

Honoring Boundaries: Generosity and Care
Unitarian Universalist Church in Cherry Hill
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Rev. Margret A. O’Neill,

Lexi Beebe, Jes Finnegan, Wendy Lucas, Libby Pontillo, Ryan Roberts, Donna Willmann

Rev. Margret A. O’Neill

“Good fences make good neighbors.” That ironic line from Robert Frost’s poem, *Building Wall*, is intended to tell us that walls and fences are not necessary between neighboring pastures and orchards, since cows and trees can get along just fine when they mingle in the same spaces. However, I have learned that in human relationship, clear and intentional boundaries are crucial to keep our lives balanced and in good working order. As author Nedra Tawwad says in introducing her book, *Set Boundaries, Find Peace*, “My life before I had healthy boundaries was overwhelming and chaotic. I, too, have struggled with codependency, peace in life and at work, and unfulfilling relationships. But setting expectations for myself and others gives me peace. Inventing a life with healthy relationships is an ongoing practice, but it gets more comfortable with time and practice.”

This clip from an interview with Brené Brown has a powerful message about the importance of boundaries as an integral component for relationships of respect, generosity, compassion and love. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TLOoa8UGqxA&t=9s>

In November 2019, soon after the start of my time serving as your minister, this congregation set a goal to strengthen your culture of trust, connection and abundance. The work on connection has gone through various stages: over 60 church members attended a workshop on Conflict Transformation in March 2020, and from that training we trained facilitators and developed the practice of Listening Circles to deepen our connected conversations; 45 people later participated in Healthy Boundaries workshop in February 2022. The Congregational Relationships Team had launched a participatory covenant creation process beginning in late 2021, holding the first listening circles to identify shared values for relationship in the weeks after that training, and those conversations were informed by our learning about the value of boundaries for peaceful balance in this beloved community.

And so it was a natural progression to begin a study of Nedra Tawwab’s book about maintaining good boundaries in our individual and group relationships, in the summer and fall of 2023. As you will hear from several of those who were part of the book discussions, Tawwab shares powerful lessons in caring for our personal relationships – and the larger promise for this congregation is that healthy boundaries will strengthen our lives in beloved community, in all the ways we are together in congregational life.

I hope the messages you hear from the book group participants today will inspire you to learn more about the value of boundaries in all our lives, and perhaps whet your interest to read the book and sign up for the next round of book discussion groups starting later this month. We will hear first from Donna Willmann about the insights she gained from this study process.

Donna Willmann

Being a part of this Book Group was both eye-opening and embarrassing. Eye-opening because even though I’m a psych major and have worked for years in helping professions, I had never looked at myself through this lens.

Embarrassing because I apparently have “porous boundaries.” I just thought I was nice. Embarrassing because I learned that being this way can actually cause relationship issues. Yep. And embarrassing because it has taken me this long to understand this and to begin to do something about it.

As we in the group all learned, we have to first notice how we are feeling. Then we have to value ourselves, yes, as much as we value others. (Not my strong suit.) All this before we can accept that we have the right to set boundaries. It is certainly hard to set and communicate boundaries, especially in long-term relationships where people are used to the way we’ve always been. But I now know it is better for us and for those we’re in relationships with.

Closely linked to all this is the concept of “self-care.” I still think it sounds a bit selfish. Self. That’s why I love another term from the book: “healthy boundaries.” Healthy is just good, not selfish. It’s a phrase reminding me that setting boundaries is a good thing. Because the word “boundaries” by itself sounds off-putting, like a fence or a wall.

So just as I’ve incorporated more exercise and healthy eating into my life (not selfish, right?), I am trying to do a better job of emotional self-care. I’ve been good at coaching others to treat themselves with the kindness and compassion they’d afford to a friend — “Of course you should take a break” or “Do you want to? No. Then don’t.”

Now I’m trying to live by the 50-year-old refrain in the L’Oreal commercial, accompanied by a toss of the hair: “Because I’m worth it . . .”

