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Work in Progress

Men's Psychological Development: A Relational Perspective

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About the Author

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Abstract

Current theories of male psychological development emphasize the primary importance of the "self" and fail to describe the whole of men's experience in relationship. Men as well as women are motivated by a primary desire for connection, and it is less accurate and useful to think of "self" than "self-in-relation" as a process. As with women, the sources of men's misery are in disconnections, violations, and dominances, and in participating in relationships which are not mutually empowering. However, the specifics of men's development differ in several important ways.

This paper was originally presented at a Stone Center Colloquium on November 7, 1990.

For the past twelve years I've lived with the relational model, watching as Janet Surrey, every other Monday night, went off to her "meeting at Jean's house," and sitting in these lecture halls watching this revolutionary work grow. It takes a long time for this theory to sink in, to grasp what is meant by "the relationship," "relational mutuality," and the "movement of relationship." As I began to understand, I had that sense of relief and joy, thinking, "This is true." And in the same way that for women, traditional theories of human development, in the light of women's experience, seemed false and lacking, these same theories started to seem false to much of men's experience as I knew it. Three years ago, Janet and I began to offer workshops — "New Visions of the Female-Male Relationship: Creativity and Empowerment" — and I began to try to apply a relational approach to male psychological development. This led to my being asked to present my work here tonight. My purpose is not to look at all aspects of men's development, but to look at men's development in relationship, from a relational perspective.

This work is based on my own experience — that of a middle-class, white, privileged, heterosexual American male — and has limits intrinsic to this viewpoint. In describing general themes in men's experience, I do not imply them true for all men. I will be using what I have learned in almost twenty years as a psychiatrist, treating men, women, and couples, and using the data from our workshops, as well as from my teaching at medical schools, my writing of novels and plays, and, of course, my relationship with Jean Baker Miller, Irene Stiver, Judy Jordan, and Sandy Kaplan. Those of you familiar with Janet Surrey's work will hear her voice in much of what follows.

Jean Baker Miller, in a 1983 working paper titled, "The Construction of Anger in Women and Men," used my first novel, *The House of God*, the story

of my medical internship, to “illustrate how many emotions — fear, horror, sadness, isolation, and especially pain and hurt — are turned into aggressive actions, even sadism....In such a life course the participants are taught an angry denial of reality.” At the end of that paper, Jean wrote: “A truly respectful interchange based on the experience of both sexes can lead us along the path of an enlarging dialogue. And I believe that such dialogue is the only path to the survival of us all.”

It is in this spirit that I present this work.

As an example of what is often seen in men in relationship, let me read from my second novel, *Fine*. Dr. Fine is an analyst-in-training and is married to Stephanie, who is trying to become a stand-up comic:

After a while she said: “Tell me, Fine, what are you feeling about us? I need to get in touch with you before I leave.”

Fine was full of feeling for his work and for his internal world, but was startled to find that he did not know what he was feeling for her, his wife. The harder he tried, the more he did not know. Damn, he thought, I’m *blocking!* “What do you *think* I’m feeling?”

“I’m not your patient, schmucko, I’m your wife! Just tell me, before I go, where you are with me, okay?”

More blank for her pressure, Fine said: “Don’t pressure me.”

“Wait — let’s not go down this path again — it’s so *old*: I ask, you see it as an attack rather than an invitation, you retreat; I ask again, you withdraw; I feel cut off and frantic, you get comatose and analyze — please not now — just tell me, simply — I mean with me now, about us — what you *feel*.”

The word hung on a hook in the air, dropped, balanced, tilted, fell. Fine sensed, in his wife, the same neediness he’d just sensed in his hysteric (patient). Yet without the luxury of analyzing it, he felt paralyzed. Her asking seemed a demand, and he could sense, in his silence, a chill and dead hollowness. He heard her, knew she cared, and wanted to respond — but could not. Had he terminated analysis prematurely? No, the problem is not me, but her — her neurotic hunger. Distracted by the cries of birds, Fine glanced away, looking out the window at the gulls diving for the garbage thrown from the Hull-Boston commuter ferry.

He felt locked into silence.

“You really don’t know how to relate, do you, Fine?”

“No,” he said, relieved, “I don’t. Men don’t have the capacity for empathy that women do.”

“You’re saying men don’t know how to relate?”

“Not nearly so well as women.”

“How do you know that?”

“I’m expert on empathy — “

“Ha! Haha!” She exploded with laughter. “You? You’re the least empathic person I know!”

“Yes,” he said, happily. “That’s why I’m expert — I can be totally objective about it.”

“That’s a cop-out, Fine! Some men have empathy, believe me, I know. Men find a way to relate, when they see that their lives depend on it.”

Current theories of male development

Most current theories of male development are about a “self,” not a “self-in-relation.” Up until recently, most theories of human development have been fashioned by men, and gender-blended. Yet in using a relational model of connections, disconnections, and violations to examine male development, it becomes clear that men themselves are fashioned by an event that is profoundly different from that fashioning women: the disconnection from the *relationship* with mother, in the name of becoming a man.

Let me comment briefly on current theories of development. Freud suggests that men and women come into the world as isolated selves, with the primary drives of sex and aggression, and that we go through stages of development one after the other like a train crossing Austria, stopping at the right station at the right time. The withdrawal from and renunciation of mother is framed in the heroic Oedipal stage, primary for establishing a solid, independent, gender, and sexual identity. Through some tricky theoretical contortions, fear of castration gets twisted into strong male superego. There is talk of “the pre-Oedipal mother,” which says something about where the value is placed; if we must use such terms, why “the pre-Oedipal mother” rather than “the post-Jocastal son”? Identification with father comes through competition, fear, and renunciation, not through a wish to connect. It sets the stage for hierarchy — that is, patriarchy — for dominance, entitlement, ownership of women, and

men's fear of men. Identity comes *before* intimacy. Men are taught to fight for power-over and for possession of women, and then, *despite* that as a context, to relate to them. Given the power of transference, Freud implies that true, intimate relationship is difficult, if not impossible; we are always shouting across an unbridgeable gap.

