

Mothers and Daughters at Menarche

An Indigenous-Inspired Quiet Revolution

In Western, industrialised society, menstruation and birth are commonly seen as unstable, pathological processes requiring medical control. Girls learn to see menstruation as embarrassing and undesirable, and as they grow into young women, find their cyclic variations at odds with a linear economy. Menarche is a nodal event around which girls' beliefs and attitudes to being female are organised. The perception of menstruation as a liability therefore has foundational implications for future female experiences, particularly childbirth. Both menarche and childbirth are potentially powerful psychological initiations that require the sacrifice of a previous physiological state and sense of identity. Across a range of cultures and times, menstruation and birth have been recognised as transformative spiritual phenomena. Some Indigenous perspectives in particular demonstrate that menstruation can be experienced as sacred blood and a source of authority and power. This article draws on indigenous examples and personal experience to challenge patriarchal norms about menstruation as a liability. Mothers are perfectly placed to gift their daughters with a woman-honouring perspective that affirms their status at menarche as valuable human beings, capable of life-bearing within their bodies. By recounting how I negotiated the passage into menarche with my own daughter, I offer a space for dialogue and reflection contributing to the cultural reform of derogatory attitudes to menstruation and women.

Menarche (or first menstruation) and childbirth are pivotal experiences in the life of a woman. Along with menopause, they are sometimes known as women's "blood mysteries," liminal states of enormous potential (Noble, 1991: 11). They represent critical transitions during which the unconscious is provoked to provide "an opportunity for regression and pathology, or reintegration and further emotional maturity" (Offerman-Zuckerberg, 1988: 1). However, the

natural processes do not automatically confer reintegration and maturity; it must be enacted and embodied. As transformative thresholds, these initiatory experiences require the conscious sacrifice of a previous physiological state and sense of identity (Rutter, 1993: xvi).

In a range of cultures and times, menarche, menstruation and birth have been recognised as spiritual phenomena of great personal, social and cosmological significance (Gadon, 1989: 2; Noble, 1991:11). In Western patriarchal societies, however, these uniquely female experiences seem to have been drained of their meaning and spirituality. They are commonly seen as medical concerns, dubious processes requiring surveillance and control (Murphy-Lawless, 1998: 23; Martin, 1987: 46-49; 58-61). Menarche usually occurs as a private event without social acknowledgment or celebration (Owen, 1998: x; McKeever, 1984: 39); menstruation has become associated with pathology, shame, and the profane (Shuttle and Redgrove, 1978: 29-30; Owen, 1998: 14-15; Martire, 2006: iii); and in most Western countries, birth has become a techno-medical emergency managed by “men, machines and hospitals” (Wagner, 2004: 1; Banks, 2001: 1). In this paper, I focus on menarche and its pivotal role in shaping girls’ perceptions of what it means to be embodied as a woman.

Menstruation

Our usual discourse on menstruation in the West depicts it as an embarrassing liability, a kind of “nose-bleed of the womb” (Shuttle and Redgrove, 1978: 29). Culturally we value ovulation and its potential child production as the *raison d’être* of the menstrual cycle, with menses seen as a waste product. Like other excretory processes, it is perceived as something distasteful coming from our “nether regions.” As Shuttle and Redgrove (1978) observed: “Menstruation is regarded, not only by physiologists and many doctors, but also by some feminists, as a sickness, a blank spot, a non-event that the woman must endure and would be better off without” (30). In the paragraphs that follow, I challenge that perception and offer a woman-affirming alternative.

Feminism has a crucial role to play in freeing menstruation from its maligned status (Koeske, 1983: 3, 13). For example, Shirley Lee’s (2002) study exploring the meaning of menstruation and premenstrual syndrome (PMS) for some Canadian women found that two groups emerged across a continuum from negative to positive (3). The negative group were more self-critical, expressing feelings of low self-esteem and self-hate. For these women, the “diagnosis” of PMS was important because their symptoms were not taken seriously without a biomedical explanation. In contrast, the positive group expressed feelings of self-appreciation and valued their menstruation, rejecting the “sickness” label. Their positive view was closely linked to a feminist perspective: “The importance of feminism in the lives and backgrounds of the extremely positive women provides a crucial component in the process of unravelling their attitudes toward menstruation and understanding its transformation from an ‘unwanted’ to a ‘valued and wanted’ condition” (Lee, 2002: 9).

