

# The Sabbath of Women

by Lara Owen

I used to think that my periods were a nuisance, a messy intrusion that increased laundry and caused a host of unpleasant symptoms including exhaustion and debilitating pain. Menstruation interfered with my sex life, with athletic activities and with my energy level. It caused erratic mood swings, irritability, and destructive, unstoppable bitchiness. It cost money--in pads and tampons to mop up the blood, in ruined clothes, in time away from work. It was a mean and sneaky saboteur that would always come at the most inconvenient time.

Despite this catechism of woe I wasn't entirely against it. When my period came there was always a part of me that was pleased. It meant I was healthy and fertile and that everything was working properly. There was a sense of pride about bleeding that I felt strongly with my first period, but, in the absence of any external support, the feeling of pleasure dwindled away.

A friend of mine who is Jewish told me that when she had her first period her mother slapped her on the face. Reeling with shock, she said "Why did you do that?". Her mother replied "I don't know, it was done to me by my mother. It's tradition."

To be hit on the face when first you become a woman -- that is an interesting statement about how the state of womanliness is regarded. Perhaps it is intended to remove the feeling of pride that comes with the first blood.

Something else took away that feeling of pride for me, and I think it was the absence of ceremony. It felt to me, internally, that something truly amazing and magical was happening, and yet everyone around me treated it as a commonplace. I felt a sense of achievement, mingled with excitement, curiosity, and embarrassment; I also remember a vague awareness of a vast and gaping unknown future. Intuitively I knew it was a massive landmark in my life--and yet no one said anything about it, other than to give me some sanitary pads. I think my mother was pleased--after all, it meant I was healthy and growing up normally--but I needed more than that. I needed a ceremony, a party, some joyful public recognition of this huge event in my development. But nothing happened. As the months went by I felt more and more the shame and embarrassment, and less and less the excitement and the pride that had glimmered for a moment with the first blood.

At home, my periods were something to be kept secret from my father and brothers. If I had to mention it, I would use a hushed voice and preferably talk only to my mother on her own. Shortly after my periods had begun, we were going on a family trip, and I had to ask my father to stop the car so that I could go to the pharmacy. Of course, he wanted to know what it was that I needed to buy. I remember this awful feeling as I told him I had to buy some sanitary pads. It was a peculiar mixture of shame, pride and total embarrassment. He was very nice about it and, as far as I can remember, never said anything to make me feel that there was anything to be ashamed of--but somehow there was always this shame in the background of my thoughts, and it colored my whole relationship with the outside world.

At school, menstruation was not a subject to be mentioned other than in the biology class. All the information I received about menstruation was purely physical. You had a period because you weren't pregnant, and the menstrual flow was simply the discarded lining of the womb provided for a possible fetus. My friends and I discussed it and, in the absence of further information, decided that the female body was poorly evolved--all that blood and fuss for years and years when you needed only to do it once or twice in order to have children.

The picture society gave me through advertising was a confusing one. Tampon ads showed lithe girls in bikinis running gleefully towards the ocean and girls in tight white jeans jumping onto horses. This didn't mesh very easily with my experience of lethargy and cramps. And I knew that no one in their right mind would trust a tampon so much that they would go out for the day in white jeans. Pah! It must have been men writing those ads.

Yet somehow I felt that I should be like the girls in the Tampax ads, and that the way my body and mind behaved was somehow wrong--that a normal girl wouldn't feel any different when she had her period. There's nothing she'd like more than to scramble onto a horse and gallop off for an adventure while that nice little tampon allowed her to forget that she was menstruating at all. The embarrassing reality was that I couldn't even get a tampon inside me. Not only was I not fitting the stereotype, I was also failing with the equipment. I felt decidedly inadequate until I eventually succeeded. Then the process of imagining I wasn't having a period at all began in earnest.

I saw my periods as an inconvenience and that was all. If they were painful I took painkillers--Feminax, they were called, and they had a powerful mixture of ingredients designed to clobber every menstrual symptom, including caffeine to offset depression and lethargy. When I had exams I would get drugs from the doctor to stave off my period until a more suitable time, when the rage of unrecognized hormones could assail my left brain without affecting my academic future. No one ever said anything about there being something useful in experiencing a powerful state of diffuse awareness once a month, and that was because no one knew.

When I was eighteen I went on the pill and was initially pleased that my periods became predictable and also much lighter. It took a few years for it to fully sink in that the reason they were so light was that they weren't really a period at all. I noticed that I was getting increasingly emotional and upset during my so-called period and so I decided to stop taking the pill. 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 for me, 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.

