

Work In Progress

Power and Effectiveness: Envisioning and Alternate Paradigm

Maureen Walker, Ph.D.

Work in Progress

Work in Progress is a publication series based on the work of the Jean Baker Miller Training Institute at the Wellesley Centers for Women. Work in Progress reflects the Institute's commitment to sharing information with others who are interested in fostering psychological well-being, preventing emotional problems, and providing appropriate services to persons who suffer from psychological distress. These publications also reflect the belief that it is important to exchange ideas while they are being developed. Many of the papers are intended to stimulate discussion and dialogue, while others are finished research reports.

Jean Baker Miller Training Institute

Founded in 1995, the Jean Baker Miller Training Institute bases its work on the Relational-Cultural Model of psychological development, which grew out of a collaborative theory-building process led by Jean Baker Miller and her colleagues. The Institute offers workshops, courses, professional trainings, publications, and ongoing projects which explore applications of the relational-cultural approach. At the heart of this work is the belief that the Relational-Cultural model offers new and better ways of understanding the diversity and complexities of human experience. For more information, please visit: www.jbmti.org.

The Wellesley Centers for Women

The Wellesley Centers for Women (WCW) conducts scholarly research and develops sound training and evaluation programs that place women's experiences at the center of its work. WCW focuses on three major areas:

- The status of women and girls and the advancement of their human rights both in the United States and around the globe;
- The education, care, and development of children and youth; and
- The emotional well-being of families and individuals.

Issues of diversity and equity are central across all the work as are the experiences and perspectives of women from a variety of backgrounds and cultures. Since 1974, WCW has influenced public policy and programs by ensuring that its work reaches policy makers, practitioners, educators, and other agents of change.

The Wellesley Centers for Women is the single organization formed in 1995 by combining the Center for Research on Women (founded 1974) and the Stone Center for Developmental Studies (founded 1981) at Wellesley College. For more information, please visit: www.wcwonline.org.

Ordering Information

Work in Progress papers and other publications of the Wellesley Centers for Women (WCW) are available for purchase through the WCW Publications Office. For a complete list of current publications, visit our online catalog at: www.wcwonline.org/publications.

Publications Office - Wellesley Centers for Women
Wellesley College, 106 Central Street, Wellesley, MA 02481
Phone: 781-283-2510 Fax: 781-283-2504

Unless otherwise noted, the authors hold the copyright to their WCW publications. Please note that reproducing a WCW publication without the explicit permission of the author(s) is a violation of copyright law.

Power and Effectiveness: Envisioning an Alternate Paradigm

Maureen Walker, Ph.D.

About the Author

Maureen Walker, Ph.D., is a psychologist with a practice in psychotherapy and anti-racism consultation. Her clinical practice and research projects involve developing links between racial identity development and relational theories to support the growth potential of persons who experience disconnections stemming from marginalization and devaluation within the dominant society. She works at Harvard Business School and is on the faculty of the Jean Baker Miller Training Institute.

Abstract

Relational-Cultural Theory provides a straightforward and elegant definition of power; it is the capacity to produce change. The implication of this framework is that power is the energy of competence in everyday living. However, in a culture stratified along multiple dimensions—race, class, and sexual orientation to name a few—power is associated with hyper-competitiveness and deterministic control. The paper begins by examining the “protective illusions” of the power-over paradigm, where humanity is rank ordered according to perceived cultural value and is stratified into groups of greater than and less than. In addition to exposing the false dichotomies of power-over arrangements, the paper examines the destructive consequences of cultural disconnection, on both the putative winners and the losers. Examples from organizational practice, clinical relationships, and socio-political contexts are used to illustrate the Relational-Cultural Model in action. Specifically, scenarios are presented from the standpoint of the politically disempowered to demonstrate the relational competencies of empathic attunement, authenticity, and accountability that foster healing, resilience, and mutual empowerment.

This paper was originally presented at the 2002 Spring Training Institute sponsored by the Jean Baker Miller Training Institute at Wellesley College.

