

# Boundaries

Elisabeth A Horst PhD is a licensed psychologist practicing in Minneapolis, and a member of the 1ST! Board.

"Boundaries" is the new buzzword among professionals who deal with sexual misconduct. Ten years ago, I heard the term used mostly to describe a feature of interaction in family systems. Family therapists talked about enmeshment and individuation, and learned to look for problems related to the blurring between self and other in family communication styles. These days, I hear "boundaries" used more to refer to rules that define the limits of professional behavior. Bad boundaries, or, worse yet, boundary violations have all but replaced high-calorie desserts as the definitive sin — among therapists, at least. Since overuse of a term always carries the risk of obscuring its original meaning, it's worth taking a look at what we really mean when we talk about boundaries. How can boundaries help in healing and prevention of sexual misconduct?

The more recent use of the term boundaries, meaning the limits of what is appropriate in professional relationships, can help us get a grip on what, exactly, goes wrong in cases of clergy sexual misconduct. The rule, the boundary, that applies in these cases is that sexual interaction between professionals and those who hire them is likely to damage the integrity of the professional relationship and is therefore not okay. Sexual misconduct is an extreme example of breaking faith with those whom one serves. Clergy hold a position of leadership, and therefore of power, in the faith community. Good professional boundaries define the limits of that power. When I had knee surgery under general anesthesia, I willingly put my body under the power of the medical team -- not so that they could do anything they wanted with me, but so that they could heal my knee. When congregants recognize clergy as spiritual leaders, we hand over to them the authority to teach, preach, counsel, lead worship-- not for their own sexual or emotional gratification, but for our edification and guidance. We entrust clergy with power so that they can use it toward certain specific ends, and we rightly expect them to look out for our interests in the process. Boundaries are the rules that define the right and wrong uses of clerical power.

Boundaries are also the dividing lines between people, the limits that define selfhood and identity. Psychotherapists use the term to describe the degree of

psychological individuation versus enmeshment between individuals. My son broke his collarbone several months ago. In the emergency room, the doctor pushed and prodded to see where it hurt, which I am told is a good way to locate and gauge the extent of the fracture. I, of course, watched anxiously and when he hit the sore place, I flinched. The doctor looked at me and apologized! It was a classic moment of boundary confusion, and it irritated my son, who rolled his eyes and insisted that it didn't really hurt that much anyway. We don't usually like it when someone else gets confused about whose pain is being felt.

Used in this sense, to define the limits of individuality the concept of boundaries is perhaps even more relevant in helping us understand what goes wrong in cases of clergy sexual misconduct. It's not just about the rules being violated; it's about a quality of relationship that is hurtful to people. Individuation (which is a healthy balance between total interpersonal isolation, on the one hand, and complete psychological enmeshment, on the other) requires a very clear sense of where I end and you begin. Getting clear about this boundary gives me the ability to connect with you without subsuming your needs and opinions and feelings under mine — without, in other words, turning your selfhood into something I use for my own ends.

Offending clergy and their victims, have a very difficult time understanding whose needs are running the relationship. Someone watching from the outside would say that the needs of the offender take over, that the victim becomes an extension of the offender rather than an individual with a distinct self. This is why victims say things like, "I didn't think I wanted to have sex with him, but I guess I must have, because I went ahead and did it." From the inside, the victim often experiences the offender's needs as if they were the victim's own, or as if they were unquestionable moral imperatives. When a victim says, "I should..." or, "I need to..." it often really means, "What someone else wants from me is..." Over and over again, in therapy sessions with victims, I ask, "What do you want? How do you feel? What would you say about this situation?" These questions implicitly teach victims that they have a point of view, that there is a boundary between them and the offender. Early on in the work, most victims are either baffled entirely by these questions, or, chilling to watch, blithely answer from the offender's point of view. "I want to be my old capable self again," said one victim who had been abused at work. "I should be able to go back to work and just ignore it, rise above the bad stuff. I don't understand why I can't just be happy" There is nothing wrong with wanting to be happy What this woman didn't understand was that she was feeling obligated to be happy on the offender's terms and with the offender's bad behavior. I suggested to her that she could perhaps disconnect from her

feelings enough to be complacent and docile under those circumstances, but happiness is something else entirely. Human beings are not wired to be happy when we are being used. "What would you want if you didn't have to think about what anyone else expected from you?" I asked. It took her some minutes to connect with the answer, and several more minutes to get over her fear of saying it out loud. "I'm afraid you'll think I'm lazy" she said, watching my face carefully "I think I'd really like to just quit, take some time off, and then find another job. Maybe something completely different from what I've been doing." It took many more months before she was able to act on this wish, but she had begun to understand that what she wanted could be different from what others wanted from her.