In other cultures, rather than being ignored, menstruation has been, and in some cases still is, seen as a time that is special and sacred for women. The abundance of female-related symbols in excavations of ancient sites in Europe and the Near East strongly suggest that these cultures were matrifocal, and revered the Goddess and the processes of the female body. Ritual practices were connected to the monthly bleeding of women, and menstrual blood itself was highly valued as possessing

magical power. The word ritual comes from *rtu*, Sanskrit for *menses*. In the days before the sacrifice of living beings, it was menstrual blood which was offered in ceremonies. Menstrual blood was sacred to the Celts, the ancient Egyptians, the Maoris, the early Taoists, the Tantrists and the Gnostics.

The Native Americans understood very well the different feelings that women have when they menstruate--and for them, these feelings were part of something very meaningful about the cycles of the woman's body. The women would go to a menstrual hut to pass the time of their bleeding. It was considered to be the time that a woman was at the height of her spiritual power, and that the most appropriate activity was to rest and gather wisdom.

In 1986 I met a teacher of the Native American traditions. He taught me that 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?

He told me to dig a hole in the ground and speak my negative thoughts about femaleness, about bleeding, into the hole. He said the earth would transform the negative energy I was holding about my female nature. I felt pretty silly doing this but I did it anyway, and I was amazed to discover how many bad feelings about being a woman I had lurking inside my highly educated feminist mind. This exercise was painful, but very effective.

I began to look at my blood with a tinge of awe rather than fear, disgust or indifference. By that time I no longer used tampons, so I got to look at my blood properly every month instead of just seeing it on a yucky old tampon. I saw that it was clear and red, and sometimes darker and clotted. If I really freed up my vision then 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, so extraordinarily magical and mysterious about inhabiting a female body. The resentment about being female that I had had 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 to rest and 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 felt I was tapping into some ancient and vast well-spring 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, and gradually the bad cramps I had had for most of my menstruating life eased up, and 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 big thing

at the beginning was this knowledge 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. \_\_\_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, on the one hand, the wisdom and power of bleeding that I was perceiving, and on the other, modern society's attitudes to the womb, lay at the heart of the subjugation and denial of female reality and 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. Bloodstains 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, not 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 spiritual beings living in physical bodies, it is true, but while we are incarnate, we are our bodies--and we can't really deep down in the bottom of our hearts love ourselves 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".

In the nineteenth century menstruation was viewed by physicians as one more sign of the inferiority and weakness of the female. However, there is usually at least a glimmer of truth in any ideology, and the physicians of the Victorian era were not completely wrong when they emphasized the importance of menstruation in women's overall health; of the relationship between the womb and the psyche; of the wisdom of rest during the period. We have tended to reject all of this because it reminds us of the time when the lives of women were more controlled by men, and because it smacks of old arguments that kept women tied to the home and powerless in the outside world. We have also, quite rightly, rejected the idea that the natural processes of being female are a sickness. But to say that something is not a sickness, and to ignore it altogether--these are not necessarily one and the same thing. By ignoring menstruation, in reaction to the ideas of the Victorian era, perhaps we have lost touch entirely with a lingering thread of awareness of its value in women's lives.

The changes that have taken place in the lives of women over the past thirty years may look like a revolution, but in many ways it has been an assimilation. Women seeking power in a male world have tended to do so by becoming pseudo-men. And perhaps unwittingly, feminism has played a part in the suppression of menstruation. One of the biggest fears that I have come across in successful and aspiring women when I discuss ancient ideas about the spiritual power of menstruation, is that this will in some way affect their myth of being "just as good as a man, and sometimes better". Many women don't want to go deeper into menstruation, they are scared of what they will discover. It suits them better to suppress their feelings with tranquilizers, to spray with vaginal deodorants to disguise the smell of blood, to numb their pain through

painkillers, to absorb their blood with tampons so they never have to actually see it. It's easier to be a successful woman in a man's world if you hardly recognize that you menstruate at all.

The technology of suppression--tampons, vaginal deodorants, sophisticated pain-killing and mood-altering drugs--has acted together with the myth of the super-woman to create a predominant cultural attitude that a menstruating woman is no different from one who is not bleeding. The trouble with all this, is that it simply isn't true. Any woman remotely in touch with her body knows that when she is menstruating, and usually for a few days before, she feels different. And this is a fact of nature that ultimately cannot be denied.

One of the aspects of menstruation that I now love and appreciate is its predictable unpredictability. You never know exactly when it is going to come, and sometimes it completely surprises you. And 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 pyramids in ancient Egypt, seers in temples in Sumeria, they 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. And this affects men too. We think of the sexes as being separate and in a way they are. But in another way we are all part of the same big human soup, and how women view themselves and are viewed affects men too. It might look on the face of it that men have had the upper hand for the past few thousand years--but that is only true from a certain perspective. Both men and women have gained and suffered from the imbalances of patriarchal society. Men have also been separated from their bodies and from their feelings, and from the pleasure and healing made possible by relationships based on co-operation rather than hierarchy and dominance.

