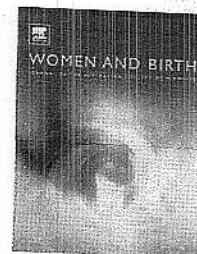


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## How menstrual shame affects birth

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**Summary** In Western, industrialised culture, menstruation and birth are commonly seen as unstable, pathological processes requiring medical control. Girls learn to see menstruation as shameful and secretive. Menarche is a nodal event around which girls' beliefs and attitudes to being female are organised. The perception of menstruation as a liability has foundational implications for future female experiences, particularly birth. Other cultures have recognised menstruation and birth as spiritual phenomena, with menarche and childbirth experienced as powerful initiatory processes. My PhD research explored the links between cultural attitudes to menstruation and spirituality, and women's experiences of birth. My feminist perspective recognised the power imbalances, patriarchal controls and structural inequities that oppress women in their intimate body experiences. Menstrual shame was identified as a core patriarchal organising principle that inculcates and perpetuates male dominance and female subordination. Engendering the perception of female physiology – and thus womanhood – as inherently flawed, menstrual shame was a key factor that predisposed women to approach birth feeling fearful, disempowered and vulnerable to intervention. However, my research also unearthed a counter-cultural group of women who had transformed their relationship with both menstruation and birth. Redesignating menstruation as a spiritual phenomenon enabled these women to dismantle their menstrual shame, connect with their female spirituality and give birth fearlessly and powerfully. For others, the profound spirituality of birth transformed their understanding of menstruation. Contrary to cultural norms, both menstruation and birth can be sacred female experiences which are sources of authority and empowerment.

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### Introduction

As a women's health practitioner, I have often been touched by the numinous power of the everyday miracles of men-

struation, pregnancy and birth. As a woman and mother, I have also experienced the transformative potential of these female experiences personally. When I completed my Masters in Women's Studies, I found significant gaps in the literature and research about the spirituality of menstruation and birth. Instead, there was an inordinate focus on the pathology of the menstrual cycle.

Jo Murphy-Lawless observed: "Once we begin to menstruate, we are told by obstetric medicine that we forever teeter on the edge of pathology because of our faulty reproductive

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system and hence our bodies are subject to continuing medical surveillance, with the emphasis on our potential to malfunction, not on our inherent well-being".<sup>1(p23)</sup> My review of the literature left me feeling that I had tapped into a powerful discourse that obscured the links between assumptions and beliefs about women, and the social and political undercurrents shaping our lives.<sup>2</sup> Moreover, the focus on pathology was markedly at odds with my own experiences of menstruation and birth as spiritual phenomena. These incongruities led me to explore other women's experiences of embodied spirituality through my doctoral research.

## Menstruation

Most Western women grow up thinking of menstruation as a kind of "nose-bleed of the womb",<sup>3(p29)</sup> a necessary evil borne reluctantly. Ovulation is regarded as the sole purpose of the menstrual cycle, with our bleeding seen as a waste-product. Like other excretory processes, it is perceived as something shameful and distasteful coming from our nether regions. Penelope Shuttle and Peter Redgrove noted: "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".<sup>3(p30)</sup> In a linear economy, the menstrual cycle is seen to interfere with productivity.<sup>4</sup> Advertising refers to 'sanitary protection' so that 'no-one will ever guess'. The dominant message in Western culture is one of menstrual suppression and secrecy.<sup>5</sup> In this article, I want to challenge that perception by raising the possibility that menstruation can be a valuable spiritual resource with significant implications for birthing.

Menarche (first menses) and childbirth are pivotal experiences in the life of a woman. Along with menopause, they are sometimes known as women's 'Blood Mysteries', liminal times of enormous potential.<sup>6</sup> They represent critical transitions during which the unconscious is provoked to provide "an opportunity for regression and pathology, or reintegration and further emotional maturity".<sup>7(p1)</sup> However, the natural processes do not automatically confer reintegration and maturity. To become transformative, they require the conscious sacrifice of a previous physiological state and sense of identity.<sup>8</sup> Some indigenous and Eastern cultures have developed elaborate rituals and communal processes to facilitate this transformation.

## Menarche—first menses

Menarche is historically viewed as the transition to womanhood.<sup>9</sup> One study found that almost all participants (137) remembered their first menstruation in detail including "where they were when it happened, what they were doing, and whom they told".<sup>10(p17-18)</sup> 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,<sup>11</sup> with little discussion of the emotional, psychological, sexual and spiritual aspects. This emphasis on the physical to the exclusion of all the other dimensions produces a fragmenting effect in the psyche.