Rev. Margret A. O’Neill

Thank you, Donna, for your deep and honest sharing. Yes, we are all of us worth it, and emotional self-care is a crucial foundation for all the good we can accomplish in the world. And now, Ryan Roberts shares the story of how the book study helped affirm his own journey into emotional self-care in his relationships.

Ryan Roberts

I am excited to share today about the boundaries book study. I’m glad I had a chance to read and be in a group talking about *Nedra Tawwad’s* book. The reason I wanted to read this book is that the last relationship I was in, I did not set boundaries. I have learned through this book it is OK to say no in a relationship. I have learned in future dating relationships to set early boundaries. You need to be firm on a “no” and stick to it. That is a good way to stay on course with the boundary you have set. I learned through this book that setting boundaries helps strengthen a relationship. If we don’t set an early boundary, a relationship can be taken advantage of.

I do believe that after reading this book, I will have more confidence in future dating relationships, because now I know I can set boundaries early. I believe setting them early will keep a healthy relationship. I highly recommend this book.

Rev. Margret A. O’Neill

Thank you, Ryan. Healthy boundaries can indeed help strengthen our relationships, so they work better for all involved. And now, Jes Finnegan shares her learning about boundaries in this book discussion process.

Jessica Finnegan

Last June I was fortunate enough to be a part of the boundaries book study with several other members of the church. We read *Set Boundaries, Find Peace* by the brilliant Nedra Glover Tawwab. If you don't already follow her on social media, you are missing out. She gives bite sized wisdom almost daily on boundaries and mindfulness topics.

This book study came at a time in my life where I needed to reevaluate my boundaries. Growing up in a household where boundaries were not a thing, it is not something I learned as a young person. I believed that my feelings and wishes were always secondary to those around me. I learned to not need anything. I did not realize that it was ok to voice concerns or take up space.

I was a serious people pleaser. I couldn't say no without guilt, even when something made me uncomfortable to my core. Now, I would speak up for others, just never myself. It was a true issue of lack of self-worth. It was painful to speak up, to be a bother, to use my voice. This was with family members, friends, coworkers. It seemed my needs or desires were always last in line.

Set Boundaries, Find Peace showed me that it is not selfish to say no, to assert boundaries. We have to love ourselves enough to take up space. It is the loving thing to do, actually. The better we care for ourselves, the more able we are to show up in the lives of our beloveds. By saying no to something I don't have the energy for, I am able to offer my energy and creative spirit in the spaces it is most needed or better used.

Boundaries also help us in saying an enthusiastic "Yes" to what lights us up. The book study was great, I highly encourage anyone to try it. I am certainly glad I participated.

Rev. Margret A. O'Neill

Thank you, Jes. The more we care for ourselves, the more we can show up for others, and that strengthens our partnerships, our families, our faith communities – a true win-win for all concerned. And now we hear from Lexi Beebe about her learning experience in this process.

Lexi Beebe

I found the book informative and well written. After reading it, I no longer feel bad about my boundaries. They are both necessary and help both sides have a more fulfilling relationship with one another.

Honestly though, the best parts of the group were the discussions afterwards, listening to everyone's interpretation of the book and hearing their successes and struggles with boundaries. It was nice to know that I am not the only one to have a hard time with this.

I also try now to be more aware of others' boundaries, or to simply take the extra time to ask before assuming anything. So I feel like, in a tiny way, the book is helping me to be a better person as well. I happily recommend this book and especially the fellowship and discussions afterwards. Happy reading!

Rev. Margret A. O'Neill

Thank you, Lexi. As you said, once we can accept and respect our own boundaries, it becomes easier and more natural to respect the boundaries of others -- another step in building the culture of positive connection throughout our lives. And now Wendy Lucas shares her experience in the learning.

