

Work In Progress

The Woman-Man Relationship: Impasses and Possibilities

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Abstract

In this paper we describe the format of workshops designed to bring men and women together to explore the impact of gender differences in relationships, and to provide a context in which to work toward creating mutuality in male-female relationships. We identify prototypical impasses between men and women, suggest structures to help relationships move through these impasses, describe different pathways to mutuality for men and women, and discuss clinical applications.

As the work of the Stone Center (Jordan, Kaplan, Miller, Stiver, Surrey; 1991), Gilligan (1982, 1990), and others has evolved over the past decade, we have begun to appreciate the different gender-related pathways of psychological development. The stage is set for a crucial dialogue to begin - for men and women to come together to describe and explore the impact of these differences and to struggle not only for equality but for mutuality in relationship. By mutual relationship we refer to what Miller (1986) and Surrey (1985) have described as growth-fostering relationships characterized by mutual engagement, mutual empathy, and mutual empowerment.

As old systems of relationship break down, new visions are called for. The historical roots of the male-female relationship are thousands of years old and are embedded in a patriarchal system which has shaped our institutions, our thinking, and the patterning of our relationships. As we work toward change, we must recognize the weight and depth of this history. Clinically as well as culturally, we see many couples struggling with very similar relational impasses. It is essential for both women and men to move out of a sense of personal deficiency, pathology, or blame - as we are *all* called on to participate in this cultural transformation of the dynamics of relationship. So far there have not been adequate opportunities to work *together* on these challenges.

In an effort to meet this need, we led our first gender workshop in 1988, "New Visions of the Male-Female Relationship: Creating Mutuality." Since then, we have conducted this workshop more than twenty times, and its evolution has involved almost eight hundred people, including men and women clinicians, college and medical students, and couples, in Holland, Istanbul, Turkey, and four-year-olds in an American preschool. Usually the men and women do *not* come in couples, except in workshops designed explicitly for couples. The workshops are designed for specific

periods of time, from three hours to three days. Almost without exception, it is the first time in their lives that participants have come together with members of the other gender for the purpose of exploring gender differences and relationships.

In this paper we'd like to describe what happens in these workshops and what we are learning about how women and men struggle for mutuality. We believe that the workshops are a microcosm of the larger culture, suggesting contexts for facilitating positive growth and change in relationships. We will also discuss implications and applications for clinical work with individuals and couples.

The workshops were originally designed on the model of relational mutuality - namely, that healthy, growth-enhancing relationships are built on experiences of mutual engagement, mutual empathy, mutual authenticity, and mutual empowerment. In designing the workshops, we were also influenced by political workshops created at the Center for Psychological Study in the Nuclear Age in Cambridge, MA to foster Soviet-American relationships. In those workshops *intergroup dialogue* was a central facilitating structure. Constructive conflict and *struggling with difference* are inevitable in relationships. They stimulate growth when the creative tension of *staying with the differences* is supported by the relational context. What Miller has called "waging good conflict" (1976) can lead to growth and enlargement of relationships. The gender workshops are designed to bring out prototypical conflicts and impasses between men and women, and then to offer structures and strategies for breaking through the impasses and for building connection.

Our work up to his point has been primarily with white, middle-class, highly educated men and women, although in most workshops there are members of various ages, sexual preference, race, class, and ethnicity, who have spoken up to represent their different perspectives. We are hoping to find ways to explore more explicitly the impact of diversity on the dynamics of woman-man relationships. The men who have come to these workshops represent a highly select sample - those who will risk doing such work.

Riane Eisler, in her book *The Chalice and the Blade* (1987), calls for the creation of a new form of relationship - moving beyond the power-over, "dominator" model to what she calls the new "partnership" model, which finds its roots in the pre-Bronze Age, prepatriarchal cultures she has studied. Eisler views this evolution as part of a whole

paradigm shift, corresponding to new models of science, physics, and biology, as well as shifts toward global awareness.

In our workshops, we emphasize the qualities of creativity which contribute to mutuality. Moving beyond old models of self-development as the basis for healthy relationship, such as consolidating identity, healthy narcissism, assertiveness, or firm ego boundaries - we emphasize the relational and creative qualities which foster growth-enhancing connection. To name a few: curiosity, flexibility, spontaneity, freedom of movement, patience, persistence, humility, playfulness, humor, and also intuition, risk taking, trying out new perspectives and configurations, paradoxical thinking, holding opposites simultaneously, knowing when to hold and when to let go, and openness to change.

The importance of creativity has not yet been fully recognized in the study of human relationships. Like most psychological characteristics, it has been studied primarily in traditionally male realms - the arts and sciences - and not yet in its fundamental forms in daily life and relationships, where women's creativity has often gone unrecognized.

The Workshop

The workshop begins with a discussion of the larger cultural context, and how important we feel it is for peacemaking and global survival. We discuss the range and limits of our own particular experience, and how issues of class, race, age, and heterosexual orientation make significant differences. We also take up the issue of stereotyping, emphasizing that we are working with *group differences* between men and women, cognizant that these will not describe any particular man or woman. Recognizing our own particularities, we begin to articulate a relational perspective on women's and men's psychological development, assuming a basic underlying motive and desire for human connection in both groups. Janet describes the Stone Center relational model of development and the paradigm shift that we will be using in the workshop. This involves a complex model, encompassing a sense of self but also a sense of the other and a sense of the relationship, stressing what Stern calls "self-with-other" experiences (1985). Healthy connection implies an awareness of and care for self, other, and the relationship, and none of these can be sacrificed in the search for mutuality. Janet also describes the connections, disconnections, and violations that shape women's experience in this culture, including women's carrying the one-sided

responsibility for the care and maintenance of relationships.

Steve then speaks about reframing men's psychological development from this same relational perspective (Bergman, 1991) and describes "male relational dread," a man's sense, in a close relationship, that he is not enough and therefore must withdraw or attack. As one man described it: "When my wife says 'I love you,' my back starts to sweat." It is essential to provide a common language - conflict, connection, mutuality, empathy, power and dread are named and defined and can then be used as the basis for communication throughout the workshop.

In the second phase of the workshop, men and women are asked to go into separate rooms to answer a prepared questionnaire. Then, breaking each larger gender group into smaller groups of three or four, participants are asked to respond to three questions, with one person recording each small group's answers.

The three questions are:

- 1) Name three strengths the other gender group brings to relationship.
- 2) What do you most want to understand about the other gender group?
- 3) What do you most want the other gender group to understand about you?

