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The Bloody Truth: A Psychological and Cultural Study of Menstruation as Lived and Experienced by Women

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The Bloody Truth:
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As Lived and Experienced by Women

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Abstract

The present research explores the negation and affirmation of menstrual life as found in culture, theory, and the concrete experiences of individual women. A phenomenological and hermeneutical thematic analysis is used throughout. In this study, the aspects of culture analyzed include language, humor, art, television, film, literature, print and television advertising, menstrual education, medicine, and some of the historical influences in the perception of women. Additionally, the formal psychological literature is examined as part of the cultural data, as are the researcher's own observations and cultural experiences.

Overall, this research reveals that the experience of menstrual bleeding has been culturally ignored and negated since the beginning of history. Those who menstruate are ignored and silenced, afforded less consideration as human beings, and are understood as necessarily secondary and inferior to men. Advertisements for menstrual products, for example, sell improved products to women but still push the same old messages of shame. However, the research also repeatedly reveals a very small minority vision in history, culture, and theories, where a more appreciative and validating view of menstrual bleeding and women is expressed.

Additionally, the research explores the experiential meanings of menstruation through protocol analyses of a sample of women. The findings demonstrate that women unfold personalized, menstrual meanings through relationships with others while being simultaneously influenced by the powerful bombardment of the silencing, tabooing, negating, and inferiority provoking aspects of the cultural tradition. Despite this (generally unnoticed or taken for granted) bombardment from the culture, in some way,

each woman comes to terms with her own bleeding, changing, predictably unpredictable body and finds her own sense of self within the culture and within her particular life. The women develop over time a certain felt sense of identity with their menstrual self, which becomes for some a kind of “friend,” a familiar ritual, which is something like a sweet, interior secret, or, at least, as all say “a part of me – part of who I am.”

TABLE OF CONTENTS

TABLE OF CONTENTS, CONTINUED

TABLE OF CONTENTS, CONTINUED

CHAPTER I

Introduction and Method

Introduction

As a topic of study, I am interested in how women of today experience their own menstruation and how those experiences dialogue with the voices of Western science and medicine and American culture. Of what importance is menstruating to women, and where do women place this aspect of their being? Is it named or spoken about in ways which are not yet recognized in average relationships, psychology, or science? Or does it remain silent and ignored for the most part like the untouched laws which often contain and oppress women (and marginalized others) without much notice? My main focus was to question women explicitly about their own experiences and attitudes of menstrual bleeding and attempt to put words to that which has lain in the mute spheres of bodily being for so long. Admittedly, one of my aspirations for this project is that the research itself will assist in creating a break in the historical taboo of menstruation and begin to liberate those silenced meanings, i.e., give this aspect of women=s being a voice and a space in which to simply Be.

In general, the nature of this study is three-fold, involving a review and analysis of the manifested meanings of menstruation found in the culture, including a review and analysis of the formal psychological literature which addresses menstruation, and structured questions and interviews with seven women to access concrete, lived meanings of menstruation. This study is somewhat unconventional in that the formal literature review becomes part of the cultural data by laying out the explicit meanings of

menstruation as defined by each theorist as well as exploring the implicit cultural meanings found in the style of the presentation of the meanings and those conveyed in the absence of any notation. Hence, the formal literature review, as data to be analyzed, includes a hermeneutic analysis of the phenomenon of menstruation and, as such, the psychological literature review is part of the cultural data of the study. In addition, the literature review is also treated as theoretical background, because it explicitly addresses psychological ideas about menstruation and woman's being.

Therefore, I have created what I call a cultural review which encompasses a traditional psychological literature review as well as a hermeneutic analysis of that literature review. The cultural review includes language, music, art, literature, humor, advertising, medicine, historical influences, the psychological literature proper, and my own perceptions as a woman and researcher. An analysis of the cultural review reveals the major themes of menstrual bleeding and provides the cultural data for this study. The dissertation and the research are an invitation to the reader to experience the power of the culture in forming and shaping silence, shame, and disparagement around menstruation and women's being as well as more positive movements toward understanding and appreciating woman's being.

Whereas there has been some progress in bringing menstruation into open discourse, and some scholars and researchers have begun the movement of giving women's bodies and situation a particular voice, nonetheless menstruation has remained an open-secret, a bloody shame, to be hidden, disguised, medicalized, and merely whispered. Further, the dominant discourse about menstruation still exists from a

culture which views it ambiguously and ambivalently as normal/sick, perfectly okay/shameful, the seat of discord and irrationality and the fertile natural ground of fecundity/the weeping wound of the aborted child, and the mark of mature womanhood/the curse. These messages however, are so intricately woven into the tapestry of the culture that, for the most part, they remain invisible to the average person and even the average woman.

Hence, the fundamental question of method for this research was: how can the experience of menstruation be understood from the woman's viewpoint? The problem this question presented is that the experience of menstruation is still buried, even for the women who experience it, within a culture which has named and defined it. Therefore, the research required investigation of the culture, to peel back as it were, the ambivalent obscurantism of the culture which, of course, women as members of the culture have taken into themselves. Also, since the topic and address of the culture toward menstruation is so often buried, silent, and suppressed, making it explicit for the researcher as well as for persons who read the research presents its own difficulties. It is in the ubiquitous details of the cultural absence and presence to menstruation which the young woman is exposed to as she grows up. And for the reader to be present to these details and to get a sense of their impact, their multidimensional force, their extraordinary repetitiveness is to be exposed to certain meanings and themes over and over again. Thus the researcher and reader may experience that repetitiveness as slightly overwhelming, just as it is overwhelming to the young person growing up in the culture, who is also bombarded again and again with messages about her body, her bleeding, and

her female ways of being. After all, there is no experience which is independent of the influences of culture, and this is certainly true for the phenomenon of menstruation. And these influences are extraordinarily detailed and specific: words, songs, music, formal education, medicine, advertisements all convey to the young person growing up how things are and what their meanings are. And for menstruation itself which is so much silenced in the culture and is so much usually absent and unthematized, any great detailing of the culture's implicit meanings is likely to seem hyperbolic, exaggerated or in some way too much commotion about very little. Menstruation as experienced is ambiguously situated between the physical body given to the woman and the cultural, familial, psychological, language meanings ascribed to the phenomenon.

Method

Cultural Analysis

In part one of the present study, I conducted analyses of ordinary and presumably influential regions of culture to discover in what ways menstruation was present along with its asserted meanings. Of all of the cultural data relating to menstruation, I asked the following questions:

1.) Where in this manifestation does *any* meaning of menstruation appear? Where is any mention of menstrual meaning conspicuously *absent*?

2.) What of this data is life-affirming and what of this data is life-rejecting?

3.) Are there intimations or movements toward a more generous alternative way of expressing woman's being?

Furthermore, the aspects of culture which I examined in this research include

language, humor, music, art, literature, television, film, menstrual education, print and television advertisements, medicine, a review of some historical influences in the perception of women, my own perceptions as woman and researcher, and, finally, a review of the traditional and phenomenological psychological literature pertaining to menstruation, taking care to note the absence and presence of menstruation, as well as the particular meanings of female bleeding conveyed within the literature. The section of historical influences was included to assist the reader to understand the temporal historical context of the study. Additionally, the cultural review includes a collection of miscellaneous anecdotes and observations gathered by this researcher over a period of about six years to offer the added perspective of an adult female who has a special attunement to menstruation and the psychological.

Initially, within the cultural review, it became apparent that in order to gain access to the more securely embedded meanings of menstruation, it would be necessary to investigate multiple outlets or expressions of the culture in order to get a better range of meaning, and so I expanded the analysis to include menstrual education. Also, previously, while conducting preliminary research on menstrual bleeding, I discovered that although many writings on the cultural aspects of menstruation are interesting and somewhat enlightening, I was routinely left wanting to know more in order to make a comparison or attempt to establish a pattern of menstrual meanings. Thus, early on in the cultural review, I had the same experience with my own research, that is, wanting more data to get at a better meaning, and so it became important to research not only more avenues of the culture, but to examine them at a greater depth than I originally

anticipated so that even within the sub-sections of the cultural review, I included historical sections as well. While this made for rather lengthy analyses, I feel that I was afforded the position of dwelling with the cultural medium long enough to gain a good sense of its position on menstruation. Fewer examples within each cultural category would have compromised the fullness of understanding and misrepresented the messages about menstruation found in the culture, because, on the surface of the culture, there appears to be little or no meaning ascribed to menstruation. Based on mere appearances, most individuals would assume that the culture sets out a blank slate, as it were, and allows girls and women to fill in their own meanings. Furthermore, since females say little about menstruation, they must prefer to stay silent and shameful about this aspect of their being.

In reality, however, the culture is loaded with meanings and attitudes of menstruation, albeit it ever so subtly and powerfully. And making this explicit requires a detailed look at that bombardment of meanings which impacts the young girl and woman in the culture.

From an organizational perspective, the order in which I reviewed the different categories of culture was specific to the order in which a young girl might first be exposed to the meanings of menstruation. Thus, language is examined first, with a discussion of its importance in the overall conveyed meanings of menstruation, along with menstrual euphemisms, dictionary definitions, the predominance of derogatory slang for female genitalia, its relevance, and so on. The category of humor is next, going on the presumption that a young girl may hear jokes and attitudes about menstruation,

and although she may not understand them, their meanings are conveyed to her and absorbed by her, nonetheless. Of course, the way in which humans are exposed to the culture is far from linear, but I have done my best to order the categories and lay out the cultural data as it might impact a growing young woman. By spelling out the cultural features in some detail, the reader can experience being exposed, in a concentrated and accelerated fashion, to the same elements of the culture which might impact a growing girl and mature woman.

Hence, the review of Historical Influences in the Perception of Women and The Formal Psychological Literature Review is given at the end of the categories, because a woman is likely to obtain such revelatory "background" information last, and only if she does active research as I have done. In certain realms of the culture, such as Menstrual Education, Print and Television Advertisements, and Medicine, I have provided historical grounding before analyzing the current data in an effort to better understand current meanings of menstruation. Additionally, within each manifestation of culture, I have attempted to organize and review examples of menstrual meanings in somewhat of an evolutionary order, i.e., from most life-negating examples to most life-affirming (where there were such movements). On the whole, life-negating, disparaging meanings of menstruation were most prevalent in every aspect of culture I examined. However, as difficult as they were to find at times, every attempt was made to illuminate alternative, life-affirming meanings of female bleeding and female being within those categories.

Participants, Questions, and Interviews

Part II of the study involved seven female subjects, whose ages fell between twenty and forty years of age. The participants recruited represented a mixture of ethnic, class, and educational backgrounds, although all women had different educations beyond high school. With the seven participants, background diversity was desirable so as to avoid a simple reiteration of a purely class or ethnically bound understanding of menstruation. Diversity with the women was also sought for the purpose of assessing menstruation as an essentially female experience, rather than as specifically educated, female experience or a specifically Caucasian or African American woman's experience, for example.

Even though I had planned to recruit participants via posted flyers, advertisements, and word of mouth, all the women were found for the study via word of mouth, with one being a friend and the rest acquaintances, friends of acquaintances and one of their sisters. I had no responses from the flyers I posted, and before placing any advertisements, my final participants surfaced. I suspected that the forbidden nature of my topic of menstruation prevented many women from volunteering in addition to the fact that a mere flyer was not enough to generate an active response from any women even mildly interested in their periods. Throughout the years of my research, in casual conversations, I often found that women were somewhat startled when I told them my topic, but then after I talked a bit about the method and the nature of my research, most showed enthusiasm, then volunteered stories or information about their own periods. I concluded that many women may be suspicious of talk of "menstruation," since, given

the culture, any talk could very easily involve embarrassment, shame, or some perverted medical or social take on what to do with their attitudes or concrete bleeding. After interviewing all the participants, and getting a better feel for my research, I surmised that any woman in this culture who would *want* to respond to a flyer asking them to talk about their periods would be rather eccentric. I certainly would have interviewed her, because for my study, any woman (within my age group) is relevant, but she most likely would have represented the ends of the bell curve.

In the beginning of the study, I actually interviewed eight women; however, when it came time to transcribe the recorded interview, one tape jammed and destroyed a full recording. Thus, I was left with seven participants, two of whom were sisters.

The following table represents contributing information about each participant.

Participant "Name"	**Age**	**Ethnicity**	**Education**	**Relatives, Caregivers With Whom Participant Lived When Growing Up**
Alicia	31	African American	Four-year College Degree	Mother, Step-Father, younger sister/ Mother, two sisters/ Mother, Step-Father, sisters
Caroline	31	Caucasian	College Sophomore	Mother, Grandmother, elderly in Mother's nursing home
Clara	29	Caucasian	Master's Degree and Professional Certificate	Mother, Father, two younger brothers, one younger sister
Melanie sister to Regina	34	Hispanic	Four-year College Degree	Mother and two sisters

Participant "Name"	**Age**	**Ethnicity**	**Education**	**Relatives, Caregivers With Whom Participant Lived When Growing Up**
Regina sister to Melanie	30	Latino	Master's Degree	Mother and three sisters
Sharon	31	Caucasian	Master's Degree	Grandmother, Grandfather/ Grandmother
Isabel	28	Caucasian/Hispanic	Four-year College Degree	Mother, Father, one younger brother, one younger sister

As the participant recruitment turned out, all of the women lived not just out of town, but out of state. They lived in Nevada, Oregon, California, North Carolina, and Washington, D.C. As a result, I had to revise the initial procedure of meeting with the women two separate times in an office space. I kept the same sequence and structure of the originally intended meetings, but instead of handing each question to the woman and waiting for her to answer and then give it to me, I resorted to email. Before setting up times to "meet" online, I spoke with each woman via telephone and described the nature of the study and her proposed involvement (two "meetings") in the study. If the woman wanted to proceed, I then mailed her two consent forms, which I had already signed, for her to then read and sign. The consent forms included the scope of her participation which involved answering six questions in writing and then participating in a taped interview. The consent form also included a promise from me to protect her anonymity at all times, and the promise that all research and identifying materials would be kept locked in a file cabinet and kept confidential by me. Finally, the consent form reminded each woman that she could withdraw from the study at any time, for any reason. The

consent forms can be found in Appendix C.

After reading and signing both consent forms, she was instructed by the cover letter to keep a copy for herself and then mail the second copy back to me in the envelope that I provided. Once I received her signed consent form in the mail, I then telephoned her to set up our initial online "meeting." Once we were online together, I sent a first email reminding her of the task, i.e., to answer with as much or as little detail as she chose and to take as much time as she needed for each answer. I also requested that she reduce distractions in the room as much as possible, i.e., no one else in the room, no televisions, music, and the like. In addition, I reminded her that I would be sending her a total of six questions, one by one, and that she only needed to respond to my questions with her "Reply" email function and then send it back to me when she was finished. After sending each question to the participant, I waited at my computer until the participant replied to my question. When I was certain I had the participant's answered question, I then sent the next question and so on until all the questions were answered.

The questions were borrowed examples of interview questions contained in a Canadian study on the meaning of menstruation and pre-menstrual syndrome in women's lives (Lee, 2002, p. 12). I posed the following questions to each participant:

1.) Please describe in detail your typical menstrual period.

2.) What do you think of when you hear the word menstruation? Describe any thoughts, words, feelings, memories or situations that come to mind.

3.) What is your first memory of menstruation?

4.) Describe how you feel about menstruation at this time in your life.

5.) Please describe some positive and negative aspects of menstruation.

6.) On a scale of 1 to 10 (1= negative; 10= positive), which number best represents your feelings about menstruation at this time?

Overall, the rationale for the questions and for the particular sequencing of them was to initially open up, for each participant, a space for expressing, thinking, reflecting on, and remembering the regions and personal experiences of menstruation. The questions themselves were rather simple, colloquial, and undemanding so that a woman of almost any educational level could comprehend and manage to produce an answer. For example, question one was left open so that each woman could include any kind of "pre-menstrual syndrome" experiences if she felt that it was a part of her menstruation. As it turned out, all the questions proved successful in eliciting plenty of personalized, meaningful material from the menstrual lives of each woman, and most of the women included descriptions of pre-menstrual experiences and did not strictly adhere to medical or social categories of PMS versus menstruation.

Additionally, question two provided the most information about the women's perception of what the culture makes menstruation out to be and the general cultural attitudes about menstruation. The women's answers to question three generally revealed how they were initiated into the world of female bleeding, and that first experience tended to set the stage attitudinally for the women's future menstruations. Subsequently, question four marked an opportunity to talk about any changes in attitude, relationships, and menstrual experiences since the women's menarche, while questions five and six

explicitly explored the women's perceived positive and negative views of menstruation, personally and culturally. For most of the participants' interviews, when they rated their menstrual experience as highly negative, I asked what the opposite high number would be like for them to grasp a clearer picture of their feelings; when they rated their menstrual experience as highly positive I asked them what the opposite low number would be like. The expansion of this question proved enlightening for several of the women's answers.

Later, at the end of the interview with each woman, I posed question six again in an effort to detect any fluctuation in the woman's feelings about menstruation, and to invite the women into a reflective mode about their answers and their participation in the study to see if the experience had any marked positive effect on her feelings of menstrual bleeding. The purpose of asking the question again, post-interview, was part of the hermeneutic approach. Although the participants' numbers did not essentially change, two of the participants expressed interest in the results of the findings and specifically remarked that they had enjoyed the opportunity to talk about their periods at length. Overall, I concluded that participation in the study further legitimated menstruation as valuable and important, and validated their own relationship to menstruation while also giving them a positive opportunity to express their feelings and experiences.

In addition to repeating question six to each woman, I asked each participant, "When was the last time you had an open, anything-goes conversation about your period?" In an effort to better understand *what* women talk about in terms of their

period and *if* they do actually have open conversations. Overall, my further questioning did not reveal much more than was uncovered throughout the interviews, i.e., generally, women do talk to one another, but mostly the talk is commiserative – complaining about the misery to someone who understands. However, this question did shed light on the fact that, perhaps for the first time, one participant, Melanie, did actually have an open conversation about her cycle with a neighbor, and her participation in this study became the occasion and topic from which to speak to her neighbor.

At the end of my first meeting with each woman, I had a total of six emails, each with one question and the participant's answer. Before signing off for that meeting, I also sent each woman a final email thanking them for their participation and asking them to be patient for a couple of weeks while I reviewed her answers and prepared for the interview (which would now take place by phone instead of a face to face meeting). Then, after collecting the women's answers to the above questions, I reviewed them carefully, noting where clarification was needed or would be useful. Again, I telephoned or emailed the participants individually to set up our next and final meeting, and then telephoned each woman again at our agreed-upon time, whereupon I placed them on "speaker" and recorded our interview with a tape-recorder.

As a way to refresh the memory of the women, I read aloud the interview questions along with their own answers. I also asked each participant what it was like for her to hear her answers read aloud, and each woman responded. Because our interview lacked the visual, face to face, component that I had initially hoped for, I explained to each woman that I was unable to catch her visual cues, as one normally

does in a conversation and that, at times, I would need her assistance letting me know when she was finished answering a question. I let each woman know that if I paused before responding, it would be simply to make sure that I gave her the time she needed to answer, and that I neither wanted to unintentionally shorten her answer nor force her to keep talking when she was actually finished. After completing the interviews, I transcribed them, and then posed the same questions to the individual data as I posed to the cultural data.

Therefore, with each participant's answers, I asked what meanings of menstruation were made explicit and then what was implicitly conveyed, and I also looked for life-affirming and life-negating understandings of menstrual bleeding. These questions were posed to the individual data again and again after reading and then re-reading the individual protocols. Each woman's answers and interview were read and combed through innumerable times in order to grasp the basic spirit of her menstrual meanings as well as to get to the personal, dominant themes of menstruation within her data. By hermeneutically reading the individual data and then re-reading it and then doing the same with all of the protocols together, I saw that the common thread or theme in all of the protocols was that all of the women found their particular meanings of menstruation in and through concrete particular relationships. Menstrual meanings are socially contextualized through particular relationships, and so that became my organizational guidepost so as to understand menstruation from their point of view, which is one of the fundamental purposes of the research. For example, each participant's relationship with her mother or mother-figure powerfully influenced her

experience of menarche which then lent shape to all subsequent life and menstrual experiences. Hence, within these common relationships, I was able to then find further themes of menstrual experience and meaning. The relationships are the lens through which meanings of menstruation appear and come into being.

Comparison of Cultural Data to Individual Data

Once I grasped the particular meanings of menstruation from the individual women, I then systematically and carefully compared those meanings with the themes and meanings of menstrual bleeding found in the cultural data including the formal psychological literature. The task was then to discover where those meanings overlapped. I posed to the entire collection of data the following questions:

1.) Where do these cultural and personal meanings converge and diverge?

2.) Are there intimations or movements toward a more generous alternative way of expressing woman's being?

CHAPTER II

Analyses of Cultural Data

Introduction

The sequence of the cultural categories and examples are two fold. On the one hand they are intentionally laid out to reflect the likely experiences of a developing girl growing up in the culture. And on the other hand, the sequence number and intensity of the cultural examples are meant to be experiential for the reader as well, providing a possibility for experiencing the multi-layered emotional induction into the culture of menstruation. Hence the reader may well feel a sense of being somewhat overwhelmed, as if the themes are being exaggerated into a kind of hyperbole, or simply inflated for effect. However, the research itself attempts to be a sober yet passionate reflection on the data as found.

Language

Apart from the non-verbal communications found in moods, gestures, and attitudes, verbal communication through language is the young woman's first and most pointed introduction to the meaning of menstruation as defined by the "world." In order to grasp the significance of this scenario, it is first important to understand that language is an existential category of human being, a sine qua non. Put more simply, language is an essential category or way of being human, without which, humans would not Be- or exist. Without language, humans would not *exist.*

This distinction is asserted by a whole group of contemporary thinkers. For phenomenological and existential thinkers, it is self evident that every human

phenomenon is also situated within language, and a for a better understanding of the phenomenon of menstruation, language is not merely a representation of thoughts and feelings; rather, language inhabits the human being, lights up things and the world, and shapes the paths and meanings of human existence. This is relevant to a cultural understanding of menstruation because words, phrases, and expressions that come into a girl's field of everyday life become part of the menu and the grounds from which she shapes her being and comes to understand herself. Although she may add to her menu of expressions throughout her life, to a great extent she is shaped by the culture from and in which she stands.

Therefore, on the one hand, these language expressions and words can provide a form of liberating self expression; on the other hand, language can confine any person to a limited, imprisoning range of self-reference. Language as confining and limiting, like inadequate life stories can be, serve as a kind of "prison house" for many persons. Colloquial language carries all the prejudices of the culture and this "prison-house" becomes especially and affectively true for women in a general sense in Western culture, and for the experience of menstruation as a particular aspect of female being. The way that menstruation is spoken and configured shapes the way menstruation is experienced.

Furthermore, language, particularly the everyday spoken language in which the young girl is immersed, is a primordial aspect of human being, and as a somewhat invisible given of human existence remains easy to overlook when searching for a cultural meaning of menstruation. Words and expressions easily become the limits of

reality or the givens of reality. In this case, sometimes the mere absence of words, silence and not speaking become ways in which menstruation is ignored or overlooked. This lacunae of open speech is an invitation to forget, to erase it as a phenomenon altogether. A phenomenological investigation of the cultural meaning of menstruation necessitates peeling back the layers of meaning inherent in the words, the slang expressions, and even the curious absences of words in reference to menstruation. The meaning of menstruation as represented in the culture can most certainly be recognized in ordinary, spoken language, and so it is here that I turn first to begin a cultural analysis.

In *The Curse: A Cultural History of Menstruation,* (1988), the authors note that whereas there is a kind of "menstrual consciousness" expressed by particular authors in specific regions of culture such as literature and psychoanalysis, more pointedly "…the materials of popular culture…are much better clues to mass psychology, to what 'the people' think" (p.115). And, as already mentioned, what "the people" think and say has an effect upon how girls and women view their menstruating selves and how boys and men view them as well.

What stands out significantly about ordinary references to menstruation from "the people" in the culture is that the word menstruation or even the topic is in no way ordinary or typical. It can not be compared to the likes of "peeing," having acid reflux or even being "bipolar," for instance, for these are often openly and easily spoken, whereas, menstruation is mostly spoken of in American culture euphemistically and obscurely. That fact in itself is significant for the meaning of menstruation. Although

menstrual cycles occur more often than birthdays or even headaches, it is simply not yet acceptable in contemporary culture to mention one's state of bleeding under ordinary circumstances; to do so clearly or directly creates a spectacle or a kind of scandal. As absurd as it may seem, at this writing, menstruation is not openly or publicly mentioned even in most women's conversations where it might make sense or belong naturally. Speaking of menstrual bleeding as a natural part of women's health or general wellbeing, is simply avoided, because menstruation has not yet reached the status of an appropriate or acceptable topic, even amongst girls and women.

The book *The Curse* (1988) provides multiple examples of menstrual euphemisms used in Western culture throughout the years. Interestingly, although the front and back inside pages of the book decoratively list these euphemisms, Houppert does not delve into the origins of the slang expressions within her text. Nevertheless, she shares quite a sampling of slang expressions which include "the curse," of course, and the following:

> the nuisance, the plague, the flowers, poorly time, monthly evacuations, the visitations, being unwell (1800s), monthly turn, monthly return, monthly troubles, that time of the month, wrong time of the month, monthlies, calendar days, problem days, poorlies, period, the moon, those days, old faithful, sick time, indisposed, the misery, les regles (the rules- French), PMS, cramps, under the weather, weeping womb, package of troubles, jam and bread, on the rag, too wet to plow, a snatch box decorated with red roses (World War II), Can't go swimming, tide's in, tide's out, flying baker (Navy signal meaning "keep off"),

> riding the red tide, the red flag is up, red light, red letter day, my redheaded friend, cherry in sherry, the red king, traveling the red road, the red sea's out, the reds, the reds are in, are you seeing red?, bloody Mary, the chick is a communist (1940s jive talk), white cylinder week, mother nature's gift, woman's friend, it's raining down south, I fell off the roof, I've got my flowers, I've got my friend, I've got the grannies, lady in the red dress, grandma's here, somebody's visiting, tante Rosa kommt aus amerika (aunt Rosa is coming from America- German), redheaded aunt from red bank, aunt Red from potsdam's here, communists in the summer house (Norwegian), aunt Susie, aunt Flo is visiting, aunt Tilly is here (Houppert, 1999, Inside front and back covers of text)

While the above list is an extensive sample of terms to denote menstruation, there are countless others unnamed here; however, all are created within a certain culture, a culture which encourages the silence, secrecy, and consequently, the shame of menstrual bleeding. While Houppert does mention today's most popular alternative term for menstruation, 'period,' she omits possibly the second most commonly used term, 'cycle.'

Additionally, if the list of terms above were explicated, the author of *Issues of Blood: The Politics of Menstruation* (1990), Sophie Laws, would separate them into categories of male versus female use. Although anyone currently living in the culture would not have much difficulty deciphering the difference, Laws has actually researched their origins and discovered a study of menstrual euphemisms in which men clearly used terms which were characteristically sexual and derogatory. Women, in contrast,

used terms which aided them in their mission to maintain a form of communication which was secret from men. Citing the study, Laws states,

> a wider range of terms was contributed by women, these being used partly so that women could tell other women that they were menstruating without any men present realizing their meaning, and partly to communicate to male partners with less embarrassment. (Laws, 1990, 83)

Therefore, the terms above such as ‘on the rag,’ ‘jam and bread,’ and others from Laws’ research such as, ‘jam sandwich,’ ‘jam rags,’ and ‘having the rags up,’ all relate to sanitary towels. Although Laws is British and conducted interviews with British men, she concludes that by comparing her research with the results of an American study of menstrual euphemisms, “British men’s terms parallel the American ones in many ways” (p.82). For both groups of men, ‘on the rag’ ranks as most popular and is used by men for multiple reasons, including as a derogatory term to other males, insinuating that another male’s anger or frustration is related to his woman partner’s menstruation and his sexual inaccessibility to her. Additionally, one man may insult the other by telling him he’s ‘on the rag,’ which means he is comparing him to a moody, menstruating woman (p.82). On a side note, this reference calls to mind, for me, the term ‘douche bag’ which is often batted around by men to one another and is intended as one of the ‘dirtiest’ insults, since it references a woman’s act of douching her vagina clean.

Although all the terms make reference to the fact that women’s sexual access is blocked for the man while she is menstruating, certain euphemisms such as ‘too wet to

plow,' 'flying baker,' and 'the red flag is up,' are all pointed references. The highly popular, 'on the rag,' however, is used predominately to indicate a bad mood, irritability, and overall "bitchiness" (p.82).

While Laws interviewed men with the purpose of uncovering their perspectives on menstruation and women, a relationship which she believes to be inseparable, she found that men could produce very few menstrual terms which they had learned from women. As already mentioned, the women's vocabularies, by contrast, were extensive. Laws states that this imbalance points to the fact that the women based their creation of terms in an effort "to avoid male attention, so it makes sense that many men would not necessarily recognize them" (p.82).

Even more interesting, in a book devoted to the history of slang (Green, 1997), the author makes no mention of any slang terms for menstruation. Neither the word 'menstruation' nor any word related to it is present in the voluminous index, yet the text gives a seemingly thorough review of bodily slang, including terms for the genitals in general and specific terms for the vagina and the penis. Given that Green is remiss with the term menstruation, it is surprising that he makes note that his list of euphemisms for the vagina, nine hundred in all, rival only those terms for drinking, which exceed two thousand. He admits that while he has listed over nine hundred terms for vagina, "there are doubtless others" (p.31). Furthermore, he states, "They encompass what is generally acknowledged as the most injurious of monosyllabic epithets, and run the course through to some of the most floridly convoluted of literary euphemisms" (p.31). Indeed, merely reading through the categories of "A Place for the Penis," "Semen," "Pubic

Hair," "Fear and Loathing," "The Hole," and "The Slit," just to name a few, is enough to make any sailor blush and any feminist throw the book across the room. While there is a category deemed "Nature," containing life-affirming terms such as "nature's tufted treasure," "daisy" and "rose," by far, most of the categories contain primarily pejorative terms crudely referring to women as mere sex objects for men.

Although oddly there are no slang terms which pay homage to menstruation mentioned, the terms for vagina are so full of insult and despising, that Green reflects thoughtfully that they represent the cultural situation of women throughout much of history. He takes into account the given within the linguistic landscape and makes a humorous, if not profound, statement with regard to the historical relationship between men and women along with the impact and importance of slang, which is quite relevant to the study of menstruation:

> As with any section of this book, many [terms] are dead, but a surprising number flourish on. Men think of sex, it is claimed, every eight seconds; the slang lexicon, if nothing else, gives them plenty of terms in which to couch their repetitive mental obsession. If such a mass of terms appears to prove yet again feminism's contention that men see women primarily as sex objects, then so be it. If slang is indeed the most 'man-made' of languages then it is never more so than when dealing with the female genitals. (Green, 1997, pp.31-32)

For certain, terms like "crack," "slit," "pussy," "prick holder," "wastepipe," and "flytrap," again, just to name a few, are hardly complimentary to women or their vaginas (pp.31-51). This is to be contrasted, however, with the slang terms for 'penis.' For the

word ‘penis,’ the titles of the sub-sections include, “Cock, Prick and Tool,” “Member,” “Weapon,” “Knife and Dagger,” “Gun,” “Stick,” “Hunter,” and “Nursery Terms,” for example (pp. 51-66). The slang terms for the penis are mostly descriptive with regard to shape and function; more than anything, they are possibly complimentary from a man’s point of view. Historically, men have not minded being seen as warriors or hunters, carrying guns and sticks. In addition, there is no “Fear and Loathing” category for men, yet there is a “Nursery Terms” heading which includes words such as “peenie,” “weenie,” “wienie,” and “willy” (p. 61). For this study, it is significant that there are no nursery terms listed for ‘vagina.’ Given the power and importance of language, one has to wonder, does this mean that there is no vagina for little girls in Western culture? Or that it is lived invisibly and unspoken? Personally, I can remember only one slang term from my days growing up in the southern United States, (‘bobo’), and I cannot remember whether or not it referred to the genitals of only girls. In any case, the qualities of the slang terms which exist for female genitals vary significantly from the qualities of the slang term for male genitals, and this demonstrates that women are valued or devalued differently and that culture takes an abusive license with regard to women’s being. Given that the existing language in the culture which refers to females, expresses hostility and loathing, it stands to reason that men are more apt to feel supported in perpetuating such a perspective on women.

On the whole, euphemisms for menstruation, whether overtly derogatory or not, communicate to the world and specifically to women and developing girls, that menstruation is an ‘unspeakable’ aspect of female being for whatever reason.

Furthermore, slang terms for the vagina which are overwhelmingly life-negating influence all persons, women and men, girls and boys. Slang terms, like any other component of language circulate in the culture and act as a social mirror, reflecting back to women the images that belong to them and to men. And insofar as these words and attitudes derogate their being "female" or "being those who bleed", they are likely to see and experience themselves and other women as worthless, dirty body parts which are rather shameful.

Apart from the importance of slang and euphemisms within the culture, formal language plays an important role with regard to shaping a woman's perception of self and shaping the perceptions which men have toward women. Dictionaries and thesauruses provide current and conventional meanings and synonyms of the word 'menstruation.' Historically, these are the places in which one turns to get an "official" or standard meaning of an unknown word or phrase. Additionally**,** If I were an uninformed girl (or boy), and had read the word menstruation or had been lucky enough to hear the word spoken, I might resort to a reference tool for clarification, especially if I had already picked up on the idea that whatever it is, menstruation is not something to talk about *aloud.* After reviewing several modern dictionaries and thesauruses directly from the shelves of a popular book store, I have found that the bulk of the definitions of menstruation are conventional, functional descriptions, devoid of any mention of possible rites of passage for a girl or any personal meanings for either a girl or woman.

To illustrate, the definition of 'menstruation' from the New Oxford American Dictionary (2001) reads, "the process in a woman of discharging blood and other

materials from the lining of the uterus at intervals of about one lunar month from puberty until menopause, except during pregnancy" and is actually a more liberal, 'standard' meaning. Put differently, the description contains rudiments of some kind of being, especially human being and are not depicted as mere components of a "process."

This particular dictionary also includes the word 'period' whose fourth definition is, "also menstrual period." This inclusion, albeit a little buried, is somewhat refreshing since many older dictionaries do not include this widely accepted colloquialism. The fact that 'period,' the most common expression signifying menstruation, now appears anywhere in a formal reference tool, points to a certain formal recognition in the culture, a signal that it is now more acceptable in this culture to use this word and make reference to its very meaning. In light of our topic, this is significant.

Additionally, this dictionary is a more recent edition of dictionaries and most likely does not represent what is accessible to the average person, providing they have any access to an actual dictionary. Classrooms, places in which a person is most likely to look up a word, certainly cannot be relied upon to have current dictionaries. What this means is that the persons who are most in need of some clarification of the meaning of menstruation will be stuck with antiquated, functional at best, definitions. Young persons will be lucky to even have the knowledge of the word 'menstruation' as a reference, since 'period' is more common in our culture and the word 'menstruation' is much more rarely spoken.

In fact, often what one will discover when looking up the word 'menstruation' is

a highly technical or scientific description of the so-called process of menstruating. When reading these definitions, it becomes difficult to picture a human being, much less a girl or a woman who has feelings and experiences. A fine example of such a definition can be found in Webster's 3rd New International Dictionary (1993) wherein it states that menstruation is:

> a discharge of blood, secretions, and tissue debris associated with necrotic changes of the uterine mucosa that recurs in non-pregnant, breeding-age females of various primates at intervals of 3 ½ to 5 weeks (as in women typically at 4 week intervals and lasting 3 to 5 days) and that is usually held to represent a readjustment of the uterus to the non-pregnant state following proliferative changes accompanying the preceding ovulation …

Here, this description is written within categorical black and white terms, i.e., as if pregnancy and breeding is the task and the outcomes are success (pregnancy) or failure (non-pregnancy) which when failed, leads to necrotic (dying) tissue and a non-pregnant female. This is all placed within a framework biased toward a vision of menstruation in which dead tissues are excreted, tissues die, pregnancies fail, and breeding has fallen short of its purpose. The woman is reduced to a manufacturer of babies, her uterus is a major part of that factory and when that fails to materialize in a baby, she is left to excretion and to death. At the end of this alienating definition, the word 'period' is offered as the seventh meaning of 'menstruation.' The meaning which is remotely close to a recognizable human experience is surprisingly listed, but given last in a series, denoting the least common understanding.

In current times, it is more likely that a young person with the resources would turn to the internet as a source of 'official' information on menstruation. As a researcher, even though I am aware that the internet contains a great deal of junk, I partly expected dictionary web sites to offer the most diverse, inclusive, perhaps female-oriented meanings of menstruation. Unfortunately, I could not have been more mistaken.

Young women or men, and adults for that matter, when looking up the definition of 'menstruation' on the internet might discover the following:

the process or an instance of discharging the menses. (thefreedictionary.com, also answers.com)

the monthly discharge of blood from the uterus of non-pregnant women from puberty to menopause

"*the women were sickly and subject to excessive menstruation*"

- menses, menstruum, catamenia, period, flow (wordwebonline.com)

- the monthly discharge of blood from the uterus of nonpregnant women from puberty to menopause; *"the women were sickly and subject to excessive menstruation"*; "a woman does not take the gout unless her menses to be stopped"- Hippocrates; the semen begins to appear in males and to be emitted at the same time of life that the catamenia begin to flow in females" –Aristotle (wordreference.com, the freedictionary.com)

In the above definitions, 'peculiar' is the word which first comes to mind. The brevity of meanings is quite striking, as well, along with the unusual and unenlightening

use of the root word “menses” as part of the meaning. These explanations provide the most basic, almost naive, descriptions of menstruation, offering either no context or a male context or a reason for a “discharge.” The first definition omits altogether any kind of time reference or relation to female being. And, while the second and third do attribute menstruation to women, the sentences offered for clarification of meaning indulge the stereotype that women who menstruate are “sick” or weak. Equally pejorative, the statements perpetuate the notion that menstruation is a state of “sickness” and not a natural part of a woman’s life. Further, the quotes by Hippocrates and Aristotle are arcane and only obfuscate the meaning of menstrual bleeding. As a researcher and ordinary citizen, I have difficulty imagining anyone gaining any kind of understanding of menstruation or female being from these definitions, except, apart from a vision of women as somehow ‘troubled.’ These explanations of menstruation are scanty and carelessly written, suggesting that the writers felt that the given meanings would not matter and would not be challenged.

However, all was not lost searching for meanings of menstruation on the internet, as I discovered a free encyclopedia link called Wikipedia (en.wikipedia.org), which as expected, gave a much more thoughtful and thorough investigation of menstrual bleeding. Refreshingly, in addition to a well-written and balanced biological portrayal of menstruation, the web site offers an extensive review of menstrual products, including the environmental pros and cons of each and a section on culture and menstruation. It also offers links to a diverse collection of related sites such as “free software to watch the menstrual cycle,” “Harry Finley: Online museum of menstruation

and women's health," and "Menstrual Suppression With Birth Control Pills," to name just a few. However, without trying to make an unfair comparison of dictionary sites to encyclopedia sites, it is important to note that even the shorter, introductory explanation of menstruation on Wikipedia is far more thoughtful. It reads as follows:

> The menstrual cycle is a set of recurring physiological changes in a female's body that are under the control of the reproductive hormone system and necessary for reproduction. In women, menstrual cycles occur typically on a monthly basis between puberty and menopause. Besides humans, only other great apes exhibit menstrual cycles, in contrast to the estrus cycle of most mammalian species. (http://en.wikepedia.org/wiki/menstrual_cycle).

On the whole, anyone looking for an understanding of menstruation could grasp something from the above definition. From this meaning, the reader can at least picture a human female who undergoes some kind of change which is related to reproduction. There is no mention of sickness or ancient philosophical quotes to distract the reader or pigeonhole women into some kind inferior place of being. The definition here is respectful and at least tells some kind of story, albeit a short one, about female human beings. Compared to the previous definitions, this might be useful and helpful.

In summary, the influence and power of language cannot be underestimated in a phenomenological investigation of the cultural meanings of menstruation. Euphemisms for menstruation, derogatory slang terms for female genitalia, and inadequate, irresponsible definitions of menstruation all become part of the fabric of a developing girl's (and boy's) world. The insulting terms and shoddy explanations all become part of

a young girl's world of self- reference, and when girls have no words to describe their own being, they either create their own secret language to reference what their body does, and/or they simply stop reflecting on their lives and cease considering their own place in the world.

Humor

So far we have seen cultural meanings of menstruation which create and perpetuate shame, embarrassment, and fear about menstrual bleeding and consequently, female being. The expression of menstrual humor within the culture does not escape perpetuation of those meanings, and comedy sketches in which male comics complain about the general nuisance of women and their pesky need to menstruate are possibly the most pointed of all.

Like the menstrual song artists, the male comedians use the term 'PMS,' but their words really seem to point to woman's entire being, menstruation, moods, cramping, bleeding and all. All the recordings mentioned here have been acquired from a compilation CD which a friend made for me, thus the detailed context and reference information of the recordings are missing. Nevertheless, the messages contained within the performances are clear: women and their bleeding bodies are to be feared and loathed. And within this male fear and loathing lies, like all examples of hatred and irrational loathing, an obvious underlying confusion about women's kind of being and a subsequent fear of the unfamiliar.

Southern comedian, Earl Pitts, for example, expresses both his fear and loathing in a sketch which begins with the All-American sound of an army bugle, and then in a

disgusted tone and drawn-out pronunciation proclaims, “You know what makes me SICK? You know what makes me so angry I just want to lay down and roll around in a room full of thumbtacks?” He peaks his audience’s attention with this dramatic introduction, yet, interestingly, he never directly answers his own questions.

Instead, he launches into the tale of his own genius and how he came to his latest revelation: He just spent a weekend of watching old movies on television with “Earl Junior,” saw one werewolf movie, and eureka: “When you get down to it, your werewolf is the perfect symbol of PMS.” He expands further, “I mean- going out of your mind onc’t a month- coming the next day having that terrible feeling of not knowing if you killed somebody- thinking that you probably did.”

For Pitts, women go out of their minds i.e., go psychotic, and become monsters before their period, forgetting who they are and what they’ve done. In what he takes to be humorous exaggeration, he likens them to psychopathic killers. And in further fanciful dehumanization, in anticipation of women’s menstrual ‘madness,’ he recommends the “proper treatment” of “staking ‘em” outside in the backyard for “a couple of days” as was done for the werewolf in the movie. He enacts an imaginary skit with his son, where his son announces that he is going outside with “food scraps” to feed his tethered mother. With careful warning, Pitts answers, ‘Okay, but don’t get too close or she’ll bite.’

To both continue the insulting exaggeration as well as to give a sniff of reality to the story, Pitts rounds out his tale with a description of how he patronizes and ignores his wife when she interrupts his game-watching time. To illustrate the practicality of his

new PMS treatment, he announces, “See, if she’d been tied to that big tree in the back yard, I wouldn’t ‘uv missed the play of the game.”

Finally, as listeners, we again hear a call to patriotism through music and are then commanded by Pitts, “Wake up, America!” He then gives some advice to men:

> Hey man, you wanna see something scary? You watch an old werewolf movie and instead of seeing (inaudible actor’s name), imagine it’s your old lady. Then do what I do onc’t a month- pop a top on a Silver Bullet and wait her out. I’m Earl Pitts, American PSO.
>
> (Transcribed from compilation CD made by a friend)

As a woman and human being, I am left angry at Pitts’ suggestion which, from my perspective, is akin to talk of “stringing up” a “black” man just because which even if done in humor is offensive. As a listener and researcher, I’m still left wondering, what exactly makes him so “sick,” and about what is he so “angry”? What vein of hatred, ill will, and resentment is he mining in this tendentious kind of humor which directly expresses conscious and unconscious hatred and fear. Perhaps, his wife calls out to him in a demanding and angry tone at some point? Perhaps that is the nature of their relationship. He does not exactly portray himself as unemotional or balanced in his thinking. When Pitts states, “Forget this understanding hormonal urges and stuff,” I am expecting to hear of some irrational behavior perpetrated by his wife or some other woman. Pitts never really gets to that and instead, engages in a full-blown fantasy about how to torture women every month, all the while tying his perspective to American patriotism. Pitts’ comedy sketch is filled with free-floating hate towards the being of

women and is loosely couched in the notion of PMS. And although all of it is supposed to be humorous and exaggerated and funny, it is so full of a certain vein of viciousness that it offends more than it entertains.

In a similar, but more palatable vein, another southern comedian, Jeff Foxworthy, approaches PMS with the seemingly compassionate statement, “Due to a hormone change, women do have a legitimate reason for being in a bad mood once a month.” After an extended bout of laughter from the audience, Foxworthy reiterates, “They do!” He then elaborates,

> And if you’re a sensitive man, you can see this coming on. It’s like with my wife- if I wake up in the morning, and I roll over and look at her and her head’s on backwards, you know (Laughter). She’s going “Gooood Morrrninng” (in The Exorcist Voice) (Extended Laughter). I’m going, “Where am I going to find an exorcist on Saturday?” “Honey, could you put the bed down, I gotta pee. Just put the bed down, ah-ight?” (Laughter) But that’s not her fault. That’s hormones’ fault. You just might as well check into Ralph’s PMS shelter for men. (Laughter and applause) ‘Cause a week is a terrible thing to waste…
>
> (Transcribed from compilation CD made by a friend)

Like Pitts, Foxworthy sees menstruating women as other-than-human and literally compares his wife to the demon-possessed Linda Blair in *The Exorcist*, all in humor, of course, but he makes the comparison, nonetheless. Seeing the woman as other-than-human is, of course, a true expression of the way many men experience woman as not understandable, as not making sense. Expressed in humorous

exaggeration, very differently from the romantic exaggeration of the woman as possessor of soul and aesthetic sensitivity, he portrays pre-menstrual or menstruating women as frightening and inhabited by evil, possessed by a demon and needing to be exorcized. This vision of women as frightening, sinister, possessed by evil spirits lies deep in the unconscious – rooted historically in the persecution of witches and the prehistoric fears of women's powers. They are powerful, magical or loathsome creatures and are therefore to be avoided (for at least one week). The idea that men need domestic abuse shelters is again a kind of humorous exaggeration, so clear because everyone knows women and children are historically the ones that need shelters, but nonetheless unconsciously and humorously this fear of women is truly found in the culture. Although not as mean-spirited as Pitts, Foxworthy, in a more ordinary style, perpetuates the cultural tendency to negate women, all that has to do with menstruation, and in consequence, their being, even while engaging in humorous exaggeration..

Finally, of all the male comedic acts reviewed here, a radio broadcast excerpt featuring a politically incorrect, cantankerous character called Madd Maxx is by far the most negating of women and their bleeding. Although his piece is short, in just a few seconds he manages to be the most insulting:

> ...Welcome to hell, Verne. Goodness sakes! I'm mad 'cause Madd Maxine ain't shut up for three weeks. She says, 'I got PMS. I got PMS.' I said, well you're about to PMS-me off!
>
> Raucous laughter from DJs
>
> I'd like to fire the little feller that invented that PMS crap. Where'd that come

from? We been around here on this earth for thousands of years, and all of a sudden in the last five years, everybody's got PMS! Goodness sakes! PMS- We had another name for it ten years ago.

What's that?

BITCH!

Raucous laughter

Makes me so mad, I don't know what to do! Used to, I could go to work to get away from a bossy woman. Now I got a new boss that IS a woman!...

(Transcribed from compilation CD made by a friend)

Here again, we have a male who is angry at women and has been allowed to spread his hate publicly under the guise of humor. Eventually, Maxx reveals that his new boss is a "lesbian," and after much denigration, equates 'her kind' with an American enemy, imagining a news report in which a Navy F-14 shoots down lesbian jets.

In the background of his skit, the DJs laugh continuously through his diatribe, and although they may be laughing at the absurdity of his character, they must also be laughing at the content of his material. It is inescapable. Whereas Maxx does bring up an interesting point questioning the origins of PMS and its recent popularity, his message and his delivery is hate-filled. What is perhaps most striking about all three comedy sketches which include so much venom for women and their process of bleeding is that they are all *public* performances. That is, the sketches have been endorsed by record companies, radio stations, and audience members alike, proving that

public gestures of hate against women are still allowed in this country. Although all kinds of prejudice still pervades where we live and discrimination still occurs in this country, had ‘Jews’ or ‘Blacks’ been the topic of these public humorous demonstrations of hate, rioting would ensue. The comedians would likely be hunted down and extinguished in some way, and at the very least, the record companies and the radio stations would refuse to endorse the performances. Women, however, are still hated and mocked for their very being and in many places in the culture are not even much protected by the veil of political correctness.

Apart from the material of male stand-up comedians, however, there also exists a kind of sub-culture in which jokes regarding menstruation are passed around via word of mouth. These jokes express a wide range of attitudes toward bleeding and are, surprisingly, in abundance and not so surprisingly, told in secret, mimicking the phenomenon of menstruation, itself. At this writing, there are seventy-two pages of jokes and personal stories of menstrual humor which have found a kind of public yet private home on the Museum of Menstruation website (mum.org/humorjok.htm).

When I was in my twenties, hanging out with male friends one day, I heard one of the many jokes featured which reads, “Why don’t hunters trust women? Because they don’t trust anything that bleeds for four days and doesn’t die” (p. 35). While I do not remember the first part about hunters, and my version of the second half included five days and not four, for over ten years, the latter half of that joke has stayed with me as a symbol of underlying male hatred for women. I remember barely listening to my male friend who was telling the joke to me and my other male friend, but when the punchline

was told, I remember being startled into consciousness and feeling the kind of jolt that one gets from being slapped in the face. I also recall the cackling explosion of laughter from both my friends, and having the disappointing revelation that this must be how they really feel about me and other women. I drew the conclusion that we women are freakish and alien, to be feared and ostracized. Until then I had thought we were equals. I was disgusted at their joke, and although we remained good friends, I never trusted them the same way again. Authors Delaney, Lupton, and Toth of *The Curse: A Cultural History of Menstruation* (1988), best express why I never fully trusted my male friends again. In response to such jokes, they write "Menstrual jokes degrade women as a *caste*: All women menstruate for a large part of their lives, and there is thus no way they can escape the ridicule and insult directed at them by this kind of humor " (p.124).

