

Work In Progress

Toward Competence and Connection

Judith V. Jordan, Ph.D.

Work in Progress

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About the Author

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Abstract

This paper explores relational competence, the capacity to move another person, to be moved, to effect a change in a relationship, or to impact the well-being of the participants in the relationship. Relational competence involves movement toward mutuality, the development of anticipatory empathy, being open to being influenced, enjoying relational curiosity, and experiencing vulnerability as a place of potential growth. This occurs in a value-laden context of wishing to empower others and appreciating the life-giving nature of community building and creating strength with others. Strategies for working with the obstacles to relational competence, at both personal and societal levels, are explored.

In the Stone Center model, the yearning for and movement toward connection are seen as central organizing factors in people's lives and the experience of chronic disconnection or isolation is seen as a primary source of suffering (Jordan, Kaplan, Miller, Stiver, & Surrey, 1991; Miller & Stiver, 1997). When we cannot represent ourselves authentically in relationship, when our real experience is not heard or responded to by the other person, then we must falsify, detach from, or suppress our response. Under such circumstances we learn that we cannot have an impact on other people in the relationships that matter to us. A sense of isolation, immobilization, self-blame, and relational incompetence develops. These meaning systems and relational images of incompetence and depletion interfere with our capacity to be productive, as well as to be in creative relationship. They inhibit our engagement with life and our capacity to love and to move with a sense of awareness to meet others, to contribute to their growth, and to grow ourselves. The need to connect and the need to contribute in a meaningful way, to be competent, productive, and creative, optimally flow together. Yet, in a system that overvalues competition and highly individualistic goals, a system that pits the individual against society and other individuals, the pursuit of competence and connection can be at odds. Further, in a system characterized by competitive individualism, the people who are more invested in relationship and community typically will feel this conflict more acutely.

The word competence has its roots in two Latin words: "com," meaning "together" and "petere," to aim at, go toward, try to reach, seek (Oxford English Dictionary, 1971). It shares these roots with the word compete. In fact, competition used to mean "to strive after (something) in company or together." Much later did competition come to mean to "be in rivalry with" or "the action of endeavoring to gain what another

endeavors to gain at the same time” (Ibid.). Current notions of competence are saturated with images of “mastery over” and competition. The verb “to master” suggests “to reduce to subjection, to get the better of, to break, to tame” (Ibid.). Evelyn Fox Keller (1985) notes that Western models of science are based on a “Baconian” model of mastery over nature. The competition and mastery implicit in most models of competence create enormous conflict for many people, especially women and other marginalized groups, people who have not traditionally been “the masters.” Rather than focus on the problem of these groups for being unable to fully participate in “the psychology of being a master,” perhaps we need to focus on the problems of a system which replaces ability, confidence, creativity, participation in growth-fostering relationships, and creativity with being the lone star at the top, dominance, being a master, and ultimately participating in oppression of those who are not fully invested in the power that this model confers (Walker, 1998). Today I would like to begin a re-examination of this system of competitively defined competence and begin to suggest what Carol Gilligan calls some strategies of resistance (Gilligan, 1990) and transformation.

Most of the original work done on competence and competence motivation was undertaken by Robert White, who suggested that there is an intrinsic motivation to be in effective interaction with the environment (1959), and that all people experience a need to feel effective, able to move or change things. The extent to which the environment responds to the efforts and actions of the individual determines the extent to which the individual feels competent or effective. When one is not able to effect a change in one’s environment, one might experience a sense of incompetence or what Seligman has called “learned helplessness” (1972). The signs of learned helplessness are close to what would be the opposite of Jean Baker Miller’s “Five Good Things”: a drop in zest, decreasing clarity, withdrawal from connection, less self knowledge, and a decrease in sense of self-worth (Miller & Stiver, 1997).

Competence, as traditionally defined, usually refers to mastery of a task, the capacity to be instrumentally effective and competitively successful. Taking the individualistic road and “beating” others comes to be seen as interpersonally strong, good, and competent. The irony is that one’s sense of self-worth is rarely buttressed in any long-term way in such a competitive system. As Morton Deutsch notes, “self-esteem is more negative in a competitive system than in a cooperative grading system. Winning doesn’t

satisfy in an ongoing way and losing makes us feel like losers. King of the Mountain doesn’t work” (Deutsch, 1985, p. 399). Furthermore, competition can damage relationships. Karen Horney noted such a system creates “envy toward the stronger ones, contempt for the weaker, distrust towards everyone” (Horney, 1936, p. 161).

