

Blood: Sacred and Taboo: Some thoughts around Menopause

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Menopause, sometimes known as the change of life, is the ending of menstruation, the monthly (*men* being the Greek for month) cycle of bleeding that women experience. Blood is both life-giving and therefore sacred and there are ancient and dramatic myths woven around the sacredness and awe-fullness of menstruation. Initiation and fertility rites that honour and use the sacred life—giving blood as well beliefs and taboos to do with the power and magic of menstruating women are well documented.

Menstruation is one of the earliest mysteries of women, linked to the moon, segregation and the primal power of pregnancy and childbirth. It is exclusive to women and therefore revered and feared by primitive (and not so primitive) man. For example, Erich Neumann, in his classic work, *The Great Mother*, mentions the traditions of the early male aborigines in Terra del Fuego who rebelled against their affiliation with the moon goddess, believing themselves to be led by the sun, and slayed all the grown women, including the elders who were the wise initiators, leaving only the ignorant and pre-pubescent girls to survive.

There is a history of sacro-magical thinking in the (patriarchal) collective that surrounds the 'blood-mysteries' of women, and so - what happens when the blood flow stops? When the woman's womb is no longer a life-creating and therefore, sacred vessel? When she no longer has that exclusive envied and feared power to give birth? When she ceases to be desired for that purpose by men – or envied her fertility by women? Does the sacred power and magic invested in her suddenly come to a halt? Does her ability to inspire awe and yearning simply fade into wrinkled invisibility? Does she lose her mystery? Is her sexuality a thing of the past because she is now 'dried up, worn out and discarded' and only permitted batty eccentricities and out-of-date clothes? Or does she enter the circle to lead others to the beat of her drum?

"We must break the menstrual taboo. In that way we can groom ourselves for becoming crones and hags, women past the age of menstruation who are not afraid of what people think and who are freer to do what we want than younger women" - Vicki Noble: Shakti Woman

In Scotland, the word 'menseless' means graceless and grace implies being bestowed with the blessing of God. Surely, then, it must be a patriarchal godhead that we menopausal women are supposed to be lacking?

Wiseblood

In ancient times menopausal women were the wise grandmothers of their tribe, their blood stored in their body, like the wisdom stored in their psyches. Although the blood has ceased its monthly flow, it becomes instead 'wiseblood' - the older woman's body of knowledge. Traditionally, she now takes on the role of initiator, she whose womb is a storehouse of accumulated power, a vessel which

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has lost none of its sacredness. This is her task and the female wisdom and experience she imparts is both her and our grace.

“The aging sibyl... (who) transcends her individual ego desires and emphasises the importance of sharing her wisdom with the community.” **Linda Schierse-Leonard:** Meeting the Madwoman

In contrast, the word ‘menseful’ means decorous, gracious or generous. So, are women who are ‘menseless’ no longer decorous as in ‘proper, decent or it suitable’? Or is it that they no longer need to corset themselves; to live, dress or respond in ways primarily catered to suit the expectations of others.

As in that wonderful poem by **Jenny Joseph**, we can ‘wear purple with a red hat that doesn't go and doesn't suit...’. Nor need we be generous - as in bountiful or unselfish. We have lived, given and experienced enough to deserve more for our - selves, to be permitted ‘self—ishness’.

*“I shall sit down on the pavement when I'm tired
And gobble up samples in shops and press alarm bells
And ran my stick along the public railings
And make up for the sobriety of my youth.
I shall go out in my slippers in the rain
And pick the flowers in other people's gardens
And learn to spit.”*

from *Warning* by **Jenny Joseph**

Sound vaguely adolescent to you? Well, there is a correspondence between the state of adolescence and menopause. (See **Female Tides** publication of findings from the Adolescence and Menopause seminars). Themes that were important in adolescence start to re-emerge during menopause. Processes which were often incomplete reappear demanding attention the second time around. Surges of creative energy, forsaken desires and wild dreams rise up with the spontaneous, energetic fire of the ‘hot flushes’ (or ‘flashes’ as they are known in America - flashes of inspiration?)

“During this period (of menopause) the forsaken body has to be claimed, cherished, inhabited before it surrenders to becoming a vessel for creativity. In this situation, it is often difficult to distinguish the adolescent from the menopausal woman, but careful differentiation of the two phases of lunar consciousness will help her to her own life, instead of bitterly yearning for what is in fact hers for the claiming”. **Marion Woodman:** The Pregnant Virgin

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Rising Fire

Rather than being a nuisance or a problem to be treated, as in Western allopathy, the hot flush is viewed by Eastern traditional practitioners as the release of Kundalini - a creative, sexual-spiritual energy that is meant to rise up the spine, activating the various chakras along the way. Seen this way, hot flushes can be experienced as a powerful transformative energy, the creative fire that can be channelled and redirected. Hot flushes are also a means for the body to rid itself of toxins, with the release of heat and sweat. It has also been noted by western science that cancer responds therapeutically to a raised body temperature. So hot flushes are healing.

To quote **Vicki Noble** again: *"Menopause is preparing to be healthy old women!"* She goes on to encourage us to *"love our menopause and appreciate and enjoy our hot flushes and the reward will be ecstasy...and renewal."*

Furious or Feisty

As part of the journey of menopause, before we can actually reach the stage of 'loving' it or using it creatively, we must face our fury at ageing. We need to rage against the Crone and acknowledge our fears or tears about our changing beauty and energy.

"As a woman passes through menopause, Nature forces her to confront her Madwoman. If she fails to confront directly her anger at ageing, she is likely to become bitter and resentful. She may be jealous of her daughter's youth and deflate her enthusiasm or try to compete with her. Or she may become depressed, ageing even faster, dwindling away without sharing her wisdom. But if she can accept the mad crone within her - the inner Hecate who sits at the crossroads of life and death - she can share with us her own unique perspective and oracular wisdom". **Linda Schierse Leonard**

Identifying the most dreadful of what we could become, dialoguing with that crazed or lonely hag and befriending her is an important and necessary stage of the work of realising and welcoming the transformative power of the wise healer-initiator within.

Ritual and Creativity

Menopause marks a significant ending and a beginning. One way of coming to terms with this important passover is to affirm it with creative expression. Releasing the fiery energy through dance, mask-making and personal ceremony or ritual enables us to welcome in the menopause and empower ourselves through it.

Symbolically, the womb has always been seen as the source - or vessel of creativity. If a woman reaches menopause without having incarnated her creativity in some form or another, the creative energy will find its way to her. If she denies it - or herself- at this pivotal stage, the consequences could be tragic.

Marion Woodman again: *"In my experience, there is one very dangerous passover to be made with the creative woman. If she is in a mid-life crisis, has recognised that she has not yet taken responsibility for her talent and has lived a basically persona-oriented - or animus-dominated- life, she may suddenly reclaim her abandoned child and attempt a 180- degree turn, with all the*

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determination of the outcast about to come into her kingdom. Either the archetypal influx is too much for her immature body, or the ego is not sufficiently related to the body energy, or the psychic shift is too sudden for the body to move in harmony with it. It is as if the initiation rites that were not assimilated at puberty have now to be integrated before the rites of menopause can be endured."

Once we have embraced our feelings around menopause and ageing - worked with the crones and craziness and learned to embody our expression of it, in one form or another - we will have much to offer as initiators, transformers and wise women. So, sisters and crones, get out your paintbrushes, beat on your drums, travel to the places you always dreamt of, begin healing, write the book you always meant to! Share with others, particularly younger women, your wisdom and your experience.

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