The joke I heard contains the same kind of mocking and hatred found in the comedy sketches above; however, there are many more jokes (from the same website) which reveal different cultural gentler perspectives on women and menstruation. There are menstrual 'dumb blonde' jokes, for example: "Why did the blonde jump off the cliff? She thought she could fly because her pantyliner had wings" (mum.org/humorjok.htm, p.25). By contrast, there are 'graphic' blood jokes: "How do you know that the barwoman doesn't like you? The string in the bloody mary" (p.10). Additionally, several of the jokes reflect the ignorance or cluelessness of males regarding the phenomenon of menstruation, and others simply poke fun at the absurdity of menstrual product advertisements:

One day, a man walks into a bar and sees a sexy woman who interests him. He

goes over to her and says, ‘Hey baby, I love you! Let’s start fooling around.’ The woman says ‘I’m sorry, I can’t. I’m on my menstrual cycle.’ So the man then says, ‘Well, don’t worry, I have a Honda- I’ll follow you. (mum.org/humorjok.htm, p.10)

A woman reader of the website writes, Many, many years ago, when I sent my husband to the store for a Kotex belt, he came back with a leather belt that matched nothing in my closet. (mum.org/humorjok.htm, p.18)

Three boys are sitting on the stoop on a summer’s afternoon. One of their fathers, exasperated that the kids are just sitting around, gives them five bucks and tells them to go amuse themselves. As they walk down Main Street they debate about what they should do with the money. Should they buy a deck of cards? A football? Play in the arcade? ‘Wait a sec!’ says one of the boys as he runs into the drug store. ‘Wait here!’ A few minutes later he comes out with a package of tampons. ‘You idiot!’ his friends shout. ‘We were going to have some fun. What are we going to do with those?’

‘Look what it says right here on the box,’ the boy replies: ‘You can go horseback riding, you can go swimming…. ‘(mum.org/humorjok.htm, p.10)

In addition, some of the other jokes featured manage to poke fun at menstruation with matter-of-fact acceptance rather than disgust and judgment:

A kindergarten class had a homework assignment to find out about something

exciting and relate it to the class the next day. The first little boy called upon, walked up to the front of the class, and with a piece of chalk, made a small white mark on the blackboard, then sat back down.

Puzzled, the teacher asked him just what it was.

‘It’s a period,’ said the little boy.

‘Well, I can see that,’ she said, ‘but what’s so exciting about a period?’

‘Damned if I know,’ said the little boy, ‘but this morning my sister was missing one, Dad had a heart attack, Mum fainted, and the man next door shot himself.’

(mum.org/humorjok.htm, p.32)

A man walks into a pharmacy and wanders up and down the aisles.

The salesgirl notices him and asks him if she can help him.

He answers that he is looking for a box of tampons for his wife.

She directs him down the correct aisle. A few minutes later, he deposits a huge bag of cotton balls and a ball of string on the counter.

‘Sir, I thought you were looking for tampons?’

He answers, ‘You see, it’s like this. Yesterday, I sent my wife to the store to get me a carton of cigarettes and she came home with a tin of tobacco and some rolling papers. So, I figure that if I have to roll my own, SO DOES SHE!!

(mum.org/humorjok.htm, p.33)

In both of the above jokes, menstruation is depicted as nothing more than what it is, an aspect of female being. In both jokes, menstruation is an accepted part of female

existence and the characters involved are living alongside the menstruating female, albeit a tad dramatically. In the first joke, the humor lies in the out-of-the-mouths-of-babes' naivety of the boy, the practical issue at hand, i.e., the daughter's missed period, and the hysteria of the adults, Dad's heart attack, Mum's fainting, and the male neighbor's suicide.

Similarly in the second joke, the husband and wife are portrayed as equals: Each spouse skimps on something the other needs. The husband 'needed' cigarettes, and the wife needed tampons. There is no name-calling, no rude comparisons, no objectification, and no hatred expressed, a refreshing departure from the norm. Delaney et al (1988) call this kind of humor "red humor" and "a liberation" for anyone who engages in it: "Through shared laughter one realizes that menstruation is a common female experience and not some secret shame" (p.128).

However, amidst the jokes and the 'harmless' humorous tales, a woman writes in with a personal experience which stands out from the rest. She introduces her memory with, 'This one is pretty bad, mostly embarrassing' (p.11). She tells a story of camping one summer with her boyfriend, 'and of course it was during [her] period.' At one point, she quickly runs out of tampons and, with her last one in, she is in desperate need to get to a store. It's hot, so she is wearing a skirt 'to top things off.' On the way to the store, the tampon was 'giving' and so she has to 'do something.' She winds up grabbing clean fast food napkins and stuffing them in her underpants, 'However,' she states, 'it wasn't very secure,' and '…it was so bad- and uncomfortable.'

When she approaches a restaurant to seek some emergency relief, she realizes

she must get out of the car, which turns out to be difficult: ‘I knew the napkins were not placed well, and I admit it was my fault for not taking enough precautions.’ As one might expect, next in this story she recalls how the napkins fell out onto the sidewalk and her ensuing ‘embarrassment:’

> …It was a long walkway and it just so happened that it was break time for the workers. A bunch of young adolescent boys were sitting along the path having cigarettes. I was a little nervous about walking by since I was wearing a relatively short skirt and they were all sitting low. I walked past them. Then to my horror I felt the napking [sic] fall. They didn’t notice at first. It fell right in the middle of where they were all sitting. I quickly turned around and saw a nightmare. A yellow napkin on the ground with blood on it. It was obvious what it was used for. Initially, I wasn’t quite sure what to do, but then I thought it would be better if I quickly grabbed it. I was soo scared, these guys just looked at it and seemed confused. In a flash I picked up the napkin and stormed inside into the bathroom. They all saw me pick it up. To my luck they had tampon dispensers. I was so mortified. I was so embarrassed. That was the single most horrible experience of my life. I mean, afterwards I kept wondering about it and I was scared to leave the bathroom. (mum.org/humorjok.htm, pp. 11-12)

Just from the extreme emotions expressed alone in this memory, one might think that she were escaping the hands of a kidnapper or rapist, when in reality, she merely gets stuck without enough tampons, experiences discomfort and has a noticeable leak of blood. However, in this culture, where menstruation is a natural yet shameful event

which must be concealed, especially from men, at all times, to have a leak in front of a group of boys is “the single most horrible experience of [her] life.” Interesting to note is that no one died, no one was maimed, no one even spoke a word or came close to physical danger, but the woman was “soo scared” several times, so much that she was afraid to leave the bathroom after it was all over. Her story reads more like a sexual trauma than a story about embarrassment. She even states that when she turned around to see the bloody napkin on the ground, she “saw a nightmare.”

Because, for a menstruating woman in this culture, she did live through a nightmare. She allowed herself (through her blood) to be exposed to males. Worse yet, she apparently feels guilt about bringing it on to herself: ‘…I admit it was my fault for not taking enough precautions.’ Additionally, it was hot, so she was wearing a short skirt ‘to top things off.’ Her short skirt compounds her vulnerability and shame. Like rape victims who have historically been blamed for dressing too seductively, her short skirt is an invitation to a loose tampon and public humiliation. Thus, she is fearful, without really knowing why, of the boys’ and others’ reactions. Would they sling their fear and hatred at her? Would she be allowed to simply carry on with her life after such a transgression? Overall, the really terrible part of her whole story is that the boys were most likely busy being adolescent boys caught up in their own world. It is probable that they were oblivious to her menstrual situation as most males in this culture have been trained, and so her mortification was lost on them. If the boys had any thought about her situation at all, they might have imagined that she cut herself in some way or that she dropped a napkin stained with lipstick. Women, not men, typically live in the

world where menstrual blood is real, visible, and recognizable, because men are customarily so well-shielded and because women customarily do such a good job of shielding. For males, menstrual blood remains an abstraction because they never have to see it.

Surprisingly, of all things humorous in the culture pertaining to menstruation, a set of menstrual products created by a young artist out of New York City named Vinnie Angel, contains perhaps some of the most life-affirming messages for women and men. In his own way, he has begun a kind of counter-culture of menstruation by designing and manufacturing tampon cases, baseball caps, menstrual calendars, and bubble bath with an accompanying CD for the menstruators' relaxation, just to name a few products.

Initially, I was introduced to Vinnie's line of products when I was given "Vinnie's Tampon Case" by a girlfriend. I must admit that the thuggish name "Vinnie" along with a rather creepy cartoon sketch of Vinnie on the case, sporting a unibrow, made me a bit uneasy. Women, including myself, are often suspicious of men who are interested in menstruation, because men are typically only interested in menstruation for their own pleasure, i.e. if they have some kind of menstrual blood fetish or something like it.

However, examining Vinnie's case a little longer, I realized that its design was meant to be a mixture of fifties' and seventies' kitsch and that it touted messages like, "Keeping track of your period can be fun and educational! Naturally" and "Remember to Refill," and "I know my flow." The corny message, "I brake for cycles," appears in a bubble next to a cartoon Vinnie's mouth who is driving a "Vinnie's Tampon Case"

truck. The truck, itself, has a face with a big, goofy grin and a license plate that reads, "Mom." Inside the cloth case is Vinnie's handy period chart, which it is so named.

Whereas, Vinnie's Tampon Case is clearly humorous, the products are actually functional and meant to be used. If a woman uses up her period chart, she simply sends Vinnie a self-addressed stamped envelope. On tamponcase.com, Vinnie's official website, one may peruse all of Vinnie's menstrual products or watch the "Know Your Flow Show." Vinnie, a young man and artist/ skate punk, takes his "VTC" (Vinnie's Tampon Case) skate team to the streets of Manhattan where he films their skating and initiations into VTC. The initiations entail having a prospective male crew member wear a pink hat, pink pants, and purple roller blades while skating for one hour in Union Park. Vinnie remarks, "To attain rank of Super Vinnie like me, you have to skate for four hours like I did." The words, "It's so worth it" appear on the screen.

On the whole, Vinnie's films, music, and advertising are not just part of a product, but are of a movement, a way of thinking and being. All that he produces pertaining to Vinnie's tampon cases are works of art. Therefore, tying his tampon cases to one aspect of culture is difficult. He acknowledges menstruation for what it is, speaks realistically about his products, and affirmatively to women about their periods. He refrains from talking down to women about this part of their lives, and instead incorporates menstruation into a funny and young, artistic and hip, dynamic and inclusive part of the world.

Music

References to menstruation and bleeding in the lyrics of popular music, or any

kind of music, for that matter, is almost literally unheard of. Of the few songs which I discovered to make any reference to menstruation, most focus on PMS as subject matter. However, even though several of the artists name PMS specifically within their songs and song titles, they seem to also write about the typical experiences that women have *during* menstruation, as well. It seems likely that since PMS has been elevated to the status of 'speakable' in the culture, it now stands for *all* that menstruation entails. The word 'menstruation' and what it denotes remains largely unspeakable.

Mary J. Blige, for example, in a song entitled, PMS, sings somberly, soulfully, and somewhat conversationally, as if she is leaning across a table to tell the listener something confidential, "I wanna talk to the ladies tonight- about a situation I'm pretty sure y'all be able to relate to- Trust me." Blige sings softly and her voice embodies the kind of weariness of which she sings:

Today I'm not feelin' pretty

See I'm feelin' quite ugly

Havin' one of those days

When I can't make up my mind

So don't even look at me

See I don't wanna hear your problem

'Cause I'm havin' some of my own

I know it was not your fault

That I'm feelin' down

I just wanna be left alone…

(Blige, retrieved from http://www.lyricsstyle.com/m/maryjblige/pms.html on 9/7/2004)

She goes on to sing of her "depression," and how she thinks "the worst of everything," and along with her clothes not fitting, she's got an attitude and "ain't talkin' to you." Full of "stress" with an "aching back," Blige announces she is "feelin' bitchy" and not like "smilin'." After mentioning PMS several more times in a bluesy, yeah, yeah kind of style, she declares, "See, I already know that I'm fucked up…And I don't need you to remind me." Blige summarizes with, "This is the worst part of everything, the worst part of being a woman is PMS, yeah."

Whereas, Blige's plummeting moods of depression and irritability fit the common descriptions of 'PMS,' her lower back pain and the decree that her current experience is the "worst" part of being a woman are historical attributes of menstruating, in general. Menstruating has commonly been called "the curse," after all. Furthermore, feeling ugly, ashamed, and wanting to be alone, are also aspects of menstrual bleeding, not just the time prior. And feeling alien, unnatural, and as if there is something innately wrong is menstruation's age-old cross to bear in Western culture. In the end, Blige labels herself "fucked up," and this is clearly a judgment which she anticipates from others: "I don't need you to remind me," she sings. Her anticipation of judgment reflects a specific kind of relatedness to others which anticipates condemnation and disgust.

Similarly, in a song entitled, PMS Blues, Dolly Parton humorously belts out blame to Eve for handing down her "curse." She sings,

Eve you wicked woman, you done put your curse on me

Why didn't you just leave that apple hangin' in the tree

You make us hate our husbands, our lovers and our boss

Why I can't count the good friends I've already lost

'Cause of PMS blues, PMS blues

I don't even like myself, but it's something I can't help

I got those God almighty, slap somebody, PMS blues.

(Retrieved from http://dollyon-line.com/archives/lyrics/pmsblues.shtml on 9/9/2004)

Like Blige, Parton seems preoccupied with PMS, yet sings about inheriting the "curse," which has been historically and culturally interpreted as menstruation and childbirth. Parton goes on to compare her usual self which is "good as gold," to her current self which is "mean and cold." She also takes pity on men who are not "afflicted" but are "affected just the same." She is more compassionate with men than with herself when she consoles, "You poor old men didn't have to grin and say 'I feel your pain.'" Here she suggests that her anger, irritability, pain, and frustration are all to be accounted for by the fate of being a woman, having PMS, yet the real subtext, we all know, is menstruation.

Overall, for Parton, the overarching theme of the song is the hormone-driven, painful, irrationality which leads women to give other people all kinds of pain. The hormones are "like the devil taking over [her] body, suffering, suffering, suffering…". Parton turns into a self-described, "awful, lowdown bitch" right before us, and in

finishing confesses, “It’s the only time in my life I ever think about wishing I’d been a man.”

Again, it simply does not logically follow that Parton laments being a woman because of PMS alone. Historically, it is the entire experience of menstruating, i.e. including bleeding, which women have loathed. Only because PMS has been ‘scientifically’ legitimated and for the most part, remains an abstraction of menstruation, does it sound ‘softer’ and therefore more acceptable. Dolly Parton, given her lovable, down-to-earth yet respectable place in country music is simply not going to be singing about bleeding vaginas, the ‘mess’ of menstruating, or even the hassle of maxi pads. Instead, she sings of “PMS,” which is a mere acronym, not even a full word, and is ‘code’ for the full, concretized reality of menstruation.

In direct contrast, artist P.J. Harvey is not afraid to mention the ‘messiness’ of menstruation. Her song, Happy and Bleeding, (1992) like Parton’s song, takes off from Eve in the Garden of Eden and her subsequent fate:

She Burst

Dropped Off

Pick the Fruit

Realize

I’m Naked

I’m Naked Too

So Cover My Body

Dress It Fine

Hide My Linen and Lace

Been Sewing Ever Since

Since Time Began… (Retrieved from http://www.purelyrics.com on 9/7/2004)

While Harvey does not mention the terms 'menstruation' or 'PMS,' she tells the story of the concealment and shame of menstruation, and, explicitly, the years of bleeding. In her story, she is the "fruit flower, myself inside out," and her refrain is, "I'm happy and bleeding for you." At one point, she alludes to avoiding pregnancy when she speaks of being "out of season" and "long overdue" and then when she gets her period, she is once again "happy and bleeding." Overall, Harvey avoids the self-flagellation in which Blige and Parton engage, even though she does make reference to the cultural, historical fate of woman, i.e. to bleed and suffer. Harvey, albeit more poetically perhaps, portrays an image closer to menstrual self-acceptance. She describes her personal experience of bleeding and her own perspective without persecuting herself or other 'irrational' menstruating or PMSing women.

Likewise, an unknown artist named Geneva Kachman, featured on the Museum of Menstruation's website, sings more in celebration, rather than condemnation, of herself and menstruation. In two songs, Spinach Bouquet and Freedom, she makes a case for choosing lovers who are thoughtful enough to buy her much-needed, zinc-laden spinach bouquets before her "period," and for choosing lovers who will experiment with her sexually during her period: that is "freedom." In On the Rag Railroad, she sings of the many 'stops' of her period train. For example,

On the rag railroad

All open windows

And Bloody noses

On goose down pillows

Got on board when I was 14

And won't get off till I'm 50

(Retrieved from http://www.mum.org/song3.htm on 9/7/2004)

In the end, Kachman makes the critical "Dylan" stop in his tracks with a defense of female "countryside:"

Dylan said she breaks

Just like a little girl

What does he know

In this countryside

Lion's open jaws

Are hot, wet, red and healthy

And she pounces

Just like the animal she is

(Retrieved from http://www.mum.org/song3.htm on 9/7/2004)

Overall, in all three songs, which are from a ten-song cycle entitled Traveling Menstrual Show, Kachman turns the tables on tradition and asserts her power by making her own use of the commonly used, derogatory male slang term for menstruation, "on the rag." She seizes the phrase and uses it as her own, just as she does with her own patterns of menstrual bleeding.

Although it is interesting and perhaps refreshing to examine an aspect of culture in which women have begun to speak out about their menstrual lives, no matter the message, it is equally important point out that for every woman's song about menstruation or PMS or both, there is a man's version in which the menstrual experiences of women are parodied, and their bleeding bodies are loathed, mocked, and abused.

To give one illustration, in a parody of a song by the heavy metal band, AC/DC, Bob Rivers screeches out, in AC/DC style, his take on "PMS." He succeeds in pushing to the limit every cultural stereotype about the nasty, irrational, menstruating woman:

> …Just the other night,
>
> She got the mood, she's gonna brood
>
> What gives her the right?
>
> Well it's PMS, she's all uptight
>
> PMS, And she'll pick a fight
>
> PMS, She's on overload
>
> PMS, Watch her explode!...

Just as the listener reaches misogynistic capacity, Rivers rants,

> …Her brand new jeans are popping their seams
>
> They're as tight as a clam
>
> She's public reservoir number one
>
> Hoover Dam
>
> So bring home some chocolates, it might save your life…

(Transcribed from a compilation CD made by a friend)

He sings further and tells men to “tell her you love her” and “hide all the knives” thereby demonstrating an absolute absence of understanding, patience or tolerance for another being who lives in a body different from his own. The song is intended to be a joke, because after all it is a parody. However, the lyrics Rivers sings are filled with fear and loathing of women in general and strays far from mere fun-poking at the habits of women during their periods. When fun-loving, down-to-earth Dolly Parton sings, “But a woman had to write this song, a man would be scared to, lest he be called a chauvinist or just fall victim to those PMS blues,” it is apparent that she never met the likes of Bob Rivers.

Art

Examples of cultural attitudes toward menstruation in art are significantly more difficult to find than in aspects of language or humor, for example. Whereas language and humor are culturally ubiquitous, art as a less ordinary form of communication commonly projects menstruation’s absence, thus expressing its place of covered-over silence in the culture. For the most part, in the visual arts, menstruation is neither present nor thematized, except in those relatively rare cases when the artist wants to make a special point of bringing menstruation to consciousness. To date, the volume of menstrual art clearly does not compare to the number of busts, portraits, or fruit bowl paintings in the world. Although much of existing menstrual art is produced by women, the examples discussed here are the creations of three women and two men.

In 1971, artist Judy Chicago produced what is perhaps the first explicitly

menstrual work of art, a larger than life photolithograph close-up of a woman removing a bloody tampon from her vagina. Her piece, “Red Flag,” is featured in a documentary film about menstruation, *Menstruation: Breaking the Silence* (1998). In this film, Chicago herself talks about the reaction she received the first time she showed her work of art at a Women and the Arts conference in 1972. Quite unexpectedly, she states, the women in the audience began “shrieking, booing, and hissing” her, shouting, “How could you make an image of a bloody penis?” Chicago’s commentary is as follows:

> They [the women] could not recognize something they do every month. They do it every month and had no mental image of it. For women, I think it was overwhelming to see their private experience in a public sphere. For men, I think it was both fascinating and frightening because it was so new. But, the issue of absence and what doesn’t exist, again, takes us back to that which isn’t an image is not considered important, even to us [women]. (1998)

For Chicago, the fact that the women in the audience did not recognize a part of themselves was appalling and telling. Not only did the women not recognize an aspect of their own lives, their recognition included a male image, revealing that reflections of themselves, in utter absence, had lost, or never gained the importance of male genitalia. The women’s responses became somewhat of a projective test, spelling out that which was foremost on their minds and in their being. As it turned out, male being was foremost.

Journalist Karen Houppert makes a similar point in *The Curse: Confronting the Last Unmentionable Taboo: Menstruation* (1999). In her introduction, she recounts the

beginnings of her writing on the tampon industry, a 1995 article in *The Village Voice,* which led to her current interest in the taboo of menstruation. To stress the importance of menstruation as a topic, Houppert describes the reaction she received from readers and critics in response to the photograph which appeared on the cover of the issue of *The Village Voice* which first featured her article. Readers, newspaper reporters, and magazine reporters alike, she states, "freaked," found the photo "offensive," and "...couldn't get past the cover to the article inside"(p.8). She describes the photograph as follows:

> In fact, the picture looked like any of a dozen provocative ads for skin creams, perfumes or health clubs: a woman's sexy lower torso in profile, smooth thighs and pert butt alluringly displayed. But here, peeking out from between the woman's thighs was a tampon string. (Houppert, 1999, p.8)

The black and white photograph, taken by Robin Holland/Outline, triggered an overwhelming emotional response, proving to Houppert that "taboos matter because they prevent consumer debate and scientific research, as well as safety monitoring of the sanitary protection industry" (pp.8-9). Furthermore, the strong objections proved that neither women nor men were accustomed to seeing images which suggest that women bleed. Although there was no blood pictured, the mere string of the tampon was enough to point to the concrete reality of menstruation, which was apparently too much for the readers to bear.

Additionally, the fact that the concrete reality of menstruation was offensive points to the overwhelming male influence in the culture which defines how women talk

and think about their own menstruation. Houppert concludes:

> …men- the mostly male CEOs of companies manufacturing menstrual products, as well as advertising executives, religious leaders, and sex-ed authors- have set a tone that shapes women's experiences for them, defining what they are allowed to feel about their periods, what they are allowed to feel about their bodies, and what they are allowed to feel about their sexuality. Menstrual etiquette matters because women are being manipulated. The consequences are significant. (Houppert, 1999, p.9)

By the same token, Artist Nikoline Calcaterra brings to light the consequences of the cultural manipulation of menstruation and women's lives in her art, stating, "…I feel the need to create discussions that often go unexpressed. Woman bleeds. Blood is life. Life is beyond control" (http://www.mum.org/artmencal.htm, 5). In her piece, "Padded," which is featured on The Museum of Menstruation website, she constructs a man's vest out of fluffy, white menstrual pads, decorates it with tampon tassles, and fashions the entire lining out of red cloth. The vest hangs in a big, bottomless, steel bird cage.

For Calcaterrra, the tampons "loosely" represent the "North American native cultures that would honour woman during her moon-time by isolating her in a menstrual hut where she could be with her powerful energy" (http://www.mum.org/armencal, p.7). The red lining refers to a woman's blood which is not allowed to flow out of her body, but is instead absorbed by tampons and other disposable menstrual products which assist in creating a "disconnection" between the woman and her menstrual cycle.

Calcaterra emphasizes, “Women no longer have to look, touch or smell their power. They simple [sic] contain, dispose and ignore the gift that separates and honours them as women” (p.7).

Like the vest, woman is “caged by patriarchy for their ‘bloody inconvenience,’” and they “continue to repress themselves by refusing to escape from cage walls” (p.7). Furthermore,

> Tampons, although dangerous and unnatural, are very convenient and allow women to ignore their moon-time and move forward in the male-dominated work world, becoming much like a man, obsessed with time, money and convenience. The result is a new generation of woman who are disconnected from the rituals of blood that define them as strong, powerful, givers of life, who instead view blood as a dirty curse that causes discomfort and inconvenience each month, beginning at puberty and ending with menopause (mum.org/artmencal.htm,5, p.7).

Drawing on inspiration from Gloria Steinem’s essay *If Men Could Menstruate* (1995), Calcaterra’s vest is meant to be worn by a male model as a format for exhibition, even though it is normally housed in its cage of steel. In her explication of “Padded,” Calcaterra quotes a relevant portion of Steinem’s essay (which may be read in full in Steinem, 1995, 366-369):

> ‘…the characteristics of the powerful, whatever they may be, are thought to be better than the characteristics of the powerless- and logic has nothing to do with it. What would happen, for instance, if suddenly, magically, men could

> menstruate and women could not? The answer is clear- menstruation would become an enviable, boast-worthy, masculine event…'
>
> (mum.org/artmencal.htm,5, p.8)

In the spirit of Steinem's essay, Calcaterra says,

> I challenge the male ego to step up and wear this vest in honour of all the women in their lives who have had to face the stigma of being the gender that bleeds and therefore gives life to this world (mum.org/artmencal.htm,5, p.8).

One male artist who steps up to Calcaterra's challenge of wearing the "menstrual vest" in honor of women is Wenda Gu, a male artist, featured in the aforementioned film on menstruation (1998), garners attention, controversy and criticism because of his mixed-medium installation entitled "Oedipus Refound: The Enigma of Blood." Introduced in the film as an artist who feels that "we are prisoners of our own ready-made culture," his featured piece incorporates the fully-used, bloody tampons and pads of sixty women from fifteen different cultures. The pads and tampons are "gifts" from the women to Gu: each woman sent an entire cycle of pads or tampons and included a letter to Gu expressing her feelings about menstruation. Gu displays the pads, tampons, and letters, alongside a series of large, white King James bibles with hollowed-out spaces for a single, blood-filled tampon.

When discussing his work, Gu confesses that others have called him "shameless" for creating "this kind" of work. Insisting on the importance of his art, he explains, "In the primal nations, they celebrate blood," and that "It's just our culture that thinks that way." In other words, as a culture, we create what is shameful or not, and we

do have control over what is deemed sacred or dirty. As an artist, Gu says he aims to push his audience to think. In one of his pieces, he places a real bloody tampon into a copy of the Bible, quite provocatively forcing his audience to think.

Having already traveled across the world with his artwork and having already received much "criticism and resistance," Gu includes in his New York installation the letters of criticism and press clippings and places them under glass. He then smashes the glass as part of the installation in an effort to "smash" the controversy and "break the silence that surrounds menstruation" (1998). Gu's art contributes to the existing bodies of fine art and pop art which aim at bringing menstruation into the realm of *outspoken* everyday being.

Television

Representations of menstruation in television, or, in this case, the historical widespread absence of such representations, perhaps provide the richest access into the meaning of menstrual bleeding in average western culture. Historically, with rare exceptions, the girls and women in television simply do not bleed. They are the ideal, neat creatures who keep their bleeding and any mention of it hidden, just like the typical girls and women outside of television in everyday culture. The scripts and storylines of early shows such as *I Love Lucy*, *Father Knows Best*, *The Patty Duke Show*, and *Andy Griffith* just to name a few, never mention or intimate, even in jest, any inkling of the stage of menarche or monthly menstrual bleeding.

Likewise, even well-remembered later television shows such as *Gilligan's Island*, *The Brady Bunch*, and even comedy-dramas such as *The Little House on the*

Prairie and *Eight Is Enough* omit any life occurrences involving women's periods. Just how did Ginger and Mary Ann deal with their "monthlies" all those years stranded on that island with Gilligan and the others? (Mrs. Howell, we assume, being "old" had already entered menopause by the time they were shipwrecked, and so how she coped was never that big of a mystery.) Although the islanders manage to make huts, hammocks, coconut pies, exercise bicycles, and several rafts which *almost* rescue them from the island, as viewers, we never see any of their ingenuity applied to the situation of women and menstruation.

Remarkably, "even the Brady girls didn't menstruate, though themes of gender and adolescence dominated nearly every episode of *The Brady Bunch*" (Kissling, 2002, ¶38). *The Brady Bunch* (originally aired 1969-1974) is now a hokey, but well-loved popular culture classic, and while most may remember the episode which deals with Marcia's vanity and features her getting hit in the nose with a football, there are no memories of Marcia, or sisters Jan or Cindy, dealing with menarche or menstruation. As the homepage banner on the website museumtv.com asserts, "Nothing is really real unless it happens on television." By omitting every aspect of the reality of menstrual bleeding, *The Brady Bunch* and every other television show which does the same, in essence, tells viewers that there is no such life experience as menstruation. Kissling, a researcher of sex roles, further explains

> Television and cinema are more than popular entertainment; as the primary forms of visual culture in American life, they form a system of representation through which individuals understand and experience the world. Visual culture

> is also a powerful and highly effective ideological apparatus, effective in large part because it is perceived as free of ideology. Many consider it just entertainment, 'a believable story about real people and their lives' (Green, 1998, p.16). As a domestic medium, that is, one that is watched in 98% of American homes, television is a particularly powerful ideological apparatus. Ideological analysis of film and television, therefore, can tell us a great deal about cultural beliefs and values, especially about gender, family, community, and nation. (Kissling, 2002, ¶5)

Television, then, for average westerners, provides not only a strong perceived mirror of everyday reality but also a significant influence over every day experience and perception of self and others. From a cultural ideological point of view, the fact that menstruation is mostly absent from television is significant and points to its overall perceived insignificance. Additionally, in the rare cases where portions of a girl's or woman's menstrual life is depicted in television, the contexts and the attitudes reveal cultural attitudes toward women and their periods.

One comedy television series which exposes the cultural stereotypes of menstruating (and being female) is *The Nanny* (1993-1999). Actually, the comedy of this entire show is built on the stereotyping of a thirty-something-year-old, unmarried Jewish woman whose sole purpose in life is to be married to a successful man, have children and live in a big house. She makes a pit stop in her dream by becoming the nanny to a successful theater producer's children in New York City. Within the series, the "earthiness" of the nanny, Miss. Fine, is often contrasted with the English

refinement of the nanny's boss, Mr. Sheffield. Miss. Fine routinely dresses outrageously and seductively and frequently makes reference to bodily functions, much to Mr. Sheffield's chagrin.

In an early episode, "Smoke Gets in Your Lies" (Season 1, episode 2, 1993), Miss. Fine nags Mr. Sheffield to become more involved in his children's lives and encourages him to attend his son's school carnival. However, Miss. Fine nags her boss, *before* she finds out that the son is in trouble with the headmaster at his school. Having thought about his relationship to his children, Mr. Sheffield reconsiders, and at the breakfast table announces to Miss. Fine his change of plans. Miss. Fine attempts to wiggle out of the situation by declaring that she has "soured on the whole carnival thing." Instantly frustrated, Mr. Sheffield questions her change of heart to which she replies, "I wasn't feeling a hundred percent that day. I must've been ovulating," At that point, the butler steps in with a serving dish and offers, "Your eggs, sir?" Unabashedly, the nanny uses one of the supposed inferiorities of women as her line of defense, and her in-your-face-attitude turns literal with the breakfast eggs being offered to Mr. Sheffield.

In another episode but a similar vein (Season 1, Episode 19), the nanny returns to the house one day after shopping to find the oldest daughter prostrate on the couch. Assuming she is ill, Miss. Fine runs to the daughter and asks her how she is. The daughter assures the nanny that she is fine but that she is having cramps again. Upon hearing this announcement, the butler makes an exaggerated point of leaving the room, and Miss. Fine questions the daughter about having her period for the fourth time in the

same month. The daughter wonders aloud what she means and Miss. Fine informs her that if women had their periods four times a month "all the men would be institutionalized." Here, the traditional perspective, i.e., that women get crazy during their periods and how men are affected by menstruation, is milked for laughs, and as it turns out, the daughter keeps getting her period in an effort to sit out of gym class. Additionally, the butler plays out a typical male response of exiting quickly before he is subjected to any menstrual talk.

This typical male stance is replicated years later in the series when the youngest daughter complains to her father that all the other girls have their "cycle" and that she is still waiting for hers. Thinking she is referring to a bicycle, the father is enthusiastic about the conversation and about getting her a bicycle. When the daughter suggests that she is talking about her period, the father becomes red-faced and embarrassed and wonders when the nanny (now his wife and her mother) will be home. Upon the former nanny's return, Mr. Sheffield tells her of the daughter's predicament. She then tells the father that the daughter will get her period soon enough and that they all should want to postpone it, suggesting how much trouble it brings. Just then the same daughter steps into the scene, agitated, and shouts, "Who ate the last nuttybuddy?" After she rushes out, mother and father laugh about the apparent situation of no longer having to wait for the youngest daughter to get her period. Here cravings, insistence, and irrationality obviously mark the emergence of menstrual bleeding and the burden that it places on *others*. Although cleverly done and admittedly funny, *The Nanny*'s portrayal of menstruation, women, and all such female matters perpetuates the historical,

stereotypical notions of impossible bleeding women.

Just as entertaining but less predictable in its portrayal of women overall, *The Golden Girls*, a female-centered comedy, makes occasional references to woman topics such as menstruation and missed periods. Throughout its original run, (1985-1992) the series broke new television ground in that it was the first of its kind to depict older women as beings other than rocking-chair grandmothers, as having interests and occupations, complex friendships and even sexual relationships. Since the series centers around the lives and relationships of four women roommates all over the age of fifty, specific attention is given to the experience of menopause in a hilarious, yet poignant, episode entitled "End of the Curse" (Season 2, Episode 1, 1987).

In this episode, Blanche, a southern-belle type, the youngest, and most sexual by far, finds herself without her period and with a false-positive at-home pregnancy test. In her dramatic fashion, she is initially unable to speak about her "problem," until the other women draw the word "pregnant" out of her. When Dorothy, the most rational, asks Blanche the identity of the father, Blanche, known for her promiscuity, is at a loss. Dorothy asks, "When was your fertile period?" Blanche replies, "Well, let's see- I'm nine weeks late- It would have been two weeks before that, so about eleven weeks ago?" Stunned, Dorothy questions, "Nine weeks late and you just realized that something was wrong?" Excitedly Blanche retorts, "Yes- I kind of lost track!" Later, we discover Blanche distraught once again just after having seen the doctor and being told that she is actually going through menopause, rather than having a baby. With the other women gathered around her once again in consolation, Blanche cries, "My life is over…I wish I

could die, because as far as I am concerned it is the end of my life."

After not eating or sleeping and crying in bed all week, the women take Blanche to see a psychiatrist. Kicking and screaming, Blanche finally talks with the doctor about her crisis and confesses that menopause means that she is "old and not a real woman anymore." The doctor, initially missing the boat tells her, "All that's happening is a biological process which means that you can't have a baby anymore." Blanche leaves unconvinced and instead has an in-depth conversation with "the girls" at home over cheesecake. At home, Blanche moans more about her life being over and the following conversation ensues.

Ma: "All this because you're going through the change?"

Blanche: "God, I hate that expression."

Dorothy: "What is the big deal? It's nothing! Look at it this way- You don't get cramps once a month. You don't go on eating binges once a month. You don't get crazy once a month."

Ma: "You just grow a beard."

Dorothy: "Don't listen to her, Blanche."

Ma: "You grow a beard, Dorothy. Believe me. I woke up one morning. I looked like Arafat."

Blanche: "Oh, my God!"

Rose: "I never grew a beard."

Ma: "You never grew brains, either."

Dorothy: "Well, I tell ya- menopause was wonderful for me. It meant no more

PMS."

Blanche: "I never had PMS!"

Rose: "Neither did I. But I had a BMW- a red one. Charlie bought it for me.

Dorothy: PMS! Premenstrual Syndrome, Rose. You mean you never got crazy once a month?"

Rose: "No."

Dorothy: "Boy, I did. I would cry, scream, carry on, put on ten pounds of water and boy, well, menopause put an end to that. I loved it!"

Blanche: "I don't see how you could love it!"

Dorothy: "Because I didn't see it as having anything to do with my sexuality. I am exactly the same person I was."

Ma: "Unfortunately."

Blanche: "Men are so lucky. They never get periods in the first place, so they never have to stop getting them so they never have to go through any of this."

Dorothy: "Blame us for being crazy when we get 'em and crazy when we don't."

Rose: "I remember the first time I got my period. Nobody had told me anything about it. Boy, was I surprised."

Blanche: "You mean your mother didn't tell you?"

Rose: "My mother was very prim and proper."

Dorothy: "What a surprise."

Blanche: "Well, my whole childhood, I kept hearing about *the curse*. How, when I was thirteen I was gonna get *the curse*. Oh, I was absolutely terrified. The year

of my thirteenth birthday, I slept with the lights on all year. Oh, I was sure there was a witch behind every wisteria. I didn't go out on Halloween. I was a wreck. But the year went by and no *curse.* Then the next year went by no *curse*. Finally, when I was fifteen, Momma took me to the doctor because I still didn't have *the curse*. And he said, 'Blanche, you mean to tell me you still don't have your period?' Of course I have my period you fool. I'm not a child. I've had my period for almost two years. It's *the curse* I don't have.

Ma: "I got it. Nobody told me. I didn't get it. Nobody told me. I figured, 'This is life,' and went back to my meatballs."

Rose: "And then when mine stopped, it just happened. A few hot flashes and that was it."

Blanche: "Oh, I've heard about those hot flashes."

Rose: "They didn't bother me. I live in Florida. Who can tell the difference between a hotflash and a weather front?"

Blanche: "Oh, it's all so depressin'"

(Dorothy and Ma argue)

Dorothy: "She'll cheer up when she realizes that it makes no difference at all and that it is just a concept not based in reality. That will cheer her up.

Blanche: "Nothing will cheer me up…"

(*The Golden Girls*, Season 2, Episode 1, 1987)

Although Blanche is temporarily cheered up by a man who finds her attractive despite being menopausal, eventually she is encouraged when she realizes that her

girlfriends are her best support during this life transition. The conversation among the women is significant because it addresses multiple aspects of bleeding from the viewpoints of four women friends. The women share their unique perspectives on menarche, menopause, and their experiences of menstruation in between. The fear, shame, isolation, and embarrassment of menstruation are depicted, as well as the shame, loathing and misunderstanding by men and doctors. Perhaps what is most remarkable is that this entire *Golden Girls* episode is devoted to women's experience, unlike most television shows which crack a joke or two and then move on to the "substance" of the plot.

One such show, *Gilmore Girls,* is a weekly, one-hour comedy-drama about a mother and daughter living in a small, New England town. Although the plot is female-centered, remarkably neither mother nor daughter ever mention the situation of menstruation. Miraculously, we, the audience enter the lives of mother and daughter presumably *after* they have had every important conversation about bleeding, how to deal with it, and contraception. This is ironic since the premise of the show is based upon the consequences of the mother's teenage pregnancy with the daughter she is raising. Although the episodes are based primarily on the unusual closeness of the mother-daughter relationship, real discussions are reserved for conversations about men and boyfriends, and so in that sense, the show merely gives the illusion of being female-centered. While the characters and the show itself is interesting and entertaining, the conversations between mother and daughter remain fast-paced and intellectual, exchanging literary and popular culture references in a never-ending inside joke of sorts.

In one episode of *Gilmore Girls* ("Dead Uncles and Vegetables," 2002), mother Lorelei and daughter Rory arrive late to a town meeting. Upon entering the back of the room, the two slink into open seats, to which the nosey, uptight meeting moderator, Taylor, snaps, "You're late!" Without missing a beat, mother Lorelei, in a high, breathy voice quips, "Oh, I hope I'm not pregnant." Taylor, looking dazed and clueless about what he has just heard, has no choice but to move on to the next agenda topic. The entire scene happens quickly because most do in this series; however, it offers one example of a woman making a conscious effort to take hold of the cultural boundaries of menstruation. From a knowing position, Lorelei (and Rory, since they are viewed as a team in the series) poke fun of the tradition of secrecy, shame, and isolation and throw it back in the face of a man who is representative of average convention and propriety. The man, Taylor, accustomed to being spared any commentary about periods and certainly unaccustomed to this attitude towards menstruation, remains outside of the women's private, "inside" joke and becomes the obvious buffoon in the scene.

By contrast, the HBO production, *Sex and the City*, avoids intimated references and goes straight for obvious and direct language pertaining to bleeding and sex. As a cable television production, it is, in fact, known for breaking through standard barriers of television "decency" in terms of content and language. *Sex and the City* (1998-2004), set in New York City, is the on-going story of the lives of four thirty- and forty-something successful women friends. The lead character is Carrie, a sex columnist who uses her own experiences as inspiration for her column. Much like *The Golden Girls*, the women of *Sex and the City* have four very different personalities yet share special,

lasting friendships. Both shows have their own devoted fan base and websites, where fans share stories about favorite scenes and fashion and liken themselves to particular characters. Across the six season run, the *Sex and the City* characters explore almost every aspect of sex and on numerous occasions have discussions where the word *vagina* appears frequently. A rarer topic for the women is menstruation, however it does appear on several occasions.

In a notable episode (#38) from the third season called "The Big Time," *Sex and the City*'s most adventurous sexual female, Samantha, is horrified after receiving a pre-menopausal catalog in the mail, and shortly thereafter becomes even more distressed when her period is late. In a diner conversation wherein Samantha shares with the other women her disgust at receiving such an undesirable catalog, Miranda (the no-nonsense lawyer) triggers a discussion about menstruation and announces that she cannot wait until menopause. She queries the others, "Do you realize how freeing it will be not to have our periods?" Charlotte, art gallery director and the friend most concerned with appearance, chimes in, "Oh, I can't wait 'til Flo stops coming to town." Samantha says wryly, "No one calls it Flo." Miranda acknowledges that her grandmother probably did, and Carrie declares that she will be relieved "to be done with the mind-numbing cramps." Miranda agrees and reveals that she has painful cramps as they speak, and in turn, Carrie reveals the same with, "I hear that sister" and pointing to herself. Charlotte responds excitedly to the fact that she also has her period and that they are synchronized in their bleeding. The rest look at her blankly, underwhelmed.

Later, in a restaurant restroom, the four women stand in front of the mirror

primping and talking about Charlotte's current boyfriend. As they talk, one of them passes a tampon in front of Miranda which triggers her to request her own from Carrie. "Ladies," Carrie warns, "this is not tampon-central. Put on list. Buy tampons." Charlotte, the first tampon offender replies, innocently, "Well, I have them at home, but they won't fit in my Kate Spade bag." Pausing for a moment from comparison of men to taxis, in another cultural revealing remark, Miranda marvels, "Wow, Kate must have a tiny vagina." Everyone laughs and Carrie discovers that now all her tampons are gone because of the "mooches" and wonders to Samantha if she has one to lend. Still upset about her lack of a period, Samantha finally erupts and confesses that she does not have her period and probably never will. "I'm drying up. My time is up. I haven't had my period in thirty-five days!," she cries. Carrie attempts to console her, "You have years of miserable cramps ahead of you." While this scene seems spontaneous and real, the first scene at the diner is somewhat awkward and the sentiments are half-hearted. The actors deliver the lines expected by women in the culture, i.e., the standard, periods-are-a-nuisance declarations and long to be rid of them. Unlike so many of other conversations the women have in the series, the actors avoid any real discussion about menstruation, about what it means to bleed for them. In this scene, menstruation gets the bum's rush.

Of all the characters, Samantha reveals the most about her relationship to bleeding. Like Blanche in *The Golden Girls*, Samantha sees the threatening end of her period as a sign of old age and the end of her life, sexually. Both characters, then, equate their regular bleeding with youth and sexual viability. When their periods stop, both women feel a loss. Samantha's loss is obvious in this episode, as she becomes depressed

to the extent that she, what else, sleeps with the most undesirable man in her building. Her self-esteem at its lowest ebb, she feels she can do no better, and in one of her infamous sex scenes, she lies unmoved and uninterested beneath him. Just as he reaches orgasm, he shouts at her because she is bleeding, “Oh, baby, either you’re a virgin or Flo just came to town!” Excitedly, Samantha shouts back, “My period!” While she has just been jump-started back to life, he becomes angry at the blood on his “two grand a set” sheets. Unable to contain her joy, Samantha offers an unconvincing apology, turns away from him as she gets dressed and merely repeats what she thinks she is expected to say, “This is embarrassing. I should go. Thanks for dinner.”

The return of her period provides for her a return of her life blood, so to speak, and an excuse to dump her dud of a man and any ties she has to him. Her period marks the return of her familiar self, yet, interestingly enough, although the show is known for its straightforward depiction of female sexuality and its rather graphic sex scenes, the viewer sees no actual sign of Samantha’s blood. In fact, we see nothing of Samantha from the waist down. Given the context of the television programs in which this episode was written and aired, the discussion and portrayal of menstruation is remarkably forward-thinking and progressive. However, given the fact that the program is a product of the twenty-first century, the inclusion of invisible menstrual blood seems rather pathetic. While investigative crime shows blatantly expose the blood of victims, and in another episode, *Sex and the City* boldly displays the blood of one of the boyfriend’s nosebleeds (which was plugged with a tampon), the writers and directors of this episode choose to omit the blood from a natural, non-violent event such as Samantha’s

menstruation. The episode finally ends in a convivial scene with the return of the old Samantha and the other three women in a special art exhibit of vagina paintings where Charlotte has worked up the nerve to pose for the artist.

In another, earlier episode entitled “The Power of the Female Sex” (Season 1, Episode 5, 1998), one of the sub-plots features the hostess at a Manhattan restaurant. Because of her power to judge and choose who is important enough to get a seat, eat, and drink, Carrie deems her “The most powerful woman in Manhattan.” Carrie has several encounters with the hostess throughout the episode but lacks the right stuff on her own merits to be seated in the trendy restaurant. Carrie lacks significance, that is, until she offers the hostess the most invaluable assistance in the restroom, a tampon. Before meeting Samantha at the bar, Carrie touches up her make-up in the ladies’ restroom mirror when she hears a tiny voice and sees a sheepish figure emerging from one of the stalls. The hostess appears before Carried humiliated and embarrassed to ask for a tampon. Happily, Carrie offers her one, and upon doing so, realizes that she has just gained all the power she needs to ever get into the restaurant again, because she has just seen the hostess in one of her weakest moments. By needing a tampon, the hostess reveals herself as a bleeding female, just like all the rest of the women trying to get into the restaurant, and she has stripped herself of the power she normally wields. In essence, she reduces herself to the lowest common denominator amongst women, and within that denominator and the culture, bleeding women are not perceived as powerful.

Given that “…how a society deals with menstruation may reveal how that society views women” (Kissling, 2002, ¶2), for the most part, television promotes the

devaluing, shaming, secrecy, and isolation of the female phenomenon of bleeding. Whereas there are television shows like *The Golden Girls* and *Sex and the City* which bring into light the legitimate, uniquely female experience of menstruation, for every one of these shows, there are still others such as *Everybody Loves Raymond* , *My Wife and Kids*, and *Married With Children* (Parsons, 2004, ¶16-21) which poke fun at menstruation and all that is female by using the diagnosis of P.M.S. as a weapon against femininity in general. The men in these shows find P.M.S. an easy weapon since it is a diagnosis, and the language is palatable by being abstract. The embarrassment of saying the word *menstruation* is avoided, and *P.M.S.* becomes cultural short-hand for an image of the biologically crazy, irrational, emotional, and inadequate bleeding female. If popular television shows provide a mirror into the hearts and minds of the masses, then like film and most other aspects of culture, television reflects that our culture has a long way to go before it genuinely values the experience of menstruation and the females who live it.

Film

Just as the absence, rather than presence, of menstruation predominates in aspects of culture such as language, art, music, and literature, the same can be said for films which are routinely devoid of any reference to menstruation. Very few films make any reference to female bleeding. Consequently, the fact that menstruation is largely omitted from the lives of women on the screen says one or all of three things: that menstruation simply does not occur in the lives of women, that menstruation is not worth mentioning, or that menstruation should not be mentioned, i.e., that it is too

shameful to depict. Of the films which do include menstruation as part of their narrative, most portray it as it is lived in the culture, a secret, mysterious, isolating, or shameful event. Movies such as Brian De Palma's *Carrie* (1976) based on Stephen King's novel of the same name which I review in the literature section, exaggerate the cultural, historical myths that menstruating women are aliens with supernatural powers, are capable of being dangerous, and are to be feared. Outside of motion picture science fiction, several other films stand out as representative of cultural attitudes, past and present.

Yours, Mine and Ours, the 1968 motion picture comedy about the blending of two unusually large Navy families, illustrates the general invisibility and unimportance of menstruation to men as well as the cultural double-bind that menstruating girls and women experience. The film, which is based on a true story, opens by sharing the everyday madness in the lives of naval officer Frank Beardsley, recent widower and father to ten children, and naval nurse Helen North, recent widow and mother to eight children. The two happen to meet following an incident when Beardsley comes home, once again, to a house full of children, chaos, and another maid who quits on the spot. The only thing different about the current scenario is that one of Beardsley's daughters is holed up in her room after having a big argument with the maid and having passed out on the bathroom floor in the midst of the fight.

Shedding light on the confusion, the other children report that Louise, the daughter in question, had been in the bath "for an hour, and that the maid had gone into the bathroom "yelling" at her. One of the youngest daughters speculates to the father

that Louise is “dead” in her room. Subsequently, Beardsley finds Louise lying in her bed, covered with the sheets and blankets, crying. When he asks her what is wrong, she hysterically exclaims that she is fine and to please leave her alone. All she wants is to be left “alone.” When the father suggests that she go to the “dispensary,” she hysterically yells, “I don’t want to see any doctors, and I don’t want them to see me!” The father resorts to scooping up Louise, bed sheets, blankets and all, and carries her to see a doctor. Instead of seeing a doctor, she sees Nurse Helen North who promptly attends to her mysterious malaise.