Erikson and the neo-Freudians are on the same train, but extend the line out to adulthood, and suggest we check out who else is at the station when we stop. From Basic Trust we move to Autonomy, Industry, and Identity, and then, after adolescence, to Intimacy driven by sexuality. Only *after* this sexual intimacy do we get to Generativity, the participation in the development of others. Only *after* the self achieves a certain "maturity," can we learn to really relate.

Kernberg and Mahler of object relations fame suggest that we seek objects to satisfy our drives, not for relationship. The key to development is "separation/individuation" — what Mahler calls "hatching" out of a matrix of embeddedness, by which a person becomes more internally organized with clear boundaries, "field-independent," emotionally controlled, with an unfolding individuality (1975). Male psychology becomes fixated on achieving a separate and individuated self, what Joe Pleck calls "male sex-role identity" (1981). "Self" is based on separation from others and self-other-differentiation, self-versus-other, which may then become self-over-other.

Kohut and self-psychologists hypothesize that we internalize objects to promote narcissistic development. As children, we need people to nurture, empathize, and mirror us, to "build up" the self. In life, we always need holding and self-promotion and buttressing, a little, but it's to support the self. Little is said about people nurturing, empowering, or empathizing with *each other*, or building mutual relationships. There is an emphasis on control and power — ego control, control of feelings, a power-control model — and on the basic Western paradigm based on comparison, competition, and aggression. Kernberg, Mahler, and Kohut seem to be saying: "Drive your *own* train."

In summary, traditional theories are of "self-out-of-relation," or "self-partly-in-relation." Motivated by sex and aggression, development means learning to be a separate, strikingly impermeable and static self. A strong identity is necessary for a mature relationship. What is a mature relationship? It may be a deep

attachment between self and object, or self and other; it may even be an "intimacy" — a sense of closeness — but it's an intimacy framed by never losing touch with this strong clear vision of self — except perhaps, for temporary lapses during sex. It may be an "intimacy," but it is not a mutuality. Growth takes place — in life and psychotherapy — by working to strengthen this sense of self.

Two questions arise: Are these accurate descriptions of the so-called "normal" process of men's development in current Western culture? Clearly, traditional theories pay little attention to basic relational questions like: What do we mean by relationship, connection, and mutuality? As a man, trained in the rightness of these traditional theories, I have always felt that while some aspects of them do describe some aspects of men's experience, they are quite superficial and fairly irrelevant to the deeper, more whole levels of my experience. In our workshops, I have realized that other men share this view. I find it curious that theories written mostly by men fail to describe so much of men's authentic experience. Perhaps this failure to write clearly about relationship comes from the difficulty men have in perceiving, understanding, and being in the *process* of relationship. While it is easy for men to envision self, and even self and other, it seems less easy to envision the *relationship* between self and other, with a life of its own, in movement, as a process, arising from and reflecting upon all participants, its realness defined by the qualities inherent in mutual empathic connection. Writing this paper has helped me to grasp the power of this paradigm shift, how it changes one's perception, understanding, and even language. Recently, using this paradigm in my work with a couple, I was pleased to hear the woman say: "I don't hate him; I hate *the relationship with him*." This way of speaking has the marvelous quality of keeping us in the facts, shifting us away from blame.

A second question: Are such theories useful in therapy? After almost two decades as a therapist, in my daily work I have found myself being less and less concerned with penises and castrations and internal objects and narcissistic mirrorings, than with the healing power of mutual relationship, with men and women both. In my own early training I came to believe that theories built on images such as "projective identification" were brilliant and crucial. Now I understand that theories can serve as implicit justifications for the distant and relationally unskilled therapist to maintain a self-out-of-relation context with

the client. At worst, if used to justify power-over actions, they can pave the way for abuse.

Much of what is promoted in these old theories seems inaccurate, irrelevant, worn, and weird. It's time to work toward a new psychology of men.

Male self-in-relation theory

I am suggesting that for men as well as women, there is a primary desire for connection with others, and that it is less accurate and useful to think of self than to think of self-in-relation — or even better, movement in relationship — as process. As with women, the seeds of misery in men's lives are planted in disconnection from others, in isolation, violation, and dominance, and in relationships which are not mutually empowering. To participate in relationships which are not mutual is a source of sadness and rage, which, even in the dominant gender, can lead over a period of time to withdrawal, stagnation, and depression, and, characteristically, insecurity, aggression, and violence. Rather than identity *before* intimacy, relationship *informs* identity in a continuous, ongoing process, the more connected, the more powerful. As Surrey has suggested: the goal of development is the increasing ability to build and enlarge mutually enhancing relationships (1987). As the quality of relationships grow, the individual grows, in life and in psychotherapy.

Not that men's "self-in-relation" is the same as women's. Let us turn to the differences.

Much evidence, such as that of Daniel Stern (1985), supports the idea that men and women both come into the world not as isolated selves, but as selves-in-relation to others, especially to mother. There are biological and hormonal differences between male and female infants, and there is data that there are sex differences in primitive empathic responses of neonates to other neonates. Yet the first few years of male development are probably quite similar to female, in terms of open emotional connectedness and mutual responsiveness.

There are several implications of this: 1) the experience of this early connectedness *is there*, in men; 2) men *do* have a notion of ways of interacting with the world which is grounded in *being-with*; 3) this notion of *being-with* is almost always done in a relationship with a woman — at least so far.

While babies are aware of gender identity at about the age of two, and there are some differences in early infancy, male and female development continues in a still similar — and connected — manner up until

about the age of three. Then, sons and mothers begin to relate to each other in a different way from daughters and mothers — there is a shift in the "relational context" — and the feelings and impasses which arise around this disconnection have profound implications for the rest of male relational development, and the translation of the dominant male power into the institutions of family and society. Mothers often are startled when their little boys say, as one mother told me: "I can't wait to grow up and not need you."

