

# KILROY CAFÉ

Philosophy for the Modern Age

©2009, Glenn Campbell, PO Box 30303, Las Vegas 89173  
glenn@kilroycafe.com www.KilroyCafe.com



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DO NOT CROSS THIS LINE!

# Boundaries

## your defense against chaos

By GLENN CAMPBELL

An essential dilemma of life is figuring out where your own personal responsibilities begin and end. No matter what resources you have, they are never enough to address all the needs around you, so you have to decide which problems are “yours” and which are not. The place you draw this line is called a boundary.

If my own life is at risk, that’s certainly my problem. If someone else’s life is a risk—a stranger I have no connection with—it’s not my problem. I may be able to sympathize, but my resources are limited and I can’t save everyone. If I try to do too much, then my own system will collapse and I’ll be able to save no one. Therefore, I have to draw the line somewhere.

A boundary is a fenceline between yourself and the outside world. The health of what goes on inside the compound depends on how well you defend the fence. If you try to take on too much responsibility by letting too many problems come in, life inside the fence will eventually degenerate into chaos.

The problem of the underclass in a wealthy society like ours is not just the lack of resources but poor personal boundaries. The limited resources of an average family usually get absorbed by things that aren’t related to core survival: pets, entertainment systems, drugs (legal or otherwise), friends who visit and never leave, etc. In fact, this is a problem of the upper classes as well. As soon as someone has more money or time than they need to survive, the fence of their compound usually expands to absorb those resources.

Intrusions into the fence are sneaky. If a stranger was breaking into your home, you would have no trouble defending your boundaries. You would call the police! However, if a relative lost his job and moved into your home, your defenses would be a lot weaker. When he has nowhere else to go, how do you tell him to leave? The real threat to our boundaries is situations where our emotions say we have no choice.

No one would turn away a starving child or a little lost puppy appearing on their doorstep, but what if there were hundreds of starving children or lost puppies? At what point do you close the gate and start refusing entry?

That, in fact, is the permanent state of the world: Needs will always far outstrip the resources available. Once you start caring about others, the problem is deciding where to stop. If you can’t stop, then your compassion will eventually eat up everything you have.

Indeed, most people don’t know how to stop. Regardless of their starting position, their responsibilities tend to expand until all their resources are absorbed. That’s when chaos kicks in. When any system is over capacity, safety systems break down and catastrophe becomes the de facto defender of boundaries.

For example, if your family has ample resources, it is noble to take on a foster child, but if you take on *ten* foster children, the integrity of your household is going to deteriorate to the point where it is just as dysfunctional as the families those foster children came from. Yet, how can you turn away a child who desperately needs you? Knowing he may be lost forever if you don’t help him, how can you refuse?

The answer is: You can and you must! Defending boundaries means looking into a cute little puppy’s eyes and saying, “No,” even if it means the puppy might suffer or die.

Every relationship involves boundaries. Certain things are my responsibility and other things are yours, and if the border between the two becomes blurred, our relationship will deteriorate. You can’t help your child too much or you’ll damage his incentive to help himself. You can’t be too supportive of your spouse or you will become the crutch he habitually leans on. In even the most caring relationship, you have to carefully guard your fence and push back responsibilities whenever they intrude into your space.

To someone who is repulsed by a boundary, it will inevitably seem cruel and arbitrary, but an arbitrary line is better than none at all. Whenever possible, you should use natural borderlines and simple rules. For example, it is a lot easier to say “No dogs” than to say “Only one dog,” because one dog will often open the door to others.

To prevent your own life from sliding into chaos, you have to actively define and defend the responsibilities you will let in. You can’t be totally cold to the needs and suffering of others, but you also can’t let your life be taken over by other people’s problems.

Your main instruments in this world are your own body and mind, and your first priority is their health and maintenance. It is noble to help others, but only as long as your own core resources are protected. If the problems of others take too much out of you, you have to pull back and redraw your borders.

If you truly care about others, then your first responsibility is protecting yourself. You must define your island and what you can reasonably do on it, then defend it firmly against any new entanglements.

—G.C.

[www.Glenn-Campbell.com](http://www.Glenn-Campbell.com)