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# **Work in Progress**

## **Relational Awareness: Transforming Disconnection**

Judith Jordan, Ph.D.



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# Relational Awareness: Transforming Disconnection

**Judith Jordan, Ph.D.**

## **About the Author**

Judith V. Jordan, Ph.D., is Director of the Women's Network at McLean Hospital in Belmont, Massachusetts, where she is also Director of Training in Psychology. She is an Assistant Professor of Psychiatry at Harvard Medical School and a Visiting Scholar at the Stone Center, Wellesley College.

## **Abstract**

*Development of the capacity for relational awareness allows people to begin to acknowledge, explore, and transform patterns of disconnection. Temporary interpersonal nonresponsiveness or empathic failures can often be immediately transformed into renewed connection. More ongoing failures or violations, however, lead to chronic disconnection which involves a notable lack of responsiveness and movement on the part of one or both people. Societal factors such as racism and sexism also create chronic disconnection. Awareness of relational resources and relational resilience assists people in their efforts to maintain or restore connections. Relational awareness groups can contribute to both an expansion of awareness of these patterns and to finding new strategies for reconnection.*

In a relational model of psychological development, disconnection from others is viewed as one of the primary sources of human suffering. Similarly, disconnection from oneself, from the natural flow of one's responses, needs, and yearnings creates distress, inauthenticity, and ultimately a sense of isolation in the world. We suggest that people gain a central sense of meaning, well-being, and worth through engagement in growth-enhancing relationships; we further suggest that an active interest in being connected and movement toward increasing connection are at the core of human development (Miller, 1988). In speaking about relational being, I am suggesting that there is primary energy that flows toward others, toward joining with others in an expansive sense of interconnectedness. In contrast, the separate-self paradigm would suggest that separation and disconnection is the primary state of affairs ("We are born alone; we die alone"). According to this view, from a place of essential aloneness, we at best reach out to relate to or use "objects" who can meet our needs or provide some passing solace in this lonely journey.

Existing autonomy and self-sufficiency models, then, create a consciousness of separation and a belief that this is at the core of the human condition. Most psychoanalytic or depth psychologies posit that when we peel away the layers of socialization and civilization we find a selfish, aggressive, and isolated individual. Classical Freudians and some object relations theorists see the desire for relatedness as grafted onto other, more primary drives such as aggression, sexuality, or hunger. Connection and love are often seen as illusions, momentarily covering over the more basic condition of isolation and self-interest.

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Children are then raised to value separation, to feel proud of signs of independence. Normative socialization teaches that we are safer and stronger if we can exist without needing relationships. This concept is at the core of the power/control mode (Jordan, 1987) which informs socialization of the dominant group in most western cultures but most dramatically in the United States. What we might call "defensive self-sufficiency" is the standard of psychological maturity in this model.

At a personal level when we are injured or violated in important relationships, particularly when this is a chronic state of affairs, we withdraw even more deeply into defensive isolation and fear of connection. There are several forces pushing us toward pervasive experiences of isolation:

- 1) normative emphasis on defensive disconnection as a means to feeling strong and self-sufficient (e. g., "becoming your own man," "standing on your own two feet");
- 2) contextually produced disconnections including societal forces which suggest certain "different" or "minority" groups are "lesser than" (e. g., women, people of color, lesbians and gays, older people);
- 3) individual pathological disconnections which result from repetitive and ongoing violations in close relationships, particularly those which involve dependency and inability to self-protect, such as between small children and parents.

I would like to suggest that the story of our preoccupation with self-sufficiency and autonomy is largely the story of our woundedness, the extent to which the cultural standards of development have warped our natural search for safe and growth-enhancing connection. Pressure toward disconnection is harshly and normatively rendered in the lives of boys and men, with society's insistence on fierce independence, autonomy, and guardedness. Several theorists have spoken about the trauma of the boy's enforced separation from his primary objects: mother and father (Bergman & Surrey, 1993; Bergman, 1991; Pollack, 1995). But I would suggest there is a more pervasive injury in the larger disruption of a sense of connectedness in general, whether with mother, father, or all others. The boy is taught to see himself as standing *over* or *against* rather than *with*; in such a stance he is taught to deny basic human engagement and vulnerability. Psychology itself, with its reigning separate-self paradigm, its overemphasis on

individualism, and its emphasis on independent "doers" reinforces this sense of separateness. But anyone who has known the experience of "coming home" to connection, whether in the embrace of a loved one, in gazing into the sparkling and responsive eyes of a baby, or in the rapture of a breathtaking sunset knows there is something basic and beyond doubt about the sense of "being with," being in the flow of relational experience.