Menarche

Menarche is historically viewed as the transition to womanhood (Shapiro, 1988: 70). A study of women's recollections of menarche found that almost all of the 137 participants remembered their first menstruation in detail including "where they were when it happened, what they were doing, and whom they told" (Golub, 1983: 17-18). Clearly it is an event loaded with personal significance. Yet in the West, preparation for menarche and menstrual education are usually restricted to the biological facts and hygiene measures (McKeever, 1984: 39), with little discussion of the emotional, psychological, sexual and spiritual dimensions. This focus on the physical to the exclusion of other dimensions is inadequate and has a fragmenting effect.

McKeever (1984) noted the critical role of menarche in the formation of mature womanhood:

The first menses is important because it serves as a "nodal event around which the psychological and biological changes occurring more or less continuously throughout adolescence, are organized and assimilated" (Koeff, 1983). In essence, it confirms a sense of womanhood in the adolescent female. Prior to menarche the adolescent seems to be unable to consolidate the extensive but less focal feminizing changes that have been ongoing since the beginning of puberty (Rierdan and Koff, 1980; Rosenbaum, 1981). (37)

However, this consolidation at menarche seems to be built around derogatory associations of femaleness in which shame plays a key role. The average woman spends about 2,400 days or six consecutive years of her life menstruating (Martire, 2006: 1). Considering that menstruation and the menstrual cycle are defining body process that span decades of a woman's life, it seems extraordinary that "a major characteristic of being a mature female remains a source of shame, embarrassment and secrecy" (McKeever, 1984: 45). Mothers who have reframed their understanding of menses with a feminist perspective can play a crucial role in reforming these derogatory attitudes by modelling and teaching a healthy, holistic approach with their daughters.

The mother-daughter relationship

The mother-daughter relationship at menarche is a vital but complex one. Martire (2006) noted two studies suggesting that "menarche and menstrual attitudes are communicated from mother to daughter and are a source of either connection or disconnection" (46) psychologically. Discussion of menstruation between mothers and daughters has been shown to evoke maternal anxiety (McKeever, 1984: 35) and feelings of unpreparedness (Golub, 1983: 34). Mothers may find it difficult to discuss menstruation with their daughters if they have experienced menarche as a fraught occasion themselves. I vividly remember the subdued, determined tone with which my mother gave me a

little book about menstruation. Taking me aside one day, she said with gravity: “I want you to read this little book because this will be happening to you soon. My mother didn’t tell me anything about it and when it happened to me for the first time, I thought something terrible was wrong with me. I don’t want that to happen to you.”

Central to maternal discomfort in discussing menstruation is the issue of sexuality: “Bodily changes bring new sexual feelings, and a new array of intellectual and emotional capacities” (McKeever, 1984: 38) which a pubertal girl may not be able to articulate. Menarche marks the onset of reproductive maturity bringing an awareness of sexual differentiation (Golub, 1983: 32, 29–30). Mothers (and fathers) may be keenly aware of their daughters’ sexual vulnerability and the potential for early pregnancies. At the same time, they may struggle to think of their children as maturing sexual beings with desires. Girls, too, at this stage of development tend to place higher priority on peer relationships than parental ones, displaying their necessary growth towards greater autonomy (Ferder and Heagle, 1992: 87). Despite these issues however, there is clearly a need for menstrual education “to move away from the focus on hygienic management to that of healthy sexuality and acceptance of self” (Cumming, Cumming and Kieran, 1991: 1).

Acceptance of self is a key concern for pubescent and adolescent girls. How can they embrace the transition to womanhood signified by menarche in the absence of any mentoring, initiation process, or social acknowledgement that something of major significance in their life-span has occurred? Most of the time, menarche is “an unritualized, uncelebrated non-event” (Owen, 1998: x). Lara Owen postulated that girls’ plummeting self-esteem and the epidemic of eating disorders can be traced to this vacuum at menarche (x). Eating disorders may reflect girls’ “hunger” to make meaning and sense of the extraordinary transformation they are undergoing. Psychoanalyst Sue Shapiro (1988) notes that a girl’s first menstruation is her own “personal experience of this central female process” (79), an event on which future experiences—like childbirth—will build. Derogatory attitudes to menstruation and the lack of celebratory rituals at menarche contain powerful, often unspoken messages about the value of her status and what she can expect as a mature woman in Western society.

