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HER BLOOD IS GOLD

In my twenties I spent a lot of time studying Chinese medicine, and the discovery that the Chinese have a very different attitude toward menstruation stimulated me to rethink my beliefs and practices. I learned that traditionally the Chinese recommend resting during menstruation and that they consider the cause of many gynecological complaints to be faulty behavior during menstruation, for example getting cold, lifting heavy objects, overworking, and eating inappropriate food.

Up until this point I hadn't really thought about my period very much other than to consider it a nuisance. I had been raised to grin and bear it and carry on as normal and to suppress my desire to lie around in a dream for a couple of days a month. I also suffered from bad cramps, which I usually treated with painkillers, although I knew that rest and a hot water bottle would soothe them—it was just that I couldn't allow myself to rest.

My Chinese teachers encouraged me to honor my body feelings, because they had a medical model that supported the idea of rest during menses. It was wonderful to discover a whole body of medical knowledge and folklore that recommended that I do exactly what I felt like doing when I had my period. Suddenly I found that it was okay to indulge myself and to spend the first day or so of my period lying down and spacing out in a comfortable and quiet environment, sipping hot herb tea and allowing my body to have a rest. As I experienced the healing that began to take place in my whole body, I realized that the menstrual period is a natural time for women to rest, a time in every month when the body requests a time, a few hours at least, of relaxation. By cutting through this natural tendency and attempting to fit into a male-dominated work schedule, I had begun to make myself sick.

Beginning to follow my body rather than ordering it around after me was a major shift. But that wasn't all—the discovery that not everyone thought the same way about menstruation opened up my own thinking. I began to realize that there was a wisdom inherent in the body itself and that my own culture didn't necessarily have a very wise or useful attitude to the processes of being female. The recognition that my attitude to menstruation had developed in the context of a society that has diminished the female for several thousand years was a major step in the development of my understanding.

I realized that not everybody everywhere thinks that menstruation is an inconvenient event to be ignored and not everyone everywhere thinks that it is yet more proof that women are inferior to men.

However, the Chinese model only went so far. It never approached issues of power and spirituality, and although the emphasis on rest was very useful, it kept me locked in a mind-set that said

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menstruation was weakness rather than strength. It was when I came across the teachings of the Native American tradition a few years later that I began to understand that something very profound was going on while I was lying about and spacing out—it wasn't simply that I was resting a tired body and rebuilding lost red blood cells.

In the Native American tradition a woman is considered to be at her most powerful, psychically and spiritually, when she is menstruating. Resting during menstruation is seen in the context of one's attention being elsewhere—on the spiritual planes, gathering wisdom.

The different feelings that women have when they menstruate are understood to be part of something very meaningful about the cycles of the woman's body. In many Native American societies, before their traditional practices were suppressed, the women would go to a menstrual hut (a moon-lodge) to pass the time of their bleeding.

Most of the women would bleed at the same time, usually coinciding with the new moon. In *Daughters of Copper Woman*, Anne Cameron describes the lives of women of the Nootka people of the Pacific Northwest, and reports that the atmosphere in the moon-lodge was one of a holiday or party. The women would play games and talk and rub each other's backs to ease cramps. They would sit on special moss padding and give their blood back to the Earth Mother.¹

It wasn't only a time for rest and relaxation, but also a time for gathering spiritual wisdom. In the tale of Tem Eyos Ki, a woman living at the time when the men of the tribe began to assume dominance over the women, it is during her seclusion during menstruation that she comes to an awakening. As a result of the wisdom she finds in the moon-lodge (called the waiting house by the Nootka), she emerges after four days and sings a song of great beauty and love that awakens the tribe to the imbalance between the men

and the women.² This story echoes the Cherokee belief that the menstruating woman is performing a function of cleansing and of gathering wisdom that is beneficial not only for the woman herself but also for the whole tribe.