Any discussion of disconnections should include the societal factors which push us in the direction of disconnection and do not support the kind of transformation of disconnections into connection that we are suggesting is essential to healthy growth. In addition to the disconnections involved in socializing children toward independence and autonomy, toward an ideal of strength in separation, I would include all the divisive and fragmenting forces in the culture that push people into shame and isolation. Importantly among these forces are racism, sexism, heterosexism, ageism, and classism; all of the judgments which render groups marginalized, denigrated, or objectified contribute to an experience of disconnection and isolation. Disempowerment and fear usually accompany these disconnections. Furthermore, the suppression of all experience which makes the dominant group uncomfortable or threatened leads to self-protective inauthenticity in many marginalized groups—another source of disconnection.

At this point in history, I would like to add I think there is a profound anti-relational backlash going on. This is not just backlash against women but also against relational values and ways of organizing experience which threaten existing patriarchal power systems. In our field of health care this is epitomized by the increasingly de-humanizing delivery of care through managed care systems. A student recently pointed out that a flyer from one managed care program offered a list of dos and don'ts about the efficient delivery of mental health services. On the list was, "Don't build relationships with your clients. They lead to regression, increased dependency, and demands for longer-term therapy!"

## Disconnections

As individuals, we all have particular ways that we disconnect, particular situations that render us most vulnerable to disconnection, and particular patterns for transforming disconnections back into

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expansive connections; furthermore, ongoing relationships develop their own patterns of disconnection and reconnection. Most of these patterns exist at an unconscious, unexamined level. Questions we might ask when we observe disconnections are: Is it noticed by both people (or all people involved since these observations are not just limited to two-person situations)? Does it *matter* to both people? Will both people try to change it? Will both people work to sustain the connection? And will they work to understand the disconnection? Will both people attempt to understand and look at what is current? Can both people "hold" responsibility for the effect of disconnections on the relationship?

In acute disconnections within primarily growth-enhancing relationships, we have the opportunity to first name the disconnection and explore the interaction pattern, what led up to it; to express our feelings and represent our needs and understandings; and to stay open to the experience of the other person. We can also make an effort to see how our feelings and responses are affecting the relationship.

Often the clue to a disconnection is the drop in energy we feel in the moment. We feel negative affect, sad, angry, or depressed, and the movement in connection either slows down or ceases. There can be fear and immobilization; our sense of investment in the connection diminishes. There is often either heightened self-consciousness or dissociation; both involve a decrease in relational awareness. In acute disconnections, however, the interaction can often be transformed rather quickly. The disconnections to which I am referring are largely in individual interactions, but there are ways these occur in groups as well.

In chronic disconnection, often brought about because the relational context is not mutual or growth-enhancing, there develops a deep sense of immobilization or impasse. In fact, that is what impasse is: a chronic disconnection. The lack of movement and negative feelings which characterize acute disconnection settle in, and one feels depressed, out of touch, stuck. The pattern of immobilization, fear, and self-blame leads to a heightened sense of isolation.

Fear figures importantly in most experiences of disconnection. While a natural, relational response to fear is to turn to another for help, comfort, protection, and love, most of us have a history of being injured in

some way when we have sought comfort from another person in times of need or vulnerability. When others have been nonresponsive or, worse yet, abusive in the face of our need and vulnerability, we are left feeling wounded, and we question the wisdom of turning to others in times of need. Trauma reactions are dramatically characterized by this pattern. In trauma a vulnerable person is violated by a powerful other who does not respond with empathy or concern to the injured person. This leaves the victim feeling as if she does not matter and is not respected—a state of disconnection which feels terribly unsafe. The tension between the yearning for connection and the terror of connection is exquisite and often paralyzing. Jean Miller and Irene Stiver (1994) have written about this as the central paradox of connections and disconnections:

In the face of significant and especially repeated experiences of disconnection, we believe that we yearn even more for connections to others. However, we also become so afraid of engaging with others about our experience that we keep important parts of ourselves out of connection; that is, we develop strategies for disconnection.

I would add that the capacity to *hold* the relationship, to be in relational flow, lessens as we fall into self-protective strategies. Often when we blame ourselves or others rather than looking at the relational patterns we are moving out of connection.

Relationships which fail to be mutual or adequately honor both people's realities also push toward disconnection. If one person is continually in the position of accommodating to the other's reality, or if contact with one's inner process is distorted in the process of relating to another, the relationship becomes illusory. Resentment about the imbalance of mutuality goes underground, and connection begins to falter.

When we are hurt by someone we love and become angry at them for hurting us but also feel we need them or the relationship and are not sure we can represent our hurt to them, we often close down or withdraw. When we need someone or are dependent on them and feel angry at them, we may also disconnect or push away to try to achieve safety. When mixed emotional states lead us in confusing directions, toward or away from the other person, it is helpful to begin to disentangle what the intertwined feelings are. Often simply naming the different

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feelings as clearly as possible is helpful. Increased clarity of experience is an important part of moving back into connection.

