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Work in Progress

Couples Therapy: A Relational Approach

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Abstract

In this paper we describe the application of the relational model to couples therapy. The model emphasizes the importance of holding awareness of self, other, and the relationship. The therapist's primary work is to help each member of the couple hold this relational awareness. The discussion of gender differences and the introduction of the language of connection, disconnection, and reconnection help couples to move out of relational impasses toward greater mutuality. Issues of autonomy, obsession, dependence, depression, and sexuality are reframed from this relational perspective.

Introduction

For almost a decade we have been working mostly with heterosexual men and women, applying the relational model in gender workshops, couples therapy, and couples groups. We have found that the model — which emphasizes holding awareness of self, other, *and* the relationship — is a powerful framework for guiding couples therapy. The therapist's primary work is to help each member of the couple hold this relational awareness. Sitting with a couple, one can begin to "see" the relationship as it exists between and around the two people and to work on the qualities, dynamics, and history of the relationship, and the vision of the relationship in the future. The therapist also "sees" this specific relationship being shaped by a web of others — in the extended family, the culture, the historical context, and in the larger world.

As an example, in our couples groups, we begin by asking people to introduce not themselves nor their spouse to the group, but their relationship. Here are examples from three couples in the same group:

A couple together for a year and a half: "It's very young, like a fawn, a lot of innocence, great potential. But it's fragile, tenuous, easily hurt, and could easily go in the wrong direction."

A couple married seven years, with two young children: "It's reliable and there, like the sky or maybe the moon. But it's clouded over, hard to see. Too many conflicting obligations — kids, work. There's no time for us. We're in parallel play."

A couple married almost 50 years: "Very old and solid — like a deep river or a porcupine. A long history of doing things a certain way, so now it's hard to move."

Images of nature are often used, as if in the human

imagination the relationship is some being, alive in the natural world.

The work we will discuss is based on our experience with over 5,000 men and women, including children and adolescents, in our workshops; 50 couples in couples groups; and approximately 30 couples in therapy. Steve has done most of the work with individual couples, which he will be describing. While there has been some diversity of race, ethnicity, class, sexual preference, and age in our workshops, our couples in therapy are mostly white, heterosexual, middle-class, and privileged. We are continuing to broaden our work to address the intersections of gender with race, class, ethnicity, and sexual preference, which *must* be addressed if differences are to be used for building connections rather than creating disconnections that lead to isolation, abuse, and violence. We try to hold and integrate this larger context in our clinical work.

It would be interesting to explore tonight how the nature and content of the gender impasses we will discuss change in other relational configurations, such as same-sex couples or heterosexual couples of different class, race, or ethnicity. This sample is relatively high-functioning and generally seeking gender equality. This is a select sample, but we feel it offers new perspectives for couples and family work. While we may talk about "men" and "women," no particular man or woman will fit our gender descriptions exactly.

The zest and vitality of a couple's relationship comes from *movement* — not from connection alone, but from *growth* in connection. We have found that using the relational model and bringing a sustained seriousness to the challenge of mutual relationship creates an urgency, if not an imperative, for a couple to move one way or another — either to connect and shift toward mutuality, or to disconnect, which may mean separating. In an honest encounter with the psychological facts of the relationship, couples often are able to separate without being crippled by shame or guilt. As one woman put it, "I don't hate him. I hate the relationship with him." In Steve's experience, often the movement one way or the other happens quite rapidly — within four to eight sessions. Sometimes couples do not move but stay entwined in non-mutual, growth-stunting, and barren relationships. For example, a couple described their relationship as follows:

Woman: "We're like two branches of a tree, growing together. I realize that the other branch is there, but I don't really see the trunk at all."

Man: "An electric power tool, which you plug into a battery pack to recharge. Then you go off and come back when it's ready to use."

Our work is guided by the Stone Center model of relational mutuality: that respectful engagement and movement around difference can ultimately lead to growth. As Surrey writes (1986):

> In mutual relationships each person can represent his or her feelings, thoughts, and perceptions in the relationship, and each person can feel that they can *move* or have impact on the other and on the flow of the relationship. The capacity to be moved, to respond, and to move the other represents the fundamental core of mutually-empowering relationships.

In describing relational movement, Jordan (1985) writes:

> One is both affecting the other and being affected by the other; one extends oneself out to the other and is receptive to the impact of the other. There is an openness to influence, emotional availability, and a constantly changing pattern of responding to and affecting the other. The movement toward the other's differentness is actually central to growth in relationship.

The Stone Center theory has been evolving to a greater focus on the dynamics and development of the *relationship*, rather than on intrapsychic or individual change alone. "The relationship, then, comes to have a unique existence beyond the individuals, to be attended to, cared about, and nurtured. The development and movement of relationship becomes the central challenge" (Surrey, 1983). Miller and Stiver (1992) write that growth-fostering relationships are characterized by movement — out of isolation and disconnection and into *new* connection.

There are strikingly different "relational paradoxes" in "normal" male and female development: young boys becoming agents of disconnection to preserve themselves (Bergman 1991); adolescent girls disconnecting from their authenticity to try to maintain relationship (Gillian, 1990; Miller, 1988).

Growth through and toward connection in couples involves working together on all the challenges to mutuality inherent and inevitable in

male-female relationships. We have found it to be central for us to hold the belief in this inevitability as well as in the vision of relational mutuality. After working with thousands of men and women, we are both sobered by the depth and universality of these challenges yet continually inspired to see what is possible and how far we can move together when a sustained context and commitment are present.

A first therapy session: From impasse to relational movement

Tom and Ann — a mythical couple made up of our experiences with many couples, a couple with whom some of you may already be familiar from Jean Baker Miller's aptly titled paper "What do we mean by relationship" (1986) — come into the office so angry at each other and so discouraged about their marriage that they cannot even look at each other, so they face me, the therapist (Steve). Tom is a tall, athletic-looking middle-aged WASP with greying blond hair and horn-rimmed glasses. He owns a small computer software company. Ann is a youthful-looking, dark-haired, Jewish woman with intense dark eyes. She is headmistress of a private school. Both wear business suits. They have two teenage sons. Immediately, they start talking about the faults of the other person, referring to each other in the third person pronoun:

Tom: "Nothing I do is enough for her."

Ann: "I'm tired of taking care of this relationship."

Tom: "She's so demanding! And oversensitive. I try and try, and nothing seems to work."

