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THE WOUNDED WOMAN

When I was growing up I swore that I would not turn out like my female forebears. My mother and grandmothers seemed to have a much more restricted life than the men of the family, and I could see that they commanded less respect as soon as the conversation veered from the personal to the world of ideas and opinions. I was a well-read, opinionated girl who placed a high value on intellectual respect, and I didn't see any reason why my opinion should have less weight than a man's. My parents supported me in this; they wanted me to have a good education and to have confidence in myself. I was smart, and I knew it.

In the outside world it was clear that it was the fathers who had the money and the power and the freedom and the control. I never saw any women who had a level of autonomy and control to match that of the men. The only women I knew who worked were the teachers at school. All other women were mothers. I promised myself that I

would not have a life like that, where I had to subordinate myself to a husband and family.

The problem with breaking tradition in this way, albeit aided and abetted by my family, was that I tended to see everything about my mother's and grandmothers' priorities, skills, and worldviews as somehow old hat, backward-looking, emotional rather than intellectual. In rebelling against the image of womanhood as the supporter of men and the nurturer of the family, I threw out much of the value of the feminine. It took a conscious wish and deep inner work to begin loving myself as a woman and to stop running away from my female nature.

At school and university I was trained in an analytical model of perception that I valued above feelings and intuition. Growing up in the sixties and seventies meant that I was part of a generation that experimented with drugs to help shift our consciousness into an awareness of the value of the nonrational. This had the effect of somewhat compensating for the one-sidedness of my education. (These days I would recommend other ways to escape from the prisons of over-analytical minds.) But despite my explorations of different states of consciousness, as a teenager I had already made certain decisions about myself and my life based on an abhorrence of the female and the diminished role she was forced to carry in the society in which I was raised.

These decisions carried on into my twenties, often translated into an unconscious awkwardness with the female aspect of myself. I had no role models of the kind of woman I wanted to be. I was making it up as I went along, and sometimes the only way I could do what I wanted appeared to be by dispensing with the female within altogether. And in a subtle way, that translated into my sense of my body. I wore jeans most of the time, and I eschewed much of what would be considered female. I kept my home in good shape and I was sympathetic with my friends—but I valued my work in the outside world

more than anything else, because that appeared to be what society placed most value upon.

By the time I was twenty I had been taking the Great Liberator (the pill) for about two years. I noticed that I was getting increasingly emotional and upset during my so-called period and these temporary bursts of hysteria felt very strange, as if I really wasn't myself. I decided to stop taking the pill and see if that had anything to do with it. I was also beginning to have fantasies about getting pregnant although that was, to my conscious mind, an impossibility. I was much too young, unmarried, and aware that my friends who had kids young seemed to have a very difficult time. No, that was a Bad Idea, only entered into by irresponsible women who didn't know what to do with their lives and who resorted to their biological functions. Well I was going to have a career and be a useful member of society, not a mere breeder.

The split in me between the instincts of my inner woman and my masculine-oriented social conditioning was severe. And I didn't realize it. I thought I was a feminist. It didn't occur to me, at that age, that the reason my less organized friends with babies had such a hard time was because society was arranged in such a way that young women had very little power. And no one seemed to be very interested in helping them. I really did think, and it is very painful to admit this, that it was their fault, that they had been stupid to get pregnant. I was going to be very careful that it didn't happen to me.

That was one part of me—the other side was flirting with the idea of pregnancy. So I came off the pill, partly because I suspected that it was messing me up and also because there was the glimmer of a reproductive drive stirring in my being.

After a couple of months I felt like "myself" again, and I realized that despite the convenience of the pill, I had actually felt cheated because my periods were so light. This was when I began to realize that menstruating was an important part of my life, a rhythm that I

depended on for my psychic and physical health, and that I ignored or suppressed it at my peril.

I became interested in the whole cycle, and investigated natural birth control. My bedroom was plastered with charts as I attempted to track my mucus flow. I never was very good about taking my temperature, and I've always disliked thermometers. But I did begin to realize that if I took the time to tune in, I actually had a lot of awareness about what was happening in my body. I could feel a twinge over my ovary when I ovulated. I could track the subtle shifts in my sexuality, the levels of introversion and extroversion throughout the month. I began to understand that it was possible to befriend this mysterious cycle that had always seemed a burden to me. I liked knowing what my body was up to.

