



**Pia Mellody, RN, CAC**  
*Senior Fellow of The Meadows*

Pia Mellody is known and respected as a preeminent authority, lecturer and educator in the fields of addictions and relationships. Her work in codependence, boundaries, and the effects of childhood trauma on emotional development has profoundly influenced the treatment of addicts and people with problems forming and maintaining relationships. She is the author of several extraordinary books, including *Facing Love Addiction*. As one of the pioneers in the field of recovery, her development of theories on the effects of childhood trauma became the foundation of The Meadows' programs and is, in large measure, the reason for its success.



**Lawrence S. Freundlich**

Lawrence S. Freundlich is the president of Freundlich Communications, a New York book packager. He is the author, with artist George Rodrigue, of *Blue Dog* and of a biography of the great restaurateur Jerome Brody, *A Life Well Spent*.



## THE INTIMACY FACTOR: The Boundaries of Love

By Pia Mellody, RN, CAC,  
& Lawrence S. Freundlich

*“Maintaining respect in the face of relational difficulties requires the practice of boundaries that gives us the gift of controlled vulnerability.”*

Relationships provoke our deepest emotions of joy and fulfillment as well as pain and loss. When we are secure in our knowledge of ourselves and are unafraid of communicating to our partners the truth of who we are, our sense of personal power and contentment makes life worth living and our place in it comfortable. We don't have to disguise our motives or to make up lies or to attack or to defend because we imagine that the expression of our true selves will reveal us as being inadequate. We are willing to be seen in our faulted and wonderful humanity, and we expect that this presentation of our humanity is just what our intimate partner wants. Achieving this kind of self-esteem-building confidence is what maturity is all about.

When people fail at relationships, it is because the model of relationality that they take into adulthood was formed for them in childhood by immature parents who passed on to them their own relational dysfunction. They taught their children every lesson but the lesson of inherent worth. In order to be “successful” children in such a family, the children were assigned roles, which were aimed at serving the parents, not the children. They became Little Miss Perfect, the Abandoned Child, the Heroine

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or Hero, Mommy or Daddy's Little Girl or Man, the Scapegoat, the Family Counselor, the Caretaker, the "6-year-old grown-up," "the 14-year-old infant." These roles are where they looked for their value. Self-esteem was not part of the equation.

These roles either disempowered them when they couldn't live up to their parents' expectations or falsely empowered them when they learned to esteem themselves for playing roles that had little or nothing to do with their childhood needs and robbed them of their spontaneity.

Having a good relationship is such a tricky business—this business of sharing truth with another—of talking and listening. The voices of our falsely empowered and disempowered childhoods still fight for a place in the script. They try to take over our vocal chords when we seek to share our adult truths and drag us back to the familiar roles of Mama's Boy, the Scapegoat, Abandoned Child, etc.

It takes authentic self-esteem to give those abusive voices closure. When they are silenced or under control, relationships happen. Then we receive communication from our partners without the shame or fear or panic that drives old voices to command us to attack or to defend or to flee. From this place of self-esteem, we present our truth with love for our partner—or at a minimum, with respect.

Maintaining respect in the face of relational difficulties requires the practice of boundaries that gives us the gift of controlled vulnerability. Personal boundaries protect us from incoming, disturbing emotion while still keeping the possibility of intimacy alive. Personal boundaries enable us to contain our own emotions while we are on the giving end, so that we remain respectful, but not so guarded that we wall-off or blockade ourselves from intimacy.

There are two kinds of boundaries that relate to physical and sexual contact or sharing. One refers to non-sexual closeness and touching and is called the non-sexual physical boundary. The other is about sexuality and is called the physical sexual boundary.

There is also an internal boundary that we use when we share intellect (ideas) and emotions. To function intimately in relationship, we work both our external physical and sexual boundaries, and our internal boundaries of mind and emotion.

Physical boundaries become relevant when we physically approach someone with the intention of getting physically close or when we invite someone to be physically close to us. These kinds of non-sexual approaches and invitations are in the realm of the affectionate. Generally, whether being approached affectionately or approaching affectionately, we relax.

These affectionate approaches require controlled containment, because it is abusive to engage someone in physical intimacy, even if it is non-sexual,

without some sort of permission from the other person. Seeking permission is an act of respect and love, and centers us in the truth of our wanting to be physically intimate with this other person.

The receiver of affection must practice containment, also. As the other person approaches us, we think of containing his affectionate offer so that what is offered matches what fits us. Protecting yourself and evaluating the content of an incoming offer is an act of self-esteem. You are centering on the truth of who you are and the kind of physical intimacy that fits your authentic feelings.

Let us consider the sexual boundary. I have a responsibility as I am approaching somebody sexually to contain myself sexually in the interest of the comfort of the other person. This action involves the establishment of the external sexual boundary. The boundary statement that sets up the healthy exercise of the sexual motive is: "I have a right to control with whom, when, where and how I am going to be sexual. And the same is true for you."