Ann: "He's so closed; he never talks. If we start to have a discussion that involves feelings, he changes the subject or gets angry and walks out. I feel shut out and alone. I told him that unless he came to therapy, the marriage is over."

Tom: "Nothing I do is enough. I even went into individual therapy for her — to try to work on myself."

They fall silent. The relationship is stuck. I get a sense that this is the endpoint of an impasse, the result of many painful attempts to connect. I feel for them.

A traditional couples therapy approach is to try to have each person stay in the "I" — first person — rather than to be in the "you" — second person. This couple, however, wasn't even in the second person, but the third — "he" and "she." My initial attempts to get them to stay in the "I" — making statements such as "I feel" or "I think" — fail, miserably.

Tom: "I feel that she always makes me feel like a failure."

Ann: "I feel that he's treating me like his mother!"

I could follow up on "mother," which might lead to a significant family history. Using the relational model, however, the first priority is the quality of their connection, which is always in the present moment. And so I actively try to shift the paradigm, away from self and/or other, to the relationship. There are three reasons for this: to see what the relationship, in fact, is, its potential, and its history as seen by each of them; to shift away from the idea of "psychopathology" residing in one or the other; and to see if this paradigm shift might help move things in the present moment.

With a sense of concern, I say that they are stuck, in an impasse, not moving, and that this stuckness is not because of a "sickness" in him or her, not the fault of either, but rather a difficulty in how they are meeting. I introduce the idea that in addition to "self" and "other," maybe we can also look at "the relationship," almost as a "thing" with qualities, a past, and quite possibly a future. I ask what they can say about the relationship.

Tom: "What relationship? There's no relationship here."

Ann (starts to cry): "It feels dead. Boring and dead. So different from where we began."

This may not seem like much, but in fact it is a relational statement, the first time that either has used the "we" and referred to "it," the relationship. I say, "I know it seems pretty hopeless right now, but maybe you can describe what the relationship was like when you met."

Ann: "He was different —so open and trustable—"

I interrupt: "Sorry, I didn't mean to ask about him. I meant the relationship."

This surprises them. For the first time they look at each other. They begin to talk, more and more animatedly, about how the relationship in the past was — in Ann's words — "safe and loving, a lot of trust, and we used to be really free, do the wildest things — go to concerts, go dancing." Tom talks about how he was attracted to Ann's depth of feeling and how, wanting to impress her on their first date, he got tickets to Symphony Hall — only to find that it was "Barbershop Quartet Night." Now there is a palpable

shift in the room — making eye contact. They laugh. They are talking about the past history of the relationship, but they are not in the past — they are in the present moment, making contact, in connection. There is a real sense of things coming unstuck, things moving.

What is moving is the relationship. I begin to sense their potential.

After awhile, now that they are connected, I try to build on this relational awareness, asking them to do a "qualities of relationship" exercise. Each tries to get an image of the *color* of the relationship, the *texture*, the *sound*, the *climate*, the *animal*:

color:	*Ann:*	red, cool blue
	Tom:	black, purple
texture:	*Ann:*	lumpy, mud
	Tom:	it started out smooth, now it's sandpapery
sound:	*Ann:*	ocean
	Tom:	distant rain
animal:	*Ann:*	cat
	Tom:	tiger

I point out how there are real similarities in their images, as well as clear differences, and say that the shift back — smooth to sandpapery — will happen again. I tell them that the problem isn't the shift or the conflict; it's how to be in creative movement rather than in deadness, stuck.

Ann: "I guess we really don't know each other."

I: "I have a sense that you really do know each other pretty well. What you don't know right now is how to move in relationship."

The session ends with my affirming that there is in fact a relationship here, a "we" with a history. Ann says that she knows it, but that Tom often seems to forget. Coming back from a business trip recently, he hung up his coat on the rack at the door and walked past her to his answering machine without even saying hello. I suggest that they can try to be creative — even playful — about working together on the relationship. For instance, they might try putting up a sign over the coat rack inside the door: "Danger: There is a relationship here." They laugh. Now we are, to a certain extent, all on the same side, all three of us working together for the sake of the relationship. I feel empathy with the pain in each of them and with the way they are connecting and disconnecting.

I say, "You're both very vulnerable right now, and the relationship is vulnerable too. It's important that each of you take care right now not to do more harm, not to hurt each other or the relationship any further."

They sense my concern, agree, and ask how they can do that. I suggest two tools they can use: the check-out and the check-in. The check-out can be used when the couple is in a fight and one person wants to stop. He or she says so but then has to say when they will bring the subject back up again. Either person can call for a check-in, which consists of each person in turn telling what he or she is feeling in themselves and in the relationship. The other listens, without asking for elaboration, and just says, "I hear you." The check-in is a simple but powerful way to make a connection in the moment. I ask if they'd like to try a check-in right now, suggesting they look at each other as they do it.

Tom (looking at Ann directly): "I'm afraid to say anything because we might start up again. I feel shell-shocked."

Ann: "I feel you're really trying, Tom, but. . . ."

I: "Can you just stay with your own experience for now?"

Ann (pause): "I feel kind of lost and scared to trust you again. But I hear you, Tom."

Tom: "And I hear you."

There's a palpable shift at this, an *authentic* statement from each of them to the other.

Finally, I suggest that before the next session they try to write a "relational purpose statement." Together, on one sheet of paper, write down the purpose of the relationship and the purpose of their "we." This is a way of seeing whether or not a couple shares the same basic world view and values — on which much can be built. We've found that how far a couple gets on this shared project is a fairly reliable predictor of how the therapy will go.

As they are leaving, Tom says, "Thanks. You brought back the idea that there is a relationship here and that it does have some good to it."

Ann: "Yes, it helps to keep the focus on the relationship, not just on him."

I: "Yes, and right now each of you have to take care of it."

Tom (joking, with a poignant truthfulness): "So it'll take care of *me*!"

They leave with a sense that together we three have broken through an impasse, a first step has been taken, a feeling that they are moving again in however tenuous a connection — which builds greater faith that

this is possible. They have a sense of greater *relational resilience* (Jordan, 1992), of *relational presence,* and that someone is really with them and with their relationship, which helps *them* to have a sense of the reality of the relationship, too, and its potential. A seed has been planted that they *can* act together to move to greater connection. This we call "relational empowerment" (Surrey, 1986), that is, locating the power or capacity to act *in the relationship.*

An extension of relational theory to couples

Impasse

Miller has written that relationships are always in movement — either towards better connection or increasing disconnection (Miller, 1986).