As Alfie Kohn (1986) points out, myths supporting the importance of competition suggest it is an unavoidable fact of life and that it motivates us to do our best. A distortion of Darwin’s work on evolution would have us believe that we are engaged in a competitive struggle toward the “survival of the fittest.” On the contrary, Stephen Jay Gould states that “there is no necessary relationship between natural selection and competitive struggle . . . that success defined as leaving more offspring can be attained by a large variety of strategies including mutualism and symbiosis . . . that we could call cooperative” (Kohn, 1986, p. 21). Yet, our education systems and our systems of assessment actively encourage this emphasis on winning, on being the best, and on competence defined by competitiveness. Assessing a child in a play setting, Piaget, himself, asked, “Who has won?” When the child responded, “We both won,” Piaget continued, “But who has won most?” (Piaget, 1965, p. 37). What are we teaching? Separate-self models in traditional psychology suggest that we are self-centered, self-gratifying at heart, and that competition is inevitable. The model of separate self, of autonomous self, of self disconnected from others, contributes to a self that is free to compete. Psychology’s elevation of separation and autonomy thus contributes to the ascendance of a competitive, individualistic, sociopolitical agenda. A psychology of connection, on the other hand, poses challenges to the larger competitive system.

The dominant myths of instrumental competence, which largely coincide with the myths of masculinity, include:

1. the myth that competition enhances performance;
2. the myth of invulnerability;
3. the myth of certainty, what I call the cultivation of pathological certainty;
4. the myth of self-sufficiency (“I did it alone, so can you.”);
5. the myth of mastery (“I mastered it, I *am* the master.”);
6. the myth of objectivity;
7. the myth of the expert;
8. the myth of unilateral change (In an interaction, the less powerful person is changed.);

9. the myth that hierarchy and ranking produces incentives and that people assume their places in the hierarchy by virtue of merit;
10. the myth that power over others creates safety; and
11. the myth that rational engagement is superior to and at odds with emotional responsiveness.

Since women have typically performed differently from men in areas of achievement, defined largely by masculine standards, women have often been viewed as having “problems with competence and achievement.” A whole theory of women’s fear of success was developed to explain this problem (Horner, 1970). When women opt out of positions of leadership, leave positions as CEOs, the question is asked: “What’s wrong with these women, can’t they hack it in the real world of competition?” How long will it be before we will say, instead, “What’s wrong with our construction of competence and success?” There has been one reigning definition which has emphasized competition, mastery, control, having an impact on the physical world and it has notably omitted the world of relationships and connection.

One of the reasons that the competitive ethic is aversive for so many girls is that girls have learned a “double voice discourse,” representing what they want and paying attention to the needs of others at the same time (Tannen, 1998). Girls and women typically care about the impact of their feelings and actions on the other person. I have called this **relational awareness**, being attentive to self, other, and relationship. Boys tend to use “single voice discourse,” pursuing their own self-interest without orienting to the perspective of the other (Ibid.). Women practice not only empathic listening, but also empathic speaking. They use what I have called **anticipatory empathy**, speaking and moving with an awareness of and concern for the possible consequences of their feelings and actions for other people, while also remaining aware of their own needs and the needs of the other person(s) (i.e., relational awareness). I believe this to be one of the greatest human capacities, involving significant skill; it can potentially avert much harm and suffering. It contributes to building relationships where neither person is at the center—relatedness is. Conversely, the individualistic way is to put *the self* at the center and in opposition to society.

What I am proposing is that we need more than one way to conceptualize competence and we need to be very aware of the power of context to shape a person’s sense of competence. We also need to

question a value system that pits connection against competence, that dichotomizes the two and does not see the possibilities and strengths in the development of relational competence.

