

Relationship

Unitarian Universalist Church in Cherry Hill

Sunday, December 11, 2022

Rev. Margret A. O'Neill and the Congregational Relationships Team

Reflection on Boundaries

Cheryl Dunican-Hein

Boundaries.... Some of you may not know that my husband refers to me as the Boundary Queen. Boundaries were a wonderful discovery for me.

I didn't always know about them. It wasn't until I was in a real tough spot emotionally in my thirties that I was introduced to boundaries. I learned that I had a right and responsibility to set boundaries.

Boundaries helped me understand other people's behavior when I saw that boundaries were in place, and I understood situations better when I observed that boundaries didn't exist or in cases where boundaries were challenged. For example, I observed when a woman I knew was being treated rather poorly by our male friends and she laughed. She communicated that this behavior was acceptable to her; it would not have been acceptable to me, and they did not behave that way toward me. We each choose what our personal boundaries are.

When my children were young, a source of conflict was when one entered their sibling's bedroom without permission. This crossed some type of boundary for them, so we set up a system of a reduction in weekly allowance for violating this boundary.

When a person **disregards** the boundaries of others, that tells me something about how close I want to be with that person, perhaps even whether I want to be in relationship with that person at all. And I would very much take notice if someone tried to **talk me out** of a boundary of mine; for example, if a friend tried to persuade me that it really is OK for them to verbally attack me when they are upset. If they tried to justify their conduct by saying that they mean no harm, that they are just frustrated. This would not work for me. This might mean I would leave the conversation during such times, or this might be a deal breaker for the relationship. Other folks might tolerate such behavior or try to change that person.

My first lesson about boundaries was that they were **about me**... my position on some issue.

I learned that boundaries were about what behaviors I was willing to accept from others, and I learned it's good to express boundaries compassionately and respectfully. A literal boundary Rohn and I had was with a family member who lived out of state and who was a heavy smoker. She wanted us to stay with her and sleep at her home when we visited, but I would have problems with my sinuses when I was around smoking for extended periods. Our boundary was, "We are sorry; we can't stay over at your home when we are in town because Cheryl gets sick when she is around cigarette smoking for extended periods." Most of the smoking was late at night when we were sleeping.

Boundaries keep us feeling safe. Boundaries are needed for healthy relationships.

I can have boundaries with myself too. For example, I know certain foods will make me unwell so I can choose usually to adhere to the boundary I have of not eating those foods rather than cheat and then pay for it with physical discomfort.

My responsibility to respect the boundaries of others is an important feature in considering this topic. Just as I want others to respect my boundaries, it is my responsibility to honor the boundaries of others.

In my profession, I was trained to avoid developing personal relationships with clients... no friendships, no business relationships, etc. And therapists and members of the clergy are ethically not permitted to engage in a romantic relationship with their clients and congregants. As a therapist, I have needed to abide by this boundary. Any other minister we ever have here also needs to abide by such a boundary.

Violation of this boundary is considered highly unethical.

Healthy boundaries promote feelings of safety.

Couples and families usually have boundaries also unless you are Raymond in the sitcom Everybody Loves Raymond. Perhaps you noticed, if you watched this show, that there were few boundaries between Raymond's marriage and his parents who lived across the street.

Appropriate boundaries promote the health of our marriages and families.

I recall a teacher in my children's elementary school who engaged in some creepy behavior toward my family. After careful consideration, I instructed the principal, that this teacher was not to have contact with or supervise my kids at any time. I was adamant. She honored that boundary fortunately, and the teacher was actually arrested for pedophilia a few months later. My kids were not harmed.

Healthy boundaries help us feel safe. They can help keep our kids safe.

Organizations are in need of boundaries too. Schools require employees be fingerprinted in an effort to keep away from children those with criminal histories who might harm students. I've seen restaurants that have signs posted on their front door indicating that weapons are not permitted on the premises. Faith communities, like other organizations, need boundaries in order to be healthy, in order for people to feel safe. Might we, as a congregation, consider what boundaries we want to have here, in order to be healthy, in order for people at UUCCH to feel safe?

Boundaries help me make sense of relationships. I love exploring boundaries. No wonder Rohn calls me the boundary queen.

Reflection on Relationship

Meggie Moore

Good morning. I'm so glad to be with you today, along with other members of our Congregational Relationships Team. Like so many folks, there was a time in my life when I was a people-pleaser. I wanted people to like me, wanted them to be happy, and wanted to make a difference in the world. Now each of those qualities isn't necessarily a bad thing. It's when the drive to accomplish them takes over and eclipses your own needs...that's when it starts to get unhealthy.

