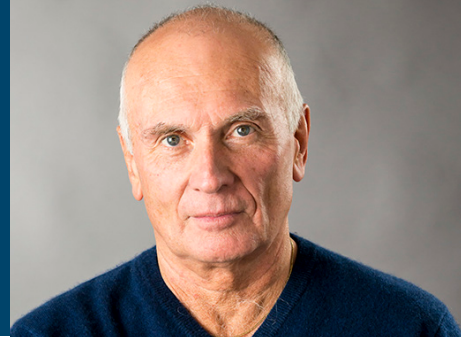




Honoring Limits—Honoring Life

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“I wish I had paid more attention to my limits. I probably would not have ended up in the hospital.” This is an all too frequent description of the kind of consequences that happen when we ignore our limits. Of course, any significant psychological story would have another perspective. There is the option of leaning into limits, “Oh no, no, no I could never go back to school. It’s just way beyond what I’m capable of.” Or “Exercise regularly! I simply don’t have that level of discipline.” We can either pretend we don’t have limits, or all we have is our limitations. It’s likely that we lean one way or the other depending upon predisposition and current real-life circumstances. Occasionally, we might lean heavily in one direction, suffering severe consequences, as with the initial quote above.

What Are Limits?

We can think of personal limits as boundaries. These boundaries separate your actions from your reserve of internal energies which give rise to thinking, feeling, and acting. Honoring your reserve of energy which supports thinking might sound like, “I really can’t continue addressing this problem. I’m going to take a bike ride and get back to it later.” Honoring your reserve of feeling or emotional energy is reflected in the following, “I’ve been grieving the loss of our dog throughout the day for a couple of weeks. I’m

going to allocate fifteen minutes per day when I sit and give myself permission to grieve and then get on with the tasks at hand.” Acknowledging the aggregate of energy supporting some action might be, “I’ll continue painting the house in the heat, and I’ll need to pause for ten minutes every hour, resting and making sure I stay hydrated.”

Dishonoring your limits happens when you deny them. Dishonoring your life happens when your limitations gain an excessive liberty to define who you are. When the latter happens, growing or stretching somewhere you’ve not been before can get significantly interrupted. Let’s look more closely at what may influence dishonoring your limits.

Difficultly Identifying and Honoring Limits

Heroic cultural imperative. Our culture has a strong fascination with heroes who appear to transcend their limits with a single bound. Believing it’s not such a bad thing, can easily lead to tampering with your limits. Are we seduced into believing that we too can attain heroic stature? Or do we view the potential hero in us as the one deserving admiration and love? John was raised in an alcoholic family where he played the role of family hero. That role holds no concessions for having personal limitations. John felt the weight of both the cultural imperative as well as family script for whom he should be. Some semblances of freedom to

be an ordinary man had to begin with his willingness to de-shame his limits. Attaining the rightfulness of being ordinary would come with deliberate, incremental movements, while learning to forgive himself for compulsively thinking he should be larger.

Reproduction of a family legacy. Sometimes we inherit a proclivity to violate our limits from those who came before us. It can simply feel like a reasonable way to approach living. Your ancestors can easily pass on from one generation to another how to face life's demands. One of those recipes can be a propensity to deny limits.

A compensation. If we perceived family members excessively surrendering to their limits, then it can be easy to compensate by at least ignoring our own limits. As I watched my father succumb to heavy depression allowing his limits to consume him, I unconsciously decided to do the opposite and paid a price for the compensation. I was visited by fatigue, a Meniere's condition leaving my balance compromised, with balance of living being the very issue.

Lack of self-awareness. If we are unacquainted with our limits, then it's difficult to identify where we need to live. It's easy to slip into working too much or even loving too much. Men typically can get unaware of their limits at work. On the other hand, women often lack clarity about their limits when caring for others.

Lack of clarity regarding the impact of changing external conditions. Our life circumstances are constantly altering. The energy needed for one situation may change significantly when prevailing conditions shift. For example, a couple goes from having no children to having twins. Weekly responsibilities at work double or moving a family of five from one town to another 1,000 miles away.