When we hurt someone we love, we often feel shame and chagrin, which can also lead us to disconnect. If the suffering in the person we love is caused by someone else or some other condition, we often feel a sense of compassion, of bearing the sadness with the person. But when we actually cause the pain, there is often a conflicting movement toward and away from. We seek to protect ourselves from seeing the hurt that we cause by withdrawing or defending our action at the same time that we may genuinely feel the pain with the person we have hurt. In such situations it is essential to witness their pain, validate their hurt, take responsibility for our part in creating it, and express sorrow about it. This does not always mean undoing the painful words or actions, as sometimes the pain is inevitable. This is an especially important dynamic for therapists to be aware of, as we often are tempted to disconnect when we fail our clients empathically or hurt them inadvertently (Jordan, 1993).

Shame is another major factor which takes us into isolation. When we feel it is unsafe to bring various aspects of ourselves directly into relationship, profound disconnection results (Jordan, 1989). The belief that no empathic response will be available from another person leads to deep withdrawal and immobilization.

## **Clinical vignette of acute disconnection**

Jane, a 39-year-old teacher, became pregnant in a relationship with her boyfriend whom she did not want to marry. After much exploration she decided she really wanted to have the baby; she felt quite joyful about this, although she also worried about how she would "manage." When she told her family, who are quite conservative and live in a small midwestern town, they were furious and judging. They wondered, "How could you do this to us? What will people think? Do you think *you* could really be a good mother? If you can't think about our feelings, could you at least think about this poor child who will probably be ruined by your selfish need to have a baby?" Jane felt devastated and moved into significant self-doubt and self-blame about this. She felt all alone,

sad, angry, and very needy. Her exaggerated neediness made her feel uncomfortable about turning to anyone for help. She feared she would overwhelm people. Every time she thought of speaking with her friend Cathy about this she felt extreme anxiety. Her attempts to defend against her anxiety led her to become more distanced and closed down. Cathy, sensing this distancing, felt that a "door was slammed" in her face and wondered what she had done to push Jane away or make her angry. She in turn pulled away. Jane noticed Cathy's pain and increasing distance. With difficulty, Jane was able to go to Cathy and tell her she felt sad and lonely to see she had hurt Cathy; she noted she felt disconnected and wanted to try to look at that with Cathy. Cathy responded by saying she had felt hurt by Jane's distancing but that she didn't want to "go away." She wanted to be there for Jane. Jane also acknowledged that she had been feeling what she called "rejection sensitive" and fearful of how "needy" she was. Cathy commented that she too was in a vulnerable place. The two friends began to feel reconnected as Jane began then to tell Cathy about what was behind her original disconnecting. When people feel a need for more care or protection at the same time they feel unsafe, they often develop hypervigilance in order to protect themselves. They look for danger, become supersensitive to rejection, and often defensively distance from the other person in an effort to feel safe or worthy.

While most disconnections are painful, they sometimes serve an important function. That is, we often disconnect in order to keep our truth alive or to maintain a sense of integrity or authenticity. This is akin to Carol Gilligan's (Brown & Gilligan, 1992) notion of political resistance where girls resist letting go of their deep knowledge about relationships when in adolescence the rules change, suggesting they need to suppress their understanding of life. If they do not develop such "political resistance," girls then move out of authentic relationship in order to preserve the illusion of relationship or to fit into the only relationships available to them.

Most chronic disconnections, however, lead to a sense of isolation and ultimately interfere with growth as more and more of our experience gets split off from the flow of relationship. Most change occurs by being able to bring aspects of ourselves into relationship with another person or persons where we get new responses, build new images, and create new actions.

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Fixed, chronic disconnections derail our development, particularly if they contribute to a wariness of new connections. Many severe and chronic disconnections do just that. They leave us with an extreme fear of relationships as well as an extreme yearning for connection; Jean Baker Miller and Irene Stiver (1994) have beautifully addressed this dynamic.

There are clearly situations when people must move out of nonmutual, hurtful relationships. At such times, disconnecting is healthy. But most often such moves must be made with an awareness of the need for other sustaining connections in a person's life. One of the most important skills a person can develop is to be able to discern which are the relationships in which one is safe being open or vulnerable and where one should be appropriately self-protective. I am not advocating a naive, universal opening to others although I wish we lived in a world where that could happen. We do not. But as a culture we need a different balance around an attitude of self-protection and self-enhancement and the ability to be open to being affected, to fostering growth in others, to caring about the building of relationship. Our societal imbalance in the promotion of self-interest has been extremely destructive to relationships.

## Relational awareness

Relational awareness involves the development of clarity about the movement of relationship; this importantly includes an awareness of our patterns and ways of connecting, disconnecting, and transforming the flow from the direction of disconnection to connection. It includes personal awareness, awareness of the other, awareness of the impact of oneself on the other, the effect of other on oneself, and the quality of energy and flow in the relationship itself. Developing relational awareness is enormously complex. It is different from developing self-knowledge or analyzing one's past relationship histories. In relational awareness one moves toward greater clarity of what actually exists in the relationship. It is more akin to being "present with" and looking at one's patterns of relating; one has a modicum of distance and capacity to observe at the same time one is present in the experience. There is an attunement to self, other, and relational processes. Awareness involves a nonjudgmental stance, an ability to notice and observe without becoming totally immersed or caught in the experience. One can learn to see consequences and

sequences of behaviors without moving into paralyzing self-doubt and self-blame.