There is probably a no more straightforward and elegant definition of power than that proposed by Jean Baker Miller: Power is the capacity to produce change (1991). This definition suggests that power is a fundamental energy of everyday living. However, in a culture that valorizes radical individualism (Jordan, 2002), power is associated with hyper-competitiveness, conquest, and might. Power mutates into “power-over,” and is then viewed as the entitlement of the “winners”—those individuals who have attained the social ranking and the material accoutrements that signify value. Such a model is quite impoverished. Envisioning a more inclusive model begins with acts of revelation: bringing to light the stories and experiences of those people who are typically characterized as vulnerable and marginalized, people who are seen as the “losers” in a power-over paradigm. What these stories often reveal are everyday strategies of attunement, empathy, and reciprocity that not only enable survival, but also enlarge capacity for navigating the complex illusions and machinations of power-over social arrangements.

One such story involves my memory of a power negotiation that occurred on an ordinary Saturday morning well over 40 years ago. On this particular Saturday morning, my mother and I walked into downtown Augusta, Georgia to pay the rent on 1131 Summer Street, the three-room clapboard structure that was my home for at least the first ten years of my life. When we entered the Lucky Real Estate office, my mother presented her cash payment (cash she had earned providing domestic service for white families) to the white woman behind the counter.

When my mother counted her cash and put it on the counter, this woman who did not know my mother, pushed it back at her and said, “Mary, you need to go and get some change.” The racial context of this encounter is significant for two reasons. First, only white people—usually women—worked behind

counters in downtown offices in Augusta in the 1950's. Second, although she did not know my mother, any white woman could, and was in fact *expected* to, exercise the entitlement of familiarity, calling my mother by her first name only to signify the difference in their social ranking. Knowing my mother as I do now, I doubt that she even blinked. I do remember her asking very calmly: "Who needs to go and get some change?" I think there were several moments of silence because no one spoke another word. The woman picked up the money, gave my mother proper change and our rent receipt. We then left and went about the business of doing whatever the two of us did on Saturday mornings.

It seems to me that those us who occupy positions of relative privilege have much to learn from those who occupy the bottom strata of the dominant power hierarchy. In fact, the historical failure of mainstream feminist movements has been the manifest and compound exclusion of women subjugated by race and class in the dominant power arrangements. It is from these people that we can draw insight and inspiration for visions of alternative paradigms. The fictional character Janie Crawford is an example of such a woman. In Alice Walker's (1979) poem about this character, she wrote:

*I love the way Janie Crawford
left her husbands, the one who wanted
to change her into a mule
and the other who tried to interest her
in being a queen
a woman unless she submits is neither a mule
nor a queen
though like a mule she may suffer
and like a queen pace
the floor. (Good Night 18)*

It occurs to me that a part of my attraction to Janie Crawford (and women like her) is that she subverts the restrictive fictions of a power-over paradigm, choosing how she will relate to a social structure that would limit her life to dichotomous choices.

From the founding concepts to the more recent formulations, Relational-Cultural Theory has grappled with issues of power. I consciously use the word grapple because it connotes collective struggle, political risk, and interpersonal discomfort. Jean Baker Miller (1987) laid the foundation for this struggle in her book, *Toward a New Psychology of Women*, when she stated that:

In most instances of difference, there is also a factor of inequality—inequality of many kinds of

resources, but fundamentally of status and power. These inequalities, which are often natural and essential, all too often mutate into power-over relationships...relationships in which there is no assumption that the goal of the relationship is to end the inequality.

Miller elaborates on this point by commenting that in fact, quite the reverse happens. The dominant group is the model for "normal" relationships. It then becomes "normal" to treat those with less power destructively to obscure the truth of that destructiveness, and to oppose any movement toward equality. In most contemporary social structures, including but not limited to modern work places, rigid stratification of power not only looks normal, it begins to feel necessary. Thus the everyday mystifications that support distorted power arrangements achieve operational credibility, and through practices of either cultural extortion or seduction, they cloud our vision and enervate our capacity for productive critique. In other words, through either the threat of exclusion and/or annihilation, or the illusory promise of inclusion and/or protection, the dominant power arrangements co-opt the talents of the most well-intentioned among us in order to maintain and reproduce their own interests. They do so by quieting the voices of opposition—the voices that would question the foundational values upon which hierarchical power rests.

Elizabeth Janeway (1980) describes our cultural legacy of power similarly:

Power, as we have seen it, involves mastery, with its connotations of individual might, heroic stature, lone suffering that must win, perhaps, a solution born of the mind of a single genius who has achieved a new vision.