It's harder than we think to treat others as subjects instead of objects. The difficulty is compounded in relationships where one person has more power, and even more compounded when the more powerful person disowns or downplays the power imbalance. Recently I asked a group of campus ministers, "How many of you feel your role gives you lots of power?" Most of them looked amused; a few looked startled. No hands went up. Ministers think of themselves as helpers, servants, not power seekers, and rightly so. Like it or not, though, the role of professional helper does involve being entrusted with a great deal of influence over those in one's care. If we (clergy and congregants both) insist on ignoring the power inherent in the role, it becomes easy to mistake compliance for love, to confuse coercion with leadership.

Members of the faith community are predisposed to respond to clergy as people of authority. In the face of this, some will tend to rebel, others to comply, some to demand, others to caretaker; but in any case the words and opinions and wishes of clergy carry relatively more weight than those of congregants, no matter how hard folks try to equalize the power. Power imbalance is not in itself a bad thing. Unless we want to try living in total anarchy we have to assign power to leaders at some point. Good leaders, however, understand something about the limits of their power and the ease with which it can be misused. An effective pastor will recognize hero worship or over compliance, and will not confuse it with love or sexual availability.

A sexual relationship can become sacred when it is a loving connection between equal partners fully committed to honoring the individuality of each. When one partner in the relationship has, by role definition, more power, it is simply not possible for the two to meet as whole individuals; the wishes and needs and interests of the more powerful partner will inevitably overshadow those of the other. One reason clergy-congregant "affairs" can seem so

innocent, or even enticing, to those involved, is that our culture's traditional sexual script eroticizes dominance and submission, and promises that our needs will be met by engaging in essentially unequal relationships. It amazes me that this promise persists so stubbornly since it is doomed from the start to create nothing but frustration of our most basic psychological needs. The fact is, neither Scarlett O'Hara nor Rhett Butler gets real intimacy or sustaining love. Victims may get immediate rewards: money, alcohol, access to secrets, being told they are special. But in an exploitive relationship, no reward can make up for the victim's loss of self-esteem. Being used is not the same as being loved. Likewise, the offender will never get true love from someone who can't really say no. Love is not love unless it is given freely. Getting clear about the boundary between myself and another means, among other things, coming to terms with what I can't get by cooption.

It also means getting clear about my sexual and relational needs and figuring out healthy ways to meet them. Many Christian churches, perhaps most faith traditions, teach us to attend to the needs of others at the expense of our own. It is possible to learn this lesson too well, to ignore our own needs so completely that we try to meet them in distorted ways. Offending clergy and their victims are usually in desperate emotional need without knowing it themselves. This is a setup for behavior that eventually ends up hurting someone.

When we visited the Boston Aquarium several years ago, we saw sharks swimming in the big tank alongside all sorts of exotic, much-smaller fish. "How do you keep the sharks from eating the little guys?" my son asked one of the keepers. "We just make sure the sharks are very well-fed," she answered. Like fish, people usually only try to steal what they can't come by honestly. Most of us are pretty good at examining ourselves for things we don't like, ought to change, could improve on. A lot of us are not as good at routinely asking ourselves, "What do I need?" and then allowing ourselves to answer in full. Feeding oneself is one big step toward eliminating the tendency to prey on others, but you can't feed yourself if you don't know what you're hungry for. Self-examination has for centuries been recognized as a useful spiritual practice. Adding a regular assessment of one's own needs to the practice could be the beginning of understanding the boundary between oneself and others. When we know what the limits are, we can find healthy ways to connect with each other. As Robert Frost said, good fences make good neighbors.

EH