We get to know our own state and how we deal with it—e. g., "When I'm angry I tend to 'go away' so I don't threaten people or the relationship," or "I push people away indirectly so they don't see my vulnerability. This leaves others feeling hurt or confused."

When people increase their capacity for relational awareness, they dramatically alter their capacity to transform disconnections. They also enhance their ability to move into growth-enhancing relationships and to move toward intimacy, closeness, and an awareness of the primacy of relatedness. Defensive patterns of "turning away" or "against" are transformed into turning "toward" and "moving with."

Relational awareness is not about "analyzing" relationships. It involves an attitude of openness to learning about our relational patterns. It often takes place most creatively in active interaction with others; we also can learn about these patterns in quiet reflection. In order to cultivate relational awareness, one must achieve a kind of steadiness and a sense of the larger perspective. What keeps us out of the relational present of authentic and close engagement? Obstacles to connection include: roles, habit patterns, automatic reactions, dissociation, reactivity rather than responsiveness, and affective overamplification. Some of the areas in which we can usefully focus relational awareness are: the difficulty of dealing with mixed feelings; shame; the need to feel powerful; fear of vulnerability; avoidance of conflict; an overdeveloped tendency to accommodate to the needs or demands of another; overreliance on control and will; the need to be admired; and—importantly—the overdeveloped need to be self-sufficient. Some of these resonate with Karen Horney's (1942) list of neurotic trends.

Teasing out what comes from the past and what comes from the present is also helpful. That is, in current relationships, we are often beset by old patterns or relational images which inevitably lead to distortions and unclarity in our current interactions. The capacity for current awareness drops where violation, fear, and trauma patterns dominate.

Not only do old relational images keep us out of connection but what I call "ego strategies" or investment in "images of who we are" or who we should be take us out of authentic connection and close us down. We become more involved in trying to



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maintain a certain set of beliefs about ourselves or in wishing to convey certain images of ourselves, and this usually takes us out of connection in a profound way. This striving becomes a strait jacket for the person maintaining the image as well as for the other person who will have to give a certain response in order to support the image being conveyed. Little growth can occur in such relationships. This kind of relating occurs in roles, often in job positions, and in fact is often normative and necessary for such relationships. But it only interferes with the more growth-enhancing or close relationships I am speaking about here. You cannot control another person to make her/him be what you want nor to respond in a particular way and be in authentic connection. You can simply represent your feelings or your own ideas and see whether the other person can respond. "Power over" is an imposition, is forceful, and is distorting. One person initiates and directs, and the other person accommodates. Real connection and growth do not happen under such circumstances.

## Transformation

What helps us stay in the struggle for connection? I believe there is something intrinsically satisfying about being in connection. It feels real; it feels healing; it feels safe. Most of us have proverbial, unconscious memories of the sense of closeness and comfort of being held close and feeling at peace. We also have more recent experiences of how good it feels to work through the difficult places in relationships. But it is a struggle, and we need support in our efforts.

Disconnections are inevitable. Empathic failures are inevitable. Hurt feelings and disappointments are inevitable. Acute disconnections can be minor or major; they can hurt a great deal, or they can cause a small loss of energy or decrease in zest. Resilience is the key. Self-empathy and empathy for others can help transform these disconnections and lead to a compassionate attitude in the struggle to stay connected. Essential to the transformation of disconnection is an openness to being moved by the other person. Also essential is an openness to being seen by the other person. Thus we must be able to open ourselves up to being known, to being moved, and to moving another person. We find ways to avoid getting stuck in disconnection; this is at the heart of relational resilience. We must move out of more narrow self-awareness.

Transforming disconnection is not about taking action, doing, fixing, changing, or controlling. It is about dealing with the fear that largely determines people's movement into separation and isolation. Safety in separation is part of the model of separate self; I would suggest instead that real safety occurs in the building of growth-fostering relationships.

The pattern of transformation of disconnection most often involves:

- 1) naming the disconnection in a non-accusatory way. "I just noticed a shift here. Did you feel it also?"
- 2) noticing what was going on when the shift occurred. In therapy this is the "why now?" question.
- 3) examining one's part in the disconnection and taking responsibility for it. "I think I may have pulled away just then," or, "Perhaps I hurt you when I said . . ."
- 4) hearing the other person's sense of what is going on.
- 5) looking together at the possible relational factors that might have contributed to the disconnection. "We've been really out of touch recently and we haven't been taking care of this relationship, have we?"
- 6) acknowledging the relational history. "What resources have we developed for dealing with these painful times."
- 7) putting the disconnection in a larger context. "This present pain is not forever nor is it the most real aspect of the relationship."
- 8) commitment to the transformation of the disconnection and to the ongoing growth-fostering nature of the relationship. Commitment to mutual respect and mutual growth is at the core of healthy relationship.
- 9) re-establishing concern and appreciation for the relationship in addition to caring for the individuals in the relationship. The willingness to explore what limits relationship is essential; it means we must give up our pretensions that we always "do" "good" relationships.