This disconnection from the relationship with mother is a primary violation in many men's lives, and a parallel violation in the life of a mother of a son. It's like a big wave, carrying the boy along from then on, a first learning about relationship which colors his learning in other close relationships, not in stages but continuously, in the family and in the culture, with women and men both. Please note that the break is not from "the mother" that traditional theories have described and sometimes exalted, but from a mutually empathic *relationship*, which happens to be with mother — from the whole relational mode of being.

An agent of disconnection

Why does this disconnection occur? Rather than any one factor bringing it about, everything in the culture forces it to come about, in the name of "growth." Prompted by father and the male image in the culture, the boy is heavily pressured to disconnect, to achieve maleness. Not only is he expected to turn away from mother to do this, and not only is mother told she has to support this, but it is bigger than merely mother: It is a turning away from *the process of connection*. A boy is taught to become an agent of disconnection. The break is not only from connection, from mutual authenticity, but also a break from *being in the process* with a person, who happens to be a woman, and mother at that. From this model, it's clear how "mother blaming" or "the engulfing mother" or "the pre-Oedipal mother" are *not* accurate descriptions of what happens. Please do see that it is not "separating from the mother" or "disconnecting from the mother," it's a *disconnecting from the very process of growth in relationship*, a learning about turning away from the whole relational mode.

This turning-away-from means that the boy never really learns *how* to do it, how to be in the process with another and grow. Unlike girls, whose relational development is grounded in the practice of attending and responding to others' feeling states,

boys do not get much practice in this arena of empathy, as described by Jordan (1984). Not knowing how to do it, it soon becomes avoided even more, devalued, and even its existence as a possibility denied. It seems to me that this denial may have much to do with the curious way that traditional male theorists fail to speak to the depths of male experience.

A basic quality of this violation of the relational process is a declaration of *difference*. The boy begins to see that he is and must be different from mother, physically, emotionally, activity-levelly, perceptively, *relationally*. This focus on difference is often a kind of declaration of maleness. Difference implies comparison. Comparison implies better than or worse than, and can lead to the idea of one person having power *over* another, especially if the difference and the conflict over difference cannot be addressed, if the relationship cannot enlarge to encompass difference, or engage with difference. This can open the door for the disparagement of mother, and of the relationship with mother, and even of relationship itself.

Little boys quickly learn to compare themselves to others — not only to others' penises — and with comparison can come competition, aggression, and perhaps violence. Often in Western, middle-class males, there is an obsession with comparison and competition. Rather than being in relationship, there is an emphasis on becoming someone special. Compare, don't identify. The boy is placed in a terrible bind: On one hand, there is a focus on self-achievement, being able to be especially good at *doing* things or *fixing* things, being competent in the world; on the other hand, there is still a strong yearning for connection. Becoming someone special seems often to be *at the expense of* being with or nurturing others. With a certain inevitability, a boy's life tilts toward trying to become someone special, or feeling bad at not. The increasing competence at doing things well may even become used in the service of "doing" disconnection well. Over time, becoming a self-in-spite-of-relationship leaves less opportunity to practice relationship. With a growing sense of competence in the world, there is a parallel sense of incompetence in the process of relationship. This can lead to a sorrowful, enraging, guilty sense of "I'm not enough in relationship." And, finally, in a vicious cycle of disengagement and achievement, this "I'm not enough" sense can become an impetus for further striving. The fantasy is that *by* achieving, a man will win love. For example, the "Hi, Mom!" syndrome: Pro football players on the sidelines after making a

great play, when caught by the TV camera, invariably turn, raise an index finger to indicate they are Number One, and shout: "Hi Mom!" In "Beautiful Boy," a song to his son, Sean, John Lennon said: "Life is what is happens to you while you're busy making other plans" (1980). Especially when they are in relationship, some men seem to be in a hurry to get somewhere else, and become something else, as if they need to become something else *in order to be valued* in the relationship they are fleeing, to become something else. But no achievement can win love.

From the early differences with mother, conflicts around difference are rarely addressed. Staying connected through conflict can release enormous creative energy. Yet men often wind up being deadly afraid of conflict — perhaps more so than women — so much so that they have to start fights and wars instead of engaging in it, relationally. "Troops, not talks."

The boy is told to disconnect from the relationship with mother, and not to share with mother what he feels about disconnecting. More important, as quoted by Surrey, is a boy "learning not to listen, to shut out my mother's voice so that I would not be distracted from pursuing my own interests" (1984). Often the boy is taught not to listen to his mother trying to maintain connection, or to listen with a certain suspicion, and if he does listen, not to *respond* to her. When faced with mother trying to reconnect, the boy is in a terrible conflict. As one of my male patients described it:

I remember my mother facing me, asking me something, and my not knowing what to say. And then she got angry, or maybe she started crying. But she kept asking me, and the feeling I had, it was like she was ripping at my heart, my guts. Not only could I not say anything, but I had to steel myself against showing her any reaction. I made my face freeze, showing her no reaction, and tried my hardest not to respond, saying to myself: "Stay like this, and it will be over." I felt like something horrible might happen. I wanted desperately to respond to her, but could not, because if I said anything it would only get worse. I was in the searing spotlight of my mother's love. I froze.

If the little boy does respond to mother, it's as if he will enter a timeless, scary world where he cannot function as a man. Often, the boy gets the message to devalue the mother, and women in general. When I

was a boy, one of the worst nicknames you could use on your boyhood friends was to call them by their mother's name: "Hi, Roz! Hey, Myrna!" To be *like* mother is felt as shameful. Connecting with women now feels as if it stands in the way of competence in being a man, and connecting itself starts to feel, by definition, problematic. To whom is the boy to turn?