Menarche plays a critical role 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 organised and assimilated" (Koeff, 1983). In essence, it confirms a sense of womanhood in the adolescent female".<sup>11(p37)</sup> Despite its enormous significance in a woman's life, menarche occurs in secret and remains "an unritualized, uncelebrated non-event" in Western culture.<sup>5(pix)</sup> Widespread derogatory attitudes to menstruation and the lack of recognition, mentoring or celebration at menarche contain powerful, often unspoken messages about the value of a girl's status and what she can expect as a mature woman in Western society.

Psychotherapist Sue Shapiro noted that a girl's first menses is her own "personal experience of this central female process",<sup>9(p79)</sup> an event on which future experiences — like childbirth — will build. The 'average' woman spends about 2400 days or 6 consecutive years of her life menstruating.<sup>12</sup> Given 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".<sup>11(p45)</sup> These ignominious beginnings set the stage for women's self-mistrust and disempowerment when it comes to birthing.

## Menstruation and birth as feminist frontiers

Despite a number of feminist studies on menstruation over the past two decades,<sup>2,11,12-14</sup> there is a pervasive unease about the topic even within feminism and menstruation remains a taboo subject. This discomfort has its origins in the knowledge that "throughout history, the woman's body is the terrain on which patriarchy is erected".<sup>15(p3)</sup> There is concern that returning attention to the body will reinforce an essentialist subordination of women.<sup>16</sup> However, this reluctance has meant that a 'woman-as-subject' understanding of female biology has not been adequately theorised. Elizabeth Grosz referred to the 'primacy of corporeality', that is, moving the body from the periphery to the centre of analysis and making it "the very "stuff" of subjectivity",<sup>17(pix)</sup> an approach I adopted in my study.

Feminism has a crucial role to play in reforming menstrual attitudes in the West. Shirley Lee's<sup>14</sup> study, which explored the meaning of menstruation and premenstrual syndrome (PMS) for some Canadian women, found that those who identified with the PMS diagnosis were more self-critical, expressing feelings of low self-esteem and self-hate. In contrast, the women who rejected the sickness label expressed feelings of self-worth linked to their 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".<sup>14(p9)</sup> As my findings elaborate, this changed attitude toward menses can play a pivotal role in proactively creating an empowered, positive birth experience.

## Childbirth

Cross-culturally and throughout history, pregnancy and childbirth have been seen as spiritual phenomena because of the miraculous processes involved.<sup>6,18–21</sup> Yet, obstetrics, which is the dominant model for birth practice in the West, does not regard spirituality as its remit.<sup>1</sup> This discrepancy reflects the Enlightenment separation of body and spirit upon which Western medicine is founded.<sup>22</sup> Like sex, childbirth is an intensely personal, physical, emotional and spiritual experience.<sup>23</sup> However, most Australian women give birth within a medical model of care that depicts birth as a purely physical process (and a risky one at that), requiring specialised medical and technological expertise. Wagner maintains this intervention model is designed to control women—chiefly through fear, a known antagonist of labour and birth.<sup>24–26</sup> Because of the intricate hormonal and physiological processes involved, this medical discourse affects “the way our bodies function as we actually give birth”.<sup>27(p297)</sup> When the complex, intimate act of birthing is reduced to a techno-medical event drained of its spirituality, something of deep human significance is lost.

Many women, especially first time mothers, feel co-opted into the obstetric discourse for complex gender-based reasons. Distrust of female body processes,<sup>4</sup> privatised mothering,<sup>28</sup> lack of social supports for mothers<sup>29</sup> and internalised gender controls<sup>30</sup> all play a part in eroding women’s self-confidence about birthing. Additional factors like the Western alienation from nature,<sup>31</sup> the rise of technocracy<sup>32</sup> and ideologies of motherhood based on expert (male) opinion<sup>33</sup> also play a role. Beneath these issues however, the corrosive and hidden presence of menstrual shame plays a foundational role in shaping women’s attitudes about giving birth.

## Research aim

The primary aim of my doctoral research, therefore, was to explore how patriarchal constructions of female body processes influence women’s experiences of menstruation, birth and spirituality. Specific objectives were:

- to investigate women’s formative memories, feelings, thoughts, beliefs and experiences of menstruation;
- to document women’s experiences of, and reflections on, their labours and births through their birth stories;
- to examine women’s self-defined meanings of spirituality.

My engagement with the data was informed by a feminist analysis of the implications for women of male as normative. The research question guiding my inquiry was: How are women’s experiences of menstruation, birth and spirituality invested with meaning, and how does this meaning shape and influence those experiences?