In all relationships, minor disconnections are inevitable, a sign of life and change. In growth-fostering relationships they become a stimulus for relational growth. There is a challenge to move out of past and into new connection. We have called this growth through and toward connection, or relational development.

Over time when disconnections cannot move in this way, there is an experience of impasse. Stiver (1993) writes:

> In an impasse, both people feel increasingly less connected, more alone and isolated, and less able to act effectively in the relationship. This can be experienced by either or both people as frustration, anger, confusion, boredom, disappointment, loneliness, hopelessness, or personal failure.

When an impasse persists, there are negative psychological consequences for both people (the negatives of Jean Baker Miller's "five good things" (Miller, 1986), and they contribute to the occurrence of depression, substance abuse, and violence.

An impasse begins to have a repetitive, spiralling quality. You step into it and become less and less able to keep from going down the same path. There is a feeling of being trapped or taken over by this habitual, stereotypic movement, less sense of freedom or range of motion, less space and energy for any creative insight or action, a feeling of being locked into a power struggle. Finally the same impasse begins to show up in many areas of the couple's life together, for example in sex.

Invitation to deep connection can provoke impasses. As Stiver and Miller write, "When yearnings for connection are stimulated, so are all the protective strategies each person has developed to stay out of connection based on past relational experience and cultural learnings" (Miller and Stiver, 1992). In heterosexual couples these are often interlocking or complimentary strategies based on past relational images — of what happens and of what can or cannot happen in relationships. That is, a woman might unconsciously assume, "If I ask him to move with my feelings, he will ridicule me or leave," while a man might assume, "If I ask her more about her feelings, things will get out of control, and I won't know how to deal with it." When one person meets fear and protection in the other, each becomes more locked into the past, more into protection, and less capable of opening or expanding.

Such assumptions keep both people from moving more fully into the relationship and contribute to the sense of constriction or diminishment of relational possibilities. In therapy, impasses have been called "the royal road to change" (Atwood, Stolorow, & Trop, 1989), as there is a great *challenge* for both people to create a *new* way of being and moving together. In working with men and women, we have found it helpful to explore how each person's past experiences in relationship — and especially around the *nature* of the relational paradox for each gender — contribute to the development of impasses, but we also work to find the ways the differences can contribute to growth. We work by building on qualities that support creativity in relationship: curiosity, flexibility, persistence, playfulness, paradoxical thinking, risk-taking, openness to the new, patience, and capacities for sustained attention and imagination.

Core relational principles guiding couples therapy

l) Holding relational awareness

While it is necessary to work on connection to self and other, it is also essential to work on staying attuned to the relationship. Facilitating awareness of interest in and caring for the relationship are powerful ways to help couples move out of self-centered or other-centered positions and perceptions. Introducing new positive imaginal ways of describing and naming the "we" makes more available in the moment the

whole history, energies, and resources of the relationship.

The language of connection and disconnection is exceptionally useful in helping couples describe their experiences and helping to move out of the blaming or pathologizing mode — either directed at self or other. Learning to see impasses as attempts at connection which then lead to greater disconnection can be very useful.

2) Working toward mutually empathic connection

As the therapist works toward empathic connection with either person, and each person with the other, she or he is facilitating movement out of impasse. As either person moves into greater authenticity, both are moved to a new level of clarity and energy. The movement into connection moves everyone; often one feels a palpable shift in the room. Holding an empathic understanding of each person's experience and vulnerabilities provides a template for the process of mutual empathy. The therapist holds the possibility of connection and enlargement in places that feel impossible, places of disconnection — when the woman or man loses the empathic connection to the other or loses touch with her or his own authenticity. By deepening the understanding of each person's experience, we move from "difference" — which is still a self-centered perception — to an authentic connection to the *person*; this moves the relationship. When the therapist supports the process of mutual empathy and mutual authenticity, she or he is helping to support the creative tension of holding different perspectives simultaneously, which is basic to the creative process of growth in connection.

3) Mutual responsibility and mutual impact

The therapist always works to facilitate mutual responsibility for the relationship. This is especially important for women, who often feel alone, angry, and burdened with this. When the therapist continually focuses attention back on the responsibility for relationship, women begin to feel supported and freer to try out new ways of moving. The language of "we" is very helpful here. As one man said, "We're hanging out in the disconnection here, trying to find a way back into connection." And another put it, "We got *into* this together, and we have to get *out* of it together."

The concept of mutual impact is helpful in guiding movement out of power or control struggles. When each person feels that they are having an *impact* on the relationship, we are moving from a power-over to a shared-power or power-with paradigm. Gendered experiences of power must be explored in couples. Men need to acknowledge the enormity of their power in the world and their often invisible power in relationships. At the same time, men often feel women have enormous power and competence in relationships and, feeling quite vulnerable, keep themselves out of real relational process. This is a huge topic. For now, let us just say that introducing this new paradigm as a way through power struggles can be helpful.

We emphasize that each person is responsible for their own behavior but also responsible to each other and to the relationship. Mutual responsibility is the key to working through impasse. As a couple or group struggles to understand and move together through an impasse, the relationship grows toward what Jordan (1992) calls "relational resiliency" (the energetic resources to move) and what Surrey (1986) has termed "relational empowerment" (the shared sense of effectiveness or ability to act to move the relationship toward connection). These qualities reside not just in the individuals but actually *in the relationship.*

4) The gendered "we"

Over time, working together, we have discovered that the way we work with this model can be quite different. This may reflect gender differences, especially in the notion of the "we."

For me (Janet) as a woman, the "we" is built on a sense of relational movement — of how we are and move together, of two voices in dialogue — something greater than the moment, greater than the sum of the parts, informing and being informed by each person. It's the *between* — the movement that connects. As the notion of "self-in-relation" is contextual, fluid, and moving, so is this conception of relationship.

For many men, the notion of the "we" seems more to be a "thing," with properties and qualities, perhaps even with "boundaries" of what is "inside" and "outside." Of course it is not a "thing" any more than "self" is a thing, but I (Steve) have found that men may find it very useful to have this "thing-ish" orientation. One man talked about "taking the relationship on our vacation." For better or worse, it can also be an enlargement of a man's "self" boundary

to include the "we." One man may see himself as the family's "Chief Executive," his wife as "Secretary of Health and Human Services." The downside of this is that the "family" can become as isolated, protected, and static as the "self." As one man put it, "I want the 'we' to mean only us — the hell with your friends!" For women, this "we" is not easily trustable, as it can simply be a projection of the man's values, perceptions, and decisions, such as in, "We vote Republican." But I have found that many men are helped by this concept of the "we" and actually become more open to mutuality when they can center in something larger than themselves. It can be a step *toward* true mutuality.

