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## Work In Progress

### What Do We Mean by Relationships?

Jean Baker Miller, M.D.

## Work in Progress

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# What Do We Mean By Relationships?

Jean Baker Miller, M.D.

## **About the Author**

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## **Abstract**

*Using a concrete illustration, this paper explores the characteristics of growth-fostering relationships. It proposes that such relationships lead to an increase in "zest" (or "vitality"), empowerment, knowledge, worth, and sense of connection with others. An examination of the interactions in growth-fostering relationships suggests that the essential feature is the interplay of mutual empathy created by both (or all) participants.*

*This paper was presented at a Stone Center colloquium in 1986.*

The purpose of these colloquia is to provide a place for exploration of new formulations about women's psychological development. I believe that this exploration helps us to understand men's development as well, and therefore enlarges our comprehension of everyone's experience.

One of the themes which has run through this series is the examination of the sense of relatedness in women's lives. It is certainly not the only topic we have covered, but it has been one that many of us see as central. To summarize this theme very briefly, it is the view that women's sense of personhood is grounded in the motivation to make and enhance relatedness to others. We observe that women tend to find satisfaction, pleasure, effectiveness and a sense of worth if they experience their life activities as arising from, and leading back into, a sense of connection with others. This view differs in its basic premise from most current psychological theories which tend to center on the development of a more separated sense of self.

Over the past few years we have examined women's growth within connections in a number of ways, for example in new delineations of such topics as empathy, dependency, power, anger, depression, models of treatment, and sex of therapists. We have discussed black women's history of living and working within the tradition of close ties to family and community, and the possible implications for women of other minority groups. We have considered women's development at certain ages in life, such as infancy, early childhood, adolescence, early adulthood, and early motherhood. We have also discussed implications of this approach for women in the workplace and for women's intellectual development, at least in the college years.

There are many more aspects to be addressed and many questions to be posed. One set of questions which has arisen in our discussions here might be

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summarized in the questions: If you talk so much about relationships, what about each person's need to develop as an individual? Doesn't each individual have to take an active part in life, not just sort of sit around relating? Doesn't the individual have to be self-motivated, self-propelled, or self-determined?

I believe the answer is that each person becomes a more developed and more active individual only as s/he is more fully related to others. I think, too, that there is no such thing as "self-motivation," but there is the ability to act which emerges from constructive processes within relationships. Also, there is no such thing as full self-determination, but we can and do play a central part in our own life — and in others' lives.

Such statements require more explanation, and that requires a better definition of what we mean by a relationship. The word is common and has been used to mean many different things both within and outside of the psychological disciplines. Perhaps we should begin to use more specific words.

I find that I can think about what we mean by relationships by asking first: What kinds of relationships lead to the psychological development of the people in them? That is the topic I'll try to address tonight.

The next question would be: What kinds of relationships lead to the reverse? That is, what kinds of relationships diminish or destroy people, lead to trouble, and lead to what is eventually called "pathology"? We can take up that topic another time.

To talk about growth-promoting relationships we should start with the overall societal context that determines the kinds of relationships that are likely to occur for anybody, and specifically for people of each sex, class, and race. However, I'm going to start at a much more concrete level, and merely mention in passing that I don't think our culture provides a good overall "relational context" for anyone. Nor does our society provide well for most of us to learn a "relational mode" of living and acting. This is basic to everything (Miller, 1976, 1984).

In this discussion, I will draw heavily on the concept of empathy as Judith Jordan (1984) has described it. Jordan has characterized empathy as a cognitive and emotional activity in which one person is able to experience the feelings and thoughts of another person and simultaneously is able to know her/his own different feelings and thoughts. She states that empathy requires a high level of cognitive and emotional integration, in contrast to past notions of empathy as a mysterious, intuitive, or even regressive process.

Surrey (1984) has directed attention to the question of how people learn this ability and to the central place of "mutual empathy" in all psychological development. Further, she has begun a delineation of the key processes in psychological development when seen as "development within relationship" — which is where all psychological development occurs. She highlights three key elements: the development of empathic abilities, the developmental process of mutual empathy, the resultant emergence of mutual empowerment and self-knowledge. Empowerment and self-knowledge follow from the experience of mutual empathy. As Surrey described mutual empathy, "In this experience, 'being with' means 'being seen' and 'feeling seen' by the other and 'seeing the other' and sensing the other 'feeling seen.'"

Intrinsic to development within relationships is Surrey's concept of "relationship authenticity." She described it as "the challenge of relationship which provides the energy for growth — the need to be seen and recognized for who one is and the need to see and understand the other with ongoing authenticity." Likewise, Surrey has proposed the concept of the motivation "to take care of the relationship(s)." This is another new formulation which shifts the center of emphasis to the relationship itself.

Surrey suggests that the individual develops a sense of "response/ability" rather than "agency" or "autonomy." By this she means that action and empowerment emerge in the context of the relational process. Each person feels empowered by the experience of mutual empathy and also develops an enlarging sense of a sound and knowledgeable basis for action. Relationships grounded in mutuality do not lead to an increase in the activities of one individual, alone, but to the empowerment of all the people involved.

In this discussion, I will try to carry forward an exploration of these concepts within the framework which Surrey has proposed. However, I will focus a bit more on the question of how these processes actually lead to the development of each individual. Later in this year's colloquium series, Jordan and Surrey will continue the exploration of the concept of mutuality and mutually empowering relationships.

### **Growth-fostering relationships**

We can begin by asking: In those relationships in which we see what appears to be psychological growth, what do we see happening? As a start, I'll suggest some of the phenomena that I think we can observe. I've listed at least five "good things."

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Each person feels a greater sense of “zest” (vitality, energy).

Each person feels more able to act and does act.

Each person has a more accurate picture of her/himself and the other person(s).

Each person feels a greater sense of worth.