Living from a sense of urgency. Living from feeling pressed vaults us out of the moment. Upon such a departure from the here and now, there is a lack of pause to generate an adequate inventory of our limits.

A need to prove something. This attachment to proving is typically about demonstrating you're lovable. Caught in the snare of proving can be endless, with our deservedness of love remaining just out of reach. The likely recipients of the proof are parents either living or dead.

Guilt. When we feel guilty about either not doing enough or not giving enough, our limits fade and we lose any consideration of our own personal worth.

Loving. Loving can be one of the most benign interruptions of honoring limits. It feels good, it's fulfilling, others typically benefit, and if a little is so wonderful, imagine how great a lot would be! It so easy for the loving agenda to gain momentum until we are at the edge of serious depletion.

Cues That Indicate Tampering With Limits May Be Happening

FATIGUE

LONELINESS

FEELING RESENTFUL

FEELING IRRITABLE

HUNGER

FEELING OVERWHELMED

COGNITIVE PERSEVERATION
(RACING THOUGHTS)

PLAYING OR RECREATING
VIEWED AS A WASTE OF TIME

Restoring an Honoring of Limits

Let's look at some ways we can restore a willingness to honor our limits.

Committed to knowing your limits. Of course, a willingness to be aware of your limits suggests that you believe knowing them is a good thing. It will take a while to have a relationship with your limits based upon care and acceptance. It may be helpful to have the attitude, “I want to know my limits just so I have options of how to relate to them.”

Interrupting shame and guilt. The more you're willing to pull shame and guilt off your limits, the more you can experience them as the essential material of your identity. As we will see, there may be another role for shame and guilt.

Allowing for an emotional reaction when limits are violated. Strong emotions such as shame, guilt and regret can be a viable indication of how much we value honoring our limits. John Bradshaw refers to such shame as “healthy shame.” “Healthy shame is part of every human's personal power. It allows us to know our limits, and thus to use the energy more effectively. We have better direction when we know our limits. We do not waste ourselves on goals we cannot reach or things we cannot change. Healthy shame allows our energy to be integrated rather than diffused.” (Healing the Shame that Binds You, p, 4) The reminder here is that strong feelings are appropriate in the presence of violation, even self-violation.

Tracking heroic inclinations. It's almost impossible to escape the culture's glorification of heroes. Avoid deciding you're immune from such acculturation. Develop a savvy, sensing the pursuit of unattainable goals or what is out of your control.

Get acquainted with where you come from. It can be very helpful to identify and prepare to interrupt a family legacy of violating limits. Greta a married mother of three came to her first session complaining of feeling overwhelmed. It did not take long before she began speaking her mother and grandmother as

having lived lives of overwhelm. “My mother and my grandmother never stopped. They worked constantly, never bothering to eat right or rest. I don't think either one ever took a vacation. I'll be damned if I'm going to pass that on to my girls.” Greta encouraged me to hold her accountable if I saw her ignoring her limits and slipping into overwhelm. Greta's commitment to her daughters spurred her on interrupting a female legacy of living an overwhelmed life. There's risk of compensating for a legacy of aggrandizing limits and allowing them to immobilize willfulness. The compensation would have you living with an unbridled tenacity, convinced that what is not in your control must certainly be attainable.

Compensation tends to create exactly what it is attempting to avoid. Limits violated or limits aggrandized will cripple an effort to sojourn with both ease and passion.

Attend to feelings of self-contempt. Self-degradation is the compost for growing a need to prove something. The illusion is that if you can eclipse you limits and prove what needs to be proven, intelligence, success or good character, along with self-worth will be restored. The restoration may occur temporarily until the voices of self-attack demand more proof.

Pause. Seeing and appreciating your limits calls for interrupting living with urgency. It can be seductive to allow pressing agendas to distract. Then, it's easier to live temporarily oblivious about your limits. It means noticing that you're moving with a pace that is pushing you beyond yourself. It's time to stop and be curious about your level of energy and what you need to come back to yourself.