Using a term coined by Bernard Loomer, Rita Nakashima Brock (1993) writes that "unilateral power" presupposes an ego-centered, self-contained person, one who aims at creating the largest determining effect on others, while being minimally influenced by the other. Not coincidentally, this model of power is totally congruent with the model that traditional psychology sets forth as "the healthy self," a self of firmly-bounded independence guided by its internal locus of control (Jordan, 1991). This paradigm of power, like this paradigm of self, is grounded in either-or choices. This paradigm of power—like this paradigm of self—is based upon what Karen Brodtkin (1998) calls the "social binary," where "difference" devolves into better than or worse

than and “different from” is translated as “opposition to.” In this system, power is a commodity to be owned, increased, and used over and against those who threaten its reproduction. People who accrue more of this commodity are deemed more valuable. In such a paradigm, power functions to cement into place inequality between dominants and subordinates.

Given that legacy, it is small wonder that people who have been historically marginalized (e.g., women) are often observed to be uncomfortable with power. Contrary to traditional wisdom, this discomfort has less to do with women’s inadequacies and more to do with the flaws of the dominant paradigm.

Miller (1991) has noted that dominating power, or what we call “the power-over factor” results in women equating power with selfishness, destructiveness, and ultimately abandonment. However, I would also submit that in part, ambivalence about power can lead to reproducing its most destructive arrangements and consequences.

It was my fascination with notions of power and fear of success that led to my doctoral dissertation research. I was fascinated largely because I was drawn to the work of Karen Horney and because I witnessed the ravages of ambivalence and relational distortion in the lives of very successful women all around me. I was interested to know what happened in women’s intimate relationships when they are publicly perceived as powerful. Once in a chance conversation with a faculty member I mentioned the name of an African American woman on my committee. He commented with undisguised derision that this woman probably made an excellent committee member. “After all,” he said, “she managed to get tenure, but she still goes home alone every night and eats cold cereal.” More recently, young professional women commented on a national news magazine show that they took great care to hide the fact that they attended prestigious graduate school of management if they hoped to meet potential dating partners. The power-over culture renders false dichotomies, reducing and constricting the range of human potential. This paradigm offers the possibility to dominate or be dominated; to be successful or to be alone; to be mule or queen.

To envision an alternative paradigm is to reject the false dichotomies of the dominant paradigm in favor of a more complex, fully inhabited experience of relationship.

Consistent with Miller’s assertion that power is the capacity to facilitate movement, Brock (1993) wrote in *Journeys by Heart* that persons in our society feel present, alive, and sustained in the world through

power—power to influence and participate in shaping the world. Power, she maintains, is a basic human reality precisely *because* we are related to each other. If the goal of relationship is movement and creativity, then embracing power is a necessary function. To disavow power is not an option. The option is to choose how to relate *to* and *through* the power that one has.

To disavow power is to disavow relational accountability. In fact, disavowal and denial are preferred tactics for protecting the status quo in power-over arrangements. By suppressing the conflict that could potentially transform the infrastructure of power, and by obscuring the reality of its tactics, these arrangements continually reproduce their own interests. An example from the workplace illustrates the point. A new manager was assigned to a department in which the relationships at their best could be described as contentious. She began her first meeting by announcing the new departmental norms: trust, mutual respect, and open communication. As this example suggests, good intentions don’t automatically translate into good use of power. The goals and intentions may in fact be noble or benign. However, when motives toward deterministic control lie at the base of those intentions, movement toward clarity and mutuality in relationship will be compromised.

Brock (1993) maintains that it is for this reason that we should turn to the vulnerable to study power, that is, to turn to those who have least access to cultural commodities or affirmation to study power. Limiting our attention to those who are perceived as strong, the benefactors and the beneficiaries of the dominant paradigm, can lead to a distorted view of power. I am reminded of a group exercise called “The Privilege Walk” that those of us who have traveled the diversity circuit have probably encountered. In this exercise, participants get to take steps forward or backward depending upon their relationship to a number of socially constructed factors: gender, physical ability, location in the economic structures, etc. Steps forward represent participation in arenas of privilege, while steps backward represent areas of disadvantage. Obviously as the game progresses, those participants with compounded privilege (e.g., white, male, upper-class, heterosexual, physically able, etc.) are so far ahead that they can literally only see what’s in front of them. The Saturday morning encounter in the Lucky Real Estate office also richly illustrates this point. My mother worked as a domestic for \$20 a week. At that time, she had neither property, nor education, nor marriage to a man—none of the cultural

accoutrements that would validate her worth as a human being. She only had that moment in relationship—a moment in which she chose to fully inhabit her aliveness and her dignity.