Each person feels more connected to the other person(s) and feels a greater motivation for connections with other people beyond those in the specific relationship.

The sum of this is that each person has increased psychological resources in these five dimensions. These features could be stated in different ways. They all can be subdivided further. This is just one way of outlining some of the important aspects. I will describe them more fully in a moment. (I must say, however, that if all of these things happened to all of us everyday throughout childhood and in all of our work and personal relationships as adults, we wouldn't have to worry about much else.)

What goes on within a relationship to produce these “good things”? To get at that, we have to look at the flow of forces within the interactions between people. Let us take one concrete example. This is an example of adults, but I believe that the essential processes occur in children's development, too. A discussion of children's growth requires attention to additional dimensions because of the differing levels of the child's abilities at each age; thus, an illustration from adult life allows for brevity.

This is a moment in a relationship between two people. If we were considering the totality of a relationship, it would be necessary to describe its larger context and specific history. I'm using this illustration here as a way of describing growth-fostering interchanges. In reality, relationships are made of thousands of interchanges. In using an example of two people, I do not mean to emphasize dyadic relationships. Again, a description of a two-person interaction can be briefer than a description of an interaction among larger numbers of people.

A woman, Ann, has just heard from her friend and co-worker, Emily, that Emily may have a serious blood disease. Ann is telling her friend Beth about this. Let us say that Beth knows Emily but is not as close a friend as Ann. Tears are in Ann's eyes and her

voice sounds sad and fearful. Beth says, “Oh, how sad.” Beth's voice and expression are sad and there is also some fear in them.

Ann then says, “Yes, sad, but I have this other awful feeling — like fear. Like I'm scared — as if it could happen to me.” Beth replies, “Me too. It is frightening to hear this. Maybe we all feel as if it's happening to us.”

This exchange goes on and Ann eventually says that she sees that she had been feeling that “it wasn't right to feel afraid.” She had felt it would be “selfish” to be afraid, as if “feeling the fear meant that she was feeling and thinking about herself when she should be thinking only about Emily, when Emily is facing such a bad prospect.” Both Ann and Beth talk further about their sadness and other aspects. As they continue, they both feel more in touch with what they suspect Emily may be feeling, and they come to feel more *able* to be with Emily in those feelings, although, of course, they don't know exactly what Emily is feeling. Ann then also feels much more of a *desire* to be with Emily at this time.

Towards the end of their conversation, Ann and Beth are talking about what they may possibly do for Emily. Both still have their sadness, fear, and other feelings about the basic situation, that is, Emily's possible devastating illness.

To suggest a contrast, we can look at a different kind of interaction. Suppose Ann began this conversation with a different friend or a family member, or with her husband, Tom. After Ann's first statement with tears in her eyes and a sad and fearful voice, Tom says, “Well, it's a terrible thing. In the end, she'll have to do the best she can. She should get a second opinion. I hear the Sloan Clinic is very good on these kinds of cases. Have you called her back yet? Did you call my sister Helen about the birthday party she's trying to arrange for my mother next week? We should really do something about that if it's going to come off.” As the conversation continues, Tom's greatest emotional interest seems to center on the birthday party, or what Ann should do about the party.

Ann goes on with the conversation about the party because that seems to be Tom's emotional focus, and she tends to think automatically that he's right about what's important. She does this because she is trying to stay in connection with him, to be in relationship with him. However, Ann now feels worse than she did before this interchange began. She dreads phoning Emily. I won't go on with the second

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example except to say that it is not an interaction which is going in a growth-promoting direction.

### The interplay

To trace the path to the five “good things,” we have to examine the progression of Ann and Beth’s interchange. We will take just the first few minutes of it.

1. Ann, the person to start this particular interchange, experienced and expressed a thought and feeling. Perhaps we can call this a “feeling-thought” or “thought-feeling.” There does not seem to be a common word in our language to convey this concept — at least not one that comes readily to mind. I think that means something extremely important. It relates to a basic notion in our cultural thinking about the separation of “thought” and “emotion.”

Ann conveyed her sadness in words and in her emotional expression, i.e., her tone of voice, the tears in her eyes, and her gestures. She also conveyed fear in her face, body, and voice, although she had not yet put her fear into words.

2. Beth responded with empathy, or an approach to empathy, or something close to empathy; she conveyed this in words and feelings. That is, Beth conveyed sadness in words and feelings and also expressed some fear in her face, body, and voice. She did not yet talk about fear.

Beth is able to feel and think something close to what Ann thinks and feels, but this is not identical to what Ann thinks and feels. That is probably an impossibility — and not even desirable. But the possibility of feeling and thinking something similar probably readily occurs in all people — unless other factors intervene, and they often do. We can return to this major point later.

What is desirable, or growth promoting, is that Beth responds to Ann with her own feelings and thoughts — both her own feelings and thoughts *in response* to Ann’s, *and* the feelings and thoughts which are arising in her. Because she does *both* of these things, she adds “something more,” something additional to what Ann expressed. She moves the interplay along. Because Beth does both of these things, it is possible for both Ann and Beth to move on to a fuller experience and to a fuller recognition and expression of the thoughts and feelings which may not have been possible a moment before, for either of them. This is emotional and cognitive attunement *and movement*, action.

3. Next, Ann had the ability to receive Beth’s response somewhat accurately; that is, to recognize that Beth is both feeling with her and adding

something more. This is important because it can happen that Beth is doing this, but Ann is unable to receive this response.

For example, suppose Ann’s reply was, “Sad, who’s sad? Not me. I just find a way to do something about it.” Other manifestations of an inability to receive an empathic response can be more subtle, such as changing the subject right at this point.

Here, Beth’s response and Ann’s reception of it make possible the ongoing movement for both of them.