For a month Janet has been asking me (Steve), "What do you mean by the 'we'?". We have spent an enormous amount of time trying to grasp our own differences in what we mean by the "we." In writing this paper — as whenever we work together — we wanted to make sure we remained differentiated and also flowed between our shared voice, our gendered voices, and our personal voices — all of which have emerged more clearly through this dialogue.

The course of a couple's therapy using the relational perspective

Ann and Tom came back to the second session saying that things were better, but still difficult. Both felt that getting in touch with the history of the relationship had been useful. But as they had started to work on a relational purpose statement, they had gotten into an impasse.

Tom: "We started out well enough, and decided that one purpose was 'to provide a loving environment for the growth and protection of our children and ourselves.' That was easy. But then she wanted more and got into her 'we're not close enough' issue — "

Ann: "Wait a sec — I didn't say 'not enough.' I just want it better."

Tom: "You're insatiable — as you said — 'the sky's the limit.'"

Ann: "What's wrong with that?"

Tom: "There's no limit to the sky! Nothing's ever good enough."

Ann: "You just want to stay stuck in the mud—as if mud's good enough!"

I stop the process. This may seem like bad news, but in fact I was delighted. In the first session, they were totally stuck in an impasse, not even looking at each other. Now they are in an impasse, but engaged, on a growing edge, trying to move. There's more to work with. They are actively struggling with each other. And they actually had started to work on their relational purpose statement. I have a sense of liking them.

Now that they are connecting, there is room for me to start to use all the various ways to work empathically with each of them and with their relationship. I acknowledge to them that this can be really hard work and that both of them are trying their best. I say that it's not unusual for impasses to come up around trying to do the purpose statement. I ask them to tell me more of what happened.

It turned out that their relational styles in doing this were much different: she wanted to toss things around in dialogue and then write something down at the end; he wanted them each to make a list and then put them together. He'd felt lost in her "looseness," and she'd felt shut out by his structure. He'd stormed out and then come back, ready to work on the purpose again. She said she couldn't work on the purpose until they processed their fight. He said he didn't want to waste anymore time on the fight but get down to the task. This got nowhere. Each is trying to connect in his and her own way, each feeling that the other is in the way.

Movement around gender difference: Engagement around difference to mutual empowerment

I talk about this being another example of a relational impasse, one which we have labeled the Product/Process Impasse. It is not unusual for men and women to split this way.

I say to Tom, "In these kinds of situations, we men often seem to get all hung up on getting it done, getting to the bottom line, 'fixing it', and don't pay attention to the process — which is her style. You know what I mean?"

Tom: "Do I ever! I want to fix it, get it done." And, as she says to me, "Don't just do something, stand there!" *(they laugh)*. "First, her process around writing this drives me nuts, and then, we have to process that process! I had to fix both! But what you're saying then is that the only way to fix it is to stop trying to fix it?" (*more laughter).*

I say to Ann, “From my experience, women often want to think in dialogue to get clearer. And men have a difficult time believing that such a process can actually get anywhere. Right?”

Ann: “In fact, it works better!”

I am thus able to reframe their impasse in terms of how what each of them is doing is influenced by the different ways each *gender* has learned to move in relationship. The problem isn’t difference itself; it’s not being able to see difference clearly and without judgement, to work with and move with difference in relationship. Engagement around difference moves a couple from self-centered perceptions to a fuller awareness of the whole person and the potential richness of the relationship.

Picking up on my saying that men are taught to fix things, Tom talks about his work — he’s an executive in charge of hundreds of people — and about his family — he’s the only son of a distant, reserved father and a depressed mother. I spend time exploring his family history, knowing that Ann senses what I’m doing: making an empathic connection with Tom by taking a “we men” stance toward his vulnerabilities. I ask Ann about her listening to Tom.

Ann: “I feel touched, but I feel angry too, about—”

Tom: “Oh Jesus! I’m spilling my guts here.”

I: “Can *you* listen, Tom? *(to Ann)* It sounds like there’s also a lot of pain behind that anger.”

Ann: “Yes. I guess I’m angry that he won’t talk like that to *me*, when I need it so much.”

I’m trying here to move toward each person’s experience, to hold the pain each feels and the pain in the relationship, helping them to do the same. We go on to look at his pain at feeling controlled by her and her anger at not wanting to be seen as a monster trying to control him: his dread, her anger. We get into Ann’s family history here, as well.

The gender of the therapist may be important in this process. I as a man, taking the “we men” stance, can often make empathic connection with the man, sensing that often the woman is understanding what I am doing in paying attention to the man’s experience in this way. She knows that I’m doing it not just for him; I’m doing it for the relationship and for her. Often she appreciates the man opening up, and so it also helps me connect with her. When I turn to her, she is more connected to me. A woman therapist, working with a woman in this way with the man watching, may be seen by the man as "ganging up" on him. That is, he may not be able to see it as in the service of the relationship and him, to his benefit.

Other important examples of engagement around gender differences are in educating a couple to the different emotional time-scales of men and women, the different abilities to focus on many things at a time (women) and one thing at a time (men), the different awareness of the relational context, of anger, the different relational curiosities, the different attentions to maintaining the continuity of connection, and, of course, the differences in power both within and outside the couple.

As we have described in our previous paper (Bergman and Surrey, 1992), these differences in the relational field may be much more visible to women and more invisible to men. Making them visible to both genders can bring rapid movement. For instance, Tom was slower to describe his emotional state, something both of them had to take into account. If Ann felt that Tom was trying to let her in rather than avoiding it or seeing her as a monster, she could relax and even enjoy this shared process of finding a resonant frequency of emotional dialogue. Difference can be a blessing to a relationship. Learning to work on difference of gender helped Ann and Tom to learn to use difference in general. For instance, each has a different attitude toward illness: Tom is a hypochondriac, and Ann is a stoic. Each’s attitude could be of great use in dealing with ideas of illness in the other. Ironically, once you feel understood and accepted for who you are, you feel ready to change.

Movement through and toward connection

By the end of the second session I am moved by how much they have moved, and I tell them that. To give words to what they’ve done, I mention the notion of connection and disconnection.