At the end of the examination, whereupon Louise is found to be “fine,” Nurse North asks to speak to Officer and father Beardsley “privately” and confesses that although they’ve “scarcely met,” she feels that she “must talk to [him] about this.” It seems that Louise has recently started menstruating and is having difficulty adapting to the emotional and bodily changes which come with the territory. She has found little privacy in the house to become accustomed to her new self, and as a result, has often felt upset and emotional. Therefore, when the maid barged into the bathroom, she was so embarrassed that she passed out upon reacting to the maid’s intrusion. If that were not enough of a challenge for Louise, Nurse North reminds Father Beardsley that Louise is still suffering the loss of her mother and that frankly, he is no substitute for a mother to whom she would be able to tell such things. She reveals that “It has not been easy” for Louise to tell her father that she has started her period. Consequently, she has been dealing with her frustration and emotional ups and downs all by herself.

None of this was directly spoken by the nurse to the father, however. From the

nurse's general descriptions of Louise's "trying time" and her need for "privacy," the father was left to deduce that Louise had begun to menstruate. At one point, the father admits, "I don't quite understand. Am I being stupid?" Nurse North responds with a brief laugh and says, "No, you're being a man, which is sometimes the same thing." Instead of merely explaining that Louise is adapting to menstruation, the nurse plays by the rules of silence in the culture and instead gives an analogy:

> You know, a tree can blossom in the middle of a busy city, but a young girl needs privacy (said softly). She hasn't been able to find it at home, so if she's been emotional, upset or even a little bit hysterical, it's because she's growing up and changing--

The father and the audience are to gather from the nurse's description that this particular kind of privacy is called for with menstrual bleeding. The same can be said for this kind of emotionality. "Oh that," we all must all conclude. Suddenly we grasp why Louise was in the bath for an hour, i.e., to rid herself of all the blood and to become "sanitary" again. We can understand why she did not want to see any doctor and did not want any doctor to see her. Her need for privacy involves not just an opportunity to become acquainted with her new body but is in alignment with the cultural belief that she should not talk about menstruation and she should certainly allow no remnants of it to be seen. In reality, Louise is struggling to learn about the social demands of a menstruating woman, without the aid of her mother. She is learning about the unique experience of isolation which menstruating in western culture demands. Telling her father that she is menstruating counters all that the culture dictates. Although no one

mentions the words *menstruation* or *period*, the intention is understood, and the obfuscation and secrecy are part of the culture.

Father Beardsley responds by exhaling deeply as if all his worries have left him and says, “Is *that* all? Why didn’t she tell me?” Nurse North, acknowledging his dismissal, replies, “Because you would have said, ‘Is *that* all?’” For at least a moment, Nurse North recognizes the double-bind in which Louise has been placed. Louise, like all girls and women in the culture, is expected to talk freely about her “naturally” changing body, i.e., her menstrual cycle, to her father, a man, who ordinarily expects her to keep it discreetly under wraps. She is supposed to find acceptance for herself and composure to speak freely in a society which is obviously rejecting of this part of her, in a culture that does not fully accept her being. She knows to keep quiet and remains frustrated because the only person she could have shared this with, her mother, is dead.

Before becoming better acquainted with Nurse North in the conversation, and initiating the romance between them, the father summarizes his opacity with “Poor Louise- stopped being a little girl and I never noticed.” One cannot help but sense that this remark was thrown in for any straggling audience members who are possibly too “stupid” to translate the nurse’s and father’s coded banter. Finally, when Father Beardsley sees his daughter again in the dispensary, he asks how she is feeling. She assures him that she is fine and asks to go home. Louise must get dressed first, however, and so she rolls her eyes at her father and orders him to turn around. He obeys, and we see his face to the camera, back to his daughter, sporting a smug grin. He now “knows” what her trouble is, yet interestingly, to the audience’s knowledge, the two never speak

about her “trying time:” again a perfect reflection of ordinary reality. As in everyday reality, menstruation, for society, if ever spoken about at all, is a one-time event (amounting to menarche), and rarely is it ever be brought up again, unless there is some problem or disease which necessitates a discussion.

Thirty-seven years later, the story of the Beardsley and North families was re-made as a contemporary film with contemporary actors. In the 2005 version, Frank Beardsley is a strict navy admiral with eight children, and Helen North is no longer a naval nurse, but rather a “free-spirited fashion designer” with ten adopted children. In this version, Frank and Helen have already known one another, re-kindle their high school romance, and eventually marry, thereby becoming a truly modern, blended family. It is interesting to note that the plot has changed such that Louise’s period is no longer the occasion for Frank and Helen’s first meeting. One has to wonder if the (male) screenwriters found the original plot including Louise’s situation too trivial to re-create.

Even though the original Frank Beardsley probably never talks to Louise or any of his other daughters for that matter about their periods, as audience members we sense what Nurse North says, that he is just being a man, i.e., wrapped up in his own world which is devoid of any regular bleeding. As audience members, we detect male narcissism and indifference towards female being and bleeding, but there is no hint of historically situated loathing or pointed hatred. In contrast to *Yours, Mine and Ours* (1968), *To Sir, With Love* (1966), offers one of the strongest examples of historical male loathing of menstruation and female being.

Set in a 1960’s working-class London high school, Sidney Poitier, as Mr.

Thackeray or “Sir” portrays a sensitive, novice teacher who struggles to teach punk, barely socialized students who are uninterested in learning. At every moment, the students test the patience of the cool, classy “Sir.” They make noise, curse (mostly with the word *bleedin’*) and sit rudely in their desks to sabotage his teaching and their own learning. He routinely challenges their lack of manners and insists that in two weeks when they graduate, they will be expected to behave like adults.

One day, from the classroom window, the students attempt to hit Sir with a water balloon as he enters the building below. Already annoyed, he enters the room cautiously and detects something burning in the classroom stove. Upon discovering the source of the smell, he becomes enraged and orders the boys out of the classroom and the girls to stay. The boys protest, but this is one time he will not be overpowered. He shouts at the boys to get out and slams the door when the last boy leaves. He turns to the girls left in the classroom and vehemently denounces their behavior once and for all:

> I’m sick of your foul language, your crude behavior, and your sluttish manner! There are certain things a decent woman keeps private! And only a filthy slut would have done this! And those who stood by and encouraged her are just as bad- I don’t care who’s responsible! You’re all to blame! Now, I am going to leave this room for five minutes by which time that DISGUSTING object had better be removed and the windows opened to clear away the stench! If you must play these filthy games, do them in your homes- NOT IN MY CLASSROOM!

Still enraged, Mr. Thackeray then storms out of the classroom and into a nearby colleague’s office. When she asks him what is wrong, pacing in front of her, he admits

to losing his temper, “the one thing [he] swore [he] would never do.” He complains, “Those kids have got me so steamed up, so easy, so quickly. I never would have thought it!” As he rants, he has the epiphany that the students should be taught as adults already and vows to teach them how to behave in the world with dignity. Ultimately, with his success, that is how he earns the affectionate name, Sir, from the students.

Although I have viewed this film, as an ordinary person, rather than researcher, several times since I was a child, the real content of the scene described did not become clear to me until I viewed it from a researcher’s point of view. When I first saw the film as a pre-adolescent with my older sisters, I had no idea what the girls in the classroom had done. Interestingly, neither did either of my sisters. Judging from good and kind Sir’s reaction, however, we all knew that whatever they did was heinous and unforgivable. After reading so much literature on menstruation, I was able to immediately recognize just about the only topic that could draw so much negative attention and hatred. The wrong they committed had to relate to menstrual bleeding.

It is significant that it is the girls’ behavior that sends Sir over the edge and makes him lose his temper. Being disrespected with threatening behavior day in and day out by the rest of the students, especially the boys, leaves him unshaken, yet when the girls burn one of their used sanitary napkins in the classroom fireplace, he comes to the end of his rope. He becomes enraged for a sustained period of time and resorts to equating the women with “sluts.” Sir intends to denounce their behavior, yet in reality he denounces their very being. He does not reach his limit with their human ignorance, their backwardness, or even their low-class manners. He, in fact, loses his temper over

being exposed to the unpleasant graphic evidence that one of them menstruates. One imagines that when he extrapolates from this that all the young women in his class must menstruate, he is angered at being inconvenienced by the knowledge that he would not, in ordinary, civilized society have to be reminded and subjected to it.

While burning one's used napkin or tampon in a public place is certainly not something I would ever do personally, and nor is it something anyone I have ever known would do, as a therapist or teacher, I experience difficulty arriving at the word *slut* to describe the woman who would do it. I might question the woman's socialization, her personal boundaries or limits, even her mental capacity, but I cannot see how she could be deemed promiscuous as a result of such a peculiar act. Furthermore, would Sir react so strongly if they had been burning their used handkerchiefs or tissues?

Given the fact that historically some European women did burn their menstrual rags (Bharadwaj & Patkar, 2004 & Warkentin, 2001, ¶10), and given the fact that the scene of this film is set in 1960's lower class London, it may well have still been the custom to burn sanitary towels or pads as a means of disposal. If this were the case, it might very well be the case that the women were following the customs set in place at home and were ignorant of public menstrual behavior. Some inquiry and instruction might prove successful in such an instance.

However, Sir does not take the time to discover why any one of his female students would publicly burn a used menstrual rag. He simply leaps to the age-old assumption that menstruating women are dirty and that "decent" women keep their

menstruations private. The “object” he finds is “DISGUSTING,” and clearly so are the women according to Sir’s standards. For him, the women are indecent because they have broken the number one and number two rules about keeping one’s period quiet and hidden, respectively. He equates their act of exposing their “dirty” menstrual pad with exposing themselves sexually or with committing some “dirty” or obscene sexual act. He makes quite a leap, but it is a familiar one that originated in the early days of the church when abstaining from sex was a way of avoiding sin and pollution, and the most noble spiritual path to heaven (Anderson, 2000, Vol.1, pp.78-81).

Furthermore, Sir’s accusation that all the women in the class are to blame for the deed of one woman is strongly reminiscent of the curse which God placed on Eve for the original sin of seeking knowledge against his wishes (*Genesis* in the Bible). Sir was surprised and so “easily” taken by anger because the automatic reaction to blame all of women’s being for their behavior is somewhat culturally primordial. The permission to blame women is so deeply, emotionally embedded in Sir’s being and perceptions of the world that even the composed Sir (Sidney Poitier) is not reflective enough to adequately censor or reject it. In his outburst, Mr. Thackeray reveals the customarily unquestioned cultural tendency to loathe menstruation and women. Although this film dates back to 1966, the same kind of loathing and disgust is still just as fresh today.

If *To Sir, With Love* is representative of loathing and disgust for menstruating women, then the nineties’ hit comedy *Clueless* (1995) is representative of how young women in particular respond to the indifference of men and seize the culturally ascribed euphemisms and cultural meanings of menstruation as their own. The film follows the

life of a privileged Beverly Hills high school student, Cher, who has the best of everything, except a mother who died when she was two years old. She and her girlfriends speak a different English language full of pop culture references and abbreviations. Dissatisfied with her grades, and taking pointers from her trial lawyer father, Cher plots to negotiate for better grades with her teachers, especially her debate teacher, Mr. Hall. In the course of her plan, she makes a romantic match with two of her teachers, one of whom is Mr. Hall, and takes under her wing a homely new girl for whom she orchestrates a spectacular makeover. She eventually finds a love of her own, from whom she was originally "clueless."

In a brief but significant scene, Mr. Hall, the debate teacher, reviews the number of tardies each student has accumulated. When he announces that Cher Horowitz has two tardies, she interrupts him with "I object! Do you recall the dates of those alleged tardies?" Mr. Hall replies confidently and emphatically, "One was last Monday." Cher, with her own air of confidence, smirks before retorting "Mr. Hall, I was surfing the crimson wave. I had to haul ass to the ladies'." In response, Mr. Hall, a man of small stature, shrinks in his chair, looking embarrassed and flustered, responds meekly, "I assume you are referring to woman's troubles, and so I'll let that one slide." Pleased with herself, Cher boldly thanks Mr. Hall and then manipulates him further by telling him that another female teacher was right about him being the only one in the school with any "intelligence." Mr.Hall, distracted from his recent embarrassment by the thought of an interested woman, smiles and looks ahead dreamily.

Within this brief exchange, something profound occurs. The tide has turned, so

to speak, on the usual flow of menstrual embarrassment and shame, and for once it falls into the lap of the male figure in the conversation. Instead of keeping quiet about her reason for being tardy on the day in question, and accepting with shame the mark against her, Cher pipes up and unabashedly announces that she was bleeding that day and had to run to the ladies' room. Of course, she uses the term *riding the crimson wave* instead of bleeding, *haul ass* instead of run and the abbreviation *ladies'* instead of ladies' restroom, but her meaning and intention is the same. In her world of convenience and abbreviated speak, those terms work perfectly and become her-own. Given that she lives in California, r*iding the crimson wave* is a fitting, non-judgmental euphemism for menstruation. Providing she really was menstruating that day, Cher receives a fair credit for being late that day. She gains further joy in having captured Mr. Hall's attention with a remark about her intended love match. By the end of the exchange, Cher is in control of the conversation despite her earlier admission to menstruating. This situation runs counter to how she felt earlier when reflecting on her poor grades: "I felt impotent and out of control, which I hate." Ironically, in declaring that she menstruates on a particular day, Cher is powerful and potent and very much in control. In an amusing contrast, Mr. Hall is the one tied to the notion of "women's troubles" and all the historical shame and embarrassment tied to it. In this case, "women's troubles" become men's troubles.

Finally, while the documentaries *Menstruation: Breaking the Silence* (1998) and *Period: The End of Menstruation?* (2005) fall into a different film genre and do not have the mass appeal or exposure that the other films had, the fact that both were created at all is significant and speaks to a shift in awareness regarding the meaning of

menstruation. They represent another turning of the menstrual tide in that someone cared more about the importance of talking about menstruation than the obstacles in the culture preventing them from speaking. Both films about menstruation are extraordinary in that they have not been funded by any menstrual products company.

Menstruation: Breaking the Silence focuses on a range of topics pertaining to menstruation and interviews significant figures in the areas of art, literature, medical and biological research, social theory, and historical documentation. Artists such as Judy Chicago and Wenda Gu are pictured with their menstrual artwork and speak candidly about the disgust and criticism they have received over the years for their creations. Judy Blume, author of *Are You There, God? It's Me, Margaret* reads a portion of her book aloud and re-connects with her endearing character Margaret. The topic of pollution caused by plastic tampon applicators is explored as well as the continuing threatening disease of toxic shock. Additionally, Harry Finley, the curator of the Museum of Menstruation is featured along with some of the museum's artifacts of menstruation. On the whole, this film provides an opportunity for a dialog about menstruation. It succeeds in breaking the silence by simply talking intelligently and with feeling about girls, women, and menstrual bleeding.

Similarly, *Period: The End of Menstruation?* continues to clear a space in the culture for a discussion of menstruation. This film, however, focuses primarily on the current debate between un-doctored menstruation and menstrual suppression, the theory that menstrual cycles should be reduced in number or stopped altogether. With the advent of hormonal pills and shots to stop menstruation in various ways, the creators of

the film assert that "the meaning of menstruation changes." For some women, suppressing menstruation means greater freedom and more choices in life, and for others it means "a frightening shift in thinking about the human body and another dangerous experiment on women's health." Through interviews with individuals of varying backgrounds and orientations, the film "interrogates the cultural and medical side effects of suppression before "the curse" disappears." While both films provide a contrast to the attitudes expressed in the first two films reviewed here, the fact that the documentaries must exist at all, over and against the quieting voices of culture, and as a forced form of female and menstrual awareness, still speaks volumes about the real societal status of menstruation, women's bodies and general women's being.

Literature

From a researcher's point of view, any mention of menstruation is remarkably absent in most literature. To the average reader, however, its absence is taken for granted and remains unnoticed. Ironically, even female-centered works such as *Little Women* (1896), *Little House on the Prairie* (1935), and *Nancy Drew Mysteries* (1969) omit the natural occurrence of menarche and menstrual bleeding in the lives of its female characters. Never do Meg, Jo, Beth, Amy, Laura Ingalls or Nancy Drew bleed in the pages of their respective novels despite the fact that women take center stage in the stories. Subsequently, life imitates art as it were, because just as female bleeding and its significance are ignored in everyday society, bleeding in the lives of women and girls in literature is skipped over altogether. Furthermore, with menstruation playing almost no role in literature, the cultural message sent to girls, boys, women and men is that

menstruation, through its omission, is neither important, nor interesting, nor worthy of mentioning. Of all the references to menstruation actually found in literature, *Carrie* by Stephen King (1999, Originally published in 1974), *The Diary of Anne Frank* (1997), and *Are You There, God? It's Me, Margaret.* (1970) by Judy Blume, are the most cited within existing menstrual research.

Of all three examples, the character Carrie in King's novel brings menstruation to epic proportions, by giving its main character the power to get back at her tormentors with telekinetic violence. In the latest printing of *Carrie* (1999), Stephen King writes an introduction in which he tells the story of how the character and the novel came into being. *Carrie* is a combination of two young women he knew in high school who, like Carrie, were social misfits; shunned, teased, and tormented by their peers. One of the young women was also strangely full of religious piety and made a particularly attractive target for her intolerant and cruel schoolmates. King notes that neither of the young women graduated from high school nor survived past the age of thirty, one committing suicide and the other dying of epileptic convulsions, alone in her apartment. Although he did not take part in the hazing and cruelty, King admits that he also did not speak against it. He now forgives himself this transgression by saying that "it's hard to stand up when you're fourteen" (p. xiii). In part, the novel *Carrie* is a tribute to the tormented girls of King's high school past:

> These were the ghosts which kept trying to come between me and what I was writing, kept insisting that I combine them, somehow, into a story that would tell what could have happened if there really was such a thing as telekinetic energy

> (and for all I know there may be). What could have happened if the world was as fair to young girls as it is hard. In short, they wanted me to write a novel. (pp. xiv-xv)

Finally, these girls who had haunted him could, through his novel, act and speak out violently against their cruel oppressors. Upon reflection, King states that the novel *Carrie* is "…dated now, but still with a surprising power to hurt and horrify" (p.xv). The primary action in the novel begins when Carrie, an oddly backward, plump awkward girl of sixteen commits the "perfect crime" against propriety by bleeding publicly in the high school shower room during her first menstruation and standing dumbly, as if she did not even know what was happening to her. Of course, her open ignorance makes her a perfect target. Her blood becomes a concrete symbol of her alien nature and her perpetual social backwardness. Soon the other girls in the locker room begin to pelt Carrie with tampons and take up a chant: "Per-iod , Per-iod, Per-iod!" (p.7):

> "You're *bleeding*!" Sue yelled suddenly, furiously. You're *bleeding,* you big dumb pudding." Carrie looked down at herself. She shrieked …a tampon suddenly struck her in the chest and fell with a plop at her feet. A red flower stained the absorbent cotton and spread … and the girls were bombarding her with tampons and sanitary napkins, some from purses, some from the broken dispenser on the wall. They flew like snow and the chant became: "Plug it *up*, plug it *up*, plug it –"…Carrie suddenly began to howl and back away, flailing her arms and grunting and gobbling … Slow helpless groans jerked out of her. Her

eyes rolled with wet whiteness, like the eyes of a hog in the slaughtering pen. (King, 1999, pp.6-10)

The girls' command to "plug it up" is profound in that it is reflective of the social expectations of female bleeding and female being in general. The girls' chanting mimics the social expectations of women in the Western world where women are expected, even commanded, to plug up their bleeding, to plug up their being in order to protect the world from their juices, their bodiliness, the offensiveness of their being.

In the tradition of great horror story writers, King routinely takes basic human fears and amplifies them to unbearable, horrifying proportions to scare his readers. In the case of *Carrie*, King's mere inclusion of menstruation as part of Carrie's female being is shocking in its own right, since menstruation is "normally" an unspeakable part of female existence. However, King takes the basic cultural shock value of menstruation and adds to it the worst fear of any enculturated, menstruating girl. Being exposed publicly as a bleeding being, without knowing how or having the means to conceal one's self from a society which is intolerant and rejecting is terrifying and humiliating. As such, bleeding in public is typically a basic and latent fear of any menstruating girl or woman. Whereas King describes his novel as 'dated,' the theme of female oppression is still current, even if it is ordinarily overlooked in the culture. Furthermore, the treatment of Carrie by her classmates, as a representation of culture's treatment of women in general, does, as King says, have the 'surprising power to hurt and horrify.'

As the novel proceeds, Carrie secretly practices and develops her telekinetic powers while her classmates conspire to ensure her final humiliating, public

degradation. They arrange for the most popular boy in school to take her to the prom and for them both to be crowned homecoming king and queen. This elaborate plan is executed just so Carrie can be doused with buckets of pig blood on the homecoming stage, an event which is a harkening back to the previous humiliation of her uncontained, flowing menstrual blood in the locker room. In response and retribution, Carrie makes use of her wild, telekinetic, raging power to blow up the school and much of the town, causing mayhem, destruction, and killing her mother, many of her school mates, and some townspeople. Even though Carrie herself dies in the end, exhausting her own spirit through her powers of destruction, she does not leave without making her mark. She refuses to remain a victim, and perhaps this is what King means when he posits a world in his story writing which recognizes the hardships of his former tormented classmates and which is 'as fair to young girls as it is hard.'

Although some interpretations of *Carrie* view King as a misogynist, claiming that his portrayal of Carrie's menarche is violent and that he juxtaposes menstruation and a crazy, vengeful female, as if they are one and the same, Karen Houppert in *The Curse* (1999) sees King's message differently. Overall, she notes that *Carrie* has appealed to male and female readers alike since its first publication, but the appeal to female readers lies in the fact that Carrie "gets mad…and even" (p.121). She concludes:

> Carrie converts a liability (menstruation, or becoming a woman) into an asset (power, more specifically the power to destroy, a decidedly unfeminine and unnurturing fantasy). Girls get a vicarious thrill from Carrie, Combative and Triumphant Destroyer of Tormentors. (Houppert, 1999, p.121)

Another frequently cited literary reference to menstruation is *The Diary of Anne Frank* (1997) which is, of course, an autobiographical expression of a young girl's development under the circumstance of hiding with her family from the Nazis during World War II in Holland. As such, it expresses something of the experiences of bodily development, menstruation, and also expresses the implicit and explicit prohibitions and silencing of too-open a concern with one's self and one's bodily changes. In keeping with the observations of Delaney et al (1988), diaries, like Anne's, are one of the few places where menstruation and menarche are mentioned in literature. The authors point out that in literature, depictions of menstruation are few and usually illustrate only the male point of view. Discussions of menarche are even rarer:

> Even more rare is literary depiction of menarche. This peculiarly female experience barely appears at all until twentieth century in Western literature. Like her counterparts in other cultures, the Western girl who becomes a woman is generally hidden from view. (Delaney et al, 1988, p.171)

Diaries, like Anne's, provide a forum for the experience of menarche and the Western girl coming of age. Delaney et al note that the Western girl "is shown more often in diaries in which she confides her fear, pride, and ambivalence; later fiction writers use the menarche as a focus for the girl's developing attitudes toward men, herself, and other women" (p. 171).

Interestingly, Anne Frank's diary was first published in a rather strenuously edited fashion by her father, who left out most of her less decent and more open talk both about her body, as well as her possibly insulting comments on his wife, his

marriage, and some of the other inhabitants of their hiding place. As Delaney et al predict, there comes a point where Anne clearly appreciates her own menstruation:

> …P.S. I forgot to mention the important news I am probably going to get my period soon. I can tell because I keep finding a whitish smear on my panties, and Mother predicted it would come soon. I can hardly wait. It's such a momentous event. Too bad I can't use sanitary napkins, but you can't get them anymore, and Mamma's tampons can be used only by women who have had a baby. (Delaney et al, 1988, p.59)

Two years later she refers to this entry by seeing it as "indelicate" and "embarrassing" and says that she "can't imagine writing so openly about" such matters. Looking back from her now more thoroughly socialized and indoctrinated standpoint, she is "surprised at [her] childish innocence … dealing with subjects that [she] remembered as being nicer than they actually were" (p.59). Later, in a positive vein she says

> …I think that what's happening to me is so wonderful, and I don't mean just the changes taking place on the outside of my body, but also those on the inside. I never discuss myself or any of these things with others, which is why I have to talk about them to myself. Whenever I get my period (and that's only been three times), I have the feeling that in spite of all the pain, discomfort and mess, I'm carrying around a sweet secret. So even though it's a nuisance, in a certain way I'm always looking forward to the time when I'll feel that secret inside me once again. (Delaney et al, 1988, p.158)

In this passage, Anne indicates a sense of interior identity with her period, with menstruation as a ‘sweet secret,’ a kind of womanly, bodily self that she looks forward to as fulfilling something precious and good. She already understands that it is a nuisance and that it must be kept largely private, not as a matter for ordinary discussion, but she still treasures the way it speaks of her own being. Another time, she speaks of her period finally starting after not having had it for two months, and concludes “despite the mess and bother, I’m glad it hasn’t deserted me” (p.277).

Overall, Anne Frank speaks about her body, feelings, and experiences with an admirable and revealing clarity. Even her self-censorship is candid and provides an enlightening glimpse into the demands of the smaller culture that exists within her confinement, which are, of course, a reflection of the demands of the outside world, the culture at-large. At one point, in a discussion of sex, she criticizes the rigidity of parents and their refusal to properly inform their children about sex, menstruation, and babies. She becomes attuned to the fear and shame that parents harbor when discussing sex education and the toll it takes on their children, giving her own situation as an example:

> Soon after I turned eleven, they told me about menstruation. But even then, I had no idea where the blood came from or what it was for. When I was twelve and a half, I learned some more from Jacque, who wasn’t as ignorant as I was. My own intuition told me what a man and a woman do when they’re together; it seemed like a crazy idea at first, but when Jacque confirmed it, I was proud of myself for having figured it out! (Frank, 1997, p.220)

In very little time, Anne asserts the impracticality of the cultural ideal to ignore

the details of sex, menstruation, and childbearing and voices her complaints about parents and other adults who participate in the conspiracy. Whereas she discovers her own relationship to her menstrual cycle, recognizing it simultaneously as a 'mess and bother' and a 'sweet secret,' Anne also becomes aware of the imposed shamefulness of having a body, of being a body that bleeds, has sex and gives birth. Houppert (1999) notes that Anne's developing sense of self is weakened and negatively impacted at this time and likens Anne's experience to the findings of Carol Gilligan, Peggy Orenstein, and Mary Pipher "who have argued that girls start losing their confidence and sense of self when they are Anne's age" (Houppert, 1999, p.137). Houppert tracks Anne's transformation throughout her diary:

> Anne loses confidence in the power of her ideas, and shortly thereafter, herself. Her changing body is first a delight and then a battleground. Desire competes with custom, and the right to conduct a romantic encounter as she sees fit is curtailed by her father, who reminds her that it is her job to *resist* sexual exploration. The elaborate etiquette surrounding menstruation, sexuality, and desire defies reason; when the rules first fail to make sense, Anne dismisses them; when they continue to do so, Anne dismisses herself. (Houppert, 1999, p.137)

Ultimately, the culture of shame with which Anne collides is most fully revealed when, years after her death in a Nazi camp, her father censors the first publication of her diary.

Another popular literary work which makes central the life of a young girl is Judy Blume's *Are You There God? It's Me, Margaret.* (1970). This fictional account of

a young girl waiting for the onset of her own menstruation has become a staple in menstrual cycle research and remains "the fifth-best-selling kids' paperback of all time, with more than six million copies sold" (Houppert, 1999, p.112). The main character, Margaret, is a typical eleven-year-old girl who moves with her family from New York City to New Jersey. As she tries to find her way in a new city and a new home, she makes new friends and struggles with the changes of puberty and the issue of choosing a religion. She joins the club of her newly-found friends called the PTS's (Pre-Teen Sensations) and is happy to be accepted until she finds out that the club's pre-requisites are wearing bras and the immediate and detailed announcement of the start of her period. Since Margaret has neither breasts nor her period, belonging to the PTS's is often stressful. At the same time, she joyfully engages in their adventures, buying pads at the drugstore to practicing wearing them and swapping period stories.

In an effort to cope with the challenges of her scary move, Margaret talks daily with God. She begins each prayer with "Are you there, God? It's me, Margaret." As her relationship with God grows, so does her relationship with herself. At one point, after being continually confronted with the stress of not having her period yet, Margaret confronts God:

> Are you there, God? It's me, Margaret. Life is getting worse here every day. I'm going to be the only one who doesn't get it. I know it God. Just like I'm the only one without a religion. Why can't you help me? Haven't I always done what you wanted? Please…let me be like everybody else. (Blume, 1970, p.101)

Out of her anger and frustration, Margaret falls out of contact with God.

Eventually, however, Margaret's prayer for normalcy is granted. She gets her period and graduates from sixth grade, even though she remains undecided about her religion. One day, unexpectedly, Margaret finally begins to bleed, is excited and calls her mother for help, who is equally excited. In the end, she reconnects with God: "Are you there, God? It's me, Margaret. I know you're there God. I know you wouldn't have missed this for anything! Thank you God. Thanks an awful lot…." (p.149).

In the film, *Menstruation: Breaking the Silence*, Judy Blume is interviewed about her book, and at one point, she reads the above last prayer to God. She begins to weep and has trouble reading the entire prayer. Tearfully, Blume remarks that she did not cry when writing the portion of the book she just read and seems bewildered and caught off guard by her own emotionality. We hear the interviewer off camera offering some words of support and assurance. Blume's connection to her character, Margaret, is touching and as viewers, we obtain a rare glimpse into a writer's vulnerability. We sense that Blume cries for Margaret, for herself, and for all girls everywhere who struggle with the desire to bleed and the simultaneous desire to be "normal."

Whereas Blume's Margaret has been wildly popular with girls for years, Houppert notes that as a writer, Blume has never received adequate critical acclaim. She has, in fact, been criticized for her writing style, the blandness of her language and the banality of her stories (Houppert, 1999, p.114). Yet it is precisely the mundaneness of Margaret's life and her relationship to her menstruation that is so intriguing- to girls, at least. Real girls worry about being "normal" and whether or not they will get their periods. Real girls also worry about where they will be when they finally do start: Will it

be in public? Will I be able to get to a bathroom without calling much attention to myself? Will it be in front of a male teacher? Will he know? Finally, real girls want to know what the blood is like and how it will feel: Is it a flood or a trickle? For real girls in this culture, there is a lot of worry about menstruation because when it arrives, it must be managed neatly and in secret. In this culture, real girls know that their bleeding is not meant for the public sphere.

Houppert asserts that Blume is deemed by some critics as a "trivial" writer because she takes the concerns of girls seriously: "What adults would dismiss as trivial, Blume elevates" (Houppert, 1999, p.115). Whereas Blume has been accused of being conventional and almost boring, her books have created much excitement over the years and have been met with the censorship of parents and school boards, "making them regulars on the American Library Association's annual list of most-challenged books" (116). Delaney et al of the *The Curse* (1988), offer their own insight into the controversy of Blume's book:

> Not only are women writers underrepresented in literature, but males have had, since Adam named by Eve, the power to defining reality, that is, of saying what is important and what is not. Confrontation with a white whale, though unlikely, is at least a possible experience for males and therefore of possible significance. Having a first period is neither possible for men nor does it affect them. Hence, it can be dismissed- and usually is. (Delaney et al, 1988, p.181)

Hence, Blume's lack of appeal to average literary critics is likely couched in an age-old male bias which simply undervalues female experience. Throughout time, this

undervaluing of female experience and prioritizing male experience has been embraced by males and females alike and appears as unquestionable reality. Thus, the mere mention of menstruation as a part of life, a part of everydayness, much less a discussion of how menstruation *feels,* is seen as "trivial" and banal and concomitantly threatening to ordinary, unquestioned reality. Delaney and Lupton argue that *Are You There God? It's Me, Margaret.* "insists on the centrality of the female experience" (p.181); therefore, it is bound to cause controversy.

Similarly, Karen Houppert calls Blume a "realist," a writer who writes about "topics like divorce, teen sex, sibling rivalry, and menstruation…. [and] makes the array of conflicting emotions surrounding them acceptable" (Houppert, 1999, p.115). She concludes that taking the concerns of kids seriously is still "radical" and that "Blume's convention-flouting book simply moves periods from the private realm into the public." In sum, "that subversive act makes everybody nervous" (p.116).

In addition to the classics mentioned above, another novel, *The Red Tent* (1998) by Anita Diamant makes a statement about female solidarity with myths of menstruation and blood as a primary factor. The story takes up from a woman's viewpoint one of the most treacherous stories from the Old Testament in which Jacob and his family slaughter a whole small city and its inhabitants by first convincing the men of the city to allow themselves to be circumcised, so that the king's son will be allowed to marry Dinah (Jacob's daughter). However, the story of *The Red Tent* gives a rich contextual background to this story of misogyny and violence by giving full voice to the narrative richness and solidarity of women who live in a rich communal fashion, partially

sheltered from patriarchal oppression in their tabooed red tent, who bleed, give birth, heal and protect each other, and live out of their own rich mythos separate from and yet bound to the men. As such, *The Red Tent* like *Are You There God? It's me, Margaret* takes as its central themes the every day being in the lives of women living in community, bleeding, worrying about their attractiveness, concerned with barrenness and giving birth, worried about the foolishness of their men, competing with each other, loving and sometimes disliking each other, and appreciating each other. And within this richly described bodily and communal reality, many of the themes found elsewhere in the literature emerge with striking clarity. As, for example, when Rachel, impatient for her menarche, finally

> …bled her first blood and cried with relief … As the sun set on the new moon when all the women commenced bleeding, they rubbed henna on Rachel's fingernails and on the soles of her feet. Her eyelids were painted yellow, and they slid every bangle, gem, and jewel that could be found onto her fingers, toes, ankles, and wrists. They covered her head with the finest embroidery and led her into the red tent … The women sang all the welcoming songs to her while Rachel ate date honey and fine wheat cakes, made in the three cornered shape of a woman's sex. She drank as much sweet wine as she could hold. Adah rubbed Rachel's arms and legs, back and abdomen with aromatic oils until she was nearly asleep. By the time they carried her out into the field where she married the earth, Rachel was stupid with pleasure and wine. She did not remember how her legs came to be caked with earth and crusted with blood and smiled in her

> sleep … She was full of joy and anticipation, lazing in the tent for the three days, collecting the precious fluid in a bronze bowel – for the first moon-blood of a virgin was a powerful libation for the garden. (Diamant, 1998, pp.24-25)

It is noteworthy here that there is joy, celebration, bodily contact, a full rich ritual appreciation of the importance of the blood, the first bleeding, the coming into womanhood and that this occurs only among the women while the men are ignorant of it and, moreover. insofar as they know of it, experience it primarily as contaminating and threatening (as taboo). This ritual appreciation of menstrual bleeding occurs over and over again in the novel as well as the horror and fear of the men for its uncanny power – for the man bleeding means being wounded and women bleed rhythmically and naturally as part of their nature. Knowing this fear and this horror, Rachel in vengeance against her own father steals his household Gods (teraphim) and allows her menstrual blood to flow over them. And when he comes in rage to get them back, she says to him

> I took them Father. I have all the teraphim. All of your gods. They are here. I sit upon them. The teraphim of our family now bathe in my monthly blood, by which your household gods are polluted beyond redemption. You can have them if you wish. I will dig them out and even wipe them off for you if you like, father. But their magic has been turned against you. You are without their protection from this time forward. (Diamant, 1998, p.118)

Here, Rachel takes her father's dread of woman's blood and being, which he has always so patently disrespected and violated, and turns it against him. However, she knows that this blood has a foundational meaning and is the source of power and life:

> The great mother … gave a gift to women that is not known among men, and this is the secret of blood. The flow at the dark of the moon, the healing blood of the moon's birth – to men this is flux and distemper, bother and pain. They imagine we suffer and consider themselves lucky. We do not disabuse them. In the red tent, the truth is known. In the red tent, where days pass like a gentle stream, as the gift … courses through us, cleansing the body of last month's death, preparing the body to receive the new month's life, women give thanks – for repose and restoration, for the knowledge that life comes from between our legs, and that life costs blood. (Diamant, 1998, p.158)

Here, Diamant speaks within an imaginary ancient (a kind of back to the future style), but actually a quite new transformative appreciative language of blood, of menstruation, of the everyday reality of life which is rooted in blood and womb, earth and water and not in the technological and male inspired abstractions that so much captivate the contemporary world. This narrative style appreciates vagina, womb, blood, and the creativity of living reality over the modern space adventuring and the ancient warrior mentality which leap over concrete bodily human being.

Finally, two pieces of nonfiction, *Cunt* (1998) by Inga Muscio and *The Vagina Monologues* (2001) by Eve Ensler, along with one book of collective creative writings about menstruation, *Moon Days* (1999) edited by Cassie Premo Steele, also speak openly about menstruation and directly to women about the female kind of bleeding. To some extent, each author picks up where the feminists of the 1970s left off in terms of initiating a movement of women's liberation. Whereas all three pieces of work are

borne out of the oppressive, patriarchal culture which is portrayed in the four previous novels, each piece contains an individual expression of the meanings of menstruation.

Cunt is one woman's fairly thorough personal and philosophical exploration of female being, over and against the traditions and imposed realities of patriarchy. In the beginning of her book, Muscio reveals the true meaning of her title choice. She reminisces about her love of words, her family tradition of defining and spelling new vocabulary words throughout dinner, and recalls hunting through the dictionary to find a word that would accurately represent herself. To her disappointment, Muscio discovers that the only word which comes close is "feminism," a word which she notes is "relatively youthful" (p.4). She concludes that "cunt" is a word which is far more historical and representative of women:

> Under the influence of this dilemma, I've asked myself if there might be a word as old, as universal and as deeply rooted as women's actual realities in patriarchal society. Hidden somewhere in the English language, could there be a word with power steeped in our history, a word which truly conveyed the rage and hope of *all women?* (Muscio, 1998, p. 5)

Muscio notes that trying to construct a woman-centered English language is "insanely difficult" and that certainly one word cannot truly represent all women; however, the word cunt will suffice in that it provides women the opportunity to turn around the pejorative meaning, claim it for themselves and "elevate it to a status which all women should rightfully experience in this society" (p.6). In Muscio's world, the word "cunt," instead of denoting the most loathsome and degraded part of the female

anatomy, becomes synonymous with "anatomical jewel." Consequently, a large portion of her writing is devoted to challenging the male perspective and to concretely exploring all facets of the anatomical jewel, from a female point of view. This includes "outing" as it were, the male biases women carry around routinely. As for cunts, "Generally speaking," she says, "we don't understand them, we don't like them and we often think they're ugly" (p.6).

Muscio advocates learning about being a woman from a fresh, i.e., female perspective. Most simply put, she says, "when our cunts bleed, *we* are *bleeding people"* (p. 6). Recognizing this fact rather than running from it, which is what the culture teaches us, is the key to self-respect, and physically smoother periods of bleeding. At one point in college, having had a history of terribly painful, almost traumatic periods, Muscio began to notice that it was possible to have a different, more positive attitude towards menstruation. As a result, she began to track her period with the cycles of the moon. In doing so, she noticed that her attention to her own life heightened and that her need for pain killers diminished. Furthermore, when she quit taking ibuprofens altogether, her period "mellowed out even more…and for the first time in [her] life, [she] actually *enjoyed* bleeding" (p.36). Overall, Muscio became attuned to the culture's true neglect and degradation of women in relation to menstruation:

> The way I had learned to deal with my bleeding ways was a reflection of what our society teaches us about everything cuntlovin' and female and rhythmic and sexual. These are things which must be somehow "controlled" with shame, embarrassment, taboo, violence or drugs. In order to serve the destructive

> tendencies of our society, everything that is cuntlovin' must be sequestered away far into deep recesses of the collective unconscious *somehow*. Therefore, like our cunts, our blood is weird, messy and ugly. The negativity surrounding menstruation is an illusion that falls, falls, falls, the instant perspective shifts. (Muscio, 1998, pp.37-38)

Despite her personal history and culture's traditional oppression of women, Muscio presses on and gives her own tutorial on women's anatomical jewel. All that she has learned about her own body, she shares in great detail and breaks the tradition of keeping silent about women's bodies, menstruation, and the like. Excerpts from her teachings are as follows.

> Your cervix is the doorway of humanity. Have you ever seen it? If you haven't, you dang well should…To insert a speculum: Lie down with some pillows under the small of your back. Spread them legs. Hold your cuntlips apart with two fingers of one hand…Take a good, long gander. Note the shape, color and texture of your cervix. It changes appearance according to where you are in your cycle. (Muscio, 1998, pp.80-82)

In essence, Muscio outlines how female meanings of reality, including meanings of menstruation, just like representative words, are consistently buried within the culture. She also outlines how it is possible for any female to uncover her own realities and consequently bring to light the realities of womankind.

Although Eve Ensler has similar ideas about female being and female sexuality, she manages to unintentionally parlay her ideas into a liberational movement for women

(and indirectly, men). As a playwright, Ensler says her *Vagina Monologues* evolved out of informal conversations about vaginas with girlfriends and then interviews with strangers. As a feminist, Ensler became fascinated with women's attitudes and stories about their vaginas, their sexuality, their being. Eventually, the enthusiasm for her play began to swell within the communities who hosted it. As Ensler puts it, the play took on a life of its own and she became a mere conduit for the women, the stories, and the mission to end violence against women. Ensler proclaims, "Vagina stories found me, as did the people who wanted to produce the play or bring it to their town" (p.xxvi). Of the intimate and painful stories Ensler heard, she notes,

> Slowly it dawned on me that nothing was more important than stopping violence toward women- that the desecration of women indicated the failure of human beings to honor and protect life and that this failing would, if we did not correct it, be the end of us all. (Ensler, 2001, p.xxvi)

On February 14, 1998, the first performance of V-Day, a collaborative effort amongst well-known female actors, comedians, and activists, took place in New York City and raised over $100,000 which was donated to organizations that work to stop violence against women (p.xxxiii). Productions of the *The Vagina Monologues*, directed and performed by faculty and students, now take place in colleges and universities across the country.

It is interesting to note that in February of 2005, administrators of a Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania college, historically known for its attention to women, cancelled their own production of the play just a few days before, citing that *The Vagina Monologues* was

not in keeping with its teachings (Schackner, 2006). Despite local failings, however, the V-Day fund is now supporting international efforts to protect women, end violence in countries such as Afghanistan, Africa, Croatia, and Yugoslavia (pp.xxxii- xxxv). Ensler notes that

> The miracle of V-Day, like *The Vagina Monologues*, is that it happened because it had to happen. A call, perhaps; an unconscious mandate, perhaps. I surrender to the Vagina Queens. Something is unfolding…*In order for the human race to continue, women must be safe and empowered.* It's an obvious idea, but like a vagina, it needs great attention and love in order to be revealed. (Ensler, 2001, pp.xxxv-xxxvi)

In The V-Day Edition of *The Vagina Monologues* (2001), Ensler dedicates an entire section of her book to her interviews with women about menstruation (pp.33-40). Her introduction to that section reads, "*I interviewed many women about menstruation. There was a choral thing that began to occur, a kind of wild collective song. Women echoed each other. I let the voices bleed into one another. I got lost in the bleeding*" (p.33). It is understandable that Ensler "got lost in the bleeding." As a reader, one senses that Ensler provides an uncensored space for women (perhaps for the first time in their lives) to express themselves as concrete, whole women, as bleeding beings. The remarks and stories are simple yet profound, boiled down essences of individual and collective experiences:

> Second grade, seven years old, my brother was talking about periods. I didn't like the way he was laughing.

> I went to my mother. “What’s my period?” I said. “It’s punctuation,” she said. “You put it at the end of a sentence.”
>
> My father bought me a card: “To my little girl who isn’t so little anymore.”
>
> I was terrified. My mother showed me the thick sanitary napkins. I was to bring the used ones to the can under the kitchen sink.
>
> I remember being one of the last. I was thirteen.
>
> We all wanted it to come.
>
> I was so afraid. I started putting the used pads in brown paper bags in the dark storage places under the roof.
>
> Eighth grade. My mother said, “Oh, that’s nice.”
>
> …My friend Marcia, they celebrated when she got hers. They had dinner for her.
>
> We all wanted our period.
>
> We all wanted it *now*.
>
> Thirteen years old. It was before Kotex. Had to watch your dress. I was black and poor. Blood on the back of my dress in church. Didn’t show, but I was guilty… (Ensler, 2001, pp.35-40)

All of the women here make personal remarks about their own periods, yet each also offers the reader insight into the cultural attitudes and demands pertaining to their bodies, their very being. Just the few examples above expose the secret culture of girls and women that exists around the experience of menstruating. Normally, women do not

call attention to their fear, excitement, confusion, their shame or humiliation around the experience of bleeding. Ordinarily, girls and women silently absorb whatever is thrown at them, just like the girl whose brother humiliates, just like girl who hides her kotex-filled bags in the attic and just like the "guilty" black girl in church. Ensler's work highlights the fact that cultural rejection of vaginas or menstruation, no matter how subtle through omission or blatant through abuse, is equal to a cultural rejection of women altogether.

Finally, in keeping with the gesture to defend the integrity of female being, *Moon Days* begins with an introduction by Cassie Steele who recognizes in her first sentence that "We still cannot talk about menstruation" (p.9). She expands by saying, "Even after all the years, all the studies, all the women activists and internists and feminists, we all—each—sometimes—once a month—use silence to talk about it" (p.9). Her book, she notes, is an attempt to end the silence, without symptoms, diagnoses, or any typical, clinical or patriarchal voice. Rather, with a collection of creative writings about menstruation, she declares

> This book is filled with quiet voices, filled with passion, filled with the small pain of cutting a finger while slicing a tomato, the large pleasure of holding a lover's finger in your mouth. Somewhere in between both the pain and the pleasure, the small and the large of it, comes this book about menstruation…The women in this book, in their openness, ask you to bring voice and color to your own silences. (Steele, 1999, p.9)

As an invitation to self exploration and a re-examining of one's menstrual bodily

experiences, Steele provides a preface written by Holly Blackford which grounds the reader in historical, cultural understandings of "womanhood." Blackford contends that remembering one's own experiences alongside a cultural grasp of what it means to be female offers an opportunity "to provide visions of new relationships to our selves" (p.12). Blackford's review is extensive and enlightening, covering a "fear-of-flooding" culture, intrusive masculine views of female adolescence, divisions of private and public spheres assigned to women and men respectively, menstrual taboos as reflections of origin myths, and menstrual education as "other" centered. Finally, Blackford proposes an alternative story of women bleeding as an origin myth "worth living and telling forever" (Blackford in Steele, 1999, p.12-23).

Overall, *Cunt*, *The Vagina Monologues*, and *Moon Days* each exists in *response* to the oppressive, patriarchal culture which routinely silences, degrades, dismisses, and abuses women. Each book offers an alternative, feminine understanding of female sexuality, menstruation and female being. Just as there is ordinarily no call to defend the meaning and importance of something as basic as trees in a forest (unless they are threatened with attack to extinction), there would be no need to stand up and defend the simple existence and composition of female being if there were no attack and attempted destruction (of female being) in the first place.

Additionally, in the face of any lingering doubt about the continued attempted destruction of female being in this "modern" age, the controversy and subsequent actions over an October 2005 *Seventeen* (Vol. 64, No. 10) magazine cover which listed an article entitled "Vagina 101" (Howze) should erase that doubt. Before the issue of the

magazine was distributed across the entire country, Arizona Albertson's grocery stores found the article and the accompanying diagrams and photographs of female anatomy too "explicit" to even carry on their shelves (Everett-Hayes, 2005). Albertson's pulled the October issue from its stores in Arizona and eleven other states, citing the informational piece "inappropriate." To avoid further controversy, the publishers of *Seventeen* subsequently revised and redistributed the October issue by removing the article as a feature from its cover. The title in the magazine index remained listed under "Health" but was changed to "Your Body/ Here is all the information you need to know about your vagina." While the article itself contains "Vagina 101" in its heading, the declaration, "What's normal and what's not" is most prominent. Diagrams of the vagina and anus are aided with text such as "Vagina: The passageway that leads to the internal sexual organs, such as the uterus. It's also where the penis enters during sex, and where blood comes out during your period." Nowhere in the article does it suggest that girls have sex with themselves or anyone else or what they should do when they do have sex. The article aims to educate girls about their own anatomy and health.

Interestingly, an article in the Seattle Times (Callimachi, 2005) on the banishment of the magazine interviews patrons of an Albertson's grocery store in Portland, Oregon and shares the views of those who feel the ban is "ridiculous" and those who find it appropriate. The 42-year-old mother of a fourteen year-old girl states, "Once their innocence is gone, it's gone." The reporter notes that the woman states that she, herself, prefers to teach her three daughters about their bodies. Judging from her remarks, most likely what she will teach is secrecy and shame, i.e., that the mere

mention of the word vagina is forbidden and shameful and even looking at a drawing of one will surely make them "guilty." Indeed, there is still an attempted destruction of female being currently taking place in the culture, and specifically, with regard to an essentially female experience, menstruation, Cassie Steele in *Moon Days* (p. 9) reminds us that women are still using silence as their way to talk about it.

Print and Television Advertisements

Elaine: "See, he's got this ex-wife-"

Dorothy: "Better be careful what you say. I happen to be an ex-wife."

Elaine: "Not like this, I'm sure. No one's like her – she's Super Woman. She was the perfect wife – cooked, cleaned, had two kids, got an education, never looked better and now she has a career."

Dorothy: "That wasn't a marriage. That was a commercial for a mini pad."

The Golden Girls, 1989, Season 4, Episode 10, "Stan Takes a Wife"

Dorothy, a mere television character, with her dry wit, actually makes a profound statement about the messages that women and girls receive from the culture overall and from the advertisers of menstrual products, in particular: Attaining socially defined standards of femininity is an impossible task, requiring super-human interests, capabilities, and "….involves the cultivation of a body that does not leak" (Merskin, 1999, ¶16). Advertisements for mini pads, tampons, and the like, especially during the time Dorothy offers her insight, often depict women in all kinds of ordinary or "successful" life situations but never with a leaky pad, tampon or anything else. Women in menstrual products advertising do not bleed, and furthermore, they do not talk about

bleeding. In part, for this reason, "…modern advertisements for feminine hygiene products still reflect…some of the centuries-old myths and taboos associated with women's bodies" and, subsequently, femininity and sexuality (¶2).