Wendy Lucas

My husband, Jay, says I am most happy when multitasking. This has been true since I was a teenager. I was deeply involved in LRY, the youth group, and the Youth Adult Council here and the UU United Nations office and the UN Youth Caucus in NYC. Simultaneously, in high school, I was in choir, band, Youth in Government, two Model U.N. groups, track and field, Debate Club; I also assisted the Guidance Counselor, and did much more. Throughout my adult life while working, I have provided support and leadership in, and fundraised for, UU groups and a broad variety of community organizations as a volunteer. My last 10 years have been more focused, caring for my aging mother, Holly. Keeping a household running, and managing a large colonial reenacting group, while caring for my two German Shepherds and occasionally my friends' dogs, took up the rest of my time.

Mom died this past July at 88 years old. For the next month I threw myself into working with Reverend Margret to create Mom's memorial service and planned the reception that was to follow. I was finally free to regularly attend in-person services here. Once Mom's service was accomplished, I started exploring groups here at UUCCH: Womyn&Religion, Sanctuary, Everyday Spiritual Practice, Alzheimer's care givers support group, a Fellowship Group, CPR training, and volunteering at the Cherry Hill Food Bank. I also began counseling, re-joined two book groups, started the work of being Mom's Executrix, and resumed managing a busy fall schedule of colonial reenacting.

I tend to say "Yes" when asked for help, and to volunteer when I see something that needs to be done. So, I was already overworked within my colonial group. But I wanted to get involved here in a significant way. To avoid drowning in good intentions and burning out, I knew I would require self-discipline and the ability to say "No," something I was not so good at. I was a prime candidate for the October Zoom sessions on setting boundaries.

I find the book, *Set Boundaries, Find Peace* enlightening. The author delineates areas where we need boundaries: family, work, romance, friendships, and technology. She then illustrates the consequences of not setting or not enforcing appropriate boundaries in these areas. Next, she describes the six types of boundaries: physical, sexual, intellectual, emotional, material, and time. Then she shows what violations of each type, look like and how to handle them. Finally, she sets forth how to identify and communicate your boundaries and how to enforce them.

My suspicions of my need for new habits and skills were confirmed. I learned that in order to establish healthy boundaries I have to identify my values, desires, and limits, and to take myself and my needs seriously. Clarifying priorities is the first step in developing clear and strong boundaries so I can communicate to others what I am and am not comfortable with and what I expect from them. I also have to learn to be assertive in communicating my desires and my limits, especially when I need to decline to take on obligations.

As our study group explored boundaries, I was inspired and encouraged. We started off setting our own boundaries by establishing our covenant. Next, we discussed each of the first eight chapters. Individuals shared examples from their experience to illustrate and test the author's points. For instance: despite having a lot of freedom and time during my care giving years, I had neglected my self-care, and constantly berated myself for not doing enough for Mom. Both habits were unhealthy and self-sabotaging, and hard to break. Even now, six months after her death, I wrestle with my habit of second-guessing whether I did enough for her. I did! I am still striving to develop a routine of self-care, but I am making progress.

I found our group’s insights and gleanings poignant in some cases, exhilarating in others. I have every confidence that healthy boundaries can lead to stronger relationships built upon mutual trust and respect. They ensure that saying “No, that doesn’t work for me” can be an act of generosity and care. They can also enable me to say “Yes” and give my very best effort to endeavors I do choose to undertake. Overall my experience was uplifting and stimulating. I look forward to joining the upcoming sessions when we will go through the workbook and transform what we’ve learned from the book into actual action and habits.

Rev. Margret A. O’Neill

Thank you, Wendy. Learning in community can provide important life lessons, enriching our own lives and our connections in relationship. And now, we hear from Libby Pontillo, reflecting on her learning as part of the Congregational Relationships Team.

Libby Pontillo

First I’d like to recognize the other members of the Congregational Relationships Team, who are making this journey together, and ask them to stand if they are here in person: Pam Anderson, Cheryl Dunican-Hein, Marilyn Masur, and Lynn Richter. Thank you all for being partners along the way.

