple addiction touches only a part of the addict's personality; another, sometimes larger part, either opposes the addiction, fights it and overcomes it, or makes it worse by building it up. That's how Judy curbed her shopping compulsion; she cut up her credit cards, made a budget and stuck to it, and gave herself a reward every time she went into a store and came out empty-handed (unfortunately, her customary reward was a cigarette). For her, smoking has a psychological hold on her that's much more powerful than physical need, which is why even when she's managed to stay off cigarettes for months at a time, she's always relapsed. Willpower and simple habit-breaking techniques that were so successful in reining in her shopping habit and sticking to a diet long enough to lose twenty pounds (and keep them off) don't work.

Inner boundaries are the source of addiction. If they're too rigid, we're unable to connect deeply enough with our emotions to harness them in the service of our cognitive process or use our cognitions—like the knowledge that the substance or the behavior is self-destructive—to control our impulses. If they're too permeable,

we can't discern the differences between our feelings, sensations, and impulses. We don't *have* them, we *are* them, and they're easily influenced by external as well as internal forces—peer pressure, social conditioning, and the behavior of others.

Mental Health or Mental Growth?

Research has shown that boundaries and boundary style influence not only our relationships with other people but also our emotional balance; personal values; cognitive abilities; career choice; preferences in art, architecture, and music; political views and opinions; and attitudes toward time and money! Given how important boundaries are in so many areas of life, it's surprising how often they're overlooked as an influence on personality, especially by psychiatrists and psychologists whose primary focus is on the individual rather than on the individual-in-relation. They're more concerned with inner boundaries than interpersonal ones because distorted or dysfunctional inner boundaries are often a hallmark of mental illness. Even if our inner boundaries aren't so distorted that we're curled up in a corner of a padded room or hearing voices when nobody's calling, most clinical psychologists and psychiatrists are more interested in our mental health than in our psychological growth.

Interpersonal psychologists think about inner boundaries differently; they focus on how inner boundaries shape our social relationships as well as how they organize (or don't organize) the contents of our minds. Interpersonal psychologists know that when inner boundaries are too weak or too porous, the self is empty and famished, forever in search of someone or something to fill it up; when they are too solid and rigid, the self can never be known, touched, or moved. And when inner boundaries are distorted, so is the possibility of psychological growth.

Boundary intelligence involves the understanding and mastery

of inner as well as interpersonal boundaries. Boundary style, though, depends on the particular qualities or dimensions of those boundaries themselves.

The Dimensions of Boundaries

What does the wind do when it's not blowing? What happens to noise when it's being quiet? What does tofu taste like when it doesn't taste like something else? And why can't I have another cookie?

The only one of six-year-old Noah's questions I can answer is the last one, and so great is my relief that I indulge a grandmother's prerogative and give him one. I consider that what his mother calls her son's Zen koans are not just riddles wrapped in paradoxes, they're Noah's attempts at organizing the phenomena of his experience into a mental set or class with its own properties—what Robert Kegan calls "durable categories"—in much the same way that he used to organize his toys into things with wheels and things without wheels. What Noah wants to know is what else wind, sound, and tofu *are* besides how he perceives them—how they feel, sound, and taste to him.

What else are boundaries besides how we experience them in relationships? What qualities, dimensions, and tendencies do they have in addition to their affective, intrapersonal, and interpersonal properties? What makes them a noun as well as a verb?

As we've seen, psychological boundaries are dynamic, not static. They change not only from one relationship to another but also within relationships, in a back-and-forth, interactional process set in motion not just by what's going on within each person but also according to what's happening between them at any given time. What boundaries do is differentiate one thing or one self from another, thus setting the two things or selves in some relation to each other.

The Soluble Self

Boundaries have certain inherent qualities and dimensions, chiefly permeability, complexity, and flexibility. The first of these, permeability, seems to be a relatively stable aspect of personality—how penetrable we generally are to the psychological influence of the thoughts, feelings, judgments, and affects of others. What the psychiatrist Louis Ormond called a healthy "insulation barrier" is a boundary structure that's permeable enough to allow experience to penetrate the inner self but solid enough to protect it from being overcome by internal impulses and external demands or overwhelmed by toxic stimuli like critical or negative judgments, ideas, views, and emotions, our own as well as other people's.

