BOUNDARIES WITH LOVE

Care, Consent and Limits You Can Live By



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This book offers education and reflection, not an assessment of a particular person or a substitute for appropriate professional support. The fictional stories are illustrations, not reports of identifiable people or guarantees of an outcome.

Public accounts are based on the sources listed at the end. They are separated from the author's reflections. No private dialogue or unreported motive is invented for historical or contemporary public people. Their inclusion does not imply endorsement.

If expressing a limit could bring violence, threats or intimidation, ordinary conversation exercises may be unsafe. Seek suitable support for your circumstances and prioritise safety. Financial, housing, employment and legal responsibilities require advice suited to the situation where appropriate.

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Before you begin

You can love somebody and still feel tired of the way you participate in their life. You can want to help and still dread the next request. You can know that a limit is needed and feel guilty each time you imagine stating it. If you recognise yourself in any of these experiences, begin here without deciding that something is wrong with your capacity to care.

Often the difficult part of a boundary is the meaning you give it. Saying no may feel like becoming selfish. Asking for space may feel like withdrawing affection. Declining one responsibility may feel like forgetting everything a family has done for you. The practical decision is small enough to name, but the fear surrounding it can make the decision feel like a judgment of your entire character.

We will give attention to both parts: what the relationship actually requires, and what happens inside you when you try to respond honestly. You may need clearer words. You may also need to understand why an uncomfortable response makes you doubt a decision you carefully considered. A sentence is easier to keep when you know the need it protects and the fear that makes you want to take it back.

This book will not ask you to become cold. It will ask you to make your care more truthful. You will consider what you freely offer, what has quietly become expected and which responsibilities need a different arrangement. You will also examine how you respond to another person’s limits. The room you want for your own choices has to belong to them too.

The stories are here to help you recognise the experience, not to tell you that your circumstances must match somebody else’s. The fictional people have English names. Their situations include imperfect intentions, difficult feelings, ordinary repair and choices that still have costs. Occasional examples from public lives

illuminate a point; their references are at the back, and they do not tell us everything about the people involved.

Read with one relationship or recurring request in mind. You do not need to revise your whole life in a single week. Notice where your answer stops feeling like a choice. Notice what you fear will happen if somebody hears your actual limit. Then practise a response small enough to be realistic and meaningful enough to make your participation more honest.

Where a limit could bring violence, threats or intimidation, ordinary conversation exercises may be unsafe. Seek support suited to your circumstances. Caring for yourself does not require proving your courage through a confrontation that puts you at risk.

You are learning how to remain a person inside the relationships you value: someone who can give, receive, choose, disappoint, repair and continue caring without pretending to have no needs. Let us begin there.

CHAPTER 1

1. Find the limit beneath the resentment

You may know that you need a boundary long before you feel able to set one. You feel it when a familiar name appears on your phone and your first response is a small tightening inside. You feel it when you agree to another favour and begin calculating what you will have to give up. You may still love the person asking. That is part of what makes the feeling difficult to admit. You do not want your exhaustion to sound like a withdrawal of love.

Stay with that experience for a moment. What exactly happens between the request and your answer? Perhaps you imagine their disappointment before you have considered your capacity. Perhaps you remember how warmly they spoke about your last act of help. Perhaps saying yes gives you immediate relief because the conversation remains pleasant. Only later, when you are doing what you promised, do you feel the cost. By then the other person has received agreement while you are living with a refusal you never allowed yourself to give.

If this feels familiar, you do not need to begin by condemning your generosity. There may be much that is good in it. You notice people, respond to need and value the relationships around you. What deserves attention is whether your generosity still contains a choice. Can you offer something because you genuinely want to, or must you offer it to avoid feeling that you have become a disappointing person? An action that looks identical from the outside can feel very different depending on the freedom inside it.

For some people, being helpful has become a way to feel secure in a relationship. You may have learned that being easy, useful or undemanding brought approval. You may simply have found that

these qualities made difficult conversations less likely. Your own history may be different; do not force it into an explanation that does not fit. The useful question is whether, today, you believe people will still want you close when you cannot provide what they want. If your answer is uncertain, a small request can carry the weight of a much larger fear.

That fear can make you wait for somebody else to release you. You hope they will notice your tiredness, remember what you have already done and say that you have offered enough. When they do not, resentment grows. Yet they may be seeing the willingness you continue to present. Some people will knowingly take advantage. Others will misunderstand an arrangement you have never corrected. Before deciding which is happening, give attention to what you have actually communicated and how the person responds when the truth becomes clearer.

You can begin privately. Write the request as plainly as possible. Underneath it, write what accepting would require. Include preparation, travel, money, emotional attention and recovery where they matter. Then write what would be displaced. The quiet evening, the necessary task or the time with your partner belongs on that page too. You are not trying to assemble evidence that you are important enough to deserve a limit. You are giving yourself an accurate picture of the choice.