Listen to the quiet voice of love. The more audible voice of love echoes suggestions about how to care for others. The quiet voice can inform you concerning how much your attention is on others, resulting in self-neglect, a dis-honoring of limits.

Employ allies. Getting clear about the nature of your limits and what they're asking for is a major undertaking. Don't try to do this alone. Get assistance,

especially from those who are crafting a mindful relationship with their own limits.

Excessively Yielding to Limits

Being risk averse. Not wanting to take risks allows our limits to dominate our lives. This attitude can be driven by fear or anger. Fear views life as too big and results in defeat, humiliation, and failure. Risking in relationships is limited by the fear of abandonment. Once we discover that life is relatively unpredictable and insecure, we can withdraw in anger refusing to live life on life's terms. Our terms become an over-indulgence with our limits. We naively forget that either way, risking or not, life wins.

Depression. We pull the plug on our life energies when we're depressed. It can certainly be a way to take a time out or a way to approach living generally. When this happens, our limits weigh down upon us, making it difficult to hold any imagining of how life might graciously greet our potentials.

A legacy. When our ancestors found themselves feeling persecuted by life with their limits becoming a force of incarceration, it becomes easy for us to take on such an inheritance of feeling victimized by life.

Confused about the value of self-forgiveness. When self-forgiveness is difficult to access, making mistakes can feel intolerable. When that happens, we find a shroud of timidity drops over the soul. Now, it's easy to withdraw from life, replacing our desire with the expectations others have of us. We sacrifice following what matters most to us, and wither into complacency and acquiescing, in the hope of minimizing the number of mistakes we make. With little or no capacity to forgive ourselves, our limits receive an inflated endorsement.

Restoring an Honoring of Life

Forgiveness and Mercy for the self. When we can't find forgiveness and mercy for our mistakes and defeats, it is extremely arduous to honor life when it guarantees that we will fumble and get lost. Tim, a 38-year-old physician's assistant and married with two

children came for his first session, soft spoken and shy. He said, "I'm here because my wife says she's losing respect for me." He soon confided in me that he had been raised in a very rigid religious family where mistakes and shortcomings might be eventually forgiven by God or his designated officials. Tim was terrified to be fully alive, frightened by the possibility that he could fall short in some unredeemable way. Tim was gradually learning that he was dishonoring his life by taking refuge withing the confines of his limits where he quaked with fear, shunning risks, naively hoping to be risk free.

He almost fell off his seat when I first suggested that making mistakes made no derogatory statement about his character and that he was both responsible and entitled with the authority to forgive himself. Tim learned to respect himself, with his wife following suit.

Come to understand that you do not actually fear taking risks. After hearing hundreds of folks tell me that they were afraid of taking some risk, what they are afraid of became quite clear. We all fear how we will treat ourselves if a risk does not yield favorable results. We worry about inflicting ridicule, guilt, and disdain upon ourselves. Taking well-measured risks is how we stretch ourselves and possibly even see life's challenges as an opportunity to grow. It does mean stepping over the threshold of our limits, possibly to somewhere we haven't been before.

Remain physically active. It can be all too easy to succumb to a depressive state, especially when it offers such an invitation to recline behind the safeguard of your limits. Walking, swimming, cycling, gardening, hiking, and dancing are energizing. We're more willing to be energized when we trust that the energy will have us more fully alive and more willing to forgive ourselves when results are less than fortuitous.

Hang with your allies. Dishonoring life by having your limits maintain status quo does not get the kind of endorsement that heroic violations of limits typically gets. Recoiling from life is usually fear-driven, and the fear is susceptible to be shamed. A place to begin getting straight with life and learning to hold your

limits with more suppleness is by meeting with a mentor or with peers who can identify with such emotional work. You may discover a legacy whereby your ancestors were prone to living from a victim's posture, not venturing out beyond their limits.