I: “Our priority together has to be, first and foremost, connecting. If we’re not in connection, there’s room for all kinds of trouble to creep in: the past, accusations about family (you’re like your father, you’re like your mother), gender stereotypes (you’re like all men, you’re like all women), and ethnic issues (you’re like all WASPS or Jews). In connection, we can talk respectfully about any of these differences, such as religious, ethnic, and class differences, without stereotyping. Today, by hanging out through this disconnection, you’ve managed to make an even better connection. Doesn’t it feel that way right now?”

Ann: "Yes. In the middle of a fight, I lose sight of Tom as a whole person and of the whole history of the relationship. He seems so diminished — like my father."

Tom: "And *you* get bigger — like my *mother*." (*They laugh*.)

To strengthen Tom's not feeling so alone with his difficulties, I ask if he'd like to read something on "male dread." He says, "Yes," and I give him my paper (Bergman, 1991).

I mention the idea of the *continuity of connection* (an awareness that the relationship continues to exist even when they are apart or feeling disconnected) and that there may be gender differences in this sense of continuity. For instance, I point out how rare it is for a man to spontaneously say, "I was thinking about what we were talking about yesterday."

Check-ins can be helpful in maintaining continuity, although, as one woman said, "We have to be careful not to let our check-ins degenerate into conversations." Finally, I ask if they'd like to take another shot right now at writing a purpose statment. They come up with the idea of writing in dialogue, a line from him, then her:

Ann: "To provide a safe environment for each other."

Tom: "And — wait for it! — for the relationship!"

This is more than compromise; this is creativity.

In the next session Tom said that he read my paper six times. "It was like you were talking about me. It was a big relief!" Ann, too, thought it helped her to understand his dread and the dread/anger impasse.

For several weeks things went better and better. They cooperated around the house; with their teenage sons, they were saying, "We're trying to find out how the 'we' will draw the line with them, together." They started to use the language of connection with each other. "Our connection right now is good." Being in better connection, they could go back over the hard things in the relationship. Humor, which had first drawn them together, made a comeback. Tom talked about "the big D—Dread," saying, "God I'm in dreadlock!" or "Lookout! Here comes another dread-attack!"

Tom: "All this talk about the importance of relationship is getting to me. Annie, if you could have on your tombstone 'She was superb at relationships,' would that be enough?"

Ann: "Absolutely! Although I'd also like a second line. And maybe a third too. Something like, 'And she pitched in the World Series.'"

Tom: "Can you understand that I can't even *imagine* that that would be enough? For me it would seem a humiliation — a failure — and that makes me feel ashamed to say it."

Reframing autonomy

The fifth session started as a disaster. They came in angry and discouraged, unable even to look at each other, back in the third person accusatory —"he said"/"she said." Nothing I tried helped. The issue was money for a vacation, a fight about he being tight, she being extravagant.

I have learned that in a deadlock such as this, attention must be paid first not to the specific issue but to the state of the connection. I ask, "What does the 'we' need now?"

Ann replies angrily: "I can understand what you're doing, asking about the 'we,' and that may be okay for him, but I'm frightened by the 'we.' My whole life has been in the 'we.' When I hear you ask me about the 'we' now, a red flag goes up. I'm going to lose the 'I.' In fact, I don't feel you really understand it from a woman's point of view, what that's like. Maybe we should go to a female couples therapist."

I: "I can see how, as a man, I might have some trouble seeing it from your side. But can you try to tell me about it?"

Ann: "I'm frightened that my concerns will get lost in my work on the 'we,' that if I'm empathic to him, I'll accommodate to him, and I'll lose. You're asking me to settle for too little."

I respond to her concerns, saying, finally, "It's important for you to keep speaking up about what you need here, and that *all* of us pay attention, so you gain, not lose. We're all on the side of not settling for less."

Ann: "I'm not so sure Tom is."

Tom: "If you're so good at this, why can't you stop me from feeling dread?"

Ann: "I'm not an expert in this stuff either, and I'm tired of taking care of you and it."

Tom: "Look — I've just got to work on my *own* crap, get my own crap together first, that's all. Maybe then I can get into this, not before."

This is such a dramatic change. A light bulb goes

on. I ask about his own psychotherapy, with a well-known psychologist who — I know from an initial conversation with him at the beginnning of my couples work with his client — works in a more traditional, self/other paradigm. It turns out that his therapist has been on vacation for five weeks — ever since we'd started meeting — but had come back last week. Tom had had an intense session that focused on his childhood and ever since had withdrawn from the relationship.

Individual therapy of one or both members of a couple who are also in couples therapy can be extremely useful if it works toward enhancing relationship. Most of the time it does. However, Tom's stance in the couples therapy is not unique. A more self-centered individual psychotherapy may accentuate, codify, and entrench self-centeredness. Despite a man becoming familiar with every nook and cranny of himself, he may be left with a profound unfamiliarity with the pathways of mutual relationship.

Couples therapy, with its frank clear presence of a relationship, may make it easier to work on men's relational skills — bringing male strengths into relationship — and ultimately teaching men mutual empathy and movement through and toward connection. In couples therapy, men may more easily move, first from the "self" to the "we." The "we" may be safer to explore than "the other." Once in the "we," a man may then be able to move to ask about differences, about the "other," and then by facing these differences move toward mutuality, with empathy. Women's path toward mutuality in couples work may be different.

And so now with Tom I say, "I can really feel for you, knowing something of the pain of your past. I guess you feel that if you go into this relationship fully, you'll be less yourself?"

Tom: "Less, hell — lose myself completely. She's so controlling!"

I: "I know you feel that way. But haven't you had the experience, when you've been in a real connection with Ann, you've been *more* yourself? More alive, more full of zest, you can go out and do things better?"

Tom thinks it over, sighs, and says sadly, "Yes, that's true."

I: "So what keeps you from being in good connection with her?"

Tom: "I'm afraid. It's like if I go into something with her, I'll get lost. She sees it as 'the sky's the limit,' and I see it as 'the tip of the iceberg.' I've gotten so I keep everything secret from her, do everything alone. You only achieve things alone. Like climbing Mount Everest."

Ann is moved and says, "Honey, no one ever climbs Mount Everest alone." Tom smiles.

I: "Maybe the healing for you can be right here in this relationship. Maybe you should focus on where you are in this relationship here and now, and let the individual therapy work go for a little while."

Ann: "I want to help, Tom."

Tom: "I thought you said you were tired of helping."

