Valuing Vulnerability:  
New Definitions of Courage  

Judith V. Jordan, Ph.D.

About the Author  
Judith V. Jordan, Ph.D., is Co-Director and a  
Founding Scholar of the Jean Baker Miller Training  
Institute at the Stone Center, which is part of the Wellesley  
Centers for Women at Wellesley College. She is also an  
Assistant Professor of Psychiatry at Harvard Medical  
School. Dr. Jordan is co-author of Women’s Growth in  
Connection, editor of Women’s Growth in Diversity, and  
avuthor of numerous chapters and working papers exploring  
the practice and applications of the Relational-Cultural  
Theory (RCT).

Abstract  
In a dominant, Western culture that celebrates  
strength in separation and holds unrealistic expectations  
for independent, autonomous functioning, vulnerability is  
seen as a handicap. This system creates the illusion of an  
vulnerable and separate self, and uses individualistic  
standards to measure a person’s worth. Since these  
unrealistic expectations cannot be humanly attained, these  
controlling images become the source of shame and  
disconnection. RCT suggests that there is value in  
embracing vulnerability and in providing support, both at  
an individual and a societal level, for the inevitable  
vulnerability of all people. Rather than espousing the  
individual, mostly mythical, traits of a “lone hero,” RCT  
moves us toward new and important pathways to resilience  
and courage through connection.

A version of this paper was originally presented at the  
2002 Learning From Women Conference, co-sponsored by  
Harvard Medical School and the Jean Baker Miller  
Training Institute.

It is always exciting to be here at the Learning from  
Women Conference, but as many of you know, this  
particular conference still fills me with the strangest  
mixture of excitement and anxiety. This year’s  
conference seemed especially hard to prepare for. My  
topic, working with vulnerability and courage in  
connection, arose partly in response to the events of  
September 11th. But it seemed like these ideas have  
been speaking to me for a while, though  
unfortunately, rather softly and unclearly.

In a recent dream, I was sitting with Irene Stiver,  
saying that I just couldn’t do this conference without  
her. We were sitting on a balcony of some stately-  
looking building with a lot of people. It turned out  
that we were already at the conference and Irene was  
saying, “I’m here, I’m here.” I was feeling better as  
she spoke to me; it was a dream image of courage in  
connection, if you will. Many of you may know that  
Irene was here for the Harvard women’s conference in  
2000. That day is very much with me today as it was  
hers last professional presentation. She was diagnosed  
with lung cancer a week after that conference and died  
four months later. I want to dedicate this talk to her.  
I also want to dedicate it to Jean Baker Miller, another  
dear friend and colleague who has taught me much  
about courage in connection. Jean first signed me on  
to present at an Orthopsychiatry conference in  
Toronto. When I protested that I was phobic about  
speaking in public and asked if someone else could  
give the paper I wrote, Jean gently suggested we  
should take the notion of voice seriously. She  
encouraged and supported me to come into my voice.  

At that conference, my short paper on empathy  
and the mother-daughter relationship, given with  
much trepidation, engendered the following question  
from a man in the audience: “Dr. Jordan, would you  
care to comment on the implications of empathy for  
Marxist and Capitalist systems of government?” My  
mouth dropped open and I started to dissociate. Then
I looked at Irene on one side of me and Jan Surrey on the other for the support that I knew would be there. With their silent encouragement, I managed to say, “That’s an interesting question, I’m sure you have some thoughts about that,” and indeed he did. He went on to give a short talk. The man’s question was profound, but I just wasn’t “present” enough to grasp its significance. The Relational-Cultural Model, while very relevant to the practice of therapy and personal relationships, is not just a sweet theory about “cozy” or “nice” connection. It presents a challenge to the dominant paradigms of separation, radical individualism, certainty and images of invulnerability both in and out of therapy.

To Irene, Jean, and all of my colleagues here, I thank you for helping create the courage to try to forge new models of human development and human connection and new ways of understanding women. And to all of you, I thank you for helping to listen us into voice, for encouraging us. I share my sense of vulnerability and my hope for the power of curiosity, openness, learning, and growing in connection. This work is partly about ideas, but it is also about our hearts, our lives, our hopes, and our passions.

**Courage in Connection**

Courage is ordinarily depicted as a characteristic of the lone, separate person who defies vulnerability and fear. In a paper written in 1990, I suggested that courage, unlike macho defiance of fear, is the capacity to act meaningfully and with integrity in the face of acknowledged vulnerability. There is no real courage where vulnerability and fear are denied. According to the Oxford English Dictionary (1971), the word courage derives from the Latin root “cor” meaning, “heart” and it lists the first definition as, “the heart as the seat of feeling, thought.” Traditional Eurocentric culture extols courage as a trait to be found in the solitary individual, an internal characteristic existing within a person who often faces her or his fate alone. This propagates a myth of “separate courage” rather than “courage in connection.”

Seeing courage only as an internal, solitary trait eliminates an understanding of the way people help to engender and support one another’s courage. It obscures the fact that we all need encouragement throughout our lives in order to stay vital and confident, to bring our most deep and real energy into connection. Courage involves bringing our truth into relationship. It often involves the courage to move into conflict. Bringing ourselves authentically into relationship leads to inevitable conflict around difference, and the courage to move into conflict is essential for growth and change. Courage also involves building resistance to the radical individualism of the dominant culture, challenging the definitions that are imposed on the less powerful by the more powerful, and importantly, challenging the messages that make the less powerful “the problem.”

Carol Gilligan (Gilligan, Rogers, & Tolman, 1991) alerted us to the importance of political resistance in psychological theory. Janie Ward (2000) has written about the special quality of resistance for liberation for African American adolescent girls. Patricia Hill Collins (2000) notes that “the authority to define societal values is a major instrument of power.” She also notes that, in resistance, “There is a refusal to accept the applied definitions and identities from the dominant group” (p. 69). In resistance, we say to the dominant culture, “you cannot define who I am or convince me that I do not belong” (Ibid., p. 39).

As women and as people concerned with helping others, we need to resist the myth of the lone individual conquering nature, being master of his fate, in control, certain of and moving to a position of power over others as confirmation of his strength, and trying to maintain images of being invulnerable and independent. We need to offer models of courage that emphasize our ongoing need for connection and encouragement. Similarly, we need to challenge the construction that suggests desire for connection and need of others is the territory of weak and emotionally immature women. We need to challenge the dominant images of “power over” others, as they shape experiences of gender, race, class, and sexual orientation. We need to question the power of binary thinking that objectifies and creates opposition around difference (weak or strong, poor or rich, gay or straight, black or white).

When we have the courage to move beyond certainty and invulnerability we enter the world of learning, curiosity, and, dare I say, love. We risk the hope of becoming part of something larger, transcending the illusion of the separate self. We can enjoy the spaciousness of real humility or we can become paralyzed with shame, a sense of personal inadequacy. The need for certainty can lead to imposition of simplistic categorizations, whether they be diagnoses or social categories which distort the experience of both the namer and the named. To be present in life and in the therapeutic relationship, we must dwell in uncertainty. In order to do this, we must tolerate our own and the other person’s vulnerability and we must create safe contexts and systems in which this can happen. In individualistic systems,