Relational Competence

The capacity to move another person, to effect a change in a relationship, or effect the well-being of all participants in the relationship might be called **relational competence**. This capacity does not mean simply influencing another person or having an impact on another person, which might produce a sense of power. From a relational point of view, we look at the quality of the impact on the other person and on the relationship. Does this change have value for both (or more) people and the relationship? Does the relationship expand, grow, and become more mutually empowering as well as contribute to the movement and growth of others beyond this immediate relationship?

Another way of framing “relational competence” is to speak of the ability to participate in growth-fostering relationships. This is the ability to “move” someone or a relationship in the emotional, cognitive, and behavioral realm. The Latin root for “emotion” is the verb “*motere* . . . to move” (Oxford English Dictionary, 1971). It is in being in touch with our own feelings—and with our own hearts—that we touch the hearts of others and both people grow.

Relational competence involves:

1. movement toward mutuality and mutual empathy (caring and learning flows both ways), where empathy expands for both self and other;
2. the development of anticipatory empathy, noticing and caring about our impact on others;
3. being open to being influenced;
4. enjoying relational curiosity;
5. experiencing vulnerability as inevitable and a place of potential growth rather than danger; and
6. creating good connection rather than exercising power over others as the path of growth.

Relational competence occurs within a context of wishing to empower others and appreciating the life-giving nature of community building, of creating strength with others rather than in isolation.

Obstacles to Relational Competence

There are several obstacles to the development of a sense of relational competence and many routes to the silencing of women’s relational voices (Gilligan, 1982) and the disappearing of women’s relational

ways of being (Fletcher, 1996). As Beverly Tatum notes, "dominant groups, by definition set the parameters within which the subordinates operate. They define a mythical norm" (1983, p. 23). Dominant groups insure their power advantage by directly and indirectly subverting the competence and limiting the power of connection among the subordinate groups. Karen Laing noted, "Isolation functions as the glue that holds oppression in place" (Laing, 1998). This is a profound truth. Undermining the sense of competence and courage of a person or a group also serves to keep oppression in place. Thus to increase connection and a sense of competence, particularly among marginalized or disenfranchised groups, threatens prevailing norms and power dynamics. It is a revolutionary act.

The development of relational competence depends on being in a context that is responsive to one's voice and actions. Resistance to interpersonal influence is a major impediment to relational competence. Nonresponsiveness is also a major component of the exercise of "power-over"; those in power are taught to resist the influence of others. Maccoby (1990) has noted this resistance to influence in 3-1/2-year-old boys and this resistance increases as boys grow older. In fact, a defining characteristic of boyhood and manhood in this culture is the capacity to resist influence, particularly from females. Studies have indicated that between the ages of 3-1/2 and 5-1/2 all children show a dramatic increase in their efforts to influence other people (Maccoby, 1990). This may be a time when children are particularly focused on exploring the world of interpersonal competence. However, the ways girls and boys attempt to influence others differ. Girls tend to make suggestions; whereas, boys make more direct demands. Furthermore and more importantly, in the two years before school, boys appear to actively develop strategies to resist being influenced by others. While, in part, these may be strategies of disconnection, I would suggest that they are invoked largely because of the competitive ethos that pervades the socialization of boys.

In a Western European system, in order to compete successfully (hence, to be a competent male), one must not be vulnerable. One must be armored. I believe denial of vulnerability is one of the greatest costs of male socialization. It also places significant strain on relationships. While girls are still effective in influencing other girls and adults, they progressively fail to have an impact on boys. Eleanor Maccoby, in her classic review of these patterns, suggests that, "girls find it aversive to try to interact with someone who is unresponsive and that they begin to avoid such

partners" (Maccoby, 1990, p. 343). Gender segregated play groups become powerful socializing environments, with boys and girls learning very different styles of interaction and play. Boys are more likely to interrupt one another, refuse to comply with others demands, and threaten others. All-girl groups are more likely to express agreement and pause to give another girl a chance to speak.

But in adolescence girls and boys move into mixed sex pairings and groups. The boys, armored to resist influence from others, meet the girls who are organized around relationship and mutual responsiveness. Because the competitive, influence-resistant style is the socially privileged and dominant style, the girls' more mutual and relational approach is seen as deficient, with very serious results for the girls and for our total society, as Gilligan (1990) suggests.