Ann: "If you're open to me, if we do it together, I won't be tired. You don't have to do it alone."

For the first time in years, Tom starts to cry. He reaches for Ann's hand, and says, "I don't know if I can do it."

At the next session, Tom is buoyant and announces, "I fired my therapist — as a gift to her!"

My heart sank. It wasn't exactly what I'd had in mind. And my subsequent chat with his therapist was not exactly what you would call a meeting of the minds. But we did agree on a sabbatical.

After that, the couples therapy went well. My first priority — and theirs — is holding the relationship. This is not behavioral or systems theory. The priority here is not the theory but the therapist's relational presence. Mutuality is two voices in dialogue. As one woman said at the end of a workshop, "You gave me the other half of the string, and now we can make a tie." As we've said, mutual empathy is a central part of this process. But in some sense the process is more than mutual empathy or perhaps a further reflection of mutual empathy. I not only try to hold each individual empathically, but my holding their relationship empathically helps them to hold their relationship in a similar way. It has to do with being related to the relationship. As a couple said to another couple in one of our groups, "Your holding your relationship helps us to hold ours."

How does holding the relationship help people to connect mutually? I think it may have something to do with offering something startling and new, something creative, beyond the usual, conditioned, past ways of seeing. Men often feel stuck in relationship, focused on self versus other, trapped

between the dread of connection and the fear of disconnection or loss. Afraid that "something might happen," they may defend the status quo. Women may more easily initiate relational movement. Women, seeing a man move from a self-centered perspective and start to come alive more mutually, may be able to join this movement empathically, and feel more fully themselves in the relationship.

With the man of the couple, I am usually working to help him move off of a self-centered way of seeing, opening up the idea that men can attend to the "we" and to the *different* experience of others, that he can move the relationship and the other, and *be moved* by the other and the relationship. I am trying to move men from a notion of equality and justice — or equal opportunity and justice — to mutuality (Gilligan, 1982). I am less concerned with "male role" or "male identity" than with "male relational skills."

With the woman, I usually work on her doing less of the relational work for the couple, on her understanding differences in dread, emotional timing, and talk, and focusing on herself. I help her to represent *her* experience in conflict, say what she feels and what she wants, and to hold her ground when she feels strongly about something — for instance with Ann, about her work as a headmistress, her family history, and her not being a defender of the status quo but on the side of change and growth.

Three enlarging movements in therapy

All the while I am using three enlarging movements in therapy, which help to open the focus, in the present moment, into new, creative ways of seeing:

l) Relational movement: moving back and forth from self and other to the relationship;

2) Gender movement: moving back and forth from "I, Tom," to "we men," and from "I, Ann," to "we women." This is not to say all men, or all women, are the same. But for men in particular, it is a chance to enlarge from self and link to a larger group. Given the current epidemic of violence and abuse by men, this is a complex linkage.

3) Movement through and toward connection: moving back and forth from connection to disconnection to reconnection, impasse, and breakthrough.

Things went well with Tom and Ann. I liked them. The therapy was fun. They were able to hold the relationship between sessions, that is, keeping in mind that there is a "we" here, bigger than both of them, with a vital history and future. I began to see them less frequently — about once a month. For a while they would call me up in a "crisis." First, I dreaded these calls, but I came to see their "crises" as signs of life out on the growing edge of the relationship, and I began to enjoy helping them reframe impasses, getting them moving. Let me mention breifly a few of these reframings.

Reframing depression

They called up in a crisis. When they came in, Ann said she was feeling very down. Tom, frustrated and worried, asked, "Do you think she needs a little Prozac?" I said I thought not. "How about a little Zoloft?" he asked. "How about a little reframing?" I said. I helped them to look at Ann's "depression" as a sign of movement in the relationship. It turned out that Ann, more connected to Tom, was paying more attention to her own feelings.

Tom: "But when she gets this depressed, how do I know when I should just let her cry and when I should try to do something about it?"

I: "You could *ask*. *(Tom is stunned by this idea.)* Why not ask her where she is, how you can help?"

Tom does so. Ann doesn't respond. I ask what keeps her from answering.

Ann: "I'm stopping myself, like I feel dread too. I want to tell him, but I don't trust his response. I've been left so many times."

I: "All of us have to hold what's new in the relationship, now. Maybe, right now the way out of this depression is through the relationship."

This helped. Men often have a hard time *asking* about another's experience. This, a gender difference in *relational curiosity,* is a key element in *power inequalities* in a couple. Power is not only about cultural systems but also relationally determined by whose experience is attended to.

Reframing dependence and independence

Tom often felt entrapped in the relationship. He had a recurrent dream. He was a boy, and his mother was tying him to a tree to keep him from running out into the street. They called me up in crisis. Awakening that morning they had felt close and made love, and then Tom, obsessed with a deal at work, had rushed to get out of the house and hadn't even said

goodbye. He was driving their son to work when the car phone rang. It was Ann, feeling very hurt that he had just left without even saying goodbye.

Tom: "Here we go! Whatever I do, it's not enough. You always want more."

Ann: "I don't think it's too much to ask you, especially after being so connected, in sex, to say goodbye."

Tom: "I can't be myself in this relationship. You're so damn dependent on me, and you want to make me just as dependent on you — trying to 'feminize' me. All day long you've been bugging me, calling me, interrupting meetings, and it's kept me from really focusing on my work.

I: "Let's try to reframe this. Tom, what would've happened if you had stayed in connection and said goodbye this morning?"

Tom: "She wouldn't be bugging me."

I: "So you'd have *more* freedom, not less?"

Tom (thinking it over): "You got me. But that's so damn hard for me to stay with. It's such a big job!"

I: "Maybe not. It wouldn't have been such a big deal just to say goodbye, and that would have altered the whole day. We men have this mental image that to deal with a woman's feeling is an immense thing, but it's not."

Tom (smiling): "You mean the real iceberg is in my head?" *(We all laugh.)*

I: "This isn't about the 'feminization' of us men; it's about the 'relationalization' of us all. If that's taken to mean 'feminization, ' we — and the world — are in big trouble!"

The false dichotomy of dependence/independence causes much grief in couples. Relationship is not a zero-sum game. If Ann feels Tom is attending to the relationship, she can attend to other things. She feels less anxiety if she's not watching all the time, thinking all the time. In her words, "If I focus outside this relationship — on my work, on my self — it and he will disappear." She feels more able to initiate things and have her own life. It's not her "learning to be more independent." It's both of them learning to hold the connection, the "us," and having the faith that the connection will sustain and hold each of them in their own lives and creativity. Her calling Tom up on the car phone was something new. She never would have done that in the past.