High inner permeability means that there's more connection than separation in our mind between and among its discrete parts; our thoughts and feelings run together, our moods shift easily, our views and opinions fluctuate. Interpersonally, too, increased permeability usually implies more connection than separation, although that doesn't necessarily mean we're always able to discriminate the good from the bad, to take in the positive, nourishing, affirming input from others and keep out what might be critical, negative, or damaging. The permeability of our inner boundaries determines how much we can absorb of what comes in from the outside without losing what makes us distinctly ourselves; how free the energy flow is between us; the exchange of affect, emotion, and ideas; our ability to screen out others' influence and separate our sense of self from their psychological presence within us; and how much we use other people to constitute who we are.

High permeability permits a relatively free flow of energy between inside and outside, self and others. Since childhood, Caroline's parents, teachers, and friends have described her as sensitive, vulnerable, imaginative, and restless; in fact, those are the words under her portrait in her senior yearbook. She's very approachable but also so gullible that she's an easy mark for beggars and con

artists; highly receptive to outside stimuli, she's easily distracted from her goal or purpose. By contrast, Elizabeth's less permeable boundaries constrain the energy flowing between inside and outside, but they also make it easier for her to focus on the task at hand. She's often unaware of her inner experience and less available to her imagination and creativity than Caroline, but she's also less impressionable or as likely to take on the moods and feelings of others. More fixed in her judgments and beliefs and more direct and explicit in her thinking than Caroline, Elizabeth's also more capable of masking her emotions and repressing painful feelings as well as better able to balance outside demands on her time and energy.

Fences of Chicken Wire, Wooden Slats, and Concrete

Nancy Popp, whose exploration of the phenomenon of boundaries provides the description of them as both a noun and a verb (and whose conception of them inspired this book, especially this chapter), offers a metaphor that likens boundaries to fence-building materials—her examples are chicken wire, wooden slats, and concrete. Chicken wire is the most permeable; it allows a lot to pass through, and although chicken wire provides little protection from external forces or the escape of big chunks of the self, it still manages to contain it. The wooden slat fence lets fewer and smaller bits of the self and others in and out; it provides more separation and protection. Concrete lets nothing pass through from either side and requires a very conscious decision to allow it to be crossed in either direction.

All or Nothing at All

Boundary complexity is determined more by one's stage of psychological development than by personality, and it tends to increase as

we move from one level of psychological growth to the next. Complexity refers to the increasing ability to differentiate, and thus relate to, the various parts or aspects of the self—its roles, identities, actions, emotions, sensations, and associations—without losing a coherent sense of the whole—of who the self is. In other words, complexity is about being able to see the trees and the forest simultaneously, the parts and the system, the contents of the mind and the container that holds them. When Noah was three and threw sand in a playmate's face because she wouldn't give him back his red plastic pail, he couldn't quite get the distinction his mother made between him and his behavior. "I love you, but I don't like the way you're acting," she'd say, but as far as he was concerned, who he was and what he did were the same thing.

Boundary complexity explains why, for instance, we can admire a friend's intellectual gifts, enjoy her sense of humor, and appreciate her generosity even though we don't share or care for other aspects of her, like her political or sexual values or her inability to keep a secret. "Sometimes the reception's only clear on one or two channels, but that doesn't mean you have to throw the TV set away," explains Petra, who is able to tolerate competing emotions, loyalties, priorities, and desires in herself without coming apart at the seams, just as she can separate from as well as connect with a number of people in her life who are very different from her. This means she can often find at least one aspect of someone in order to make a relationship possible (which explains how she can sleep with a man she wouldn't want to wake up with).

The more complex our boundaries are, the more parts of our self we can bring to a relationship and the greater the possibilities are for feeling understood and accepted in at least some of those aspects. Since the more of the self we expose, the more vulnerable we are, we may be less willing to be seen or known in our entirety by someone else. And even though we're safer, we're also more separate and disconnected from our authentic self, too. Often we hold back what we feel the least confident about, especially with people whose

expectations, opinions, perceptions, and experiences of us constitute a big chunk of our self-definition. Jeanette, who never went to college and is married to a man with three advanced degrees, feels the least confident about her intellectual ability; Ellen, who's always been self-conscious about her body, is disconnected from her sexuality; Trina, who was raised by a couple of doctors who didn't believe in anything they couldn't see under a microscope or grow in a petri dish, is cut off from her emotions.

When the complexity of our boundaries is limited, we can't tolerate too many differences between ourselves and other people and still feel whole. Our feelings, ideas, and judgments must match theirs because we're unable to manage ambivalent or opposing ones. We have trouble holding onto our position in a conflict or a confrontation because it seems like a global assault on our very essence—we feel like we're coming apart. One negative comment from someone important to our sense of self-esteem—something that indicates she doesn't know, accept, or "get" us in a significant way—can make us feel totally rejected; not just that aspect of ourselves but all of us. But when we can tolerate or contain our differences without losing track of or contact with the rest of who we (and they) are, we can be connected to as well as separate from others in more than one way; there are more possibilities for relatedness between us. In other words, the more differentiated we are (the more complex our boundaries), the more we can choose what we share and what we hold back.