Obstacles to Relational Competence/Gender Issues

In primary heterosexual pairings women complain often of being "stonewalled," not listened to, not taken in, not having impact. A recent study by Gottman et al. (1998) of married couples suggests that divorce is predicted most accurately in marriage by a husband's refusal to accept influence from his wife. Very succinctly Gottman notes "husbands do not want to share power with their wives." The issue of avoiding influence is clearly a power dynamic. To be denied the ability to influence another person is to be disempowered and to have one's relational competence undermined.

It worries me that the nonresponsive neutrality of traditional therapies is similarly disempowering and undermining of the development of a sense of relational competence for both clients and therapists. Many therapists get caught in needing to appear to be the expert or needing to appear to be perfectly warm, loving people. When they are inevitably thrown off balance or feel vulnerable during some of the therapy work, they sometimes attribute it to the "manipulativeness" of the client or the client's use of "projective identification."

The traditional culture of therapy supports the following myths of competence: therapists are the experts; change is unilateral; and the person with power, the therapist, should be invulnerable or should not be too emotionally responsive. In such a professional context, the therapist who believes in mutual empathy, the importance of being moved and being emotionally present, may inevitably feel she is "doing it wrong." Further, if she believes she has to be

an expert, she will often feel incompetent and fraudulent, particularly when she experiences uncertainty or needs to ask for consultation (which I consider to be a clear sign of relational competence rather than incompetence). In fact, serious difficulty occurs in therapy when therapists deny their vulnerability and refuse to reach out for help from colleagues.

I have written about shame in the therapist and I think much of this is anchored in unrealistic expectations about how we should be able to help our clients (Jordan, 1989). Managed care and increasing expectations for quick, clear fix-ups only add to the burden that many therapists already feel. I think many of us spend much time struggling with a sense of incompetence or that recurring feeling that, “surely someone else would be better at this than I am” (or maybe I should just speak for myself).

Therapists’ sense of incompetence can become a major source of disconnection. When I feel helpless and unable to bring something useful to a therapy session, I often feel incompetent. I *believe* in the mystery of therapy and I *believe* in staying open in vulnerability. Unfortunately, in therapy sessions that are particularly challenging or unclear, the old voices of supervisors in my head or what I call the rules of “the general internalized psychotherapy culture,” demand I have more clarity and certainty than I do. In the face of my own internal critics, I begin to pull out of connection with myself and with my client. As I withdraw, I sink into a deeper sense of incompetence. The irony, of course, is that in therapy, the more I can move into being present in relationship, the more effective the therapy is. Healing is about *staying with*, providing an opportunity for connection, and bringing awareness to patterns of disconnection. Stephen Levine noted, “Healing is to enter with mercy and awareness that which has been withdrawn from in judgment and hatred” (Levine, 1997, p. 17). While this sounds so seamless and easy, in practice, it is challenging and confounding at times! We struggle to bring this attitude of compassion to both our clients and ourselves.

Further, unrealistic expectations of ourselves as human beings are epidemic among therapists. A seasoned, exceptionally talented therapist I am treating noted recently that she spends most of her time feeling fraudulent with her clients. She stated, “If they knew all of the confusion and personal struggles that exist in my life, they would never listen to me.” Struggling with these feelings myself, I said something muted or stiff like, “I’m not sure we have to be relational experts in our own lives to be decent

therapists.” She, being quite attuned, scanned my face and said, “Oh, I’m not the only one!” and we shared a moment of ironic laughter.

I know that when I am caught up in trying to preserve some image of myself as “the good therapist” or “the psychologically healthy adult,” I am likely, in fact, to be less present and less relationally competent. Preoccupations with images of who we are or who we *should* be take us out of authentic connection and close us down. This happens in and out of therapy.

Relational Competence in Organizations

Pressure to be the expert, the authority at the top dispensing wisdom is widespread. I would like to share another vignette about the pressure to be “the expert” from the world of business. Laura is a woman in the Stone Center’s study group that is exploring relational practice in organizations and institutions. This vignette exemplifies another way in which relational competence can be completely congruent with and contribute to effective work practices—competence and connection do not have to be at odds.