As it turns out, since the inception of commercial menstrual products, the advertising and the original lack of it, has always reflected and reinforced age-old cultural, life-negating meanings of female bleeding and female being. Before the first commercial menstrual product ever appeared on the market, women historically used either some form of homemade bandage or tampon to absorb menstrual blood. Throughout the centuries and across different countries, climates, and cultures, women fashioned a variety of napkins and tampons from naturally absorbent materials such as grass, paper, wool, vegetable fiber, and cloth. In western culture for example, French women used washable menstrual rags until about 1945, and until about 1925, American women used bulky, physically and emotionally irritating cloth diapers which also had to be washed out continuously for reuse. Although Johnson and Johnson manufactured the first commercial disposable menstrual napkin in 1896, "Lister's Towels," were not advertised due to Victorian morality, and therefore did not reach many women. Consequently, the first disposable pads made of cotton and gauze, were removed from the market (Delaney et al, 1988, pp, 138-139).

Twenty-five years later, in 1921, the first successful commercial sanitary napkin manufactured by Kimberly-Clark appeared on the market. An abbreviation for cotton-like-textile, "Kotex," marked the successful commercial beginnings of menstrual gear. The inspiration for this particular disposable pad dates back to World War I, when

French nurses realized that that the cellulose bandaging material used for wounds was more absorbent than the cumbersome, washable diapers they had been using (Delaney, 1988, 139). Kimberly-Clark, a paper supplier had provided the absorbent material, "Cellucotton," to the American War Department at cost. Known to be five times more absorbent than cotton and relatively inexpensive, Cellucotton was a perfect war-time product. However, after the war, Kimberly-Clark looked to more profitable horizons in the form of marketing the first "sanitary protection" for women (Warkentin, 2001, ¶4).

From that moment, the menstrual product industry has been primarily concerned with how to market its products effectively and profitably, a much different motivation than simply providing women with products which make their lives easier. Remarkably, throughout the next hundred years, the central message and method of the menstrual products industry has been the same, i.e., to medicalize menstruation as a bodily problem, to accentuate hygiene and cleanliness, and to strongly emphasize the potential for personal and social embarrassment (Warkentin, 2001, ¶6). By employing this marketing strategy, the latter part of which also adeptly instructs women to keep silent, menstruation is thus now largely defined by the marketing choices of the menstrual products industry:

> The medical discourse suggests a certain level of education and speciality [sic] are required to gain effective knowledge of the subject; the hygiene discourse casts menstruation as something dirty that requires sanitation; and the embarrassment discourse suggests that not only are women unqualified to discuss their own bodies, it isn't seemly for them to do so. (Warkentin, 2001, ¶6)

Conveniently, explicit instruction to use medically recommended menstrual products coincided with the rise of those (mostly male) medical experts around the turn of the century who became skilled at instructing women about their bodies. Additionally, the push for so-called sanitation during menstruation not only reinforced the existing ancient idea of the inherently polluted bleeding woman, it fit nicely with the emerging "American love affair with science" which pushed a scientific approach to housecleaning and germ eradication (Houppert, 1999, p.15). The focus on Domestic Science and the responsibility for "a sanitary crusade against 'dangerous enemies within'" a household and other places fell upon the shoulders of women, of course, and was, simultaneously, a boon for the menstrual products industry which promptly cashed in on the new trend through the marketing of its products (Ehrenreich, 1979, pp.158 & Houppert, 1999, 15). After all, what better, profitable place to emphasize germs than inside a woman where dirt, guilt, shame, and responsibility already exist?

Finally, the avoidance of direct language about bleeding in advertising and the strict adherence to "code" talk perpetuated "women's fear of exposure, promoting a whole culture of concealment" (Houppert, 1999, p.14). The fact that menstrual product advertising refused to mention blood, menstruation or even the words *sanitary napkin* to denote its product, and then at times encouraged women to avoid "embarrassment" by ordering through the mail, only "reinforced the idea that *any* [emphasis mine] sign that you were menstruating, even purchasing menstrual products, was cause for embarrassment" (p.14). Again, the industry's aim was to capitalize on women's practical need for a product by heightening the women's already-present shame about

bleeding and fears of exposure by leaking through their clothing or even being seen purchasing the product.

If only those women had known how “liberated” they were about to become with the introduction of a “new” product, the tampon, in 1936. While admittedly, the tampon brought far more convenience than the pad which had to be belted or pinned, it was hardly a new idea as Tampax marketers later asserted. It was, however, the first mass-marketed tampon, and so it did bring a certain kind of physical liberation. The only problem was that the emotional baggage and enslavement peddled earlier by Kotex was still prominent in its advertisements, as Houppert reminds: “Like others in the sanitary protection industry, it took care to remind women that menstruation was naughty; as irrepressible evidence of sexuality, news of its arrival, departure, and duration had to be kept under wraps” (p.14).

The same old messages are evidenced by Tampax’s introductory ad in *The American Weekly*, July 26, 1936, “Welcome This New Day for Womanhood: This summer you can experience a comfort and an assurance of daintiness you have never known before: Sanitary Protection Worn Internally” (p.2). The first lines read,

> It seems too good to be true. But…at last…a method of sanitary protection has been perfected that enables you to be completely free of embarrassment…completely comfortable…completely sure of safe protection. (verbatim from depiction of ad in Houppert, 1999, p.2)

Furthermore, after touting the American Medical Association and promising endorsements from individual physicians, the ad asserts, “ …Tampax eliminates odor

because it prevents its formation" and "Tampax provides complete sanitary protection…safe at all times…" (verbatim from depiction of ad, p.2). The de-coding or translation of this entire advertisement, in plain English, promises a woman that she will no longer be embarrassed by her natural state of menstruating. This, however, is not because she will no longer menstruate, but because no one will be able to *detect* that she is menstruating, which, by now, is presumably the most shameful thing imaginable. Furthermore, "the ad promises [the tampons] will 'enable you to be completely free of embarrassment,' and offer 'safety at all times' "-as if physical safety and freedom from embarrassment were linked" (Warkentin, 2001, ¶7). Overall, because she will neither leak blood, nor smell of blood, she is free from being found out by others, is permitted to remain socially active, and will not have to remove herself from ordinary activities.

Similarly, this theme of keeping a "dirty little secret" surfaces again in 1939 with Kotex's own tampon called "Fibs" (Houppert, 1999, p.14 & Warkentin, 2001, ¶10), which capitalizes on the natural invisibility of wearing a tampon to further promote the fear of menstrual exposure to women. The "fib" is necessary to "protect" the woman, to keep alive the lie, to hide the fact of menstruating from being revealed to others and consequently embarrassing the wearer.

After the war, the national expectation was that women abandon whatever passion and autonomy they had gained in the workforce and return to their duties at home, their rightful, primary fulfilling place as wife and mother, what Betty Friedan calls "the feminine mystique." In the late 1940s and throughout the 1950s, the women in menstrual product advertising were pictures of this national ideology and became mere

ornamental figures, rather than purposeful beings as they had been before. Simply put, whereas "the woman of the 1940s bore burdens; in the 1950s, her burden was to be beautiful" (Delaney et al, 1988, p.132). Additionally, the products' usefulness within the advertisements took a back seat to "coy language arranged in short sentences," reflecting the idea that "when women are less needed in the workforce, their IQ automatically decreases, if we are to judge by the advertisers' practices" (p.131).

Indeed, the cultural trend to reduce woman to a non-threatening figure of limited scope in the 1950s is perhaps best captured in the often-used advertising concept, "Two Cunts and a Kitchen," or, the less-graphic, "Two C's and a K" which originated in the 1950s. The concept, which has "worked for years," (Archer, 2000, ¶4) usually posits two women, often at a kitchen table with cups of coffee, engaged in pleasant, private conversation about a given product, usually cleaning or menstrual products, i.e., products which women buy (found in http://wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title =Two_Cunts_in_a_Kitchen). Although the formula is reportedly "losing its supporters these days," (Archer, 2000, ¶4) the fact that advertisers still put the situation of women through a crank, a simplistic formula, in order to sell women, themselves, products which continue to limit and stereotype their lives is insulting in itself, but the additional pejorative use of the word "cunt" adds a final injury.

During the 1960s and 1970s more variations of disposable pads and tampons were created and advertised, but the year 1970 finally brought a revolutionary kind of napkin, the "Stayfree Mini-pad." The Stayfree Mini-pad was the first disposable pad that held itself in place with a thin strip of adhesive, offering a kind of physical

liberation for women much like the introduction of the mass-marketed tampon in the 1930s. This is the life-changing, freedom-promising pad which Dorothy mocks in the mentioned episode of *The Golden Girls.* During this time, however, even with significant product improvements, advertisers still insist that women be silent and embarrassed about menstruating. Advertisers' persistent use of indirect, euphemistic language such as 'those special days,' and 'that time of the month' continue to communicate to women and men that menstruation is simply unmentionable (Delaney et al, 1988, p.132). Pair such language with images of blue, rather than red liquid, pouring onto a pad or being soaked up by a tampon, and both sexes are bound to get the message that menstruation and that special part of women are never fit for discussion.

Moreover, the use of *special* in 'those special days' creates a double-bind for women, because, whereas on the one hand, the term *special* often means unique, in this case, it also suggests that the woman's days are unusual, or, given the cultural context, they are days of particular trouble or loathing. Whereas the overt text of the advertising appears to stress the positive denotation, it is the negative connotation which women recognize from the culture and are meant to embrace so that the industry sells more napkins. Menstrual days are only unusual from a male perspective, just as menstrual periods are only particularly troublesome in a culture which does not make physical or psychological space for them.

Although November 1, 1972 marked the first time that menstrual products could be advertised on radio and television, there appeared little change in the overall marketing of napkins or tampons (Delaney et al, 1988, pp.134 & 139). Author Karen

Houppert notes that a 1972 double-page advertisement for Playtex tampons instills the same fears and doubts as a 1920s Kotex advertisement. In a depiction of a self-conscious woman standing alone at a bustling party, the 1972 ad announces, 'The nice thing about a tampon is it keeps you odor-free. Or does it?' Houppert expands with, "Playtex assures this lonely pariah that its tampon 'reduces any doubt about intimate odor, but in a very gentle, totally feminine way that's very reassuring' (Houppert, 1999, pp.37-38). Similarly, she states,

> …one 1920s scenario shows a 'dean of women' discussing modern hygiene and odor with a troubled student. 'Many women are unconsciously guilty. At certain times they are seriously offensive to others. With realization comes constant fear. (Houppert, 1999, p.37)

Remarkably, despite the fact that fifty years separates the two ads, the illustration of fear is the same, and surprisingly, with all the improvements over the years in absorbency and fit with napkins and tampons, the intensity of the insecurity generated by the industry is no different. To illustrate even further, Houppert reminds us that since Tampax's revolutionary beginnings in 1936, the company has claimed, 'Tampax [tampons] eliminates odor because it prevents its formation,' yet Tampax continuously manufactures scented tampons presumably to mask odor (pp.37-38). The logic behind selling unnecessarily scented tampons is the same which pushes "feminine" sprays and wipes. In order to make more money, the industry perpetuates the idea that menstruating women are stinking dirty, "offensive" and even "guilty." The industry creates the products, then creates the need for them by emotionally

manipulating women. Advertisers kept and still keep to their original formula of "selling shame," as Warkentin calls it, no matter how illogical the products or advertising, simply because women continue to buy it, literally and figuratively, without much question.

Before the 1980s, the menstrual product industry and its advertising escaped average logic and public scrutiny due to the embarrassing nature of its products, a cultural perspective which it helped to promulgate. However, in the early 1980s, after women began to actually die from Toxic Shock after using Proctor and Gamble's new "Rely" tampon, the industry experienced a considerable shake-up, but one that did not last long.

After discovering new, extraordinarily absorbent, synthetic materials such as polyester and carboxymethylcellulose, Proctor and Gamble created the new Rely tampon which became the most absorbent tampon ever marketed (p.29). As part of its introduction to the public, it was mass-distributed by mail in 1980 as a free sample to sixty million households. Once it hit the shelves, it quickly became the most popular, capturing 24 percent of the market, triggering other companies to create their own synthetic material tampons to join the competition (p.29). The problem was that its greatest asset became its greatest downfall since the ultra absorbent synthetics "provided an ideal breeding ground for the *Staphylococcus aureus* bacterium" which produces the potentially fatal toxic shock syndrome (TSS) (p.30). Houppert notes that although the bacterium is present in the vaginas of 15 percent of all women, it usually remains dormant. Previously deemed a rare disease by the Centers for Disease Control, cases of

toxic shock began to multiply quickly in young, menstruating women after Rely's initial test-marketing in 1979. This created a public relation crisis that the industry in cooperation with the government and the FDA rather quickly put to rest.

The first research study of the content of menstrual product print advertising aimed at teenage girls conducted over a ten-year period (1976-1986) revealed that "advertisements continued to present menstruation as a 'hygienic crisis'(Merskin, 1999, ¶ 27) rather than a "….,maturational, crisis" or even a maturational event (¶ 7). A later study by Merskin, modeled after this first research project, examines the content of 97 menstrual ads from two major girls' magazines from 1987-1997, and poses the question, "Overall, do advertisements that target girls perpetuate or dispel myths and taboos associated with menstruation?" (¶27). Not surprisingly, Merskin's research discovered that advertisements "present both positive and negative information to girls," (¶49) but "Despite the presence of advertising in broadcast and other media and liberalization of body-related thinking, 'menstruation has not been redefined as something positive'" (¶57). Ads perpetuate and dispel menstrual taboos by first identifying with girls' fears and then by offering "solutions" to those fears by way of the "perfect" menstrual product. Interestingly, this is the same structure of interaction which many con-artists use to rob or otherwise take advantage of their victims.

Apart from delineating the particulars of persuasive menstrual product advertising, Merskin notes that "the current array of feminine hygiene advertisements targeted toward adolescent girls does serve to reinforce an ideology that helps to define social roles and the subsequent relegation of girls and women to private space" (¶51).

Public space is meant for female attractiveness and cleanliness, and menstruation is certainly a time for neither. Modern girls may be unlimited physically and mentally in their endeavors, but they must have the proper product for their "freedom," "otherwise they risk humiliation and disgrace if any signs of their femaleness should seep through their clothing" (¶54). On the whole, Merskin admits that the "significance" of a girl's menstruation may have changed over the years as a result of the availability of birth control, but the cultural perception of menstruation makes the biggest impact upon "how this event is perceived and how her sense of self develops" (¶57). Inevitably, a girl's sense of self becomes dependent upon body image and that body image is "one increasingly prescribed by the media" (¶57).

Subsequently, the same girls who negotiate coming of age while being bombarded by advertised images of unnatural thinness and sparkling clean female being, grow up to become adult women who carry those introjected, culturally prescribed images of body and self as baggage. Already down for the count, so to speak, women are exposed daily to television and print advertising of menstrual products which serve to reinforce the American ideology which "suggests that evidence of femininity, the fact that women bleed, is best kept hidden" (¶55). By the time girls become women, this notion is a taken-for-granted aspect of life as a female.

Picking up where Merskin leaves off in her research, this researcher's random collection of menstrual products' print advertising aimed at women from 2000-2006 reveals that the menstrual products industry is still working diligently to promote the concealment of femininity. While Merskin's research finds that the text of the

advertisements aimed at adolescents focused most frequently on fear, then secrecy, freedom, peace of mind/ trust, and comfort, the product features stressed most often were first comfort, then lack of bulk, ease of use, biodegradability, convenience, and finally protection (¶s 37 & 46). By contrast, the ads directed primarily at women overwhelmingly concentrate on "protection" from leaks, explicitly or implicitly. While nothing can compare to seeing and reading printed advertisements to obtain their full effect, a mere verbatim listing of the text found in a sample of ads provides an education:

- Try Maximum Protection from Always- Most coverage front to back & and side to side from Always- Always- Protecting All Women. Always.
- Here's a list of all the tampons that protect better than Playtex (unscented- Gentle Glide-Incredible Comfort and Protection)
- Anytime, Anywhere Period Protection- Always/ Tampax
- If you want great leakage protection, you want Tampax. If you want a tampon that looks fancy, cut on the dotted line.
- Introducing the new look of KOTEX packaging. Beautiful flowers outside. Same great protection inside. Kotex fits. Period.
- You might lose sleep, but not because of your period. Try Tampax Pearl for overnight protection.
- Quilted- 6X MORE ABSORBANT PROTECTION THAN WOMEN NORMALLY NEED. always ULTRA- NEW QUILTED- BEING A GIRL JUST GOT BETTER.

- Protection You Can Trust. The One. The Only. Tampax.
- Like mother, like daughter. {except when it comes to their protection needs}- Pads, liners, tampons or any combination, with Always and Tampax you can create your own protection system.
- DON'T SIT THIS ONE OUT. Get Stand-Up Protection from Always- Sit for awhile, then stand up, and your flow can suddenly increase. That's why Always Ultra Thin has a unique LeakGuard Core. It helps neutralize odor and protect against leaks. So stand up and celebrate. Protecting all women. always.
- Outstanding protection is the best offense. TAMPAX- Official Partner of the WNBA
- o.b.- designed by a woman doctor to fit your body- small tampon. BIG PROTECTION.

Here, as it has always been in the "sanitary protection" industry, the idea of "protection" is obscured. Just what or who is being protected? The ads never say, really, but the term is taken for granted and used repeatedly. From a practical point of view, we might assume that it is our underwear and clothes that need protecting from the staining potential of menstrual blood. Though this idea is plausible, given the suggested graveness of the leaks and the severity of the "protection" needed, it is more likely that when we buy the proper product, we are protecting others from the gore of our blood and the reality of our menstruation. Furthermore, given the cultural context, we are also protecting ourselves from having to touch the dirtiness of our own bloody leakage as

well as protecting ourselves from the shame and embarrassment of revealing our impurity to others. The implications of the advertisers' use of the word *protection* seep far beyond the stains in our underwear to the propaganda about menstruation and women distributed freely by menstrual products manufacturers. In reality, women are the ones who need protection from the scare tactics of advertisers who intentionally incite fear, shame, and embarrassment all for the purpose of profit.

Always pads, for example, breaks new ground and creates new paranoia with the marketing concept, "Stand-up protection." The advertising shouts, "DON'T SIT THIS ONE OUT" with a picture of a woman at a party standing up from a chair with one hand already in the hand of her cheerful male dance partner. The rest of the text then explains how a menstruating woman cannot even find safety just staying out of the way of others and being a wallflower. It is imperative to understand that there is now this new danger of sitting, since even if she sits to avoid embarrassing leaks or odor, she will ultimately be red-faced (or red-bottomed) anyway. This is likely because when she does stand up, her act of standing creates a rush of her "flow" and a potential leak which will apparently suddenly announce itself in a great rush of redness and humiliation not unlike the gymnasium scene in "Carrie." Additionally, along with that redness there is the immediate potential for an unbearable stench.

So, the ad suggests, now that you have a new fear of passivity which has never occurred to you until now, "stand up and celebrate," because "Always Ultra Thin has a unique LeakGuard Core which [only] helps neutralize odor and protect against leaks." So, stand up and face your man (your judge) because you are safe since Always

"protects all women. always." The absurdity of this ad might be hilarious were it not so tragic, and the danger in its contentions might even be detectible were the industry not so shrouded in concealment.

Although every advertisement seems to imply that its product provides "protection," the next most common, blatant assertion is the offering of comfort:

- Who needs new fangled gimmicks?- When it comes to comfort Nothing's like Playtex Gentle Glide Tampons.- Playtex Portables- Playtex Deodorant Gentle Glide- Playtex Odor Absorbing Gentle Glide- so comfortable you can't even feel them.
- Playtex Deodorant Gentle Glide- Caution: Do not try this without Playtex Gentle Glide Tampons.- They're unbelievably comfortable. And you simply can't buy a tampon that protects better.
- Even thin pads can feel like diapers. With Playtex Gentle Glide all you feel is comfortable. - It's true. With pads, even the thinnest ones, you always know they're there. And that can make you feel like you are wearing a diaper. Who wants to be protected like that? Try Playtex Gentle Glide tampons. They're a more comfortable way to deal with your period. Playtex Gentle Glide tampons have a unique design that adjusts to comfort fit. So they're more than invisible- they're completely comfortable!- Playtex Gentle Glide- So comfortable you can't even feel them.

- Beyond plastic. (*flushable*)- Beyond cardboard. (*comfortable*)- It's the best of both. And more. Introducing…Playtex beyond- The Natural Shape of Comfort- Introducing the first Natural Taper tampon and applicator duo. Comfortable. Colorful. Flushable. Fabulous.
- If you're going to sit on it all day, it better be comfortable. Our DriWeave is softer than ever and it helps keep you dry. So you're always sittin' pretty. Have a happy period. always
- Introducing a luxuriously softer, cotton-like Dri-Weave. - Our all-new patented Dri-Weave is better than before. It's softer, more like cotton, and it pulls moisture away. So every Always pad helps keep you dry and comfortable. Softer than before, protects like Always. Always
- It's the little comforts. always- Sit on something super comfy, even on the light days. The soft top sheet on every regular and long CleanWeave pantiliner is here when you need it. always
- always- If you like cotton, you'll love Always.- Always is now softer than before, more like cotton. NEW Always pads with soft Cotton-Like Dri-Weave pull fluid away from your skin to help provide clean, dry protection.

From the above ads, it seems reasonable that a company would want to tout the practical comfort of their products to women, and certainly, pads that feel like cotton rather than plastic sound comfortable, just as tampons that have a tapered tip are imaginably more comfortable upon insertion rather than a tampon with a square tip.

There is no mention of tampon insertion, however. Women must deduce how the tapered tip is more comfortable. Also, admittedly, using a tampon so comfortable that "you can't even feel" it *sounds* good, but in light of TSS, is it really responsible to play up *not* feeling and the subsequent possible forgetting about the tampon? Playtex cannot avoid reinforcing the cultural expectation and practice of ignoring and forgetting about menstruation.

Similarly, Playtex reminds women of the "invisibility" of their tampons, opposite to the high visibility (and implied shame and embarrassment) of "even the thinnest pad." Even more irrelevant is the claim that Playtex tampons are "colorful," and somehow offering their tampons in three pastel shades is part of their fabulousness. In a similar attitude, Always insists on calling menses "fluid" or "moisture" and depicts the moisture as a neat blue stripe symmetrically suspended in the center of its pad. The cotton-like fabric keeps the menstrual "fluid" away from the woman's skin to "help provide clean, dry protection," or, in other words, to insure that she avoids touching the dirtiness of menstruation. Although comfort is a practical, concrete quality of a pad or tampon, the advertisers stray from practicality and continue to pull women and the experience of menstruation into the world of shameful bleeding and abstraction from experience.

Perhaps the most pernicious of all menstrual product marketing concepts is the notion of freshness, which of course, implies that menstruating is the opposite, and opens the market for another line of supplemental products such as deodorant sprays and wipes which then reinforce the need to be fresh *everyday*. A sample of the freshness

ads for pads, tampons, and wipes are as follows,

- scent from heaven. – How divine! Introducing new KOTEX LIGHTDAYS Incredibly Thin Everyday Liners. Select from three light, refreshingly natural scents. Or choose unscented. Made of breathable material that looks, feels and flexes like your panties. They even fit thongs. A new choice for feeling fresh and confident everyday (not just during your period). Available in 17- or 46-count packages. Experience them for yourself! Kotex. Kotex fits. Period.
- Pads don't just feel like diapers. Playtex Deodorant Tampons eliminate odor. Now get the best odor protection you can buy. With a fresh scent and unique technology, Playtex Deodorant Tampons work to eliminate odor better than any pads or any other tampons can. Playtex Deodorant Gentle Glide. So comfortable you can't even feel them.
- Stayfree…the <u>only</u> maxi that **actively** fights odors.- reinforced four-wall protection- anti-leak core-now with odor neutralizers- remarkable protection against leaks and odors
- Carefree. Start fresh everyday! Carefree Dry Ideal
- Try them for your period…you'll love 'em for the rest of the month. Playtex Personal Cleansing Cloths. Feel fresh, clean, and confident anytime, anywhere. Get Fresh. Find them in the tampon aisle.

- New get fresh!- now lightly scented- Always fresh- Tampax fresh- Same great protection in a new fresh scent!
- FRESH- INSTANT REFRESHMENT. ANYTIME. ANYPLACE. NEW always FEMININE WIPES- BEING A GIRL JUST GOT BETTER.

The only conclusion which women (or men) can draw from these ads is that women do not just have a natural human scent, they stink. They stink especially during their period, but they are inclined to offend on any given day, thus the suggestion for wipes and pantiliners on a daily basis. Sometimes it takes divine intervention ("heaven scent") with "refreshingly natural scents" to counteract the stale, unnatural perfume of woman. Sometimes it takes the language and the ammunition of war such as an "anti-leak core" and "four-wall protection" to "actively fight odors."

As it is understood in advertising, unlike men who never reek from their genitals and do not need, say "penis" or "masculine wipes" to feel fresh, women need products to help them feel "fresh" and "clean," because it is their only way to feel truly "confident" in the world. Whereas in real, modern Western culture, it remains unacceptable for *both* men and women to smell as *living* human beings, women, historically equated with nature and "earthiness" are held to a higher standard of "clean" to counteract their nature. Women are to routinely be de-natured to an anti-septic, doll-like status which is certainly more challenging to achieve.

Perhaps the strangest, but most revealing of these advertisements is the last (from above) which appeared in a Parade magazine in July 2000. It depicts the text in a

box, below a black-and-white photograph of a bare-chested, muscular, Caucasian man who is standing under a series of outdoor showers, pictured against a desert backdrop. For the first few times I examined this ad, I had no idea what it meant, and only after several years of researching the phenomenon of menstruation was I able to look at it again later and comprehend it, instantaneously. The ad intends to inform women that with "feminine wipes," they, too, can feel and be as fresh as a man. "Anytime" and "anywhere" they can gain "instant refreshment." And the fact that they can achieve this similitude to masculinity, the ideal, after all, makes the drudgery of "being a girl…better."

In recent years, Tampax plays the emotional center stage with Pearl Tampon ads featuring women in embarrassing situations such as standing in a circle of people at a party with the back of the woman's dress tucked into her underwear, unknowingly exposing her behind. The caption reads, "EMBARRASSMENT HAPPENS. LEAKS SHOULDN'T." In a similar spirit, o.b. tampons blatantly zeros in on women's paranoia about leaking blood in public. Except for a picture of a box of super o.b. tampons, the ad is text only:

> No More discreetly obvious backward glances in the mirror. – Once you try o.b. Tampons, there's no looking back. That's because **o.b. users experience fewer leaks with o.b. than with the leading tampon.*** It's the only tampon created by a woman gynecologist to fit the contours of a woman's body. So try o.b. Tampons and face the day head-on. **We dare you.**

As with Tampax Pearl, o.b. first identifies with the worried menstruating woman who

is preoccupied by her leaking body. The advertiser then swears to combat her fear of leaking with the perfect tampon, which is endorsed by a female doctor to add two-fold to its legitimacy. O.b. reinforces the fear of menstrual leakage by suggesting that without the proper equipment, a woman should be distracted by her body and unable to look at the world straightforwardly.

Like many of the print ads which feature several women (usually four) engaged in some form of conviviality, Kotex follows suit and spins an elaborate campaign around the theme of friendship, presumably in an effort to duplicate the female enthusiasm and sense of female bonding created by HBO's television series, *Sex and the City*. In a double-page advertisement in a 2005 People magazine, Kotex features the article "Ten Friends That Every Woman Needs" by Dr. Jan Yager. Interspersed throughout the article are illustrated portraits of elegantly-coiffed women with blood-red hair and no eyes, each representing one of Kotex's many products, or, one might suppose, one of the "friends that every woman needs." Below each woman is a picture of a box of one of Kotex's products which also feature dahlias, tulips, orchids, and lilies as further marketing representations. In one fell swoop, Kotex raises "feminine protection" (and flowers) to the level of human friendship while simultaneously reducing friendship to an impersonal, marketable commodity.

In addition to offering protection, comfort, freshness, social acceptance, and emotional security, menstrual products companies entice their potential customers with promises of superior dryness, and in recent years, with increasing frequency, qualities of thinness, flexibility, and fit. Advertisers claim that the benefit of thinness in a pad is

flexibility, which is conducive to activity, a more attractive way of being for women these days than the passive stance of the Modess era women. Whereas the ornamental Modess woman had to stay beautiful (blood-free) and had to sit out of the dance because she did not have "stand-up protection," today's woman is expected to work, dance, play sports, do yoga, i.e., participate to the fullest extent, while staying within the culture's ideal of beautiful. Although perhaps women have become more active as a matter of choice, their need to stay clean, leak-free, and immaculate at all times is still endorsed within the menstrual advertising which stresses activity:

- Introducing the thinnest, most flexible Kotex Ultra Thin ever. It moves with you. So you're free to jog, hip-hop or just flop- right on the couch. Kotex fits. Period.
- Kotex. be flexible. be fabulous. Try the thinnest, most flexible KOTEX Ultra Thin ever. It moves with you- whether you shake and shimmy, work out or just flop on the couch. Kotex fits. Period.
- The gold metal standard for active women everywhere. Kotex. With pads, liners and Security Tampons. They score high marks for comfort, flexibility and protection. No wonder Kotex is an official supplier of the 2004 U.S. Olympic Team. Kotex fits. Period.
- Outstanding protection is the best offense. TAMPAX- Official Partner of the WNBA
- Who would have thought a tampon could get me to that Zen place? I'm glad I didn't have to skip class. 'Cause, for me, yoga and pads

> just don't mix. Inhale. At least the whole class can breathe deeply now, without me getting self-conscious. Whoa, the blood's rushing to my head. How long do we have to hold this? Exhale and focus. I am centered and totally relaxed. Relax. It's Tampax Pearl. Tampax Pearl has unbelievable comfort and protection with a smooth plastic applicator and a unique absorbent braid that helps capture leaks before they happen. Check out tampaxpearl.com for more information and a free sample.

The last advertisement mentioned here depicts an African-American woman with other African-American women taking a yoga class. The focus of the ad is the woman in the center, but all the women are featured holding a common yoga pose called "downward dog." The text of the ad is obviously supposed to be the inner dialog of the woman featured, and even though the ad ran in a September, 2005 People magazine, she is a throw-back to the original 1936 Tampax tampon promotion.

The woman holds all the same fears and beliefs of her predecessors in that if it were not for tampons, she would have skipped yoga class because of the extra visible bulk and the high risk of leaks with a pad. What's more, the *entire class* can "breathe deeply now" without her "getting self-conscious" from a fear of her own odor or a visible leak of her menses. In a class full of exercising, sweating women, how terrible could a menstrual leak or odor be? Remarkably, neither the social expectations depicted nor the scare tactics used have changed in almost eighty years.

Even more remarkable is the fact that, probably for the first time ever in a

menstrual products ad, the word *blood* is mentioned. However, cleverly, it is not in direct reference to menstruation. In fact, the blood the woman mentions is flowing in the opposite direction of her vagina, and is "rushing" to her head. Without being explicit and running the risk of offending with the truth, the advertisers hope that women will pick up on the inference and feel understood by Tampax.

Furthermore, it is no wonder that the woman feels the blood rushing to her head, since she is holding an inverted pose, one of the many poses *not* recommended for menstruating women. Many yoga videos and conscientious yoga instructors warn women that inverted poses work counter to the natural energy flow of the menstruating woman: "We are cyclic beings. Denying that we are does violence to the basic principles of self-understanding we seek through yoga" (Schatz, 2002, ¶3). Since during menstruation blood naturally flows down and out of the body, standing on one's head or something similar will interrupt the direction of the flow, physically and spiritually, and "The vascular congestion that results can lead to increased menstrual bleeding"(Schatz, 2002, ¶6).

Furthermore, according to a Playtex Products, Inc. Investor Relations Press Release, Playtex, responding to "an 800% increase in the number of young women participating in sports over the past thirty years," released a new tampon, Playtex Sport with Sport Level Protection in August, 2006. Determined to cater to women (and sales) through the promotion of activity and athletics, Playtex, Julie Elkinton, Vice President of Feminine Care at Playtex says,

We wanted to design a tampon that met active women's needs for comfort and

> protection. We think of sports as a real test for tampon protection. If a tampon can keep athletes worry-free while playing sports, then it is effective enough to be used in daily activity.
>
> (http:phx.corporate.ir.net/phoenix.zhtml?c=63087&p=irol-news-article)

Despite reported increases in women's confidence, Playtex is determined to promote age-old industry notions about menstruation:

> 'Young women are worried about people looking at them and finding out that they have their periods. To them a failure of protection would be devastating. Many will skip the activity when they have their period because of this potential embarrassment,' says Dr. Jenny Susser, a Sports Psychologist in the Women's Sports Center at the Hospital for Special Services in New York City. (http: phx.corporate-ir.net/phoenix.zhtml?c=63087&p=irol-news-Article)

Instead of encouraging women to participate in sports or other activities in the face of leaks every now and then, Playtex, like other manufacturers, feed the fear of exposure by creating industrial-strength products which supposedly forever separate women and their blood from the world.

Overall, even though increasingly thin pads and increasingly effective tampons are conducive to today's more active woman, thin and flexible pads are also smaller and less noticeable, whether a woman is wearing the pad or carrying it in her hand to the restroom. The same can be said for "compact" tampons, and while both may make the menstrual lives of women easier, both also contribute to the unrelenting attitude of stealth and shame surrounding menstruation. Women may have been "dainty" in the old

days of advertising, but today's inclined-to-be-active woman is "discreet," secretly transporting and wearing pads and tampons without calling attention to herself or her period:

- Tampax Compak is period protection- undercover. So small, it fits almost *anywhere*- even in your tiny beaded evening purse. Plus, it gives you full-size protection with the comfort of an extendable plastic applicator. That's protection and discretion in the palm of your hand. Compak size. Complete protection. Tampax. The Revolution Continues.
- New! Always Thin Pantiliners- When you buy Always Pads- As THIN as a credit card. Take them wherever you go and no one will notice.
- Having one of those move-it-over-a-notch-or-two kind of days? At least you've got one ultra-thin accessory during your period. Improved Kotex Ultra Thins, with the Leak Lock System. Dual Layers. Better protection. Securing your diva status. Kotex fits. Period.

Again, the lesson here is that no "diva" would ever expose the secret of menstruation by carrying a regular-sized pad or tampon or wearing even a spot of her own blood. She would also never be caught with a big, obvious lump protruding from the back of her skirt, or she would surely lose her "diva" status.

Finally, although television commercials are probably far more influential in marketing and persuasion than print advertisements, television ads, given their fleeting nature, are more difficult to collect and analyze. A thorough analysis is dependent upon the feasibility of videotaping, audio-taping or hand-recording a given ad's content.

While many menstrual product commercials are predictably shown during “women’s” programming such as soap operas and talk shows, commercials appear and disappear quickly, packing a great deal of content, audio, visual, symbolic, and attitudinal information in an average of thirty seconds. Furthermore, sometimes particular ads are shown only a few times before being pulled from the air, making their full comprehension all the more difficult.

One such fleeting commercial that aired around the year 2000 featured Tampax Compak Tampons, and oddly, an average-looking, twenty-something Caucasian guy sitting at table playing with, what else, a Tampax Compak tampon. The commercial itself is uncomplicated and aptly films the apparently clueless “Average Joe” intently examining the tampon. At one point, he curiously rips it open, but remains unaware of its purpose despite being visibly impressed with its expanding capabilities. As viewers, we witness a man touching and marveling at something which, in ordinary society, a woman keeps secret from everyone, but especially from a man. Notably, at the moment “Joe” extends the tampon and gazes at it incredulously, we have the feeling that he is making a direct comparison of the tampon to his own expanding capabilities and that he comes up short, so to speak.

Furthermore, we sense that the advertisers are likening the extraordinary qualities of the tampon to “maleness.” Although part of the commercial depicts the man as an ignorant buffoon, unaware of the secret of menstruation, because the commercial includes a man and his perceptions, the ad becomes sexually suggestive and in a creepy way, violates the menstrual taboo. Like the Tampax print ads which make men the

central figure of menstruation, it is not difficult to understand why the airing of this commercial was short-lived.

Later commercials from Tampax Compak Tampons move men, albeit still clueless, to the background of tampon discussion. One frequently run commercial of 2003 depicts a female, African-American high school student in a classroom "discreetly" passing a Compak tampon to a fellow, needy female classmate. When the older, Caucasian male teacher catches her generosity, he warns loudly, "Miss. McGilicutty, I hope you have enough for everyone." In response, she laughs softly, smirks, and says she has enough for the "girls." We see the male teacher and the boys in the classroom left looking thoroughly confused, while the girls smugly exchange knowing glances with one another. For once, the girls are united in the face of the taboo of menstruation and the males appear, if not disappointed, at least confused, to be left out of the "secret."

Another Tampax Compak commercial, aimed at self-conscious women instead of self-conscious students, depicts a woman proudly going to great lengths to hide evidence of her period. At an outside bistro, a thirty-something, Caucasian heterosexual couple sit at a table where they have just ordered coffee and tea. At one point, the woman's purse falls over on the table, and a Tampax Compak tampon falls out. The man immediately picks it up by the end and shakes it vigorously as if it is sugar or artificial sweetener for his drink. However, just before he is about to rip the end open, the woman cringes momentarily but then blurts, "Aren't you trying to cut back?" "Yeah. You're right," he reluctantly answers. The woman, pleased with her response to such a

"close call," stifles a smile, and the man remains oblivious to the fact that what he thinks is sweetener is really a tampon and oblivious to the energy the woman has expended in the act of concealing the truth.

Eventually, "discreet" becomes the compact tampon's advertising buzz word as, in another commercial, we witness a high school girl getting up from her desk with tampon concealed in her hand, ready to make her way to the bathroom without revealing that she has her period. Similarly, another Tampax commercial which ran in 2001 tells women directly, "Leave your purse out of it. The applicator tampon you can hide in your hand. The Revolution Continues." Somehow the fact that women are still looking for ways to "hide" evidence of their menstruation hardly seems to warrant a "revolution."

Similarly, in one of Tampax's seemingly ubiquitous "The Braid Makes You Brave" ads, a group of twenty-something men and women are stripping down to their underwear and jumping off a pier to swim in the dark. Upbeat music plays in the background over the friends' shouts of encouragement to the last woman left standing awkwardly, debating whether or not to jump. Apparently, she is menstruating and has reservations about jumping, swimming, and resulting embarrassing leaks. She comes to her senses, however, and realizes that she can afford to be "brave" since she is wearing the proper equipment, a Tampax Pearl tampon. Even swimming in the dark is cause for self-conscious hesitation, according to advertisers.

Moreover, in one commercial, Always pads tells us that women are at risk for menstrual leaks even when they move unconsciously, i.e., when sleeping. With an overhead view of a woman sleeping in a bed with mildly tangled sheets, the viewer

hears, “We turn thirty plus times a night. That equals a lot of movement, requiring a lot of protection.” Here, the message is that even if women try to consciously now restrict their activity for fear of leaking; there is always unconscious or uncontrollable worrisome movement.

Finally, amidst the varied commercials tailored to social trends, menstrual product advertisers still offer traditional commercials which communicate the cultural, historical loathing of menstruation. Stayfree Maxi begins one 2003 commercial with, “Brace yourself. This is a commercial about your period.” After a brief discussion of leaks and Stayfree Maxi’s superior protection, a blue liquid pours over the pad, and the narrator tells us, “So, forget about leaks.” As if we could, at this point.

Additionally, in 2003, Kotex reminds a culture of already self-conscious women, “Some things you don’t want getting out…like a secret or your period.” To add further emphasis, Kotex’s new trademark, a red period (punctuation) drops down to the bottom of the screen. The commercial continues with talk of “Leak Lock Protection” for those escaping periods, and we are once again reminded of the terrible offense of leaking the secret of menstruation, either verbally or physically.

In a more subtle turn, leaks and general menstrual dirtiness are addressed in a companion commercial to Tampax’s Pearl Tampons print advertisements. A blonde, Caucasian woman dressed in white jeans, white shirt, and pearls, thus representing purity and confidence, excuses herself at a party. “I’ll be right back,” she says and then locates the bathroom. After entering, she makes the foolish move of putting a tampon on the windowsill. Of course, the tampon falls off and into the shrubs below. The woman

gasps and looks out the window with disappointment. Somewhat desperate, she looks under the counter for a replacement, but sadly all she finds are pads and "other" kinds of tampons. While she rigs a contraption to retrieve her lost tampon, music plays in the background and a man sings "My baby's got class. This girl's got style…" Flash back to her boyfriend still in the party telling others, "My girlfriend's great- smart, funny, you know- super classy." Next, the classy girlfriend confidently returns and we gather that she was successful with her tampon recovery. Content with her secret, she greets her boyfriend with the cover-up, "Sorry. Long line." If he only knew how naturally déclassé she would be without her leak-protecting, class-bolstering tampon.

In an interesting twist, Kotex again dabbles in punctuation, but first casually calls out to women, "Hey, a period has its place. Unfortunately, Mother Nature likes to put it in the wrong place." Just then Kotex's red period moves into the middle of the word *weekend.* "Luckily there's Kotex maxi with wings for protection that can go just about anywhere. So, you're free to go just about anyplace. Kotex fits. Period." Hoping to become as popular with women as the euphemism *period*, Kotex moves its red dot from advertisement to advertisement and in this commercial empathizes with women's feeling of inconvenience during her period. What Kotex misses is that women's biggest inconvenience, whether or not they know it, is the struggle to find some kind of healthy relationship to their bleeding bodies, their being, when they live in a world where they are subjected to commercials just like this one.

Indeed, inconvenience, for women, is living in a culture which loathes and de-naturalizes feminine bleeding. As Warkentin points out,

> Menstruation is a site of conflicting discourses in which gender, sexuality, reproduction and power meet head on. Each bleeds into the next. Witness the teen-oriented menstrual product ads in which dating advice is doled out alongside product information. A site is formed at which leakages are the rule- not the exception. And leaks, remember, are exactly what commercial menstrual products, with their sanitary obsessions, clinical blue liquids and "protection" from body fluids, are desperate to avoid. The silent performance of menstruation they demand is not actually possible- at least, it is not possible for every woman. Leaks inevitably happen. (Warkentin, 2001, ¶16)

Ultimately, just as *The Golden Girls'* Dorothy asserts, women are not the stuff of which mini pad commercials are made. Living in a culture which routinely prioritizes every other experience before menstruation, and living with frequent advertisements and commercials which regularly remind women that their period is in the "wrong place" is far more demoralizing and inconveniencing than the practical messiness of the experience itself.

As a woman and a researcher, the analysis of a mere seventy-nine print advertisements and just twenty menstrual products commercials is overwhelming in terms of being bombarded with messages about the defectiveness of my bleeding self. Even though the ads examined here are only a fraction of the number that any woman is exposed to over the course of her life, the repeated perceptions are wearing and demoralizing. Menstrual products advertisers do not do women any favors when they attempt to identify with the embarrassment, shame, insecurity, and feelings of dirtiness

that women experience as a result of the cultural rejection of their bleeding bodies. In fact, advertisements and commercials which continually reflect these qualities are part of the problem of the cultural rejection of women.

Menstrual Education

Once western society became industrialized and a market society emerged, the lives and roles of women changed dramatically. No longer were women confined to the farm, the house, and the family. Women found work outside of their traditional roles as mother, wife, and mistress of the household, working from sun-up to after-dark each day. At the same time that women were freed, in a sense, to venture outside the confines of their family and home, they were also left searching for an alternative a sense of purpose and place in society. Prior to industrialization, women understood what they were supposed to do, they knew that they were needed, even if they were not appreciated, and certainly had enough work to fill their days. Healer and midwife were two of the roles that women played in the Old Order, prior to industrialization. Women, as lived experts within healing traditions, were in the position to learn about herbal remedies and healing methods from their mothers or other females, and the tradition included talking with other women about their bodies, about making babies and other situations such as avoiding pregnancy. But after the birth of the market place, women were displaced from these roles and the healers and midwives were replaced by male doctors or “experts” (Ehrenreich & English, 1979, pp.1-98).

Since this shift in history, male experts have been educating women about their bodies, i.e., how to heal them, how to manage them before, during, and after childbirth,

and how to think about them generally. This became especially true with all matters of female reproduction, due to the fact that the doctors, as professionals, were happy to take over this position of purveyors of knowledge and practitioners. Women, who at one time acted as the learned healers of a society, learned to dispense with what they knew about their own bodies and listen to the dictates of male experts. The doctors declared that the collective, intuitive, lived knowledge within women's expertise was nothing but "old wives tales" and patently false. This tradition of women listening to the experts continues to this day, and the notion that medical doctors know more about menstruation and women's reproduction is a taken-for-granted, commonplace and falls into the official category of *gynecology*. In this way, the alienated male experts took over the field (women's bodies) and declared it theirs to explore and conquer as one of the new frontiers (Ehrenreich & English, 1979, p.19).

Although the assertion that doctors know more about menstruation and reproduction has been authoritatively enforced for decades, doctors have simultaneously expected mothers to privately teach their daughters about menstruation and reproduction in the home. While doctors would have the final say in diagnosing illness and prescribing how women's bodies should work, it would still be up to the women to do the educating in the first place. This task, as one might imagine, becomes difficult for women who, from the moment they, themselves begin to bleed, learn to stay silent about all matters pertaining to menstruation. It is truly unfair and unrealistic to expect any woman, who has been rendered speechless and unfeeling about anything menstrual or sexual to suddenly spring to life in the company of her daughter with great knowledge,

reflection, and enthusiasm about the perfectly "natural" miracle of menstruation. It is an absurd request, yet for years doctors have been criticizing mothers for their bad timing, ignorance, and ineptitude when speaking with their daughters.

One such doctor, Emil Novak, a successful doctor of gynecology from the early twentieth century, wrote and published popular textbooks of gynecology. Revised and updated versions of his texts are still published and widely used in medical schools today (Berek, 2002). During his years of active practice, he also wrote more basic, informational books for women called *The Woman Asks the Doctor* (Novak, 1935 & 1944). According to Novak, "No one can quite take the place of the mother in instructing her daughter in the simple and beautiful truths of the reproductive life and its various manifestations" (1935, p.106). While the implication is that the doctor has the final word on what is normal and what is not, Novak states that it is up to the mother to first enlighten her daughter. He adds, however, if "home instruction is out of the question" and the mother is unable due to "ignorance or other incapacity," the daughter should be instructed outside the home by a "legitimate" agent of 'sex education' (p.106). Novak clearly has high expectations for the enlightening of young women by mothers, and he has harsh words for mothers who do not live up to his standards.

In both versions of his handbook for women (1935 & 1944), Novak is clueless to any influence that culture, his profession or the attitudes of men, just to name a few, might have on the menstrual lives of young women, other than their nervous, inadequate mother:

This leads me to say a word as to the *attitude to be taken by the parents and*

> *especially by the mother*, toward the girl approaching this important phase of her life. Much can thus be done to lighten the problem for the girl, and often to exert a profound influence over her future life…Even as regards to menstruation, it is surprising that so few mothers, with their own early lives as a background, should still be so apathetic in the matter of imparting the simplest information about the function to their daughters. I recall an instance in which a little girl of thirteen, taken with her first menstrual bleeding while out at play, ran home screaming to her mother, believing that she had been injured and that something terrible had happened because she was bleeding.
>
> > It would really seem inexcusable for a mother not to prepare her child for the onset of this function, and to instruct her in its proper hygiene (see Chapter IX), although, except among very ignorant and shiftless mothers, it is only fair to say that dereliction in this respect is becoming much less common than it was in a former and more puritanical age than our own. (Novak, 1935 & 1944, pp.75-76, pp.53-54)

His mother-blaming takes on another dimension:

> …The period of menstruation is commonly referred to as being 'unwell,' and this is a rather unfortunate concept of the function. It is a perfectly normal phase and this is the idea of it which should be impressed upon young girls. *Too many mothers make the mistake of impressing their daughters with the importance of coddling themselves during the periods,* of abstaining from play and exercise at this time and, in short, of actually considering themselves sick…. (Novak, 1935

& 1944, pp.76 & 54)

Novak confuses the mothers' adaptation to the culture's demand for silence in menstrual matters and her consequential paralysis with being "apathetic" to the needs of their daughters. Furthermore, when mothers are able to communicate with their daughters about menstrual bleeding and all that it entails, according to Novak, they are doing it badly, because they advise them to rest if they are tired and tend to themselves if they should need it. This behavior is categorized as "codling," because, as he writes later, one of the most important pieces of information a mother should impart is that "…[menstruation] in itself it should not cause any interference with the girl's life activities…(1944, p.73).

Moreover, the notion that the women are 'unwell' is not some concoction of lazy mothers, but rather the mothers' mimicking what they have heard from *doctors*. Novak, himself, devotes an entire chapter to "Hygiene of Menstruation," wherein he warns women what not to wear, how often to bath and douche, what kind of exercise to engage in, and whether or not to take cold or warm baths during this time in her life (1944, pp.73-80). She should not study too much (lest she gain too much knowledge, like that impudent first lady, Eve?), and she should not dance too strenuously so as not to "forget her fatigue" (p.75). Baths, by the way, should neither be too hot nor too cold, as cold may suppress the bleeding, and, according to Novak, this is a "painful" state of affairs. Although he views complaints of severe menstrual cramps as most often the product of the female mind and her own persuasion to be "unwell" during this time, Novak asserts that suppression of the menses is "painful." This last concern of Novak's

borders on humorous, since it sounds suspiciously like a man's attempt to understand menstruation by comparing it to ejaculation, the only sexually-related excretion he knows, in which case "suppression" could be somewhat "painful."