One of the most inspiring accounts of menstrual beliefs and practices that I have read comes from a woman of the Yurok people of Northern California, paraphrased by Thomas Buckley:

A menstruating woman should isolate herself because this is the time when she is at the height of her powers. Thus the time should not be wasted in mundane tasks and social distractions, nor should one's concentration be broken by concerns with the opposite sex. Rather, all of one's energies should be applied in concentrated meditation "to find out the purpose of your life" and toward the "accumulation" of spiritual energy. The menstrual shelter, or room, is "like the men's sweathouse," a place where you "go into yourself and make yourself stronger." The blood that flows serves to "purify" the woman, preparing her for spiritual accomplishment. A woman must use a scratching implement, instead of scratching absent-mindedly with her fingers, as an aid in focusing her full attention on her body by making even the most natural and spontaneous of actions fully conscious and intentional: "You should feel all of your body exactly as it is, and pay attention."³

It was usual for most Native American groups to hold puberty rituals for the young women, and for many, including the Apache, these were the most elaborate and beloved of all their ceremonies. The puberty rituals of the Nootka graphically demonstrate the respect and

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reverence that they had for women. After a girl had her first moon-time there would be a big party for her. Then she would undergo a ritual of endurance, in which she would be taken far out to sea and left to make her own way home by swimming back to land. On arriving back at the shore she would be greeted by the whole village, and from that moment on she would be recognized as a woman and seen as ready for the responsibilities of marriage and children.⁴

The description of the training for this rite of passage emphasizes both physical strength and the development of character. It was considered important that a woman be able to demonstrate her capacity for patience and perseverance.⁵

This teaching seems so apt, and so lacking in our modern world. Our initiation of girls into womanhood is superficial in comparison—learning to put on make-up, wearing a first bra, using a tampon for the first time. Many women get married and get pregnant without having any sense of their own capacity for endurance, physically or psychologically. Small wonder then that so many girl-women elect to give birth with the aid of pain-killers and a technology that robs them of the experience of their own strength. This lack of challenge and strengthening at puberty may also contribute to the self-hate that afflicts so many young women and leads to eating disorders and addictions.

The puberty rituals of the Pygmies of the Congo, described by Colin Turnbull in *The Forest People*, also depict a culture with a positive view of women and of their power. Unlike the Pygmies, the nearby African villagers view the arrival of a girl's first menstrual blood as an evil omen, "something best concealed and not talked about in public. The girl is an object of suspicion, scorn, repulsion, and anger." In contrast, the Pygmies greet menstrual blood as a symbol of life, and when a Pygmy girl has her first blood it is considered a gift. The whole

group joins in a puberty festival called the *elima*, and as Turnbull notes, "the *elima* is one of the happiest, most joyful occasions in their lives."

The *elima* involves all kinds of physical activities and much playing and running in the forest, as well as training by the older women in the *elima* house. The girls learn the songs of the women and they sing loudly through the forest, "so that everyone should know that they were the *Bamelina*, the people of the *elima*, girls who had been blessed with the blood and were now women."⁶

Turnbull notes that the Pygmies, unlike their village-dwelling neighbors, have a benign worldview—that is, they think of the forest in which they live as a place that will readily meet their needs for food and shelter as well as their needs for spiritual protection. They are completely at home in the forest, and they have a relationship of love and respect with their environment. This seems to be intricately related to their positive attitude to the feminine.

The Yurok and the Nootka also had a good relationship with their environment. They were well adapted to it, and the ocean and rivers and forests nearby gave them ample food. Like the Pygmies, they saw menstruation as a time of power and the puberty of girls a time of strength and celebration.

It seems that a benign worldview is a prerequisite for a positive attitude toward one's own world—one's own body—and most specifically, toward the female body, as that is a microcosm of the larger female body, the earth.

This is clearly reflected in the attitudes of these two cultures to menstruation. It is interesting to note that as Euro-Western culture becomes more earth-conscious and awakened to the ecological damage that our lack of respect for the earth is creating, the female is also becoming more respected.

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Menstruation beliefs and rituals have fascinated anthropologists for years, and there is a growing body of research on the subject. If you are interested and want to find out more about different cultures and their perspectives on menstruation, I strongly recommend the book *Blood Magic*, edited by Thomas Buckley and Alma Gottlieb. There are also several other books mentioned in the bibliography at the back of this book.