

Boundaries: Boring or Beautiful?

by Sara Webb, Executive Director, Rosen Method: the Berkeley Center

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A discussion of professional boundaries is often considered to be a boring topic--a long list of do's and don't's, limit-setting and rules that is mundane and uninspiring. My opinion is that the topic of boundaries is important to think about professionally, but that the importance of it is much more general and goes to the heart of being who we are in the world.

Our first knowledge of boundaries comes from touch. Each baby comes to know the extent of his/her own body by the effects of being lifted, carried, caressed, pushed and pulled as he or she is cared for. That is how each of us learns where we end and another begins. We learn that we are not infinite and that only our own limbs and appendages are under our direct control, --not the bedpost and not the person's legs next to us. This is a primal, primitive lesson in boundaries. We find out who we are in space, and that no one else can occupy the same physical space that we do. It is basic physical contact that defines our body and our first experience of "self." As a child develops and matures, this original sense of self gets expanded and refined by interactions with the physical universe and with family and friends. Kids continue to discover who they are by seeing what is possible and where they get stopped. Gravity doesn't allow us to fly to the top of a tree; we have to climb. We can't have any toy in the room--some other child may grab it away. By bumping up against people and things in more and more sophisticated interactions, we continue to build our sense of self. Sometimes the human interactions that a child experiences are confusing because the boundaries of the adults in their lives are unclear and involve double binds, emotional intrusion, merging or neglect. A parent may not recognize the child as a separate person or allow the child to have feelings that are independent of the parent's idea of what is right. Such mixed messages weaken the solid sense of existence that a young person should be building.

As a Rosen practitioner, I see my role and intention in working with clients as renewing that original process of self-discovery. Rosen touch affirms and recreates the early infantile experience of discovering who you are through elementary physical contact. Being in touch precedes language and understanding and touch defines existence. I want to interact verbally with my clients in ways that also are solid and centered, ways that give my clients something to bump up against. For example, I try to end the session and leave the room on time even if a client says she wants me to stay. And I don't want to get swayed and blown around in the wind of emotions that swirl in the session. I try to be who I am and do what I do in a consistent, recognizable way so that my client finds out that she can push me or plead with me, knowing that I will continue to be myself. This creates the opportunity for those visitors to my office to find their own voice and to do what they want in the world with a sense of personal power.

By demonstrating my limits and boundaries during a session, I am modeling my own entitlement to have them and supporting my clients' right to say no and thereby to set limits in their own lives. I had

one client who was so overwhelmed with guilt and fear every time she said no to anyone that she didn't dare do it. Her Rosen work enabled her to go out in her life each week and try saying no to someone-- her sister, her husband, her daughter or boss, and then come back the next week to deal with the intolerable waves of anxiety she experienced after doing so. As my client practiced her newfound ability to put her foot down, she discovered she could actually exercise choice in her life and that when she said yes now, it now expressed a true desire.

I believe there is no true yes in life until you can say no freely. Saying no is a huge part of "being who we truly are." Establishing our personal boundaries is how we define ourselves not just when we are two-year olds, but as adults as well. I think of my own personal story of making a commitment to marriage. When I was young, my boyfriend of three years asked me to marry him. I said no thank you, and then a few months later he asked me again. I said no again and I said no to his proposals five more times, but finally, the eighth time, when he asked me, I looked and saw I really wanted to marry him! My yes was actually a real choice and therefore it was powerful and lasting. Twenty-two years later I am still happily married and he is my hero. I am just lucky that my husband-to-be was persistent enough to wait around until I got through all my rejections of him to a real acceptance.

Rosen bodywork is another arena where setting boundaries makes something possible that wouldn't happen otherwise. By holding confidentiality and clear time lines, and by eliminating dual relationships, a practitioner establishes a therapeutic container for a Rosen session. Any kind of container has borders on all sides but empty space in the center. Once the container of a Rosen session is established, the space at the heart of a session magically opens. It is open for contact, for intense and intimate connection with a purity of relationship that is unlike anything else in our lives. Here, the Yes to love can be felt in the body without a need for protection. This experience does indeed have a power to transform our being. It is the creation of this reality that makes all the humdrum rules and negativity of boundaries worthwhile. It makes possible a beautiful and free expression of ourselves.

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