Imagine a world in which men and women worked together to develop the sense of inner peace that comes from sitting still for a couple of days once a month. In which men supported women to spend a few days in peaceful quiet. A world in which menstrual blood was once again a magical fluid with the power to nurture new life. A world in which menstruation was understood to be the Sabbath of women--a natural space within one moon's cycle for retreat, introversion, and inner work. From which women emerge like the new-born moon itself, renewed, the old skin shed.

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*The following two sections were included as sidebars in the original version of the article*

## Why Call Menstruation the Sabbath of Women?

A few years ago I had the opportunity to spend extended periods of time alone in a beautiful spot in the Sierras on the shore of Lake Tahoe, a vast blueness sacred to the Indians. I began to fully retreat when I had my period, being quiet and alone, sitting on the earth in the sunshine with lizards and blue jays for company, with the wind and the moon and the sun, the ripples and the colours on the lake my guides and entertainers. I journeyed inside my psyche and would find myself suddenly in tears at something long forgotten, an event from my childhood or adolescence. My period became a time when I found I was particularly able to open up to psychological material and release emotions. I noticed that after the first few days of bleeding I would go very still and quiet for a day or so and seemingly nothing would be happening -- an empty space after the weeping and remembering. Then as my period ended there would be several hours of clarity in which I would be particularly creative, and open to information about the future -- usually the coming month, but sometimes further reaching than that.

This pattern continues, although usually it is less intense these days. Much of the deeply held psychological clutter appears to have been released -- probably as much as my psyche wants to deal with at this stage in my life. Now I feel more up-to-date with myself so there is less to let go of, usually just anything I have held onto from the preceding month. I still struggle with the empty time, and often start to do things, imagining that nothing is happening internally so I might as well get back to business in the outer world. Often this backfires and I find that I accomplish little and use up a lot of energy. It's hard to sit still when nothing is coming up to work on, it's hard for me to honor that emptiness even though I know it precedes creativity, inspiration and insight. It is all part of the process but it is an undramatic part, and I still have a tendency to ride roughshod over it.

I don't have a daily meditation practice. I prefer to adjust my inner and contemplative time to my own impulses. Often when I have my period I go into a quiet, solitary and meditative space for three or four days, and then much less the rest of the month. This feels like a very natural rhythm to me, and that's why I think of the bleeding time as the Sabbath of women.

### Bleeding onto the Earth

Traditionally Native American women went to a moon-lodge while they were bleeding and bled onto moss, sitting on the earth. They consider the relationship between women and the earth to be very important, and this relationship is nurtured by bleeding onto the earth. When women do this they have a direct cellular connection with the earth, which grounds and centers them.

When I was first introduced to the idea of bleeding onto the earth by a friend of mine I thought it sounded a little silly, a little pretentious. But I started doing it tentatively, and began to feel a flicker of connection to something very old. One of the problems I had was figuring out how to do it. Native American women used to sit on moss in the moon house. Where was I supposed to sit and bleed? Even if I went and found a nice piece of earth to sit on, I didn't want to stay there for the whole time. Then I started using cloth pads to absorb my blood and soaking them in water before I washed them. I

realized that I could pour the soaking water onto the earth. So now that's what I do. The water is a beautiful red, and I pour it onto the ground around plants, and the act of doing this fills me with a feeling of connection, of rightness, of being at peace with something that is often neglected in modern life. Simple acts of value, simple knowledge.

It's like chopping wood, rocking a baby, baking bread, drinking from a fast flowing mountain stream. It's one of those acts of being a human being that is timeless, of eternal value, part of the steady round of life and death. The cells that die in my body, that are carried in the menstrual blood, are food for the earth. What dies gives birth. What dies feeds those who live and will live.

If I ignore my blood I get distanced from this knowledge. I fear and dislike my blood--for without the knowledge that it too is food, that it too is a gift I bear, then I see it as purely loss. A waste of blood, a waste of time, a baby that wasn't conceived. Whether I desire pregnancy or not, my blood is always a gift. And it is a gift in a literal sense, as well as a psychic gift to myself. It is a gift from my body back to the earth: the mother that has fed and nurtured me every day of my life.

This article was first published in the summer of 1991 in Whole Earth Review (a big thank you to Howard Rheingold). It has subsequently been widely reprinted internationally. It appears on many Web sites. All the ideas and much of the text of this article formed the basis of my books on menstruation which were published in 1993 (*Her Blood is Gold*) and 1998 (*Honoring Mensesruation A Time of Self-Renewal* )

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