Laura, who is a senior corporate vice president, noted that she took a job managing a large engineering group whose technology she knew only superficially. In her first week, the project team, many consisting of 10-year veterans with this product, was holding a meeting to determine if the new product was ready to ship. She attended the meeting expecting to take a back seat. When she entered the room, the meeting fell silent. All eyes turned to her. With a sinking feeling, she reports, she realized the decision would be hers. Not because she had the information to make the decision, but because she had the positional responsibility to do so. To avoid that responsibility would be to let the group feel leaderless. To make the decision independently would have been foolhardy if not impossible (although that’s what the situation pulled for). So she outlined the process they would use. She would make the decision and take responsibility if it turned out badly. But first, she’d do some research. She went around the room asking each person, “If you were in my shoes, what would you decide and why?” By the end of the meeting she was able to make a decision, informed by all the real decision makers, the project team (Woodburn, 1998).

In this example, Laura demonstrates the ability to move aside from the expectations for expert, top-down leadership and the unrealistic expectations for an expertise she couldn’t possibly hold, and she makes beautiful use of relational competence. She turns to the other workers, the people with the relevant experience, and invites them to take part in the process

at the same time that she accepts her defined task as the one who holds the responsibility.

Expanding our notions of competence, then, involves moving away from the dissociated manipulation of objects or from an abstract intellectual exercise, to an appreciation of relational competence and the capacity to make things happen for the good of the relationship and the community. A part of this expansion is bringing into clear articulation and focus that which gets devalued and “disappeared,” a term Joyce Fletcher has used (Fletcher, 1996).

Relational competence, as shown by Laura, is not a function of some intuitive, biologically given instinct that women possess. It involves vision, philosophy, emotional and cognitive skills, and the development of relational practice. There is relational problem-solving in which the power of dialogue, of asking for help, and of sharing uncertainty is openly acknowledged. Cooperative efforts, rather than competitive one-upmanship are encouraged. There is value placed on competence that is in service of the community. When we build relational competence in organizations, we work to empower others and the project, the work, or the community, not just to assert self-dominance or elevate individual needs (Fletcher, 1996).

Resistance and Transformation

Operating within a system that overemphasizes certainty, competitive success, and tough adversarial standards of conduct disempowers people who value connection and community. bell hooks speaks of the power of the black women’s “oppositional gaze” (hooks, 1991). Tracy Robinson and Janie Ward (1991), writing about African American girls, speak about transforming the “resistance of survival” to the “resistance for liberation.” They point to the importance of African American women acknowledging the problems of, and demanding change in, an environment that oppresses them, thus transforming self-directed anger into striving for justice. One approach to helping women and other marginalized groups is to foster awareness of the specific expectations and standards of the dominant group and to explicitly critique and name alternative values or ways of constructing reality. The shaming and silencing strategies of the dominant group can be countered with this consciousness along with the support of others who share this awareness.

When I was helping to organize a women’s treatment program at a psychiatric hospital, one of the early tasks given to us by the administration was to make an organizational chart of our program. All of

us in the leadership group knew what an organizational chart looked like but we felt that the usual box at the top, followed by two boxes down, etc., did not fit the way we were trying to operate. So we put together an organizational chart made up of intersecting circles. At the top of the page we placed the patient council and advisors. We placed what we thought of as the leadership coordinating committee at the bottom.

When we showed the chart to the chief administrator of the hospital, his first response was, “Didn’t anyone teach you how to make an organizational chart?” When we responded that we were well aware of what many people’s organizational charts looked like and that we felt our chart did in fact represent our program, his next question was, “But who do we go to when we need a decision made?” We noted that we had a committee that made decisions, in consultation with the other groups. This was met with an exasperated, “Oh, ladies! . . . Who do we go to when we want a *final* decision?” We persisted. Hence, we were persistently treated as if we were quite incompetent leaders and quite irritating people. Together we held our ground. But, when we were dealt with alone (and that was a definite strategy of disempowerment by the administration), each of us often felt more anxious and we would rush back to the others to shore ourselves up.

At a recent conference on relational leadership, a woman in the audience noted she had been chided by a boss for being too interested in “the soft stuff,” the emotional, relational aspects in her company. Initially she felt ashamed that she was not thinking about the really important stuff—the hard stuff, the *real* stuff. Then, when she thought about it she realized “the soft stuff is the real stuff.” However, it is often the unacknowledged, invisible, dismissed and demeaned stuff. It is the stuff of relational competence.