My mother's and my economic survival and physical safety depended upon her attunement to the relational cosurround.n relationship to my mother, the woman behind the desk was the face of power. My mother had to be aware of her standing in relationship to the woman, where the woman stood vis-à-vis her own boss, and consequences of aggravated conflict with the woman. In this particular power context, the choices would appear to be limited: to succumb to humiliation at the hands of another woman who was trying to put her in her place or to compound her victimization by indulging fantasies of domination. Either choice would have been a strategy of profound disconnection. To paraphrase an idea put forth by bell hooks (2000) in *Margin to Center*, to adopt the values of the dominant power paradigm is to impoverish our choices. Karen Kollias (1975) goes on to explain:

While middle-class models of power, have primarily been white men, lower- and working-class women, especially non-white women, have seldom been able to depend on someone else for their decisions and maintenance. The process of taking active control over their lives and influencing those close to them has given them a lifetime of experience with decision-making of the most basic nature: survival.

To make visible the experiences of marginalized women in exploring the complex potentialities of power is to enact the feminist principles of relationship and a reversal in our scholarship: to create theory “from the ground up.”

Miller (1987) echoed these principles when she asserted that dominant, deterministic power obscures the realities of relationship. It effects the appearance of lone, individualistic action when, in fact, action is supported by an entire system. Fletcher, Jordan, and Miller (2000) explained that these supports are interwoven in the very fabric of being and are thereby invisible. All power, including destructive power, is created by and depends upon relationship. When we believe the lie of lone individualism, women—and all people who do not have access to the invisible supports—are left feeling deficient, or are somehow labeled less competent or less committed in systems where power distortions are the norm.

A few decades ago, the self-help industry set out to rectify this deficiency by producing a spate of publications all designed to help women become

better, more enthusiastic mimics of the mythical, self-contained (self-made) man and exercise some version of mythical self-contained power. The shelves were filled with such titles: everything from *Games Your Mother Never Taught You* and *The Cinderella Complex to Dress for Success*. Recently, I have seen at least two popular magazines urging women to mimic men in order to wrest power and control in their work lives. This advice about hoarding power was dispensed not only to women engaged in business enterprises but also to those of us in mental health professions. In one videotaped session after another, students are admonished not to engage in power struggles with their clients, with simultaneous warnings about the dire consequences that would ensue should we ever leak our power out of the therapeutic frame to the client. In other words, we were taught to win by pretending that we were not engaged in battle. We were taught to engage power by obscuring reality and lying—I think even or perhaps especially—to ourselves. The paradigm of hierarchical, ego-bounded power is grounded in reactive fearfulness of zero-sum choices, in which we must gain power-over to avoid being overpowered. Such power cannot be embraced; it can only be temporarily extorted.

Envisioning an Alternative Paradigm

Two questions that support the process of envisioning an alternative paradigm of power are the following:

1. If power is a fundamental energy of relationship, how does power look when used in service of zest, clarity, mutuality, and affirmation of connection?
2. How might our relationship with power help us to more fully inhabit our lives?

Brock (1993) suggests that we begin by thinking of power as ambiguous and open-ended. She speaks of power as processes that create and sustain relationship; she also describes power as bonds that are created and sustained by our relational selves.

Relational Conflict

A telling indicator of how we embrace power is how we engage conflict. Which leads to another founding principle of Relational-Cultural Theory: that conflict is necessary for growth (Miller, 1987). Under the power-over paradigm, the dominant group moves expeditiously to suppress conflict precisely because its interests are served when the status quo can be represented as consensus. The oppressed group might

likewise participate in this arrangement through a variety of disconnection strategies: from mimicking the postures and practices of the dominant group or by disavowing their own power and relevance in relationship. Again, these are strategies of disconnection that result from accepting the reductionist terms of the power-over paradigm. To embrace power from a relational perspective is to enlarge the terms of engagement. Most often, it means creating a new choice out of the dichotomized options.