Despite the glimmers of awareness that this awakening brought, when I became pregnant a few years later I still had an attitude of neglect toward my body when its needs interfered with my work. I remember being extremely hungry but putting other things before eating. I miscarried, and the grief that I felt in my body for the lost baby and the frustration of a pregnancy cut short awakened me to my body and its essential femaleness in a shocking way.

This was an experience that set me apart from the world of men, and the intellect, in a stark and thorough way. I had no conscious resources within me to deal with the feelings that overwhelmed me. I was full of loss for a being that had at most been six weeks old. It didn't make any sense. But I could feel my body grieving in a powerful way. I cried endlessly and was depressed throughout the rest of what would have been the pregnancy. All I wanted was to get pregnant again, but I didn't conceive. My husband didn't understand my pain, and I didn't understand or accept it enough to be able to explain it to him. I was lost in an unprepared-for sea of hormonal anguish. Being a woman was taking me into regions of feeling that were vast

and uncontrollable. Why had no one prepared me for this? Why didn't anyone talk about the fact that a woman's physiology had such a powerful effect on her mental and emotional state? Was I some kind of aberration—or was this another of the facets of female experience consigned to the secret compartment of life?

One day an acupuncture client of mine said, "I had three miscarriages you know, and every time I felt the most terrible grief. No one understands the pain of it who hasn't been through it."

I felt a bit better after that, and I realized that I didn't have a single woman in my family or circle of friends who had had a miscarriage and who could have reassured me from her own experience. But many of them had been through pregnancy and childbirth—if miscarriage could provoke such a flood of feeling, what on earth was giving birth like? I began talking to women and reading on the subject, and I began to see that there was still a folkloric tradition that understood mood swings and hyper-emotionality but that this traditional knowledge didn't fit into the modern world. It seemed to be being taken less and less into account. Were women becoming less emotional, or was society refusing to acknowledge the relationship between cycles and mood? It seemed to me that much of the richness of female experience was being cauterized by the machine age, by the linear mind that works in weeks rather than moon cycles and talks of pregnancy as forty weeks rather than nine moons; that calls a woman's blood-time her "period" rather than any of the more beautiful names that have been used in other times and cultures—the most often heard being the term used by the Native Americans, *moon-time*.

After the miscarriage my moon-time became extremely painful. I had truly terrible cramps, and atrocious premenstrual rages. My marriage was falling apart, and the chief reason seemed to be our inability to understand each other's maleness and femaleness. We used to joke about men and women needing to live apart for their own sanity. But

really, we each didn't understand or respect the needs and rhythms of our own gender. I would become enraged every month in order to send my husband away, instead of being able to say gracefully "I would like some time alone when I am bleeding."

THE WOUND MAKES ITSELF KNOWN

In my late twenties I discovered that I had cervical dysplasia (abnormal cells on the surface of the cervix), and the gynecologist wanted to cauterize my cervix. I was horror-struck, and my body recoiled from such a brutal procedure. I knew that this was not going to be healing for me, and it would just further damage an area already wounded by a clumsy D&C after the miscarriage.

It wasn't only the procedure that appeared brutal to me—the gynecologist had a brutal manner. For one thing, he was a man, which I initially accepted; I later realized that my true reaction was intense discomfort. It was incongruous to have a man coldly and clinically discussing the condition of my cervix. I hated the way he winked at me when he told me to "Take your bottom half things off." I hated having an unknown man inserting cold metal instruments inside me and demonstrating the results of his tests to spotty male students. They all stood around, three of them, all male, staring into a microscope that was inserted into my vagina, as I lay with my feet wide apart in stirrups, like some kind of captive animal. I was deeply offended by this. He was treating a very dear and sensitive part of my body as if he temporarily owned it. And I was outraged when he took a biopsy from my cervix without telling me first what he was going to do. The most piercing pain I have ever felt shot through the interior of my body. I screamed, and asked, shocked and terrified, "What have you done to me?"

"Oh be quiet," he said. "It doesn't hurt. There aren't enough nerve endings there for it to hurt."