The rationale for this is to give each gender group the opportunity to give voice to their particular experience and to stimulate respect, curiosity, interest, and empathy for the other group. The answers to these questions later become the basis for the intergroup dialogue.

When the genders separate for the first time to answer the questions, there is a palpable sense of relief - how much easier it is for members of both genders to be with their own!

The women easily form small groups and seek a group process to answer the questions. They readily engage with each other, and Janet observes the clear relational energies and responsive movements, verbal and nonverbal - there is much hand waving and head nodding - all around the room.

The men, while relieved to be with each other away from the women, begin more slowly, starting with jokes and sarcastic banter, often about having to be there. Many have begun the workshop by holding themselves apart, assuming a critical, contemptuous, or bored stance. Actually, many of the men have been brought under some duress by women - as one said, "dragged kicking and screaming." However when they get with the other men, they become enlivened

and energetic. Filling out the questionnaire in the small group, frequently each man will first write down his *own* list of answers in silence and then join in compiling his list with other individual lists.

Next, all the women come together into one large group with Janet, and the men with Steve, to share their responses with each other and with each of us. Typically, a strong sense of connection between the women evolves quickly. Often the women talk about how much easier it is to be with other women than in a *mixed* group, how much safer and more confident they feel. They speak of how much anxiety and attention go toward monitoring the men's responses.

The men, when they get together in one large group, are often surprised at how similar their individual responses to the questions are. Hearing that other men share the same thoughts and feelings in their relationships with women is a tremendously important step and helps the men to feel accepted and validated by other men for doing this work - what one man jokingly referred to as "the wimp-work of relationship." This men's group eventually becomes energized and cohesive.

We have found that this same-gender group experience is a vitally necessary precursor to the next phase. Janet and the other women are always amazed at the difference in the men when they come back into the mixed gender group, after being together in the men's group: they are no longer stiff or holding back, but energized and curious, and, as Janet once said, "looking so much more *dimensional*."

Men's answers to Question 1

"Name three strengths the other gender group brings to relationship." This question is always the *easiest* for the men to answer. Some of the men's answers about women are:

nurturance, capacity for feeling, sensitivity, speaking emotional truth, realness, self-revealing, interest in working on relationships, courage to raise issues, ability to deal with more than one thing at a time, capacity to ask for support, seeing both sides of a situation, warmth, tenderness, skill at noncompetitive interaction, women are the "waker-uppers" in relationship, women have more patience with children.

Women's answers to Question 1

This, the easiest question for the men, is inevitably the most *difficult* question for the women. (Some groups have said, "None.") It is difficult because the women soon realize that some quality of

men - say, "objectivity" - may be a strength or not, depending on whether or not it is in the service of the relationship, that is, it depends on "the relational context." Here are some of the women's answers about men's strengths:

"caretakers; deep loyalties; relationship through action and projects; lifting heavy objects; rational thinking; focusing on one thing at a time; honesty; directness; can let things go and move on; breadwinners; protectors; know how to deal with fear; alliance builders; not so overwhelmed by feelings; strategic; product makers; purposeful; stabilizers of the relationship; killing spiders; their sex-drive; they make us feel frisky about sex; they have internal heaters at night."

Men's answers to Question 2

"What do you most want to understand about the other gender group?" This question is invariably the *hardest* for the men. The reasons for this are multiple. Women are usually more forthcoming about their experiences, so men have less to ask about. Also, men have been trained away from a curious, open, empathic stance about others and often are concerned that if they ask questions, they won't know how to deal with the emotions stirred up and unleashed. For many men, opening up a connection by asking questions about a woman's experience feels dangerous. As one man said, "I may get caught in an emotional bog;" another, "an emotional swamp." (This "wetland" imagery is quite common.) Men's questions tend to be about women's anger and what women's relational processes are like:

"What are you so angry about? What do you want from me? Why do you expand your processes ad *infinitum*? When you're with your friends, how do you know when to end a conversation? - do you ever actually get anywhere? What is it like to be oppressed? How do you come to personalize relational failure to such a degree? What supports you? What is it like to have your cyclical bodily functions? Why is the sharing of feelings so important? How can your emotions be so fluid? How can you do three things at once? Why do you fake orgasm? How to understand your sensitivity to subtle cues, verbal and nonverbal? How do you stay with your feelings so well? How do you care so much without losing your self? What's this intense need in a relationship? Why do women tend to tolerate men's behavior? What's it like to have babies?"

Women's answers to Question 2

This, the hardest question for men to answer, is

invariably the *easiest* for the women, who have many, many questions. One woman answered, "Everything! I've been waiting my whole life to hear this!" The questions women ask of men center on men's fears and vulnerabilities and the effort to understand men's emotional and relational life:

"What are men's real fears? Why is it so hard to talk about relationships? How can you disconnect actions from emotions, how can you have sex without being emotionally involved? Why the urgency for sex? What is the burden of needing to be successful? What moves you deeply? Do men feel? If so, how and what? What do sports really mean? What do jokes really mean? What helps men overcome their experience of dread? Why won't men go to doctors? Why won't men stop and ask directions? What are you so afraid of in relationships? Why do you have trouble listening? What is the most effective way to teach the harms of patriarchy? How can we engage men in dialogue? What goes on between men that you don't want women to know about? What is it between sons and their mothers? What happens between receiving a message and sending back your response? How can you put yourself first so much of the time? What would it take to get men to become relational without major bloodletting? What's it like to live in a man's body?"

As the women and men return from their separate groups, we ask them to sit on opposite sides of the room. At this point, there is a lot of anxiety and often anger from the men, who begin to complain about the separation - "in a workshop on relationship you shouldn't separate us!" - and often to question our competence as leaders.

We asked one man, who seemed terribly anxious, what was wrong. He said, "I'm afraid that *something might happen!*"

The women are often leaning forward in their chairs, curious, expectant, and one woman replied, "I'm *hoping* that something might happen!"

The men experience the face-to-face setup as an invitation to confrontation, possibly leading to disconnection and maybe even physical withdrawal or violence. Compared to being in the men's group, this is a kind of living hell. As one highly motivated, caring man said, with a mournful sigh, "It was so much easier the old way. You didn't have to work so hard."

This intergroup encounter is the most powerful and poignant time in the workshop. Whether we work for two hours or eight hours (depending on the time available), certain predictable impasses and

breakthroughs occur.