Am I the Problem?

We need to develop critical relational consciousness and question social norms that devalue and undermine relational values. We need to question situations that leave girls and women feeling, much too frequently, that, “I am the problem.” Perhaps just asking the simple question, “Am I really the problem?” would begin to free girls and women from blaming ourselves and accepting the shame that the culture puts on us for functioning in a way different from the dominant patterns. bell hooks enjoins us to see the social world critically and to oppose ideas which disempower us and all women (hooks, 1984).

We need to be critical or resistant, not to disempower other people but to disempower the disempowering ideas and values. We must be careful not to focus only on changing the girls to increase their sense of connection and competence but, more importantly, to focus on changing the systems within which the girls lose their voices, their sense of competence, and their real sense of connection with themselves and others.

I want to suggest several beginning strategies for resistance and transformation. These might also be seen as anti-shaming strategies: 1) naming the problem; 2) complaining; 3) claiming/reframing strengths; and 4) developing communities of resilience and courage.

Naming the Problem and Noticing Who Makes the Rules

Naming what is valued and privileged in any situation is essential. Pointing to the fact that these standards and values are created by a particular community removes their absolute power. Developing critical awareness of existing norms and practices is the first step to dismantling them. Alternate values and practices then need to be named and encouraged. Whenever “outsiders,” however, are critical of the prevailing way of doing things and suggest changes, they are often met with the disempowering response of “you will be *lowering* (not *changing*) the standards.”

There could be nothing more transformative for the dominant American culture than shifting from the myth of “rugged individualism” to embracing the centrality of connection. We need to develop an ethic of empowering people who will in turn empower others to develop expanding circles of care and competence, a kind of “relational ripple.” We need to exercise competence in the service of community, to “uplift the community rather than assert individual rights” (Belenky et al., 1997), to develop womankind and mankind (Women don’t object too vigorously to being lumped as mankind, but what man would stand for being called a part of womankind?). We need multiple perspectives on competence; we particularly need to listen to people on the margin, the greatest social critics and sources of new strength available to us. In the year 2000, 65% of entrants into the workplace will be women and minorities. The margin will be the center.

Complaining

In transforming the knee jerk question “What’s wrong with women?” whenever women don’t fit in, we need to listen carefully to women’s complaints. Complaining is one of the most important human

capacities we can exercise to name injustice and seek change—if someone is listening (Jordan, 1997). Women’s complaints about many social systems, including the workplace, schools, and therapy, are not signs of women’s weakness. Women and other marginalized people (e.g., people of color, gays and lesbians, the physically challenged) are the potential leaders for transformation of the existing disconnected and nonrelational social systems. But we are silenced when we complain (“Don’t you women ever do anything but whine and complain?”). We are criticized if we speak with a clear, firm voice (I was called “strident” three times on a panel by a male scholar who professes to be a friend of feminism). You’re damned if you do and damned if you don’t. As Beverly Tatum notes, writing primarily about racism, “racism is a system of advantage based on race. Someone benefits from racism or sexism . . . The targeted group is labeled as defective or substandard in significant ways” (Tatum, 1997, p. 23). In other words, oppression is a way of making people feel incompetent. We *need* to complain. With encouragement from others, complaints become protest. When protest is supported by community, it becomes social action. When communities join together to protest and take social action, social revolution is born.

Moving Out of Silence

Mary Belenky et al. (1997) asked why do so many smart women feel so dumb? How are smart women led to believe they have nothing important to say? A very bright and articulate colleague was commenting on her usual stance in a rather adversarial academic seminar with peers. She noted that whenever she starts to think about saying anything contradictory, she goes blank. Later, driving away from the meeting, she recovers what it is she had hoped to say. I remember sitting in agonizing silence in adversarial seminar after seminar in graduate school, unable to speak, fearful I had nothing to say. My silence increased after the only other two women in this nine-person program dropped out at the end of the first year. I was told by a professor and two fellow students that I was “wasting space” in the program because as a woman I would never fully use this education. I was reminded of my mother’s story when she bravely traveled across the country to apply in person for admission to medical school 50 years earlier. She was told, “Why don’t you go home, find a nice husband, and raise a family?” (She didn’t take this advice.)

