

BOUNDARIES

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I grew up in an era in which, among the middle class, “spare the rod and spoil the child” was considered a truism, although children were spanked with a hand and not a rod, and among the working class, parents often used switches or belts. Children were expected to be obedient when told what to do, and not “talk back” or “sass”. So my parents, who had decided they didn’t believe in corporal punishment and who were more than willing to take their four children’s input into family rules, were considered very liberal, even lax. Indeed, one babysitter, told that she was not to use spanking to discipline us, predicted dire things for our futures. Likely, she said, we would all end up in prison – me in particular. When I was ordained to the ministry twenty-five years later, my mother said she wished she had the woman’s address!

Although my parents were considered uncomfortably liberal by many, their children avoided many of the pitfalls of the succeeding era. Unlike many of their friends’ children, none of us had drug or alcohol problems, or ran away to San Francisco to become a hippie, or got involved in political violence, or ended up down and out living on the edge of poverty. Indeed, my parents remember our teen years as relatively easy ones. All of us graduated from high school and eventually from college, and two went further. We all have our quirks and faults and we had our share of life’s mistakes and challenges, but not many that could be rightfully laid at the doorstep of liberal parenting. And although they were liberal, our parents were not laissez-faire. We had household rules. We had chores. At 12 I was able to take care of the house when my mother was away visiting family.

My mother refused to take all the credit for the relative peace in our household. My parents did take in a couple of other people’s teenagers for short periods of time and felt that these other children challenged their skills and certainly their methods – it is hard to say whether it was because of the teens’ basic personalities or their previous upbringing. My parents had never before had to deal with stealing, staying out beyond an agreed upon return time, or a sullen refusal to communicate. My father, generally a gentle man at home, was nonetheless large and imposing, capable of getting even adults to listen up, much less children. That capacity probably helped him in reasoning with these more out-of-control youngsters, and with us as well.

So given my parents’ reputation for liberality in their parenting days, it was somewhat interesting and amusing that from time to time in later years we heard complaints from them about the laxness of the next generation. Their complaints were, of course, not that people didn’t beat their children, but that they seemed to set no rules, no boundaries, and allowed their children to behave badly towards others, yelling in places where others were trying to converse, taking things that didn’t belong to them, bumping into the elderly and not excusing themselves, being rude, interrupting, and so on. It seemed as if those who had been raised very strictly had swung the pendulum far to the other side and, in some cases, seemed to be failing to raise their children at all, or at least indulging them

at the expense of others and at the expense of teaching them some of the things their children needed to learn to live responsibly in community.

Although I never faced these decisions with my own children, as a young adult I was put in charge of deciding some of these things for others. I was a social worker who looked in on families in which parents had been judged unfit, either because they were abusive or because they were neglectful, the far end of either side of the spectrum. In one case, what the parents called discipline the courts regarded as abuse. On the other side, the lack of oversight was so egregious as to constitute abuse or even danger. In a few families, both conditions occurred. Although sometimes it was quite clear that something was abusive – rape, burns, broken bones, severe bruising – it wasn't always clear where the line was. When does a spanking become a beating? Likewise, although it was quite clear that children shouldn't be starved nor left alone before a certain age, when was that age? What level of comfort and care was the minimum? When it came to psychological abuse, what kind of behavior rose to that level? When it came to an inability to get a child to attend school, deal with inadequate housing, or lack of cleanliness and hygiene, where was the line where outsiders had to get involved? And what was the standard of parental behavior that was so egregious that it meant the child could be removed permanently? No two judges had the same definitions or boundaries, and I am sure that other caseworkers and their supervisors had difficulty deciding exactly where those boundaries between not good and unacceptable lay. I could see that, although the extremes were clear, the boundaries were cultural.

It was made even more challenging by the fact that the boundaries of my own culture were quite different from those of the various cultures I was dealing with. And the boundaries in a liberal family like mine were a bit fuzzier and more negotiable even with some very clear rules than were the boundaries in the families of many of my classmates. No doubt growing up in a family that didn't have as many bright lines made it harder to become an enforcer of bright lines on others.

Boundaries. What is too rigid? What is too loose? How do we decide what is necessary to live in community?

Traditionally, although not always, people who think of themselves as conservative tend towards stricter boundaries and brighter lines and people who think of themselves as open or liberal tend towards looser, fuzzier, boundaries. Since we are in a UU congregation, I am going to talk a bit more about the latter and the problems it can bring with us.

If we fail to have necessary boundaries, we give one person or one group freedom to do what they will at the expense of another – and often at their own expense, because they do not learn to live with others. But we are the people in Frost's poem who don't love a wall and don't quite believe that good fences make good neighbors. There is a well-known play written by Swiss playwright Max Frisch called *The Firebugs* about an inability say no, to set limits. It takes place in a town in which there have been many cases of arson. The play opens with a warning chorus of fireman. All over the city there