And that's exactly where I found myself a few years ago. I was in a job that I gave everything to...but that didn't value me as a person. I was in a relationship that I sacrificed for at the expense of my own mental health...but was fundamentally unequal. Even a lot of my friendships were based on what I could do for them, with no parity in return. As much as I was giving, I felt terribly lonely and burned out.

Luckily, though it did not feel so lucky at the time, I reached a breaking point. I literally had not another ounce of myself to give, and filed for divorce from my spouse. I drew a line in the sand that said, “this is what I need, and I’m not getting it, so I need to move on.” It was wrenching. It was desperately scary. But I lived through that moment. And the next one. And the next. I kept putting one foot in front of the other, sometimes in a daze, and just kept going.

When couples break up, very often friend groups do too. It wasn’t surprising that this was the case for me. But what **did** surprise me was that as I kept repeating my boundaries — “this is what I need, and I’m not getting it, so I need to move on”—a lot of those “take advantage” friends fell to the wayside as well. And the people who stayed, the people who said “yes, that is a healthy boundary, and we respect you for claiming it” turned out to be some of the most incredible and loyal people ever.

So I tried it some more. I went to my job and said, “this is what I need, and I’m not getting it, so I need to move on.” And my employer said “no, we can’t give you that.” So I quit. I walked away from a job I’d worked passionately for nearly 8 years...and felt the weight start to lift from my shoulders. I hadn’t realized how heavy it was until I decided to walk away.

It may have taken me until 40 to learn it, but I was beginning to discover that by establishing healthy boundaries in my personal and professional life, things were a lot better. I was learning to say yes to the things that lit me up inside, and that it was possible to respectfully turn away from relationships and situations that weren’t serving me anymore. It wasn’t that I was a failure. (I had to shake that misconception off.) It was that my job, my friendship, whatever it was, had run its course, and now it was time for something new. And that was incredibly freeing.

The author Anna Taylor writes, “Love yourself enough to set boundaries. Your time and energy are precious, and you get to decide how you use them. You teach people how to treat you by deciding what you will and won’t accept.”

You see, establishing healthy boundaries isn’t just about the “no”; it’s about making room for the “yes” that’s truly important. Yes, I deserve to have balance in my life. Yes, I deserve to work a job that values me and my contribution. Yes, I deserve to be surrounded by people who I love and who love me deeply. And yes, you deserve that, too.

As our faith community journeys together in covenant and healthy, boundaried relationships, let us hold one other tenderly in both our nos and our yeses.

Relationship

Rev. Margret A. O’Neill

Many thanks to Cheryl and Meggie for their powerful reflections today. This service is the second in a two-part series, and at least the sixth in the services that have focused in the past twelve months on Creating Covenant together, supporting the deep and engaged process of creating a church-wide covenant that embodies this congregation’s deeply held values and commitments for relationship, and that supports us all as we live and learn our way into the ongoing evolution of community here.

I was interviewed this week by a student from a conservative Christian seminary, who was fulfilling a course assignment to learn about a faith tradition very different from his own. We had a wide-ranging and mutually respectful conversation, and I kept returning to the central fact that Unitarian Universalism does not have a single sacred book, no unifying theology or doctrine, and that what unites us in our faith is the covenant we make to be in relationship with each other, and for how we will be in the world. He found that fascinating, and kept testing my statement with his curiosity, and our conversation affirmed for me the work you are doing here, revitalizing the covenant that will take you into the future. What good work this is.

Last week we talked about the new direction that the Congregational Relationships Team has adopted, and about the concepts, themes and phrases that have emerged in the process of creating covenant that began last December and continues into this year. Those themes began to take shape in the Listening Circles last March, in which members named the values for relationship that are most important to you in this community. Your values for relationship are:

Community with Collaboration, Teamwork and Generosity
Trust with Acceptance and Respect
Love with Compassion and Care
Learning with Openness and Curiosity

And so you affirm that community, trust, love and learning are central to the relationships in this church.

And then through another round of Listening Circles later in the spring, followed by the World Café gatherings this fall, the outline began to take shape for a covenant that welcomes all into a network of acceptance, open mindedness, and curiosity; of listening, compassion and kindness; with accountability, boundaries and respect, while honoring all voices in the community's democratic process; practicing apology and forgiveness with humility when we fall short; in gratitude and appreciation with the fun and joy in sharing.