We are all wounded, we are all struggling to be in positive connection. If we try to maintain the image of being accomplished at relationships, then we inevitably move out of the real give-and-take of relatedness. While idealization is appealing, it is not about growth or about being real. Real relationship is staying with what actually is trying to be honest, kind, open, and compassionate with the real-life pain that

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exists everywhere. Instead of judgment, comparison, and distancing in the face of another's pain or in the face of difficulties in relationship, we intend compassion and empathy for ourselves and for the other person. Sharing vulnerability, grief, and suffering is enormously healing in a relationship where we feel trusting and trustworthy. Looking at the things that impede good connection and revealing the blockages that get in our way often opens the way toward reconnection. We cannot always get rid of the blockages to connection, but we can bring awareness to them and bring them into the relationship by communicating about them—and sometimes just doing that does dispel the blockages.

Attention must be paid also to "what holds the relationship." What is the larger context, and how supportive is it of the struggle to stay in connection? Where there is commitment to mutual growth, mutual respect, and the willingness to explore the disconnections and pain in relationship, then there is hope that connection can prevail. When we see someone else as "other"—racially, sexually, or politically—we tend to treat them as an object—as "not I," not someone creating a "we" with "us." This destroys a sense of connection.

Bringing nonjudgmental awareness to ourselves and others is difficult. Often when people point out a problem in us or state that they see something in us we do not like, the response is, "Oh, no. Am I like that? I'm terrible." Or we get defensive and look for flaws in the other to explain their judgment of us. We need to support one another in hearing descriptive feedback so that we do not automatically move to places of shame or self-blame. Learning how others see us is essential to our growth, and being able to provide that for others is also part of expanding relatedness. By this I do not mean catharsis "let it all hang out" with each other. I mean responsible empathic attunement to others where we share authentically but with concern and attention to the effects of our actions and feelings on others and on the relationship.

Different emotional states tend to either guide us toward connection or take us away. Depression takes us out of connection, into an unclear state. Sadness can produce powerful connection if we are able to reach toward others to seek support and comfort (Stiver & Miller, 1988). Similarly, anger can lead to connection as an effort to communicate hurt and to get

some caring response from the other person who is hurting us (Miller, 1982). Rage, however, usually takes us out of connection because the intensity is too great and is often fed by old, unspoken angers; the preoccupation with self-protection leads to a closing down, and people are frightened by rage. Fear can move us toward or away from others; if we are able to turn to others in fear, we can be comforted and learn new ways to be with our fear. It can be deeply moving, soothing, and trust building. Or, in fear, we can move into hiding and distance. Shame, secrets, and inauthenticity clearly take us out of connection.

Therapists, too, must look at how we disconnect or keep people at a distance in order to create some sense of personal safety. Fear so clearly figures in our movement into separation (Jordan, 1993).

As we build relationships, we need to create a conscious history of relational patterns and specifically relational repair. This helps us learn how we have effectively mended torn places in the relationships before. We might construct a relational resilience inventory as well as an inventory of where we are vulnerable to disconnections.

The ability to reconnect, to be resilient in relationship, to move back into connection to see if mutual, growth-enhancing relatedness can be reestablished is one of the most important skills one can develop.

## **Relational awareness groups**

As part of an effort to facilitate the development of relational skills in the last year, I have been co-leading a group called "a relational awareness practice group." It is run by two co-leaders and is a combined didactic and experiential group in which we seek to help people become aware of their relational patterns. We also try to help people communicate their needs, feelings, and concerns effectively and respectfully at the same time they expand their awareness of self, other, and relationship. This is not a catharsis group nor is it a group to analyze where the patterns come from in the past, although we notice when feelings that come from the past take over and make staying in the present difficult. We try to help the women identify their relational resources, strengths, and vulnerabilities. Each group begins with a relational "check-in" process. In this check-in, people state in several sentences where they are emotionally or otherwise and what impact they think their current

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state might have on the other group members. People are encouraged to ask themselves the questions: What do I feel? What do I want? What impact will these have on the other person? What do I need to do to move this relationship in the direction of growth for all of us? What is happening in the relationship right now? What does the relationship need?

We also ask people if they have a relational topic they would like the group to discuss. The co-leaders participate in this check-in, not going into great detail but commenting on their current state insofar as it might impact on the group—e. g., "I'm feeling a bit tired today, so I may seem a little distant," or "I was looking forward to this group a lot, so I may jump in and comment a lot and may possibly crowd people a little." This particular group is made up largely of trauma survivors.

