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The Empty Picture Frame Exercise Workshop Script- 04/28/21

(adapted 04/28/21 from the 2021 book Children Of Pain by Robert Ben Mitchell, pages 74-80)

Boundaries are the foundation of any independent life, for they are the difference between a loose cannon and a well disciplined person. Boundaries distinguish the person who is out of control from the person who knows where and when to stop. And boundaries give us the confidence to go where we want, because we know we will not go where we should not be. True, boundaries can not erase or redraw our past, but they can keep us from repeating it, because boundaries built on memories will never let us forget.

Life is really all about our relationships: our relationships with friends, with family, with co-workers, and even our own bodies. We could even sum it up by saying life is our relationship to every person, place and thing in the universe. But without proper boundaries, relationships that might have otherwise been wholesome and supportive will become toxic and destructive. That is why things went so tragically wrong when we were children: those in charge did not have healthy boundaries. They did not think and stop before unleashing a barrage of hateful and hurtful words. They did not think and stop before they brought their hand down in yet another painful blow. And, they did not think and stop before they turned us into human sex toys for their own pleasure. They had no boundaries, and we paid the price.

The Empty Picture Frame exercise helps us to re-establish safe boundaries by determining if there is anything worth salvaging in the relationships we have with those who abused us. Each of our experiences of abuse were unique and different and so are the relationships we have with those who hurt us. So, how do we determine if we should continue having these relationships? *The Empty Picture Frame* provides us with a means of doing just that.

The Empty Picture Frame is simple in application, but profound in implication. It can be done either with paper and pen, or on a computer, or simply as a mind exercise. However, in practice, it can help us to define new boundaries between ourselves and our transgressors. It can even, if necessary, help us to remove them entirely from our lives, should that be our best solution. It goes like this:

1. Settle into a quiet space where you can comfortably sit or lay down.
2. Take a few minutes to center yourself and your breathing.
3. Decide which past abuser you want to consider. If there is more than one, you can repeat this exercise for each of them.
4. Close your eyes and imagine you are looking at an empty picture frame.

5. Now ask yourself:

Is there at least one picture I can put in this frame of a past, non-abusive time I spent with this abuser that I would like to repeat today, if it were possible to do so?

When considering a past, non-abusive memory that you might put into the empty picture frame, try to distinguish a normal experience from what were grooming ones. This may be difficult as many, or most, of an abuser's past behaviors were designed to groom you for their predation.

6. If you answered "yes" to the question in step 5, then you may want to consider continued, limited contact with this abuser, but with safe boundaries in place.
7. If you answered "no" to the question in step 5, then you may want to consider that this abuser is too toxic for you and cut off all future contact with them.

For some of us, the answer to this exercise might come quickly and decisively, while for others it might be more complicated. What if there are some good memories which we can put into the picture frame? What if there is something there worth salvaging? And, worse of all, what if nothing can be placed in the picture frame and nothing but toxicity remains, but there is a complex dependency relationship - financial, social, occupational, or emotional - which makes total disconnection impractical or impossible? This is where boundary skills become critical.

All of this takes time and planning, and, in some cases, at least at first, it may not be possible to accomplish enough to fully establish all of the boundaries we need. Yet, even small changes, such as merely reducing the amount of contact time, can provide much welcome relief from our current circumstances, and may, in time, open up new possibilities for creating stronger, healthier boundaries in the future.