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# Courage in Connection: Conflict, Compassion, Creativity

Judith V. Jordan, Ph.D.

## **About the Author**

Judith V. Jordan, Ph.D., is Director of Women's Studies, Assistant Director of Training in Psychology, and Associate Psychologist at McLean Hospital, Belmont, Mass. She is also Instructor in Psychiatry at Harvard Medical School and a Visiting Scholar at the Stone Center, Wellesley, Mass.

## **Abstract**

Courage is ordinarily depicted as a characteristic of the lone, separate person who defies vulnerability and fear. This paper emphasizes, instead, the contextual, relational nature of courage. In a relational model, action informed by fear and supported by the encouragement of others replaces a notion of solitary accomplishment and suppression of vulnerability. In particular, the courage to move into conflict is examined. Patriarchal systems attempt to isolate and silence members of the subordinate groups in an effort to deflect conflict. Relationships based on mutuality eliminate established patterns of entitlement and "power over." The capacity to move into "good conflict" is essential to relationships based on mutuality. Courage in connection and the capacity to work for relational expansion through good conflict challenge traditional patterns of power; they also expose the profoundly nonmutual and anti-relational biases present in our culture.

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In the development of mutually empathic relationships, we are vulnerable to being moved and affected by others; and we seek movement and responsiveness in the other person. Tonight, I would like to address the vulnerability, courage, and conflict that exist in deep and creative connection.

## **Responses to vulnerability**

The ways a culture treats differences between people, especially with regard to images of strength and weakness, shape the ways that individuals value and respond to each other. In this light, I have become increasingly concerned about our society's images of strength and its attitudes toward vulnerability. To be vulnerable, according to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, is to be "susceptible of receiving wounds or physical injury; open to attack." Depending on the context in which we feel vulnerable, we may, in fact, be in danger, open to injury. Vulnerability often can constitute a realistic reason for anxiety in a competitive, nonmutual system, because the vulnerable are often exploited or dismissed. When vulnerability feels unsafe, we often deny it in ourselves or others. Then we project our disavowed feelings onto others and either punish them or control their experience (what some might call *projective identification*). This denial is profoundly anti-relational; it figures importantly in the violation of others, and ultimately, ironically, diminishes our real sense of strength and courage.

For the purposes of this paper, I would like to suggest a more interpersonal and psychological definition of vulnerability as that experience of self in which we are open to the influence of others at the same time that we are open to our need for others; what we reveal of ourselves is relatively undistorted by defense. The sense of "being in control" or having "power over" lessens when we feel vulnerable; we are subject to being "moved" by internal, affective experience as well as to being affected by other people

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and external conditions. (I must say, this sounds a lot like being alive and in healthy, close relationship!) In an empathic or compassionate milieu, we honor emotional openness and reward trust with care and respect; furthermore, in the process of *en-couragement* (what some might call *empowerment*), we help people grow toward a greater sense of confidence and vitality. We accept vulnerability as an inevitable part of being alive, important to the development of growth-enhancing connections. Without this acceptance, pretense and defense deaden relationships. But given the larger cultural context, it still takes courage to explore our vulnerability.

In a culture which idealizes power over others and views competitive hierarchy as a necessary means to concretize power differentials (a decidedly nonmutual system), the subordinate groups come to “hold” characteristics of “weakness” and vulnerability which are disavowed and disowned by the dominant group (Miller, 1986). Using the psychological mechanisms of denial and projection, then, people identify with the “strong” or the “weak,” and neither group is free to experience wholeness; individual relationships mirror these dynamics of fragmentation and pretense. Our sense of safety *with* others and our psychological openness to being influenced or “moved” by others are incompatible with a competitive system. Denial, combined with “power over,” leads to further suppression of the frightening reminders of the ultimate lack of control inherent in all life. This factor worries me most: We are resorting increasingly to violence against and abuse of those who are less powerful and therefore vulnerable. The more vehement our denial and suppression of our own vulnerability, the more violent is our response to it in others. I believe we are seeing this with sexual abuse of children; increasing incidents of violence against gays and lesbians; intimidation and coercion of people of color; the raping and battering of women; the casting aside of aging women by panicked, or merely bored, mid-life spouses who replace them with younger “perfect 10s;” and, finally, the sexual abuse of clients in therapy (something I will speak more about later).

Major gender differences in our attitudes toward vulnerability contribute to some of these societal problems. In particular, boys are taught to deny or master internal and external circumstances which generate vulnerable or helpless feelings. Competitive ethics suggest that the other’s relative weakness enhances one’s own chances for advancement or assertion of dominance. Conversely, one’s own vulnerability signals that one is in danger. That men

have tremendous difficulty moving into self-disclosure and intimate exchange is a painful consequence of this socialization. Girls, on the other hand, enjoy far more latitude to be emotionally open, and they are encouraged to support or protect this quality in others. Vulnerability in others, then, tends to evoke compassion or nurturance in those socialized toward caregiving, but it evokes exploitation and violence in those socialized toward dominance.

### **Redefining courage**

Our culture’s definitions of courage tend to deny the experience of vulnerability. We laud “fearlessness” where there should be an equal challenge to feel fear, a signal that can inform responsible action. Nowhere do we see the awful consequences of this confusion of fearlessness with true courage more vividly than in the lethality statistics for adolescent boys. Under the gun to prove their masculinity in terms of strength and “guts,” they die in large numbers, taking absurd risks while avoiding or suppressing their very real and potentially useful feelings of fear (Greenberg, Carey, & Popper, 1985; Thorson & Powell, 1987).

I would like to suggest 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. Interpersonal courage grows in the committed and open movement of authentic being toward engaging with another person.

The word *courage*, according to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, derives from the Latin root *cor*, meaning, *heart*, for which the first definition listed is: “The heart as the seat of feeling, thought.” Narrow and stereotyped notions of courage, however, have dominated what little psychological literature on the subject exists. We study soldiers in combat, astronauts, parachutists, and bomb disposal experts to exemplify the qualities of courage which our culture recognizes (Rachman, 1990). We emphasize action, will, and perseverance in the face of danger, particularly in death’s face, and overlook the capacity to act in the presence of strong affect, particularly fear. We would rather stress action to defy death than allow the feelings which remind us of our ultimate vulnerability to death.

We also extol courage as a trait to be found in the solitary individual, an internal characteristic existing in a person who often faces her or his fate alone. Although we elaborate a myth of “separate courage” rather than “courage in connection,” the few