For some people, differentiation is the same thing as separation. Says a woman quoted in Letty Pogrebin's book on friendship, "I don't make a huge distinction between myself and others so I have very little sense of distance when I meet a new person. No one seems strange to me." But as the following comment indicates, that position also puts her at somewhat of a disadvantage: "I like everyone right away and feel like I'm the one who has something to prove."

Contrast this with Steffie's more complex boundaries: "I used to

think everyone was alike—nothing human was alien to me," she says. "So I tended to ignore or discount how different people actually are from each other and from me. But as I've gotten older, the differences interest me more than the similarities. I'm more curious, more open to the unfamiliar, more aware of the incredible variety of people in the world. Instead of thinking, wow, is that person strange, I just think, well, *that* was a *National Geographic* experience!"

Locking the Door vs. Leaving It Open

Flexibility is the capacity to regulate boundary permeability, the range of motion between how open and closed we can be to the psychological surround. Often we exercise this capacity instinctively or intuitively, without really being conscious of it. We tune out what our teenager's saying while he's driving in order to shout, "Look out for that stop sign!" before he runs through it. Or we tell a stranger more about ourself than we ordinarily might because there's something about him that seems to invite such disclosures, or because we know we'll never see him after the plane lands, or because we really need to talk (or because of all of these things).

At other times, we exercise the flexibility of our boundaries with both awareness and choice; we redirect the conversation with our mother-in-law in order to keep it from affecting how we feel about the house we just bought that she doesn't like, or we adjust the volume or intensity of our relationship with a friend or a colleague whose energy, moods, or force of personality overwhelms and exhausts us.

Flexibility, more than either permeability or complexity, depends on the ability to assess a situation or an individual in terms of safety or threat to the self and adjust our boundaries accordingly. It's the extent to which our boundaries can "give" under pressure or stress from inside (what we think, know, and feel about ourselves)

or outside (what the situation, person, or environment is telling us).

Looking at boundaries in this multidimensional way lets us see that while being open to other people in all ways, at all times, is a nice idea in theory, in practice it is a very vulnerable stance. Being closed off is much less risky—it reduces the possibility that we'll be psychologically engulfed or annihilated—but it also restricts the possibilities of any connection or relatedness at all. Miranda's boundaries are extremely permeable but hardly flexible at all; she suffers from sensory overload, and other people's unhappiness "cuts through me like a knife, no matter how good a mood I'm in to begin with." Annabel's boundaries are as permeable as Miranda's, but they're much more flexible, which is why she can ignore chatter from her cubicle next to the watercooler, empathize with her coworkers' fears that layoffs are coming, and then get back to her own work without letting their concerns interfere with her concentration.

Managing boundaries isn't possible until we understand them as both a noun and a verb . . . not just their particular qualities or dimensions, but how they determine what happens in our relational life. Just as a dress or a coat can look one way in a magazine or on the hanger and different when we put it on, boundaries can look or feel different according to the circumstance in which they're activated. They may be quite permeable when we're with someone we love and trust, when we're untroubled, even unconsciously, by fears of being swallowed up or abandoned. Boundaries may be less permeable when we're with someone who doesn't respect our limits, or so one-dimensional that we can't relate to those who don't endorse our beliefs or lifestyle. Boundaries might be complex enough to allow us to connect on some level even with people whose values are diametrically opposed to ours, or conversely, to prevent us from connecting at all with people who are very similar to us.

Boundaries manifest themselves in relationships when internal or external signals activate them. Most commonly the signals mean that someone's violated our psychological space, which is the defi-

nition of emotional trespass, although in moments of greater closeness or intimacy signals may also indicate that our boundaries are shifting because we've invited someone into that space.

There are four principles of boundary intelligence. *Awareness*, the first principle, is about being alert to those signals. Once you are, you can exercise the second principle, *insight*, which is a cognitive rather than an emotional analysis of what's happening in the moment. The third is *intention*, or clarifying what you want to happen in the relationship over time as well as right now. And the fourth principle, *action*, is about mobilizing and managing your boundaries to bring about what you want to happen. As Rainer Maria Rilke wrote, "Once the realization is accepted that even between the closest human beings infinite distance continues to exist, a wonderful living side by side can grow up if they succeed in loving the distance between them, which makes it possible for each to see the other whole."