Overall, regardless of the fact that Novak's gynecological handbooks for women were written in 1935 and 1944, the *attitudes* and judgments about women and menstruation, where to learn about menstruation, what should be learned and who should teach it, remains exactly the same. The same contradictions and double-talk exists today, i.e., menstruation is natural, but do not talk about it or let anyone see signs of it; menstruation is not dirty, but make certain you are clean and do not let any one smell you; menstruation is a part of life but do not notice it or let it interfere with your daily activities. Furthermore, the thirteen-year-old girl, described by Novak, who was surprised and frightened by the appearance of her first menses, unfortunately most certainly lives today over and over again.

Novak's books were actually a kind of remnant from the mid to late nineteenth century trend in which doctors wrote voluminously on the topic of women, women's bodies, and "The Woman Problem." During that time women were perceived as the inverse of the economic man of the time who had evolved as a result of the market. Placed on a dubious pedestal within society, women were considered dreamy, weak, passive, irrational, emotional, and easily depressed, all those qualities that men were not. To further state the perceptions of the time, "Economic man is rational; therefore romantic woman is intuitive, emotional, and incapable of quantitative reasoning…she is tender and submissive…she is self effacing, even masochistic" (Ehrenreich & English,

1979, pp.24-25). Additionally, she was seen as *sickly*, as an almost ghost like figure of attraction. In sum, during the Victorian period, "a morbid aesthetic developed, in which sickness was seen as a source of female beauty, and, beauty –in the high-fashion sense– was in fact a source of sickness" (p.108). Interestingly enough, these descriptions of beauty still linger *today* in the fashion modeling world and in Hollywood starlet standards, so it is surprising that Novak, coming right off the heels of the era, would not recognize the influence of recent cultural standards and place the blame of "being unwell" on mothers alone. Then again, self-reflection was not one of the prized male attributes of the time.

Partly because mothers were seen by the experts as doing such a poor job at teaching their daughters about menstruation and sex, so-called educational films were created and shown routinely in public schools to girls. These films, created and funded by menstrual product companies starting in about the 1950's, were and still are based more on indoctrination than education, because the companies use any opportunity to peddle their own wares in the films while simultaneously perpetuating cultural attitudes which encourage the need for their products. The menstrual product companies, knowing that "menstrual education is a one-shot deal," and that "menstrual instruction, unlike sex ed, often relies entirely on a curriculum created by sanitary protection companies," seize the perfect developmental opportunity to secure customers who will likely remain loyal for all of their menstrual lives (Houppert, 1999, pp.81& 65).

Therefore, while average women and girls are going about their lives attempting to conceal and forget about their experiences of menstruation, savvy menstrual products

companies, with their educational and marketing departments, are presumably collaborating freely and having uncensored discussions about menstruation and the fear and shame of the bleeding masses. Knowing that "the industry's point of view is the only one young girls hear in the schools," "the industry struggles valiantly to de-bunk one set of myths while promoting another set with more lucrative potential" (p.81). Ironically, then, sanitary protection companies, remain more reflective with regard to menstruation than those females who actually bleed, and, after having carefully plotted a commercial course, the companies produce a film which they then show to young girls who then perceive it to be *the* only perspective on puberty and menstruation.

To illustrate some of the early menstrual propaganda shown in schools to girls, Karen Houppert (1999, pp.65-69) details a black and white, landmark puberty film from 1953 entitled *Molly Grows Up.* Labeling it a "menstrual classic," Houppert describes a (presumably Caucasian) twelve-year-old Molly "with stars in her eyes" talking with two elderly neighborly ladies about a wedding she has just attended. Smitten with the romantic image of the wedding dress, Molly eventually "gaily" skips home only to sit dreamily at her sister's dresser, trying on her sister's lipstick and hat. "Stars return to Molly's eyes" as she then dreams of her having her own period while caressing a sanitary pad she finds in her sister's drawer. Houppert states, "Conveniently, viewers see the brand name- Modess, made by Personal Products Corporation." Her sister predicts that she will get her period soon, judging from the way Molly has been "acting."

The film plays out with Molly coming to the understanding that "the partys'

over," as Houppert says. The same old contradictory messages apply, i.e., go about your days as you would normally, but be certain to take special precautions. The real message for girls and women is to *act* in front of the rest of the world as if nothing has changed, but personally they must go to great lengths to conceal the dirtiness and shamefulness of menstruating.

Along with educational films, menstrual product companies produced handbooks on menstruation for young girls and mothers. They serve the same purpose as films, informing, persuading, and selling. A 1963 pamphlet produced by Personal Products Company entitled *How Shall I Tell My Daughter? is* obviously created for mothers who might be nervous or perplexed about talking about menstruation with their daughters. The dramatic title, in itself, sounds like a pronouncement of a deadly disease rather than a simple text on an aspect of female being. The content is a further reflection of old themes: "Often apprehension may be caused by those terms 'the curse,' 'unwell time,' etc. Hardly reassuring, are they? You might explain that these terribly old-fashioned terms were used long ago" (pp.16-17). 'Long ago'? As in last year or yesterday? The author, Patricia Gail Morrison, Director of Education, seems to either suffer from some kind of delusion or is attempting some rather bold brainwashing of mothers. Further examples of her persuasion include

> Years ago women squeezed their bodies into painfully tight corsets, had no modern sanitary napkins, and so they actually were uncomfortable on 'those days.' Nowadays, with comfortable sanitary napkins and better health habits, women needn't call menstruation any gloomy names. (Morrison, 1963, p.17)

Apparently women need not use ‘gloomy’ terms for menstruation, but they should stick to antiquated euphemisms such as ‘those days.’ Here, Morrison attempts to bury the physical pain and cultural rejection of menstruation in Victorian times, and acts as if the current climate of menstruation is free of the oppression of ‘years ago.’ And, like Dr. Novak, she resorts to mother-blaming for their daughters’ “imaginary pains”

> Again, remember that you are your daughter’s best or worst example. It is no coincidence that mothers who complain about menstrual pain often have daughters who develop pains, too. Mothers “too tired to move” during their periods have daughters following the same pattern. And mothers who remain cheerful and calm usually find that their daughters do, too. (Morrison, 1963, p.17)

Without overlooking the power of suggestion or modeling, could it not also be true that perhaps mother and daughter actually do have painful periods? The message is clear: a girl or woman with painful menstruations simply does not fit into the romantic advertisements of dainty, modest women in ball gowns who are supposed to be wearing Modess belts and sanitary napkins.

The accuracy of menstrual pamphlets for mothers aside, they are of little use if mothers are not socialized to talk about menstruation at all, much less with their daughters in the first place. Although the culture places the ultimate responsibility upon the mother to educate her daughter about menarche, Merskin (1999) notes that

> Scholars … have suggested that mothers often react after the fact, rather than preparing their daughters for the event, resulting in uncertainty and even trauma-

> an experience that reinforces the fundamental nature of taboo- bleeding, pain, fear, and the unknown. (Merskin, 1999, ¶16)

There is no wonder that mothers often put off "the talk," given that mothers also grow up in a culture where menstruation is ignored at best. Furthermore, currently when mothers do talk to their daughters about menstruation, it is hygiene and outward appearance, i.e., which products to use to look and smell clean that is stressed rather than sexuality. Merskin states, "Over the past century the focus on menarche has gone from reproduction to appearances" (¶18).

Strikingly, websites, the supposedly most modern commentaries on menstruation created by menstrual product companies to perform the same functions as films and booklets, use contemporary language but are remarkably similar in attitude to the older educational materials. One major difference is that the websites offer opportunities to give feedback to the companies and offer a forum for girls to "chat" with one another about their concerns. On the surface, these forums promote a sense of female community and open discussion of the forbidden topic of bleeding, which does stand in contrast to the state of isolation encouraged previously.

Two major websites, girlspace.com and beinggirl.com, sponsored by Kotex and Always/Tampax, respectively, share similar structures in that they offer information on menstruation and of course, their own products. Both sites provide a wider range of topics for girl teens to explore and to dialog about, and both sites have similar visual styles with strong colors and young, contemporary overtones. Boiled down, however, without the distractions of blaring music or fashion and beauty articles, both websites

denounce the old days of difficult, shameful menstruating, yet they still push contradictory messages about the naturalness of menstruation and the best way to hide it. They still perpetuate the fears of exposure and the shame of bleeding along with themes of embarrassment, hiding, and finding just the right "protection" from blood, odors, dirtiness, and one's self. The only difference is that the websites plant the seeds for the fears by bringing up topics such as "Most Embarrassing Moment" or questions like "How To Tell Dad" (about your period, that is) and then allow the girls, within their discussions, to do the real work of keeping the fears going. The companies merely sit back and wait for the sales to increase.

Both websites have message boards filled with pitiful pleas from young girls to "plz help" them with some problem pertaining to the concealment of their own menstruation. One excerpt from the *Period Talk* message board under "Girl Stuff" at Girlspace.com (January 19, 2006) includes

how old when you start your period	ashie011
what do you use?	Happy Living Thing
how do you u carry tampons/pads	
to the toilet if u r at school???	Lady_Scorpio
what do you do if your at your friends place	
and get your period???	Cheeky_weirdoooo
hehe	Registered
this is so embarrassing but anyway plz	
help	i_love_jem…

(http://www.girlspace.com/messageboards/ShowForum.aspx?ForumID=1)

Out of all the entries for that day, “how do you u carry tampons/pads to the toilet if u r at school???” received the most replies with 22 and had the largest number of views with a grand total of 341. The top number of views on remaining entries does not exceed 132 for that day. The answers to this dilemma include

pockets, purse

u could carry a purse and hide them in there, or u could put it in ur jacket while carrying it or in the pocket or ur jacket or pants

put a tampon/pad in your lunch bag so that way, on your way to lunch, u can stop in the bathroom, change your tampon/pad that u got from your lunch bag and no one will know…thats what i do

I have a little bag that I carry mine in!!

Here are a couple of ideas:

Put your pads or tampons in my pencil case and then take your pencil case with you to the washroom.

Carry them in your purse or a special fancy handbag.

Put them in your pocket or hide them under your shirt or jacket.

Put them in your shoe, If you use pads. It is really cushiony.

Put them in your lunch bag and change your pad/tampon at lunch

These are all the ones I can think of now. I use a majority of them and they work fine.

HOPE I HELPED!!

Only one later entry stands out from the rest, and it reads, “i either put my tampon in my bra or in the waistband strap or my thong and no one can see it. Sometimes i don’t really care and hold them in my hand because who cares if you are on your period? it just means your a healthy girl” A young woman with the on-line nickname “cool steelers gurl 86” has a strategy which she recommends to hide the fact that she is menstruating from others, but she recognizes that sometimes she catches the absurdity of her efforts and accepts herself as a bleeding ‘girl.’ The next morning, Lady_Scorpio checks the posted replies to her answers and writes “thx sooooooooo much girls u helped me a lot!!!” Given the attention she received, Lady_Scorpio must feel validated in asking her question and less alone and alienated in reading the answers. Just how much of the “who cares?” attitude she absorbs, we will never know, but it is interesting and significant that not one adult from the website ever steps in to allay the teens’ fears. That would defeat the advertising.

Similarly, beinggirl.com, “created for teens, by teens, and Always, Always, Tampax,” posts “articles” of special interest to teen girls which are supposedly written by peers. One article, “Getting Ready for the Prom,” found July 31, 2004 under the category Menstruation, has a sub-title, *On the rag…Other girls’ solutions to period problems.* Suspiciously, the “article” provides an opportunity for one girl to advise another girl, who is going to the prom on the due date of her period, to wear pantiliners and Compak tampons for the best “protection.” The dilemma is that the one girl expecting her period on prom day is contemplating wearing another dress because she does not feel safe wearing her “thin, pink” one. All the other girls chime in to encourage

her to wear her “gorgeous” dress anyway. No one mentions explicitly why she might want to change her dress. The possibility of seeing her bulky pad or the leakage of menstrual blood is only implied.

At one point, the girl with the pink dress admits her true fears to the others, “But what if I’m dancing around and my tampons go flying out of my purse and across the floor?” As wild as her fantasy sounds, it is not nearly as wild as one girl’s solution:

> I have an idea about that. When I was a sophomore I was supposed to go to a dance. I got my period and I decided not to go because I was sure everyone would know. I was using pads then too, and I was afraid that they would fall out of my purse. So my mom and I wrapped them up in wrapping paper, like presents, so that even if they fell out, or someone looked in my purse, they wouldn’t know what they were.

The girl with the concern admits, “That’s not a bad idea. I could do that, wear a pantiliner, and just check a lot to make sure my period hasn’t come.” By accepting all three suggestions in the story, she satisfies everyone, herself, Always/Tampax, and her girlfriends. She also aptly perpetuates the shame of menstruating and unrealistic fears of exposure. Just how likely could her purse “go flying” on the dance floor, showering other dancers with her tampons, and so what if someone saw that she was carrying tampons or pads? The worst they might discover is that she is human or even female. Worse yet is the pathetic, yet inventive, picture of a mother and daughter huddled together wrapping tampons and pantiliners in decorative paper so that the white missles will be mistaken as presents for someone else.

When the topic of telling her boyfriend that she is on her period emerges in the conversation, one girl finally gives some realistic, thoughtful advice. Divulging to him in the spirit of friendship makes sense, but, she says if you are sexually active and you are afraid to tell him, then "you're definitely not close enough or mature enough, to be having sex with him." When it comes to recommending sex, the girls and the website come to their senses. There can be no game-playing or product recommendation on the topic of sex. Parents might become angry and since there are no products to sell, it simply is not lucrative.

Other websites for girls looking for information about development and other teen topics do exist, but they are not nearly as easy to find. One modern, comprehensive website, magazine.gurl.com, is featured in Houppert's *The Curse* (1999) and still exists today in 2006. The site devotes a page to menstruation and describes in detail, week by week, what happens to a girl's body. Technical terms are used along with descriptions of discharge, so that the experience moves from the abstract to the concrete. If that is not explicit enough, viewers can click on a menstrual film which shows an illustrated uterus and ovaries which move through every stage of menstruation, alongside descriptions of each event. The end of the film depicts a red, cartoon tampon moving, not out of the vagina, but across the bottom of the screen near the vagina to suggest that it has absorbed menstrual fluid. Unlike the two sites previously discussed, the page is devoid of suggestions or advertisements to use particular devices such as pads or tampons. Their message boards also contain many questions from scared or confused girls, but I found no responses from fellow members which encouraged secrecy and shame.

Furthermore, the creators of the website make a point of saying that their mission is to inform only, to provide all the options, so that the girl can make her own choices. The creators have also published informational books which parallel, in greater detail and volume, the content on the site.

Apart from menstrual product company films, pamphlets, and websites, books written by independent authors have long provided information to girls and mothers about menstruation. A 1973 book entitled *Twenty-eight Days* (Elgin & Osterritter) offers some unusual cultural grounding for the menstruating girl in an interesting first chapter, "Myths, Menstruation, and Religion" (pp.1-15). Here, the beginnings of female loathing are recounted, and the remnants of which reviewed in the second chapter "Modern Myths." In 1973, authors still have to assure girls that it is okay to bathe, get hair permanents and have teeth filled during their periods (p.16). The rest of the book is filled with accurate physiological and emotional information on menstrual bleeding and is less detailed with practical aspects of bleeding than later books such as *Period.* (1981, 1991) and *The Period Book* (1996). Both books answer their own genuine girl questions such as "What if I start in the middle of my math class?" (1991) and "What if I get my period at school?" (1996) but, interestingly, the later book offers answers which encourage, rather than discourage, desperate efforts to keep menstrual bleeding a secret. In response to what to do about getting a period at school, authors Gravelle & Gravelle suggest that if the girl has bled through her underpants into her clothing she may want to "rinse her clothes out and wait until they have dried enough to put them back on" (p.85). This is an unrealistic suggestion given that rinsing out one's clothes and waiting for

them to dry could take the rest of the day. It is also unrealistic given that junior high and high school students, in reality, have no time between classes, and if the girl is that late returning to class, she is already a spectacle. The authors offer other suggestions like tying another shirt with sleeves around the girl's waist or having another girl walk directly behind the girl with the stain (pp.85-87). On the one hand, the tone of the answers encourage action and a kind of self-care, but on the other hand, these suggestions, while appearing empathic are actually inflammatory, fear-evoking, and participate in the catastrophizing of the situation, much like the menstrual product company websites.

Finally, two books provide a fresh direction for the course of menstrual education. *Life Blood: A New Image for Menstruation* (Sheffield, 1988) provides a positive, life-affirming, accepting, and beautiful portrayal of menstruation with Matisse-like illustrations (Sheila Bewley). Both the author and illustrator work collaboratively to express the world-meaning significance of menstruation in simple, yet beautiful language. With similar intention but different execution, the creators of magzine.gurl.com, write about all aspects of girlhood in *Deal With It! A Whole New Approach to Your Body, Brain, and Life as a gURL* (1999). Unlike any other text on female puberty, the writers (Drill, Mcdonald & Odes) craft a detailed, straightforward, and honest account of changing girlhood which makes a point of underlining aspects of culture which impact those changes and images of self. While other books use cartoon drawings to depict so-called serious aspects of puberty, *Deal With It!* uses playful drawings to depict further the humor even in life's "sorriest" situations. These books

provide evidence that positive, straightforward, and life-affirming interpretations of menarche and menstrual cycles are possible and that in order to achieve such interpretations, in the very least, a bracketing of old assumptions and a recognition of culture's unrelenting negative impact is necessary.

Personally, I do not remember a film in school, but I do remember a talk in which we girls were sent to a room by ourselves while the boys were sent outside to play. We were sure we had done something wrong and were about to hear a lecture. Instead, we heard all about the dry, "scientific" facts of menstruating and the "dangers" of putting our hands on boys' knees. We were also told that even though we may feel like dying from our cramps, we should go outside and run around the block for good exercise. The fact that we could see the boys outside playing from our classroom window just made matters worse. In the end, we realized that we were held more responsible in the world than the boys and I felt as if we were being punished, after all, even though we had done no wrong. We had these bodies that had to be covered and controlled and apparently we made boys think of sex just with our very being and for that, we were responsible and would be held accountable.

At this point, in my personal development and growth as a researcher, it is clear to me that whereas junior high school girls are typically subjected to an awkward talk or film about their bodies, while at the same time, boys are awkwardly left outside, literally and figuratively. They are typically distracted with another activity by teachers and left to their own imaginations and impressions. These impressions include the isolation of the girls from the boys, some kind of "serious" talk, thoughts of what-did-they-do-

wrong?, and a strange self-consciousness from the girls once the talk is over, as well as intimations of something “dirty.” The boys, like the girls, never have a chance to understand themselves or each other affirmatively with such interference.

Medicine

Medical meanings of menstruation, like all medical findings, evolve from an historical context, i.e., the context of the current, most prevalent understanding of the world which includes its perceived relationship to humans, the perceived composition of the human body, along with its function and purpose. In addition, medical understandings of female anatomy also correspond specifically, within any given historical time, to the way in which men value or de-value and how they relate to women. In other words, medical models, including medical models of menstruation, regardless of being touted as factual and objective, are actually perspectival, subjective, and politically situated, as Laws (1990) and others assert (Knight, 1991), (Ehrenreich & English, 1979), (Agonito, 1977).

Throughout the ages, men in power offer many speculations about reproduction and the phenomenon of menstruation, but even a brief peek into many of the theories reveals that the investigating men rarely, for whatever reason, resort to asking women about the basics of menstruation (Delaney et al, 1988, p.45). In part, for this reason, menstruation remains somewhat of a conundrum to doctors and professionals for a surprising number of years. Delaney et al notes that “even the scientific explanations for menstruation have been colored by the same fear and wonder of the most primitive peoples on earth” and that “the weird theories put forth in the advancement of menstrual

knowledge reveal at least as much about the men as they do about the menses" (1988, p.45). Consequently, she states,

> By the late nineteenth century-when political and social revolutions had irrevocably altered the course of world affairs and [Darwin's] *The Origin of the Species* had successfully and finally challenged man's solipsistic view of his universal worth- menstruation was still a mystery to men. (Delaney et al, 1988, p.45)

Surprisingly, Dr. Emil Novak, author of one of the oldest and most commonly revised gynecological texts, admits in his writings, to men's historical fascination and simultaneous ignorance regarding menstruation. In the first chapter of *Menstruation and its Disorders* (1921) entitled "The Superstition and Folklore of Menstruation," he asserts, "The element of mystery in the phenomenon seems to have inhibited intelligent efforts to study it" (p.1). Novak, himself, is fascinated and sets out to counter such unintelligent efforts, and includes the same chapter in his *The Woman Asks the Doctor* (1935 & 1944) series aimed at "the average intelligent woman." He summarizes,

> No function of the human body has been the object of more speculation and study than that of menstruation in the female. Up until very recent times, there was only the usual type of mediaeval speculation about the subject, with nothing of scientific study. To the ancients menstruation was presented only as a peculiar, rather offensive discharge of blood occurring at mysteriously regular periods. It is not strange that all sorts of superstitions soon enshrouded the subject, and many of these have come down to us through the centuries. (Novak,

1935 & 1944, p.8)

It is worth noting that Novak, a man, thinks it is not strange that so many superstitions surround menstruation, while Delaney, Lupton and Toth, all women, marvel that menstruation, an observable phenomenon within the context of women's lives, remains a mystery in the medical community for so long. The obvious question is why did no one bother to ask women simple questions about the aspect of their lives called menstruation? Why did no one ask if they were all menstruating at the same time? This belief, for example, along with the idea that women possessed fewer teeth, was held around the fourth-century BC by Aristotle and then perpetuated (Anderson, 2000, Vol. 1 p.28).

Similarly, in the first-century AD, Pliny the Elder, a Roman authority on natural history, contends in his writing that women bleed more heavily on the third month, an assertion which could have easily been refuted or confirmed (p.28). Pliny also succeeds in elaborating on another popular perspective of the day, i.e., the contaminating nature of menstrual fluid:

> 'Contact with it turns a new wine sour, crops touched by it become barren, grafts die, seeds in the garden are dried up, the fruit of the trees fall off, the bright surface of mirrors in which it is merely reflected is dimmed, the edge of steel and the gleam of ivory are dulled, hives of bees die, even bronze and iron are at once seized by rust, and a horrible smell fills the air; to taste it drives dogs mad and infects their bites with an incurable poison…' (Anderson, 2000, Vol. 1, p.28)

Overall, the fear-based beliefs that menstrual blood was mysterious, magical or contaminating were not easily forgotten and remained popular ideas in Europe for centuries. Despite being easily disproved, these beliefs eventually made their way into the “superstitions” of the United States, thereby perpetuating feelings of fear, loathing and shame surrounding menstruation. Consequently, one can surmise that even the level of secrecy and silence around the phenomenon of menstruation was powerful enough to keep such superstitions alive across different seas and cultures.

Despite the undeniable, historical meanings of menstrual fluid that survived centuries, the interpretation of the act or biological function of menstruation has undergone changes throughout the ages. Until the late eighteenth century, menstruating was seen as normal for a woman, given that male and female bodies were viewed as structurally similar (Tavris, 1992, p.158). At that time, woman was viewed as naturally inferior (as always), but menstruation was a natural, expected, even necessary, part of her being.

Aristotle, for example, in his writings from 347 through 322 B.C., sees woman as “a mutilated or incomplete man” and fundamentally inferior because she is lacking, compared to man, in what he called vital heat (Agonito, 1977, p.41). For Aristotle, menstruation is a sign of woman’s relative inability in “concoction” or ripening, meaning that she only cooks or ripens to the point of making menstrual blood which merely forms the embryo’s “nutritive soul” (pp.43-44). From Aristotle’s point of view, the woman’s bleeding (though natural and not morbid) is comparable to diarrhea in that both are caused by insufficient “concoction.” This idea perhaps provides an early

contribution to the idea of the evacuative “dirtiness” of menstruation itself.

By contrast, from Aristotle’s perspective, the man, possessing greater heat, can transform matter and produce semen. Semen is considered the proper end product of concoction (of course) since it has more form and shapes the spiritual soul. The woman’s blood, as it were, provides the matter, and the semen provides the form. In sum, the female always provides the material, while the male principle fashions it, shapes it, or sculpts it. Thus with Aristotle, order, structure, form, rationality, the soul itself, that which is judged as most important to human being at the time, is said to be generated by the male. Correspondingly, in later philosophical thought, man comes to represent greater being, i.e., all that is cultured, and the woman represents the lesser aspects of being including body, nature or earth (Agonito, 1977, pp.43-47).

Prior to Aristotle, many other theories of menstruation abound, and in the sixth century B.C., Pythagoras saw the menses as eliminating extra blood and as the basis for woman’s need for extra evacuation. Furthermore, Empedocles, in the fifth century B.C., thought this need for extra evacuation was because woman’s flesh is less dense than man’s, and at the same time, Parmenides thought that woman is hotter and consequently contains more blood which she must then expel. Later however, Galen, in the second century A.D., thought that menstruation eliminated juices which gathered in an idle, house-bound life.

About the same period, Soranus thought that women eliminate surplus matter through menstruation in the way men dispose of matter in athletics, presumably through perspiration. Later, in the eleventh century, the physician Avicenna and, in the

seventeenth century, Regnier de Graaf saw the womb as the weakest point of the female body and therefore the place for the excess or fermented blood to evacuate (Delaney et al, 1988, pp.46-47). Remarkably, throughout the centuries, even more outlandish theories of menstruation evolve; however, in their historical review, Delaney et al notes that most menstrual theories do contain a portion of truth:

> The lining of the womb becomes menstrual fluid unless it is needed for an embryo's nutrition, so the nutritive theory is partially vindicated. There is a sort of plethora when conception does not occur, in that the lining is no longer needed. The womb is the convenient place for the escape of this fluid. (Delaney et al, 1988, p. 48)

Moreover, as close to the truth as all the theories may have been, all are colored by personal perspectives. The authors add further,

> …nearly all menstrual theorists also imposed their own order upon their material observations, and their ordering was shaped by patriarchal preconceptions. They reasoned that menstruation was a sign of woman's otherness, hence a sign of inferiority; their next step was to rationalize this inferiority through whatever science was at their disposal. And that kind of rationalization is hardly dead in our own era. (Delaney et al, 1988, pp.48-49)

As absurd as it sounds, for centuries, menstruation was viewed as a normal part of women's inferiority, and "the idea that menstruation is a problem for women (and their families) is new to this century" (Tavris, 1992, p.158). Around the time of the Industrial Revolution, the politics between men and women shifted, and the male view

that woman is physically and spiritually different from man became prevalent. In *The Mismeasure of Woman* (1992), Tavris notes,

> In the nineteenth century…a major transformation took place in the scientific and popular views of the female body. It was no longer seen as analogous to the male body, but distinctly opposite, different. Menstruation became a symbol of that difference. (Tavris, 1992, pp.158-159)

In the social, political climate of the time, the "difference" of menstruation became yet another symbol of female inferiority and a sign of weakness. Therefore, although woman had already historically been understood as inferior to man, her physiology had also been accepted as normal (since she was the inverse of man), but when the perception of her being shifted, menstruation evolved into her symbol of weakness, a sickness, as "a monthly wound from which women must recover" (p.159). Women then, were perceived to be not only inferior beings but also abnormal, diseased, weakened, and debilitated, compared to men. Of course, the idea that men can also be viewed as significantly weak compared to women, managed to escape cultural and political popularity at that time and continues to do so. As Carol Tavris points out, historically man has been the measure of all things, including women, thus accounting for the ubiquitous and historical *Mismeasure of Woman*, the subject and title of her text (1992).

Prior to the Industrial Revolution, before the political and cultural shift in perspective with regard to women, women's bodies, and menstruation, women and men lived a rather predictable concrete existence, a life far removed from the abstracted world of the future market economy. During what Ehrenreich & English (1979) call The

Old Order, before the emergence of machines and the subsequent creation of the market economy, women and men had defined roles and duties pertaining to the survival of the family and the household. The authors note that during this time, daily lives of ordinary women and men change very little, and … "life, for the great majority of people, has a unity and simplicity which will never cease to fascinate the 'industrial man' who comes later" (p.6). Furthermore,

> This life is not marked off into different 'spheres' or 'realms' of experience: 'work' and 'home,' 'public' and 'private,' 'sacred' and 'secular.' Production (of food, clothing, tools) takes place in the same rooms or outdoor spaces where children grow up, babies are born, couples come together…Ritual and superstition affirm the unity of body and earth, biology and labor: menstruating women must not bake bread; conception is most favored at the time of spring planting; sexual transgressions will bring blight and ruin to the crops, and so on. (Ehrenreich & English, 1979, pp.6-7)

Although the governance of the family, the village, and the church was clearly patriarchal, i.e., authoritatively male, life for men and women before the Industrial Revolution was also gynocentric in that, "the skills and work of women [were] indispensable to survival" (pp.7-8). Women lived as subordinates to male elders but were in no way helplessly dependent. In fact, although most likely not always happy, women generally led full, purposeful, productive lives. They were in charge of everything pertaining to running the household, from gardening and cooking, to sewing and making soap, candles, and medicines to care for the family (p.8). More importantly,

"It was not only women's productive skills which gave her importance in the Old Order. She knew the herbs that healed, the songs to soothe a feverish child, the precautions to be taken during pregnancy"(p.8). Those women who were very skilled became midwives, herbal healers or "wise women" whose talented reputations might be known several villages away (pp.8-9). Overall, for the sake of the survival of the family and village, women's knowledge pertaining to homemaking, caretaking, and healing was expected to be passed on from mother to daughter, from one generation to the next.

However, in The New Order, once machines turned everything human into a commodity, society underwent drastic changes, "the unity of biological and economic, private and public life [was] shattered," (p.9) and women lost their vital place in the family and the community. Although women might have gained opportunities to obtain a life outside the family or village, they also lost their sense of undeniable purpose and their place or value within society. While women became displaced from their duties as caregivers, housekeepers, and healers, an emerging "masculinist" view of the world became necessary to maintain the emerging public life or market economy. Subsequently, within this masculinist view of the world, only public life pertaining to the essentially abstract economic market is considered real, and "from this vantage point, woman inevitably appears alien, mysterious" (p.18). Woman, then, no longer appreciated in society, became an outsider in light of the market economy and "a challenge to the rational scientific intellect" (p.19). Furthermore,

> Woman's body, with its autonomous rhythms and generative possibilities, appears to the masculinist vision as a 'frontier,' another part of the natural world

> to be explored and mined. A new science -gynecology- arose in the nineteenth century to study this strange territory and concluded that the female body is not only primitive, but deeply pathological. (Ehrenreich & English, 1979, p.19)

Therefore, at the time women faced social displacement, men found "woman" a question to be answered and stepped into new roles as "experts" (ironically in the same areas of daily life in which women were so learned and practiced). Men began to dictate their newly-found "expertise" to women, and particularly medicine, rather than healing, became a powerful paradigm of professional authority. Ehrenreich & English emphasize:

> …the experts had studied; they were in a position to draw on a wider range of human experience than any woman could know. But too often the experts' theories were grossly unscientific, while the traditional lore of the women contained wisdom based on centuries of observation and experience. (Ehrenreich & English, 1979, p.33)

Additionally, unlike female lay healers who willingly shared their wisdom and experience, medical experts held on tightly to their knowledge, keeping it exclusive and an elite market commodity. In Europe, a battle between female lay healing and the medical profession ensued, and eventually, peasant female lay healers were targeted and persecuted as witches. Those accused of being witches and working for the devil had experience and tested remedies for illnesses, while the university-trained physicians, who were also backed by the Church, "had little to go on but guesswork and myth" (p.37). Nevertheless, through the witch trials, the physicians established themselves on

the side of God and lawfulness, while the lay healers remained witches led by evil and magic (p.39).

The abstract world of the market economy encouraged the men who were active medical professionals to see women not as healers but primarily as patients. Women were relegated to an idle life, seen as sick by physicians, and became sick from the constraints of their life, while at the same time being romanticized as aesthetic and ornamental. Men of the market economy put all their emotional stock of the life they were not living – the real concrete bodily life – in women. In the meantime, physicians were working on their medical profession not as healers but as practitioners of heroic medicine, which had little to do with healing and much to do with powerful and drastic interventions. In sum, "…It gave the regular doctors something to do, something activist, masculine, and imminently more salable than the herbal teas and sympathy served up by rural female healers" (p.47).

Ironically, in nineteenth century romantic America, women who had been the original healers were barred from entering the field of medicine. By their own theory, doctors (men) had to take over the female body to save delicate woman from the gross world of the body and specifically, the indelicacy of the vagina. Women, of course, had and do still possess much more natural experience of 'blood and mire' (p.64):

> Even the most sheltered Victorian lady, never mind the working-class mother struggling to raise her family in a one- or two-bedroom tenement apartment-knew something of 'blood and mire.' A woman necessarily encounters blood more often than a man, not counting surgeons and soldiers. Mothers know much

> more about mire and bad smells, even if they are cushioned by servants, then [sic] businessmen and professors. The romantic argument against women in medicine seemed to say that even the sphere in which women were expected to inhabit was too rough for them- as if menstruation, childbirth, defecation, etc. were too undignified for a lady to experience. (Ehrenreich & English, 1979, p.64)

As a matter of "protection" then, official knowledge of the body, especially the territory of the vagina, was removed from women and redirected to the sphere of medical professionalism. Furthermore, since women were viewed as basically inanimate beings, i.e., ladies and too delicate to inhabit the harsh world of medical training and practice, any woman who dared to enter such a man's world and succeed was viewed as a "freak," as 'strong-minded' and 'monstrous' in her aspirations (p.65).

Given that the ideal female during the Romantic era was idle, ornamental, and languid, this meant, from the medical point of view, that femininity itself was a disease. Medical theories from late nineteenth century to early twentieth century perceived the natural, physiological state of woman as sick. Furthermore,

> Menstruation, that perennial source of alarm to the male imagination, provided both the evidence and the explanation. Menstruation was a serious threat throughout life- so was the lack of it…Popular advice books written by physicians took on a somber tone as they entered into 'the female functions' or 'the diseases of women.' (Ehrenreich & English, 1979, p.110)

One such advice book, *The People's Medical Advisor* (1895), features an entire

section devoted to “Woman and Her Diseases” (pp.684-771). The later portion of this section is devoted to patient testimonials to Dr. Pierce’s treatments and potions (pp.727-771), and twenty-one of the featured female patients state “Female Weakness” as their primary complaint. The symptoms of “Female Weakness” include, but are not limited to, inability to walk, loss of appetite, loss of weight, abdominal or menstrual heaviness or pains, headaches, persistent tired feeling, inability to sleep, weakness of voice, and an overall inability to “work.” The symptoms given again and again closely resemble the symptoms of a person despairing or depressed, much like the real-life depictions of “The Woman Problem” by Ehrenreich & English (1979, pp.1-5). Of course, the medical advisor misses such a similarity. Many of the women speak of “female troubles,” “poorly sick females,” the “female complaint,” and “weakly women,” as taken-for-granted truths. Additionally, one husband who wrote in for his wife describes her with authority as having had “all other complaints that the female is heir to” (Pierce, 1895, p.770). Strikingly, there is no portion of the book devoted to “Men and His Diseases,” and there are no remarks from men complaining of their own kind of “weakness.” Women, however, are clearly problematic.

In case the reader misses this point, the book also states, “Nine out of ten women are troubled more or less by weakness and diseases peculiar to their sex” (Pierce, 1895, p.681). The good Doctor Pierce also depicts the female as so fragile that “Acute Suppression of the Menses may be caused by *strong emotions*, as excessive joy, or by violent *excitement* of the *propensities*, as intense anger, sudden fright, fear, or anxiety” (p.690). Moreover, “Suppression may result from sudden exposure to the cold,

immersion of the hands or feet in cold water, drinking cold water when the body is heated, sitting on the cold ground or damp grass, or from a burn or wound" (p.690).

Almost fifty years later, *The Modern Home Physician* (Robinson Ph.C., M.D., Editor, 1942) asserts that although women may announce during their menstrual period that they are 'unwell,' as was once assumed, the doctor declares that this is actually not the case. At this point, he says, the menstruating woman should recognize that menstruation is "a physiological process and calls for no great change in ordinary habits" (Robinson, 1942, p.497). Unable to shake this idea of inherent female sickness, the doctor then immediately contradicts this assertion and gives a rather lengthy course of action for the presumably fragile female:

> A moderate amount of open-air exercise is more beneficial than otherwise, but chilling of the feet and legs should be avoided as far as possible. Baths, provided they are not cold, may be taken throughout the period. (Robinson, 1942, p.497)

In reality, the social conventions involved in being female during the Romantic era such as wearing rib-breaking and organ distorting corsets, along with practice of sipping arsenic, combined with a susceptibility to tuberculosis and the issue of no reliable means of birth control, left women of the day more vulnerable to illness and death than modern women (Ehrenreich & English, 1979, p.112). As a result of the New Order, however, women were either encouraged to lie around and wallow in their noble nothingness, becoming sicker by the day, or if faced with the affliction of being working class women, they had to toil in the fields and factories anyway, despite their inherent pathological state of being.

During the late nineteenth century, as the professional base of medicine expanded, doctors emerged as members of the scientific community, and since at that time science was associated with goodness and morality, the new doctors considered themselves moral reformers to their patients and not just doctors. Popular health books such as Pierce's *The People's Common Sense Medical Advisor* (1895), and Emil Novak's *The Woman Asks the Doctor* (1935 & 1944) freely offer advice, or rather dictate, to patients on a variety of topics ranging from the evils of masturbation, contraception, and abortion to choosing suitable underwear, recommending the number of hours to work and the kinds of activities to engage in while menstruating.

In addition, with regard to 'The Woman Problem,' new doctors applied their scientific objectivity to the true nature of woman, along with "the sources of her frailty and the biological limits of her social role" (Ehrenreich & English, 1979, p.116). For them, in the natural order of all things, everything had its place, and woman's place or purpose was to reproduce the species. Being sexual, of course, had nothing to do with her purpose, and "was seen as unwomanly and possibly detrimental to the supreme function of reproduction" (p.121). Furthermore, the uterus and ovaries did nothing to reduce sexual desire which stemmed from the brain, and in fact, these organs contributed to this unattractive problem of female lust. Whereas neither organ could tame the sexual desires in the minds of women, "they were still sufficiently in control to be blamed for all female disorders, from headaches to sore throats to indigestion" (p.122). The organs of woman's central purpose were seen as the origin of any disease, and so for any given malady, a woman's reproductive organs were targeted, treated, and

subject to removal. Hence,

> To the doctors it seemed as if a new organ had entered the scene to contest for power- the female brain. Nineteenth-century gynecology became absorbed in the combat between the brain and the uterus for dominion over the female persona. (Ehrenreich & English, 1979, p.126)

As a result of this shift in perspective, doctors began to experiment more freely with treatment of the culprits of women's diseases. At the time, standard treatment for women's troubles (which could have been any kind of symptom) may include one or all of the following: "a manual investigation," 'leeching' (of the vulva or neck of the uterus) 'injections' (into the uterus), and 'cauterization' with nitrate of silver or hot steel (p.123). Additionally, "in the second half of the century, these fumbling experiments with the female interior gave way to the more decisive technique of surgery- aimed increasingly at the control of female personality disorders" (p.123). Clitoridectomies, ovariotomies, and later, hysterectomies, were performed repeatedly on middle and upper class women, in an effort to "treat" their ailing brains which thought like women. Although lower class and black women could not afford to pay for doctors' treatments, they did not escape victimization and were instead used as targets for experimentation (pp.124-125). At the end of the nineteenth century, the medical profession continued to depict woman as pictures of invalidism and insanity.

From a medical and social perspective, women were seen as too frail and too unstable to engage in most aspects of life and were certainly too dainty, and unstable to enter medical schools. Women's being was best meant for being a patient. Higher

education for women had exacerbated their insanity by encouraging them to have interests apart from reproducing, and education had been correlated with the greater number of women than men in mental institutions and had been singled out as the reason for the population drop of “better” classes of people (pp.134-135). Furthermore, menstrual irregularity became a sign of women’s fluctuating sanity and the on-going focus of medical expertise. Medical advice books of the day pondered every so-called predicament involved with a women having and not having her period: “Menstrual irregularity upset the doctor’s sensibilities as much as female sexuality. Both were evidences of spontaneous, ungovernable forces at work in the female flesh” (p.128). As a result of the persistent dissection of female being by medicine and the new field of psychology, women were often left with symptoms and diagnoses of neurasthenia and hysteria.

Correspondingly, if conditions like neurasthenia and hysteria could not be cured by treating the culprits, the reproductive organs themselves, then doctors were left with no alternative other than to treat the minds of female patients afflicted. The Rest Cure became popularized by Dr. S. Weir Mitchell and involved removing the woman from her home, isolating her from all friends and relatives, confining her forcibly to a bed, feeding her only bland food, massaging her for an hour a day and restricting her to communicating only with nurses and her doctor (p.131). Unlike previous gynecological cures which were often horribly painful, The Rest Cure became popular because it did not cause pain. Female invalidism, as it were, became epidemic, and more and more men, including doctors, became frustrated that women were not fulfilling their duties as

wives and mothers. Hostility towards women grew, and the idea that afflicted women were malingering became professionally widespread.

In response to the perception of being inherently sick, women had few options within their sick lives and from their own sick beds. Doctors and husbands began to suspect that women were merely opting out of having a sexual relationship with them and escaping caring properly for their children, which given the circumstances of their lives was a likely possibility. Similarly, Ehrenreich & English cite historian, Carroll Smith-Rosenburg's interpretation of hysteria which places the hysterical fit as some women's "only acceptable outburst- of rage, of despair, or simply of *energy*-possible" within the culture (138). With more and more women lapsing into hysteria, doctors' hostility grew. Mitchell's Rest Cure, in fact, spawned from his desire to give women "a drawn-out experience of invalidism," a heavy dose of what they were suffering from in order that they would snap themselves out of their mode of refusal to fulfill their duties (p.136). Whether or not malingering was an original component of Mitchell's theory of hysteria, the consensus between gynecology and psychology was that hysteria was a mental disorder and should be treated as such. Correspondingly, Freud sought to cure hysteria with his treatment, Psychoanalysis.

Finally, whereas the New Order initially made medical doctors the dominating experts in the lives of women, Psychoanalysis in the twentieth century invited psychologists and psychiatrists to replace them (p.140). Even still,

> For decades into the twentieth century doctors would continue to view menstruation, pregnancy and menopause as physical diseases and intellectual

> liabilities…The female reproductive organs would continue to be viewed as a kind of frontier for chemical and surgical expansionism, untested drugs, and reckless experimentation. (Ehrenreich & English, 1979, p.140)

As the practice of scientific medicine evolved and developed in the twentieth century, the dominating view of the world, i.e., industrialized society, began to make a distinct appearance in the medical models and metaphors of the human body (Martin, 1992, p.36). Remnants of this model are evidenced by descriptions of particular cells of the body as "factories" contributing to the whole of the organism, a representation of the whole of society. Earlier medical models made use of Market Economy metaphors, likening physiological processes to losses and gains in business, reflecting "nineteenth century's concern with conserving energy and limiting expenditure" (pp.34-35). Depending upon the perspective, women foolishly wasted energy physiologically and men wisely saved or men actively spent energy while women passively and lazily conserved their energy. Despite the passage of time and better understandings of anatomy and physiology, the old saving-expenditure metaphor remains, but in an advanced form where "economic functions of greater complexity have been added" (p.37). Therefore, in essence, just as society's understanding of how the world works changed, so too did the medical metaphors of the human body. Throughout the years, the language and structure of the metaphors reflect scientists' and society's interests and preoccupations.

Therefore, based on this understanding, it is logical that more contemporary perspectives of the human body borrow from a signal-response system of

communication. This arrangement of the human body arose from new twentieth-century discoveries about the brain and central nervous system, information science, management and control. It is important to note that this signal-response model is "organized hierarchically, not a committee reaching decisions by mutual influence," and it is this power structure which makes a strong and lasting appearance in medical metaphors (pp.40-41). Emily Martin notes that this top-down theory of control is a reflection of the notion of the body as a "hierarchical information-processing system" which sets up the idea that menopause, for example, is a negative event, "a kind of failure of the authority structure in the body" (pp.42 & 45). From a referencing text, she cites,

> The cause of ovarian 'decline' is the 'decreasing ability of the aging ovaries to respond to pituitary gonadotropins.' At every point in this system, functions 'fail' and falter. Follicles 'fail to muster the strength' to reach ovulation. As functions fail, so do members of the system decline: 'breasts and genital organs gradually atrophy,' 'wither,' and become 'senile.' (Martin, 1992, p.42)

Likewise, Martin notes that menstruation is perceived within the same physiological top-down paradigm of failed production, or failed conception, and this idea contributes to its negative cultural perception. According to this view, every time an egg is released, the ultimate goal must be successful fertilization. Of course, not every egg which is released will be fertilized, but medical theory and texts traditionally describe menstruation as failure to produce, the big disappointment. From the standpoint of industrialization, within a world which has become dependent upon the

production work of factories, not producing the end product is cause for worry. Martin emphasizes,

> Menstruation not only carries with it the connotation of a productive system that has failed to produce, it also carries the idea of production gone awry, making products of no use, not to specification, unsalable, wasted, scrap. However disgusting it may be, menstrual blood will come out. Production gone awry is also an image that fills us with horror. Amid the glorification of machinery common in the nineteenth century were also fears of what machines could do if they went out of control. (Martin, 1992, p.46)

Menstruation, from this standpoint, is the very symbol of production knocked off its course and the failure to produce a baby. In relation to women's real lives, however, menstruation falls outside of categories like industry and production. Menstruation simply is what it is in relation to women's lives, and it experiences a certain distortion when compared to any other phenomenon, particularly any predominately male phenomenon. To illustrate, Martin states,

> Perhaps one reason the negative image of failed production is attached to menstruation is precisely that women are in some sinister sense out of control when they menstruate. They are not reproducing, not continuing the species, not preparing to stay at home with the baby, not providing a safe, warm womb to nurture a man's sperm. I think it is plain that the negative power behind the image of failure to produce can be considerable when applied metaphorically to women's bodies. (Martin, 1992, p.47)

Other highly negative terms such as degenerate, decline, withdrawn, spasms, lack, weakened, leak, deteriorate, discharge, and repair are used metaphorically in descriptions of menstruation and menopause. These terms are not at all neutral, because they convey failure and dissolution and demonstrate that "unacknowledged cultural attitudes can seep into scientific writings through evaluative words" (p.48). The average or natural attitude of the reader and the medical community is to argue that these terms simply fit the phenomenon, do not represent a biased view, but rather are objectively given. Martin contends, however, that a convincing counterargument insists that other organs that renew themselves through shedding a lining, such as the stomach and the skin, are described simply as engaging in a periodic renewing with no extensive commentary on decay, dissolution, weakening, or deterioration (pp.49-50). Furthermore, popular culture resorts to positively portraying exfoliation of the skin, the largest organ, by declaring that sloughing the dead skin away exposes the radiant new skin cells. Thus,

> One can choose to look at what happens to the lining of stomachs and uteruses negatively as breakdown and decay needing repair or positively as continual production and replenishment. Of these two sides of the same coin, stomachs, which women *and* men have, fall on the positive side; uteruses, which only woman have, fall on the negative.
>
> One other analogous process is not handled negatively in the general physiology texts. Although it is well known to those researchers who work with male ejaculates that a very large proportion of the ejaculate is

> composed of shedded cellular material, the texts make no mention of a shedding process let alone processes of deterioration and repair in the male reproductive tract. (Martin, 1992, p.50)

Although in her research and writing, Martin refers to texts from the 1980's, her conclusions are still relevant today. For example, in the 2002 edition of *Novak's Gynecology*, one of the most commonly used medical texts, all the old language of failure, lost pregnancy, collapse, breakdown, shedding, and tissue destruction is fully present. Therefore, the notion of menstruation as failed production is still alive in the medical culture (pp.162-163).

Moreover, the structure depicted is also clearly hierarchical, as Martin asserts; however, Novak's hierarchy includes the portrayal of an intricate competition, a virtual war, among the cohort of ovulatory follicles, of which only one can become the "single dominant follicle" (p.167). Novak's descriptions fit the aggressive, current-day cultural trend toward winner-takes-all. Each follicle is portrayed as threatened within an environment of scarcity, as fighting for its life, against the other follicles. For example,

> …The falling FSH level that occurs with the progression of the follicular phase represents a threat to continued follicular growth. The resulting adverse environment can be withstood only by follicles with a selective advantage for binding the diminishing FSH molecules; that is, those with the greatest number of FSH receptors. The dominant follicle, therefore, can be perceived as the one with a richly estrogenic microenvironment and the most FSH receptors (75). As it grows and develops, the follicle continues to produce estrogen, which results

> in further lowering of the circulating FSH and creating a more adverse environment for competing follicles. This process continues until all members of the initial cohort have suffered atresia, with the exception of the single, dominant follicle. The stage is then set for ovulation… (Berek, 2002, pp.166-167)

Here, the text boldly depicts each follicle as if it were a soldier going to war, wearing a helmet, ready to use a bayonet against the enemy. In other words, the language here is distinctly, historically male. The metaphors indeed engage failed production, but do so with a twist, against the backdrop of modern Capitalism, Rugged Individualism, and Corporate America. The ideal goal of pregnancy is ever-present in its description of menstruation, and furthermore the follicles' journey to become top-egg is also depicted as a kind of racing to succeed, a cutthroat competition, seen in the likes of Donald Trump's boardroom in the "reality" television show *The Apprentice*. In fact, much of the language used and the scenes depicted might easily be found on any of today's reality shows such as *Survivor, The Biggest Loser, America's Next Top Model, Project Runway, Dancing with the Stars, America's Top Chef*, just to name a few. Current-day television programs also reflect the culture's obsession with production and being top-producing dog. In Novak's text, it is assumed that every follicle is in a race and that only the top egg follicle has the chance for the great success, i.e. fertilization and implantation.

Furthermore, an arbitrary hierarchy of importance is established within this discourse on competition and success, in which there is no consideration for the fact that

non-dominant follicles, and eggs not released are also a part of an intricate cooperative total body system. Additionally, the notions of pregnancy as success and menstruation as failed conception, obscure the lived reality for individual women since pregnancy cannot always be the goal. The ideal goal of success as only pregnancy sets up an impossible position for real women, because it eliminates the possibility for any other personal meanings for menstruation; in essence the idea of success and pregnancy are merged and menstruation is reduced to nothing but failed production. Of course, implicit in the discussion of failed production and the identity of success with pregnancy, i.e., the negative view of menstruation and menopause, is the assumption that the purpose of female being is nothing but reproduction (Tavris, 1992, p.161). Traditionally, this has been the dominant male understanding or purpose of female being.