If I concentrate on the first part, this boundary empowers me to make my own decision about whether to be sexual with someone, and, if I agree to be sexual, I still have the responsibility and the right to determine when, where and how I want to do that. When I protect myself this way, I am in an act of self-love. I am dealing with the truth of my sexual motive and my partner's.

Our physical sexual boundary must be in place when someone is approaching us with sexual motives. We have to be respectful of what they are saying to us about when, where and how. We cannot just demand our way. As we are being physically or sexually intimate, we either signal our availability or discourage it, but with respect.

When you have a functional boundary, you protect and contain yourself while remaining vulnerable enough for intimacy, but not so vulnerable that you can be easily damaged.

The two boundaries we exercise when we are relating intimately in the areas of intellect and emotion are the internal listening boundary and the internal talking boundary. Almost all troubled relationships suffer from partners who have boundary failures that damage their ability to listen or talk without interference from their trauma histories.

Our internal listening boundary protects us from the thought and emotions of our partner as he reaches out for intimacy with us. We exercise our internal talking boundary in order to protect our partner as we reach out for intellectual and emotional intimacy with him.

When someone is talking to and emoting at us, our internal listening boundary allows us to remain sensitive and engaged, while at the same time protected from painful, false or irrelevant data and emotion.

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*One refers to non-sexual closeness and touching and is called the non-sexual physical boundary. The other is about sexuality and is called the physical sexual boundary.”*

Exercising the listening boundary empowers us to sort through the ideas and emotions that are being directed at us, allowing inner access only to ideas and emotions that we deem appropriate. This selection process is controlled by what we know of our authentic self—with how intimate we are with our own truth. Our desire to protect our authenticity from damage is, therefore, self-esteeming—an act of self-love on the behalf of our authenticity.

We use the talking boundary when we approach our partner with our intellect or with our emotions. We focus on containment so that our truth is neither too explosive nor offensive. Our essential goal is to communicate our truth without manipulation, inserting a covert agenda into the information we are sharing. Manipulation is controlling and toxic and destroys intimacy. We need to remind ourselves that we are talking to be known and not to control or to manipulate.

In order for us to learn the truth, we have to get ourselves into the right position to receive it. We cannot be caught up and distracted in defending ourselves or in attacking. We have to learn what it means to be contained. Whenever we contain during intimate communication with our partner, we are in the act of loving him or her and in the act of loving the truth of who we ourselves are. Whenever we exercise our boundaries to protect the truth of who we are from someone who is approaching us intimately, we are in an act of self-esteem, while simultaneously esteeming the truth of who the other person is. Both acts are acts of love: love of self and love of other.

Boundary work within the reality issue enables us to tell the truth about who we are; that activates the principle that God is truth. The self-care-dependency issue automatically activates a sense of self-esteem in which we learn to accept the truth of our own neediness. That activates the principle that our needs will be met and that God is love. When we have learned how properly to moderate ourselves, our containment boundary encourages us to protect the truth of self and trustingly honor the truth of other selves; automatically we activate those two principles: that God is truth and that God is love. So all core work is learning how to live in truth and, in living in truth, learning to love self and others. All trauma work around core issues is deep spiritual work.

Being spiritual tunes us into the energy of our authentic self. Call it remembering. Like tuning a knob on the radio, it puts you onto the right wavelength, and you communicate with God's energy and you find solace and guidance, peace, grace, and love. ∞

*The Intimacy Factor: The Ground Rules for Overcoming the Obstacles to Truth, Respect and Lasting Love* by Pia Mellody and Lawrence S. Freundlich will be available in hardcover from Harper San Francisco in May 2003. This is the latest in a series of books by Mellody that cover her work and her treatment philosophy. Mellody shows how the successful exercise of containment and protective boundaries creates the conditions in which true relationships flourish and which lead to the spiritual path.

## INTRODUCING

# New 2003 Workshop

## Facilitated by Pia Mellody

This workshop is based on Pia Mellody's new book, *The Intimacy Factor*.

## Developing the Full Potential of Your Relationships Through the Use of Personal Boundaries

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- The nature of boundaries;
- How relational trauma in childhood interferes with being intimate;
- How to speak from a place of humility;
- How to listen from a place of curiosity;
- Overcoming the urge to control or manipulate a partner;
- Stopping the blame game;
- Moving from a place of defensiveness to a place of intimacy;
- Emotional accountability; and
- Boundaries as a form of spiritual practice (energizing a relationship by moving from negative to positive energy).

The experiential work will include learning how to be intellectually and emotionally intimate through the use of internal boundaries.

This workshop is designed to help people to become more skilled in using boundaries. A therapeutic or recovery background is preferred for this workshop.

Initially this workshop will be facilitated by Pia Mellody.

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