

Boundaries? What Are They?

Thomas Merton Brightman

My father's oldest brother died in Florida during winter. The funeral was delayed until spring as his relatives wanted to bury him in New York State in the family plot. Knowing the date of the services well in advance, I was able to schedule time to drive my father to the funeral. I was alone with my father for four days. This was the longest time ever spent with without my mother being present.

From 1984, when I consciously began a concerted effort to find out who I was and why I behaved as I did, my father had observed or been directly involved in much of my process. We had managed some healing and had agreed to disagree in other areas. The drive to the family homestead in New York provided opportunity to talk extensively and informally about our lives together and apart.

Some of our most pointed dialogue was about boundaries or the lack thereof in our family system. I also described shame-bound systems in great detail. He related stories from his childhood that fit the model. It was quite a respectful and productive time of mutually piecing together parts of the family puzzle. I felt affirmed in his apparent new level of acceptance of my journey. He was the most willing to listen that I've ever experienced.

At the funeral, I paid attention to the interactions of the many relatives that I rarely see any more. There was little touching. Family units were dispersed. Communications seemed forced and trite. I did not hear anyone speak of feelings. Even the members of the bereaved family were non-demonstrative toward each other. Many seats under the tarp beside the grave were empty. It seemed as though no one wanted to be close to the ceremony.

I do not like the wife of the deceased. She was abusive to me as a child. She always violated people's space. When I was at her house as a young boy she would always follow me into the bathroom and look over my shoulder at me while I urinated so that I would not wet on her floor



or stool. No matter how quietly I slipped into the bathroom, she would hear and come rushing in to watch. Despite this history, my growth allowed me to set aside old judgments for the day. I was most gracious and supportive.

Someone recalled and commented that the deceased person did not consider himself religious and did not want a Christian burial. His wife quickly retorted that this funeral was for her, not for him and that she was doing it the way she wanted it to be. End of subject. That could have been a tip off to me about what would happen later.

Following the burial, people left quickly. Then there were only three people on the family plot: my father, aunt and me. My aunt led my father to the adjacent gravesites. I gave them space to talk, standing a short distance away. She reviewed for my father who was buried in each grave, as well as how many places remained available. She informed him that he and my mother could be buried in two of the spaces not far from where my brother was interred.

“You can go here and Mary Etta can go there,” she said. He replied, “You know that Mary Etta would never want to be buried here.” Her retort, “Donald, she’ll be dead, just put her in the ground.” My father paused and I listened intently. What would he say, I mused. “Well, if she’s dead, I guess I could . . .” he said.

Bingo! What a poignant example of absolute disregard for personal boundaries. A perfect example of the violations I had sought to have my father understand and accept as part of my abuse and one of the sources of my maladaptive behavior for which the larger world had punished me.



There was a fleeting rush of anger at his response and my aunt’s assertion. However, I let go of the anger and waited for her to leave. Then I looked my father in the eye from directly in front of him and quickly recapped what had just happened.

“This is what I’ve been pleading with you to understand. Do you see why this family could do anything that it wanted to do with me? It doesn’t even matter if one of us is dead. The other members of the family are going to do whatever pleases them. Nothing is sacred. They only revere their control and denial.

“Did you listen to your response? There is no way that I can make this family dynamic any more visible to you. This is why I work so hard at recovery. You keep asking me when it will be over. With this as my history, I don’t know if it will ever be over.”

We each became quiet. There was a space without words. Neither of us could escape our separate perspectives. My family does not support me in the discovery of my earliest sexual abuse. This was one small window to the underlying family dysfunction. In his own way, my father was trapped in the same system. I hoped that this event would propel him to new awareness. A day later another incredible occurrence laid open another family secret.

And, thinking that I had gained some ground that wouldn't slip from beneath my feet, we began the drive home. Not too far down the road, my father asked me if I'd talk to my mother about being buried in New York. "No! I will not. It is time for you to do your own work." I guess I shouldn't have been surprised that I couldn't really affect his denial system.

I am reminded that dealing with my own denial provides lifetime employment.