Michelle Obama described a version of this strain when she spoke about raising young children while Barack worked away. What was called part-time professional work had continued to make full-time demands. Later, she took Sasha to a job interview and made her need for pay and flexibility clear. She also recognised that many workers could not negotiate as she could. [1] Your circumstances may be very different. The useful question remains close to home: does the name of an arrangement describe what it actually requires from you?

Ask what you hope a yes will secure. Appreciation is a normal thing to want. So are closeness and the reassurance that you matter. But if you have quietly made assistance the price of those things, no amount of giving may feel sufficient. A person who thanks you can still ask again. A person who loves you can still overlook a cost they do not understand. Your contribution needs to be something you can honestly offer, rather than an unspoken test of whether somebody finally values you enough to stop requesting it.

This is why resentment needs to be listened to carefully. It may be telling you that a stated limit has been repeatedly ignored. It may be telling you that your circumstances have changed. It may be telling you that you are offering what you want to be seen offering instead of what you can sustain. These possibilities lead to different conversations. Do not use one uncomfortable feeling as a complete judgment of another person's character, and do not dismiss the feeling merely because the person has good intentions.

One gentle starting point is to revise a single arrangement. You do not have to announce a transformation to everybody you know. Choose a request whose cost you understand and an answer you can keep. Say what you can offer, what you cannot and when the change begins. You may feel guilty while doing it. The feeling does not automatically settle whether the decision is fair. Let the actual need, the actual cost and your real responsibilities help you judge.

Resentment can point to an unmet need, but it is not always proof that the other person has crossed a limit. You may be exhausted, comparing the relationship with an ideal or disappointed that help did not produce the closeness you hoped for. Examine the expectation carefully. If you offered a favour to gain affection, the other person's gratitude may never feel sufficient because the favour carried a private purpose. A clearer understanding of that purpose can change what you choose to offer next.

There are also situations where the limit was stated and repeatedly ignored. Here the task is not another private explanation of your

feelings. It is deciding what action you can take when the pattern continues. Distinguishing an unnamed expectation from an ignored agreement helps you respond proportionately. The first often needs clearer communication. The second may need follow-through, a revised arrangement or distance. If you treat both as the same problem, you may either punish someone for an expectation they did not know or keep explaining a limit they already understand.

Consider whether the limit is temporary or continuing. A difficult week may require rest; a recurring responsibility may require a new arrangement. Avoid solving a permanent problem with a one-day break and then returning to the same overload.

Notice the fear that makes no difficult. You may fear rejection, conflict, religious judgement or being seen as selfish. Naming the fear does not make it disappear. It helps you distinguish the actual consequence from the consequence you imagine.

Dependability includes making promises you can keep. Generosity includes offering what you freely choose. Being considerate includes giving clear information when you cannot participate. These qualities do not require every answer to be yes.

The evening Hannah stopped being the automatic answer

The following story is fictional.

Hannah knew who wanted tea without asking. At a family gathering, she could see the empty cups, the child looking for a plate and the uncle standing beside a chair he needed help to move. She dealt with each small problem before it became visible. People called her thoughtful. Her husband, Peter, liked telling visitors that nobody could host as she did. The praise had once pleased her. Recently it had begun to feel like another instruction.

On the evening of their anniversary, Peter invited his siblings to dinner. He imagined a lively celebration. Hannah imagined shopping after work, preparing food, clearing a room and spending the evening noticing everybody else's comfort. He had not discussed those tasks because he did not experience the invitation as a list of tasks. When she heard the plan, she said that it sounded lovely. Then she stood in the kitchen feeling angry with him for failing to recognise that it did not sound lovely to her at all.

The resentment became visible through a small event. Peter asked where the serving dishes were. Hannah answered sharply that he might know if he ever did anything in his own house. He withdrew. She continued preparing dinner, now with the additional burden of feeling misunderstood. Each thought that the other had damaged an evening intended to celebrate them. Neither had yet named the arrangement that was causing the damage.

The next morning, Hannah wanted to say that she was finished doing anything for his family. The statement would have expressed the size of her exhaustion while concealing the actual decisions required. She did not want to stop seeing them. She wanted to stop being the invisible condition that made every gathering effortless for everybody else. She wrote down what hosting meant: planning, paying, preparing, attending, cleaning and recovering. For the first time, the obligation had a shape larger than the word dinner.

She asked Peter to look at the list with her. He initially pointed out that he always offered to help. Hannah acknowledged that he did. Then she described the difference between offering assistance and carrying responsibility. If she still had to identify each task, ask for it and check whether it was finished, she remained the organiser. She needed him to take ownership of an arrangement, rather than wait beside it until she supplied instructions.

Peter heard criticism of his character where Hannah intended a description of the work. They paused the discussion, agreeing to return after breakfast. When they did, she said that her sharp

remark had been unfair. She could acknowledge the way she had spoken without withdrawing the problem. He admitted that he had invited people into an evening she would largely provide. His generous intention had not given him permission to commit her time.