Maintaining a Creative Relationship with Limits

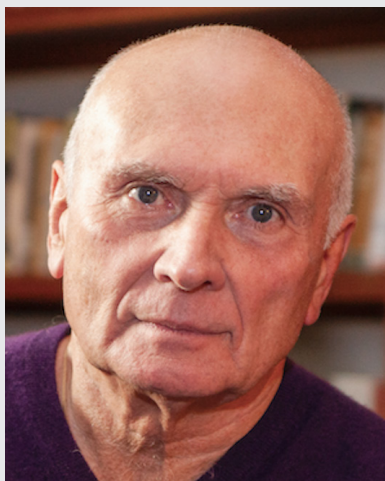
Maintaining a creative relationship with limits is not a simple undertaking. It calls for a strong commitment to remain mindful of what is occurring around us and within us. Most of all, it asks us to devotionally act in support of rightsizing our souls. We are watchful of pushing ourselves beyond our borders or taking sanctuary behind our limits, noticing a tendency to collapse.

We remain creative with our limits by first acknowledging they exist and that they reflect the core of our humanity. Honoring our limits means renewing an appreciation for how much they make us human. Remembering that dishonoring happens as we either ignore our limits or dishonor our lives by embracing them with an inflated enthusiasm. Limits mark the edges and contours of who we are. They hold and maintain what we can bring to the world, to those we love, those we work with and the task we deem desirable. We want them to possess enough

plasticity, allowing us to stretch to the unexplored spaces of the soul.

Refrain from comparing your limits to those of others. Your limits have been crafted by your ancestors, family, culture and how you've held and pushed them. Unfortunately, there is no getting this relationship to our limits just right. We're bound to either prod or yield to them. It's a lot like having a relationship with a person. There's either too much of us in the relationship or not enough. It can be challenging to do something about getting fulfillment by an inordinate amount of limit-stretching. At best, we can get effective at making corrections, which itself is a creative act. Coming acquainted with how we allow ourselves to get seduced, wandering feverishly beyond our limits, is very helpful and calls for a level of humility supporting such honesty.

Our creative spirit breathes as we live the questions of our limits. Am I pushing unduly beyond my limits? Is there some indication that the imprudent drive is happening? What might the need to shove limits aside be asking for? Am I retreating from life by allowing my limits to define me as unable? Is there some risk I might be willing to take that I believe could be a reasonable stretch beyond status quo? What will support me as I choose to live life from my desire?



PAUL DUNION earned his Doctoral degree in Counseling and Consulting Psychology from the University of Massachusetts at Amherst and his M.A. in Philosophy from the University of Connecticut. He taught Philosophy for thirteen years at UConn and Three Rivers Community College.

Dr. Dunion has been in private practice for the past thirty-seven years. He is a wholistic psychological healer, employing an existential modality as well as a somatic approach to treating trauma. He is trained in EMDR and is a graduate of the Somatic Experiencing Institute.

From its early beginnings, Dr. Dunion represented the State of Connecticut at the national gatherings of the mytho-poetic men's movement, sponsored by Wingspan. As the founder of Boys to Men, Dr. Dunion created a mentoring community for teenage boys. He is also the co-founder of COMEGA (Connecticut Gathering of Men), having served over 6,000 men since 1992, which continues to offer biannual retreats. In 2013, Dr. Dunion established the Croton Mystery School and designed its curriculum with a focus on teaching students how to make peace with life's mystery and unpredictability. Dr. Dunion has offered over 200 workshops on topics related to Human Potential. Currently, he offers supervision for younger psychotherapists.

He has published five books: *Seekers – Finding Our Way Home*; *Path of the Novice Mystic – Maintaining a Beginner's Heart and Mind*; *Dare to Grow-Up – Become Who You Are Meant to Be*; *Shadow Marriage – A Descent into Intimacy*; and *Temptation in the House of the Lord*. Dr. Dunion's latest offering due to be released in 2020 is *Wisdom – Apprenticing to the Unknown and Befriending Fate*.