Almost invariably, the women will ask the men to go first and to read their responses to Question 1, three strengths women bring to relationship. One small group of men will answer hesitatingly, the women will respond enthusiastically, and then ask more questions, wanting to go deeper. At this, the men will experience the women's questions as (to use the language of three different groups) "bullets," "arrows," or "darts" and will start to feel judged as inadequate, under attack, and criticized. Dread is generated, and the men withdraw and fall silent. This stimulates the *Dread/Anger Impasse*: the men retreat, the women begin to get angry and feel abandoned and misunderstood, and then the men either withdraw further or attack the women for being angry. Things stop, dead. After a while the women will read their responses to Question 1, often beginning by saying, "We found it really *difficult* to answer this question." Since this is the easiest question for the men, the men feel *more* criticized, often saying, "You couldn't even come up with *three* strengths?" The women reply, "It depends on how they're used." The men: "You can't even name three without *qualifying* them?" In this hostile atmosphere the men find it hard to grasp that a strength may also be a weakness, *depending on how it's used in relationship, the relational context*. This is a consistent gender difference, often invisible to men. Stuck in the impasse, there follow attempts to avoid further conflict. One man suggested to a woman that she go and listen to herself alone with a tape recorder until she modified her anger to a level to which he could respond. (An example of how women are supposed to go off, get therapy, or read self-help books to change themselves to fix the relationship.) This comment made the impasse worse.

What is a relational impasse?

An *impasse* occurs when a relationship is stuck, static, unmoving, with a sense that it may never move again. Things go dead, each participant retreats into his or her self. Everyone feels the relational space close down, and the closing down closes down more space, and a negative spiral is created; increased dread leads to increased anger leads to increased dread. Things become more polarized, and often fall into more gender-stereotypical behavior, resulting in disconnection and the loss of the possibility not only of contact but also of *working with the conflict*. An impasse is *relational* in the sense that it cannot reside only in one person or the other, but *in the process* between them - it's not a matter of him or her, but how

they are interacting. While there may be a transference component, the impasse is not mainly transference, but rather the result of one relational style meeting another, quite different one - the result of everyone's learnings over many years, about what happens in relationship. Yet in the workshops, when individuals and couples start to see that these group impasses are clearly recognizable in their own lives, there is a sense of relief. In our workshops for couples, people often are astonished to hear other couples using their exact same words or phrases.

Another striking gender difference, also mostly invisible to men, is the way that there is a continuous flow toward the group focusing on the *men's* experience. Partly this is because the women keep asking more questions, partly it is because the men do not. Over and over, like the ballast of a ship, the attention tips to what's going on with the men. If you remember, Question 2 - "What do you most want to understand about the other gender?" - was quite difficult for the men to respond to. Again and again we see how, in the end, the problem of mutuality is not only the men's inability to talk about their experience in relationship, but also their disinclination to explore and their difficulty in searching out the women's experience, in asking questions that would open up the relationship, what Jordan, Kaplan, Miller, Stiver, and Surrey (1991) have called "approaches to empathy" or "relational intersubjectivity" or simply "curiosity about the experience of the other, the other's interiority." The process of "trying on the feelings" of the other as a way of knowing and connecting, so essentially familiar to women in relationship, is often foreign to men. In one group, after Steve over and over urged the men to ask the women a direct question about their experience, one man asked, "What do you want from us?" Group observation of whose experience receives the most attention can lead to a constructive discussion of how power imbalances are played out - without any conscious intent.

In addition to the *Dread/Anger Impasse*, two others are invariably present in our workshops, and often in couples, that we can only mention here: the *Product/Process Impasse*, where the women want to keep opening up the process while the men are trying to complete the task. One couple related a conversation they had when they were moving to a new house, carrying a box to the car:

Woman: "It's sad to say goodbye to this house."
Man: "Yeah, but think about where we're going"
(the woman slows down and starts to cry)

Man: "Uh-oh"
 Woman: "Please - can we talk?"
 Man: "Not now' We've got to finish this."
 Woman: "I really need to talk. I need to know where you are."
 Man: (exasperated): "I'm right here. Moving. How can we talk when we're trying to move?"
 Woman: "How can you just go about moving without any feeling?"

The third impasse we call the *Power-over/Power-with Impasse*, where the men experience conflict as a threat or an attempt to control, while the women want everyone's voice to be heard and attended to and retreat from what seem like definitive stands. An example, based on one medical student's dilemma brought up in a workshop, is around something as simple as going to dinner:

Woman: "Where shall we go to dinner?"
 Man: "Let's go to Miguel's."
 Woman: "How about Pintemento?"
 Man: "Okay, let's go to Pintemento."
 Woman: "But it sounded like you wanted to go to Miguel's."
 Man: "No, no, it's okay - let's go where *you* want to go."
 Woman: "But I want to go where you want to go too. (pause) Why don't you want to go to Pintemento?"
 Man: "I just want to decide."
 Woman: "We *are* deciding."
 Man: "We're not getting anywhere. (tensely) Let's just make a decision."
 Woman: (screaming) "Why are you yelling at me?"
 Man: (screaming) "I'm not yelling"

All three impasses may occur in any particular aspect of a relationship. Think, for example, of how any or all of these impasses might get played out around sex.

The shift to mutuality

What happens to break through these impasses? What we consistently try to introduce into the process is the value of *staying with conflict* and *staying in connection*, holding to and moving with a sense of "the relationship, the "We," which includes but also transcends the "You" and the "Me." Acknowledging the importance of mutual responsibility for the relationship can be a very new and fresh level of

thinking for many people. Sometimes the concept is not easy. We suggested to one man that when he felt like retreating, he think about taking care of the relationship. He replied, "How can I think about the 'We' when I'm thinking about the 'Me'?" We felt he was speaking for all of us.

And yet it is just at the point when the participants are deadened and flattened by the anger and dread and pain of an impasse that to talk not of a particular person but of "the relationship" is of the most use. Those of you who work with couples know that, in the pain and rage of the initial visit, to focus on one - or each - person's failings or pathology is to invite disaster. But when both members of a couple focus on "the relationship," the idea that "the relationship is not working and we are going to address that, together," often brings a sense of relief, movement out of the impasse, away from blame or shame and toward a new sense of possibility.