One well-meaning professor of mine suggested I

had a phobia about speaking in public and lent me a relaxation tape and cognitive behavioral workbook. I felt stupid, embarrassed, and I tried hard to improve myself. I, like my professor, felt I was the problem. I remember another occasion when each person in our Stone Center theory group, began to share our fears that we weren't really smart, that our ideas weren't that new. As I listened to each of my colleagues, I could barely believe my ears that these intelligent women had any doubts about their competence, but as I uttered my own doubts and fears, spoke my own conviction of incompetence, I felt like I was speaking the deep, dark truth.

Claiming Strength

In an interdependent world, we need cooperation more than competition. Those who buy into the competitive, individualistic model often believe that those who urge cooperation do so because they do not have the strength or the resources to "go it alone." Naming the strengths involved in relational competence, making these strengths explicit and clear is a first step. The skills of mutual empathy, connection building, empowering others, anticipatory empathy, and contributing to the community can be detailed and celebrated. We also have to find ways to stay connected to our internal resources as well as the resources in the world around us. This involves connecting with external allies who can validate and support our truths as well as push us to grow, as we encourage them to build their authentic strength as well.

Community

Importantly, we need to remember that strength and competence grow in context, with ongoing encouragement and support. We generate resilience and courage in community. African American women speak of "community othermothers" who help nurture community by listening and encouraging others into voice. Given the right context, the right listening, I can be smarter than I am smart and in other circumstances I am dumber than I am dumb. Bernice Johnston Reagon of *Sweet Honey in the Rock* notes, "Black women have had to have the standing power of rocks and of mountains—cold and hard, strong and stationary. That quality has often obscured the fact that inside the strength, partnering the sturdiness, we are as honey. If our world is warm, honey flows and so do we. If it is cold, stiff and stay put, so do we" (Reagon, 1993, p. 24).

Morrie Schwartz, quoted as he was dying, suggested, "The way you get meaning into your life is to devote yourself to loving others, devote yourself to

your community around you and devote yourself to creating something that gives you purpose and meaning" (Albom, 1997, p. 43). Stephen Levine noted, "Love is the only rational act" (Ibid., p. 52). In order to transform a culture of disconnection into a culture of connection we need to develop new images of strength, in which vulnerability, connection building, serving others, seeking justice, and being encouraged and emboldened *by community as we build community* are at the core. The existing privileged models of success and competence, which are characterized by defensive armoring and disconnection, are not working. A woman at a meeting recently asked me if I knew what gave the giant sequoia trees their strength. When I admitted I didn't know, she said they actually have very shallow roots but the roots of nearby trees intertwine and support one another. These biggest and oldest of trees, these images of power and strength literally hold each other up (A follow-up call to Muir woods confirmed this.). We need to move beyond models of resistance to models of transformation.

We need to shift the dominant images away from war-making and elevation of individual specialness to the creation and sustenance of connection and community. There is nothing wrong with someone who wants to give and serve and contribute to the growth of others. There is something wrong with a culture that cannot appreciate and validate the centrality of connection in the world.

Concluding Comments

Finally, I want to leave you with two playful images, two points, two questions, and two poems, mostly borrowed from others.

The two playful images:

1. The expansive movement of relational ripples.
2. A global singing group called the "Resister Sisters."

The two points:

1. Isolation is the glue that holds oppression in place (Liang, 1998).
2. The soft stuff *is* the real stuff.

The two questions:

1. Why do so many smart women feel so dumb?
2. Am I *really* the problem?

The two poems:

Rose Sanders, Civil rights worker (Belenky, e al., 1997, p. 258):

I want to lift my sister up. She is not heavy
If I don't lift her up, I will fall down
I want to lift my brother up. He is not heavy
If I don't lift him up, I will fall down
I want to lift my people up. They are not heavy
If I don't lift them up, I will fall down

Ella Baker's Song by Bernice Johnson Reagon of
Sweet Honey in the Rock (Ibid., p. 93):

That which touches me most
Is that I had a chance to work with people
Passing on to others
That which was passed to me

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