Father? There is a desperate need at that time for the boy not to be different from someone, but to be *like* someone. Boys are supposed to be able to start to be like father, to connect with father, to have an empathic relationship with a strong and caring father. Yet the disconnection from empathic relationship is an injury from which the father himself is recovering. He too has learned not to listen — or to listen with a certain suspicion — and if he does listen, not to respond. The thing that the father is often worst at teaching — and *thinks* he values least — is movement in relationship. In studies quoted by Osherson, fathers interacted with their children, in the first three months, an average of 37 seconds per day; at nine months, it's in the range of one hour (1987). Father's role, often, is to show a son how to become a better agent of disconnection from relationship, especially from that with mother, to "be a big boy," and "big boys don't cry." Father may also push mother to disengage. Fathers are often described as "distant" or "absent" — out of relationship — and so remain a mystery. Being mysterious, they can be made larger than life — "heroes," stimulating for a boy the heroic journey — or smaller than life — "wimps." Rarely are they allowed to be life-sized, merely and authentically human, in Mary Watkin's wonderful phrase, "leading normal-sized lives." Father-son is bittersweet.

Making authentic relationships with life-sized fathers is important. There are some wonderful fathers, especially these days, and sometimes it works. Much has been written about this recently, for instance by Osherson, Gerzon, and Nelson, among others (1987, 1982, and 1988 respectively). Fathers *do* have special relationships with sons, teaching them how to be effective in the world, how to play fair, be a team member as well as a leader, how to uphold moral principles, as well as how to form deep bonds with other men and boys, bonds of friendship, loyalty, and love. Yet for all the strengths of the father-son relationship, it is less easy for fathers to interact around emotions, and the *process* of interaction is quite different from that of mothers and sons: less based on affective give-and-take, continuity, and working through conflict and difference to mutual empower-

ment. Even when it works, it works in valuing independence and action, learning to do things out in the world. Often, it emphasizes "success" as what a boy *does*, not who a boy *is*, rarely who a boy *is with* others, and almost never who a boy *is mutually* with others.

And while the father may be able to help consolidate in the boy a sense of maleness and self-worth, based on learning how to relate through sameness, the father may have difficulty in showing his son how to relate through difference, with mother, with women in general, or even, sometimes, with other class and ethnic groups.

The boy also learns about relationship from *the relationship between mother and father*. Not only are we all born into relationship, but we are almost always born into relationships. (Of course, the crucial relationships into which a child is born vary tremendously, family to family and culture to culture). The boy has an always-present, intense example of the male-female relationship before his eyes. He watches it continuously, observing how the relationship reflects on each participant and moves in time, and he, himself, participates in the relationship and its reflections. If this main example of how men and women relate is filled with misunderstandings, power struggles, and miscommunications, the boy may come to see this as the normal way, and/or may come to not expect much in relationship. If a boy feels inadequate in relationship with his mother and with his father separately, and if the mother-father relationship does not appear pleasurable to mimic in action, the boy's quest for self-achievement, out of relationship, may be spurred on. The yearning for both father and mother, and yearning for relationship in general, may become shut off, and denied. Men may wind up unaware of this yearning for connection, or left with only a dimly-sensed yearning for this yearning.

The yearning is not just for connection with others, but also for connection with self — "self-empathy," in Jordan's words (1984). Disconnecting is "learning not to listen" to self and/or other's feeling states. This may leave the boy less motivated to attend to, or try to find out about his own and/or other people's internal worlds — what Surrey calls the "interiority" of experience (1987). Over time, a boy's active curiosity about another person's feeling states may diminish. The sense of "interiority" itself may become devalued and denied.

Out in the world: Connections, disconnections, and violations

Very often, boys find connections out in the world, or connect to their own creative fire in isolation. Seven-year-old boys playing together as buddies is a wonderful sight — the enthusiasm between them, as they fashion games together, the sense of well-being, the relief at finding a pal. (One of Hollywood's sure money-makers is the "buddy-buddy" story). Boys find friends and playmates (Harry Stack Sullivan's "chums"), and have adventures out in the world: the boys' side of the playground being so different from the girls', with the boys playing games and sports in leader-follower groups, including the game of "war." Gilligan's work on gender difference in childhood moral reasoning is relevant here (1982). Action is the name of the game. Yet the charm of buddies doesn't last long: Ask any man about his boyhood, and you will hear hair-raising stories filled with incredible cruelty, violence, and daily terror. Boyhood is not a "latency," in any sense of that word.

At worst, in response to the jolt of shifting the relational context from mother-connection to father-disconnection, the boy feels hurt and that something is wrong. Jean Baker Miller recently spoke on how anger is often a sign of a person feeling hurt or that something is wrong, and can be a healthy and motivating force if it can be worked on in relationship (1990). If it can be worked on with father or mother, it can bring the boy more into relationship. If not, it can turn into aggression and violence, or isolation.

The more isolated boy may turn to the inner world, creating stories or pictures or models. This inner world can be romanticized, in writers (an acquaintance of Kafka, spotting him at a cafe, asked: "Mind if I join you?" Kafka said: "Yes"), and scientists (Einstein, at six, was thought retarded; in later life he said: "I now bask in the solitude which was so painful in my youth").

No discussion of men's development can ignore male violence or male power. Male violence is epidemic; women are often the victims. In the breakdown of relationship, violence flourishes. The more efficient an agent of disconnection a person becomes, the more potential for violence. What's missing from much theory of male development is a power analysis: men denying they have power over women, and men's reaction to the fact of the widespread sexual abuse of girls and women and

young boys. A primary violation in women's lives is the early realization that men are strong and can hurt them, physically and sexually. Little girls pick up the violence in a lack of connection — as subtle as a look in a man's eyes, a sexual objectification. Little boys often notice this fear in little girls. Boys learn about their physical power, to enjoy it, and to fear it.

The last thing men can talk about with each other is their feelings about their potential for sexual violence. Often, it is not part of their awareness. For example: One day at my swim club, I was walking toward the whirlpool, wearing only my bathing suit; a woman in the whirlpool turned, saw me, and I saw in her eyes a sudden fear of me, a man; it made me realize how deeply women carry this, all the time.