In an impasse, the polarization and rage can be extreme. One man, enraged, said to a woman, "I've had enough of women's anger, and if I hear the word 'patriarchy' one more time, I'll kill! It's not *me!*" In this kind of impasse, other men and women try to offer empathic responses to those who have become polarized, and the group begins to find ways of holding the conflict, and the different perspectives, to move toward some enlarged understanding that encompasses the differences. The work stays in the here and now, and, when it moves, stays away from a "self-centered" perspective. We encourage group members to make "I-statements" - speaking from each one's personal experience, beginning a statement with "I feel" or "I think", but we have learned that it is not enough to just "get your feelings out." Participants have to be aware of the effect of their statements on the tenuous web of connection that is being created by the group. "I-statements" made *with awareness of the relational context and an intention to build connection* move the group toward greater clarity and authenticity; "I-statements" made without this awareness and intention solidify the impasse.

The group moves back and forth through power struggles, polarization, emotional reactivity, defensiveness, avoidance tactics, personalizing, and sometimes deep despair, cynicism, grief, and hopelessness about ever getting anywhere - an accurate microcosm of the woman-man relationship! The group also moves in and out of moments of breakthroughs into connection and creative, constructive dialogue and problem solving. An important breakthrough often comes when the men

feel supported enough to follow up on their question to the women, "Why are you so angry?" In a recent workshop, this produced the following dialogue:

A woman: "I was really angry at what was going on in the group yesterday. When you asked us to visualize our images of the relationship in the group, I saw a wall of grey steel with the sound of fingernails going down it. You men don't really give a damn about us." (silence from the men; we ask what's going on)

A man: "If we respond, we'll take away her feelings."

The woman: "No, if you're silent you will. We keep having to read your facial expressions, because you don't tell us the truth."

The man: "I guess I just have to let you be angry."

Steve: "Why not *ask* her what *she* wants?"

The man: "What do you want?"

The woman: "I needed to express my anger - I need you to understand that."

A man: "You want me to agree with you?"

Another woman: "She wants a *response*, rather than a sheet of metal." (The men try to respond, but it is difficult and awkward; the women respond to the men's difficulty - the focus is soon back on the men.)

The woman: "You men keep asking me what I want you to do, but again the *focus here isn't* on *you*, it's on *me*. I'm asking you to touch into my anger - to connect."

Janet: "She wants you to 'try on' her experience. She's asking for an empathic connection that feels like you're there with her, like you're *interested*."

The man. "It's hard for me to hear your anger when I feel so responsible, but I'll try."

Another man: "I hear you saying *not* to think about it in terms of my self, right? (the woman nods) You know something? - that's a *big relief*" (much laughter from the group; a sense of real connection and movement)

This shifted the quality of connection dramatically - and lastingly - toward what we call "mutuality." Everyone sensed the shift. The men felt the relational space open up, and the opening up opened up more space - the negative spiral turned positive. No longer feeling dread, the men were able to listen to, be interested in, and respond to the women. Although there was intense conflict, there was relief in the sense of not being alone with it. Different participants offered different perspectives on how to break through the impasse, with various creative

solutions being tried. There were several tries which led to disconnections, but *staying present* through the disconnection allowed a better connection to be made. As the men felt the relational space open, they could trust the women more and be more creative in what they said; as the women began to sense this mutual empathy, they began to trust the men more and take greater risks as well. Suddenly we all found ourselves engaged in the process of growth through and toward connection

As groups begin to work on the impasses together, there develops a sense of shared responsibility and creativity. There follows a distinct moment when it is clear to everyone present that a shift has occurred, the group feels different. In fact *something has happened*. This we have called the "shift into mutuality." We have a sense, so far, that this shift occurs in our workshops, to a greater or lesser extent, depending on how much time we have for the process of mutual empathy to work. It isn't always clear how we got there, yet everyone can recognize the difference: there is an intense *sense of relational presence - people are really there*. In one group, we asked the participants, at the end, to look back and describe the feeling after the shift had occurred. These were some of the words they used:

"release, comfort, caring, safety, sharing, peaceful, easy, enjoyment of different styles, hopefulness, mutual nurturance, energizing, movement, insight, softening, appropriate confrontation, dynamic process, clearer recognition of others' experience."

In Stone Center language, we have described mutuality as a *way* of being in relationship - a dialogical, open, changing movement in relationship, where each person can increasingly represent her or his own experience, feelings, and perceptions, and each can move and be moved by the other and by the relationship. This sense of mutually-empathic joining is the basis for new power and new action. When men and women get to this place, something truly hopeful has happened. We don't yet know what is possible or what power this *shift to mutuality* between women and men can truly generate!

In the workshops, only after this shift and movement occurs can the most difficult subjects be worked on. The issues brought up previously that led to the impasses are often the ones which the group now "goes back over," with a new, fresh sense of really attending, responding, ruthlessly encountering the psychological "facts" without the burden of judgment, without a need to "agree," "disagree," or

even “agree to disagree,” and with an authentic desire to understand. It’s amazing to us how the same questions which had brought hostile silence now bring animated discussion, how dread and anger - in one workshop nicknamed “the Big D” and “the big A” - can be addressed unflinchingly. Humor is much in evidence, humor not in the service of sublimated aggression, but in the service of connection. Real information begins to be exchanged with real feeling. Real understanding occurs. For example, the men in one group said that one reason they fall silent when they sense a problem in relationship is that they’ve been taught they have to *fix* problems, and if they can’t fix it, they won’t say anything at all, won’t even acknowledge that the problem exists - “if you don’t talk about it, there’s no problem.”

With the affirmation of shared experience with other men, and freed from a sense of dread about the women’s reaction, the men could show their pain about their sense of relational incompetence, and the women could *feel* it. At the same time, the men could appreciate and feel how crazy-making this is for the women. Through this mutually empathic joining - holding both sets of feelings, simultaneously - a creative moment happens, and the relationship can move.

In that same “fingernail-on-steel” group, after the shift to mutuality had occurred, for the first time we heard men describe how it is only in groups with other men that they can begin to be open about the losses in their lives - the loss of relationships with wives, children, and especially fathers. The men talked about how they could *not* be open about grief and loss with women - and then started to do it! As the men spoke of this, the women were leaning forward with exquisite attentiveness. One man said:

“All you women are leaning forward, listening really hard, and it’s really quiet, like you can’t believe that men have grief, or are lonely.”

A woman: “Are men lonely?”

The man: “God, don’t you *know*?”