This issue also has broader cultural implications beyond the family. According to Richard Tarnas, the crisis of modern humanity is an “essentially masculine crisis” (qtd. in Clements, 2002: 26), based on a dominant, but now alienated masculine world view. To redress this imbalance, it is important for our society to remember the ancient wisdom about the spiritual power of menstruation (Owen, 1998: xi) for what it brings to the planet. We need to create the attitudinal changes and appropriate rituals to make it relevant for us now. Owen (1998) observed: “Reintegrating a truly feminist, woman-honoring perspective on menstruation means turning a whole system of thought upside down” (x). This is no easy task in a culture that for thousands of years

has denigrated the female body and processes like menstruation (Reilly, 1995: 209), and idolised maleness both for the Deity and the human subject (Reilly, 1995: 62-78).

Indigenous perspectives

Many Indigenous cultures have long recognised menstruation as a spiritual phenomenon. Some of the traditions described below may no longer be extant, but they nonetheless offer a valuable contrast to Western discourse that stimulates our imagination and challenges us to think outside the familiar.

Australian Indigenous cultures

Thirty years ago, Rita Gross (1977) refuted the androcentric claim that traditional Aboriginal Australian life was based on a male/female division corresponding to a sacred/profane dichotomy. Using a woman-centred methodology, Gross maintained that Aboriginal women represent a “different kind of sacrality than that associated with males” (Gross, 1977: 147), one rooted in the somatic experiences of menstruation and birth, where the experiences themselves were felt to be religious and were therefore ritualised. Gross further claimed that these female experiences were used “in non-derogatory ways as bases for symbol and theology in men’s culture” (1151).

In a more contemporary context, Hannah Bell (1998) described the Indigenous perspective of the Ngarinyin people of the northwest Kimberley region of Western Australia:

Womb blood is necessary to feed the unborn, to give it identity, form and spiritual connectedness with the physical world it will soon enter ... Menstrual blood is considered very powerful because it is believed to create perfect human beings. It is unique to women, and its power is feared and revered by men. (23)

Moreover Bell (1998) noted that for the Ngarinyin people, gender relations are akin to right and left hands: physically and functionally different, but without hierarchy.

Southern India

In southern India, poetry from 2000 years ago depicted a sacred power (*ananku*) associated with women’s sexuality which was greatest during menarche and menstruation (Jenett, 2007: 1). Understood as the Goddess’s power, it warranted a time of seclusion and separation from others. Jenett (2007) noted: “The bodies of women in ancient Tamil Nadu/Kerala were considered particularly potent and full of *ananku* at menarche, during menstruation and after childbirth” (1). Goddess worship is still practiced in Kerala today with rituals to honour the menstrual flow, and the metaphor of the red earth signifying the womb of the Goddess (Jenett, 2007: 2). Savithri de Tourreil observed: “The

Nayar world view interprets menarche and menstruation as empowerment, as an onrush of sacred power, cyclical like the seasons, elemental and uniquely female” (qtd. in Jenett, 2007: 3).

The Navajo

For the Navajo people, the Kinaalda menarche ceremony was one of their most important celebrations and a key feature of their cosmology, agriculture and social life (Rutter, 1993: 39). Lasting five days, the whole community participated in this initiation through an elaborate sequence of songs and rituals that re-enacted the story of “Changing Woman,” the first menstruant, a female Deity, daughter of Mother Earth and Father Sky. The Kinaalda ceremony is wonderfully rich in its symbolism. For example, the initiate received a special kind of massage, known as “molding” from her mentor, during which she lay on a pile of blankets supplied by guests and family members so that the initiate’s touch would bless them. After the “molding,” the girl in her turn “stretched” the young children by moving her hands from the waist to the top of each child’s head, bestowing the blessing of healthy growth upon them (Rutter, 1993: 58).

In recognition of the girl’s vulnerability at this liminal time, the women elders gave continuous teaching and instruction in which negative thoughts, words or actions were prohibited: “Attributes of kindness, generosity and co-operation are repeatedly modeled for her and emphasized in her teaching” (Rutter, 1993: 63). Through this ceremony, the initiate learns that becoming a woman identifies her with the Goddess and she “awakens to a sense of her own feminine divinity when her people ceremonially endow her with symbolic items of jewellery, clothing and song” (40, 54). By the end of the ceremony, the initiate “who has ‘walked into beauty’ is entrusted to hold Changing Woman’s power as sacred” (67).