Combining “Opposites”

Let me share a case in point. In one of her early talks, Irene Stiver (1991) recounted an incident in which she tried to discuss an issue that for her was quite emotionally charged with a male colleague. As the conversation wore on, the intensity of her feelings grew. The more intense her feelings, the more agitated, unavailable, and dismissive he became. She eventually decided to take a different tack. She stripped the emotional color from the content and coolly recited the facts, to which he exclaimed, “Well why didn’t you say so?” He went on to chide her for “coming on like a witch on a broom.” Stiver pointed out that her emotion was a very important part of her content; yet, the incident is an all too familiar rendering of the dichotomous choices offered up by patriarchal power paradigms. One is either rational or emotional, professional or (the word that most expeditiously silences most women) unprofessional. This incident poignantly illustrates Jordan’s (1991) assertion that underlying the prevailing models of power is the belief that affect is incompatible with cognitive effectiveness. Further, cognition is not only different from affect; it is superior and in opposition to affect. For that reason, women come to believe that emotions are to be hidden, disposed of, or at the very least neutralized.

A recent conversation with a client (let’s call her Ellie) serves to illustrate this point. Ellie is Ivy League educated with a degree in business; she is also a woman with psychiatric disabilities. She has spent the last six years of her life working in various clerical “temp” assignments. In describing an encounter with her supervisor over a missed deadline, she commented that she felt inept at explaining a technical process to her impatient supervisor. Ellie was very aware that positionally she was the least powerful, most expendable member of the team. When I asked her how she felt when the supervisor approached her with an impatient, accusatory tone, she at first said she didn’t know. Eventually she was able to name her

feelings of guilt, annoyance, and embarrassment. She then resumed talking about how inadequate she felt trying to explain herself. I then asked her how she felt about that at the time. She immediately said, “I don’t think I felt anything, but I believe I knew I had a right to them.” I then asked: “If you can imagine your feelings as a physical object, what would it be?” Eventually she said her feelings were rather like a wall. I asked if we could imagine her feelings as a door, an opening through which to reach another person. She immediately responded that she would never want the supervisor to know that she felt guilty. “So your guilty feelings—and the others—could potentially endanger you in some way?” “Absolutely.” The conversation went on: “It’s pretty hard to feel friendly toward some aspect of yourself that could imperil you?” “Right...I try to hide them right away.” In her desperation, the only solution she could imagine was to disconnect from her feeling-thoughts—and after years of socialization, this happened almost automatically.

As we talked, it was clear that this woman felt trapped in a dichotomy. The big question, the *only* question this dichotomy allowed her, was should she or should she not *express* her feelings in a professional setting. Following from that dichotomy is a series of corollary falsehoods. For example, that there is only one way to experience and express frustration, guilt, sadness, or excitement; that frustration causes outburst; that sadness equals weeping; that excitement creates frenzy.

We decided that one way to enlarge her operational space was to include more options; the question then became how I will relate to all of the feelings I’m having. She was able to stay connected to her feeling-thoughts and begin to generate options out of them. She decided that there was something essentially true, meaningful, and useful in each of her feelings, and that it was actually the *conflict*, her encounter with her supervisor, that raised those realities to light. Her supervisor, first an antagonist, became a potential ally. She then came up with an action plan for future encounters: first, to breathe and if not welcome her feelings to at least treat them politely as one might an unexpected guest; to acknowledge the supervisor’s concerns; to address the problem in whatever way seems appropriate; and to invite suggestions. In many ways, Ellie was learning to embrace power by combining opposites. She recognized that the restrictive categories of the dominant paradigm that kept her from fully inhabiting her experience also restricted her range of motion and action in relationship. She decided to

engage conflict by trying on the role of what Harriet Rubin (1998) calls the “collaborative antagonist.” From a place of connection with her own feeling-thoughts, Ellie felt empowered to risk empathic attunement with supervisor. And from that place of mutual empathy, she was more open to the kind of learning that facilitated both her own growth and the accomplishment of organizational goals.

Learning to engage collaborative conflict is critical to the relational exercise of power. Moreover, the context of collaborative conflict holds rich potential for exercise of power as energy, strength, and effective interaction.

Choosing Relational Accountability

I have often spoken of a conflictual situation that occurred in my work life a few years ago. In brief, I was a part of a reorganization effort in which several new members were brought into the department. While I was the senior member of the team, I was not its leader and was feeling quite frustrated. I was being thwarted in my efforts to make the kinds of contributions that I was capable of and, in my view, *obliged* to make.