## Cultural feminism

To examine the links between cultural attitudes to menstruation, women’s birthing experiences and spirituality, I used a cultural feminist perspective. Cultural feminism (sometimes known as embodied postmodernism) views the problem of

patriarchy as the “dynamics of acculturation” that devalue women, rather than “oppressive types of supposedly inherent masculine behaviour”.<sup>31(p128)</sup> Cultural feminism never accepted the Cartesian separation of nature and culture or the notion that women were disenfranchised as cultural agents because of our reproductive processes. Instead, this perspective claimed an intimate association between the female body, culture and the Earthbody.

Cultural feminism has studied non-patriarchal and pre-patriarchal cultures, both of which have honoured the cosmological potential of the female body. Cultural feminism resonates strongly with the symbols and myths from the pre-patriarchal Goddess era (4400 BCE) because they provide substance and form for the resacralisation of the female body and nature.<sup>31</sup> Non-patriarchal cultures like the Australian Indigenous, Native American and Eastern Goddess-worshipping societies are contemporary examples that acknowledge and revere the Sacred Female, thereby offering “clues to the meaning of earlier images and practices”.<sup>18(pxxv)</sup> This feminist perspective enabled me to locate my research in a profound historical tradition embedded in the sacred female dimension of being.<sup>31</sup>

## Sample and methods

My sample comprised forty-eight women and included mothers who had given birth in the last ten years, some midwives and staff from a women’s service. I conducted ten interviews ( $n = 10$ ) and seven groups ( $n = 38$ ). My study was approved by the University Human Ethics Committee and all participants signed informed consent forms. I was very mindful that broaching women’s intimate experiences of menstruation, birth and spirituality required sensitivity, respect and compassion. My approach was underpinned by the same ethics of care and concern applicable to my professional work, and a commitment to be compassionately present with each woman as she explored her inner reality.

## The methodology

My methodology was Organic Inquiry, an emerging qualitative approach which regards research as a partnership with Spirit.<sup>34</sup> Originating in San Francisco in the mid-1990s, it developed out of the women’s spirituality movement, feminist research and transpersonal psychology.<sup>35</sup> Organic Inquiry is ideally suited to topics with a psycho-spiritual orientation, making it perfect for my study. Alongside intellectual knowledge, it incorporates feeling, intuitive and body-based information as vital aspects of human experience in both data collection and analysis.<sup>36</sup> The primary distinguishing characteristic which sets it apart from other methodologies is its goal of transformative change for all involved in the research.<sup>37</sup>

## Findings—menstruation

Most women in my study began menstruating in the chthonic realm, a dark place of secrecy and shame where their bleeding was associated with derogatory meanings. Ginger Martire’s<sup>12</sup> study articulated the journey from a patriarchal version of menstruation to a psycho-spiritually rewarding

relationship with the bleeding. The first phase, which is governed by shame, negative attitudes and unconsciousness, was reported by most of my participants. Dana remembered: "When I was in Grade 6, I got my period and your periods were yucky and an inconvenience." For Ann, menstruation was "something to be endured. It had so many bad connotations", while Naomi recalled: "there was definitely the under-current of it being a curse."

Many women described their embarrassment about menstruating. Louise told me: "I got my periods when I was 14 and I was just so embarrassed!" Stacey was a late developer and looking forward to getting her period but when she did: "it was a non-event, I was embarrassed." Like several others, Naomi remembered the discomfort of the toilet block: "I was embarrassed going to the toilets at school and having to change pads and realising that if I came out, the girls outside would know what I'd been doing." These statements reveal that even amongst girls themselves, menstruation was concealed and if discovered, a dreaded source of shame.

This secrecy was a dominant feature for many women. Louise recalled: "The main thing I remember is that I didn't want anyone to know". Hannah reflected on her experience: "I guess the meaning of it was like a secret that I just kept to myself", while for Jasmine: "It was hide it away, don't let anyone know about it ... There was a lot of fear around it." Fear is the inevitable corollary of shame and secrecy — fear of being exposed, fear of leaking, fear of humiliation—all of which amounts to a fear of being female. Fear is described as the emotion "associated with being disconnected from the greater reality".<sup>38(p274)</sup> In experiencing the healthy physiology of menstruation as a potentially humiliating spectacle, these statements show how women become disconnected from their bodies and their powerful procreative energies. This disconnection becomes a very effective form of subordination that has profound implications when it comes to the next major female life initiation: birth.

Several women reported an ambiguous pride at menarche, suggesting that some girls intuitively sense something meaningful happening to them despite the cultural denigration. Andrea described how "there was a sense of pride but it was also a double-edged sword." Janet remembered "in the very early days being secretly extremely proud ... but also very embarrassed that anybody else should know." Jodi described the actual moment of suppression: "There was an initial leap of excitement because I'd become a woman and then within five seconds, it was suppressed." These flickers of pride show that there is sometimes a germinal consciousness of menstruation's spiritual significance, providing a rudimentary foundation upon which to build positive messages about womanhood and menstruation at menarche.