The cultural contexts of these Indigenous perspectives are local and specific to their own times and places, but they nonetheless model a spirituality that has relevance for contemporary Western women. Charlene Spretnak (1996) noted: “No matter what kinds of ‘social production’ shape gender within a culture, the physicality of the female body with its elemental capabilities (to grow people of either sex from one’s flesh, to bleed in rhythm with the moon, to transform food into milk for infants) is a core reality to which culture responds” (323). My personal experience of menarche as a spiritual awakening did not receive any external validation at the time, but was affirmed by learning about these Indigenous traditions. As my daughter grew towards puberty and menarche, I felt a moral imperative to provide her with an understanding of the potentially sacred significance of menstruation.

A personal mother/daughter story of menarche

Over the last few years, my daughter and I have had many conversations about changes in body shape, different body parts, puberty, menstruation and

sex. From the time she was born, Caitlin has seen my workbooks lying around the house—anatomy and physiology texts, fertility books and birth videos, charts and diagrams. She has always known the correct anatomical words for her body parts, inside and out, and she has grown up seeing both her father and me naked and comfortable in our own flesh.

However, in recent months there have been more questions about strange new sensations inside her body, about desire and sexual difference, and about the challenges—hormonal, emotional, and physical—of what is happening for her at this special time in her life. The mystery of her transformation into a young woman has been accelerating. Although we have had many intimate conversations and reassurances, I feel we need to create a more symbolic context in which we can couch the deeper meaning of her menstruation in a way that nourishes her soul and contributes to power of her spirit. So we set aside a time for a special talk together.

As Caitlin was born late in my life, we now find ourselves counterpoised at the polar ends of the menstrual continuum. As I negotiate the hormonal and psychic turbulence of the peri-menopause, Caitlin is undergoing puberty and menarche. She is maturing early, ahead of most of the girls in her class. My “little” girl’s body is blossoming into rounded hips and growing breast-buds and I am very proud of how she carries and conducts herself. Puberty came much later for me. I was fourteen before my first menstruation finally ushered me over its threshold. I had been waiting a long time and I will never forget the profound impact of that spiritual initiation....

When my best friend began menstruating at age eleven, she complained and moaned about the pain and the mess. One by one, the other girls in our class got their period too. They also moaned and complained, yet there was still the sense that they now belonged to a secret club from which I was excluded. I carried a pad in the bottom of my school bag, hoping to entice my bleed. The pad disintegrated and was replaced several times. Every day, I prayed for it to come; the waiting seemed interminable.

One year, two years, three years.... Brought up in a Catholic family, in desperation I made a plea bargain with God: “If you give me my bleed, I will NEVER moan or complain. I will treasure it as a gift for the rest of my life. Please let it come—soon!” Without understanding why, even at that age I had already intuited that menarche and menstruation were something auspicious. That vow, uttered from the depths of my young spirit, is something I have remembered and honoured ever since, and its implications continue to unfold in my life in ways I could never have foreseen then.

It was Christmas holidays—the summer of my 14th year. I was wearing a floral dress with an orange ruffle around the bottom. Magically, it appeared one day—the dark stain on my undies. I could hardly believe it! There was no pain, no cramping, no mess, just a quiet, gentle wetness. I was thrilled and my spirit soared. The wonder of this elusive process was at last happening to me and it inspired a deep sense of awe. Within myself, I felt infinitely proud, as though I had just stretched a foot

taller. The mystery of fertility, the conferring of womanhood, the power of biology, akin to the phases of the moon, the rise and fall of the tides, and the changing of the seasons—these were what my first menstruation signified for me.

Later that day, I went for a walk along the beach with my eldest sister, paddling in the water, chatting together. The unwieldy pad and belt were uncomfortable but I didn't care. I felt like I had been initiated into the innermost secrets of the Universe. My first menstruation seemed to expand my sense of self through a fundamental connection with nature to the heartbeat of all creation. In some enigmatic way, it meant I was involved with the greater, enduring processes of Life itself.

I received the gift of my menstruation with deep thankfulness and respect. Like sap in the trees, it quickened my soul, the sheer grace of it coursing through me, saturating my consciousness. As I matured, I knew I felt differently about my bleeding than my friends or family. There was no social or cultural validation of any kind for what I had experienced; it was a secret, personal appreciation. However, from that day on, I never forgot the blessedness of that first bleed, nor its spiritual power to transform....