Once when someone asked me how I felt about my new team, I responded that *I felt like a lobster in a boiling pot*. The symbol speaks volumes—primarily about the relational images I carried into conflict and the strategies of disconnection I employed that served to exacerbate the distortions and hostilities thus foreclosing opportunities for movement. As relational images function to explain self, other, the purposes and the possibilities for relationship, a lobster that’s already in a boiling pot has a fairly certain outcome. In spite of all of the clamoring and clanging about, at some point it’s certain it’s going to be somebody’s dinner.

These images may then function to support a stance of victimness that justifies lack of relational accountability. Having declared myself the victim in this situation, I felt justified in some of my more clangorous “assertions.” Had I fully internalized the lessons from my mother, I might have chosen differently—for to behave clangorously in most organizations is almost to ensure that you will become someone’s dinner.

Choosing Mutual Empowerment

To engage in collaborative conflict is to relinquish any claim on the illusion of victory or power over another being. When the focus remains on mutual empowerment, there is little room for the instant

gratification of tit-for-tat interactions. In other words, engaging in relational conflict requires relearning how to breathe, to reflect, and to connect with feeling-thoughts *before* attempting to influence the other person. It also means—and this is crucial—allowing oneself to be moved or influenced by another. (Recall the masterful, autonomous and bounded self resists external influence.)

Clearly under conditions of inequitable power and domination, the notion of mutual impact can feel quite threatening. In no way do I wish to minimize the oppression that many people in the world endure by blithely suggesting that they open themselves to being influenced by their oppressors. I am suggesting that those of us who do not live with the daily threat of subjugation and annihilation have more choices than the limited power-over paradigms would have us believe.

I think again of my mother’s quiet but forceful query which sought not to obliterate the woman behind the desk, but to subvert the power paradigm that defined my mother as an inferior being. Moreover, my mother refused to indulge those strategies of disconnection that ultimately result in self-obliteration. I am convinced that my mother made use of what Elizabeth Janeway (1980) calls the power of disbelief. She refused to believe the humiliating lies of the power-over paradigm; lies that defined her as less than human, unworthy of respect, or as Walker’s (1919) character put it, “one of the mules of the world.” I am also convinced that she gave the woman an opportunity to relinquish her image of the proper relationship between a white and a black woman, and the opportunity to pay more attention to the actual relationship she was living in the moment.

Amplifying Difference to Expand the Relational Space

The radical notion in the practice of relational power is that rather than constricting the antagonist to the role of adversary, it possible to engage conflict by embracing the difference, by engaging the point of view that the antagonist represents (Rubin, 1998). In *Margin to Center*, bell hooks speaks eloquently to this notion when she comments that women need the experience of working through conflict. Our socialization into the power-over paradigm would have us believe that in conflict our options are limited to victimizing or destroying. Often, because of our fear of intractable disconnection, we sabotage our chances for sustainable solidarity by offering instead the illusion of support.

The power-over paradigm would have us rush to common ground before fully engaging the rich potentialities of our differences. Interestingly, some of the more recent research on negotiation practices suggests that the rush to common ground results in an impoverished negotiation. To quote one management pundit, “rushing to common ground leaves way too much money on the table.” The somewhat counter-intuitive notion is that amplifying differences can serve to enrich the relationship and unleash collaborative powers that might otherwise have remained constrained. From either side of the inequality there is the notion that any challenge to the *status quo* can only be dangerous.

The practice of relational conflict requires renunciation of the usual terms of power in that the antagonist is valued for her difference (however awkwardly it might be packaged), is listened into fuller voice, and encouraged to engage in deeper connection.

Practicing Supported Vulnerability

Relational conflict allows and is supported by the practice of courage in vulnerability. (I’m intrigued by the notion that within *some* contexts, we might practice softening ourselves for conflict instead of bracing ourselves for conflict...staying in the relationship connected to our own voice and as Jordan (2002) suggests “listening the other into voice.”) A central tenet of Relational-Cultural Theory is that humans learn and grow through action in relationship by staying present, alive, and connected in the present moment, a place of profound vulnerability. I recently listened to a talk in which the speaker suggested that most organizations expect the employees to function like stealth fighters: steeled-strength, silent, functional, and, above all, invulnerable. The irony, according to Thomas (2002), is that it is in our vulnerability that we find our growing edge.