4. Having heard Beth’s response, Ann had the possibility of “trying again” or “trying some more” to express her feelings and thoughts more fully and more accurately. She felt able to do this, even though Beth’s words so far were not fully accurate, i.e., Beth had talked only about sadness up until this time. Now Ann talks about fear in words as well as in a fuller emotional expression of it.

5. Beth had the ability to receive Ann’s now fuller response to her response, to convey that she had done so, and to express her own next feelings and thoughts. In doing this, she now has an even more accurate empathic response to Ann. And, importantly, she also thinks, feels, and conveys her thoughts and feelings more fully and clearly.

The essence of what happened is movement and mutuality. This is emotional and cognitive action, motion for both people. It’s not a question of Beth’s sitting there being empathic to Ann. Ann is being empathic to Beth. For example, I mentioned that Ann received Beth’s empathic response somewhat accurately. For Ann to be able to do this, she has to be empathic to Beth. That is, she has to be able to pick up, to know somewhat accurately Beth’s feelings and thoughts, and to recognize that they were in response to her. She also picks up the added expression which Beth had brought in. This is what Surrey has referred to as “mutual empathy” (1984).

Thus, this interplay of increasingly full and clear expression of each person’s thoughts and feelings creates movement. Each person is both empathic and adds “something more.” The “something more” leads to the flow and change, the progression. Because each person can receive and then can respond to the feelings and thoughts of the other, she is enlarging her own feelings and thoughts and the feelings and thoughts of both people.

Each person’s thoughts and feelings are in motion and simultaneously each experiences and knows more from the progress of that motion — the flow created by two people. (In other inter-changes, it can be more than two people.)

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## Growth

How does psychological growth come about from interactions such as this? How does this kind of interplay lead to the “outcomes” I’ve listed?

I’ll discuss first these outcomes in general. I’ll use Ann’s experience as a way of illustrating these general points. To talk only about Ann is not an adequate way to talk about relationships and interactions — or about an individual. It is the interplay between people which is important. They have both created the interplay. (In other instances involving more than two people, they have all created it.) Each contributes to it. It is something more than what is done by each individual or what goes on in each individual or what can appropriately be characterized in terms such as what each individual gains or loses. However, I will try to describe how this interplay contributes to the growth of each individual because that is the topic here. I think it will be obvious that similar processes are occurring for both Ann and Beth even if I do not note this at each point.

There is another problem, too. I will be talking now in sequence about processes that all happen simultaneously. It is becoming clear that I’m using static language and the language of the individual to discuss an interplay which is in motion and is about more than one person; now, in addition, I will be talking sequentially about component parts which all occur at the same time.

### “Zest” in emotional connection

In an interplay like this, each person feels a greater sense of “zest.” I don’t think I have the right word for this. I’m trying to suggest the emotion — the feeling — which comes when we feel a real sense of connection with another person(s). It is an increase — as opposed to a decrease — in a feeling of vitality, aliveness, energy.

This feeling is difficult to describe. But it is there when people make emotional connection, and it is notably absent when we do not. We all can probably recognize the opposite of this feeling, the “down” kind of feeling that we experience when we feel we are not making connection with the other person(s).

People who work with children, like Daniel Stern (1985), are trying to describe this kind of experience as it occurs in infants. I think it is equally vital for adults. Exactly why and how this feeling of zest and energy occurs when people connect I cannot say. I do know that it does occur — and so does its opposite. Stern and others are trying to delineate it more precisely in infants.

This feeling — the feeling of increased vitality and energy which comes from the sense of connection — is the most basic feature. It is “emotional.” Without it, the other features cannot occur. However, this sense is never just emotional, because nothing is just emotional. There is always content. Further, nothing stands still. This feeling, which is absolutely basic, will go in one direction or another. For it to go towards a growth-enhancing direction, the other components are necessary.

In this example, Ann felt more vitality or energy because Beth was *there* with her *in the course* of these feelings. To say that Ann felt this increase in energy does not mean that she necessarily felt less sad or even less fearful. It is to say that she felt *in connection with* another person(s) in these feelings, whatever they are.

As part of this basic feeling of being in emotional connection, Ann was enlarged in several more ways — many of which are all too rare for all of us. First, she was able to state her feelings and thoughts as they came to her as the interplay went along — or to *represent* her experience as it arose for her. This could be what we mean by authenticity.

In addition, she gained in what could be called courage: the ability to put forward her feelings and thoughts and to stand by them — and to go with them. This experience, too, is not frequent enough for any of us in many parts of our lives.

As Beth and Ann proceed in this connection, something else happens, too. Beth conveys that she cares and is concerned for Ann. This is not caring for Ann in some static sense, or in some abstract sense. Beth conveys caring and concern about Ann as “Ann-feeling-these-feelings-and- thinking-these-thoughts” in this moment. It is from many, many such interactions that Ann can build a picture of other people’s caring and concern for her. That is, it is from many experiences of feeling other people’s caring and concern for her as “Ann-feeling-such-particular-feelings- and-thinking-such-particular-thoughts” in many particular moments that Ann can build the vitality that sustains psychological development. And it is from not enough of this experience that the reverse occurs.

Beth does not state her caring and concern by saying it in words explicitly. It is the *going with* Ann in Ann’s immediate experience that conveys caring and concern. This is a part of what leads to the increase in zest or the “energizing” effect of the emotional joining. One way to describe this feeling may be to say it is the opposite of a “descent in feeling” — a downer — or a trend in the direction of a depressive feeling. As I try to “dissect out” the elements in the flow of connection

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between people, I'm struck by how often it seems easier to describe the opposite of them. I think this means something about how deeply we lack recognition of growth-fostering processes in which people engage, so often the parts of life in which women are engaged. Maybe it also has something to do with a background of learning about everything from theories of pathology.

All of the valuable effects of this emotional joining — and more which I haven't described yet — seem important enough in themselves, but they also lead to the next important feature: the feeling of the ability to act, the motivation to take action, and the actual taking of action.