have been houses burned to the ground by men posing as peddlers. As the play opens, a character named Biederman is reading the paper and deploring the situation in his town, when the maid tells him that there is a peddler at the door that she can't get rid of. Biederman tells her that he himself will get rid of the peddler, that peddlers are a source of danger. Instead, manipulated by his guilt and his inability to admit his fears, he invites the homeless peddler to sleep in his attic. The peddler invites a friend to join him in his new abode. They begin drinking Biederman's wine and are treated like honored guests. When Biederman and his wife are kept awake at night by the two moving things around in the attic, he storms up to tell them they absolutely must leave. He sees that the noise has been made because the two men have filled his attic with barrels – barrels labeled GASOLINE. "What is in those barrels?" he asks his guests. "Gasoline." they reply. "Don't kid me!" Biederman says, "Someone less understanding than I might think you were serious." And when a policeman calling at the house asks about the barrels, Biederman tells him they are full of hair tonic. Biederman and his wife are terrified. They can't sleep. "But if I do something now, they could just light a match and burn the house down. We had better make friends with them. Establish an understanding." says Biederman. He invites the men to dinner. One of them is out looking for sawdust; the other is playing with a detonator and a fuse. At the end of the play, after dinner, the men ask Biederman for some matches. As he hesitates the men say, "You're afraid. You think we're firebugs." "Oh, no, absolutely not." "Well, we are you know." "Stop kidding!" Biederman says as he hands them the matches while his wife screams at him. "Don't be silly, my dear, do you think if they were really firebugs they wouldn't have matches of their own?" The play ends with the sounds of sirens and the house in flames.

The play, written in 1958, was an allegory for the German middle class and their accommodation of, and eventual capitulation to, Fascism. The irony in the play is the way the firebugs play on the Biedermans' inability to say no, to confront, to say, "I think you may be up to no good" in order to carry out their destruction. I first saw the play in the late 1960's in a production that raised questions about our own equivocation on important issues of destruction and morality. In society, the liberal impulse's strength has been our ability to acknowledge that there are complexities and differing points of view in most situations. Frisch presents us an interesting challenge. When is it time to say, "Here is where I stand"? When do we say, "These are the limits, this is wrong"? He presents us with the paradox that the fanaticism, which we so deplore and which makes us hesitate to take firm stands, will overrun us if we are unwilling to stand up against it.

It is no accident that whenever someone in America wants to go to war they cite Neville Chamberlain's attempt to make peace with Hitler as a reason to use military force now rather than trying to negotiate a peace. History proved Chamberlain wrong in failing to stop Hitler early, and it has ever after been called up as the consequence of failing to stand up to evil soon enough. Of course, not every potential enemy is Hitler, but Chamberlain has been cited, rightly, as an example of too wishy-washy a statesman with too loose boundaries. I understand that he was a British Unitarian. Of course, in many, perhaps most, scenarios, we might have applauded Chamberlain's efforts to avoid war, his efforts for Peace in Our Time. There are thousands of world leaders one could

profitably negotiate with to avoid war. But you have to draw some lines, and there are always people who will use compromise merely as a means to press for more.

Within more intimate relationships, we all know people who put up with far too much from others, who are used as doormats by family and friends, and people who are quick to take offense and flee at any slight, both real and imagined --- those who seem to have little sense of self and those who seem self-centered.

Communities struggle with this issue. What behavior is allowed in public? How quick should police be to crack down on minor crimes? How seriously should quality of life violations of the law – prostitution, noise, public drunkenness, graffiti, private drug use – be taken? We often think these are victimless crimes, yet New York City found that cracking down on the little things led to a decrease in criminal violence. And, frankly, having lived for many years in a college area where small “crimes” such as public urination, loud drunken parties, poor home maintenance, garbage in the yard (which attracted animals), and drug use (which attracted unsavory characters), were common I found that the day-to-day quality of life was worse than when I lived in a big city with far worse major crime statistics.

Over the past thirty years, many UU congregations have struggled with the question of boundaries. A UU congregation in South Carolina had an alcoholic member who became abusive when he drank, and he so regularly showed up intoxicated and abusive at church events that the entire social life of the congregation was shut down until the Board decided they had to take action. They told him he was no longer welcome at church events until he went to treatment and was sober for six months, but he could attend services as soon as he was sober. But for nearly a year they allowed one member’s dysfunction to stop them from serving as a community of support to everyone else, and, as so often happens in a failure to set boundaries, they were not aiding the individual they failed to confront. For far too long they facilitated his bad behavior by putting up with it. This is too common in open-minded congregations, who, in the name of liberalism or freedom or love or kindness, don’t set appropriate limits, thereby selecting in favor of those who behave badly or don’t mind if others do. We sometimes mistake passivity or fear of conflict for loving kindness. Often it is not an individual but rather a group that needs limits or boundaries. One congregation I knew was ruled by a tiny minority of members who behaved in a ruthless and degrading manner to anyone who challenged their authority. They spreading lies and rumors and ruled through gossip and innuendo. Karl Rove had nothing on these folks. After a few years the healthy people left and it became a group ruled by a minority. The majority was passive, either too distant to care or too frail or passive to dare to challenge their rule. In such situations, boundaries of appropriate behavior become a matter of justice and democracy.

Boundaries are made up of rules, customs, norms, ethics, and laws. When there are too many of these or the wrong ones they can be stifling, harsh and unjust, or maybe just bureaucratic and boring. But anarchy and lawlessness can be equally unjust and hurtful.

Of course, we are taught in our religion and in an accurate reading of the religion that Jesus taught, that human beings at our best are generous, open-hearted, kind, forgiving and loving. These liberal virtues are ones we all hope to live out. But these are complex virtues in community. We can go after the one lost lamb, but we can't go after the one lost lamb if the other 99 are harmed by our inattention. Sometimes it is the good son, not the prodigal son, who is in quiet need of our attention. Sometimes good fences do make good neighbors. This is not the essence of a liberal church. We strive for inclusion and open-heartedness and forgiveness. But it is necessary to remember that there are limits to every virtue.