Furthermore, historically, male attitudes manifested through science and professional medicine have dictated that the female body is always in some kind of failure, failure to be exactly what the male perception expects. This notion of the insufficient female body, the one that needs “fixing and tuning to protect itself from itself” has led to, among other treatments, hysterectomies for the “unnecessary uterus” and hormone replacements for estrogen ‘deficiency.’ When a woman’s particular organs begin to fail or break down, the prevailing medical attitude and action has been to simply get rid of said organ (p.161). Tavris notes that as late as 1981, The World Health Organization defined menopause as Estrogen Deficiency Disease, and this of course, prompted doctors to recommend HRT (Hormone Replacement Therapy). Overall then,

it is important to realize that the female body will always be lacking from a particular male point of view, even when the point of view is disguised as “objective science” or “empirical research.”

One example of such a viewpoint is the book, *Is Menstruation Obsolete?,* (Coutinho, 1999) which begins by presupposing that “suppressing menstruation, particularly by continuous oral contraceptive use or other hormonal methods, has remarkable health advantages” (p.ix). The author’s desire to push menstruation into obsolescence is meant to be understood as altruistic, as his subtitle states: *How suppressing menstruation can help women who suffer from anemia, endometriosis, or PMS.* Coutinho’s contention is that modern women bleed more often than necessary due to multiple factors, including an increase in younger menarches, longer delays to have children, and overall fewer pregnancies. He asserts that women of one hundred years ago had fewer than fifty menstrual cycles in a lifetime, while women of today may experience more than four-hundred, *needlessly*. He argues that “It is reasonable to assume that at the dawn of the human epoch women menstruated rarely or not at all- it would have been extraordinary for a woman to menstruate regularly” (p.2). Yet, if it were true that women ‘menstruated rarely or not at all,’ how is it that, according to Coutinho (pp.35-54), menstruation became the original “inspiration” behind the practice of therapeutic bloodletting, which, ironically medical experts “heroically” employed to the point of homicide until the early twentieth century (Ehrenreich & English,1979, p.46). And if it were true that women barely menstruated, why is it that throughout history men have been so preoccupied with menstruation that they have attempted again

and again to dissect it, define it, and now, in Coutinho's case, put an end to it? His basic logic does not follow.

In light of his contention, however, Coutinho traces the roots of many contemporary diseases and female discomforts to the idea that women are now menstruating too much, so menstruating less would be healthier and medically sounder. Furthermore, the elimination of bleeding altogether would liberate women from the physical and emotional restrictions of having a period. However, in an article on menstrual suppression which The Society for Menstrual Cycle Research posted on its internal email, author Lianne George (*The End of the Period*, 2005, found on www.macleans.ca) aptly quotes endocrinologist Dr. Jerilynn Prior who speaks to the idea of menstrual suppression as female liberation:

> The argument for cessation of periods is couched in feminist notions of choice and control, but you can't truly have either when you don't have all of the information, the regulatory bodies aren't demanding it, and the pharmaceutical stands to make billions by pushing the drug through…(George, 2005, ¶18)

Another problem with Coutinho's proposal to end "medically unnecessary" menstrual cycles is that the idea is fundamentally rooted in the belief that the only significance of menstruation is related to pregnancy. The only way his argument is possible is if menstruation is considered not as an aspect of woman's way of being, but merely as a function of clearing the uterus to produce babies; for the rest, it is only a health hazard. All other meanings of menstruation are dismissed early in the book as myths, fairy tales, and sentimental ideas. Furthermore, the assumption that '…periods

serve no other function than reproduction – and that you can isolate them from every other system in the body,' "is preposterous," says George (2005, ¶13). She emphasizes Dr. Prior's points,

> 'Menstruation, this amazingly intricate, carefully crafted cycle, is a vital sign of our health. To wantonly disrupt it is a horrifying thought. Regulatory bodies are saying, "We approved the original pill, so this must be okay. It's just taking the pill more frequently." But even the original pill probably contains negatives that we still don't know about.' (George, 2005, ¶13)

Here, overall, "medical meanings" triumph over both tradition and the experience of both men and women, and this becomes an absurd reification of the idea that the woman low on estrogen, either menstruating or menopausal, is suffering from an estrogen deficiency disease. Nonetheless, this absurdity remains typical of the history of ideas that see the normal body/mind of the woman as always somehow defective, deficient, needing tampering with, fixing, or medical improvement.

Significantly, in his book on menstrual suppression, Dr. Coutinho boasts of his history of helping to develop the controversial, injectable three-month contraceptive DepoProvera as well as The World Health Organization's endorsement of the drug "for long-term use, declaring it safe and effective as a contraceptive" (1999, pp.8-11). Touted by Coutinho as "approved all over the world," and "in wide use," the very symbol of modern medicine (1999, p.10), George notes that it has also been linked to a number of serious illnesses in women, specifically significant bone density loss (2005, ¶11).

Finally, the very title of Dr. Coutinho's book suggests an absurdity which is easy to overlook, that is, whether or not an aspect of being could fall into obsolescence. As Geraldine Matus, notes, it "is a bit like asking whether being a woman is obsolete" (2005 ¶26). Challenging those who are still foolish enough to support menstruation because it is "natural," Coutinho argues,

> The logic is that things natural, such as pain, physical or mental impairment, or even disease, should be accepted simply because they are natural…Instead of recognizing the uselessness of periodic bleeding, some doctors and scientists still seek to attribute advantages that it might bring to women's health. (Coutinho, 1999, p.137)

And there it is again- the assumption and assertion that menstruation is like a man's version of pain always to be eliminated, and represents physical and mental instability and even disease. Remarkably, no one is suggesting to men or researching the possibility that ejaculation at all is somehow unhealthy and should be abolished by medical means. Matus, a holistic reproductive health care practitioner featured in George's article, proposes an equal absurdity:

> I could say, "Men don't need to ejaculate. It's messy; it means a loss of essential nutrients; it's embarrassing when you have a wet dream and your mother comes in. So take a pill and suppress it." But that would change everything about how he works. And they'd probably burn us at the stake if we suggested it. But *that's* how ridiculous this is. (George, 2005, ¶26)

Alternatively, standing in direct contrast to the traditional, medical disease-

model accounts of menstruation, female physiology, and female being are the authors of *OurBodies, Ourselves* (1998) and *Women's Bodies, Women's Wisdom* (1998). Both texts are written as guidebooks for women and women's health and, unlike the old home medical advisors previously cited, are meant to actively engage women to look after their own interests, sexuality, and mental and physical health. Refreshingly, both texts, from their own perspectives, break much different ground with regard to the treatment and status of women, and intentionally set out to create a different medical resource which honors and respects woman's particular kind of being over and against old understandings.

Our Bodies, Ourselves, first published in 1970, was the product of a grass-roots women's health movement, The Boston Women's Health Book Collective, and "grew out of a course by and for women about health, sexuality, and child-bearing" (p.21). Written from the perspective of "hundreds of women's experiences,"

> it places women's experiences within the social, political, and economic forces that determine all of our lives, thus going beyond individualistic, narrow, 'self-care' and self-help approaches, and views health in the context of the sexist, racist, and financial pressures that affect far too many girls, women, and families adversely. (The Boston Women's Health Book Collective, 1998, p.21)

In light of this, in a chapter entitled, "Understanding our bodies: Sexual Anatomy, Reproduction, and the Menstrual Cycle" (p.269), menstruation is described as one of the stages in the reproductive life cycle (pp.276-285). Nowhere does the writing's content or tone assume that reproduction is the overall purpose of woman's being. To reproduce

or not to reproduce remains one of the choices in a woman's life which is left up to the individual woman. Furthermore, the intent behind the depictions and explanations of sexual and reproductive anatomy and physiology is to educate women so that reproduction remains a choice, rather than a duty or an outcome from ignorance. From this perspective, menstruation is neither "failed production" nor "failed conception," but rather, *one* of the paths that a woman's body can and most frequently does take.

Additionally, the text offers medical descriptions of the processes involved in menstruation, along with concrete, realistic depictions of the sensations a woman might feel in order that she may identify stages of her own cycle. For example,

> Each month, during our reproductive years, ten to 20 follicles begin maturing under the influence of hormones (see the Appendix for more details). Usually only one develops fully. Our bodies reabsorb the others before they complete development…At ovulation, the follicle and the ovarian surface open over the egg, allowing it to float out. About this time, some women feel a twinge or cramp in the lower abdomen or back, sometimes with a small amount of extra vaginal discharge, perhaps bloody. The symptoms can be severe enough to be confused with appendicitis or ectopic pregnancy. This is *Mittelschmerz* ('middle pain'). (The Boston Women's Health Book Collective, 1998, p.276)

Furthermore, the ebb and flow of the hormones estrogen and progesterone are portrayed as participants in the whole reproductive system, and whereas there is repeated use of the term *signal*, the traditional sense of hierarchy and the final rule by the brain is absent:

> During the reproductive part of a woman's life, baseline levels of all the sex hormones are continuously produced. In addition to those levels, there are fluctuations that establish the menstrual cycle. The main organs involved in the cycle are the *hypothalamus* (a part of the brain), the *pituitary* (also a part of the brain, located above the roof of the mouth), and the *ovaries*. (Both the pituitary and the ovaries are glands.) The hypothalamus signals the pituitary, which then signals the ovaries, which in turn signal the hypothalamus (feedback). The signaling is done by hormones secreted by the different organs and carried from one part of the body to another through the blood. (The Boston Women's Health Book Collective, 1998, p.284)

Here, cooperation amongst organs and systems, rather than rule of one organ, is the difference between the above narrative account of menstruation and Dr. Novak's traditional portrayal. Finally, overall health, diet, exercise, cultural attitudes (including blatant mention of cultural "taboos" of menstruation), and a woman's particular feelings about her cycle are considered as all part of her experience of menstruation. "Menstrual Problems" such as pain, are seriously addressed rather than being attributed to women's tendency to dramatize or complain. Practical, product advice is offered along with an overview of "home remedies" which address food, sleep, and exercise (pp.280-285). In sum, *Our Bodies, Ouselves* is not at all like traditional medical advice books for women.

In a similar spirit, but much different form, in her popular book, W*omen's Bodies, Women's Wisdom: Creating Physical and Emotional Health and Healing* (1998), Christiane Northrup, M.D., asserts that "The state of a woman's health is indeed

completely tied up with the culture in which she lives and her position within it, as well as in the way she lives her life as an individual" (p.xxxi). She acknowledges however, that merely recognizing that culture affects a woman's health is not enough to attain wellness. Instead, a new model of health must be created, and it begins with an analysis of the influencing culture. Northrup identifies the dominant ideas in Western culture as an addictive system.

Overall, in an addictive system, she says, the body is considered to be subordinate to the brain and its dictates of reason, much like the hierarchical medical metaphors of production and corporate business. Human beings learn to think over or ignore their bodily feelings of fatigue, hunger, discomfort, or a simple need for caring and nurturing. Furthermore, prevailing ideas of Western culture condition us to see our own bodies as adversaries, particularly when the body is giving us messages that we do not want to hear, such as the fact that we need to slow down, get more sleep or eat better food. Northrup emphasizes, "The culture often tries to kill the body-as-messenger along with its message. Yet our own body is the best health system we have – if we know how to listen to it" (p.9).

Additionally, especially for women, Northrup contends that it is important to recognize that the addictive system is created by a history of patriarchal traditions and that, as such, it always favors an externalizing, authority-dominated view. In sum, predominating cultural views ignore women's experience and wisdom, as do the practices of traditional medicine. Moreover, within this perspective, three so-called truths prevail: "disease is the enemy," "medical science is omnipotent," and "the female

body is abnormal" (pp.7-12). Disease then, is seen as "'the enemy' to be eliminated at all costs," rather than as a "messenger trying to get our attention" (p.9), and women are taught to look outside themselves because doctors always know more about their bodies than they do (p.9). Finally, "health practitioners and women alike view even normal bodily functions such as menstruation, menopause, and childbirth as medical conditions requiring treatment," thus medicalizing women's bodies before they are even born (p.11).

She also reminds women that their psyches are intimately related to the functions of her ovaries throughout menstruation. For example, before ovulation, women tend to be outgoing and upbeat, and during ovulation women are more receptive to others, mimicking the path of the follicle and egg, and after ovulation, women become more inward and reflective. The inward and reflective period is considered the premenstrual period, and it is the time when women are naturally more attuned to that which is most important in their lives. Thus, feeling sensitive or becoming "emotional" is related to reconnecting with one's self and possibly questioning or re-evaluating one's current life choices. Northrup contends that when women are considered "bitchy," it is that they are reacting spontaneously to people or situations in their lives which, ordinarily they have emotionally cut themselves off from or merely tolerated.

Additionally, within her understanding and drawing on Friedan's concept of "the feminine mystique," since women have been taught to put the needs of others first, women historically become stuck in lives devoted to children and husbands and neglect time and projects for themselves. Given this situation, when such women become

"premenstrual," they naturally become in touch with those numbed aspects of their being. From Northrup's perspective, bouts of crying, then, are not for "no reason" but relate to feelings of loss and sadness, and likewise, irritability, intolerance, or anger are a result of getting in touch with previously denied experience. When women suddenly refuse to be taken for granted, treated like servants, or have their feelings ignored, they act out of alignment with familial and societal expectations. Society and family members, then, respond as if women have suddenly lost their minds, whereas, the opposite statement is likely closer to the truth. The truth is that when women take their own concerns seriously, they have suddenly regained a kind of self-valuing consciousness.

Additionally, according to Northrup's understanding, the more a woman is out of touch with herself, the more she will suffer premenstrually, which includes emotional and physical discomforts. She states, "Even though our bodies and minds may not express these issues and concerns as they would in the first part of our cycle- on our so-called good days- our inner wisdom is clearly asking for our attention" (p.109). By the same token, we can reason that men who routinely disregard and take for granted the women in their lives are apt to influence women to have more noticeable and more severe cases of so-called Premenstrual Syndrome. Further, these women are also more likely to go to doctors for their "symptoms" and are more likely to be diagnosed with the illness PMS. Consequently, they are the also likely to identify with the diagnosis, label themselves as crazy or sick, thus fulfilling the prophecy of the culture. The men in their lives are also, in most probability, the same kind of men who enjoy making PMS

jokes as a further way to degrade menstruation, providing another point of access for demeaning women and keeping them at a lower status in the culture. Thus, the women in their lives, feeling more discounted and even less understood, develop even more pronounced “symptoms” of PMS, perpetuating the cycle of the diseased female.

In order to heal, then, Northrup proposes that women must reclaim their own authority and the authority of their own best health system (their natural body). Women (and men) need to dethrone the depersonalizing pseudo-objectivity of traditional medicine. Alternatively, she proposes an attitudinal revolution in which women especially listen to their own bodies, attend reverentially to their own experiences, and value their own being and their own bodies, thus overthrowing the ancient shame and devaluing of their gendered bodies. Specifically, in relation to menstruation, Northrup asserts,

> If we are to reclaim our menstrual wisdom and honor our cyclic natures, we must at the same time acknowledge the negative attitudes that most of us have internalized concerning our menstrual cycles…..Nothing in our society—with the exception of violence and fear—has been more effective in keeping women in their place than the degradation of the menstrual cycle. (Northrup, 1998, p.113)

Unlike the traditional text books, the latest of which barely tip a hat to the idea of cultural influences, Northrup, like the authors of *Our Bodies, Ourselves*, is proposing that women give culture and their own experiences and feelings value, especially in relation to their sexuality and experiences of menstruation. Both of these women’s texts

encourage women to have a dialogue with their bodies and give their own perceptions merit, unlike traditional texts which merely dictate diagnoses and how a woman should feel. Northrup elaborates,

> We can reclaim the wisdom of the menstrual cycle by tuning into our cyclic nature and celebrating it as a source of our female power. The ebb and flow of dreams, creativity, and hormones offer us a profound opportunity to deepen our connection with our inner knowing. This is a gradual process for most women, one that involves unearthing our own personal histories and then, day by day, thinking differently about our cycles and living with them in a new way. (Northrup, 1998, p.101)

On the whole, given that menstrual cycles and bleeding are related to the contexts of women's lives, when a woman experiences some difficulty, "menstrual blood, especially when it comes at an unscheduled time, is a message" (pp.144-145). Instead of seeing unusual menstruation as an irritant or an intrusion in one's life, within this new frame of reference, it is beneficial to pay attention to its patterns, examine one's feelings, and note when it first arrived, thus examining it in context. In her book, Northrup takes many individual cases of menstrual disturbance and looks at the women and their situation from an inclusive point of view and then offers the least intrusive medical testing, if necessary, medical and home remedy treatments as well as recommendations and exercises to improve the woman's relationship to her emotional, spiritual, and bodily health.

Finally, touching on a topic that traditional home medical advisors speak freely

about, Northrup discusses the real road to healing which involves talking with daughters (and other women) in a truly supportive attitude about individual experiences of menstruation and the negative attitudes that exist around female bodies and menstruation. She emphasizes, "*Clearly, we cannot take our daughters into a space where we have never been.*" The remedy, then, is to first provide for ourselves our own healing and our own menstrual wisdom (p.161).

Over the centuries, women's bodies and subsequently, women's being, have been hypothesized about, grossly misunderstood, faintly grasped, poked, prodded, cauterized, judged as the inverse of the men, similar to but inferior to men, the opposite of men, seen as healers, witches, broken, and then diseased because of their difference from men. We have seen at least two medical perspectives which take for granted that women are unique and simultaneously legitimate in their mental, spiritual, and physical being. What would happen if all of the culture, including the traditional medical world, regarded women's reproductive processes as the accepted norm? *In the Mismeasure of Women*, (1992) Carol Tavris asks this question, and then thoughtfully fills in the answer.

> If the female reproductive process were regarded as the norm in this society, ways of thinking and treating the female body would be entirely different… Women and men would regard changes in moods, efficiency, and good humor as expected and normal variations, not as abnormal deviations from the (impossible) male ideal of steadiness and implacability…We would, by understanding the interplay of mind and body, be better able to distinguish

> emotions that signify something important (such as family conflict that should be dealt with) from those that are momentary blips on the screen of life…We would regard the changes of menstruation and menopause as normal, not as failures, losses, deficiencies, and weaknesses…We would not confuse normal physical changes with symptoms of a disorder or a disease…We would regard surgical procedures and drugs as treatments of last resort, when medically necessary to save a woman's life or when, on balance, they will significantly improve the quality of a woman's life…Most of all, we would recognize that if hormones affect one sex, they also affect the other. (Tavris, 1992, pp.167- 169)

Historical Influences in the Perception of Women

Almost all of the areas involved in the cultural analysis, even the literature review, are grounded in a long history, going back to the beginnings of the Judaic Christian tradition on the one hand and the early Greeks on the other. These histories provide a somewhat invisible gravitational force with regard to the perception of women which also relates to the perception of menstruation as one central feature of woman's existence. As a kind of cultural a priori, this largely unrecognized and unconscious influence is a given even for theorists of sexual differences, but certainly for ordinary citizens, humorists, artists, and advertisers. Even before the existence of history in the usual sense of the documented writing of histories, the rise and fall of civilizations, wars and conquests, it is apparent that something happened to the meaning of menstruation and with it the meaning of being a woman. This can be surmised from the fact that all of the civilizations we can look at seem to share in a common discomfort with the

phenomena of menstruation and appear to develop superstitions as to its power, its potential malign influences, its closeness to magic and sorcery, its connection to the cosmic flows of energy, its relation to the moon, etc. Within the traditions rooted in Christianity, Islam, and Judaism there is, of course, the common source in the biblical Abraham. However, even before those stories were spoken or written, it appears that there must have been an even more ancient development, which set the stage for menstruation to become such a force culturally and socially.

Several authors have attempted to mine that field of prehistory imaginatively and with an anthropological eye, to capture what menstruation and the embodiment of woman must have meant in the early times of the human race. The titles of the books already tell the tale they propose: Judy Grahn's (1993) *Blood, Bread, and Roses: How Menstruation Created the World* and Chris Knight's (1991) *Blood Relations: Menstruation and the Origins of Culture*. Together, these two books weave a history of the world rooted in woman's blood and woman's being. They evoke the pre-historical consciousness of a just beginning to symbolize human kind, which begins to note certain regularities and mysterious connections in the world such as the phases of the moon and menstrual bleeding as well as the connection between blood and the creation of babies. Perhaps babies were made from the menstrual blood, and perhaps that blood gathered in the curious swelling of the belly, and perhaps birth itself with its strange blood was part of that miracle. And perhaps the woman's blood and the blood of animals as they die, bleeding and being wounded before they become food for us, are also connected. And the regularity, the rules that the woman's bleeding follows began

to be noticed as something amazing. Furthermore, myths began to arise in the women and in the men that the whole universe was tied to menstrual bleeding, not only the moon and tides but many other things as well. In all this, there was enormous power as well as 'taboo,' which also means sacred and powerful. That death could come from the wrong use of that blood – that it might kill, or give life, or make the hunt go well or badly, or be in other ways magically powerful was felt and feared.

This early symbolic beginning of differentiation of rhythms, a beginning sense of measurement with twenty-eight days of the moon and of menstruation was the origin of mathematics. Menstruation and its regularity was and is impressive – in French it is called regle, which also means rule or measure and for early humans this regularity began to bring about a measured and orderly world out of chaos. (Grahn, 1993, p. 5) Both then numerical order, regularity, following the rules, and the very powers of creation were linked in the taboo/sacred power of menstruation. As Grahn (1993) says,

> Unlike the estrus of any other primates, then, human menstruation is linked to a single, large, visible, external body. The onset of human menstruation can be measured by a cycle outside itself, and once that connection was realized, it was used to articulate other connections. Humans have a fundamental and unique tool of external-internal measurement in the synchronization of the menstrual cycle and the lunar cycle. (Grahn, 1993, p. 7)

Hence, these thinkers suggest that the origin of human separations – the making of distinctions, the development of measurement are all rooted in the phenomenon of menstruation and the way in which it set up the world. And then as this blood was

experienced as so powerful, so creative, so magical, so taboo/sacred – it led to the separation and protection of the women which eventually led to their being, as it were, systematically excluded from the powers of society, a remarkable reversal or twist of fate. That which was most powerful (hence taboo/sacred) was made into weakness and impurity. How that came to pass in pre-history can only very indirectly be documented or theoretically invented, yet these two authors have given some sense to this fear-based ancient prehistory.

Since menstruation is an essentially female experience, it must be understood from the perspective of the meaning of female existence, past and present. Throughout history, the nature of woman's being has been assigned different meanings by various influential and mostly male figures within religion, politics, science and, as already discussed, medicine. Historically, woman has been perceived as "naturally" inferior, evil, secondary, deformed, weak, mysterious, and irrational along with a multitude of other mostly pejorative and usually degrading dispositions. Every conceptualization of woman's "natural" constitution, whether religiously or scientifically ordained, has had concrete economic, social, political, religious, sexual, medical, and personal consequences for every woman and female child. From the beginning, "original sin" as documented by the bible, to the emergence of Sigmund Freud and his psychoanalytic understandings, to the transition from gendered being to ideas of "sexual equality," menstrual blood has been one of the core issues though usually unrecognized.

In other words, males or male thinking in history have always spawned general perceptions of the way in which the world and society is or ought to be configured.

Within their perceptions, men have always had a "place" for women and a commentary about her being, her body, and her blood. Her concrete bodily being, then, has traditionally become evidence for rationalizing her place in the understandings of society, the culture and the world. In *Issues of Blood: The Politics of Menstruation* (1990), Laws explains that, "…menstruation is used in our culture as the basis, the excuse, for a flexible and changing set of ideas and practices which reinforce men's power over women" (p.109). Consequently then, every theory of woman's being throughout the ages has included implicitly and explicitly a vision of the meaning of her body and the meaning of menstruation. That women bleed with rhythmic regularity is a phenomenon that marks their gender, and that has always excited the imagination, awe, fear, and sometimes horror of the men who have always been and continue to be the primary authors of her social significance.

Contrary to popular belief, a women's movement began long before the more well-known suffrage movement of the mid nineteenth century, and it related to the fact that women were stuck at home (or in the church) and limited to the company of other women. "Left to themselves, activist women of the early nineteenth century drew on each other's energy and inspiration to organize hundreds of benevolent associations, charitable institutions, and mutual-support groups" (Ehrenreich & English, 1979, p.50). Many women became fed up with the butchery and malpractice of the heroic medicine "experts" who had replaced the female lay healers, and as a result, searched for their own home remedies and more systematic ways to improve their knowledge base. Societies were formed and masses of women gathered together regularly to expand their

lives and their rights as women, as humans. “At this time in history, according to medical historian Richard Shryock, the health and feminist movements were ‘indistinguishable’ (p.51). Eventually, women would also organize to obtain the right to vote.

At one of those gatherings, the Woman’s Rights Convention of Boston, September 20, 1855, Ralph Waldo Emerson spoke on behalf of women and their right to vote (Agonito, 1978, pp.209-221). Surprisingly, the woman Emerson defended still had a “nature” similar to the woman of Hegel’s and Kant’s expectations; however, Emerson found intuition and lack of reason in a woman’s life advantageous. Emerson states,

> But the starry crown of woman is in the power of her affection and sentiment, and the infinite enlargements to which they lead…There is much in their nature, much in their social position which gives them a certain power of divination. And women know, at first sight, the characters of those with whom they converse. There is much that tends to give them a religious height which men do not attain. Their sequestration from affairs and from the injury to the moral sense which affairs often inflict, aids this. And in every remarkable religious development in the world, women have taken a leading part… (quoted in Agonito, pp.213-215)

Clearly, Emerson’s woman sits atop a pedestal, not because she is an inanimate object like the woman of Kant and Hegel, but because of her particular active, engaging “nature.” In fact, “…she has great magnanimity, she is the educator of humanity through the care of her children, she is the civilizer of mankind” (p.208).

Unlike any other philosopher (except Socrates and Plato), John Stuart Mill speaks on behalf of woman but makes no presumptions about her general nature. In his *The Subjection of Women* (1869), Mill argues that the subordination of women is wrong in itself from a utilitarian point of view and in the general defense of civil liberties. Offering a compelling historical account of the subjection of women, and ultimately likening women's experiences with slavery, Mill's essay was written in England during the early years of the feminist movement and is considered a classic feminist piece (pp. 223-224). From a utilitarian point of view, Mill asserts that "no society could hope to approach justice so long as half its people were in a state of subjection," and "As a civil libertarian Mill lamented that women were deprived of freedom and dignity" (p. 223). Further he understood that:

> What is now called the nature of women is an eminently artificial thing— the result of forced repression in some directions, unnatural stimulation in others. It may be asserted without scruple, that no other class of dependents have had their character so entirely distorted from its natural proportions by their relation with their masters… (quoted in Agonito, 1977, p. 239)

And in seeing this, he understands the extraordinary outrage that was perpetrated on women who were thus deformed through such tyrannical subjugation. Mills grasps that the way women act, is in large part, a function of their situation, and not, as so many others assert, rooted only in their given biological nature. Despite his eloquence and convincing argument, Mill's assertion that women should be afforded the same status as men did not achieve popularity and was likely overshadowed by Darwin's theory of

evolution which emerged ten years earlier.

Some decades before Freud began to study the gyrations of hysterics, Karl Marx and Frederick Engels were in the midst of the Industrial Revolution, analyzing the exploitation of the laboring class. Their historical understanding, partly rooted in Lewis Morgan's anthropological ideas, is that originally there was a kind of primitive communism which gave way to civilization in which men took over and reduced the power and status of women, and then to developed capitalism; during this progression the most fundamental class struggle is the antagonism between the sexes. Thus man is the bourgeois capitalist and the woman is the proletariat – reduced through this historical unfolding to a kind of slave. Hence, developed capitalism, the market economy, takes the most abstract and alienated ideas of ownership, money, and capital and makes them the ruling forces in the power relations among humans. Working men are then exploited by the capitalists and women are exploited even further by their husbands, whether the husbands are capitalists or workers. Thus the proletariat, the exploited workers have in their power a sub-proletariat class – their women (Agonito, 1977, pp. 271-288). They buy their woman's subservience with money, using their economic dependency to force them to comply and however much this is mystified with bourgeois romanticism, the brute fact of economic subservience remains. It is this regime of enslavement which communism sought to overthrow. Thus, the new revolution will lead eventually to

> …a race of men who never in their lives have had any occasion for buying with money or other economic means of power the surrender of a woman; a race of

> woman who have never had any occasion for surrendering to any man for any other reason but love, or for refusing to surrender to their lover from fear of economic consequences. Once such people are in the world, they will not give a moment's thought to what we today believe should be their course. They will follow their own practice and fashion their own public opinion about the individual practice of every person – only this and nothing more. (quoted in Agonito, 1977 p. 288)

This utopian hope, striking the chains off all the prisoners of oppression, is at the heart of communist idealism and in its humanistic refinement includes the liberation of the genders in their relation to each other. However, despite this grand hope for the liberation of women, the Marxist analysis makes external productivity (the work place) the center piece in its analysis. A feminist critique of their effort makes note of the fact that "…its concentration on production rather than human reproduction means that it is not adequate to the task of explaining gender differences in society and understanding the history of struggle over them" (Himmelweit in Carver, 1991, p.196). Marx's idea of reproduction means "the ability of whole social systems to keep going, 'reproducing' themselves, by means of the processes that define and determine them, laying the foundations for their own continuation" (p. 197). Hence, even the creation of children, coupling, and the family are understood as an extension by the "commodity owners" of their interests in "future workers." Himmelweit critiques further how little Marx and Engels address the intimate zone of family relations and reproduction.

And further, unlike the relations of production, the relations of human

> reproduction do not appear to have any internal dynamic of their own and therefore must be seen as effects and not causes in the course of history. (Himmelweit in Carver, 1991, p. 205)

Hence, ultimately Marx and Engels took up naturalistic assumptions about the relation between the sexes. They simply were the way they were in capitalist society, and while capitalism put a layer of oppression upon them, the relations involved in reproduction simply involved at best love, commitment, and exclusive long term, heterosexual partnerships. None of these ideas receive any analysis or even description, but are simply taken for granted. The way in which Marx and Engels employ the use of the word reproduction to mean an abstract regeneration of society rather than its primary, bodily, human meaning, is reflective of the way in which men ordinarily skip over the concerns of menstruation and all bodily references to reproduction. In everyday being, for Marx, Engels or ordinary contemporary men, concrete, bodily reproduction belongs to women, and for men, women just naturally inhabit the private world of bodily existence where men need not, and typically do not, tread.

Almost one-hundred years after Marx and Engels first denounced Capitalism and even decades after American women fought for and won the right to vote, feminist writer Betty Friedan tapped into an otherwise invisible social malaise experienced by women. Friedan found that the prevailing de-humanizing ideal to which women aspired, which she called the “feminine mystique,” is at the root of modern woman’s dis-ease. In her book, *The Feminine Mystique* (1963), she notes that in spite of the enormous increases in potential opportunity for work, for life, and for creativity which the new

technologies opened to women, at the end of World War II, women were sent marching back to their houses, their housework, their children, and the decorative but somewhat unimportant world of domesticity.

Although men and the culture had relegated women to the private realm of housekeeping, “experts” could not contain their ideas about how women ought to maintain and keep order. Women were encouraged to keep their house germ free, and housework was turned into a “science” for women to study and master. Women, in large measure became the man’s little woman and his better half. They did so with enthusiasm and verve. “They were marrying younger, having more babies, failing to pursue careers despite their education,” and “To be a suburban housewife appeared to be the goal of most American women” (Agonito, 1977, p. 375).

Overall, part of women’s enthusiasm was a result of having lost their jobs to returning service men. This was celebrated as a return to pre-war normality. Aggressive propaganda and advertising praised the return of the men from war, and the wonderful resumption of the good normal life, where women would not have to do onerous men’s work and could be proper women once again. The expectations were that women would return gladly to their comfortable homes, their houses, and their position as homemakers and housewives. Keeping a comfortable home for their husbands and families was their duty. This ideal or mystique included the expectation that the man worked outside the home, while the woman worked in the home cooking, cleaning, and doing laundry, all in a welcoming friendly manner. Being the emotional center of a domestic haven or refuge from the harsh world of competition and the strife of the work

world was her fundamental task. Thus, this idealized wife/mother/housekeeper identity was to be the meaning and value of her life.

Although Mill compared the situation of women with that of slaves, Friedan goes even further by comparing the role of the ideal housewife with victims of a Nazi concentration camp. To summarize her understanding

> Both states entail loss of human identity and destruction of self respect, both reduce their victims to a concern with simple animal needs, both force abandonment of individuality and preference for the security of the crowd, both imprisoned their victims, cutting them off from the larger world of ideas and events. (Agonito, 1977, p. 376)

To bring the point home concretely to the situation of American women, Friedan cites witnesses to her views, including a Boston analyst who says

> It is true, there are too many more women patients than men. Their complaints are varied, but if you look underneath, you find this underlying feeling of emptiness. It is not inferiority. It is almost like nothingness. The situation is that they are not pursuing any goals of their own. (Friedan, 1983, p. 295)

Fridan's vision with her powerful metaphors, examples, and basic understanding caught on powerfully because it resonated with women's experience and continues to do so in this age. In the seventies the science fiction film, *The Stepford Wives* (1972) was released and solidified this portrayal of the dutiful, self sacrificing, empty wife/mother, further solidifying an imaginative dramatic portrait of the empty soul – the term "stepford wife" had become a cultural icon and its recent cinematic remaking speaks to

its continuing power.

Despite Friedan's and other feminists' insights into the oppression of women, the condition of women in the culture has remained very much the same. Marxist philosopher Herbert Marcuse and philosopher Ivan Illich (1982) have a similarly shared vision of the ongoing pressure which keeps women subjugated in the market economy, which is the ordinary world. Further, they both understand that an appreciation for gender distinctions is essential to women's actual liberation. Continually adhering to the idea of "human being" in the workforce and the culture does not do justice to either male or female being (Illich, 1982, p. 9).

For example, Marcuse explicitly speaks to the fact that although women have been spared from thorough immersion in the ordinary aggression of the male world, i.e., they have been stuck with doing the washing, cleaning, the wiping of noses and behinds, and keeping the world clean of signs of menstruation, women have also been more continually connected with concrete human existence. As a consequence, they remain more grounded in matters of everyday, actual living. Hence, they participate more in

> The faculty of being "receptive," "passive," [which] is a precondition of freedom; it is the ability to see things in their own right, to experience the joy enclosed in them, the erotic energy of nature – an energy which is there to be liberated; nature too awaits the revolution. This receptivity is itself the soil of creation: it is opposed, not to productivity, but to destructive productivity. (quoted in Agonito, 1977, p. 389)

In Marcuse's vision, it is essential that women not become just like men, because their

creativity announces a possible new world. As he states,

> At stake is rather the ascent of eros over aggression, in both men and women; and this means, in a male dominated civilization, the "femalization" of the male. It would express the decisive change in the instinctual structure: the weakening of primary aggressiveness which, by a combination of biological and social factors, has governed the patriarchal culture. (quoted in Agonito, 1977. p.390)

Of course this change in structure requires a whole revolutionary reworking of the economic and social order, a revising of the fundamentals of economic and social relations in the culture. As such, his call remains a utopian project, a call to revolution in the Marxist tradition.

Similarly, Ivan Illich sees that the capitalist domain of scarcity (Illich, 1982, pp.18-19) must be overcome for women's oppression to be eliminated. The revolution must involve the giving up of the status quo, the ideal of a constantly expanding economy which destructively plunders the world and creates poverty and aggression. The society's continual push for "more" naturally creates social imbalance. Additionally, Illich asserts that the abandonment of gendered reality as found in the old ordering of the world adds to the momentum of capital exploitation (pp. 3-4). He contends that in order to exploit both men and women thoroughly, the notion of a genderless "economic man" had to be invented as an ongoing image of persons (pp. 9-11). Fundamentally, the idea of economic man turned real men and women into mere units of abstract, genderless, unisex production or ownership. Of course, this "genderless being" became the portrait of traditional, male being.

For Illich, then, the eradication of what he calls “vernacular gender” along with the creation of the genderless idea of the human was a crucial step in increasing, rather than eliminating, the oppression of women (Illich, 1982, pp. 3-5). The notion of “sexual equality” became the ideological catchword, which meant that everyone was to become, more or less, like a man. Illich forcefully demonstrates that such equality always means a continued oppression of women both economically and socially (pp. 16-17). In those countries where equality and equal pay for equal work is heavily marketed, women still make only a fraction of what men make. Nothing changes partly because equality is still under the domination of a masculinist and oppressive imaging of the world.

Therefore, concretely, for American women “liberation” has meant the “freedom” (which has evolved into the necessity) to step outside the woman’s world of “homemaking” into the man’s world of the workforce. Through “sexual equality,” women have been afforded the opportunity to secure jobs where implicitly, the message has been, “If you’re gonna work here, you have to do things our way.” Sexual equality has meant that women now have the legal right to work in atmospheres that have been created to accommodate the traditional, male approach to work and being. Consequently, in the 1980’s, women wore their own version of “power suits” with enormous shoulder pads which made their bodies formidable and fit for the competition with men in the workplace.

Becoming more and more like men has become the standard in the workplace, and although it is now acceptable, even expected, that women will seek work outside the home, the duties for women in the home, nevertheless have not diminished. Women

are still largely responsible for cooking, laundry, cleaning, primary care of children, keeping up with their schoolwork, and taking care to preserve the general relatedness of the family. Her outside employment has often restricted her freedom rather than expanded it. In actuality, most women are more heavily obligated than ever.

Moreover, in the workplace, women conform to the environments and systems of men all the while concealing the blood and pain of their periods and any difficulties at home for which they are still primarily responsible. For example, when the children become sick and must go to the doctor, traditionally it is the woman who takes off work to attend to them, not the man. Women have learned to adapt to the male-dominated workplace, because it is their "right" to do so. Conventional male attitudes and approaches to work are considered the norm and neutral or "genderless" ground even though women may outnumber the men in certain work arenas. However, male-dominated, competitive, aggressive corporate "Apprentice"-like environments are considered the ideal. Straight as an arrow, on target, unfluctuating, steady like a man, are the catchwords of this enterprise.

This male ideal of apparent steadiness has become so omnipresent in the culture that it has developed into the extreme idea of doing away with menstruation altogether, because it has been declared "medically unnecessary." (Coutinho, 1999, p.x) And women have become so accustomed to denying their true being that total menstrual suppression has recently been seriously and successfully marketed. For example, in a 2005 article on menstrual suppression

Dr. Shari Brasner, a forty-year-old Manhattan gynecologist, says she, for one,

> just doesn't have time to menstruate. Brasner has been suppressing her period for a decade with the continuous use of birth control pills … "I have an incredibly busy day," she says, "and the reality is, I just don't have time to get to the bathroom every two or three hours to change a tampon or a sanitary napkin." Brasner adds that she believes her use of birth control pills "to be safe. I know it to be effective, and it saves me time, energy, and in the long run, some money. Just in dry cleaning bills alone." (George, 2005, ¶6)

This forty year old woman in her workplace has the same worries as a typical thirteen year old girl in junior high school, i.e. trying to find the time and the courage to get to the bathroom for herself.

A woman striving to be like men is, of course, not new. Developmental theories, for instance, have always postulated male ways of being as the norm.

> Modern American theorists of early psychological development and, indeed, of the entire life span from Erik Erickson (1950) to Daniel Levinson (1978), tend to see all of development as a process of separating oneself out from the matrix of others – "becoming one's own man," in Levinson's words. Development of the self presumably is attained via a series of painful crises by which the individual accomplishes a sequence of essential separation from others, thereby achieving an inner sense of separated individuation. (Miller in Jordan et al, 1991, p.11)

The dramatic enactment of this developmental image is what millions of television viewers watch every week on *The Apprentice*. Donald Trump as perfect economic-man is the ideal. Moreover, the other reality television shows previously mentioned also

portray the grand competitive struggle to be number one.

On the whole the theories of Marcuse, Illich, and The Stone Center authors all converge because they have in mind not just women but the greater good of all of society, and indeed, the whole world. They do not simply propose to add on rights and experiences of a marginalized group of persons, but rather to be inclusive and accepting, and thus take advantage of the resourcefulness and creativity of women to reshape and reform the world:

> Another way to put this is to say that women's actual practice in the real world and the complex processes that those practices entail have not been drawn upon, nor elaborated on, as a basis of culture, knowledge, theory, or public policy. They then come to sound almost unreal or idealistic, but they are real; they are going on every day. If they were not, none of us would have lived and developed at all. But they have been split off from official definitions of reality. (Miller in Jordan et al, 1991, p. 26)

Women's contribution which Illich refers to as "unpaid" or "shadow work," has always been absolutely essential to the maintenance of the world. Furthermore,

> An underlying question may be; Has our tradition made it difficult to conceive of the possibility that freedom and maximum use of our resources – our initiative, our intellect, and our powers – can occur within a context that requires simultaneous responsibility for the care and growth or others and of the natural world? We can not hope that such a sense of responsibility will develop after the person develops first as a separated "self," as currently defined. … the search

> for the more appropriate study of women in women's own terms can not only lead to understanding women, certainly a valid goal in itself, but can also provide clues to a deeper grasp of the necessities for all human development and, simultaneously, to a greater realization of the realities of the vast, untapped human capacities. This is not an easy thing to do, because our whole system of thought, our categories, the eyes with which we see and the ears with which we hear have been trained in a system removed from this activity. (Miller in Jordan et al, 1991, p. 26)

Researcher's Observations and Cultural Experiences

Over the course of over five years, as a researcher, I have collected a variety of data in order to attain current cultural meaning(s) of menstruation in Western culture. Some of the data which I gathered have come from the traditional, authoritative fields such as psychology, philosophy, medicine, education, and history. These fields have formally reflected and commented on menstruation as a bodily "function" and aspect of women's being. These fields tell their own story of what menstruation is or should be. While I have documented these overtly expressed meanings, I have also attempted to uncover the imbedded, implicit meanings of what it means to bleed in this culture, meanings which the "authorities" of medicine, for example, do not openly acknowledge.

The same kind of analysis was needed for other areas of culture such as language, music, art, television, movies, and advertisements. While these regions of culture express both obvious and subtle meanings of menstruation, in order to grasp their attitudes about bleeding and women, they require a more assertive attunement to

menstruation than the authoritative, pedagogical areas of culture. This assertive attunement has led me, as a woman and a researcher, to document some of the personal experiences which so strongly suggest a cultural meaning of menstrual bleeding. For the sake of this research, I have deemed these personal experiences data and reflected on as such, i.e. hermeneutically, in the same way as I have researched all the regions of the study.

Some of my own experiences involve encounters with average women and men, doctors of traditional and non-traditional medicine, and strangely, encounters with the nameless, faceless "others" who govern the public bathroom etiquette for women. Finally, this particular project led me to encounters with myself, and my own attitudes, not just as a researcher but as an ordinary woman who bleeds.

On the average, whenever I spoke with women about the topic of my dissertation, for whatever reason, but usually because they asked me, most women seemed somewhat taken aback, but rebounded quickly with sincere interest and curiosity. Many wanted to know what my findings were so far, and I lost track of the number of times in which women I barely knew launched into a description of their menstrual patterns. They often spoke of their particular difficulties, much like women sometimes do in the company of female friends or other, familiar women. One woman spoke of how her periods had been irregular all her life until she began to have children. "Now," she said, "It's just like clockwork." For about a year into my research, I was mildly stunned at these admissions, not because I found what the women were saying shocking, but because it took so little for them to break the cultural code of silence.

Additionally, in response to their candor, I felt as if I had given them the permission to speak about themselves. My experience was that the women had been ready to talk about their bleeding being but were silenced until I had pressed a button for them, allowing them to unburden themselves. Most women were ready to speak.

On the other hand, a small percentage of women I encountered over the years, after inquiring about the topic of my dissertation, blushed, became silent for a second or two and then immediately made reference to "other" cultures and their attitudes about menstruation. For these women, the cultural rejection of bleeding women lived far away in some other land. They could not or would not imagine that I was researching our own, Western culture, and they seemed clueless to the idea that secrecy and silence about this aspect of women's being lived here. Interestingly enough, not one of them knew the details of any of the foreign customs to which they referred. All of them stumbled over their references, became speechless at some point, unwittingly shedding more light on my topic in the process. In the face of these women, I felt both a certain fragility or a hardness which would not allow them to look any closer, perhaps into their own lives. I did not have the heart or the strength with any of these women to let them in on the secret.

In keeping with the reactions of women to menstrual issues, one day while mindlessly switching channels on the television, I spotted two women on QVC, one of the home shopping channels, awkwardly holding up a pair of underwear to viewers and making declarations about their "stain resistance." What caught my attention was the unusual self-consciousness of the female hosts. Ordinarily, presenters on home

shopping networks can talk for hours about the products they are pushing without stuttering or stumbling over their words, or even if they do, they usually do not seem to care.

By contrast, these women were very aware of their words and seemed downright embarrassed to be talking about the qualities of “Barely Breezies” underwear. “Every woman knows how important this is,” one of them announced. Neither one of them said why or talked about what kind of stains the underwear repelled, but in the corner of the screen there appeared footage of blue ink being dripped onto the crotch of a pair of “Barely Breezies” panties. The implication, of course, was not that women excrete blue ink, but that the underwear contains a special property which repels blood, although the show would not feature a red liquid to demonstrate such. Furthermore, neither one of the hosts was about to mention the “b” word to graphically conjure up that image.

Instead, the other host nervously uttered, “We don’t like to talk about these things, but it’s important.” Caught between a rock and a hard place, the female hosts were forced to play up the special quality of the underwear, as all good salespersons do, while simultaneously observing the rules of civility by not talking about menstrual fluids, as all good females do in the culture. Not liking to talk about “these things” seemed to be a self-admission as well as the appropriate disclaimer for imaginary sensitive viewers.

As it turned out however, the sensitive viewers proved to be not so imaginary, because the other host then squeaked, “Every man listening to this is covering his ears,

going ‘blah, blah, blah.’” She then laughed and in the middle of her nervous laughter, the companion host shouted, “Oh look, our producers left!” More nervous laughter ensued. It then occurred to me that the women had been responding, in part, to the faces and reactions of the men in the studio. Like a scene right out of junior high school, the men had become squeamish, repulsed or embarrassed and made that apparent to the women, going so far as to walk out of the studio to demonstrate their disapproval. The women were pitifully trying to sell the “importance” of the underwear to women while simultaneously pleasing the men by noticing their discomfort. Overall, their preoccupation with male being won out over their skill or concern to sell something practical to women. The women’s actions emulate the values of the culture which dictate that the details of female being are inherently shameful and secondary to male being.

The men’s reactions to the words of the women on QVC, parallel the reactions of most of the men I encountered while conducting research on female being and bleeding. Every now and then, across different social situations, when I was introduced as a graduate student of psychology, men also expressed interest in my dissertation topic. It made little difference whether or not they were college educated or not, most were taken aback by my announcing “Menstruation” as my interest. Several times over formal dinners, it was the men who pressed me to talk about my research. In the beginning, I used their reactions as fodder for my study, noticing their complexion change to scarlet, their obvious discomfort, and their predictable desire to change the conversation. After a few of these encounters, I grew wary of what I perceived as

immaturity and intolerance, especially since many of them just wanted to engage in some form of “intellectualism” by discussing research. Frankly, I became disgusted for their requests to talk about something they could not handle, bleeding women’s bodies. A couple of times I asked if they were sure they wanted to hear my topic. Of the times I did this, both men assured me that they did, indeed want to know. Both times, both men responded in the predictable way, i.e., by recoiling. Overall, I had less patience with the rejecting responses of men than the women, and I believe it had to do with the arrogance of the men. They were all so sure of themselves when they asked to hear what I was studying. Yet when I told them, it was as if I could vanquish them with the mere utterance of “Menstruation.” As I discovered, men are not accustomed to women insisting on being heard or being a central topic.

Interestingly, I found that when I was insistent with my topic and announced it despite the fact that I knew it would be deemed “distasteful” at dinners or any other affair, while uncomfortable women often leapt conversationally to other cultures, men assumed that I must be studying the “disorders” of menstruating. I must be looking for some “cure” for the female predicament of bleeding. At one point I was asked, rather inappropriately, by a male medical doctor in a social setting, if I had experienced “difficult” periods myself and was that the reason I was investigating menstruation. Judging by the manner in which he asked, and the way he pulled me aside, I felt as if he were asking for his own amusement and wanted to know some detail or secret about my sexuality, something he found titillating and “dirty.” My response was that I was studying menstruation because it is an overlooked aspect of female being and because of

his very response. Needless to say, his interest immediately trailed off, as mine had long before, and he wandered into the next room no doubt to "mingle."

Similarly, I recall being asked by a man for the topic of my dissertation in a more structured setting when I called to consolidate my student loans. Responding to a specific mailing from a specific lender, I gave the information that the male loan officer needed to process my request. During a short wait for some processing by the computer, the young man asked for my area of study and my dissertation topic. I replied, "Clinical Psychology- Menstruation," to which he laughed and asked, "Are you serious?" Stoically, I said, "Yes." He then asked, "What- the effects of?" I answered, "No- Women's experiences of versus what culture says it should be or men say it is." He rebounded with, "Cool." While this was not a very stimulating conversation, and he might have felt contained by the rules of being "professional," I did not feel dismissed completely by him. His reaction I found typical, i.e., men have a difficult time thinking of menstruation as a natural aspect of female being worthy of interest, investigation, discussion, and respect. In his world, to be sure, no one seriously dwells on menstruation for any period of time. Pun intended.