### Action

First of all, Ann (and Beth, too) felt empowered to act *right in the immediate relationship — in this interplay, itself*. Each acted and had an impact on the other in a very important way. The word impact is not meant to convey force or coercion. It is meant to suggest an effect, an important effect.

Action in the immediate interplay is an extremely valuable form of action, and a form which is often overlooked. It is the key form of action in its consequences for psychological development because it is the way we each affect each other. It is the way we play a part in augmenting or diminishing other people — and the relationship.

Next, as a result of the action within the immediate interplay, Ann felt empowered to act in realms beyond. For example, she felt much more able to go to be with Emily in a fuller way and to take action within her relationship with Emily. Prior to her exchange with Beth, Ann had had more hesitation and conflict about facing this difficult situation with Emily. Further, as her interchange with Beth proceeded, she felt more able and motivated to take additional forms of action with Emily, such as planning about a second opinion, going with Emily to doctors, or whatever seemed important to Emily. All of this she was more able to do in a way in which she could be more fully *with* Emily.

### Knowledge

Each person has made a step toward a fuller and more accurate picture of herself and of the other person. The picture becomes clearer, more delineated and articulated. Ann knows a bit more about her sadness and about Beth's sadness as she experiences these with Beth, and she is learning a bit more about her fear and Beth's fear.

There is an additional feature about Ann's knowledge of their fear. It is the aspect that says, "I know more about why and how I feel this fear, and I can have the fear without so much of its prior link with selfishness." Ann has delineated the parameters of these two features a bit more accurately. The linking of her own fear with selfishness had constituted an unnecessary but significant hindrance for her. With this delineation now made more clearly, Ann can know, too, more about the existence of her true sadness and concern for Emily — her feeling *with* Emily, as it really exists. Before this exchange with Beth, she was not as clear about her concern, her sadness, or her fear because they were all mixed in and obscured in the "knot" which included "selfishness" — and this confusion was detracting from the next aspect, her sense of worth.

### Sense of worth

Ann now feels herself a bit more of a worthwhile person *because* she has felt worthwhile in her interchange with Beth — worthwhile as "Ann-thinking-these-thoughts-and-feeling- these-feelings."

Beth's responsiveness conveyed to Ann a picture of herself as someone worthy of another person's recognition and attention in the experiencing of these feelings and thoughts. I want to emphasize this point. It could have been brought in under the topic of the "zest" coming from the emotional connection because it is part of that topic. As I mentioned, all of these things are a part of each other.

I think we all develop a sense of worth only because another person(s) conveys attention to, and recognition of, our experience. In a basic sense, we must feel that others recognize our existence — and recognizing our existence cannot occur in the abstract. It means recognizing us as we are experiencing whatever we are experiencing as we go through life. Otherwise, we cannot feel worthy at all. As some people have said, sometimes we cannot feel the right to be on this earth. Again, here, this would mean recognizing Ann as "Ann-feeling-these-particular-feelings-and-thinking-these-particular-thoughts."

We try to do this for infants and children without, of course, stating that we are doing so in these words. For example, if a child expresses some type of distress, adults attend to it and try to respond. We try to attune to it: Is the child afraid, or tired, or hungry? Or, if a child is joyous, or just "hanging out," we often join the child in that mode or mood, and the child feels "recognized." I think that this attention and recognition are just as vital for adults and have to continue all through life — or else we suffer terribly.

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Adults have more ability to express their experience, but certainly not totally well-developed abilities. Further, this recognition is heavily influenced by what any society says is valuable — and whose experience is considered to be of interest and worthy of attention and recognition.

To elaborate further the topic of worth in this specific example, Ann was able to experience something additional, that is, Beth recognized and attended to Ann's experience and did not convey the negative characterization of Ann as selfish — quite the reverse. Sorting out this distinction adds significantly to Ann's feeling more worthy.

By contrast, we are very diminished when the feelings which arise in us are feelings which we have been taught to connect with false and unnecessary beliefs. We label them as bad or unacceptable in one way or another. These connotations of badness may be given various names. For women, one of the common connotations is "selfish." It has been linked with so many feelings that it can come to seem to many women that almost any feeling must be selfish — just because the feeling arises in them. For men, the negative connotations are often different. For example, men are often made to feel that having many of a great range of appropriate feelings means they are "weak" or "too emotional."

It is really a great benefit to Ann to be more able to know her feeling of fear for itself. It is probably a very appropriate response to the situation and one which will help her to engage with it. Making the distinction between fear and selfishness is important in itself, but it also aids Ann by helping her move along to a path which then augments her feelings of worthiness in another way. She now moves toward Emily, and toward action with Emily, in a fruitful fashion. She is now doing something in relation to her own fear (*not just for Emily*), and the active engagement with the fear makes her feel even more worthwhile. It is the opposite of a path toward immobility or feeling helpless to act. Feeling unable to act or to move along to do something in the face of the fear would have made her feel less worthy because she hadn't acted on the matter at hand. Other common alternatives are doing something, but not something which attends to the crucial feeling involved, such as eating, drinking, sleeping, overworking, or something else.

There is another point about the acceptability of the fear which may be even more basic. Ann was able to feel that her feelings were among the acceptable human feelings. All of us have some of the very common notions that many of our feelings are not

really acceptable — if anyone else really knew. They are beyond the bounds of what a worthwhile person "should" feel. It is a great step to have another person go with us in these feelings. The act of "going with us in the feelings" makes us more able to believe that these feelings are within the realm of human possibilities and not something beyond the pale of what any decent person should feel. In this example, Beth was "right in there" grappling with these feelings too — and becoming more connected as this interplay proceeded. To feel that another person becomes more connected in the course of experiencing the feelings — rather than less connected — this is what goes into building a sense of worth.