Practicing the Power of Naming

In addition to relational conflict, one of the practices that subverts the restrictive fictions of the power-over paradigm is the practice of complaint. The dominant powers attempt to suppress complaint, by any means necessary, but most often through humiliation and shaming (After all, we are told nobody likes a whiner). To complain, to publicly admit injury or weakness or harm is to disrupt the *status quo*. Miller (1987) calls this naming of injury “an act of vast exposure.”

No one more dramatically embodies this principle

than a woman named Mamie Bradley. Mrs. Bradley was a black mother whose son Emmet Till was murdered while vacationing in Mississippi because he allegedly whistled at a 27-year-old white woman. As the reports go, the woman’s boyfriend and his friends shot 15-year-old Emmet in the head, tied a 70-pound block around his neck, and threw him into the Tallahatchie River. When his body was returned to his mother, she opened the coffin and wept publicly on the platform of a Chicago train station. Instead of hiding the ugliness, pain, and horror of what happened, she chose another course. She allowed journalists to take photographs of his mutilated body. She delayed the funeral for days so that thousands of people could visit the funeral home and “see what had been done to her boy.”

Hers was a powerful act of resistance in a culture that would shame her into hiding and silence. Many were moved to action as a result of seeing the photographs of the mutilated corpse and hearing his mother talk. Mamie Bradley decided to go back to school. In her own words: “my burning thing, the thing that has come out of Emmet’s death is to learn until your head swells.” She made a clear distinction between resistance and hatred. She went on, “I did not spend one minute hating my son’s killers; I did not wish them dead; I did not wish them in jail. If I had to, I could take their children and raise them as my own. “ In the face of unspeakable violation and heartbreak, she refused to be shamed into silence and isolation. She refused to bear the shame of a shameless culture. She enveloped herself in community, and in so doing gathered the courage to expand her practice of community to larger and larger circles—to the extent of including her son’s acquitted killers.

Under conditions of extreme domination and the threat of death, people throughout the ages have found ways to embrace an alternative model of power. Consider, for example, the mothers of the disappeared in Latin America. These are the women who met in dark churches, refusing to submit to the isolation imposed by a violent, oppressive, militaristic regime. These are the women who marched silently in public plazas wearing the names of their disappeared children embroidered on their shawls. Their strategies exemplify one version of alternative practice called “defecting in place.” Coined by Kathleen Fischer (1999), defecting in place is both a strategy and a metaphor signifying a departure from the old ways of thinking and relating, while being present in a whole new way. It is occupying a space within the parameters of the old structure and filling it with

alternative community. Like the mothers of the disappeared, women who defect in place stay connected to their feeling-thoughts, and thereby increase the possibilities for connection with others. They come together to experience and refine an alternative power, one that is much closer to love.

To embrace an alternative power is to relinquish any fantasies of happy endings. The *status quo* works ceaselessly through a variety of means to perpetuate itself, and it does not tolerate disruption well. Ours is a culture that codifies identities, rank orders those identities by worth, and dispenses prizes—both real and illusory—based on compliance with the designated roles. It should come as no surprise then that opposition to alternative power comes in many faces, shapes, and genders. We often fail to recognize the operation of dominating, deterministic power because it carries the faces of those nearest to our hearts. It sometimes bears faces that look much like our own. In other words, in subverting the dominant patriarchal paradigm, the adversary we encounter is not always the adversary we expect. It is often the case that the persons most opposed to an alternative paradigm are the very persons who are subjugated in power-over systems. Such reactivity is predictable when understood as an expression of the relational paradox. Safety seems to reside in the illusion of connection, in not risking conflict that might upend the ordered arrangements of the *status quo*, particularly when those arrangements provide a modicum of privilege over and against others.

Envisioning an alternative paradigm of power often occasions for taking leave. When it is clear that a disconnection is intractable, the only reasonable response may be to leave the relationship. To quote Rubin (1998):

When you have tried everything, and your opponent remains an adversary, walk away. It is the only way to keep your spiritual and emotional initiative for another day.

Chronic, deadening disconnection is characterized by a perpetual lack of mutuality. There is no possibility for growth-enhancing connection or mutual empowerment. Under those conditions, to walk away is to make a bold claim on renewal and relational possibility.