As she put it: "I'm not settling for less anymore, and *we're* not either."

Reframing obsession

Tom became obsessed with a stressful work situation. All he could talk about was work, and he didn't want to be this way. Ann was fed up. They came in, and this time Ann suggested that *Tom* might need a little Prozac. "I hear it's good for obsessive-compulsive people, too," she said. As we worked, I tried to reframe obsession in terms of relationship, that is, that the way out is neither in medication nor in getting more into the analysis of the obsession, but rather by moving more fully into relationship. Any obsession is a turning away from living in connection. I suggested that by putting the relationship as a priority, Tom could let go of his obsession with work. Ann agreed, saying that if she felt connected to Tom, she would be glad to listen to his work." If *you're* interesting, your work is interesting to me. We talked about ways to make the transition from work to home — how to connect after a long hard day.

A month later, in their last session with me, Tom and Ann said that reframing the obsession had helped.

Tom: "I'm pretty much over my dread now. I can attend to *her* experience and ask about it. I feel more able to nurture the relationship now."

Ann: "It's amazing. I feel listened to now. Not that there aren't troubles. Last week we got into a hassle. He was at work and kept me waiting for hours. I started to get angry, but then I wasn't all that mad because I figured that *we* got into this and now *we* are going to get out of it. The incredible thing is that I feel that his empathy all of a sudden has me thinking, 'Hmm. What has *my* part been in not having enough power in this relationship in the past? Maybe *I* haven't been initiating enough here. Not that I'm a victim, but rather what part have I played in this?'"

Tom: "When we're in conflict, I feel I can *do* it now, that my whole ego isn't on the line. In the past, I felt that I had to have the right answer, that what I did was a reflection on what I was worth. Now I know that's got nothing to do with it, in terms of Ann. I can let go of my self-centered thinking about this by asking about her. *(to Ann)* I used to think you were so damn oversensitive. Now I see that your sensitivity can be useful in this relationship. *(joking)* Especially given mine."

Ann: "Neither of us has to do it alone. We do it together."

Tom: "We do it together."

They've come to a place not only of mutual empathy and mutual authenticity, but of mutual empowerment. I called them up a year later, and while money is still an issue, they're doing well.

Couples groups

In working with heterosexual couples in a group setting, I (Janet) continue to prefer working with a co-therapist of the other gender for the very reason that it is difficult to get couples to join a group in the first place. The extraordinary isolation of most couples around what really happens in their relationships is a great problem, as both people are deprived of the gifts of observing and working with other couples experiencing similiar struggles and impasses. Feeling less alone with their struggle and having the opportunity for enlarged relational perspectives are profoundly helpful in moving out of impasses.

Seeing similar issues in others and being there *for* others create a context for growth, not only for individuals but for relationships. A context which supports and values relationships is also enormously helpful. One man said, "In our lives today we're surrounded by couples getting divorced, and it makes me feel so much stronger being with others who are staying with it."

As a woman, Janet feels supported and less burdened by working with a male co-therapist and other men in the group. Men are often able to make important empathic connections with each other, and we are increasingly convinced how much men need each other to feel understood, to increase trust, and to feel permitted, if not encouraged, to take a more relational stance. This support often helps equalize the genders around a major imbalance frequently seen in male-female relationships. Often men are envious, at times angry, about a woman's strong relationships with others — especially her friends — and thus feel more emotionally dependent on her than they perceive she is on them. This creates feelings of greater vulnerability and more dread. As one woman described in a couples group:

> One of the most profound moments for me in this group was seeing Michael (her husband) flanked by all the other men in the group. Not so alone — supported and enlarged — more himself. I've always been afraid of men in groups, but here, feeling we were working together, I felt strangely comforted and deeply loving of him.

Sexual impasses

One of the most isolating areas for most couples is their sexual relationships. Gender differences are highlighted in sexuality, and all the gender impasses we have described previously (Bergman and Surrey, 1992), dread/anger, product/process, and power-over/power-with, may be seen here. In our workshops with men and women of all ages, curiosity about the others' sexuality abound. All of us have many unanswered questions and not a lot of opportunity to discuss these together.

In all our workshops, women's questions center around the urgency and meanings of sex for men, how men can separate sex from emotional relationship, how men can want sex when the relationship is in a bad place, how men connect violence and sexuality.

Men's questions center on the mysteries of women's sexuality. What turns you on? Do women fake orgasm? Why don't you initiate sex? What's it like to be touched by a man? Why do women need to talk before sex? Why do women need to talk after sex? During sex?

Moving into connection

Sexual impasses can be reframed from the perspective of movement in relationship. The sexual impasse around *moving into connection* is typical. Men see physical connection as a means to relational connection. Women want sex to be an expression of relational connection. Often, over time this difference leads to impasse — less of either kind of connection (sexual or relational), anger, resentment, disappointment or blaming, or giving up on the sexual and focusing on other areas of the relationship. Reframing these impasses as difficulties around movement into connection may open a couple to new perspectives and sometimes to new ways of moving.

In the opportunity for deep connection which sexuality offers, the longing or yearning for connection is stimulated and so are all the protective strategies evolved through past experience of pain and failure in relationships — in this and others.

One man described this. "What has to happen for a woman in that 15 minutes of emotional foreplay? I feel like all our personal and collective histories of sexual abuse and power violations have to be worked through, and all the ways we have failed each other, the ways our parents failed each other — and maybe even our grandparents too. It's overwhelming! I

don't know how to do it."

A woman described this. "I feel I have to get into the present moment, to be here. I need to feel safe but also *real*. All the feelings I've been avoiding start to rush in: anger at you, things that weren't said, all my pain and disappointment in you and in myself. Tears come. I don't always feel up to it. I guess I have my own version of dread."

Another man said, "It's such a shift from the rest of my life where I'm in charge, hyperactive, hyperbusy. Here I'm supposed to slow down and listen to her, attune my movement to hers. I can't do it. I go too fast, and she gets hurt. So I tend to avoid the whole thing."

In the movement of getting connected, the resistances we all have to slowing down, being real, in touch, and connecting come to the fore.

Men and women often split responsibility for different aspects of the relationship. Women tend to feel angry and alone in tending to the emotional part of the relationship, where men feel the responsibility for initiating the sexual part. Again, working toward mutual responsibility is helpful.