### **Greater sense of connection and the motivation for more connections**

As a result of this interchange, Ann wants more connection with others, not less. Perhaps the simplest reason is that these first four things "feel so good" that Ann wants more of them — i.e., the "zest" or "energy," the empowerment and action, the knowledge, and the sense of increased worth.

There are other features embedded in these terms. I'll suggest just one more here. As a result of the increased "zest," empowerment, knowledge and worth which Ann has felt, she now feels more concern and caring for Beth. This is an extraordinarily wonderful feeling. It is different from being the recipient of others' concern, or being loved, and very different from something like feeling "approved of." It is much more valuable. It is the active, outgoing feeling of caring about another person because that person is so valued in our eyes. It leads to the desire for more and fuller connection with that person and also to a concern for that person's well-being. We cannot will this feeling into existence. It comes along as a concomitant of this kind of interchange, and it leads to wanting more relationship with the person whom we value and care about.

I believe that the motivation for more connection becomes generalized to other people, beyond the person directly involved. Indeed one way of thinking about the criteria for growth- fostering interactions may be: Does this interaction lead to a greater sense of connection with the person(s) directly involved rather than less? And does this interaction lead to a motivation for more connection in general rather than the reverse — that is, a decline in motivation for connection or a turn toward isolation.

To return to the specifics in this example, we can see that Ann is more motivated now to make more

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connection beyond her connection with Beth, that is, connection with Emily. Further, the prospect now does not entail as many of those features which were going to make Ann feel diminished or in conflict, i.e., her own fears and the associated notion that she may be a selfish person. Ann's "fear about her fear" and the conflict around the issue of selfishness could have stood in the way of her access to the other feelings she really did have about Emily. These good feelings toward Emily have now moved into more clarity and prominence for her. To the extent that the obstacles caused by the fear-and-selfishness confusion existed, they would have prevented Ann from connecting with Emily in as fruitful a way at this time (and, incidentally, in a way that Emily probably needs at this time; Emily doesn't really need Ann's self-blame and the like).

### **Growth for Beth**

We can mention some of the characteristics of this interplay under the heading of Beth's psychological growth, again because it seems easier to talk about them in this way. However, once this interchange is underway, these same features are occurring for Ann, too.

First of all, Beth responded to Ann because people probably are impelled simply to respond to feelings — unless something else interferes. Beth's response gave Beth a sense of connection with another person which is gratifying and energy-producing in itself, just as it was for Ann. This point is often overlooked. People "feel good" if they can respond to another person's feelings with feelings of their own. There is pleasure and gratification in this, *per se*. It is not a question of "helping" or "getting" as these terms are usually used in psychological circles. It is being in the flow of human connection rather than out of it, rather than feeling that you must turn away from it. The latter is a terrible feeling. We have all experienced it. Likewise, this connection does not concern the question of whether the feelings are happy or sad or something else; it concerns the question of having feelings in connection with another person aside from the specific nature of the feelings.

There is a point which is even more basic, perhaps. Human beings "pick up" the emotions of other people. This is one great human characteristic. As soon as we've "picked up" the feelings, we are then experiencing them too. We are experiencing the feeling(s) ourselves — not "for someone else," as it were. We, then, are doing whatever we are doing based on what is now impelling us.

Thus, the reason that Beth was able to enter into a true emotional connection with Ann was that this interplay tapped into Beth's own sadness and fears. She found them present and could express them in interchange with Ann. Ann's reception of Beth's response enabled Beth to see more of her own sadness and fear, to know some of her emotions a bit more directly and fully.

Another way to put this point may be to say that this phenomenon may be basic to everything about people — everything that is potentially good and potentially bad. It concerns the capacity of each of us to feel the feelings of others *with our* feelings and their associated thought content. We each, then, "are in it," as it were. We each either go with these feelings in us, or we do something specifically to counter them or turn away from them. (Incidentally, I think that most group therapy and family therapies turn on this point.)

Either we deal with the feelings which are inevitably present by turning to each other — or we turn away from others. If we turn from others without conveying recognition of the existence of their feelings, we inevitably lead the other person to feel diminished. We also are inevitably turning away from engaging with our own experience in connection with others; we are trying to deal with it in a less than optimal way — that is, alone, in isolation. There are reasons to counter or to have differences with the feelings evoked in us by other people, but we can do this better if we first know that we have experienced them. (For example, suppose someone is angrily treating a child unfairly. We may have very different thoughts on this, but we probably do "pick up" and feel the anger; we're probably better off if we engage with the other person without denying either person's feelings and associated thoughts.)

The forces which determine when and how we are impelled to counter the feelings is a very large and important topic. It leads into the questions of how we deal with feelings we don't want to confront, and also how we deal with true differences in feelings and their associated thoughts. These are two different issues. This question also leads to the topic of how we treat children all through development — what feelings we allow them to have in connection with us or how we force them into isolation with their feelings because we do not feel able to deal with the feelings in interaction with the child. All of this is very heavily influenced by the cultural mode of dealing with feelings — and what feelings members of each sex are allowed to have and to "speak about."

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In this specific example, the point is that Beth benefitted because she was dealing with her *own* feelings as soon as the interplay got under way — not just Ann's feelings. In the course of the interchange, Beth, then, came to know more about her own sadness and her own fears.

In regard to action and a sense of worth, Beth, like Ann, was empowered to act within the relationship, and she, too, felt this action as one source of worth. There is the further point that people tend to feel empowered and worthy if they feel they have a positive effect — a positive impact — with another person(s) (Stiver, 1985); or an impact, even if it is not wholly positive. Again, it is not "giving" in the usual sense, nor a loss or sacrifice of anything. It is a pleasurable feeling. The contrast is the opposite feeling, that we can't have an impact no matter how we try, can't seem to reach another person. This is one of the worst experiences. A common example is someone leaving the room when you're trying to say something to her/him. Even more common, but more subtle and sometimes more confusing, is the experience of feeling that someone is "turning off," or psychologically leaving the scene.