These findings expose menstrual shame as a core patriarchal organising principle that inculcates and perpetuates male dominance and female subordination. Menstrual shame engenders fear, self-consciousness and the perception of female physiology — and thus womanhood — as inherently flawed. This shame alienates women from our body consciousness, undermining our confidence and trust in ourselves and in the healthy, natural processes of menstruation and birth. Moreover, when our bleeding is maligned at menarche and derogated during our menstruating years, the spiritual potential of menstruation and its contribution to confident

birthing is lost. Naming, understanding and dismantling the toxic pairing of shame and menstruation are therefore critical feminist concerns.

### Connection between menses and birth

In the West, we rarely consider how attitudes to menstruation might impact on birthing because we rarely consider menstruation at all. Yet, my findings reveal that menstruation plays a profound role in shaping women's self-perception and our in/ability to birth confidently and powerfully. The fear and alienation from our body processes which begins at menarche means that many women approach birthing disconnected from their sacred, procreative power. For some participants, an awareness of this relationship occurred during the group discussions. Carla noted: "When I had my first son, it was a really negative experience, painful and long, every intervention possible. At the end, I had this huge sense of failure. Maybe that's part of that menstrual disconnectedness - you're disconnected from your body menstruating, so you become disconnected from your body in the birthing process too."

Naomi articulated well the foundational impact of attitudes to menstruation on birthing: "If that area of your body is associated with shame, how's that going to affect the energy around birthing? If a girl is really honoured for her first bleeding and she's taught ways of being powerful in the world and of being in contact with her own needs, then by the time she gives birth, she knows she's a woman and she feels powerful." Conversely, if a girl is not honoured at menarche and not taught ways of being powerful in the world, she loses contact with her own needs and by the time she comes to give birth, she feels disempowered. Ebony's story is a good example: "When I was eighteen, I got these cool shorts and I was hanging out with the boys one day when I got my period and I cursed myself for being a girl .... By the time my son came along, I was twenty-two but that part of me was still unspeakable, still very secret .... The labour lasted three days. He couldn't breathe and had to go to intensive care. I could see how all of that could stem from the shamefulness to begin with - about being a woman and having those body processes."

However, this double-bind can be effectively resolved as the participants in one of my groups discovered. After attending some menstruation and birth workshops, they recovered a connection with their embodied spirituality and their birthing power. Lexie recounted: "After having a very medical, non-spiritual birth, the difference Naomi's group made to my life was incredible ... It gave me a chance to be in touch with my spirituality and with the universal birthing energy, and it changed everything: my experience of the birth, my connection with my child, my connection with myself and with all the other women on the planet. It helped me take control of my birth and direct the experience. It was a very big gift for me." This holistic preparation enabled Lexie to experience her second birth as a transformative rite of passage. Chloe reported the same sense of empowerment: "Naomi's workshops gave me a chance for preparation and for healing my last birth, so I could come to this one and feel more empowered. They made a huge difference." These testimonies suggest that there is an inner wholeness pattern

enormous significance, even if they were unable to say exactly why. One participant, Sally, observed that menstruation's spiritual significance must have a purpose. I believe that purpose is consciousness — an evolutionary consciousness that is incisive, assertive, life-preserving and unitive.

Judy Grahn predicted the transition from male dominance to a more balanced custodianship of the Earth when "menstruation, entering a state of newly washed hygiene, will quickly entrain again with a different set of elements — those needed to neutralize the forces set in motion by male seclusion and male-only origin story".<sup>42</sup>(p277–278) The women in my study are part of the vanguard ushering in that evolutionary transition. Their experiences show how menstrual consciousness can be a participation in the Divine Matrix,<sup>43</sup> a participation that may well hold the keys to solving many of the global problems now confronting us.

Reforming attitudes to menstruation is a core feature of moving away from a "non-cyclical reality"<sup>5(pix)</sup> alienated from nature, towards a perspective that restores both the female dimension of being and nature to their rightful place. Lara Owen observed: "Reintegrating a truly feminist, woman-honoring perspective on menstruation means turning a whole system of thought upside down".<sup>5(pix)</sup>

## Conclusion

Menstrual shame is the 'card hand' Western women have been dealt through growing up in a patriarchal culture. When it is accepted as normal, even 'natural', its pervasive corrosive effects continue to be perpetuated and girls grow into women who believe there is something fundamentally flawed about them and their bodies. However, when menstrual shame is unmasked for the oppressive social construction that it is, women are free to discover the powerful spiritual energies residing in their female biology. When women embody the spirituality of menstruation, they not only birth powerfully. They become activists of a broader cultural reform.

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