Another woman: “I thought so, but we’ve been waiting a long time to hear it. About a *millenium*, in fact.”

Another woman: “I’m drawn toward you, but I’m pulling back too, because I just don’t want to take care of you anymore.”

The man: “I can understand that. But we’re not asking you to take care of us anymore. Just hear it, that’s all.”

When the groups are working together in this way, we have heard the most extraordinary, honest, sensitive, intelligent, and thoughtful discussions of questions raised by each group about the other. We have discussed sexual differences and impasses, parenting issues, power imbalances, and even sexual abuse by therapists - to name a few. These are the moments that build our faith in the as yet untapped power of mutuality between women and men. Usually, only at the very end of this male-female encounter part of the workshop, with time running out, do we get to Question 3 - “What do you most want the other gender group to understand about you?” By the time we get to these answers, the shift to mutuality has occurred, and we ask the men and women just to read their answers through, without discussion. In the quiet, attentive atmosphere, the answers are always not only touching, but healing.

Women’s answers to Question 3

“What do you most want men to understand about you?”

“We are not the enemy; even if I’m not clear, I have a point; to know what my experience of disconnection feels like; that conflict is an invitation to engagement which can bring closeness and resolution; conflict does not mean the dissolution of the relationship; how frightening men’s power for violence is in limiting women’s actions; don’t trivialize my experience - go with my female creative process; what it feels like to make 67 cents to the dollar; that my way is not wrong, just different; that we are angry because we are hurt; that my sexuality is far beyond the physical connection; that I just want you to be there; that I am a human being too; we want to share, not take over; that we’re not experts at relationships either.”

Men’s answers to Question 3

“What do you most want women to understand about you?”

“I am not your enemy; how many of my actions are acts of love; my difficulties communicating feelings; my need for solitude; my difficulties in admitting powerlessness and asking for help; that I need space; that I need time; I’m scared too; not to have to censor my maleness; I love competition and play; how I feel about responsibility; the heavy burden placed on men to be successful and not look foolish; that being a son is often difficult; my sense of intrusion that often comes with relationships and my sense of shame for feeling that; I want to change; we care about

relationships as much as women do; men are scared of other men too; men have different priorities; the complexity of masculinity; our relational yearnings; our grief over losses; that I will come back after I go away.

In a workshop with college students, where the group encounter had been particularly heated and fragmented, after the men had read what they wanted the women to understand about them, one of the women was so moved, she spoke for the group:

"There's a glow now. You gave us the other half of the string, and now we can make a tie."

The double standard on the road to mutuality

How does this shift to mutuality occur? At the end of the group encounter, when we have asked participants what *they* think helped the shift to mutuality to occur, these are some of their answers:

"We realized we weren't getting anywhere by staying angry."

"We felt, somehow, as if we were *seen*, together. Like we'd deeply seen a truth of the way we were treating each other, together."

"We got out of the "I" to the "We," out of the authority/submissive role." "We got into a movement rather than an obsessing."

"We saw the danger of going on like that."

"I think when that young lady there said that we were getting nowhere, I felt kind of ashamed, and didn't want any more conflict, and I tried to listen. And then when you bugged us men to respond, eventually we did."

We have seen that there is a "double standard" on this road to mutuality, and that men and women have different work to do on this shared journey. We also recognize that although men deeply feel women's power in relationships, men's power and privilege in the world has the major impact on the search for mutuality. Most frequently, it is the less powerful person or group who is more aware of the lack of mutuality and who initiates the struggle. Members of the more powerful group have different work to do as they begin to take responsibility for change.

Women's path to mutuality

1. The importance of sequence

At this time in our history, many women are

feeling angry, despairing, and "tired of taking care of men, of doing all the *work* in the relationship." In the workshops, we have seen over and over how the beginning point of dialogue is around women's anger. Women *want* to hear men's experience but often first need to feel men moving toward them, learning to connect empathically, listening and seeking to understand their experience, especially to understand the origins of their anger. Only after this happens (or even after a slight forward movement is felt) are women able to listen fully to men and appreciate the depth of honesty the men are often able to express in the workshops.

2. Women working together

The power that results from the women meeting together and building a sense of solidarity and support before the intergroup dialogue is striking. The women often talk together about how different it feels to be among women. When men are present, especially their own partners, they feel more focused on the men's reactions. They notice together how much energy goes into watching the men - one woman called this "ego-tending," another, "hovering," as she was constantly checking out her husband to make sure that he wasn't either getting hurt, or hurting someone else. Women can validate each other's experience with this monitoring *and* the desire to change.

When the intergroup dialogue begins then, the women are able to offer enormous support to each other. Feeling this support, individual women are more able to effectively represent their experience to the men and to *stay with* their anger and their needs until the men respond. Other women can then relate to the men's confusion and suggest ways they might respond. This work can be done in a group much more easily and effectively than in a dyad.

There are significant divisions that emerge among women, especially around anger at men. We have seen enormous controversy about anger and where it belongs. These differences can be used to create mutuality if they do not lead to a split among women, that functions to resist change and to support the status quo.

3. The search for new models of relationship

Women in the workshops are often seeking a new model of relating to men - struggling to let go of what feels like "compulsive caretaking." The men often respond anxiously when the old forms are challenged, fearing that women are moving away or abandoning them. It is essential for everyone to work together toward a new psychology of a woman-man relationship, where women can stay *with* their own

experience *and* hold an empathic connection to the men without feeling they have to “take care of men or the relationship.” One woman described this situation as follows:

“It’s like on a football field (she was trying to use men’s language). We’ve been way down on your side and now we’re going back to our side. We’re having a good time together here. But we’re still *holding* the relationship with you and are waiting for you to move toward us so we can play the game over the whole field.”

This is a very important growth step - envisioning the possibility of different configurations of connection and allowing for different patterns of movement, distance and initiation within connection.

In the workshops, we have seen women shift to an appreciation of men’s intelligence and perceptivity once the dialogue really opens up; we have heard women sharing aspects of their own experience in interesting new ways - ways that emerge as women and men begin to create a *shared relational context*. Appreciating and sharing are beautiful examples of Jean Baker Miller’s description (1986) of the five outcomes of connection: new energy, an ability to take new action, new knowledge of self and other, an enhanced sense of self-worth, and a desire for more connection. (However, as growth in connection is never linear, such a positive experience can make it even more painful when, in real life, things revert - as they inevitably will - to old ways.) As a next step, many women say they need to examine why they resist and fear really seeing men’s emotional vulnerabilities. Women, at this point, also have to face their own limitations and fears in relationship.