This point illustrates Surrey's (1984) concept of response/ability. Each person acquires more ability to act as a result of her response to the other person in the relationship — and the other person's response to her. That is, action emerges out of the interplay, not out of one person as a sole, individual "actor." Surrey suggests that at bottom we all acquire our mature abilities to act in the course of the interactions throughout our development. (Infants are born with a repertoire of abilities and the potential for growth of many more.) Further, out of the experience of authentic mutually-empathic interactions we acquire the "feeling-thinking" knowledge of ourselves and others which gives us a sense of a "knowledgeable" basis for action.

There is another idea contained in the concept of response/ability. It is the idea that we each have the responsibility to recognize and attend to the experience of others, to participate in ongoing mutual empathy. People must do this for each other. Since this is a basic human need, each of us is responsible for carrying it out. In carrying it out, we each also grow, as Beth and Ann did. We may have different feelings and thoughts, but we have the basic responsibility to engage with others about the feelings and thoughts.

The concept leads into the larger topic of the societal and familial forms in which response/ability is carried out. For the present, we can say that both

men and women have suffered from its lack, but in very different ways. In general, men have been pressured to be individual "actors" and to not seek a basis for action in their relationships. Meanwhile, however, women have been encouraged to provide empathy and support for men's action. Women have not had the empathic attention to their experience nor support for the actions which would flow from mutual empathic interactions.

Other aspects in the interplay are also important to Beth. I have mentioned Ann's feeling of caring and concern for Beth. Beth feels this caring and concern for her as it comes to her from Ann. It adds to her sense of worth.

Beth also feels that Ann has recognized and attended to her as "Beth-feeling-these- feelings-and-thinking-these-thoughts," in the way that Ann experienced this recognition from Beth. Beth, too, is able to enjoy the outgoing feeling of caring and concern for Ann in a fashion similar to Ann's concern for her.

For all these reasons and more, Beth is motivated to make more connections with others in the way Ann is.

## Corrections and additions

I have talked about the psychological development of each person in a fashion which is still artificially separated. This whole discussion now ought to be redone, recast in more adequate terms, those which would describe the growth of the connection itself, and the growth of each person in terms of the connection. For the moment, perhaps it will suffice to say that the important thing is that both people were connected through the interplay of their "feeling- thoughts." They both created something new together. Both are enlarged by this creation. Something new now exists, built by both of them. This is "the connection between," the relationship. It does not belong to one or the other. It belongs to both. Yet each feels it as "hers," as part of her. She contributed to its creation. And it contributed to her, to what she now "is," which is *more* than she was a few moments before.

This is one way of beginning to talk about what a growth-fostering relationship is. It is a relationship composed of many interactions like this one. I don't mean to suggest that every interaction includes all of these growth-fostering elements in their fullest. I've condensed all of them into a few minutes of an interchange for purposes of illustration. I do mean to suggest that many interactions do include some or all of these processes and that they are the "stuff" of

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psychological growth. Most important, they foster growth if they allow the possibility for a flow, for something to happen next time, even if it did not happen this time. Thousands of these kinds of interchanges over time provide psychological development for children and for adults.

This discussion is also a way to suggest that the more important work at this time is not the study of how distinctions between self and relationship occur, but rather the study of what makes for growth-fostering relationships and then what makes for the opposite, i.e., relationships which diminish each of the people in them — along with obscuring and confusing the processes occurring.

Relationships have to encompass many disparate and conflicting thoughts and feelings. There has to be room for oppositional thoughts and feelings, negative and destructive thoughts and feelings, and many misperceptions and misunderstandings. We can think back to the example of Ann and her husband. There, Ann has a more arduous task if she is to deal with what she feels is wrong or lacking as she experiences it. She would have to work at turning the direction of that interaction. But people can do that. In general, so long as people can see a possibility of engaging with the other person in thoughts and feelings — a possibility of connecting — they can grapple with it. Of course, the other person(s) has to be able to engage with the matter at hand too, to enter into the movement of thoughts and feelings. It is when there seems to be no possibility of engaging with the feelings and thoughts at hand, no way to move within the relationship, that the most trouble occurs. The topic of interchanges which are not growth-promoting, or which are destructive, is a large one which we will explore at another time.

It is probably fair to say that the more growth-fostering interactions we have had, the better base of psychological resources we will build; these resources help us deal with the difficult and conflictual interactions. Engaging in conflictual interactions can lead to growth too — so long as there is a possibility of really engaging. Mutually growth-fostering interactions cannot occur if one person has an overwhelming amount of power to determine what happens in the interactions and uses her/his power in that way. In that case, the more powerful person can readily diminish the other person(s) without ever engaging with the matter at hand.

There are more corrections, qualifications, and additions to be made. Further, I've made several basic assumptions which I have not yet made explicit. One concerns the question of how growth-promoting

interchanges become generalized. Related to that is the question of how we internalize them, how we construct a thinking-feeling framework which determines what we believe we are and can do, and what we believe others are and can do. These beliefs become the truth by which we live, the "truth" that determines our actions, thoughts, and feelings.

At present, perhaps we can say that the optimal internalization may be one in which we have incorporated "relational images" which have been created by many interactions which have allowed us to express as fully as possible our experience at each age in life. The result is that we carry within us a base for the courage and the desire to continue to keep trying to express our experience within connections to others. It is the parts of ourselves which we feel we cannot experience within relationship which make trouble for us, the parts we have walled off because we've been led to believe that we cannot bring them into a relational context.