The kinds of connections we work toward in the group are mutually respectful, empathic, and empowering in which each person notices the effect they have on the others and also notes how they are affected by others. Being mindful or attentive to the relationship is the first step towards becoming aware of what needs work and what people want to happen in the relationship. We do not go into detail about people's histories or even current relationships. Most importantly, we want people to see their own relational patterns more clearly, particularly how they move into disconnection or might evoke that in others. At the same time we acknowledge that people often feel the need for disconnection, distancing, or establishing a sense of control over their involvement in the interaction. We also honor the longings, resources, and capacity they have to reconnect and try to build on those.

Often the fear of being open, of being affected by another, of taking in something that is offered leaves us feeling disconnected and isolated. A deep and moving discussion occurred in one of our meetings about how much the women wanted to give to one another and wanted to be there for each other. But they then went on to talk about how hard it was to really let someone else have an impact on them or to ask for help from others. They were just too scared about being vulnerable, open, or receptive. As the conversation went on, one of the women suddenly got a look of amazement on her face and said, "Well, what's really going on here then? We're all saying we want to give to one another, but there's no one willing

to be open to really take in and be affected by what we're giving! So, is anybody really giving to anyone if no one is there to receive it? Is anything really happening?" For this group of trauma survivors, this became a moment of powerful relational awareness. They saw that reparative, loving connection is what they needed but also saw they were too scared to open themselves to it because their sense of need and vulnerability were so great.

During the check-in at a recent group, several people remarked they felt depressed, anxious, and cut off. One woman spoke for the group, "I'm feeling depressed, immobilized, and withdrawn today. I probably won't be able to participate much in the group. I don't want people to take that personally and think I'm angry at them 'cuz I'm not." The isolation in the room was palpable. No one had a topic to talk about. After a short but thick and tense silence, one of the co-leaders suggested that it felt like everyone wanted to be out of the room. But we also knew from our history together that if we could begin to name the feelings, then we might experience a shift out of the isolation. There might be good reason for people to feel a heightened self-protectiveness, but we might explore both the disconnection and the reasons for it to see if there were common threads from which we could learn. One woman, Pat, commented, "Well you know, Connie (another woman in the group) and I had a big fight just before the group started, and some people were there. I think it scared people." Another short but painful silence followed. Then Connie responded, "I just gotta say I blew up and lost it. I'm sorry. I'm not angry now. I'm ashamed." The anxiety in the room lessened. Pat responded, "I don't want to keep this going either. It feels better that you said you were quiet 'cuz you feel bad. I thought you were still mad and ready to pounce, so I thought I'm sure as hell not going to open myself up here." Another member then joined in, "I thought you were both mad and I was going to have to fix it all like I used to in my family. Now, instead, I can just say this is making me so tense. And right now I actually feel a little more okay." One of the co-leaders commented on the process of being able to look at how we are affecting each other and how the tension begins to shift when we are able to check things out with each other. All the details of the fight or the past woundings were not necessary to this discussion nor to achieving more clarity together. But being in the authentic feelings

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was. Moving into disconnection was also seen as a necessary self-protective strategy until the safety of the relational context could be evaluated.

In another group meeting, Carol responded to Diane at one point when Diane was describing a painful interaction that had occurred in another setting by saying, "I don't know what you're talking about." Betty heard this as a distancing, critical response as if Carol were saying to Diane, "It isn't true what you're saying." Betty expressed her anger at Carol. Dottie then said she heard the comment more as curiosity—"Tell me what you're talking about." A discussion ensued, framed in the struggle to stay connected and to learn something about ourselves and others. It did not deteriorate into a standoff, with people venting their anger, distancing, or staying in their isolation and being "right" about what they heard.

Relational awareness allows people to address imbalances, pains, and failures of mutuality before they become too big, before impasses develop. It supports relational resilience. Self-empathy is as important as empathy for the other. To feel competent interpersonally, one must be taken seriously by others. That includes asking for what you want, saying "no" to things you do not want, and learning ways to manage interpersonal conflict. It involves honoring others' needs as well as being respectful of your impact on them. It also involves learning ways to build relationship and honoring the importance of relationship through transforming disconnections. The pattern of opening and closing, transforming disconnections, moving into deeper connection, but then often lapsing into distance is illustrated by some work I have been doing with Beth.

Beth is a successful lawyer who first undertook therapy about 10 years ago to work on anxieties she was experiencing in graduate school and her difficulties getting into a committed relationship with a man. She completed her therapeutic work in three years was doing well in a new marriage with a new baby and a career that was extremely successful and gratifying. But about two years ago she began to experience disturbing dreams, a sense of isolation, sexual withdrawal from her husband, and a nagging sense that something "big" was wrong. She called to resume therapy. She spoke of feeling very cut off and isolated everywhere in her world. In therapy, she began to recover memories of abuse by an uncle and a