Starting this project, I thought I was pretty well aware of boundaries. I was aware of physical and sexual boundaries, and boundaries surrounding confidentiality. Many of us are aware of material boundaries around possessions and how they are shared. In reading this book, I realized that there were types of boundaries I hadn’t thought of as boundaries: especially **emotional** and **intellectual boundaries**. These were areas in which I had definitely felt the discomfort of boundary violations, but I couldn’t always put my finger on why I had these feelings, or sort out conflicting feelings, especially when being challenged.

Emotional boundaries are complex. We may understand a boundary around gossiping about personal details of someone else’s life, for example, or even pushing someone to share more than they feel comfortable sharing. Many of us have felt the impact of a violation in these areas. But I hadn’t really thought about some of the other behaviors named in this section as boundary violations:

- Excessive venting of feelings to someone else
- Invalidating someone’s feelings – This I have definitely experienced!
- Telling people how to feel, e.g., “You shouldn’t get so upset about that.” – Who among us hasn’t been told that – or maybe said it?
- Minimizing the impact of something on someone else – e.g., “Oh, that wasn’t such a big deal!” How often do we hear – and say - that?
- Pushing people to move quickly past complicated feelings. “You need to get over that!” I feel a lot of things deeply, and it takes time for me to process these feelings. I have definitely experienced this violation.

Why are these behaviors boundary violations? While some may be well-meaning, they take away our ability to experience and process our authentic feelings. They can be belittling and dismissive, leaving us feeling that we are somehow deficient, or that our feelings are wrong.

Intellectual boundaries are something I hadn’t really put into the “Boundaries” box, although I certainly know what violations feel like. Sadly, some of these are common in our current political arena.

- Calling people names or ridiculing them for their beliefs or opinions. This can be done openly or with subtle sarcasm, eye rolls, and body language.
- Dismissing someone or being rude or mean during disagreements
- Yelling during disagreements
- Demeaning someone's family member in front of that person (or not)
- Making jokes at the expense of someone, whether present or not

At heart, many of these behaviors are simply unkind. We at UUCCH pride ourselves on offering a welcoming place for the free and open exchange of ideas. In this context, creating a sense of safety for sharing ideas and opinions is essential. Violations of intellectual boundaries like those I've mentioned can undercut this sense of safety and shut discussion down.

Like many in our reading groups, I realized that I had shied away from expressing my discomfort and stating my boundaries when I was the recipient of some of these behaviors. I felt the feelings, but I didn't feel confident that I had the tools to express them or the courage to acknowledge the hurt that I felt. This book has given many of us a deeper understanding, a sense of empowerment, and some effective language to express what we feel. And just as importantly, it has heightened our awareness of our need to be sensitive to, and honor, the boundaries of others.

Setting boundaries is an art, rather than a science. To set an effective boundary, we need to find a way to state it so that the person whom we want to hear it will listen. Nuance, tone, and timing are important. Tawwab gives some suggestions about how and when to state and re-state boundaries. Group participants came up with additional ideas. Foundational to all of this work are self-awareness, a willingness to truly listen to the other person, and a good dose of courage. Honoring boundaries reflects the relational values of our faith, expressed in our congregational covenant, and as such, is truly a spiritual practice ----worth practicing.

Rev. Margret A. O'Neill

Thank you, Libby – and Donna, Ryan, Jes, Lexi and Wendy. Yes, honoring boundaries reflects the relational values of our faith, expressed in our congregational covenant, and as such, is truly a spiritual practice, worth practicing. If you are feeling inspired after hearing these heartfelt words about a powerful learning experience, there is a book discussion on *Set Boundaries, Find Peace* being offered on three Monday evenings, starting on February 26. The announcement and registration link will be in Newsgram starting on Tuesday, and if you need to borrow a book, just let me know. This is good learning, for ourselves and for our life in beloved community, as we learn how to live with respect, compassion and care for ourselves and each other. Amen and Blessed Be.

Sources:

Tawwab, Nedra Glover. *Set Boundaries, Find Peace: A Guide to Reclaiming Yourself*. Penguin Publishing Group. Kindle Edition.

Brené Brown interview about boundaries

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TL0oa8UGqxA&t=9s>