They made three decisions. Invitations involving work for both would be discussed before being issued. Peter would organise the next family meal, including food and clearing up. Hannah would state her capacity directly, even when she disliked disappointing him. She also identified something harder to admit: she sometimes took over because she wanted the evening done in her exact way. Sharing responsibility meant allowing a different meal, a simpler table and a result that did not make her look like the perfect hostess.

Two weeks later, Peter proposed another visit. Hannah had a demanding deadline and declined to host. Her first impulse was to list every difficulty until her answer became unchallengeable. Instead, she explained the deadline and offered a later weekend she genuinely wanted. Peter was disappointed. He did not immediately become delighted by the new arrangement. That evening, they had to tolerate the ordinary discomfort of wanting different things without turning it into evidence that their marriage lacked love.

The next gathering was less polished. One dish arrived late. Peter forgot a dessert spoon. Hannah noticed the errors and remained seated. Later, he asked whether she had felt uncared for because the evening was not as carefully organised. She answered that she had felt more included, precisely because her presence had mattered more than her performance. He had learned something about care that praise had not taught him. She had learned something about capacity that resentment had not communicated clearly.

The change did not remove every imbalance. They still had to review how work was shared, especially when relatives treated

Hannah as the person to ask. What changed first was the automatic assumption. A request could now become a conversation. She no longer had to become visibly exhausted before her time counted as part of the family's plans.

Notice what Hannah protected: participation in a gathering she could enjoy, time for her own responsibilities and a marriage in which invitations were shared decisions. Her boundary was not a verdict that Peter or his family were selfish people. It was a revision of a practical arrangement. Such revisions may be necessary even where affection is real and intentions are kind.

If Hannah's story touches something in you, notice the moment at which her participation disappeared. It happened before the argument, when an invitation was treated as permission to use her time. Her resentment became easier to understand once she could describe the work underneath the apparently simple request. You may need that same act of honesty before you need a stronger sentence.

Consider one place where people praise what you provide. Does that praise leave room for you to provide less? If you imagine declining, what description of yourself do you fear losing? A dependable person can still have a limit. A generous person can still require a shared decision. Let your definition of those qualities include the life of the person expected to practise them.

Be careful not to turn this reflection into blame against yourself. Perhaps you did not know how to speak earlier. Perhaps the arrangement grew one small request at a time. You can understand how it developed and still choose to revise it now. The aim is to make your next answer more truthful, not to punish yourself for every answer you gave before you understood its cost.

As you continue, carry this question: what would I freely offer if I did not have to use the offer to prove that I am worthy of care? The

answer may still be generous. It will also be more likely to belong to you.

Reflection: the capacity page

List the recurring requests you accept. Mark which you freely enjoy, which are manageable and which leave you depleted or resentful. Choose one item to revise. Write what you can offer instead, if anything, and what you will do when the request exceeds that offer.

Do not begin by changing every arrangement at once. One clear, realistic limit is easier to practise than a sudden declaration that everyone must treat you differently.

Sources, further reading and support

Public accounts and source notes

The occasional public examples support the mentoring discussion; they are not complete portraits of the relationships. Numbers refer to the following sources, consulted 12 October 2026. The psychological reflections are the author's guidance, not diagnoses of the public people.

[1] White House archive: conversation with Robin Roberts at the Working Families Summit, 23 June 2014

https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/photos-and-video/video/2014/06/24/first-lady-speaks-working-families-summit

[2] National Park Service: Abigail Adams

https://www.nps.gov/people/abigail-adams.htm

[3] Serena Williams, as told to Rob Haskell: Vogue, 9 August 2022

https://www.vogue.com/article/serena-williams-retirement-in-her-own-words

[4] PEOPLE: Dolly Parton interview about Carl Dean, 2025

https://people.com/dolly-parton-great-old-love-story-late-husband-exclusive-11847380

[5] National Park Service: Courage to Love, historic resource study, section Val-Kill as an Act of Independence, printed pages 132–133

https://www.nps.gov/elro/learn/historyculture/upload/ERCouragetoLove-2.pdf

Consent and safety

RAINN, Consent 101: Respect, Boundaries, and Building Trust. Educational information on freely chosen, ongoing consent.

https://rainn.org/share-the-facts/consent-101-respect-boundaries-and-building-trust/

The National Domestic Violence Hotline, Create Your Personal Safety Plan. Its services are based in the United States; availability differs by location. Consult appropriate local services or trusted professional support for your own circumstances.

https://www.thehotline.org/plan-for-safety/create-your-personal-safety-plan/

Do not treat a communication script as a safety plan. If a boundary could bring harm, consider support and a plan suitable for your circumstances before making a direct announcement. Source organisations do not endorse this book. Websites and services may change.