As a white, heterosexual woman (and a psychotherapist), I (Janet) am aware that in some other situations I hold the power and privilege. One of the important learnings for me in doing these workshops has been to understand better the *responsibilities* of the more powerful group in the struggle for relational mutuality, and then to apply that to myself - recognizing in other situations my initial blindness, my resistance to doing the work, and that it is up to me to be responsible for listening to the others’ experiences, and for initiating change in relationships where I am in the more powerful position.

Men’s path to mutuality.

In our workshops, men “get to mutual” in several steps - steps which may apply to men “getting to mutual” in any relationship, including therapy:

1) *Men naming their relational experiences.* It’s

surprising how rarely men have had their experience *named*. To use words like “relational dread,” “a desire for connection,” and to talk about a paradigm shift to thinking of “the relationship” as a “thing” give men a language which rings true and makes the relational world more real. As one man put it, “You mean we can take ‘the relationship’ on vacation with us to the Grand Canyon?”

2) *Men connecting with other men.* In our all-male subgroup, a man listens to another man describe in detail what he had always thought of as his own “secret” experiences - for example, “dread.” Hearing similarities may wake both men up, making each sharper and clearer, building a base of understanding through an interchange around *similarity*. Men feel a heightened sense of male identity, and male vulnerability, grief, and loss are often themes. Most Robert Bly / “men’s movement” gatherings end at this point (Bly, 1990). Yet we see all-male work as a beginning, as a necessary step for the next phase, when men, facing women, are asked to do the uncomfortable and dangerous work, on their creative edges, of opening to women and connecting through difference.

3) *Men holding differences in relationship with women.*

In the arena of relationship, men often feel incompetent, criticized, and defensive. This may lead to men disparaging the idea of “learning from women,” or the fear of becoming “soft males” or “feminized men.” We have seen the profound differences between women and men, and one of the differences is that *men are often not as aware of the relational differences*. If men are to learn about mutual empathic relationship and the nurturing of relationship, this learning will most likely take place through engagement with differences with women.

But first, men have to *see the differences*. Often, relational events are invisible to men. (After four years of this work, I (Steve) can vouch for this myself.) Men are not as aware of “the relational context” as women, are not as aware of women’s attending to men’s egos and responding to men’s feeling states in relationship, and are not as aware of power imbalances involving the disempowerment of the subordinate gender. (Often, neither men nor women are aware of the gender differences in *relational timing* - women are often quicker than men.) To make these invisible relational facts visible is an essential step in men’s learning mutuality - and crucial in working with men in psychotherapy. When these facts are revealed in a supportive environment, with other men seeing them

at the same time so that the facts can be felt not as *personal* blindness but as *gender* blindness, men feel a sense of amazement, relief, and curiosity. Women's *relational* power is often frightening to men. For men to *hear* women's experience of diminished *institutional* power, and, further, to *see* that a shift from a power-over to a power-with model would mean not loss of men's power but in fact a further empowerment of all, has enormous implications for the culture and for the society.

Men often translate difference into conflict, and conflict with women can be intense. Men need to learn that they can encounter and hold conflict without something bad happening. Often, at the first sign of difference and conflict, a man may make a "flyswatter" response - trying to crush it. The fear of becoming violent is a prime element of male relational dread.

Men can get stuck in the paralysis of the dread of connection on the one hand, and, on the other, if they are in connection, in the fear of disconnection, of loss. This stuck stance can feel so precarious that men may do everything in their power not to change anything. If, as one man said, "the feeling of peace is when nothing happens," doing and saying nothing can protect a man from the anxious feeling that "something might happen." In relationship, men may be more at home with stasis, with a finished product, and fear process and relational movement. To get to mutual in relationship with women, it is essential that men be supported through conflict, dread, and fear long enough to have the experience of "something good happening."

4) Men learning empathy in relationship with women.

Faced with women's anger, a crucial step for men to take is to *watch other men respond to women*, and *women respond to women*, to *see how* the process of attending and responding takes place. Men can learn to allow themselves to be moved by the feelings of the other as a way of becoming connected, and to know that it is possible to move in connection without endangering the sense of self.

At an early age men learn that self-worth means being competent at doing things well. In our workshops, men learn more about "doing empathy well." Empathy is "broken down" into its components, and becomes something real, unmysterious, even fascinating. Each component - "attending," "responding," "not being a blank screen," "trying on feelings" - becomes known, and then reassembled. Men learn what it is and how to do it, and then find

that they can get better at it and feel valued for it.

Often in our workshops men will say, "But I *have* good relationships with men - me and my buddy can be out fishing for a whole day, and not talk much, but it's a good relationship." And yet men, when asked, will admit that "with my wife, it's different - both of us can really open up and talk. I feel she really understands me." When this happens - and it is almost always with a woman - men recognize how good it feels to be in mutual empathic relationship. This desire for mutuality may be hard to "get to" in men's awareness and may come out directly only at times when it is unalterably lost, or when men, almost despite themselves, find themselves experiencing it, or when they see women having it with their women friends, see that it is missing in their own lives and sense a deep lonely yearning, for connection.

Finally, the question that women often ask is *How do you get men to listen and attend to these matters?* While men may have a deep yearning for connection, a lot stands in the way of starting to learn about it - for about five thousand years "real men" didn't do this. So why do some men open up?

Sometimes, men will be opened up by a *loving relationship* with a woman, or by being a father, or by caring for a sick or dying father or mother or other family member.

Men may also open up through *the pain and suffering in relationship*. As in our workshops, getting to a painful and creative edge of an impasse with a woman is often a precursor to a shift to mutuality. Men may have a difficult time *anticipating* relational events, so that often it is only *after* men say or do something to affect someone - or even to hurt someone - that they wake up. Men may have to flee - or damage or destroy - a relationship with a woman in order to really *feel* what they have to lose, and to realize that they want exactly what they are fleeing, or what they have damaged or destroyed. Men's being stuck between dread of connection and fear of loss, and being afraid of engaging in the movement of relationship, may have much to do with men's difficulty in both *anticipating and* recollecting relational events. It is rare that a man will say to a woman, without prompting, "I was thinking about what we were talking about yesterday."