One question that has come up again and again in this process goes something like this: "It is all very well to come up with the words, but how do we make the covenant real in our lives; how do we assure that we are upholding our values of acceptance, listening, compassion, democracy, forgiveness, and joy?" Your Relationships Team has been researching that question, and what they have found is that a significant part of the answer rests in strengthening our ability to identify, communicate and enact our boundaries both individually and in community. A member of the Relationships Team put it succinctly: a covenant is a way of collectively naming our boundaries. The covenant identifies our agreed-upon expectations for how we will live together in community, and those expectations frame our boundaries. Naming them explicitly means that when we fall short of those expectations we can see more clearly where the hurt is coming from, link our actions to our covenant, and call ourselves and each other back into healthy and productive relationship. And so in this work together the spirit of love, the spirit of this church, flourishes among us in every way.

I mentioned last week that the Relationships Team is studying a book titled *Set Boundaries, Find Peace* by Nedra Glover Tawwab, as they prepare to offer a congregational reading and discussion project so that we can all learn and practice these important skills together. There is some helpful language in the book that makes these ideas more specific and concrete, and I will share some of that now as we seek better understandings and practices to uphold the covenant you are writing together.

Tawwab says, "Healthy boundaries ... require an awareness of your emotional, mental, and physical capacities, combined with clear communication. Healthy boundaries [mean]:

- Being clear about your values
- Listening to your own opinion and sharing with others appropriately
- Having a healthy vulnerability with people who've earned your trust
- Being comfortable saying no
- Being comfortable hearing no without taking it personally

I love how that list fits with what you are doing here. Writing the covenant is that first step of being clear about this congregation's values. Listening to ourselves and each other is one of the

top priorities for the covenant. Creating an environment of safety and trust, so that we can be vulnerable and real with each other, will be a positive outcome of learning to live within the framework of our covenant. And being comfortable saying no to harmful behavior, even when harm was not intended, and accepting the “no” with good grace, allows us to call ourselves and each other back into relationship. All these are part of the learning we will do together to strengthen this covenantal community.

As Tawwab explains, “Whenever you identify a boundary you’d like to set ... there are two steps to the process: communication and action. Verbally communicating your needs [and expectations] is step one. People cannot accurately assume your boundaries based on ... unspoken expectations. When you explicitly state what you expect, there is little room for others to misinterpret what works for you.”

When people ask why we need a written church covenant, and why we are investing so much time and intention into creating it, that is the answer -- that we need be clear and to communicate our collective, value-based expectations for relationships here. That is why a covenant is a written, open, accessible document, clearly stating in positive terms this congregation’s expectations for how we will live into the love that is the spirit of this church.

The second step, says Tawwab, is action. “The process doesn’t end with the communication. You must uphold what you communicate through your behavior. Betting on the other person to read your mind is a recipe for an unhealthy relationship. Action is required ... You will have to put in the work to ensure that your boundaries are respected. It’s your responsibility to follow through on it.”

The Relationships Team understands that creating a church covenant is just a first step – as this congregation creates and adopts the covenant as a guide for building healthy relationships throughout the church, we all need to become skilled in the behaviors we want to practice – how are we accepting and respectful of all our differences? What does it mean to listen deeply and well? How do we show compassion and kindness in our everyday interactions? How do we honor and balance our individual opinions as we accept and support group decisions even (or especially) when we do not agree? How do we feel good about what is happening when things do not go exactly as we think they should?

Taking action to live into our covenant will require that we learn to recognize and to speak up when we feel that a covenantal boundary has been crossed, becoming comfortable both saying “no” and hearing “no;” giving and receiving those messages that help bring us back to our values. This is a learning journey, and we will all need to practice these new ways of being together, and to offer apology, forgiveness and grace, calling ourselves and each other back into covenant with love whenever when we fall short.

It is true that living into a covenant, setting and holding our boundaries, is not easy, that it takes courage and commitment, and it is a pretty sure bet that our learning will include awkward moments as we work through our fear of how others may respond, as we struggle with the language to express ourselves, and as we manage our embarrassment when someone names a boundary crossing and invites us to reconsider our words or behavior to better reflect our values. But as Nedra Tawwab counsels us, we need to remember that our short-term discomfort is natural and healthy, and worth enduring it, as we move toward long-term covenantal relationship in this beloved community.

As Cheryl so wisely put it, boundaries help us make sense of relationships. And as Meggie said, this faith community is finding new ways to journey together in covenant and healthy, boundaried relationships, and so let us hold one other tenderly in both our nos and our yeses. May we gather the spirit of this church, the spirit of love, and harvest the power of our relationships, so that together we continue to create a world of ever more justice, harmony and peace. I invite you now to rise in body or spirit and join in our closing hymn, 347 Gather the Spirit

Sources

Tawwab, Nedra Glover. *Set Boundaries, Find Peace*. Penguin Publishing Group. Kindle Edition.