general sense of neglect and abandonment in her home. She was indeed profoundly disconnected, often related to people in a distanced inauthentic manner, and felt very unknown and unseen. She described the one exception to her cut-off way of being as her three children with whom she experienced deep connection, warmth, and love. As she contrasted this closeness with the isolation, she felt everywhere else in her life for her whole life, she "got how bad it really had been." At this time in therapy she began to feel intense sadness. But she also began to feel increasing hope about the possibility of feeling more love and closeness in her life with others. As she opened more to others she also began to feel more fear; this is part of the paradox of connection and disconnection which Stiver and Miller (1988) describe. It is a common, dramatic pattern in trauma work; as a person begins to heal and open up, she is thrown into intense fear, often leading to abrupt, spasmodic closing down. In working with trauma this often leads to a roller coaster (Chu, 1992) or whiplash feeling in the treatment. At best she was able to reach out to me or to her husband and take the risk that this relationship could be different from the violating relationships of her past. At worst she moved back into isolation, fear, and self-blame. In response to her, I validated that it really made sense that she wanted to cut herself off, to withdraw and "numb out," given the context in which she existed as a child and the resulting expectations about relationships with which she was left. In therapy her increasing awareness of how awful, dangerous, and isolated her childhood had been contrasted with her hope of the possibility of something different. She reported, "I feel out of it, under water, hazy. I can't tell what I'm feeling." Then she added, "I feel increasingly scared of being hurt and abandoned." Again, I acknowledged her need to move back into disconnection and isolation, knowing that the larger movement is toward connecting and establishing a different kind of relationship. I said that made sense in the past and empathized with the way things were for her as a child. In therapy, I validated the smaller movement back into disconnection and isolation and knew that the larger movement, even represented by her coming back into therapy and being able to turn to me more frequently in her distress, is toward connecting and establishing a different kind of relationship. This means that we look at the differences in the relational context then

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and now (as they exist in the therapy and in her relationship with her husband compared to earlier interactions with parents).

Beth's latest crisis of immobility and numbness came after a couples meeting in which she began to reveal more of herself with her husband, a very new and frightening experience for her. She has been increasing her authentic communication in her therapy, in her marriage, and has started doing it with a new friend who is also an abuse survivor. Each time she takes a step forward, she spirals backward into depression, confusion, immobility, and disconnection. In order to move forward she struggles to stay with the sad edge of loss and anger, of what was not there for her, and how sad that is. I empathize with the necessary movement into disconnection and fear, but I do not see it as the whole picture. In moments of fear and trauma, her capacity for relational awareness drops; anger, blaming of self and other, self-destructiveness, and isolation increase. I can help hold the larger picture of hope and connection. I might add that it helps me as a therapist to recognize the spiraling pattern of connection and disconnection in working through the trauma; otherwise I would tend to personalize and blame myself each time Beth goes into major jolting disconnection. That would undoubtedly lead me to disconnect as well.

It is essential that therapists, too, get to know and take responsibility for our disconnections (Jordan, 1993). It is important in therapy as well as in our lives that we not become hemmed in by idealized expectations of how or who we should be; that includes being careful not to set new standards of relational perfection which none of us can live up to. This attempt only contributes to shame, and shame leads to inevitable disconnection and impasse. We are all struggling to stay in growth-enhancing connection; we are all constantly moving into disconnection. If we build impossible expectations of how we should be as therapists or parents or friends or lovers, we will only be building new places for disconnection, as our shame and disappointment in ourselves will lead us away from others. Getting to know our places of disconnection importantly means developing a compassionate attitude toward our needs to disconnect, our yearnings to connect, and our many imperfections in the journey of connection.

## Discussion Summary

*After each colloquium presentation a discussion is held. Selected portions are summarized here. At this session, Drs. Eldridge, Rosen, Stiver, and Surrey joined Dr. Judith Jordan in leading the discussion.*

**Question:** I'm feeling very oppressed by living and working in systems that do not value relationship. I realized during your talk how much our surroundings either contribute to or interfere with our capacity to form growth-enhancing relationship.

**Jordan:** The context in which we try to build relationships makes a big difference. This society has been organized in a highly individualistic way for a very long time, but I think we are experiencing now an exaggerated effort to break connection. The kinds of connections that have been developing among women and other marginalized groups are threatening to existing power structures. In many of the institutions, people experience a sense of weariness and of being stymied in trying to build connection. It is a hard time politically and socially.

**Eldridge:** I want to echo what you've said regarding the workplace. People are increasingly oppressed in the workplace. There's so much more disconnection than there was even 10 years ago.

**Question:** I'm very concerned about the effects of managed care on the kind of therapy that you are suggesting is most helpful for people.

**Jordan:** In these managed care plans there tends to be an emphasis on a "fix it" mentality, on technique and devaluation of the relationship between therapist and client. If you believe, as we do, that healing occurs in the establishment of connection, these other approaches, driven by economic pressures, often reflect an anti-relational bias. I think as therapists we are going to have to mobilize to resist some of the ways these economic pressures are driving clinical decisions. We also will have to try to respond creatively by exploring ways we can offer more cost-effective treatment. For instance, we have developed some time-limited psychoeducational groups. Some people have experimented with session-limited relational therapy, spread out over time.