A final way that men may open up to mutuality is *through men's groups*. Men connecting with men may lead to a separatist mentality which merely and archaically makes men more "male" and doesn't propel men toward making mutual connection; or it may lead to the realization that other men are a

resource in learning to form mutually empathic, mutually authentic, mutually empowering relationships, with both men and women. There is a tremendous power right now in these men's groups. If this power can be *brought into relationship with women and shifted to mutual connection*, we might just be seeing a beginning in the transformation of the millennial pain shared by women and men to shared creative energy. Our workshop with four-year-old girls and boys gives us much hope for these possibilities.

Clinical applications

There are a number of applications of this model for clinical work that particularly emphasize the value of psychoeducational-process groups for studying and working with gender differences. (Useful educational material may be found in the Stone Center Working Paper series, Gilligan's and her group's writings (1982,1989), and in Tannen (1990).) An interesting strategy for group therapy would be to alternate meetings of same-gender groups with the larger mixed-gender group. The value of groups is especially important in breaking down "individual pathology" attribution models and breaking out of the terrible isolation many couples experience. Most heterosexual couples lack a community where open exchange and constructive dialogue around relational struggles can take place.

We have developed an application of this workshop specifically for couples. A small group of couples meets on a Friday night and all day Saturday, with a similar format of intergroup dialogue. We also discuss particular strategies and exercises for building connection, and couples leave with commitments to do particular assignments or projects together. We meet again one month later to see how people are applying the principles and to hear the couples report back on their work together. Mutual relationship has great power not only in one individual with another or others, but in one *couple* with another couple or other couples. As one man said to the group of couples, at the end of one workshop, "Your holding your relationships helps us to hold ours." Coleadership is of great value when the work toward mutuality is a vital and ongoing aspect of the coleadership pair. For example, while we are working together as leaders, we "check-in" periodically on the status of our own relationship both privately and in the group.

In the workshops for clinicians and for couples, we suggest particular "relational principles" which help to break through impasses. These principles, derived from the workshops, include: shifting to a

relational paradigm; recognition and naming of impasses; early intervention; using a language of "connectors;" staying with difference and conflict; creativity in action; moving through disconnection; letting go and coming back; and appreciating small changes.

We urge couples to map out the dialogue of a particular impasse they experience together (these are usually quite repetitive and fairly easy to choreograph), actually charting out in each line of dialogue what is going on in the woman, what is going on in the man, and what is going on in the relationship. Then, using our relational principles, we ask them to brainstorm ways to alter the dialogue, as a way of preventing or making early interventions in these destructive spirals and creatively changing impasses to breakthroughs. Looking together at their interaction helps couples to move into a space of mutual responsibility for the relationship.

In workshops for clinicians we also suggest particular strategies for building connection that may help clients work on developing relational mutuality. I'll give a few examples.

First we try to *enhance relational awareness*. To help men and women move into a relational paradigm, the use of "we" language is explored. One useful exercise has been to ask both people to close their eyes and *visualize the relationship*, and then to describe to each other the qualities of the relationship. What is the color, texture, sound, of the relationship. How does this change? For one man the texture went from "velvet" to "gravel" in an instant. Another question is "What animal is the relationship like?" One woman described the relationship as "a lioness, with two huge paws around both of us," while her partner saw "a spirited horse with a lot of energy - but it can gallop and get away from you."

Other ways to enhance relational awareness are 1) to have couples do a *relational inventory, together* - an informal assessment of the strengths and weaknesses of their relationship - and 2) to have both people together write a *relational purpose statement* - what is the purpose of the relationship, what are the questions it holds, what are we together to do or to learn. For example, one couple wrote:

"To create a refuge, a safe place for us and children to grow and thrive, to create a place of peace and thus to contribute to the possibility of global peace."

We have noticed striking gender differences in *relational time* - the tempo and rhythm at which women and men attend to and respond to each other.

We suggest several ways of bringing awareness to these gender-specific ways of handling relational time, such as the *check-in*, a simple, powerful, and useful exercise. Either person can call for a check-in, which consists of each person giving a brief "I-statement" - "I feel" or "I think". Discussion is not encouraged. As one couple said, "We have to be careful not to let our check-ins degenerate into conversation." Either person can also call for a *check-out*, with the proviso that the one checking out takes responsibility for checking back in, and saying *when* she or he will do this. Another strategy (Bombardieri, 1990) is the *20-minute rule*, which ensures but also limits talking about a particularly troublesome subject to 20 minutes per day. This creates a structure where men feel they don't have to take responsibility for setting time limits, while women can feel confident that they can expect full attention and engagement around the issue at hand.

To deal with the process/product impasse, we suggest *choosing a project* - or, better, *two* projects, one from each person's area of interest or expertise - finding a way to create together, whether this is a garden, a song, or a piece of serious writing - and to grow in the process of facilitating and building on each other's strengths.

We also suggest *ground rules for waging good conflict*, including check-ins (each person stating where he or she is in respect to the process of conflict) and check-outs (either person calling for a time out, if the conflict feels stuck, destructive, or abusive.) Some ground rules need to be set in advance.

Couples can find humorous phrases which give perspective to impasses or conflicts, such as one man saying, in the middle of a fierce stuck place, "It's time to throw the garbage," or to find a phrase which, when the relationship seems to be disappearing, will *evoke* it - one couple's was: "We do it *together*."

Conclusion

From our work together over the past few years, we have grown even more cautious and gravely aware of how far we have to go, yet we also feel some hope that there can be creative change, movement, and growth toward mutuality in the woman-man relationship. It is only when we find ways to work together, to find the community and support we need to *participate* in this work, that such movement can take place. Perhaps what is needed is a "Women-and-Men's Movement."

Learning to live together creatively, facing into difference - difference of race, class, sexual orientation,

ethnicity, and nation - is of vital significance as we move into the twenty first century. We believe that this work on woman-man relationships is a potential model for the crucial work we all need to undertake, in transforming human impasses to possibilities.

Discussion Summary

After each colloquium presentation a discussion is held. Selected portions are summarized here. At this session Drs. Cynthia Garcia Coll, Judith Jordan, Jean Baker Miller, Robin Cook-Nobles, and Irene Stiver joined Stephen Bergman and Janet Surrey in leading the discussion.

Garcia Coll: "As a developmental psychologist I am interested in how we develop these patterns. Can you talk about your work in other cultures and with four-year-olds?"

Bergman: With four-year olds at a preschool, we used the same format, first asking the boys and girls separately to answer 3 questions, modified for their level of understanding. Next the boys and girls sat on the floor facing each other.