Of all the men I encountered during my research of menstruation, I must admit that a male doctor surprised me the most with his reaction. During a visit to my internist for complaints of chronic sickness, my doctor had noticed that I was a graduate student of psychology and asked me my year of graduate school. I answered him and added that I still had an internship to complete and that I had begun working on my dissertation. He then asked, with a mild degree of curiosity, the nature of my topic. When I replied,

"Menstruation," he quickly turned his head to the side as if he had suffered an imaginary blow, threw his hands up in a kind of "surrender," and said, "Okay, okay, that's enough." I was sick already, but his reaction stunned me and literally turned my stomach. Of all people, I naively felt he should have responded with at least interest in my topic rather than outright rejection of it. I vowed then that his reaction would make it into my research as an example of cultural attitudes. Furthermore, I never went back to him.

Not only did I take special note of specific interactions and reactions relating to the topic of menstruation, but I also documented the general attitudes about women and their periods which seemingly go unnoticed throughout the culture. The most pointed attitudes about women's bleeding bodies surfaced around bathroom "hygiene," particularly culture's demand for women to maintain a certain standard with regard to disposal of used pads, tampons, and tampon applicators. Since beginning this study, and even before then, I could not help but notice the signs that appear in public restrooms directed at women. Many have a certain tone of dictatorship and intolerance.

For example, throughout my own years of menstruating and using public restrooms, I noticed that sometimes signs order women to place in the small trash can, which is supposed to be next to the toilet, *any* tampon applicator, whether cardboard or plastic, i.e. biodegradable or not and/or *any* used tampon. Sometimes signs of this type appear angrily handwritten, replete with demanding tone and exclamation points. It is difficult to determine whether or not the anger is directed at women for unnecessarily clogging the toilets or if the anger is directed at women simply because, as bleeding

beings they require extra restroom attention. The signs usually focus on “hygiene” and “sanitation” and instruct women to go to unnecessary lengths to dispose of their used menstrual gear. With all the emphasis on good hygiene and being sanitary and discreet directed at women in and out of restrooms, it is no wonder that they often think of themselves as dirty. It is also no wonder that they sometimes do their best to eliminate any evidence of their bleeding by attempting to flush a used pad or panty liner down the toilet.

Even a popular, modern ski lodge in Pennsylvania equips its women’s restroom stalls with a “Sanibag” dispenser. This is a product which I had never seen in my life until I used this particular restroom. I felt as if I had missed out on something for many years however, because the dispenser looked as if it bore the same old design and message from the beginning of Sanibag time. The Sanibag is a special bag created just for “sanitary napkin disposal.” With its descriptions translated into three languages, the Sanibag is also for “personal hygiene and cleanliness.” The dispenser also proudly states, “Preferred by discreet women everywhere.” And just in case some female suffers from confusion about its proper disposal, the dispenser requests that she “please discard in waste basket.” I was so amused, and admittedly, horrified that the Sanibag could still be in production today without any revision of its graphic design or use of language that I took a picture of it while in my stall to take away as evidence.

One of the most clearly judgmental signs which I encountered hangs in every stall in a fairly new mall in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. Professionally printed, it reads, “Please dispose of sanitary items properly. Use container provided. Do not flush.” The

use of the word *properly* implies that any other manner of disposal is the opposite, improper, and that the woman disposing of her used pads or tampons must behave properly. In case the woman does not know what *proper* is, the sign-maker or the bathroom authorities tell us that proper means using the "container provided." And, just in case any woman is too dense to grasp this instruction, the bathroom police drive the message of *proper* home with the order to "do not flush." On the whole, the message smacks of condescension and the implication that women are, indeed, dirty. Why, I continue to wonder, is there no hygiene instruction for men in restrooms or anywhere else? Why are there no "penis wipes" on the market so that men may "freshen up?" Additionally, why is there no call for men to be "sanitary" and to urinate within the confines of the toilet bowl? Or, even more simply, why are there no Sanibag dispensers in men's restrooms so that men may discreetly contain their spit, rather than freely expelling on the sidewalk as some do? Even public restrooms also perpetuate the notion that women are to be ashamed about their bodies and their general being.

Finally, one day while reading my emails, I ran across further evidence of cultural loathing toward women and menstruation. In February of 2005, I received a blanket email from one of the members of the Society for Menstrual Cycle Research (SMCR), a society of which I am a member. The email was entitled "Harassment of academics" and so I fully expected to read some forwarded report about some academics somewhere, perhaps being banned from speaking at some event. I was surprised to find that it was a first-hand account of harassment from the writer of the email. She admitted that she had grown accustomed to being mocked for studying and

teaching about menstruation, but she had recently "experienced a new, more virlulent strain of harassment" and was reaching out to her peers to find out how common this form was. She then went on to describe how, after giving a talk describing movements to celebrate menstruation, she began to receive crank calls. She also reports that the university president's office received a call from someone wondering if the taxpayers were paying for such "foolish" research. Additionally, a university employee emailed her and chastised her for her 'appalling' and 'inappropriate' language in the title of her talk. (She used the words *rag* and *menstruation.*) The employee was female and "informed [her] that [she] had 'brought womanhood to a new low.'"

Unfortunately, she reports more accounts of harassment in her email, but later in response to her request for stories of similar experiences, Harry Finley, the curator of the Museum of Menstruation (www.mum.org) answers. Finley responds with an account of the history of the harassment he has received over the years. He declares that he has had similar attacks since opening the museum and that he has "the additional misfortune to be of the male persuasion, which has incited even women in favor of celebrating menstruation to attack [him]." Most disappointing to him, it appears, are criticisms from family members who declare that he has 'disgraced the family name' and who have cut him off from the family.

On the whole, it is interesting, not to mention upsetting, to note that the criticisms and harassment that both SMCR members document revolve around the idea that the discussion of menstruation is not just inappropriate, it is thoroughly dirty or *obscene.* The further implication, then, is the fact that women's bodies, or more simply,

women are dirty and obscene. The criticisms provide a kind of projective test for the critic. The content of the criticisms reveal the critics' own beliefs about menstruation. The female critics respond as if they have been sexually violated, exposed or exploited. The male critics act as if discussion of menstrual cycles is a disgusting waste of time, not worth anything, except for the occasional titillation. What are the critics thinking and/or picturing such that the natural experience of menstruating, which is directly connected to the creation of life, becomes both obscene and a degradation? Perhaps each critic is thinking about the act of sex, the other direct link to menstruation. It is possible that for those who harass and criticize, menstruation is a reminder of their own shame in doing or thinking about the sexual act. After all, in portions of contemporary culture, sex has been renamed "the nasty." For those who criticize, menstruation, along with the women who menstruate, are harbingers of shame.

Psychological Literature Introduction

In this section the psychological literature is reviewed both as a potential theoretical background as well as a furthering of the cultural analysis central to this study. For psychological theory, as will be shown, also expresses cultural taboos, values, and ideas. It can be said that typically theories highlight what the culture emphasizes and usually ignores what the culture has silenced. The previously mentioned secretive, taboo quality of menstruation found in the culture presented certain difficulties with regard to even to researching the topic itself. For, ›menstruation‹ as a category is not readily available in the indexes of texts, and neither is it always accurately organized or noted. Sometimes it appears under ›blood‹ or ›puberty‹ or some

other category, if at all. Most frequently, its appearance is conspicuously absent, but only to an individual like myself who is studying menstruation. To the average person, its absence is most likely usual and unnoticed. At this point, I am no longer surprised when I do not find the topic of menstruation even in the indexes of books written specifically on women=s health or psychological development, for example. Menstruation=s absence or ignoring occurs all too readily.

Indeed, researching ›menstruation= involved an unusual attunement and a systematic de-construction of the culture, which was described earlier as hermeneutic. In my research, I found that reading a text involved noticing what is explicitly said about menstruation, usually several times, then noting any inferences made and translating any symbolism present. Additionally, quite often, the strongest implicit statements about menstruation are made simply where it has been left out, which includes areas such as indexes and chapter headings. Conducting a psychological literature review on menstruation (and a cultural review, for that matter) necessitated a different kind of attunement than an ordinary kind of collecting and reporting of theories. Because of menstruation=s taken-for-granted silenced seat in the culture, it was necessary to actively and systematically look for its appearance and meanings.

Within the present study of menstruation, the most influential theorists are the psychoanalysts, both the orthodox and neo-Freudians, the developmental theorists, the existential-phenomenological theorists, the feminists, and the cultural, anthropological theorists whom I refer to as ABlood@ authors because all of them speak directly about blood and bleeding in the lives of women.

Psychoanalysts

Freud

The word ›menstruation‹ appears in indexes of Sigmund Freud‹s writings infrequently, surprisingly enough. In fact, in *Totem and Taboo* there is no mention of menstruation itself in the index, despite the fact that he discusses the menstruation taboo, specifically. He states that along with dead men and newborn babies, Awomen menstruating or in labor stimulate desires by their special helplessness...For that reason, all of these persons and all of these states are taboo, since temptation must be resisted" (*SE* 13: 33). Here, Freud goes on to explain that a taboo, a prohibition, exists only in the presence of a desire. Menstruation is noted here as a taboo, as one might expect. However, Freud considers menstruation here and within his other writings as a state of being which is of importance primarily to the male. It is the male who finds the Ahelplessness@ of menstruation appealing. Like all of Freud‹s other references to menstruation, monthly bleeding does not exist as an experience which is of any real significance in the life of the female human being. Menstruation is mentioned because it serves as a catalyst for male being, male desire.

Interestingly enough, in Freudian psychology, menstruation also serves as a symbol of repulsion. Once boys and girls reach the Oedipal stage of sexual development, both are preoccupied with the existence of the penis and castration becomes of concern to each. In *An Outline of Psychoanalysis* (*SE* 23: 47-51), Freud remarks that boys become consumed with the potential loss of their own Asupremely valued part@ and are traumatized by the sight of their sister‹s genitals, where the castration has apparently

already taken place. Freud emphasizes that the trauma is intensified later by the presence of blood which further demonstrates the wound of castration. Girls, by contrast, Areact(s) to the fact of not having received one (penis).@ Castration anxiety for the girl, then, is that she lacks a penis from the beginning, thus making menstruation a symbolic periodic re-wounding. For Freud, menstruation is an experience which is secondary to psychic development and sexual identity. Its presence only serves to reinforce an earlier stage in development, the Oedipal stage.

Finally, after reviewing Freud=s theory, it is apparent that menstruation=s importance in relation to women=s experience is virtually ignored, thus given little meaning. Therefore, it comes as no surprise that the word ›menstruation= rarely appears in his indexes or his writings. Given the fact that Freud is Father of Psychoanalysis, and has had such an impact upon the Western cultures= ideas of human development and human being, it is little wonder that the neglect of menstruation has continued and that this whole region of women=s being still remains largely unrecognized today.

Deutsch

In *Psychology of Women: Volume 1* (1944), Helene Deutsch devotes an entire chapter to menstruation and describes it as a Apsychologic experience@ (p.149). Unlike Freud, Deutsch recognizes that females have an experience of menstruation which is unique to their own kind of being (which is not male), and in part, is shaped by their Aexpectations@ of experience even before menarche. She calls menstruation a Areal and personal experience@ which is partly based upon a girl=s fantasies about her own mother=s ›secrets= (p. 149). The age at which the girl learns about her own mother=s bleeding

influences her expectations about her own experience to come and her notions of femininity. AThe younger she is and the more incapable of assimilating these impressions, the more painful, bloody, cruel, and threatening are these manifestations of femininity in relation to her fantasy life@ (p.150). Deutsch says that one of the main images involved in a girl=s fantasy is the woundedness or trauma of the internal organs related to the visible, external genital bleeding.

Like Freud, Deutsch acknowledges the menstrual taboo and notes that menstruation is culturally connected with Aideas of horror, danger, shame, and sin@ (p.152). And like other analysts, medical doctors, and average citizens, she places the responsibility of informing the daughter about menstruation primarily on the mother. However, she notes that menstruation is indeed the mother=s >secret= and is often the very thing that the mother conceals from her children. Deutsch attributes the mother=s Apsychologic resistance@ to her fear of her daughter=s reaction to it, because the mother cannot help but wonder if the daughter will have the same reactions of disgust and repulsion as revealed in the culture. She adds that daughters tend to prefer to learn of menstruation from sisters or older friends rather than their mother since, as children, their mothers= bleeding was associated with Acruelty, uncleanness, bad odors, and reactions of disgust@ (p.157). However, no matter how the girl intellectually prepares for her first menstruation, it is usually experienced as a Atrauma,@ in part, because of the previous associations gained from her mother and from the disappointment she experiences as she realizes that there is no advantageous change in her after reaching this Aimportant sign of maturity." Overall then, for Deutsch, menstruation, marks an

important sign of maturity, and is an experience significant to the girl=s life. However, within her framework, she views this sign of maturity as a perpetual trauma in the life of the girl and woman. In fact, Helene Deutsch adheres to Freud=s ideas of menstruation as a sign of castration and woundedness.

Bettelheim

Within the framework of psychoanalysis, Bruno Bettelheim turns the ordinary interpretations of penis envy and male dominance upside down in *Symbolic Wounds* (1971) by asserting that at the heart of psychic development is an envy of the powers of the menstruating and childbearing woman. While girls envy the penis which they lack, boys, too, envy the girl=s possession of a vagina. He states, AWe are hardly in need of proof that men stand in awe of the procreative power of women, that they wish to participate in it, and that both emotions are found readily in Western society@ (p.10).

Bettelheim came to this conclusion after studying the rites of passage in specific preliterate Australian societies and later comparing them to his own observations of adolescent boys and girls with whom he worked in a residential treatment institution. Bettelheim contends that the institutionalized boys and girls he observed lived in a peer society much like the societies of Australia, wherein all members had become excitedly yet fearfully aware of their own and each other=s personal marks of growth into adulthood. Some of the boys became jealous that the girls had a distinct Asign@ of passage and some of the girls resented the boys because they would never have to bleed. Out of the climate of this society, to ease the tension, the adolescents created an imitative rite of passage in which the boys Acut@ index fingers and mixed their Ablood@ with the girls'

menses every month. The cut finger was a compromise to drawing blood from a Asecret place@ on the boys= bodies (pp.24-26). Bettelheim noted that these behaviors and attitudes were imitative of the societies where subincision was practiced. And just as the adolescents boys Acut@ themselves in order to be like the girls who knew distinctly when they reached certain maturity, Bettelheim notes, AWhen men by subincision make themselves *resemble* women, the obvious reason is that they are trying to *be* women@ (p.49).

Overall, Bettelheim sets out to question the standard psychoanalytic interpretation that initiation rites, or rites of passage spring from the developmental standpoint of Oedipal conflict and castration anxiety wherein boys and girls already have a certain loathing and fear of their mother. He says that to properly understand initiation rites, one must look to earlier emotional experiences where the infant boy or girl has an attachment to the mother, the boy=s ambivalence and positive feelings toward female figures in general, and Athe ambivalence of boys and girls, originating in pre-genital fixations, about accepting their prescribed adult sex roles@ (p.19).

Furthermore, Bettelheim sees that the males of preliterate societies have taken a negative experience (fear) and created for themselves a more positive experience (mastering it) by trying to make women=s power their own, instead of turning their envy into loathing and engaging in a menstrual taboo (p.10). Finally, he expresses hope that his study:

> …may lessen the male-centering propensity and shed new light on the psycho-sociological role of woman; that it may indicate how much more that is feminine

> exists in men than is generally believed, and how greatly woman=s influence and strivings have affected social institutions which we still explain on a purely masculine basis...it should be remembered that similar factors lie behind many other aspects of human behavior and our social institutions. (Bettelheim, 1971, p. 58)

Horney

Karen Horney places menstruation within a cultural context, emphasizing that Amenstruation is more than bleeding,@ and in *Feminine Psychology* (1967) she coins the phrase Apremenstrual tension@ in her chapter of the same name (pp.99-106). She notes that the cultural, emotional atmosphere surrounding Aeverything sexual@ is anxiety and that the subject of menstruation falls within this anxiety-evoking category. Males and females alike engage in a kind of fantasizing about menstruation and for men this includes a primitive, deep-seated fear and dread of women. For women, ideas of menstrual blood relate to their first exposure to menstruation with older relatives wherein they first caught glimpses of the female body as Avulnerable@ (p.159). For women, their own menstrual blood evokes Acruel impulses and fantasies of both an active and passive nature@ (p. 99). Thus, for Horney, menstruation is associated with woundedness and inner damage.

Horney describes these impulses and fantasies for women as Adisturbances@ which occur just before her menstrual period. They include and are certainly not limited to the physiological changes that take place with a woman=s body as she prepares for pregnancy. Concomitant to the physiological changes are the Apsychological burdens@

which emerge prior to bleeding. Horney states that as the woman=s body rhythmically prepares physiologically for pregnancy each month, so too, does the woman engage in a kind of psychic preparation for pregnancy on a regular basis (pp.101-106).

At the heart of her psychic preparation are tensions whose intensity depends upon how conflicted she is about having a child both in general and at that particular point in her life. Horney asserts, AI rather hold that this particular time in a woman=s cycle represents a burden only to those women in whom the idea of motherhood is fraught with great inner conflicts@ (p.106). As her body prepares each month for pregnancy with the swelling of tissues and an increase in libido, pushed to the fore psychically is the issue of bearing a child. Once the woman begins to bleed, she usually feels some physical and emotional relief, as the issue of becoming a mother ceases for the time being. Overall, Horney rejects the primacy of the phallus and opposes Freud=s assertion that motherhood surfaces as an issue in a woman=s life merely out of the disappointment of not having a penis. Rather, Athe desire (for a child) is primary and instinctually anchored deeply in the biological sphere@ (p.106). Thus, while she still likens menstruation to woundedness as do many of the orthodox Freudians, she proposes that female genitalia and all related female experience exist and bear meaning and legitimacy in their own right, apart from a phallocentric understanding.

Developmental Theorists

Erikson

Unlike Freud, Erikson in *Identity: Youth and Crisis* (1968) stresses the importance of the social realm in conjunction with the biological in the course of human development in general, and ego or identity formation in particular. For Erikson, genital maturation marks a change in the emerging adolescent's social interactions and throws light upon the uncertainties of future roles.

The adolescent struggles for a sense of continuity by carrying the crises and virtues from the early stages of development into the emerging aspects of sexual maturity (p. 128). Therefore, relationships become the medium through which the adolescent defines who she is. Through interaction with other adolescents and through the continued comparison of self and other, the adolescent shapes her notion of self. For Erikson, then, relationships are the crux of identity formation, and while relationships with the opposite sex are often not sexual in nature, the background from which the opposite sexes interact is the sexually developing body with the prospect of intimacy (pp. 132-133). Erikson becomes more specific about this backdrop in the light of female development. Although he does not make menstruation central to his discussion, per se, he does mention menstruation explicitly and he proposes that the unique physical (and psychological) development of the female is central in meaning and importance to her own being and that she does not develop merely out of response to or secondarily to male development.

Erikson (1968) highlights the historical fact that psychoanalytic theories of human development were configured as a response to and a remedy for clients who were

suffering. Furthermore, these understandings of human being were crafted from a male perspective, a failed attempt to empathize with women, hence the penis is the center from which all being exists and responds. He emphasizes that within this framework of understanding, women and girls suffer the most from this grossly inaccurate comparison. Within this discourse, where fundamental biological (and socio-political) differences are overlooked, women are viewed as traumatized, castrated, wounded, and are ultimately doomed to a life of perpetual trauma, envy, and resentment (pp.261-294).

In his chapter entitled, AWoman and the Inner Space,@ Erikson contends that a truly empathic theory of female human development must begin with the fact that women are biologically and physically different from men. He relinquishes the idea that the female re-experiences Oedipal conflicts at the time of menstruation and emphasizes that the inner space is not to be seen in terms of a physical deficit, but as a factual condition of being female. To assume that females develop out of Afearful analogies and fantasies,@ i.e., the situation of not having a penis, is to ignore basic sensory perception and kinesthetic experience of the female. He states, A...in this total setting the existence of a productive inner-bodily space safely set in the center of female form and carriage has, I would think, greater actuality than has the missing external organ@ (p.267).

Erikson ponders the identity formation of female being which, like male being, is rooted in a specific somatic design. Quite obviously and simply, the somatic design of female being includes organs which have the capacity for menstruation, pregnancy, and birth. These physical capacities are concomitant with psychological capacities, all of which are distinctly different from male somatic design and capacities. For Erikson, Athe

basic modalities of woman=s commitment and involvement naturally also reflect the ground plan of her body @ (p.285). He observes female being and bodiliness in light of her natural orientation in the world, what she is set up to do, what she can do, rather than in terms of what she cannot do or does not have physically or psychically. Here, Erikson does not dictate the behaviors and attitudes of women or try to box every woman into motherhood. Rather, he describes her in terms of her being and capacity. He states

> We may mention in passing woman=s capacity on many levels of existence to actively *include*, to accept, and ›*to have and to hold*=B but also to *hold on*, and *hold in*. She may be protective with high selectivity and overprotective without discrimination. That she must protect means that she must rely on protection- and she may demand overprotection. (Erikson, 1968, p. 285)

Thus, women, by their very physical, psychological existence live more so in a world of protection, protectiveness, wanting to protect and to be protected than men, whereas men live more as standing up and into the world. And this is rooted both in the ground-plan of their bodies as well as powerfully influenced by the culture.

In conclusion, Erikson takes a remarkable turn from the speculative, phallocentric psychoanalytic theory of female development and truly fleshes out female physical being as a real, living orientation in the world. His theory invites us into:

> ... a shift of theoretical emphasis from the loss of an external organ to a sense of vital inner potential, from a hateful contempt for the mother to a solidarity with her and other women; from a ›passive= renunciation of male activity to the purposeful and competent pursuit of activities consonant with the possession of

> ovaries, a uterus, and a vagina; and from a masochistic pleasure in pain to an ability to stand (and to understand) pain as a meaningful aspect of human experience in general and of the feminine role in particular (Erikson, 1968, p. 275).

Chodorow, Gilligan, Stone Center Authors

For the purposes of this research, I have grouped the theories of Nancy Chodorow, Carol Gilligan, and the Stone Center (including Jean Baker Miller) in one section not because of the similarity in the content of their research but because of the similarity in approach. All three perspectives are authored by females (with different orientations) and make the point of researching and writing about female perspectives. Further, the fundamental aim and specialty of all three is to reveal that which is hidden or overlooked in female psychology and sociology, and each perspective succeeds in breaking new ground in illuminating aspects of female development which have not been given much consideration. In their own way, they all appreciate the cultural and relational nature of women=s being as it exists in Western culture and the ways in which the culture has continued to dismiss and dis-empower women. What remains interesting, however, is the fact that none of them have addressed menstruation specifically, as a particular component and regular occurrence in women=s lives, not even from a relational or cultural standpoint.

To illustrate, Amenstruation@ or any word which would lead a reader to it, such as Ablood@ or A body,@ does not exist in any index of the examined texts of Gilligan, Miller or the Stone Center. AMenstruation@ does appear as a category in the index of

Chodorow=s *The Reproduction of Mothering: Psychoanalysis and the Sociology of Gender* (1978) however, it is mentioned only somewhat incidentally as items in a series, Areproductive difference@ (p.15) and Aphysiological experience@ (p.16) of women. This remains somewhat incredible since the text itself is about mothering and menstruating is an integral part of reproduction and becoming a mother. The closest Chodorow comes to explicitly addressing the experience of menstruation in women=s lives is her mention of the onset of puberty in a girl=s life and the subsequent recapitulation of the Oedipal conflict.

Similarly, Miller=s *Toward a New Psychology of Women* (1986) makes explicit reference to the legacy of women as A>carriers= for society of certain aspects of the total human experience – those aspects that remain unsolved....The result of such a process is to keep men from fully integrating these areas into their own lives@ (p.23). This is the partial basis for the mistreatment and subjugation of women, i.e., to silence women, to keep them and all that they represent down, such as weakness, frailty, passion and loss of mastery and control. Women=s sensitivity and intuitiveness also threatens the male sense of knowing what is really important, as women appear to be privy to important secrets of relational life. AWhen women have raised questions that reflect their concerns, the issues have been pushed aside and labeled as trivial,@ a rather defensive retort (p.24).

Further, in delineating the most important issues of the women=s movement, Miller first stresses the importance of Aphysical frankness - open talk about one=s body - in order to know about it and how it works@ (p. 24). The second important issue mentioned is Asexual frankness-open knowledge about sexual matters is a pressing need,

as is a redefinition of female sexuality in women=s terms rather than as it is perceived by men@ (p.24). Therefore, she eloquently affirms the importance of bringing into speech that which has been hidden about female being, yet she herself neither mentions menstruation nor female sexuality in concrete terms of everyday female existence. Body and sexuality remain at the level of sparse discourse and abstraction.

Additionally, while research by Carol Gilligan (1993) and other writings from the Stone Center have given a different voice to female being and made significant contributions to validating women=s experiences, they, too, manage to maintain a discourse which essentially dances around the idea of female embodiment. To illustrate just how little attention is given to the female body in these writings, it is interesting to note how often words relating to the female body are mentioned in the indexes as compared with words pertaining to male anatomy.

As already mentioned, neither Gilligan nor Stone Center writings make any mention of Amenstruation,@ but neither do they reference any other words relating to the female body specifically, such as Avagina,@ Abreasts,@ Auterus,@ or Aclitoris.@ Gilligan cites AabortionA ten times and Aabortion decision@ twenty-five times all with regard to the attitudes and self-concepts of her subjects in one study. She also mentions Aoedipal fantasies@ three times, and the Stone Center gives extensive referencing (fourteen times) of AOedipal stage@ and its related components. Additionally, in the Stone Center writings, Apenis envy@ appears eight times, Acastration anxiety@ six times, Amasturbation@ three times and Aorgasm@ three times. The significance of all these apparent bodily references is that all are interpreted and discussed within the context of refuting Freudian theory,

thus limiting any illumination of concrete, existential female embodiment. As with Chodorow and Miller, Gilligan and the Stone Center manage to skip over the tangible, touchable, juicy body – the very grounds of female being, as if it were untouchable, unmentionable. Thus, these discussions, though illuminating and insightful in the relational, social and cultural senses, remain a disembodied and disincarnate vision of female being.

Existential Phenomenological Theorists

Merleau-Ponty

Maurice Merleau-Ponty addresses menstruation directly, although not extensively, in his translated lectures *Merleau-Ponty: At the Sorbonne* (no date), whereby he speaks in context of human development and puberty and references the works of psychoanalyst Helene Deutsch and cultural anthropologist Margaret Mead. For Merleau-Ponty, emotional and bodily development are not two separate endeavors. Psychic development and corporeal development constitute Aa single relationship@ whereby the psyche of the whole subject mirrors her physical constitution and vice versa (p.61). Menstruation, then, is not merely a biological event which defines achievement of a stage in maturity (commonly thought to be puberty). Neither is it a mere intellectual Aknowing@ of the Afacts@ of female bleeding superimposed on the corporeality of the girl. The female whose body begins to bleed begins to develop anonymously in a very specific way, related to a specific region of her being which also connects to the whole of her being. How she accepts or rejects this specific pre-personal development can have a bearing on *how* she menstruates, the regularity or irregularity, for example. The

physiological experience must also be understood and taken up by the girl into her personal existence before it marks her genuine transition into puberty.

Thus, puberty, as a stage in human development, marks the pairing of the anonymous development of a girl=s body (menstruation) with an emotional acceptance or psychic understanding as to how the phenomena of periodic bleeding fits into her everyday existence. For Merleau-Ponty, Adevelopment is neither causal nor final,@ and Ait is always in a certain corporeal field that the individual accomplishes the decisive act of development@ (pp. 61-62).

Overall, Merleau-Ponty in *The Phenomenology of Perception (1995)* proposes a philosophy of human being which avoids the Cartesian dualism of mind and body. Within his understanding, the body is more than mere object secondary to the mind, and the mind is not the primary mode of existence with physical attributes and phenomena tacked on. Merleau-Ponty strives for a different conception of human being altogether, one which calls for a different languaging. And, this language includes specifically new existential terms like: body-subject, anonymous-prepersonal-body, appropriation and personalization of physiology, etc. As Merleau-Ponty and other existential phenomenologists have moved toward that special language which speaks of existence beyond the splits of Cartesian Dualisms, so the present research aims at a language which can express more amply the realm of female being expressed in and through the appropriation of menstruation as a woman=s experience.

De Beauvoir

In her voluminous work, *The Second Sex* (1989) Simone de Beauvoir asks the

question, ›Why is woman the Other ?.‹ She addresses the question of female being through two primary lenses: Part I, ›Facts and Myths‹ and Part II, ›Woman‹s Life Today.‹ In ›Facts and Myths,‹ she begins to answer the question by tackling the argument that it is woman‹s destiny to be the sex which is forever defined and importantly in relation to the primary, male sex.

First, she looks at the data of biology, i.e., reproduction, in lower animals, mammals, and then in humans, to uncover the scientific knowledge which has historically been used to differentiate the sexes, and to characterize them as active or passive, male or female, and then to ascribe importance based on perceived activity or passivity (pp.1-24). Historically, females and female reproduction have been perceived and portrayed as passive and secondary to males and male reproduction. In her review, de Beauvoir demonstrates that differentiating between the sexes has never been as clear-cut as purported and that attributing roles of activity or passivity or change and permanence to sperm and ova is too facile a characterization. In sum A...the two sexes represent two diverse aspects of the life of the species@ (p.24). Therefore, she rejects the notion that difference in biology is a sufficient argument for woman as Other.

Additionally, de Beauvoir compares the growth and sexual development of male and female human being, and declares that AWoman‹s story is much more complex@ (p.26). While males develop rather straightforwardly, i.e., A... in desire and coition his transcendence toward the species is at one with his subjectivity- he *is* his body,@ for females at puberty, Athe species reasserts its claim@ and A...this whole occurrence has the aspect of a *crisis*@ (p.26). She depicts the female as being taken over by her changing

body, fluctuating endocrine system, and the onset of menstruation. In essence, physically the female body begins to develop as if she is preparing for a kind of otherness. She states:

> Many of the ovarian secretions function for the benefit of the egg, promoting its maturation and adapting the uterus to its requirements; in respect to the organism as a whole they make for disequilibrium rather than for regulation- the woman is adapted to the needs of the *egg* rather than to her own requirements. (de Beauvoir, 1989, p.27)

For de Beauvoir, this sense of otherness primarily contains feelings of self-alienation. In the passage above, she speaks as if the Aegg@ is separate from the existence of female, not as if the egg is now a given of her existence. In summarizing female reproduction, she remarks that AFrom puberty to menopause woman is in the theater of a play that unfolds within her and in which she is not personally concerned@ (p.27). Here the assumption is that woman must Aplay along@ with the capacities of furthering the species whether or not it is part of her own life=s personal project.

Although there is existential truth in the description of the woman being *dragged* into the larger project of the species, de Beauvoir=s own bias that menstruation is *nothing more* than an intrusion in the woman=s life stands out often in her writing. While she describes the menstrual cycle as a Acomplex process, still mysterious in many of its details@ and makes note that it involves the Awhole female organism,@ impacting every system of the female body, she plainly states that Athe menstrual cycle is a burden, and a useless one from the point of view of the individual@ (pp. 27-28). Her arguments lean

most heavily in the direction of self-alienation and many of her descriptions take up the historically given idealized male position, which posits a separate autonomous individual in control of himself as the human norm. She then judges female existence from that perspective. Insofar as she does that, she overlooks the cyclical, physical, emotional rhythms as precisely expressive of woman-s being and as requiring cultural space and place to be affirmed, validated, and valued in their own right.

However, unlike the feminist cultural, relational developmental theorists who portray a disembodied woman, de Beauvoir does not shy away from any kind of discussion of the female body, the experience of menstruation included:

> In the lower mammals the debris may escape gradually or may be carried away by lymphatic vessels; but in woman and the other primates, the thickened lining membrane (endometrium) breaks down suddenly, the blood vessels and blood spaces are opened, and the bloody mass trickles out as the menstrual flow. Then, while the corpus luteum regresses, the membrane that lines the uterus is reconstituted and a new follicular phase of the cycle begins. (de Beauvoir, 1989, p.28)

Here, de Beauvoir carefully gives a scientific, yet thoughtful, almost poetical description of the physical properties of menstruation, and continues with another page of intricate description of the changes in blood pressure, hormonal levels, and the gastrointestinal system. She ends her discussion with mention of the unpleasant emotional corollaries of these systemic changes during menstruation and an expressive depiction of the woman-s existential plight at this time:

> ....The central nervous system is affected...leading to a marked capriciousness of disposition. The woman is more emotional, more nervous, more irritable than usual, and may manifest serious psychic disturbance. It is during her periods that she feels her body most painfully as an obscure, alien thing; it is, indeed, the prey of a stubborn and foreign life that each month constructs and then tears down a cradle within it; each month all things are made ready for a child and then aborted in the crimson flow. Woman, like man, *is* her body; but her body is something other than herself. (de Beauvoir, 1989, p.29)

De Beauvoir characterizes woman at this time as Acapricious,@ A emotional,@ Anervous,@ A irritable,@ and Apsychically disturbed.@ While this is the experience of many women, it is also expressive of male bias. De Beauvoir points out that it is possible to argue the validity of these so-called Afacts@ of a woman=s existence. She *is* all of those qualities. De Beauvoir emphasizes, however, that Afacts@ about female or male being, or what is called Afeminine,@ or Amasculine@ have no real significance in and of themselves. Femininity and masculinity are both defined within a context, a culture, the situation of their being. It is the situatedness of the characteristics of female embodiment which gives them meaning, and AThere is no true living reality except as manifested by the conscious individual through activities and in the bosom of a society@ (p.37).

Therefore, while Athe body is one of the essential elements in (woman=s) situation in the world,@ it is not enough to define woman as woman (p.37). Drawing on Merleau-Ponty, Sartre, and Heidegger, de Beauvoir understands the body in terms of an instrument, as a pathway to the world and that the so-called facts about woman=s being

are manifestations of a given bodily instrument which grasps the world and colors and shapes a particular way of being (p.32). At the same time, the embodied woman is perceived and shaped by the society in which she lives. Mere biology is not enough to define woman, and neither is it enough to define the essentially female experience of menstruation. As de Beauvoir states, Awe are concerned to find out what humanity has made of the human female@ (p.37).

Irigary

For Irigary as for de Beauvoir, the standard medical story of reproduction re-institutes the primacy of the phallic, male order. Luce Irigaray wishes to establish a different way of thinking and for this purpose institutes a set of metaphors and tropes derived explicitly through making the woman=s body and its functioning the central pivot for thinking. In *Speculum of the Other Woman* (1985) and *This Sex Which is Not One* (1985), she develops at least two sets of ideas around this central theme. Firstly, the theme of doubling, not being one, not being unified, built around the metaphor of vaginal lips which are not one thing, not like a penis, but rather an enclosure, an active wrapping around movement of fleshly being which hugs and contains rather than standing out as a single thing. Secondly, she builds up the trope of fluidity B blood red, fluids, saliva, water, rhythm, back and forth harmonics. For the purposes of the present research, she presents the provocative possibility of de-constructing and re-constructing language to find a less phallocentric way of speaking, a way of expressing the woman=s experience of menstruation within her own experiential field.

Leder

The Cartesian dualism of which Merleau-Ponty speaks is further critiqued by Drew Leder in *The Absent Body* (1990). He begins by pointing out that Descartes entire philosophy, which gives priority to the mind, is actually rooted in human experience. In Western culture it's quite natural to forget to include one=s bodily experiences and to stay within the world of intentions, purposes, thoughts, a kind of intellectualization of the world rather than an experience of the world. But, this understanding is also experiential in that when the body functions well and smoothly it invites a forgetting, i.e., it disappears from focal consciousness to serve as a kind of implicit unnoticed background. Only when there is disruption does the body become focal. Leder states, AWhen my embodiment radically diverges from the habitual, dys-appearance is likely to result ... the body changes, exhibiting novel sensations and altered capacities ... In the face of such a transformation I can no longer take the body for granted@ (p. 89). Pain, disease, aging, and various modes of female being including menstruation, pregnancy, and menopause are examples of such dys-appearance.

However, Leder makes a point of stating that puberty, aging and modes of woman=s existence are not to be considered in themselves Adysfunctional or alienating@ (p. 89). Since women on an everyday basis experience rather radical bodily changes, they are called back to their bodies more often than men. For example, AMarked shifts occur near and at the time of menstruation, yielding a heightened attention to the physical@ (p. 89). What is interesting to note here is that with all the focus Leder gives regarding bodily dys-appearance and even going so far as to include women=s being as

examples, his examples of women are rather scanty. He uses pregnancy over and over again as a primary example of woman=s dys-appearance, when he could use menstruation as a far more frequent everyday, ready-at-hand example. Here Leder is in step with the culture and forgets to remember the basic situation of women and their being where menstruation occurs far more often in their experience than pregnancy.

Included in Leder=s phenomenology of dys-appearance is a sharp awareness of the impact of the Other. He emphasizes that A... we are never proto-solipsists left to construct a body image in isolation,@ and A...awareness of my body is a profoundly social thing, arising out of experiences of the corporeality of other people and of their gaze directed back upon me@ (p. 92). For the purposes of this research, and the understanding of women=s experiences, this aspect of being, intersubjectivity, is of special significance because it is women more often than men who find themselves at the end of another=s objectifying gaze. Other philosophers, Sartre, Irigary, and de Beauvoir especially, make note of the ordinary objectification of women in the culture and its effects on their everyday perception of themselves and their conduct.

However, Leder emphasizes that being with the Other need not always be objectifiying in the Sartrean sense. Being with the Other often allows for the supplementation rather than the truncation of our own embodiment when the gaze of the Other is welcoming (p. 94). At the same time, Leder does recognize the creation of dys-appearance when the gaze of Other is Ahighly distanced, antagonistic, or objectifying@ (p.96). Moreover, when this perspective is internalized it can provoke a profound sense of self-alienation, i.e., Aa radical split...between the body I live out and my object-body@

(p.96). This is of particular importance for the study of menstruation, as the literature examined thus far has already shown that the personal experience of menstruation is somewhat *naturally* self-alienating. When we add to that the component of otherness which is critical, denigrating or objectifying of the menstruating woman, the sense of self-alienation is compounded and the radical split between lived-body and object-body is intensified and can become inscribed in the woman=s very being.

Recent Phenomenological Research

In an unpublished doctoral dissertation on the social psychology of menarche, Miles (1986) specifically aims at unfolding female experience. She found that with the onset of menses in a girl=s life, a shift occurs within every existential dimension of her being, and in all her social relations. Miles noticed for example that the girl=s relationship to her own identity, her body, her peers, and family changes and that her general comportment in the world as a human being changes as she approaches this personally and socially meaningful milestone. Additionally, Miles revealed that with every subsequent menstruation, the meanings which the girl had already begun to experience became more elaborated and differentiated in terms of social identity and comportment. At the time of menarche, girls experience heightened feelings of vulnerability in the presence of males, an experience which not only affects her relationship to herself and her general comportment but also Acolors@ her relationships with males. This felt visibility (or invisibility) is particularly significant to the present meaning of menstruation research because, as Miles points out, this experience Ais essentially related and reflective of the culturally-given taboo toward the menstruating body and its visible

sign, the menstrual blood@ (p.114).

In an unpublished study of PMS (1999), Stehr found that premenstrual syndrome is lived as a kind of premenstrual anguish. According to her findings, for her subjects, the diagnosis of PMS is an explanatory metaphor of the objectified body. On the one hand, the diagnosis relieved them of responsibility by providing a convenient handle on their physical and emotional discomfort, and on the other hand, the label itself with its objectification and invalidation of their experience, produced its own conflicted anguish. The label created a situation in which the woman is provisionally understood by others and simultaneously alienated by them and herself. At the heart of the existential anguish described by Stehr, is a profound crisis of identity, agency, personal worthiness and acceptability in the world or culture. The crisis exists between two selves, the me and the not-me self: the everyday habitual, autonomous, more reasonable, non-PMS self and the irrational, unworthy, over-emotional PMS self. In her reading of this crisis, the whole social, cultural world and its treatment of female existence comes to its ambivalent expression. In the present study, women's experience of menstruation as a phenomenon was found to involve almost all the situated ambiguities that Stehr found in her study.

In a similar vein, in a pilot study on the meaning of menstruation which I conducted (Work, 1998), I was faced with the implicit characterization of menstruation as an objectified intruder in the lives of the individual women. In several of the protocols, the women talked about their personal experience of menstruation as if it were an inconvenient interruption which they had to endure before they could get on with their *real* lives. Within their descriptions surfaced a sense of the two selves mentioned in

Stehr=s study: the self which *is* me and the self which is *not* me.

Also within this pilot study, I was initially met with enthusiasm (all higher educated subjects) with regard to telling their own menstrual stories; however, later I was also faced with reluctance and hesitance surrounding the same. Overall, it seemed that when the women imagined someone else reading or hearing their descriptions, they became self-conscious and found it difficult to speak and reveal themselves – to the extent that two subjects did not turn in their protocols within the time frame of the study. Throughout this limited research, I picked up on the participants= ambivalence around speaking and not speaking about an experience which one customarily keeps private or secret.

Cultural, Anthropological ABlood@ Authors

Within all of the literature which directly addresses the situations of women, there exists a group of independent authors who assertively address female embodiment and explicitly address the phenomenon of menstruation from radically divergent points of view (Buckley & Goltlieb, 1988; Delaney, Lupton, Toth, 1988; Golub, 1985; Grahn, 1993; Houppert, 1999; Knight, 1991; Laws, 1990; Lupton, 1993; Martin, 1992; Tavris, 1993; Weideger, 1976). These authors, mostly women, take up menstruation as a vital, significant reflection of woman=s being, which if neglected as it has been, leaves half of human kind in the shadows.

Sophie Laws (1990), for example, a feminist activist, takes up the Aissue of blood@ as it exists in her region of Western culture (Britain) and wonders about the origin of the shame that women often experience when menstruating. She understands

that the experienced shame involves a kind of political dance or etiquette in the culture in which women cooperate with men by carefully concealing any traces of their monthly bleeding. She deliberately avoids the idea of the menstrual taboo since it implies a kind of cultural determinism -the taboo becomes easily a kind of mere social taken-for-granted fact. As if men are naturally repulsed by blood; therefore, the taboo exists. Or, the blood taboo exists because women and men are naturally conflicted. Or, since the taboo is age-old, this justifies its existence and forbids its questioning. Worse yet, Laws argues that the idea of the Amenstrual taboo@ sets in motion a distortion of history in which women are credited with the creation of the taboo and then blamed for it.

She conducts an unorthodox sociological, feminist investigation in which she interviews men about *their* attitudes toward women=s monthly bleeding. She bases her study on the premise that Western culture is configured so that women are vulnerable to and easily influenced by men=s attitudes toward them. Ultimately, Laws finds that men generally have negative views of menstruation, which dovetail with their general attitudes towards women. Hence, by interviewing men she intends to make clear the cultural climate which women are up against as opposed to collecting the experiences of women in a vacuum. She presumes that in order for women to address their shame about their own menstrual cycles, they need to examine the larger context of their experience which includes the looming critical attitudes of men.

While Laws takes up the larger context of the secrecy of menstruation by including ordinary men or what amounts to the ordinary male gaze, Martin (1992) goes a step further by scrutinizing the more elaborately and rationally constructed gaze of

scientific, medical, and industrious men. Historically, the fields of general science and medicine and industry were created from a male perspective which valued production and activity and saw the male as the norm, productively and otherwise. Emily Martin (1992) reviews in detail the history of the image of menstruation found in science and in medical texts. Specifically, she notes that the male body and its functions is portrayed as more active, productive, and generally more engaged whereas the female body and its functions including ovulation, menstruation, pregnancy, and birth are seen as passive, less productive, and disengaged from world participation. These notions of activity and productivity are derived from the cultural meanings already present which value mass production, continuous activity and continual outcomes which are perceived as valuable. Within this imagery, sperm which are continually being produced in great abundance is ejaculated and each sperm swims vigorously, actively, and with firm goal-directedness toward the ovum. The single ovum, which requires much more time to be produced, is portrayed as immovable and passively waiting to be penetrated. Overall then, Martin contends that these functions of the female body are perceived and portrayed as inferior and less valuable in that the overall production is fewer in number, weaker, slower, and less frequent. Martin states A...the image of menstruation in medical texts is unabashedly one of failed production@ (p. 92).

Additionally, within this cultural analysis she reveals that menstruation, from a cultural point of view, is relegated to the private spheres of the home and family. However, she points out that when women are questioned individually about menstruation, their views do not parallel the cultural perspective (pp.92-112).

Realistically, menstruating women also go out into the world to school and work. When asked how they viewed their own menstrual bleeding, the women Martin interviewed replied in various ways depending upon social class and what kind of work, if any, they envisioned themselves doing outside the home. Martin notes that overall women who spoke positively about their own menstruation also saw it as part of their definition as a woman. The women who described menstruation as a ›hassle‹ expressed views which are more in keeping with the cultural notion of menstruation as private and tied to home and family.

The ›hassle,‹ she discovered, involved negotiating the world outside the home while menstruating and simultaneously trying to conceal any evidence of bleeding. Time and space outside the home, at work and at school, are not conducive to taking care of the practical issues of bleeding, especially while trying to keep it hidden. In these everyday situations, Martin emphasizes that A... [women] are asked to do the impossible: conceal and control their bodily functions in institutions whose organization of time and space take little cognizance of them@ (p.94). As a result of this, women have historically found for themselves private spaces within the public spaces of work or school, e.g. bathrooms when available. While these private spaces are a place of concealment, they also provide an opportunity for women=s Asolidarity and resistance@ (p.97).

Interestingly enough, Martin states that although the women she interviewed expressed awareness of the fact that society does not make allowances for the particularities of women=s bodies, none of them raised the question, why not? (p.100). Not accounting for women=s bodies in the public sphere is traditional and currently,

Martin states, A...the structure of workplaces in the United States [still] does not easily allow any woman to live with her bodily functions, whether she be menstruating or pregnant@ (p.101). Furthermore, this lack of institutional support, she contends, does not allow women to be Awhole people,@ i.e., they cannot be productive and reproductive at the same time (p. 100).

Overall, these two researchers, and the others mentioned, take up menstruation and the historical, cultural, social meanings of it as crucial reflections of the status of women, nature, rationality, the body, and the economic order. Most significantly they talk about actual living women in the home, the work place, in the family, as daughters, wives, and mothers who bleed monthly during a significant portion of their adult life. By speaking so explicitly and concretely of menstruation and the rest of woman=s being, they participate in breaking the code of silence, and they represent a perspective and create a model on which this study is based.

Psychological Literature Review Summary

A review of the traditional, psychological literature reveals that menstruation has been researched and depicted primarily from a male-dominated point of view and has mostly presupposed all the cultural and social biases associated historically with that viewpoint. Freudian psychology, which has been profoundly influential in the culture, perpetuates the menstrual taboo and cultural and biological determinisms. Women and their bodily processes are secondary to males and are naturally inferior and repulsive; therefore, the taboo exists and needs no questioning.

Some of the neo-Freudian psychology recognizes that women=s bodies/lives

may, in fact, live and grow autonomously, however, menstruation exists along side a taken-for-granted taboo within the culture and monthly bleeding is a taken-for-granted repeated trauma. Mothers get partly blamed for perpetuating the trauma because they do not speak openly about menstruation to their daughters. These theorists put women/mothers in a double-bind. Menstruation is natural – and naturally traumatic. The message remains: keep quiet about it at all times, but speak freely and openly when informing your daughters. This is an impossible feat to accomplish, and this is a message which is embedded in the culture and predominately endorsed by the field of medicine as the present research's expanded cultural review demonstrates clearly.

Furthermore, this message to speak and not to speak about menstruation, that it is important but not important enough to speak about, also shows up in the developmental, feminist, and even existential-phenomenological literature. Even the literature which specializes in female experience promulgates this notion by forgetting to include or avoiding menstruation as a topic. The related phenomena in which women are to have their periods – even enjoy them – but just not openly, outside of the home is finally thematized in the literature by the ABlood@ authors. It is interesting to see these double-bind phenomena in the research participants' individual responses sometimes with some awareness.

Overall, the formal, psychological literature remains mostly negative in its perception of menstruation and women even when trying not to. Erikson and Bettelheim offer some refreshing rare exceptions and that is why I choose to present them here. I also choose to highlight them because they provide some of the rarer literature which

addresses menstruation and women=s bodies explicitly, and because it is interesting to note that these perceptions remain hidden within the culture as well as in the field of psychology.

Additionally, the philosophical psychological literature presented here moves in the direction of animating, legitimating, and personalizing female bodiliness and female being. Thus, it provides a ground for understanding a way of being outside theories which render women as merely dominated by nature and hormonal emotionality, as weak, vulnerable to mental illness, and as castrated-half men. Moreover, the recent existential-phenomenological studies pertaining to female embodiment pave a way to a situated investigation of women=s meanings of menstruation. Finally, as noted earlier, the literature of the ABlood@ authors has offered the most detail in terms of informing and inspiring the present research i.e., to hermeneutically explore the larger context of menstruation/women=s being along side the personal narratives of women.

Cultural Data Conclusions

The results of a systematic analysis of the combined cultural data presented in this study reveal that menstruation has historically been and is still consistently presented, portrayed, studied, regarded, and sold as an indication of female inferiority, weakness, sickness, dirtiness, and inherent shame or sinfulness. Even the bulk of formal psychological literature remains largely negative in its characterization of menstruation and of women even when attempting to do the opposite – the negating force of the culture remains powerfully present. Just as in the other cultural areas, there are some rare positive exceptions. Both Erickson and Bettelheim offer theories that

support the specific human value of woman's body and spirit. Bettelheim even proposes that men unconsciously envy women's bleeding as well as her reproductive powers, a kind of "womb envy" to replace the old fashioned idea of "penis envy."

But, for the most part the use of derogatory or silenced and euphemistic language provides a fundamental basis of understanding for menstruation and women in the culture. Likewise, humor, music, art, television, literature, and film offer a showcase for attitudes about menstruation and women. The history and content of menstrual education and medicine are also important aspects of culture to consider in the meaning of menstruation, along with the illuminating backdrop of historical influences.