As the mother of a pubescent girl approaching menarche, I feel the imperative to pass on that benediction to my daughter. Caitlin and I met for our special talk. To evoke an atmosphere of spirituality, I created a simple ritual by lighting a candle and setting it beside a spray of pink frangipanis. We snuggled up together on the couch and I invoked a simple prayer asking Spirit—and I named the Deity as “beautiful Mother Spirit”—to be present with us as we talked about menstruation. After our prayer, I walked her through the hormonal changes of puberty and the menstrual cycle—dipping first into one book, then another, to read a passage or show a picture. None of it was new to her; she volunteered much of the information herself, displaying her solid knowledge of the topic. But as we talked, I allowed my awe and wonder to become transparent. I spoke in soft, animated tones about the beauty of menstruation, and of how this blood is different to any other kind of blood—not like a cut finger or a nose bleed. This blood has the power to cradle new human life. It is really sacred.

I tell Caitlin that if it wasn't for the thickening of my uterine lining, she would not be here. Each one of us began our lives as a tiny cluster of cells burrowing into that rich, red lining, absorbing nourishment, oxygen, the right hormones and a safe place in which to incubate ourselves into fully formed human beings. I also tell her that when I was just a tiny embryo inside my mother's womb, I already carried one of the eggs that went on to become her, giving her a sense of her female genealogy.

We looked at colour photos of the endometrium, at fertilisation, implantation and the stages of pregnancy. She asked a few questions and displayed her knowledge as we talked. I spoke of the amazing power that is coming alive in her now, and told her that whether she decides to have children or not, her femaleness endows her with beautiful creative capacity. I talked about the

Navajo tradition, snippets of which she had heard many times before, and I told her again the story of my own menarche.

My daughter knew this was a different kind of conversation. As we finished talking, she smiled and gave a big sigh expressing a mixture of nostalgia for childhood, apprehension of the unknown and excited anticipation. “Can I play on your lap-top now?” she asked. It was time to move on! I laughed and gave her a hug, then put my hand gently across her belly and offered my homage: “May your menstruation always be a blessing for you and remind you of your connection to the Great Mother Spirit.”

Afterwards, I decided to begin a “menarche box” for Caitlin. When I was a little girl, my older sister kept a “glory box” in preparation for marriage: a wooden trunk containing new linen, utensils and other household items that she bought from time to time. I found a dark red wooden trunk, which is temporarily housed at a friend’s place—the same friend Caitlin has asked to be her mentor, a woman she likes very much and feels she can confide in. The menarche box contains a variety of practical and symbolic items which I add to as I find them: a quilt with varieties of red patterns made specifically for her menarche, some dark red towels embroidered with her name in blue silk, some colourful cloth menstrual pads, a beautiful set of red Russian dolls to symbolise her female genealogy, some ruby jewellery, a menarche journal, a funny book on womanhood, a red pillow in the shape of some lips with a small teddy-bear attached, a shell necklace and a rose quartz crystal.

We plan a special ceremony to honour Caitlin when her menarche comes, a ritual we will prepare together attended by some close friends—mothers and daughters—followed by a sumptuous meal and celebration. During the ceremony, I will surprise her with the menarche box which she knows nothing about. A tailor-made red satin curtain is waiting to decorate the room, along with red crepe paper, streamers and balloons. A few months ago when we were shopping, Caitlin saw a lovely red dress and asked if we could buy it for her ceremony, which we did. When she tells me that the girls at school say periods are “yucky,” I remind her that menstruation is sacred. She is excited and looking forward to her big day. When Caitlin “walks into beauty,” she knows she will be supported to embrace and honour her maturing femaleness and all it symbolises.

Conclusion

In the West, menstruation is struggling to break free of hundreds of years of patriarchal oppression. A key site of this labour is the family home and the mother-daughter relationship. Feminism has to be the vanguard of this struggle, for the sake of women to come and for the Earth itself. Arguing for a radical revision of feminism, Vicki Noble (2003) proclaimed:

Rather than trying to become just like men, proving that our perceived differences (like the menstrual cycle, and the fact that we are

capable of giving birth) are irrelevant and merely “constructed,” what I aim for as a feminist is no less than a reinstatement of our original biological right to rule this planet. What could be more timely in this hour of threatened planetary destruction at the hands of horrific male technologies of war? (12)

Whether we agree with her radical position or not, we have an obligation to reframe the significance of menstruation, especially at menarche, because of its critical role in shaping the meanings associated with womanhood. As mothers, we are ideally placed to enact a quiet revolution with our daughters in the privacy of our homes. Despite the maternal constraints discussed in this article, when mothers transform their own attitude to menstruation from an “unwanted” into a “valued and wanted” condition, the change can be contagious for their daughters and provide the ballast for secure identity formation. This personal transformation has a powerful ripple effect on successive generations and on others with whom we come into contact. “Walking into beauty” may hold the key to changing women’s position in our world for the better.

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