While men are taught that they have power and are supposed to act powerfully, men may sense women's fear of it. Men too are afraid of it, in themselves, and from other men. In a patriarchy, men may also be victims. Hierarchy means that there's always someone *more* successful and *more* powerful, and men are haunted by failure. The biggest winners are potentially the biggest losers. In a power-over model, it isn't safe to take an authentic, vulnerable, relational stance. In such systems, relationship can be seen as a threat to power. While a man may find it easy to use power from a narcissistic stance, knocking other people over, it's difficult to use power in relationship. Men can come to think that sensitivity to the welfare of others drains power and is hazardous.

The question of power in relationship is complex: Physical power, cultural power, and economic power are more in the province of men, while emotional power and relational power may be more in the province of women.

And so the main arc of men's development: After disconnection from mother and after engaging in an independent-based relationship with father, the boy makes his way in the world. Boys seek out boyfriends, and then girlfriends. Mentors come along, mostly male, although mentor relationships, being one-way, often end up in the same *power-over* violations as with other men. Agents of disconnection learn how to disconnect others, and learn how to twist themselves out of relationship, to "succeed." Men move into marriage and having children, which may really open them up to the powerful and creative forces of connection which have been masked for years. Some men do seem to get their needs met by women, in traditional marriages, but that is different from participating in a mutual relationship, and

women's needs, in traditional relational structures, are subordinate.

What are the strengths of *men-in-relation*? From our workshops, when women answer that question, they use phrases such as: "caretakers; deep loyalties; relationship through action, through projects, through doing; lifting heavy objects; rational thinking; focusing on one thing at a time; honesty; directness; can let things go and move on to other things; breadwinners; protectors; know how to deal with fear; alliance builders; not so overwhelmed by feelings; strategic; product-makers; purposeful; killing spiders; frisky about sex."

What is the quality of male relationship? Although men say they want to be in contact and have love and support and want to feel that they can love, I don't think this whole process is as *able* to feel good to us men, in the same sense as *what feels good to women* — at least without new learning and practice. For all the reasons I've suggested, men do not engage with pleasure in back-and-forth movement, continuity, interchange, flow, process, bringing out others, mutuality, dialogue as opposed to debate. There's little holding of the relational moment. While men can feel connection in the moment, they often deflect it — joking, shifting their attention, physicalizing it — breaking the tension of connection, fragmenting the process temporally. Men also tend to fragment work from home, in ways that women do less often. For instance, two breakthroughs in my relationship with Janet were my learning to a) think about her during the day and call her up with no purpose in mind other than to make contact: "I just called to say hello and to stay in touch;" and b) my learning to say: "I was thinking about what we were talking about yesterday." My women patients have taught me that women want to feel men engaged actively and *with continuity* in the process of relationship.

Men throughout their lives are left with a dim sense of wanting to connect, yes. But actually to *be in relationship*, to engage in self-with-other experience, is a different thing. What prevents it?

Male relational dread

At one point in our workshop, men and women sit facing each other on opposite sides of the room. The men, forced to sit still and interact with the women, are invariably — and almost immediately — surprised to find that they share an unspoken, common, familiar sense in close relationships: the sense of dread. When we asked one man what was

wrong, he said: "I'm afraid that *something might happen*." It is astonishing for men to identify this sense of dread, and to recognize that it is shared. This realization brings much relief.

Male relational dread is a process. It arises in the intensity of relationship, mostly with women. In the example from *Fine* and in the clinical vignette, the man and boy are facing a woman who invites a response from the man on a feeling level, often in this way:

"What are you feeling?" (Pause. Silence from the man.) "Can you tell me?"

"I don't know."

"Sure you do. Please, talk to me?"

At this point the man may take evasive action, falling silent, changing the subject or yawning, striking out with anger or sarcasm, or making a rapid exit, sometimes into the newspaper. What is going on?

Well, what is going on is a man becoming overwhelmed with a deep sense of dread, a visceral sense, literally in the gut, or heart. Invitation starts to seem like demand; urgency and curiosity like criticism. The more the woman comes forward, offering to explore things relationally, the more the man feels dread, and wants to *avoid things relationally*. (Couples and family therapists have described this process, but have not described the dread.) Women's experience in this process, is, in the words of a woman friend: "Men don't give women enough information to keep them from going crazy."

What is men's experience, in this scene? First of all, men do listen, at least until dread takes over. Secondly, men do have feelings, and are often able to sort out what the feelings are, although this may take some time — that's the "pause." Unfortunately, women often seem to be on a different time, and in the midst of the man sorting out what he feels, she may ask again — "Can you tell me?" This makes the man feel pressure, and his "I don't know" — or even "I don't know — I'll tell you tomorrow" — can be an attempt at buying time to stay focused on what he feels and say it — in fact, an attempt at staying in relationship. But then, when the woman asks again — "Sure you do. Please talk to me?" — the man's original feeling gets all mixed up with the feeling of being under pressure to respond. In this third aspect of relating, response, things really begin to fall apart. At this point dread starts to take over, rising from the gut up, and things get increasingly fuzzy, such that feelings become blurred and homogenized into a wish to escape — even further listening becomes difficult.

Note that this is not “the engulfing mother;” rather it is *the warp in the relational context*: We are in the wasteland of the negatives of Jean Baker Miller’s five aspects of healthy connection (1986). Things come to a dead stop. The relationship goes flat. The process of dread is *relational*, not only intrapsychic. While there is, as always, a transference component, relational dread is not merely a “maternal transference.” Dread arises not from the woman reminding a man of his mother, but from his being in a relational process where things are happening fast and complexly *on both sides*, a dynamic where one relational style is meeting another, quite different one. At issue is *the process of relationship*, not the person, real or transference. A man’s dread is the result of “negative learnings” about the process of relationship, over and over again.

What are the experiential aspects of this process of relational dread?

1) Inevitability of disaster: Nothing good can come of my going into this, it’s just a question of how bad it will be before it’s over.