There are major overriding factors which prevent all of us from bringing large parts of our experience into a relational framework. We do not live within a culture which provides a full relational context. Some cultures may be better at providing for some aspects of experience than are others, but no culture provides an optimal relational context for living and developing. The reason seems obvious to me. Once any group of people has been socially defined as dominant, and another as subordinate, there cannot be a full relational context. We have had one massive division based on sex; there are other divisions based on class, race, and other dimensions. Because we have not provided for optimal interactions between adults, we do not yet have the best resources to provide them for children of either sex.

An optimal relational context would have to be based first of all in the concept of mutuality, the concept that each person's experience must be recognized and granted full value. As it has been, relationships have been determined by half of the world's interpretation of all experience, that is, the male interpretation of their own and of everyone else's experience. This interpretation of experience has come to seem so usual that we do not notice it as such. Most men and women do not consciously engage in nongrowth-fostering interactions. Indeed, most people want to have productive interactions. But it seems apparent that interactions determined by the interpretations of half of the world cannot be valid interpretations. Thus, we have a vast amount of work to do.

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There is one more important qualification to make now. It is very likely that these notions are very culture-bound. For example, many other cultures may not have concepts which are similar to our concerns with self-worth, knowledge of self, or action, at least in the ways we tend to think of them. I think that the basic connections between people are important in all cultures, but the formulations surrounding these may require much alteration. One way to proceed is to recognize the high probability of cultural self-centeredness and to invite critiques and dialogue with the people who can address these limitations and errors.

### Discussion Summary

*After each colloquium lecture, a discussion is held. Selected portions are summarized here. In this session, Drs. Alexandra Kaplan, Janet Surrey, and Carolyn Swift joined Dr. Miller in leading the discussion.*

**Question:** Are you saying that growth occurs through one person mirroring the other? Isn't that what others have said?

**Miller:** Perhaps I wasn't clear enough on that. I don't think people grow if one person is "mirroring" the other. Moreover, I think it is impossible to mirror the other with the exact "feeling-thinking" content. There will be inevitably a difference of connotations and meanings. But it is possible to be closely attuned to the feelings and thoughts of the other person. That is not really so hard as many of us have been led to believe; it can be "learned" if it is encouraged in people's development. Most especially, we can "attend" to the other person and convey that we are trying to do so. The "trying" matters a great deal.

The combination of emotional responsiveness and yet difference allows each of us to *add* something to the interplay; that's what makes possible the movement, the flow which makes for growth, change. If you attend to me and respond with feelings and thoughts which connect and convey recognition of what I've just expressed — but which are your authentically different feelings and thoughts — I have the chance to see and feel and think something a little different. I'm "stretched" a little in my actual "life experience," enlarged in that way. And then if I do likewise, you are, too.

**Comment:** What you talked about sounds so unreal. Most relationships aren't so idyllic at all.

**Miller:** That's right. In this, I'm not trying to describe a total relationship realistically. I'm trying to get at the question of how relationships between people lead to psychological growth. I've used a few minutes of an interchange just as a way to talk about

very abstract notions. I've condensed these very abstract notions all into this one short interplay.

In reality, all of these things don't occur every few minutes. They can be seen more accurately as trends and flows which go on over time and many thousands of interactions. However, at each moment, we do and say things which tend either to open up the possibilities for growth-fostering processes to occur, or which go in the direction of closing down the possibilities. If the flow can be kept open to some extent, we may do pieces of these sorts of things in the next hours, days, weeks, etc.

On the other hand, I don't think the basic processes, or something like them, are unreal. A great many people are doing some parts of these things all the time. If no one did, no person would survive or grow at all. More often women are the people who have "learned" empathy and mutual empathy. Men learn some too, but men have not been encouraged to learn empathy and mutual empathy in the same way. This is certainly not made a central goal and concentration all through life.

These are the parts of life which have been more "assigned" to women's realm. They have not been valued and honored, and they have not been noticed and described well.

**Kaplan:** I just want to emphasize the point of it being hard sometimes just to recognize feelings, as feelings, just so we recognize how very powerful the cultural forces are which tend to impede that. Women are often led to believe that we should be ashamed of our own inner experience. Feelings, *per se*, are also denigrated so that it's a real struggle between keeping alive the positive sense that Jean was talking about in the face of the multiple messages we get from individuals around us and from the society as a whole. I think we're all always in that struggle.

**Comment:** It still sounds to me as if you're talking about what may go on in psychotherapy — even an ideal picture of therapy, not what really occurs there most of the time. Life is filled with conflict.

**Miller:** Life is certainly filled with conflict, but here I'm trying to sketch a way of thinking about the sources of growth. We hope to elaborate further on conflictual interactions at other talks. Conflict also can lead to growth. A further topic is conflictual interactions which do not lead to growth and those in which one person or groups of people do not have the power to change the character of nongrowth-fostering interactions.

However, I want to emphasize again that I think women still have a lot of trouble recognizing the

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growth-fostering interchanges in which they engage a lot of the time. Millions of women have done these kinds of things for centuries. They've been couched in psychology, in global and mysterious terms like the maternal instinct, or "symbiotic states" with infants, or nurturing, and the like.

**Surrey:** About conflict, I think the key factor is maintaining connectedness even with conflict. That keeps something open and moving even if there is disagreement and misunderstanding. If the conflict leads to disconnection, then the opportunity for growth is lost. Staying with difficult feelings such as anger and others, not going away physically or psychologically, is what can move that situation along.

About the positive steps toward connections, I think that we do a lot of the things Jean was talking about, the affirming, connecting, and that we value the importance of that, but we tend not to notice how much we do it.

**Kaplan:** I also think that a lot of the time in interactions like the one described here, people say we're "just talking." There isn't the recognition of the reality that interactions between people are growth-fostering.

**Question:** Are you saying that we could all be more zestful and empowered? Are you saying we're naturally zestful and empowered? Then why don't women feel this more than we do?