For much of my inspiration, I rely on the tradition of song. In American black tradition there is a spiritual entitled *Go Down, Moses*. “Go down, Moses. Tell Old Pharaoh to let my people go...” Tell Old Pharaoh to free the enslaved, the oppressed. In speaking to conditions of 20th and 21st century enslavement, singer

Roberta Flack (1971) exhorted the oppressed to let Pharaoh go. In her song, *Go Up, Moses*, Flack offered a brilliant insight into the manipulative dependency of dominating power. She sang that Pharaoh doesn’t want or value you, but he needs you. Without you, there is no Pharaoh.

Faced with the manipulative dependencies and the false prizes of the power-over paradigm, the greatest challenge is at times to let Pharaoh go. To let Pharaoh go is to take responsibility for examining the degree to which we have internalized the values of the power-over paradigm, creating an inclination to dominate and control others. To let Pharaoh go is to claim our competencies, to nurture our capacities, and to embrace accountability to a new paradigm of power in relationship.

Closing Comments

I would like to close with a meditation on power taken with some degree of license from the words of Marianne Williamson (1996). I invite you to envision yourself fully inhabiting your competence, your dignity, and your power—and to call in witnesses, a community of allies to bear witness to your process, such as Mamie Bradley, the mothers of the disappeared, etc.:

*Our deepest fear is not that we are inadequate.
Our deepest fear is that we are powerful beyond
measure.*

*We ask ourselves who am I to be brilliant, talented,
fabulous?*

Actually, who are you not to be?

Your playing small does not serve the world.

*There is nothing enlightened or relational about
shrinking so that other people won’t feel insecure.*

Shrinking is a strategy of disconnection.

*As we let our own light shine, we unconsciously give
other people permission to do the same.*

**We encourage and are encouraged toward growth
in connection.**

References

- Brock, R. N. (1993). *Journeys by heart: A christology of erotic power*. New York: Crossroads Press.
- Dorn, J., Flack, R., & Jackson, J. (1971) *Go Up, Moses*. [Recorded by Flack, R.]. On *Quiet Fire* [CD]. New York: Atlantic Records.
- Fischer, K. (1999). *Transforming fire: Women using anger creatively*. Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press

-
- Fletcher, J., Jordan, J. & Miller, J. (2000). Women and the workplace: Applications of psychodynamic theory. *The American Journal of Psychoanalysis*, 60(3), 243-261.
- hooks, b. (2000). *Feminist theory: From margin to center* (2nd ed.). Cambridge, MA: South End Press.
- Janeway, E. (1980). *Powers of the weak*. New York: Knopf.
- Jordan, J. V. (1991). Empathy and self boundaries. In J. Jordan, A. Kaplan, J. Miller, I. Stiver, & J. Surrey (Eds.). *Women's growth in connection*. New York: Guilford Press.
- Jordan, J. V. (2002, April). *Courage in connection: Working with vulnerability*. Paper presented at the Harvard Learning from Women Conference co-sponsored by Harvard Medical School/Cambridge Hospital and the Jean Baker Miller Training Institute, Boston, MA.
- Kollias, K. (1975). Class realities: Creating a new power base. *Quest*, 1, (3), 28-43.
- Miller, J. B. (1986). *Toward a new psychology of women*. (2nd ed.). Boston: Beacon Press.
- Miller, J. B. (1991). Women and power. In J. Jordan, A. Kaplan, J. Miller, I. Stiver, & J. Surrey (Eds.), *Women's growth in connection*. New York: Guilford Press.
- Rubin, H. (1998). *The princess: Machiavelli for women*. New York: Dell Books.
- Stiver, I. (1991) Work inhibitions in women. In J. Jordan, A. Kaplan, J. Miller, I. Stiver, & J. Surrey (Eds.), *Women's growth in connection*. New York: Guilford Press.
- Thomas, D. (2002). Unpublished symposium comments, Harvard University, February 6, 2002.
- Walker, A. (1979). Janie Crawford in *Good night, Willie Lee, I'll See You in the Morning*. San Diego: Harvest/Harcourt Brace and Janovich.
- Williamson, M. (1996). *A return to love: Reflections on the principles of a course in miracles*. New York: HarperCollins.