2) Timelessness: It will never be over; an eternity would be too brief.

3) Damage: The damage will be immense, and irreparable.

4) Closeness: The closer I feel to the woman — even, the more I love her — the more intense my dread becomes.

5) Precariousness: Even if it starts to dissipate and clear and feel better, it can turn, at any moment, back to dread, betraying me.

6) Process: It is a shifting, time-warped terrain, a movement in relationship with few fixed landmarks, a way of being in which I, a man, am unsure, even of the validity of my perceptions, let alone my “being with” another person while I’m in it. In this quickly forward-moving process, I can’t find a firm foothold in myself, and I’m scared something out of control may happen. It seems that male perceptivity and “set” have become more attuned to stasis than movement. The concept and practice of process has been made difficult for men.

7) Guilt: I am not enough. I have not been enough in these relationships before; I feel I have let women down all along, and am guilty about that.

8) Denial of and fear of aggression: If I am trapped, pushed too far, and unable to withdraw or leave, I might panic and get violent and hurt someone, as I have done in the past, either by disconnecting or by taking physical action. Rather than engage in this conflict, I’d better leave or be nice. As one man said in

our workshop: “I feel like I’m all dressed up in my power with nowhere to go.” As a woman patient of mine put it: “He wants it nice; I want it real.”

9) Incompetence and shame: All my life I have been taught that I have to be competent in the world, and in this I don’t feel competent. She is better at this than I am, verbally and relationally — not only does she know the territory in general better, but she seems to know *me* better than I know myself. I could focus on one thing at a time, but this is many things, all mixed together, and vague things at that. From a workshop: “She insists we talk about violence and patriarchy and our relationship, all at once! It’s baffling!”

“I’m ashamed at my incompetence — I ought to be able to function, in this, but cannot. I ought to be able to take action, to *fix* the flat tire of this relationship. And before I can say anything, I have to be *sure* of what I am going to say — usually, I can go off by myself and get sure, first; and here I cannot — I have to be accurate. Here again, a gender difference: When something goes wrong in relationship, women often feel “I am wrong;” men feel, “I should be able to fix it.”

10) Paralysis: As each of these things come up, my dread is redoubled. Trying to fix things, under the pressure of feeling I *have* to fix things, *fast*, I fumble things even more. From our workshops it became clear that it is men’s feeling that they have to *fix* the relational impasse which may prevent them from responding *at all*, or even from acknowledging the impasse: If I can’t fix it, I won’t say anything at all. And *fix it well*: In one workshop, when the men started to talk about their experience, a woman responded enthusiastically: “A+!” At that all of us men fell silent, withdrawing — it was male dread, in action. As the women, curious, moved forward relationally, asking questions about the men’s experience, the men felt and described the women’s questions as “bullets” or “arrows” or “darts.” The men — sometimes with good reason — didn’t trust that the women could let go of their images of men and be open to accept male vulnerability.

And so, through these various aspects of dread, even though men may desperately want connection, they again become agents of disconnection. Men often respond by putting a stop to the process — withdrawing, striking out, tuning out, changing the subject, joking, being nice, falling silent. Men also resort to “station identification” — talking at some length about themselves and where they place themselves, status-

wise, in the world: “I’m senior vice-president at...,” etc. Under the influence of alcohol or drugs, violence may be the response. Women feel shut out; in the words of a friend: “When you want to talk about it, they get this glazed look; they look at you like you’re a vegetable in a market. When you keep at it, they start to look at you like you’re the enemy. You say, “Yoo-hoo, it’s me — remember me? Your friend? How did I get to be the enemy? I mean things were fine — what happened?” It makes me feel like a Martian, in relation to men. But it makes me feel really sorry for them, too.” Another woman said: “It’s like when you’re pedaling fast on your bicycle, and suddenly the chain slips off, and you’re left pedaling hard, going nowhere.”

In our workshops, while men start out with the dread that “something might happen,” women start out with *curiosity* about hearing from men about male experience, *hoping* that “something might happen.” Again: stasis opposed to process. A classic impasse. Deborah Tannen’s recent book describes the verbal impasses brilliantly and with scrupulous fairness (1990). Yet if the goal of talking is the caretaking and growth of the relationship, it is not accurate to portray men and women as having separate but equal skill and power. They rarely do.

Culturally, men may come to sense that facing into things with others is futile. I am amazed, in teaching medical students, how by their final year, they have bought the notion that facing into pain and suffering with patients is draining, and must be avoided, even though this is what they went into medicine to do. This process of male relational dread, repeated over and over throughout development, works against male growth-in-relationship. Men’s *curiosity* about relationship — even men’s curiosity about other people — can become deadened.

The potential for growth at “mid-life”

Often, this self-out-of-relation serves men well in the world through their 20s and perhaps their 30s, as relationships become more complex, as long as no major life-crisis happens to strike. And yet if, as in relational theory, connection is primary to healthy growth, and isolation is the killer, the “normal” male way can take men only so far, petering out in the vogueish “mid-life crisis,” the late 30s or early 40s, when men start to fall apart. We men are told to create our lives, our work — even, in a sense, our loves — in isolation, and then our isolation kills us. In “mid-life,” men may sense a loss of meaning, an

emptiness, loneliness, failure, rage, sadness, leading to further isolation, stagnation and stasis, and depression. For such men, all of a sudden trying to make deep and meaningful connection with others becomes of great importance, even as important as their work. If a man cannot open up to exploring the possibility of connection, he may revert to the old ways of “relating:” buying a sports car, dating a 20-year-old, trying to be virile and powerful. Terrible things may happen: drink or drugs, harmful affairs, workaholism, suicide, neglect and violation of loved ones — and, if in positions of power, neglect and violation of other members of society or of other nations. In this crisis, men may use sexuality to try to connect; they can be surprised to find that women may need connection to be fully sexual.

