

Work in Progress

Valuing Vulnerability: New Definitions of Courage

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About the Author

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Abstract

In a dominant, Western culture that celebrates strength in separation and holds unrealistic expectations for independent, autonomous functioning, vulnerability is seen as a handicap. This system creates the illusion of an invulnerable and separate self, and uses individualistic standards to measure a person's worth. Since these unrealistic expectations cannot be humanly attained, these controlling images become the source of shame and disconnection. RCT suggests that there is value in embracing vulnerability and in providing support, both at an individual and a societal level, for the inevitable vulnerability of all people. Rather than espousing the individual, mostly mythical, traits of a "lone hero," RCT moves us toward new and important pathways to resilience and courage through connection.

A version of this paper was originally presented at the 2002 *Learning From Women Conference*, co-sponsored by Harvard Medical School and the Jean Baker Miller Training Institute.

It is always exciting to be here at the *Learning from Women Conference*, but as many of you know, this particular conference still fills me with the strangest mixture of excitement and anxiety. This year's conference seemed especially hard to prepare for. My topic, working with vulnerability and courage in connection, arose partly in response to the events of September 11th. But it seemed like these ideas have been speaking to me for a while, though unfortunately, rather softly and unclearly.

In a recent dream, I was sitting with Irene Stiver, saying that I just couldn't do this conference without her. We were sitting on a balcony of some stately-looking building with a lot of people. It turned out that we were already at the conference and Irene was saying, "I'm here, I'm here." I was feeling better as she spoke to me; it was a dream image of courage in connection, if you will. Many of you may know that Irene was here for the Harvard women's conference in 2000. That day is very much with me today as it was her last professional presentation. She was diagnosed with lung cancer a week after that conference and died four months later. I want to dedicate this talk to her. I also want to dedicate it to Jean Baker Miller, another dear friend and colleague who has taught me much about courage in connection. Jean first signed me on to present at an Orthopsychiatry conference in Toronto. When I protested that I was phobic about speaking in public and asked if someone else could give the paper I wrote, Jean gently suggested we should take the notion of voice seriously. She encouraged and supported me to come into my voice.

At that conference, my short paper on empathy and the mother-daughter relationship, given with much trepidation, engendered the following question from a man in the audience: "Dr. Jordan, would you care to comment on the implications of empathy for Marxist and Capitalist systems of government?" My mouth dropped open and I started to dissociate. Then

I looked at Irene on one side of me and Jan Surrey on the other for the support that I knew would be there. With their silent encouragement, I managed to say, "That's an interesting question, I'm sure you have some thoughts about that," and indeed he did. He went on to give a short talk. The man's question was profound, but I just wasn't "present" enough to grasp its significance. The Relational-Cultural Model, while very relevant to the practice of therapy and personal relationships, is not just a sweet theory about "cozy" or "nice" connection. It presents a challenge to the dominant paradigms of separation, radical individualism, certainty and images of invulnerability both in and out of therapy.

To Irene, Jean, and all of my colleagues here, I thank you for helping create the courage to try to forge new models of human development and human connection and new ways of understanding women. And to all of you, I thank you for helping to listen us into voice, for encouraging us. I share my sense of vulnerability and my hope for the power of curiosity, openness, learning, and growing in connection. This work is partly about ideas, but it is also about our hearts, our lives, our hopes, and our passions.

Courage in Connection

Courage is ordinarily depicted as a characteristic of the lone, separate person who defies vulnerability and fear. In a paper written in 1990, I suggested that courage, unlike macho defiance of fear, is the capacity to act meaningfully and with integrity in the face of acknowledged vulnerability. There is no real courage where vulnerability and fear are denied. According to the Oxford English Dictionary (1971), the word courage derives from the Latin root "cor" meaning, "heart" and it lists the first definition as, "the heart as the seat of feeling, thought." Traditional Eurocentric culture extols courage as a trait to be found in the solitary individual, an internal characteristic existing within a person who often faces her or his fate alone. This propagates a myth of "separate courage" rather than "courage in connection."

Seeing courage only as an internal, solitary trait eliminates an understanding of the way people help to engender and support one another's courage. It obscures the fact that we all need encouragement throughout life in order to stay vital and confident, to bring our most deep and real energy into connection. Courage involves bringing our truth into relationship. It often involves the courage to move into conflict. Bringing ourselves authentically into relationship leads to inevitable conflict around difference, and the

courage to move into conflict is essential for growth and change. Courage also involves building resistance to the radical individualism of the dominant culture, challenging the definitions that are imposed on the less powerful by the more powerful, and importantly, challenging the messages that make the less powerful "the problem."

Carol Gilligan (Gilligan, Rogers, & Tolman, 1991) alerted us to the importance of political resistance in psychological theory. Janie Ward (2000) has written about the special quality of resistance for liberation for African American adolescent girls. Patricia Hill Collins (2000) notes that "the authority to define societal values is a major instrument of power." She also notes that, in resistance, "There is a refusal to accept the applied definitions and identities from the dominant group" (p. 69). In resistance, we say to the dominant culture, "you cannot define who I am or convince me that I do not belong" (Ibid., p. 39).

As women and as people concerned with helping others, we need to resist the myth of the lone individual conquering nature, being master of his fate, in control, certain of and moving to a position of power over others as confirmation of his strength, and trying to maintain images of being invulnerable and independent. We need to offer models of courage that emphasize our ongoing need for connection and encouragement. Similarly, we need to challenge the construction that suggests desire for connection and need of others is the territory of weak and emotionally immature women. We need to challenge the dominant images of "power over" others, as they shape experiences of gender, race, class, and sexual orientation. We need to question the power of binary thinking that objectifies and creates opposition around difference (weak or strong, poor or rich, gay or straight, black or white).

When we have the courage to move beyond certainty and invulnerability we enter the world of learning, curiosity, and, dare I say, love. We risk the hope of becoming part of something larger, transcending the illusion of the separate self. We can enjoy the spaciousness of real humility or we can become paralyzed with shame, a sense of personal inadequacy. The need for certainty can lead to imposition of simplistic categorizations, whether they be diagnoses or social categories which distort the experience of both the namer and the named. To be present in life and in the therapeutic relationship, we must dwell in uncertainty. In order to do this, we must tolerate our own and the other person's vulnerability and we must create safe contexts and systems in which this can happen. In individualistic systems,