The boys' answer to Question 1, "What do you like about girls?"

"They like to play what I like to play."

"They always play with me and help me with things."

The girls' answers:

"We like kissing and hugging boys."

"We like when they chase us and tie us up and they thought we were dead and we faked it and then we like sneaking away and getting away."

This is appalling. But then something started to happen. The boys were fidgeting, not paying much attention to the girls, and the girls began to tell a story, together, each adding lines. The story was about how one girl had tricked a wicked baby sitter. Soon the boys were listening wide-eyed. The girls - we realized this later - had found a way to connect.

Then a rather peculiar thing happened. I asked, "When you play a game with the boys, who goes first?" One girl said, "Boys go first." She looked to the other girls, and then, giggling, started to chant, "Boys go first' Boys go first'" Soon all the girls were getting into it, "Boys go first' Boys go first'" But the hopeful side was that, after this encounter, there was a free-play period in a field. Soon the teacher, astonished, said, "This is amazing! I've never seen this before! The boys and girls are playing together. And there are no

more hierarchical patterns among the boys." He pointed out that the girls and boys were running around holding hands - sometimes a foursome would run by - and that the "top boy," the one usually on top of the hierarchy of play, was by himself. No one was really paying much attention to him. It hadn't been at all clear to us what what had been going on in the group, but now we could see that something had shifted, and the shift was being incorporated immediately in their more interconnected play.

Surrey: We were in Turkey, a very gender-segregated society, with very few cross-gender interactions except sexual ones, and with very prescribed and male-dominated ways of being. People in Turkey kept on saying "We're very relational, we define ourselves in relation, what we need is more 'self.'" In fact, they were in very patterned relationships - with rigid and specified male and female roles and identities - they were not dynamic, growth-fostering relationships. We saw that the women were beginning to initiate the struggle for change, but that the men were much further behind the men we'd seen in America and seemed much less sensitized to relational matters.

It's a culture where men spend an enormous amount of time together - there's a strong male role and identity in family and society and a richness of male ritual - no "soft males." It's a power-over culture, and that hinders mutuality in relationships. These observations brought to mind some of the issues of the men's movement in this country, where men are trying to create ritual and identity. Perhaps men here are trying to recreate something that could be at odds with building connection.

Question: Can there be other models of healthy relationship besides mutuality, such as a relationship based on action or autonomy? Do men have to "sell out" to women's model of relationship, to mutuality?

Surrey: To me, mutuality simply means always holding an awareness of the other. You can be very active, doing things together or working "independently", but if you are out of touch with the impact of your actions on others, I don't think that's a healthy mode. Mutuality doesn't mean sitting around and talking all the time, it simply means maintaining a sense of self, a sense of the other, and a sense of what's happening in the relationship. You can be halfway around the world from someone and hold that, or you can be in a room with someone and *not* hold it. You could go off for days and write a book, if you negotiated that, and it still could be done with an awareness of the other and of the relationship - these

are not mutually exclusive at all. But I do believe that action without awareness of its impact is extraordinarily dangerous and can lead to violence, so I would never say that that's a positive model. It's the same problem with autonomy - independence, creativity, working on your own - all those things are terrific, but never should be done without the awareness of the other and the impact on the relationship.

Bergman: We are not talking about men adopting women's ways; we are talking about both men and women moving to more healthy, human ways. This is not the "feminization" of men, but rather the "relationalization" of men and women both, together.

Stiver: This relates to the effect that the relational model brings to individual work as well as couples work. Whether you're working with a man or a woman, you can always bring the relationship into the work. The focus is to become aware not only of your own experience but to broaden your experience of the important people in your life. Whether I'm working with a man or a woman, I feel the work is more successful when something really changes in their important relationships. It's a dynamic of experiencing a relationship, often for the first time, in a different way.

Miller: It's a good question because sometimes we tend to get caught in old polarities, like relationships versus action or relationships versus something like autonomy. Relationships are very active if they're moving. Also, people can find their greatest sense of themselves, their fullest use of themselves within the context of relationships. In fact, I think people find their fullest selves when they are in a relationship that's moving toward mutuality.

Jordan: If men have been in a position of power-over and that position has brought them benefits, of course they're going to resist any change that will move them out of that position. Men not wanting to do it the "women's way," or selling out to women, is a crucial question because a huge part of male socialization is towards not being like women. The question is: How to present mutuality as having something in it for men? Steve has suggested very clearly that in these workshops men begin to get the sense that mutuality in relationship offers them a way to relieve and deal with their aloneness, their isolation, and their sense of being so armored and cut off.

Question: I'm wondering how your model applies in situations of difference among races, or gays and straights - the issues that arise from prejudice?

Cook-Nobles: I have been thinking about the male-female relationship within the African-American experience. In the groups you have described, one of the questions the men asked the women was "What is it like to be oppressed?" In the African-American experience, because both men and women have experienced oppression, the fear of the loss of the relationship takes on a different meaning qualitatively. The ultimate fear is that the safety net will be taken away if the relationship or the group is broken up. That threat may get in the way of hearing the other person's experience. I think that is some of what has happened in the African-American community's response to the Thomas hearings. In dealing with the dynamics between two people, you are forced to look at the possible effect on the whole community. Will we lose the whole community? Who will be there to take care of us as a group? So you have those within-group conflicts which complicate the process on another level.

Question: I was also thinking of *different* races. How do people of color get members of the dominant race to sit down and recognize that there is a degree of interdependence that makes it worth their while to engage in the kind of intergroup conflict that these workshops address?

Cook-Nobles: I think there's a shift going on in which the minority group is not necessarily trying to get the majority group to sit down, but a shift in which the majority group needs to see its *need* to sit down. I think that's the shift not only in racial minority groups but also in the lesbian and gay community. We have to own the problem together.

Surrey: That was my point about the double standard and the importance to me of learning about initiating and taking responsibility as a white heterosexual woman. Watching men have to learn has helped me enormously.

Question: What about the danger of stereotyping men and women, polarizing into opposites human characteristics which are probably on a continuum rather than dichotomous?

Surrey: What we see really clearly is that the greater the impasse, the more gender stereotypical the behavior; the greater the movement toward mutuality, the more both women and men show the whole range of human characteristics, and the more we see everyone showing more individual, or "personal" behavior - and I believe that that's a microcosm of the larger situation in the society and in the world.

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