On the other hand, if at that more receptive time of men’s lives, the yearning for connection is nurtured, amazing things can happen: Men may go into therapy, where they may begin to address the relational conflicts and differences instead of stopping them; men may try to reconnect with their children, wives, fathers, and mothers — roughly in that order; men may try to deal with their abuse of substances by joining Alcoholics Anonymous — a *mutual-help* organization, where, in my experience, the men who make it are those who, despite almost everything in their nature calling for them to stay isolated, go *against* their nature and move toward others, asking for help. (One of AA’s slogans is: “Identify, don’t compare.”) By caring for sick and suffering parents, spouses, children, or others, men may open more fully to attending and responding to feelings, empathically and mutually. Men may also turn to spiritual pursuits, even have spiritual awakenings. Tremendous creativity and power-*with*-others can be unleashed, to replace power-*over*. Priorities can shift: Men who have always had vague or hidden concerns about the wholeness of life on the planet can start joining with others in peace or ecological movements. All this can happen.

And yet, however much a man may seek out others, there may still be a nagging subtle notion of a man seeking to have his own needs met, rather than learning the shift to engaging in mutuality — mutual empathy, empowerment, and authenticity. Moving toward connection with a new openness may inflame the process of relational dread, for the quest for connection is almost always with women. At this time of life, men find that women’s power is exactly what they desire: *relational* power, power-*with*. Women not

only seem to know how to connect, but also to seek it out and actually *enjoy* it. All the old feelings can arise, with new addenda, like men feeling angry at feeling vulnerable to women's emotional and relational power. Men may sense women as so powerful in relationship that men may not be able to figure out what women are complaining about in being victims; men can feel overpowered and like victims, too — something that women may find hard to understand. In any non-mutual, power-over system, each participant — even the privileged and dominant — feels like a victim, sometimes. And yet, as one man said in our workshop: “Men want relationship, sure, but the bottom line is we don't want to give up our power to get it.”

I believe that it is possible for men to participate in non-self-centered, mutual relationship, and grow in connection. Vast numbers of men, now, are trying to do this. I believe we are talking here about the creative spirit — a genderless spirit — as evidenced in relationship: collaborative, co-creative, at work together. As a writer, I have come to believe that the creative process is a non-ego, non-self-limited state. This is much the same process as in successful psychotherapy, or in any other healing encounter in life. It can be nonverbal, and is seen at times of awe, love, shock, sorrow, and enlightenment. Men desperately want this quality of self-in-relation, and in dark times kill themselves or destroy others over their failure to “get” it. It's not that we men don't have this yearning, it's that it's tied up with our dread. Many of us want to move from the comparative, competitive mind to the relational mind. There is a real split now, in men, reflecting the split in the world: those who would keep on with the old, outdated institutions which are destroying our planet, and those who, at a grass-roots level, in relationships and groups, are taking action to change things. The key is in traveling the mutual and creative way — letting self be created in relationship — which is at the heart of all healthy human growth.

What about men's relationships with men? From the 60s on, women have gotten together with women, and the effect has been truly revolutionary, transforming world-consciousness — not only about women's experience but, for the first time in history, about the prevalence of childhood sexual abuse — and shifting attention to women's strengths, which had been seen as weaknesses. Lately, mirroring this process, many of what have been seen as men's strengths are being revealed as weaknesses: competitiveness and aggressiveness, independence and

separateness and self-sufficiency, non-emotionality, the ability to block things out and not be affected or deterred from one's goal, “toughness.” Men are now getting together with men. This is of value, and I applaud the healing of male-male wounds which can take place. Yet there are disturbing concerns. Men have been getting together with men for thousands of years — it's the most usual thing for men to do, however current the focus. Of the various different groupings of human beings, men alone in groups have proven, historically, the most dangerous. Two aspects concern me:

First, the idea, popularized by Robert Bly, of America in the 80s as being populated by “soft males,” and his saying “We're ready to start seeing the wildman and to put his powerful dark energy to use” (1990). While this may be in the service of “finding a strong and caring father,” it has not made the paradigm shift to “finding the strong and caring *relationship*,” to the two-way, mutual process at the core of healthy growth.

Second, it seems to me that the way to something new is not only in sending men off into the woods alone à la Bly, but also in bringing men back into relationship with women. In our workshops, we first split the men and women into gender groups. In my work with the men, it is clear how comfortable they are with each other — there's a lot of laughing and finding common experience. It is in the next step, when the genders face each other across the room, that the conflicts through difference arise, and the feelings deepen, and the vital work — inevitably moving through the process of male dread and female anger, toward mutuality — gets done. Men blossom in the workshop — usually, they have been brought by women, and, being there under duress, start out skeptical and negative; by the end the women are amazed at how intelligent, sensitive, and actively perceptive men are about relationships — but men blossom only after being forced to face their common *and* individual differences in relationship with women.

No amount of we men learning how to be warriors alone together or jumping out of airplanes alone together or seeing our fathers as human-sized will help us to learn to relate to women, or perhaps even to learn what is meant by “*mutual*.” Male-male work, if it stays male-male, may serve as a fragmentation of energy and a deflection of power which can seed violence and destruction. The missing piece, the learning and empowering piece, is to do that which is *new* to our age, to bring men and women back from

their enclaves into the creative space called relationship.

The key to this is in working, in the present, on the energy contained in the events of that fork in the past, when most of us men — not by choice, mind you — when we men, faced with profound difference and the conflict engendered in that difference, rather than walking through it with others and finding the creative power in that conflict and difference and moving into a power-*with* way of living, deflected the conflict, polarized the difference, set the obsessions of comparison running in our heads, and hurried on full-tilt to vague rewards promised, somewhere else than in the mutual relationship which had nourished us, much as it had nourished our sisters. And yet it is a miracle of human evolution that it is always in the present moment, and that when people truly get together, *it can help*. The experience of connecting mutually is there in men and women both, and for both it is deeply linked with the relationship with a woman. Both men and women have experienced violations which interfere with healthy mutual relationships. The creative energy which can be liberated by the genders working with conflict and difference is profound. It seems to me that the real hope for living in harmony and wholeness in the world is that liberation. After all, something might happen. In shifting the paradigm from Self/Other to Relationship, we are entering the realm of the common good. From there, it's a short step to global awareness and action.