**Stiver:** Recently I asked a managed care group if it would be possible to have more sessions with a patient. The response was that the person had come in an acute situation and that had been treated, so anything further was not necessary. If we agree, as Judy noted, that disconnection is the source of

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psychological problems and connection is the path to health, it's an irony that the very thing that will move people toward health is seen as unnecessary. I would hope that there will be more energetic protest in the field.

**Question:** I usually work with women, and recently I've had about four men in my practice. They're all depressed. The relational model fits them so well when they start talking about their sadness, their disappointment, and their shame. A man I saw in the hour before I came here is getting very depressed. Your talk has given me some insight into the shame he's feeling about disconnecting and not knowing how to connect. Sometimes when you sit and listen to men who are really trying to work on these things, there isn't that much difference from women about the pain they're experiencing or what they want.

**Surrey:** In the work on gender dialogue Steve Bergman and I do, we often notice that with an empathic listener men may be able to speak their own experiences. But they often have more difficulty being with another person's experience. They have difficulty expressing relational curiosity, which is really attending to or opening up to the interiority of the other. That turns out to be one of the biggest pieces of work with men: helping them feel comfortable and not intrusive in opening up relationships and turning to the other and asking questions.

**Question:** I wonder if you could talk a little bit about the importance of apologizing as a way to bridge disconnections, in particular why it's so difficult for a therapist to apologize to a client. Could you give an example?

**Jordan:** It's a wonderful question. I think it's urgently important to acknowledge and apologize when, as therapists, we make mistakes or we fail people. It's important to say, "I'm sorry; I didn't understand; I'm sorry I made a mistake; or I'm sorry I was late." I think the kind of response that therapists using more traditional models might have, such as, "Oh, you have some feelings about that?" are not in the service of building connection but seem to serve self-protective distancing on the part of the therapist.

**Rosen:** I say, "I'm sorry," all the time in therapy. Much of my training was about interpretation and nonacknowledgement of my own experience in the therapy relationship. It took me a long time to realize

that when I did something stupid in the therapy, exploring the person's response only led to increasing distance and increasing disconnection. There was also often shame and anger on my part that this person had caught me in my failure. I remember the first time that a patient of mine accused me in a rageful despair of not allowing her to experience the full range of her despair, and she was totally right. I had been squashing it. Part of the reason was that if I gave her room to experience the despair after this much time in treatment, I felt it was a statement of my failure as a therapist. She should be further along, happy, and all that sort of thing. I just said, "You are right. I'm really sorry, and I'm really going to think about that." It became a continuing theme of a real blind spot in me. It really moved my work and treatment along with other people, and it certainly did in my relationship with her too.

**Stiver:** That's also giving up the role of the expert and moving out of the "power over" mode that we are taught and which inevitably has to lead to disconnection because there's such a gap between the two people. People don't feel it's safe to show that they're angry or sad or anything. Therapists participate in that just as profoundly as the people we're seeing in treatment. For those of us who move out of that old model, it's tremendously freeing to be in more authentic connection.

**Jordan:** I think this is part of the demystification of the therapist. As I mentioned, in the relational awareness groups I've been co-leading, the group members have commented over and over again that it has made a real difference to them that the leaders participate in the group check-in process. They say they feel respected and joined by that kind of participation on the part of the leaders. It models bringing yourself into relationship rather than staying "above."

**Question:** How do you deal with the question of how can this relationship be authentic and real when you are being paid to do the work?

**Stiver:** When I was working with an adolescent who said, "You're just seeing me for the money," one of my early supervisors said, "Tell her that caring about her is free, but therapy costs money." We're trained to understand about how psychological problems arise and to try to be responsive. But therapy can't proceed if there isn't real connection

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between the two people. Clients often have a hard time believing that somebody can genuinely be concerned with their well-being.

**Jordan:** I would prefer to participate in a good therapy session than in many of the social situations in which I engage. And I struggle with accepting money for the privilege of sitting with someone while they talk about what's deepest in their hearts and minds. But in our current social/economic systems this is defined as a professional helping relationship. And we also acknowledge that there are roles and responsibilities that belong with each participant in this relationship. They shape the relationship in ways that make it different from other relationships such as friendship. But the caring is deep and real.

**Question:** When you talk about awareness, how much of that is practicing what you know and can't say, and how much of that is actually developing new knowledge that emerges from the relationship?

**Stiver:** I think that both go on. We all have much more awareness than we know, and that gets experienced differently. When we become more relationally aware, as Judy has talked about, we become able to see, name, and often find a way out of stuckness in relational patterns. We are able to become more aware of the other person, to move out of self-preoccupation into some kind of awareness of relationship. I think that's a lot of the work of relational therapy: to increase the awareness of what just happened in the relationship and how might you move in new ways.

**Jordan:** Awareness is largely a function of the relationship. It develops between two or more people. It isn't just one person becoming more perceptive about what's happening. The awareness is created in the movement of relationship.

**Surrey:** When you can be in the "we," the knowledge is greater than one's own knowledge.

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