The different sexual rhythms of men and women make moving together a great challenge. Men's more linear movement and product/performance orientation may seriously collide with women's more process/dialogical way of moving. Women often say that they want to feel that neither person is leading, but rather that both are in a simultaneous movement. Women often avoid any form of initiation which feels like power-over, that is, asking the other to follow or be with her in her movement. Men may have more difficulty following or moving with the other.

The process of disengagement

The process of disengagement creates a final challenge: once connected, how to disengage without disconnecting. Men are likely to end more abruptly, moving to the next thing, which may be sleep, even showing intolerance for sustaining the connection as long as a woman may want. Women need more movement around separation — like saying goodbye at a party — a more gradual, back and forth process — feeling a wish to move together through the disengagement.

Some principles of couples therapy from a relational perspective

Let us summarize principles we've illustrated in working with Tom and Ann.

l) Holding the relationship, with awareness, faith, and "in process."

2) The priority of maintaining connection: connection comes first.

3) Three enlarging movements in therapy: reframing in terms of relational movement, gender movement, and movement through and toward connection.

4) The concepts of impasse and breakthrough.

5) Strategies and tools to create mutuality: check-in, check-out, purpose statement, creativity.

6) Working in the present moment. We have found that the greatest barrier to movement toward mutuality is the ego, or ego-centeredness. In a larger sense, the ego is the past, all the conditionings of the human past and the individual past. The way out is in the present.

7) Engaging around difference — creating mutual empathy.

8) Reframing depression, obsession, autonomy, and dependence in terms of the movement or stasis of the relationship.

9) Working with continuity and transition: the ongoing struggle for mutual authenticity.

10) Working with spirituality. One way that the idea of "the relationship" helps people is that it suggests something greater than self and other. Many people we've worked with have made the link between the relational model and their own spiritual connection or practice, the capacity to be part of something greater than the self. For example, often we have found that men who are in a 12-step program, who have had an experience of spirituality involving movement out of self-centeredness, may appreciate this approach and move with it quickly. It is often helpful to address the individual and shared spiritual dimension with a couple.

The creative movement in connection, toward mutual relationship, greater than self and other, brings us to an awareness of a connection with a dynamic and interrelated whole of which we are part. This is at the heart of helping people — and couples — to heal.

Let us close by reading Ann and Tom's relational purpose statement. "Providing a safe and 'growth-ful' environment for each other, our children, our friends,

and for our relationships. Trying to provide financially so we don't have to worry — trying to have more fun anyway. Living together in a peaceful and compassionate way, bringing that to others, and to the world."

Discussion summary

After each colloquium presentation a discussion is held. Selected portions are summarized here. At this session, Drs. Cynthia Garcia Coll, Jean Baker Miller, and Natalie Eldredge joined Stephen Bergman and Janet Surrey in leading the discussion.

Question: What is a man's understanding of "the relationship?" When you mentioned its "thingness," it sounded like a possession he has rather than something he is part of.

Bergman: The "we" is a concept which men seem to be able to really get with. Men are all of a sudden looking at this "thing." When they have a word and a concept, they can start talking about it. At worst, it's very self-referential, a bigger self which subsumes or includes others. At best it's a good stepping stone out of all of the "self-versus-other" conditionings, which often is focused on a particular "other," a woman. Once a man feels more comfortable with that way of perceiving, you can start to talk of more subtle and sophisticated ways of looking at the "we."

Miller: It's difficult in this culture, where we only have notions of "I" and "you," to have a notion of something we're calling a "relationship." Sometimes it's helpful almost to be concrete, as a start, even though you know it's not concrete.

Garcia Coll: I wonder which parts of the model are relevant cross-culturally. Some cultures are more collectively oriented than individual oriented. There is a question of how much holding the relationship is easy or more difficult depending on the notion of "us" or "we," and how you keep the boundary between "we" and "I."

Surrey: In the past, the woman's voice, the woman's "I" has sometimes gotten lost in the "we"— as in, "We vote Republican." What we really are talking about is relational movement: two voices in dialogue creating something new, two voices in dialogue creating a "we" larger than each, empowering both.

Bergman: I would stress how different our male and female perceptions are about this and how difficult it has been to find a common language.

Surrey: It's unusual in this culture to be verbal and articulate about the "we." When you ask people to introduce "the relationship," it's startling; yet they can, in wonderful ways. It's there, and we try to bring it forth.

Question: What about lesbian and gay men relationships? Are male-female characteristics relevant?

Surrey: First of all, in heterosexual gender relationships, it is *when* people are in these impasses that you see *more* stereotypic gender behaviors. Once you move toward more mutuality in relationships you see less of these stereotypes and more range of behaviors. In gay or lesbian relationships, these same impasses or others may emerge which are particularly related to members being of the same gender.

Eldredge: In gay or lesbian couples, you can't use gender in the same way to describe differences, but there are often the same kind of differences. Who is more task-oriented or more process-oriented will come up. In heterosexual couples, you can't get away from gender. It's right there. Gender is not as useful in working with same sex couples. It may be useful in the way that gays and lesbians are discriminated against from the outside. For instance, lesbian couples suffer greater discrimination than gay males around issues of earning power. And gender may be important in terms of sexuality of lesbians, the way that in the culture women are not taught to be initiators of sexuality.

Question: Can you apply this work to a couple where there is battering?

Surrey: Until the battering stops, *that is* the central issue you have to work on. Men may have to work with other men first, before working in the couple. This may best be accomplished by men working with other men in groups.

Question: Could you say a little more about what you meant by "spirituality"?

Bergman: Most people, if asked the question, will have something to say about the spiritual dimension of their life and may not have said it to the other person of the couple. It is very important to see each person's experience and if it can be shared. As soon as you start to talk about something greater than self or other, that connects with someone who has a spiritual practice, experience, or enquiry, such as AA or Al Anon.

Surrey: A lot of the language of spirituality is the language of connection. Anything other than self/other is relegated to the spiritual dimension, which, in this culture, is something other than psychology. The ability to feel connected to the "we," to nature, or to a larger human reality is related to the paradigm shift of which we are speaking.

Miller: Especially in couples therapy, when people are able to really connect in the ways you are talking about and feel that they are being heard and are really there, that tends to put people in touch with the human dilemma and pain, and in that sense also, in touch with the larger community of people in a culture which brings about so much disconnection and suffering.

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