Discussion Summary

After each colloquium presentation a discussion is held. Selected portions are summarized here. At this session Drs. Judith Jordan, Jean Baker Miller, Irene Stiver, and Janet Surrey joined Stephen Bergman in leading the discussion.

Question: I was counting for awhile, and noticed that you mentioned the word “mother” at least five times as often as “father,” in a lecture on men’s development. Could you say more about the promise that father-son relationships can hold in helping infants and young sons with relationship.

Bergman: I think that we are on the cusp of something new — we are seeing a whole new way of fathering. I would guess that most of the fathers in this audience are participants in nurturing relationships. I firmly believe that the potential exists, and I think there are signs that the potential is starting to be realized. Much more attention is being paid to how fathers can be in relationship with sons. On the other

hand, much has been written about the old or orthodox or classic “role of the father” and the father’s effect on his son. Less has been written about the *relational context* of men’s development: the relational mode or process of son with mother and/or with father. In general, in this culture at present, to focus on *the relational context* of men’s development tends to shift the focus to the relationship with mother and to the son’s loss of that mode of relationship.

Stiver: Even with the changes, there are some major problems around the dynamics. The father — even the more enlightened father — has been deprived in many ways in his own experience and in the move away from early relationship with his own mother, as Steve has described. There are bound to be a lot of complex feelings that a father has toward his son. He may see the young son as getting from the mother what the father still wants and feels is taboo. This is one reason why the father-son relationship is such an ambivalent relationship. We see fathers tease and ridicule sons, and yet want this affective connection. This can increase dread also.

Steve spoke to having to come back to women — the need to go back and forth as a way of learning to lessen the dread and to learn to tolerate conflict. This is still very hard for fathers. They are often extraordinarily torn by the envy or the yearning or the need to deny that in themselves and the need to be critical of that in their sons. Sons can be extraordinarily sensitive to these feelings in their fathers; many have to present a non-authentic persona to the father. It’s a difficult situation — one that needs our attention.

Question: What is the prognosis for male-female relationships? Are we stuck in a personal dilemma? Is it cultural? Global? Where do we start?

Bergman: The best answer is to say that we are all here tonight. There’s never been such a population of men at these lectures. My being asked to speak tonight signifies the start of a definite enquiry into the possibility of a dialogue between the genders. There are things happening now that have rarely happened before in history. For instance, the fact that has come out — only in the last decade — of such widespread childhood sexual abuse. There is a tremendous wish on the part of many men, now, to “do it relationally.” And we are not saying that these gender differences are determined by biological difference and are immutable — quite the contrary: These are differences *learned in relationship*. There’s a lot of hope.

Surrey: What strikes me in our workshops is how far we can go in such a short time. We find the

same impasses repeated over and over; they are not insurmountable when we address them together — and that's very hopeful for me. When the men come back after having been with each other, it's not just forming bonds with each other, but also validating each other for being there and for valuing relationship and for learning through their experience of vulnerability in relationship. When the men and women then have a chance to work on these things together, the men feel the support of other men and the richness of other men's contributions. Some women have been learning and growing together for decades, through their connectedness in support groups; so that there's much more power, energy, and intelligence brought to bear on any relational situation, having each other to call on to shape a creative response. Men are new to this. It seems to me a lot has to do with men valuing and sharing with each other, and then being part of this dialogue with women.

Jordan: I used to think that what we have here is just Western culture — competitive, individualistic, self-sufficient. But the cross-cultural data suggests that this country is off the scale — that we are so far into the individualistic, competitive ethic, and that, in fact, we continue to socialize males to be soldiers — whether on the battlefield or in industry — and you don't socialize soldiers to be empathic, listening, caring people. I think, ultimately, the individualistic ethic is starting to fail in terms of ecological and economic success in the world, and it will push the system to move into some new paradigms, and I feel some hope about that.

Surrey: The nuclear and global age — the interconnectedness and the necessity for living with a different kind of consciousness — is really pushing our attentiveness to our survival at a rate far beyond what it's been for 3,000 years. I think many forces are at work to bring change.

Miller: I don't think Steve was trying to be bleak or gloomy, but rather that he was seriously accounting for deep-seated problems — and the possibilities for an opening to change.

Question: What part do mothers play in contributing to the disconnections in a young boy's experience?

Miller: At the time I was raising my sons, we mothers were made to feel that we better not have these boys be like women. Of course, I was psychoanalytically trained; so perhaps I heard even more of this, but perhaps not. It was a tremendous injunction on all of us. We did absorb this and feel

that we would do such tremendous damage if we kept relating to sons in the ways that came readily to us. It was a terrible thing we were taught. I believe that's changing.

Question: Are you saying that men are an inadequate version of women in the ability to be in relationship?

Bergman: First of all, I want to emphasize again that I am not talking about all men, at all times, in all cultures. Some men are quite able to be in relationship, and some women are quite unable. And yet there are patterns and facts which are, in general, undeniable: When we speak about relationship as mutual — in terms of authenticity, empowerment, and empathy — the process of caring for the relationship and participating actively and with active curiosity in the development of other people through relationship, the genders are not of equal skill and motivation. Men are not taught to be caretakers of relational processes and contexts in the way that women are. This does not mean that men have not been taught to be caretakers in other ways — men have numerous and clear strengths, which I have elaborated in detail.

I also want to re-emphasize that if and when men are motivated, they can learn to participate in the relational process in mutual ways. However, having said all this, I think we men must face the facts: If the focus is mutual relationship, we have a lot to learn. The issue is not to compare genders. Women writers have talked and written about what can keep women out of relationship.

Finally, I would emphasize that this is just a beginning of the enquiry. I hope that others of both genders will join this exploration, free of defensiveness and dread, in the spirit of a creative mutuality.

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