After that I didn't trust him to do anything else to me, and I told him that I felt that there was a psychological reason for my illness, and that I preferred to use gentle methods to heal it. He exploded and told me I was a foolish woman and would undoubtedly die as a result of refusing his surgery. I burst into tears and ran out of his office. How dare he talk to me like that, as if I was nothing, just a body for his skills to work on. I knew that his threat was an attempt to bully me, and one that had no justifiable foundation—the level of dysplasia I had was mild and had a good chance of getting better without surgical treatment.

I had little faith in the procedures of modern medicine because they paid no attention to factors that I was sure were involved in my disease, such as my recent divorce, and the way my periods had been recently, and various other factors of which I had only a glimmering awareness. All they looked at was my cervix—and I knew very well that all of me was involved in this aberration from the norm. It seemed poor medicine not to take the other factors into account.

My lack of faith made me very uncomfortable whenever I went for a doctor's visit. It had been several years since I had been near a doctor, and in the interim I had been practicing acupuncture and living a lifestyle around naturopathic principles. I was shocked when I rediscovered the mind-set that accompanies modern medicine. I would try and talk about my state of mind and how I knew that it was affecting my health and that I was sure that there were less invasive methods of healing that I could use. After all, this was a long way from being a threatening condition. I could afford to take the time I needed to heal more naturally without cutting and cauterizing and traumatizing my body.¹

No one wanted to listen. They just wanted to do invasive and unpleasant things to me, as fast as possible please, without, it seemed to

me, due consideration of the possible outcome. They wanted a quiet compliant patient with no self-awareness. They had stolen my right to my own process of illness and recovery. It seemed obvious to me that if I didn't get the meaning from the message my cervix was giving me, then my body would try again, and I would become sick, perhaps in a different way. It didn't make sense to go ahead and permanently scar my cervix, possibly affecting my ability to carry a child to full term, without trying to understand why my body was behaving in this way.

Each time I had to have a biopsy (I had changed to a different doctor and hospital by this point), the doctor showed no interest in my distaste for the procedure or for my sense that it might be traumatizing an already upset area.

I knew that the whole thing was tied in with my periods, which had been strange recently. My cycle had shortened to twenty-one days, and I had a very different blood flow. I knew instinctively that something was going on with my womb and that the dysplasia was a symptom of an imbalance that was deeper. I suspected there was an important issue for me to get hold of.

I realized after a while that I really wanted to heal myself. It just didn't feel right to me to go through this surgical business. But I decided I would have to, so I opted for the least invasive remedy—laser treatment. Then a series of interesting synchronicities prevented me from having the treatment. It was delayed and delayed, and before the rescheduled date for the treatment, I went to a workshop led by a man who teaches the Native American tradition.

He told me that in the Native American teachings a menstruating woman has the potential to be more psychically and spiritually powerful than anyone, male or female, at any other time. That turned my conditioned pictures of reality upside down. I'd always experienced my period as a time of weakness and difficulty—what on earth was the man talking about?

When I asked him specifically about my wounded cervix he asked me a lot of questions and then said that he thought that my problem was rooted in a denial of my femaleness and that he saw that I had negative ideas deep in my unconscious about what it meant to be a woman. He told me to dig a hole in my garden every now and then and speak all the negative thoughts I could think of about the state of being female into the hole, then cover it up so that the earth could transform the energy (just as it transforms waste matter into compost, so it has the capacity to transform our thoughts).

When I went home I tried this technique. I felt pretty silly, and I was glad that no one could see into my tiny garden. I didn't know that I had so many bad feelings about being a woman lurking in my highly educated feminist mind until I did this exercise. It was painful, and it was very effective.

I started looking at how I behaved when I had my period, and the first thing I saw was that I used tampons. I tuned in to my body and in my imagination asked my vagina and cervix what they thought of tampons. "Ugh," they said, unequivocally. "Horrible things." And I thought about it and realized that maybe there was something important about the blood flowing freely out of the vagina. It occurred to me that the tampons might be irritating my cervix, and I wondered if my initial difficulty with them in my teens hadn't in fact been a wise instinct of my body. I had used tampons without ever thinking about the effect they might be having on me—they were a source of liberation, I thought, one that allowed me to act as if I didn't really have a period.