**Miller:** Yes, I am saying that we'd all be more zestful and empowered if we had more interactions like this, and if we had had them from the beginnings of our lives, too. We've all had some of the elements in them or we wouldn't have survived at all. I'm suggesting, too, that our culture has not provided a relational context which fosters them anywhere nearly enough for everyone — and especially mutually. For women, it has not been mutual. It's been more going one way with women providing more for others and receiving much less. Women do grow from providing these sources of growth, but they suffer, too, because it is not mutual.

You also raise a question which touches on some of the assumptions I didn't make explicit. One of them is: What's "natural"? At bottom, all psychological theories make some assumptions on that score. I'm assuming that babies are born with a basic ability to act, or energy. From then on, the amounts of zest and empowerment which each person goes on to develop depend on the interactions in life. (It's true that each baby probably has its own temperament and style, but each baby is active in its own way.)

**Comment:** I think you're being very one-sided and unfair. Women aren't all empathic and men unempathic.

**Miller:** Of course, you're right. All women aren't all empathic and all men the reverse. I believe that all women and men have the potential for mutual empathy. However, I do believe that there are differences at this time in history, and I believe that they are results of the kinds of interactions which have been encouraged differently for men and for women so far. One way I think about this is to say that our culture has said to us all that men will do the "important things" in life; women will take care of the "lesser realm" of fostering the growth of other human beings. As a result, more women have "learned empathy" and women tend to value relationships. Certainly men do too, and some men have learned a great deal. In the overall, however, men even have been encouraged to turn away from learning about this whole realm, to develop in other directions — because it has been said to be "womanly."

**Surrey:** The difference between empathy and mutual empathy is very hard to keep in mind. It is not a question of one person sort of looking into the other person's eyes and feeling what the other person is feeling. It is a question of a process of interactive engaging and moving along. I do feel that this happens more frequently between women at this time; certainly not always and not always well, because we have not had totally optimal opportunities to learn to do this well. What we have are rather sputtering attempts from moments here and moments there.

**Comment:** But women have a lot of trouble knowing and stating their own feelings.

**Miller:** Yes, and sometimes some women are much better at helping other people to know and express their feelings than with knowing and stating their own. But I think that a very central point is that most of the time we don't "know" our feelings fully until we try to put them into interaction with other people. I think that "feeling-thoughts" in reality don't come to us so clearly because of the very nature of what they are. We get to know them as we put them into interaction and we simultaneously keep changing them as we express and know them — and would keep changing them more if we had more mutual interactions, because feelings are very much a response to the immediate. That's how they are. In addition, they are usually a mixture of varied feelings. I tried to get at these points a little in this example. It's a question of the interactive flow and how the flow helps us get to know and move along to more clarity

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about a mixture of feelings, or “feeling-thoughts.”

**Question:** You’ve said that when these kinds of interactions occur, we inevitably care about the people we’ve engaged with. What about people who are in relationships and not getting these “good things” and they still keep caring?

**Miller:** That takes a long explanation. I’ll start on just one part. Women value relationships a great deal and I believe that they are “right” in doing so. Women also value the participation in other people’s growth and grow a great deal from this participation and care about the person with whom they’ve participated. Mothers, for example, can keep feeling this way for a long time. However, it is not good when this is consistently one-sided and even exploitative.

**Surrey:** First, I’d say that if this is consistently one way, the person’s care does eventually diminish. However, very often we tend to look only at one part of the whole for example, the man-woman part. Sometimes other people are part of the whole relational context and they are providing something, for example, children, other family members. It may not be optimal or fully mutual, but it can explain why women can sometimes keep giving care.

Another issue is that the motive to care can go on a long time because women’s sense of self-worth is often based heavily in the sense that she is a caring person, and she hates to lose that sense. She may want at least to feel that about herself, even if care for her is not returned. These are some of the features that sometimes occur in asymmetric relationships. But there are problems in such a situation.

**Kaplan:** Just to take that one step further, I think that the desire “to be in relation” and “to care” is just awesomely powerful. A compelling example is that of battered women who stay in battering relationships. From listening to what some of the women say, one way to hear them is that they want to be in a situation in which there is a potential for caring, for connection. That potential matters, and they keep trying, hoping they can make the relationship “work.” Another factor is that most women tend to take responsibility for the relationship. If it fails, they feel as if they’ve failed; so they keep trying to work at it even harder. Or course there are other factors in these situations, certainly very powerful ones such as economic realities and the lack of other essential social supports, physical safety questions, and others; this is just one of the psychological features that women do express.

**Swift:** You’ve said that the language we have is lacking, for example in your not having a common

word to use for “feeling-thought.” What do you see as the next steps toward a more accurate language that would encompass the processes which are central in psychological development?

**Miller:** That’s a big and tough question. As an example of how thorough-going it is, we can look at the word emotion, especially as it is usually split from, and opposed to, reason or rationality. I think that reflects patriarchal culture basically; thus, there is no such thing as “emotion” as derived in that way, as if it had no thought content.

It’s interesting to see how many serious current women writers have started making up new words, for example, Mary Daly. A whole group of French feminist writers are also very involved with the question of language.

At present, the main thing may be to recognize that our language may be inadequate. The next step may be for all of us in our lives and our work to try to represent our experience as closely as possible. We may find that we are often stammering and inarticulate. It is very valuable to turn to each other in these attempts. This helps us to become clearer and clearer. And it will help us to recognize where we do not have good common language available in our culture to express women’s experience. We can also be aware of how much we tend to express our experience in negative ways. This is very heavily influenced by the language of the culture, too. We have not inherited the tools, the words, which would represent our experience accurately. I think that there will be a long struggle to develop them. It may be valuable to recognize this as a long task ahead and not to expect that we should have the exact right and accurate ways to speak about ourselves ready at hand in any short order. In other words, without making false excuses for ourselves, we may be stammering for good reason.

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