"Aha!" I thought. "One that allowed me to pretend I wasn't really having a period." And I watched that thought, and the thoughts behind it, and I began to realize that I had a background belief that my period was something to be ignored and suppressed as much as possible. Suppression was, I knew, one of the main causes of illness and

imbalance. Maybe my periods wanted to have a more central place in my life and in my awareness. I began to experiment with that.

If my bleeding started at the weekend, I stopped driving and stayed home, relaxing in my garden. I remember that it was summer and I lay in the sunshine, just experiencing my bleeding. It was interesting to me—I felt so much better if I just lay about and did nothing. If my period started during the working week it was more of a problem, but I would try and rest as much as I could. It was a couple of years before I had the space to really go into what was happening when I was bleeding, but in the beginning it was a major step to allow my period into my life just that much. To sit through the pain instead of reaching automatically for a pain-killer, to wear pads instead of tampons and look at my blood and feel the blood coming out of me, to just sit and begin to tune in to my bleeding body, to get the first glimmers of a sense of peace that came from just Being, letting go of Doing.

At last I began to feel that I was getting in touch with the root of my problems, but the way forward seemed blurry to me. It was clear that in order to heal myself, to become at ease with myself and comfortable in my skin, I had to love my womanliness to a depth that I had not yet plumbed. And in order to do this I had to realize that once again, I had no role models.

I felt very alone. I had a good friend who paid attention to her periods, and her friendship helped me enormously at this time—but I also wanted an older woman as a guide, someone who understood the wholeness of being female in a way that no one around me did. I felt tantalizingly close to this wholeness at times, usually when I was bleeding, but then I would return to my accustomed state of underlying confusion about what it meant to be a woman. In what way was it different from being a man? And how did the menstrual cycle relate to that? I began to wonder about the effect that menstruation had on

me not only physically, now that I had realized that it was a time for rest and renewal, but also psychologically and spiritually. What was the meaning of this bleeding time in my overall development, my individuation, and my place in society?

During this time I repeatedly dreamed of a woman who had been bruised and battered. She was very sad, and I would take her in my arms and comfort her. In the dreams I felt shocked at the extent of the cruelty that had been perpetrated on her, and I also saw that she had somehow allowed this damage to take place. I didn't understand why the damage had occurred, but I could hold her in my arms and love her. So I did that, night after night. Sometimes I made love to her. Sometimes I simply held her. Sometimes I just looked at her bruises. I didn't relate to her personally at this time—I had never been beaten like that. Now it is clear that she was a symbol of my wounded woman within, but at the time she was a visitor to my dream-life, and not really a part of "me." Usually she was blonde, which made it harder for me to identify with her personally because I have dark hair. And maybe she was a visitor, as well as a representation of a part of myself. What was clear was that I loved her and I wanted to heal her.

For me the wound of being female was a literal wound on the surface of my cervix, and it became clear to me through my dreams and fantasies that my work was to heal the wounded woman within. Doing the exercise of digging the hole in the ground had made me very aware of the largely unconscious negativity that I had toward so much of female reality. I began to look more closely than ever at what had created that wounding, at what "female reality" actually meant, and at how our society rejected or belittled so much of that. Recovering the beauty and majesty and joy of being female became my task in life.

By allowing my body to be my teacher—by really listening to myself while I was bleeding, I began to understand what the Native

Americans were talking about when they stressed the potential power of menstruation.

I began to look at my blood with a tinge of awe rather than fear, disgust, or indifference. By this time I no longer used tampons, so I got to look at my blood properly every month. I saw that sometimes it was clear and red and sometimes darker and clotted. If I really freed up my vision, I could see that it was full of life, full of magic, full of potential. I began to experience a frisson of joy when I thought about bleeding, about being a woman, that there was something, after all, extraordinarily magical and mysterious about inhabiting a female body. The resentment about being female that I had held in my teens and early twenties, the feelings that boys had a better deal, faded away and were replaced by a growing sense of wonder at the intricacies and depths and possibilities offered by the monthly cycle.

I began to take time not only to rest but also to meditate and just be with myself when I had my period. I found out that it was a time when I was particularly able to find insight and that this insight was of a timeless nature. I noticed that my dreams were often very strong, especially toward the end of my period—clear and prophetic. I felt I was tapping into some ancient and vast wellspring of female wisdom—simply by sitting still and listening when I was bleeding. Taking this time out when I was bleeding created a very different relationship with my body. My health improved, my cervix healed, and gradually the bad cramps I had experienced for most of my menstruating life eased up. My period became a time of pleasure rather than pain.

I was beginning to really love myself. Of course, you can't make yourself do this, just as you can't make yourself love another person. It began to happen very gradually, and many people came into my life who helped me see more clearly. But the revelation at the beginning was that menstruation is a source of power. This priceless

piece of information, coupled with a strong instinct I had about the power of the womb, transformed my deep and largely unconscious lack of self-respect.

This was the information I had needed to give me the confidence to set about healing my own gynecological problems. It inspired me to see if I could feel the power of menstruation if I paid enough attention when I was bleeding. To think of menstruation as a source of power for women completely went against my conditioning, and yet I knew in my heart that it was true. I realized that in the dichotomy between what our culture teaches us, and my gut reaction of "Yes! Of course!" to this ancient wisdom, there was a lot of energy. When you find the places where a culture splits from a natural truth you have found a key—a way inside the diseases of the culture. I began to understand that the split between the wisdom and power of bleeding that I was perceiving and modern society's attitudes to the womb lay at the heart of the subjugation and denial of female reality and experience.

One of the gifts of being female is the access to other worlds that comes during the premenstruum and the time of bleeding. This liminal time opens a woman up to her psychic abilities. Euro-Western mechanistic culture prizes the rational and is suspicious of the nonrational—of the intuition, the unseen realms, and the world of the spirit. The Christian church has encouraged us to think of ourselves as separate from God and in need of the intermediary of a priest in order to connect with spiritual realms. This emphasis on rationalism and the severance from an autonomous relationship with Spirit has served to cut women off from a deep relationship with their menstrual cycle. A great part of women's psychic strength is tied up with the cycles of their bodies, and if we ignore this time and fail to recognize its enormous value then we lose touch with the richness of female experience.

For many women, the root of their unhappiness lies in a painful relationship with the processes of being female. Women are trained to

hide the fact that they are menstruating at all costs. Blood stains on clothing are a hideous embarrassment. No one ever says, "I don't want to come to work or go to the party because I've got my period" unless they are feeling ill with it, and then they usually say they have a headache or a digestive problem.

When the womb and menstruation are seen merely as uncomfortable biological necessity, women's self-esteem is correspondingly low. We are our bodies—and we can't really love ourselves deep down in the bottom of our hearts if we don't wholeheartedly love our bodies. And you don't love your body if you catch yourself saying, "Oh no, I've got my period."

Of course, one of the reasons that we say such things is because our lives are planned out in advance. The altered state that menstruation can take one into is not compatible with late twentieth-century action-packed industrial life, with running around in the world performing our scheduled and organized tasks. Menstruation is predictably unpredictable. You never know exactly when it is going to come, and sometimes it completely surprises you. Not only is it inconsiderate of timetables and schedules, it is also messy. Hooray! We try to sanitize and order modern life to the degree that we run into danger of there being no life left in us. Periods save us from this doom—they are a wild and basic, raw and instinctual, bloody and eternal aspect of the female—and no amount of "civilization" will change that. My period is a monthly occurrence in my life that I have in common with all women who have ever lived. Women living in caves twenty thousand years ago, priestesses in palaces in ancient Egypt, seers in temples in Sumeria, all bled with the moon. The first woman who made fire might well have had her period at the time. Now that's a thought. If menstruation is a highly creative time for women psychically and spiritually, who knows what gifts humankind has been brought by women during their menses.

The value we place on menstruation has a direct correlation with the value we place on ourselves as women. If we look at the attitudes of matrifocal, earth-centered societies, we see a very different relationship with the menstrual cycle. As we saw in chapter 3, some cultures prize the onset of menstruation and mark it with celebration. In some Native American societies a menstruating woman's dreams are taken very seriously for their oracular wisdom. In the Tantric tradition a menstruating woman is considered to be at the height of her power, "a true transmitter of the life force, able to act and respond with power and wisdom."²

It is the loss of contact with this innate wisdom that has led to the distortion of menstrual power into menstrual symptoms.