Overall, an historical and cultural review of colloquial language demonstrates a remarkable preoccupation with female genitalia rather than male genitalia. Further, attitudes surrounding indications of male genitalia are significantly more life-affirming than the attitudes contained in euphemisms for female genitalia and menstruation. Euphemisms for the menstrual cycle created and used by men are characteristically sexual in nature and derogatory, whereas women typically create and use euphemisms for menstruating which enable them to maintain the secrecy and silence surrounding all things menstrual. For the most part, in an effort to avoid the cultural shame of menstruation, women to some extent perpetuate shame about their own bodies by not speaking about menstruation at all or by creating coded language. Furthermore, with an absence of positive menstrual terms in the culture and the presence of denigrating and objectifying menstrual references, girls are forced to make a conscious or unconscious decision about their menstruating bodies: they must either develop into women who use

denigrating terms of self-reference, or actively seek positive terms to conceptualize their bleeding bodies or simply withdraw from self-reference altogether.

Additionally, the pervasive use of the acronym PMS has expanded in meaning culturally to include any behavior or bodily function relating to menstruation. The use of "PMS" is a way of talking about menstruation while subtracting the image of blood, mess, and embarrassment. Whereas PMS denotes "premenstrual syndrome" and diagnostically denotes moodiness and mental and physical discomfort as a result of fluctuating hormones, the term PMS is currently used in song, poetry, humor, television, film, and ordinary conversation to reference menstruation. Since PMS is used universally to connote physiological and/or emotional female instability, the use of PMS in reference to menstruation also connotes female inferiority.

Subsequently, menstruation as shameful and as a symbol of women's inferiority shows up in examples of music, literature, television, and film. The absence of representations of menstrual women or conditions of menstruation from classical and traditional art signifies an avoidance and general lack of acceptance within the culture. Menstruation, however, finds representation in certain modern pieces of feminist art, part and parcel as a result of centuries of neglect. Additionally, other non-traditional, alternative, life-affirming concepts of menstruation also appear in music, film, and television, but remain the rare exception rather than the rule.

Similarly, menstrual product television commercials and print advertisements work diligently to keep in place the idea that menstruation is a liability for women and they sell the perception that menstruation is dirty and generally unacceptable in the

culture. By identifying and sympathizing with women's fears of being exposed as bleeding beings, and by promising security and "protection" from exposure and humiliation, menstrual product companies perpetuate old stereotypes and more shame about women's bleeding and being. Menstrual product companies are strategic about promoting these traditional ideas and creating customers for life by generating most of the education for girls about menstruation.

As part of the larger context of history and the industrialization of society, professional medicine, with its male experts, took over the tradition of female lay healers and further influenced the perception of menstruation as a sign of women's inherent inferiority, deficiency, and sickness. Within the profession of medicine, menstruation fundamentally is seen as a pathological aspect of women's being. Menstruation, like woman, herself, is something to be harnessed or controlled and only doctors and men know how to do this correctly. Although several modern references do depict alternative understandings of menstruation as a natural, life-affirming component of women's being, the over-arching theory of menstruation is that of pathology. Theories and medications (hormones) which support partial and thorough menstrual suppression are increasing in popularity in the current culture. Overall, throughout history, the field of medicine has also placed women in an emotional double-bind, touting menstruation as a "natural" part of female being, all the while warning women to refrain from basic activities, and suggesting to them that their reasoning is compromised during menstruation. Recently some medical men have even suggested that menstruation is medically unnecessary and should be eliminated because it contributes to female

diseases. The expert doctors have often blamed women for their inability to come to terms with their own menstrual cycles, have notoriously denied women's experiences of menstruating, and have generally overlooked how the shaming and silencing culture has shaped mothers' abbreviated and inadequate explanations of menstruation and reproduction to their daughters.

Therefore, historically, menstruation is used as a tool by men to leverage power against and away from women. Overall, menstruation, which is an essentially female experience, is still seen as a sign of difference from men, which, instead of being a mere difference, is construed as a deficiency. Historically, the fact that women menstruate has been equated with defectiveness and has been used socially, politically, medically, scientifically, and economically to keep women subjected to men and separated from the same access to the world as men. Furthermore, menstruating women have been seen as dangerous and mysterious, and the biblical story of creation, which posits woman as the downfall of man and as cursed with the disability of bearing children painfully as punishment has perhaps had the most profound and lasting negative influence upon the perception of menstruation and women. The biblical account of menstruation portrays women as "unclean," and promotes the inferiority of women, implying that woman will always be second in the eyes of God and in relation to man. Additionally, the ancient Greek theories that women are fundamentally deficient in "heat" and provide only the matter in the creation of life also greatly influenced women's inferior status, as did Darwin's scientific backing of woman's puny nature and Freud's view of woman as a castrated male.

Finally, overall, the cultural meaning of menstruation is representative of men's meanings and associations of female bleeding. Even women's aversion to their own bleeding is largely learned through an overarching culture, which is dominated by male authority. From birth to death, women are bombarded in the culture by male images, ideas, attitudes and words for menstruation which endorse loathing, mocking, rejection, and fear of menstrual bleeding. The mention or insinuation of anything menstrual conjures images of sexuality, "dirty" sex, sin, and inferiority. With the mere mention of menstruation, typical men become either embarrassed or angered, and often react by withdrawing or lashing out. Women, furthermore, react similarly, either with shrinking with embarrassment or blowing up with anger, depending on how thoroughly they have internalized men's perceptions and feelings about women. The difference is that women also suffer the shame of bleeding, a shame aimed at their very own being.

CHAPTER III

Analyses of Participants' Data

Introduction

Whereas the analysis of the cultural data on women and menstruation (which includes the formal psychological literature) reveals a remarkable preponderance of negative, shame filled meanings, the individual participants' answers and interviews illuminate more thoroughly what it is like to be on the receiving end of those messages. In addition, the individual interviews provide a stage for and descriptive data on the personalized, concrete relational meanings of menstruation. The participants describe their menstrual meanings emerging in relation to mother, father, girlfriend, husband, for example, and their relationship to culture-at-large and their own self. Concrete relationships are the regions where their menstrual meanings play out. These concrete relationships with specific incidents and memories, when unfolded, provide the actual flesh of the personalized and meaningful menstrual life. This obvious and yet, interestingly enough, easily overlooked aspect of the protocols show that menstruation is an inherently *relational* experience. This is easy to miss because each participant somewhat dryly describes her "typical menstrual period" (answering the first question) as though it were a series of events or symptoms which she copes with in isolation. Initially, within these answers, others are mentioned minimally and only as general presences who judge or irritate or as doctors who may or may not help in relieving pain or other symptoms. And, while some women were descriptive about the pain they experienced, they, too, describe their pain in isolation.

Additionally, each woman gives a rundown of how many days she usually bleeds, how heavy or light the bleeding is, the degree of cramping she usually endures and some mention of feeling mildly “emotional” or “moody” or even weathering extreme feelings of depression. Every answer contains some general understanding of the particular woman’s menstrual cycle and how she has coped or navigated her personal situation throughout the years. Although the specific content of these answers is not highly illuminating in and of itself, the general clinical style of reporting and the depiction of isolation throughout become revelatory of the cultural climate in which the women live.

For a moment, I was ready to believe that the physical descriptions the women gave were the *sole* reality of the women’s typical experience of menstruation. Culture declares that menstruation is a bodily function; a mere set of symptoms to be managed in silence, rarely to be spoken of, and dealt with in isolation until its natural end. A woman’s life and relationships to self or anyone else play no part in culture’s denuded, de-contextualized understanding of menstruation. The women’s protocols eventually revealed that menstruating is deeply anchored in the particular lives of the women, which include their specific relationships.

Relationships as Grounds for Menstrual Meanings

Relationships to Mothers

One of the most powerful relationships tied to menstruation is the woman’s relationship with her mother. When asked for their first memory of menstruation, every woman recounted an incident in which her mother (or grandmother as in Sharon’s case)

was the central figure, other than herself. Additionally, when recounting their first memory, almost all the participants recalled their own menarche, and with most, their mother was the person with the solution to the "problem," whether she was actually helpful or not. For example, Clara remembers feeling "dumbstruck and totally confused" upon discovering that she started her period for the first time. She states,

> I made a make shift cushion of toilet paper into my underwear, went down to my mother to tell her what had happened & could I 'please, please, please' stay home from school. She handed me some bulky, 'night time'; i.e. extra long & thick maxi-pads & told me I didn't get to miss out on school when I had a period. I remember being really pissed off; as well as feeling the terribleness of cramps for the first time. I also had this strange notion that my period was somehow punishment.

Clara turns to her mother in her time of confusion, and her mother provides the practical solution she needs to manage her sudden bleeding, even though Clara later questions her mother's less than ideal choice of bulky pads. Later, when Clara turns to her mother for sympathy and consolation, Clara is disappointed, "pissed off" even, when her mother provides what may be interpreted as the ordinary, "real world" response to her discomfort. In the "real" world, you don't get to miss out on school when you have a period. This exchange with her mother partially initiates Clara into the culture as a menstruating woman. She recalls being left with the terribleness of cramps and having "a strange notion" that her period was somehow punishment. Essentially, she felt left alone in the dark with this new state of being, even though her mother was physically present.

Like Clara, Alicia, in her first memory of menstruation, recalls her own menarche and that she urgently seeks out the assistance of her mother. Unlike Clara's harsh reality however, Alicia's mother had given her a "period pack" which Alicia, describes as "a pretty box filled with an informational guide on how to handle my period, there were maxi pads and all types of candy." She had been prepared somewhat but still found herself caught off guard in her bathroom at home when she discovers that she has begun to bleed. She states that upon her discovery, she laughs hysterically and shouts out for her mother. In her description, Alicia, further states,

> She comes downstairs and I show her, she just smiles and goes to my room to get the period pack. The next day at school I was a SUPERSTAR! I wasn't the first of my friends to get their period and I daggone [sic] sure wasn't going to be the last.

Alicia calls out to her mother for help and in an understated, yet supportive way, her mother comes through for her and encourages her to step into life as a menstruating being. Alicia clearly feels differently about stepping out into the world, i.e., going to school, than Amy. Interestingly enough however, with all her mother's encouragement, Alicia describes her mother's reaction as essentially silent and summarizes her mother's reaction by saying, "You know, so I go in there, and I fix myself up and you know, but she just never said anything. I mean, she- gave me more a reaction when I passed my driver's test." Although done differently, Alicia's mother, like Amy's, plays a central role in her first menstruation and helps make a lasting first impression of what it means to menstruate.

Although Isabel's mother was out of town when Isabel first started her period, her mother still played a vital role in the experience. Isabel remarks,

> …I mean I felt like it was kind of cool because I was left to my own devices- I mean not that my dad would have had any problem with taking me to a store and buying tampons or whatever but it was just like we never talked about those things. Anyways, my mom was always the one that was more- talked to us about sex and stuff like that and she is a female (laughs) so she can relate, so I guess yeah it wasn't- it wasn't bad and then 'cause I was kind of excited when my mom came home so I could tell her the news that I was blossoming.

Isabel's mother was an integral part of her first menstrual cycle, as was the norm in this study, but Isabel holds the unique position of actually wanting to tell her mother that she has begun bleeding. She approaches her first period with an unburdened, celebratory attitude. She had been educated about menstruating prior to menarche, but not necessarily by her mother. However, her family had engaged in general conversations about body parts, what makes boys different from girls, penises and vaginas, and so there was already a degree of comfortableness and acceptance about such topics within the family. She still wants to tell her mother first because "she is a female so she can relate." Isabel begins her life as a menstruating woman feeling self-sufficient and excited to tell her mother the good news. Her mother plays a central and life-affirming role in her initiation into the culture as a menstruating female.

In the remaining protocols, mothers remain ever-present, yet they do not all carry such a life-affirming association with regards to menstruation. Caroline had no prior

education or knowledge about the nature of periods when she first started, and so when she discovered blood in her underpants she remarks,

> I did not know what was happening and I got scared and I cried. I yelled for my mother and she came running up the stairs to the bathroom very concerned and when she realized what was going on she was relieved. She was good about explaining it to me. It made me feel relieved. I think I felt a little silly for crying afterword [sic].

Overall, Caroline's introduction to her own menstruation is anchored in confusion, fear, a degree of emotional invalidation from her mother, and a sense of shame in feeling afraid and not knowing what was happening. She looks to her mother's expression of relief to know that she, herself, will be okay, and she must rely upon her mother for an explanation of menstruation after the fact. Although Caroline admits later in her interview that she no longer feels silly for her initial fear, her first experience of menstruating and her first memory of such is inextricably tied to her relationship with her mother.

Finally, even though Melanie first cites discussing menstruation with her doctor as her first memory, she also recalls, "And for some other reason I have a vivid memory of a few of my mom's mestruations [sic]." She further explains,

> One morning she was standing at the bathroom counter, getting ready for work, and she looked down, and said, 'What have you girls spilled on the floor?'(it was a carpeted floor.) And we all said 'nothing.' Then she wiped between her legs and discovered it was her, who was dripping blood on the floor unknowingly. My

> mom is very immodest and open, and allowed us to be in the bathroom with her while she was using the toilet. And I remember, glancing at her while she was wiping, and I saw all the red on the toilet paper. I thought that was gross.

It is interesting to note that Melanie remembers one of her *mother's* menstruations as one of her first memories of menstruation. And in this "vivid" scene which she "for some reason" recalls, it is her mother who makes a "mess" with her own menses but attempts to blame it on the daughters. Melanie makes a descriptive slip in her writing and exposes her mother's "mess" and how she feels about it when she misspells her mother's menstruation ("mestruation"). Her mother's "immodest" and "open" behavior is intrusive for her sensibilities and she is left with an image of blood on tissue which she finds "gross." It becomes predictable that later in her interview, Melanie remembers feeling embarrassed to tell her mother that she started her period when it came time. Melanie's associations with menstruation involve shock, embarrassment, and her relationship with her mother in which she exposed her daughter to more than she was able to bear.

In summary, whether physically or emotionally present at the time or not, the women's mothers played significant roles in their first memory of menstruation, thus greatly influencing the women's attitudes about menstrual cycles in general and their own bodies and experiences in particular.

Relationships to Fathers

Although not nearly as conspicuous as the mothers in the protocols, fathers made an appearance and made an impact upon the developing women during the onset of their

first periods and thereafter, albeit the influence is not as obvious to the women. Isabel best summarizes the role that fathers (and father-figures) play in relation to their daughters and menstruation when she remarks, "...Anyways my mom was always the one that was more- talked to us about sex and stuff like that and she is a female (laughs) so she can relate…" Isabel implies that she didn't particularly want to tell her father because he was male and therefore could *not* relate to her situation. Of all the women interviewed, Isabel describes the most comfortable and accepted relationship with her father, and she makes a point of mentioning that at the time she did not think that her father would refuse to take her to the store to buy tampons or whatever she needed; however, she still does not look forward to telling her father in the same way as she does with her mother. She does not share the same kind of relationship with him, and she attributes that, in part, to his essential maleness. He does not have the same body and therefore he cannot relate.

The rest of the women who mention fathers or father-figures in particular have even stronger conflicted feelings about telling and not-telling that they have begun their periods or having their situation revealed to them by someone else. Telling their fathers or having them find out involve great shame and embarrassment and subjecting them to harsh judgment and alienation. Sharon speaks about her own reaction to her grandmother, telling her grandfather that she had begun to bleed:

> Well he was a guy, you know- that was the big thing- you are a guy, you are the other and I have this thing now and you don't umm and I think that I had also- I think at this point I had also known- I had conversations after that video umm- I

> think I was aware that he was pretty reluctant or refused to buy tampons or pads or whatever it was that my grandmother had needed- that that was something he didn't like to do or refused to do if she needed them and so I think that was in my head you know- and trying to make sense of you know- why is he so proud that he is unwilling to go. All that stuff was part of it.

Sharon's reaction to her grandfather and his knowledge of her menstruation reaches beyond the mere fact that he is male and therefore he could not understand her situation. Her reaction that he is the "Other" is laden with the knowledge that he had already judged and rejected her grandmother; he had refused to assist her and had been "too proud" to step into the world and exert the effort to buy menstrual products for his wife. Sharon had surmised that her grandfather had already rejected the whole of her grandmother's being when he decided that such duties were beneath him. Her understanding of her grandfather's "otherness" is that he had already alienated and judged her grandmother as "Other," so what would prevent him from doing the same to her? In Sharon's protocol, fathers/father figures have the power to shame and alienate.

Similarly, Alicia describes a scenario with her first step-father in which he attempts to ostracize and alienate at least one of the women in his family. She reports that she, herself, never received any comments from him first-hand, but that she had heard from her sister who went to live with him after his and her mother's divorce, that he made demands about how to dispose of her used maxi-pads or tampons. She states, "Um, he told her that whenever she changes, to put it in a plastic bag and walk it to the trash outside of the side of the house. WHO is gonna do that?" Interestingly, Alicia does

not even utter the name of the item to be changed. She then remarks, 'WHO is gonna do that?' which seems very different from my own first thought which was, what kind of person would *ask* such a thing? Furthermore, who should *have* to do such a thing? Personally, a demand like that is completely out of the question, and I would not consider for one second such a request, yet Alicia's response suggests that she does consider it.

In fact, historically, women have considered many such requests and suffered worse oppression surrounding their menstruation. Many have literally gone into hiding during their menstrual cycle, lied about having cramps or feeling tired, and have gone out of their way to *protect* others (usually men) from the fact that they were bleeding. Women have been doing this for years and are still jumping through hoops to conceal their menstruation from others; however, apparently, Alicia's step-father's command crosses the line of tolerance for her standards. Ultimately, Alicia denounces his demand, but for a brief moment, she considers who *would* walk outside to dispose of a dirty pad or tampon applicator. She decides that she would not and her sister would not, but still wonders who might. Her step-father demonstrates an age-old intolerance and disgust for menstruation and the overall being of menstruating women that women have learned to absorb throughout the years. The fact that Alicia entertains her step-father's proposition even fleetingly suggests that she, too, has had to adapt to the presence of negative male attitudes over the years and is accustomed to the feeling of alienation surrounding menstruation.

Of all the participants, Clara has the strongest reaction to her father in relation to

menstruation and depicts perhaps the most vivid picture of alienation in relation to him. She does not, however, offer a clear understanding of her memories or feelings. In fact, she does not even arrive at the core memory or association without extensive questioning from me. At one point during her interview, I inquired about a statement she made about finding herself "loathing" her cycle. She remarks, "…although I think it's at those moments I am either buying tampons or pads….irate that they are next to the baby diapers in the grocery store." When I asked her to clarify what she meant, she responded that she "didn't know" and was ready to leave it at that until I kept questioning her. After almost a full page of dialogue, Clara delivers the loaded proclamation, "that tampon feminine hygiene aisle- it's always like a no-man's land for half the population. You know it's treated as this strange aisle that only women will ever walk down."

She describes the feminine hygiene aisle as "barren" and not as "inviting" as other aisles like the beer and chips aisle where there are ads tempting customers to try a new salsa. Furthermore, "the only time you see a man down that aisle is when you see a desperate father or desperate boyfriend or husband who's been sent on a mission..." After musing about this idea for a moment in the interview, Clara suddenly has a memory of starting her period while on a trip with her father to visit her grandmother. In this memory, she relates that she had started her period mid-trip and did not want to say that she needed to stop again because then her father would inevitably ask it why. She stresses that she eventually found the incredible amount of "courage" she needed to ask her father to stop; only it was eleven o'clock at night. Her father stopped at the nearest Safeway and handed her a hundred dollar bill and sent her in alone. At thirteen or

fourteen she stood flustered in the aisle trying to pick out what she needed and she imagines that he must have “felt bad” because her father appeared in the store at the end of the aisle, “but he did not come in the aisle.” She says she quickly picked something and when she got to her grandmother’s house, her father “just went to bed” and her grandmother helped her clean up and get “set up.” At the end of telling this story she states, “That experience kind of reminds me of like the feminine hygiene aisle.”

Clara’s story exposes the origin of her disdain for the “feminine hygiene aisle,” i.e., the memory of her father’s insensitivity and indifference to her and her situation of being female. To her, the aisle also represents being female and alone, embarrassed and ashamed, afraid and having to be courageous in the face of it. Since the age of thirteen, Clara has carried this emotionally loaded association, and whereas hers is the most dramatically emotional of the participants, it nonetheless resonates with almost all of the women as expressing the profound alienation they experienced from men in the face of discovering themselves as menstruating women.

Relationships to Boyfriends/Husbands

In relation to boyfriends and husbands, the most common themes of which the women speak involve providing protection men from the realities of menstruation, sex during menstruation, and finding overall acceptance as menstruating beings. Interesting to note is that the two participants who are lesbian did not mention any difficulties with their girlfriends surrounding menstruation; however partners of the opposite sex present certain obstacles to the rest of the women.

Concealing signs or evidence of menstrual bleeding from bosses, co-workers,

strangers, and generalized others is present throughout all the protocols, but when it comes to bleeding and being intimate with men, a particular kind of negotiation is executed by the women. However, even though they may notice, not all the women question the fact that their partners require special treatment. To them, handling their partners' sensibilities is part of everyday life and they have grown to accept rather than question it.

For instance, during Alicia's interview, I overheard in the background the most revealing dynamics between her and her boyfriend that are neither in her written protocol nor in her formal, verbalized answers. When questioning Alicia about her statement that menstruation "cleanses," she begins to answer, but in the in the middle of her first sentence she shouts out from her phone, "You might want to cover your ears." She continues with her answer as if there had been no interruption, and she gives no explanation for her remark and says nothing about to whom she spoke. I let her finish her answer, but then I return to her gesture to warn who I assume (correctly) is her boyfriend. I ask, "Is he squeamish?" Emphatically, she answers, "Oh my God. I can't even mention- he's sittin' here like go in the room, please. Please go in the room. If I say 'tampon' he freaks out." Whether accurate or not, Alicia and I both jump to the assumption that he is 'squeamish' about the blood and mess of periods, although we have no discussion to verify this. When I further ask her what his response is about, she answers:

> He just said 'ew.' (Laughs) I'm chalking it up to that he's a man and he doesn't understand that it's a natural part of life. The same way he had wet dreams as a

> kid, well- get over it. There's nothing you can do about it. I'll just never be that girl that asks him to run to the store to pick me up a box of pads. He'll drive me there and give me the money but he probably will never go in and actually purchase it.

Clearly, Alicia has come to an understanding about the limitations her boyfriend has in accepting her fully as a bleeding being. Although as part of her boyfriend's development and being, he had wet dreams which are a 'natural part of life,' her implication is that he cannot understand that periods are the same. She attributes his lack of understanding to being a 'man,' and she has adapted to the fact and takes for granted that he is intolerant of hearing anything about periods and bleeding. She has also adapted to the reality that in a possible "emergency," he will never 'get over' himself enough to actually go in the store and purchase the pad or tampons she needs. He will never be that guy, but she frames it by saying, 'I'll just never be that girl that asks him…' At this point in their relationship, she knows not to bother to ask. On the whole, Alicia has grown used to the fact that she must alter her needs and behavior at least to some degree, in relation to him. She notes that his attitude towards her talk of periods suggests that *she* go in the other room. She even laughs when he says 'ew' in response to the word 'tampon.' Although I did not inquire into her laugh, it seems indicative that his intolerance of her bleeding is at least tolerable to her.

By the same token, she, too, has decided on her limitations with regard to hiding herself. When I asked her if she conceals her tampons and "stuff" at home, she says, "No. I mean they're under the bathroom sink just because they're more convenient in

that spot. But no, I'm not gonna hide it because it's life." This idea that periods are a part of life relates back to the interview topic of discussion when she shouted out the warning to her boyfriend to cover his ears. In response to my reiteration, "You said your period is just a part of you- who you are," without skipping a beat, she resolutely replied, "And there's nothing you can do about it." This remark seems to summarize the conflicting state of her menstrual affairs at least with regard to her boyfriend; it is a natural part of one's life but it is a part to be merely tolerated. The first portion of the remark suggests a kind of self love and acceptance, yet the later half suggests she is stuck with an unpleasant situation and could not change it even if she tried.

Melanie, too, is accustomed to keeping quiet about her cycle, not because her husband has ever told her never to mention it, but because she, herself, finds it too "graphic" and so she anticipates that he will respond in the same way. In their relationship, they never speak about her period except in relation to conceiving their children and even then their language includes a generalized "we." To illustrate, Melanie says she might say to her husband, "Now would be a good time for us to be together. We might be able to get pregnant right now." Afterwards, she states that if "we" did not conceive, "then I would feel like O.K. – I started- we didn't get pregnant." Quite obviously, she refrains from using the word "I" and does not mention the word "fertility" even though she clearly understands the notion. Melanie also emphasizes that she never announces her cycle to her husband and he never asks her about it:

> I don't need to tell him I am having a cycle. Umm, maybe he just sees that the tampons are to the front of the cabinet. Or maybe he just kind of picks up on a

> few clues here and there- I never say 'Oh I am having my period right now.' So I think he might just pick up on the clues.

Overall, the communication between her and her husband is "generalized" and based on intimation. For Melanie, pointed discussions about her period are "super, super, super graphic," and she prefers "way more casual, way more simple" discussions. Although they both imagined that her husband would be "grossed out" by the actual birth of their children and Melanie's inevitable dripping of blood and making "messes" in the bathroom, Melanie says that he was "awesome" and "…wasn't grossed out by any of that…" The interview establishes that ordinarily, outside of pregnancy and childbirth, Melanie never even gives her husband a chance to be "grossed out," as she habitually rolls up pads, wraps them in toilet paper and puts them in "an old toilet paper cardboard cylinder thing." When I remark that it seems that he does not even have the opportunity to become disgusted, Melanie quickly retorts, "Nope," and then reminds me that she, herself, "probably would be" [offended]. Although it is uncertain, it is likely that Melanie's husband has had no desire to speak with her directly about her cycle and that he has never missed seeing any tampon wrappers or used pads in the trash; however, even if he desired an open discussion and/or candid living conditions, he has most likely discovered her shame and embarrassment around the topic and has learned to take her cues of discretion. With regard to her menstrual cycle, Melanie generally lives stealthily and under a cloud of shame and disgust. In relation to her husband and her menstrual cycle, she lives out this shame and disgust by continuing to protect him (and herself) from its concreteness.

Although Melanie's boyfriend is, as far as we know, not outright offended at the signs of her menstrual cycle, Regina admits that her boyfriend does get "totally grossed out" about the realities of her bleeding. Although Regina does not worry about offending her boyfriend by leaving her pads and tampons in plain view, she states that a "big no-no" for him involves her not flushing after she goes to the bathroom "because you can see the blood on the toilet paper." She surmises that his aversion to seeing blood is its association to pain and his chronic injury and believes that "pain really scares him." Furthermore, for her, his not seeing blood on a regular basis perpetuates the idea that it is only ever associated with pain. Regina summarizes, "…and I think these guys just aren't used to seeing blood on a regular basis," and jokes that she "may need to desensitize him [her boyfriend] a little bit." Although in moments such as this, Regina conjures tolerance, empathy, and even a defense for her boyfriend, there are times when she expresses genuine frustration towards his attitude and limitations.

For instance, the presence of Regina's period implies that she cannot have sex because her current boyfriend "is not interested at all." Although she would welcome intercourse during her period and has in the past with an ex boyfriend, it is not possible given her current relationship and her boyfriend's reaction to her blood. Although overall for Regina, menstruation is "something you have to hide and keep 'sanitary,'" when I inquire about her meaning and use of the word sanitary (which included quotation marks), she reveals that she has a direct association to her boyfriend:

> Well, sanitary um- I guess maybe I am kind of referencing my current boyfriend who gets totally grossed about- out about the sight of any kind of blood or any

> remnants of blood or anything, like if we are having sex and maybe it's like two days after my period and there's any inkling of blood on the condom afterwards, he's just really kind of grossed out about that.

She ends this reflection with a candid unveiling of her own feelings, "And it kind of annoys the shit out of me because I am like- it's just a piece of my body, what's so gross about it?" Although just moments earlier in the interview, she, herself, reveals that logistically dealing with the blood is "kind of gross sometimes" and "kind of a hassle," apparently she knows that her repulsion is mild and she understands that it includes an overall acceptance of herself. However, she takes her boyfriend's repulsion at the sight of her menstrual blood as a rejection of her *being*. His inability to accept her fully sexually during her period is an expression of intolerance of her full being. In sum, Regina's experience is that she must hide a portion of herself, her bleeding self, and shield her boyfriend, her most intimate partner, from any trace of her blood. Like Alicia and Melanie, Regina has grown accustomed to protecting her partner from the realities of menstrual bleeding, but unlike the other women, Regina is more aware of her concessions and has a stronger emotional reaction to them.

While all the women mentioned above take special care in language and action *not* to offend their partners with the facts of their menstruation, by contrast, Isabel makes a special point of exposing her boyfriends to the bare facts of her bleeding self early on in her relationships with them. In response to memories or associations to the word 'menstruation,' she declares that she likes to say 'period,' 'on the rag,' or 'I am bleeding' to her girlfriends and her boyfriend. She prefers to say 'I am bleeding' to her boyfriend

especially. When asked why she likes to say that she is “bleeding” to her boyfriend especially, she answers:

> Uh, I guess it’s just kind of a test, you know, to see who’s scared because some guys won’t go- won’t go there at all and some guys don’t care- maybe they had families or something and so some people are just more comfortable than others and I feel like that’s a pretty big part of who I am both physically and emotionally you know with PMS or whatever so I like to have sex when (laughs and voice raises) I am bleeding so you know it’s like don’t pull that on me- if they are not going to, if they can’t handle it then it’s not going to work out.

Isabel points out that she continues to say she is ‘bleeding’ to those men who balk at her language initially, resulting in a kind of “desensitization” of them. Unlike the women mentioned above, she does not sacrifice expression of herself or deny any part of her being by giving in to the irrational, idiosyncratic sensitivities of her partner. Furthermore, to coax a fearful boyfriend into having menstrual sex, she educated him on the basics of menstruation and warned him about the presence of blood. She says that she reminded him that it would be harmless and then outright suggested that he get used to the idea of seeing blood on his penis. Clearly, Isabel takes a different approach to her relationship to menstruation and her male partners than the other participants. Yet, the fact that she feels she must, so to speak, throw “blood” at her boyfriends, as a “test” of their capacity to tolerate menstruation shows that she, too, must struggle with the same climate of shame and protection of men from menstrual blood.

Relationships to Authority Figures

Some of the participants' first exposure to menstruation took place in a school setting as part of their education in biology or health class, while some were given books from their mothers as an educational tool and in place of *any* kind of discussion. In either case, the attitudes and the content of the classes and books constituted for the women, given their young ages and vulnerability at the time, authority's official stance on menstruation. Some of the women were also influenced, positively and negatively, early on and in later years by their doctors and nurses. In all situations, the young women were at the mercy of the "experts," those who presumably had the final word on menstrual cycles and were expecting to be guided and enlightened on a foreign topic.

Of all the participants, Sharon has the most vivid memory of learning about menstruation in school. Her emotionally loaded memory is associated with her distaste for the word 'menstruation' and is anchored in embarrassment, shame and social exclusion:

> I think about that first sex ed film I saw in sixth grade with the homely girl going up to the counter at the grocery store, pad strategically placed under her magazine, embarrassed by this thing that was happening to her body- and fearing that anyone should find out.

Although the film invariably contained more images than Sharon describes, she left class with this visual definition of a menstruating girl and has carried it with her over the years. Clearly, the portrayal of the girl in the film is not an image any young girl would look forward to attaining. Later in her interview, Sharon also recalls another scene when

the girl "is putting these pads under this magazine and jerking away when she has to go through the check-out counter." She says that after she saw this film in school she went home and talked with her grandparents and learned from her grandmother that her grandfather had refused to buy her grandmother pads when he was at the grocery store, as described earlier. The film and this revelation about her grandfather became significant for her and steadfast in her memory. The girl in the film who quickly jerks away from the check-out counter with her shameful purchase fits Sharon's narrative at home; menstruation is shameful. Given that the attitudes and expectations toward menstruating women taught in school paralleled those in her home, we can understand how she might come to the conclusion that becoming a bleeding person really is that awful. As it turned out, Sharon did and continues to experience difficulties with her bleeding, yet as an adult, she found relief from some of her physical and emotional discomfort by working in a kind of partnership with her doctor.

Although Clara did not view any sexual education films in school, she did receive an educational book with instructions to read certain portions from her mother. When she first mentions the experience in the context of recalling her first period, she speaks of it with a noticeable degree of bitterness and resentment:

> While I had been told about periods & their cycles [although I'd like to add it was a superficial explanation] along with all that "blossoming into a woman" crap; it took me a while to make the connection that this blood was mine & it was my first period. I felt dumbstruck and totally confused.

Clara later reveals in the interview, albeit without saying it directly, that she felt duped

by words and the explanations in the book and essentially abandoned by her mother for leaving her alone with such a paltry and deceptive description of female reality. She recounts a warning about bleeding and the fact that it will come “whether you want it or not” and that how to take care of the bleeding was completely ignored. Furthermore, Clara recalls that the book offered a gross underestimation of the pain and inconvenience of having a period:

> Right, like basically I remember it saying something like it will be uncomfortable. A very benign, safe word- it will be uncomfortable and you will have to use a pad and um it will last anywhere from five to eight days. And this is very skimming the surface, you know, it didn’t go into the depth of all the various emotions you go through or the fact that----- for an option or the fact that it has to do with like your ovaries and eggs and how all that works. ….it made it sound like bleeding- made it sound safe and like oh you won’t even notice.

Obviously, Clara did notice her bleeding despite the attempted trance induction from the book authors (and her mother) instructing her not to notice. Also, the fact that Clara mentions the word ‘safe’ a couple of times suggests that she actually felt the opposite. She apparently could not help but feel unprepared and vulnerable in the face of all the flowery talk and soft summaries of womanhood which bore little resemblance to her actual life. Looking back, Clara compares and contrasts her real, concrete experiences with the foretold experiences in her book and notices the discrepancies and danger she encountered, all without any warning from the book or her mother. Clara, like the other women, relied upon those who were “in charge” to educate her about what was real and

to be expected about menstruation. Yet, what she found was that those in charge, the book authors and her mother, had an agenda which aimed to minimize the existence of menstruation altogether. Years later, after living with some distress about having irregular periods, Clara found some reassurance from her gynecologist and some clarity about what was "normal." As an adult, she sought a doctor who would speak to her more realistically and straightforwardly about her period.

In direct contrast to Clara's experience, Melanie was literally given a drawing as an explanation of menstruation and what to expect, but unlike Clara, Melanie did not appreciate such an explicit depiction of menstrual bleeding:

> I also remember going to a physical and the doctor, a woman, explained to me some of the things to expect when I started my period. I remember her drawing a picture of a pad, and explaining and drawing that I would pass some squiggly looking solid things, and not to be surprised. That, even now, sounds totally gross.

Whereas Clara was distressed by not receiving enough information, Melanie was upset by too much, apparently too soon. When I point out to Melanie that what she heard from her doctor seemed rather unorthodox, she described her as "down to earth," "kind of like a hippy," and with an obvious tone of disappointment, she described the doctor's words as "not clinical at all." Unlike Clara who might have put to good use such down to earth, practical information, Melanie shuddered and felt paralyzed by the doctor's words and drawings.

Like Clara, Melanie "never heard a birds and bees conversation" from her

mother, but adds, "…even anything to do with sexual things were just really upsetting to me." When asked if she would have preferred having a discussion about her period with her mother, she replies, "No, it was not a big deal for me. I mean umm I didn't- I mean the doctor talk was enough- that was enough." At this point in our discussion, I felt that Melanie had once again had "enough," that is, enough rehashing of all the details of menstrual bleeding, this issue related to sexuality. Although she did become more spontaneous as the interview progressed, Melanie and I had talked briefly about the fact that she was uncomfortable throughout talking about this very private topic for her. In fact, I was continually grateful to have her as a participant, given her admitted embarrassment. Although Melanie's doctor presumably had good intentions of giving her practical information so that she would be prepared for her own period, the doctor's plan apparently backfired with Melanie. Like Melanie's mother, the doctor failed to notice Melanie's particular sensitivities, and her words and drawings merely anchored Melanie further into her feelings of fear, shame, and embarrassment about her body and its ability to bleed. For Melanie, the presence of authority figures who might discuss menstruation or "sexual things" presented her with danger, the real risk of emotional exposure and embarrassment.

Although without saying so explicitly, Alicia also experienced certain authority figures in her adolescence as somewhat dangerous, because they left her emotionally and physically exposed, subjecting her to their ignorance about menstruation. In her associations with the word 'menstruation,' Alicia names her "relatives down south," a general, old-fashioned understanding of periods, as well as a vivid particular memory of

her school nurse. While her relatives caused her a kind of benign embarrassment by using the more pointed word ‘menstruation’ in her presence, it was her school nurse who administered an alarming diagnosis of her periods, creating an ever-present feeling of dis-ease as an association:

> And then I think of the nurse at my high school who told me that the cause of my “painful menstruations” I probably had a tumor in my uterus…this woman had me thinking I had uterine cancer! That’s just ridiculous!

Although Alicia was actually excited at the idea of starting her period after her sexual education class, when she finally did start her period, she had cramps chronically and severely enough to send her to the school nurse all too often. The painful reality of Alicia’s menstrual cycle became more evident to her, and the excitement about her period began to wane. After the casual diagnosis from the nurse, her excitement dissolved further into fear. She explains,

> ...Um, but it’s just the way she told me. I mean I freaked out- I called the help line at Kaiser when I got home from school that day ‘cause I thought- she didn’t- and when you’re in high school and you hear tumor, you think of cancer. I’m thinking I had cancer.

Alicia speaks with annoyance and resentment about the nurse and the emotional turmoil she was put through without any “guidance” to go with her diagnosis. She describes her terror in the face of her newly found illness, about which, to make matters worse, she felt she could not even speak openly. For Alicia, the school nurse was an authority figure with nursing credentials who was to be believed; “She was the school nurse. I have to

have tumors." As it turned out, after calling the helpline and finally mentioning her situation to her mother, her mother responded merely by telling Alicia that she was "fine." Alicia states, "that was it," and figured that she did not have a tumor or tumors and told herself, "I guess I'm gonna live with it."

Ironically, years later, Alicia found out that she does have fibroid tumors and her doctor addressed it by putting her on birth control pills. Since then, Alicia's periods have been a "breeze," and she states, "I have been happy ever since." In her association with the word 'menstruation' Alicia expresses disdain for the nurse who correctly diagnosed her when she was in high school, yet she barely complains at all about her mother's dismissal of her real pain and concern. Instead, she complains more indirectly about her relatives and their "country" understanding of menstruation. For Alicia, the word 'menstruation' is bound to the authority figures who let her down, bound to the medical alarm the nurse created for her, and bound to her experience of familial or "country" ignorance. The history of her own menstrual cycle is also bound to the doctor who finally diagnosed her with fibroids and prescribed the birth control pills which reduced the presence of her period significantly, bringing her relief from her years of pain and suffering.

On the whole, all the participants spontaneously discussed how their relationships to menstrual bleeding were influenced and informed by authority figures. Whereas most spoke clearly of teachers, doctors, and nurses as they were growing up, Caroline and Regina both mentioned nameless and faceless sources that stood for them as significant, authoritative voices on the topic of menstruation.

Although Regina lived “in a houseful of women,” she named television and magazines as her primary source of information on menstruation before she reached menarche. She does not remember any lessons in school, and she did not have conversations with her sisters or her mother. She did, however, educate herself by reading all the information on her sisters’ and mother’s boxes of menstrual pads and she even took note of the diagrams inside. She states, “So I kind of knew what was coming.”

Regina’s information was based on the “feminine hygiene” products’ perspective of menstrual bleeding and their need to sell pads. Her knowledge of menstruation was also hampered by the imposed rules of propriety and discretion which television and magazines historically follow. Given how little attention both mediums pay to an accurate portrayal of menstruation, one can appreciate just how much knowledge Regina had to fill in for herself. Paradoxically, as an adult, she is the only participant who begins her protocol by mentioning the recommendations of her chiropractor and her medical doctor and the steps she took to “remove” her PMS. After growing up without accessible information about her period, as an adult, Regina makes good use of the medical “experts” available to her.

Of all the references to authority figures within the participants’ protocols, Caroline describes an incident growing up with a nameless, faceless adult male figure which perhaps most poignantly captures any female’s experience within western culture. In response to the request for her associations to the word ‘menstruation,’ in written form Caroline responds by calling the word “technical” and a “put-off.” When I ask her in the interview to expound on her answer, she is at first stumped and takes a moment to

"re-group." Although she is still unclear about just what she means, she begins to speak and describes menstruation as having a "stigma" and then she adds, "I don't think it comes from me first." Caroline speaks further and sheds light on her previous statement:

> I think um, growing up in previous circles, uh friends or people that I've hung out with for example, I might say the word menstruation or talk about a woman's period, and I can actually remember a man- after I said the word menstruation, he held up his hand and said 'Ub- shut up, don't wanna hear that. Don't wanna about it.' And you know, I, I don't know, for some people that's kind of a – they see it as something yucky or gross that a woman does.

Nowhere else in Caroline's answers or interview does she mention any other authority figure other than the general presence of her mother and grandmother. She had no idea what menstrual bleeding was prior to the discovery of her own and prior to her mother's impromptu, basic explanation. She does not recall reading anything about it or seeing any program or commercial on television or listening to any school lecture. She remembers no other "authoritative" commentary on menstruation and women's being apart from this "man" whose response stood out so vividly for her. In mentioning the word 'menstruation,' which is an aspect of her kind of being, what was reflected back to her by the man was flat rejection of that being. Furthermore, she took the man's perception in and accepted as part of her self, the unmentionable self, "something yucky or gross that a woman does." Caroline summarizes; "I think there are maybe two- at least two views of women's menstrual cycles and for some reason I think of the view that people have that are negative about it." Like all the other participants, she internalized

the negative views of someone who was in a position of influence. For Caroline, perhaps the man's influence was simply that he was a man in the culture who was permitted to say something rude to another person (female) and get away with it. She obviously noticed that his kind of rudeness was acceptable, since she still recalls the incident and mentions nothing in the story about anyone rejecting his manner of treating her. To this day, she finds that instead of spontaneously having her own thoughts and feelings about her bleeding kind of self, she must first anticipate the thoughts and feelings of critical others, critical *man*kind.

Relationships to Girlfriends

During the participants' formative years, girlfriends either played a major role for the women in discovering their menstruating selves or they played no mentionable role at all. While four participants do not refer to girlfriends in any way until their adulthood, two of the women speak of their girlfriends growing up as part of a kind of spirit of enthusiasm surrounding the anticipation of menstruation and becoming a woman, as part of an elite culture in which to be accepted.

While Clara uses the word "dread" when asked for her associations to the word 'menstruation,' she also mentions "feeling as if [she] is part of an elite squad - women." Although her statement is contradictory, Clara's history of menstruation sheds light on her description in that it did include two kinds of impressions of bleeding. Her menstrual history includes her own menarche which was *dreadful*, i.e., full of dread, and the menarche of an older peer which, as she observed from a distance, appeared ideal and reserved only for those worthy, the eighth grade *elite*.

To further illustrate, Clara recounts being in sixth grade and feeling envious of an older, eighth grade girl who started her period and then acquired new privileges, special treatment, and perhaps most importantly, happiness, as a result of her new stage in life. Clara recalls that the girl seemed really "cool" and that she, herself, "wanted to be a part of that."

> …she seemed at least to me, from a sixth grade perspective, that she was really happy about it and her mom came in and talked to the teacher and it was all on the sly but this was the kind of girl that told everyone. Everyone knew and so it was a big deal for her- like she got special bathroom breaks all of a sudden and she had like a little pouch that she carried around with her to the bathroom that used to be filled with pads and I just- She made, this girl her name was Karen, made such a big deal about it- She's an adult now because she has had her period and she's a real woman and she is getting to experience something that no other girl in the sixth grade got to experience at least in that class with me and I just thought, 'Wow, that seems like a really cool thing to have happen to you. You know, I want these special bathroom breaks and the special little bag, you know and then to have my mom talk to the teacher about how I need extra bathroom breaks.'

The only problem being that Clara did not have that experience when she, herself, began to bleed. She describes feeling the opposite of special and was not given privileges by her mother or anyone else just because she started her period. As mentioned previously, her mother refused to let her stay home from school because of her cramps and even

emphasized that she did not get to stay home from school when she had her period. She, in fact, describes feeling “punished” for her new stage of development, thus her feeling of “dread.”

Remarkably, for Clara, both strong impressions of menstrual bleeding currently remain intact: life punishing and life affirming. However, perhaps most interesting is that she associates the word ‘menstruation’ with the life punishing memory of her own menarche and the word ‘period’ with the more life affirming memory of “cool” girlhood cliques which entail special treatment and high regard. Throughout the questions and interview, Clara reveals her conflicting feelings about her menstruation but demonstrates little awareness of the origins of her conflicting associations. Ultimately however, although she admits to struggling with her relationship to her period, as an adult, she strives to reject negative attitudes toward menstruation and strives more for acceptance and appreciation of her own bleeding, in part, by talking about her “period” with girlfriends. Clara reflects on her own period and declares, “It’s a common topic of conversation with girlfriends where we can compare & contrast experiences; explore and share new experiences regarding products or home brew tricks to relieve symptoms.” For Clara, the somewhat optimistic or perhaps hopeful bottom line is that periods provide “a common bond with all women everywhere.”

While Clara longed to be part of the menstruating “in” crowd as an adolescent, so did Alicia, and at the onset of her period, Alicia quickly became one of the girls Clara longed to be. Before her menarche, Alicia recalls admiring the older, menstruating girls in her school. In her first memory of menstruation, Alicia immediately recalls being in

the seventh grade at a Catholic school and remarks,

> …my friends and I were fascinated with periods… periods meant you were older and therefore cooler. All seventh and eighth graders had their periods (or so we thought) and they were the FLYEST people we knew.

Alicia and her friends did not stop at admiring the older girls from afar. They actually practiced what it would be like to be in their shoes, i.e. mature enough to carry a purse *for a reason.* She imagined her maxi case inside the Gucci purse which her mother promised her once she turned thirteen. She also describes how she and her friends regularly saved their change in order to buy pads and tampons from the machines in the girls' bathroom. They would gather as a group, buy what they could just to see what they were like, or they would put them in their purses 'just in case.' Alicia elaborates,

> We liked playing with them- dropping them in water to watch them expand and we couldn't understand how they were gonna expand inside of us. We were taking apart the maxi pads to see what was inside. And then take them home with us, so we could do what- I don't know. I mean but- it was- we had a- I had a fascination with maxi pads and tampons. I don't even know how much money I spent, and then it did get to the point where Mrs. Graham, our teacher, I guess, had to have a conversation with the principal because the machine was always empty. (Laughs) And so we weren't allowed to go into the bathroom as a group anymore. We would go in one at a time and go and get like a maxi pad and come back out during recess and be like, you know, look at it like it was manna from heaven, I don't know.

It is interesting to note that the teacher and the principal dealt with the girls' enthusiasm for menstruation by doing what they presumably thought would solve the "problem" of the machine's perpetual empty status while simultaneously extinguishing the girls' joy and solidarity. Perhaps en masse or even individually, girls who were excited about their periods were too much for the school administrators to bear. After all, how does one deal with girls who are in ecstatic anticipation of menstrual bleeding? Apparently, no one ever thought that the solution to the problem of the machine "always" being empty might be simply to fill the machine more often. As a researcher I have to wonder, did someone have the thought, "We have to save these maxi pads and tampons for the girls who are already ashamed about their body and too afraid to ask for them when they need them"? The solution could have been to sell more maxi pads and tampons while preserving this rare thing called excitement about female being. Ultimately, however, the teacher and principal acted in such a way as to exclude any preservation of the girls' excitement about their own development. Squelching the girls' behavior was their solution.

Ironically, while the principal and teacher eliminated the en masse emptying of the tampon machine, they did not completely eliminate the girls' emotions about periods. Rather, the girls maintained their individual interests in maxi pads, tampons, and bleeding and found ways to contain their jubilation, so that it appeared more "civilized" to the authorities. The end result was that the girls stepped back into their cultural places of tending to their menstruations in solitude, in isolation.

Moreover, the school's obvious disapproval of the girls' behavior most likely

affected the girls' understanding of menstrual propriety, because, in our interview, when I offered Alicia my congratulations and remarked to her how rare I found her and her friends' enthusiasm, her first response was laughter followed by the comment, "I'm a freak!" Later she added, "We went to Catholic school. We didn't have enough to occupy our minds, I guess." She points out that her school was Catholic and suggests that it was perhaps a little less exciting than public school; however, her remark reveals that she received the final word on menstruation from the school administrators. The final word for her and her friends was that interest, especially outward expressions of excitement, in one's developing body is strictly forbidden and *trivial*. Interest in one's body must be the result of boredom. Despite the fact that her school thwarted their fun, Alicia fondly remembers being with her friends and their collective enthusiasm about periods.

In direct contrast, Melanie has no fond memories of talking with girlfriends about her menstrual cycle before or after it started. When asked for associations to the word 'menstruation,' she emphasizes that she uses the word 'cycle' instead of 'menstruation' or even 'period' because she finds those words just too "graphic." When pressed for further meaning, she responds,

> I think it feels embarrassing, those words, and I think they are still tied to being a young person, especially all through high school ages just hearing people talk about their periods or whatever would just- ehh, I was just- I just hated it- hated it- I remember even anything to do with sexual things were just really upsetting to me.

For Melanie, during childhood the topic of her "cycle" was akin to all sexual matters, too

private and embarrassing to speak about with anyone, even girlfriends. Apart from the purpose of childbearing, Melanie states that she has little appreciation for her cycle, and she declares that she would be "happy" if she never menstruated again. To emphasize her distaste, she proclaims, "I don't have this 'womanly bond' with other women just because we all menstruate. (Like in the book, *The Red Tent*)."

As already mentioned, Melanie's personal history of bleeding includes being exposed to her mother's menstruation in ways that were "graphic" and uncomfortable for her at the time. Her interview revealed that as a result of her experiences and her preference to keep private about her own development, as a teenager, she wound up feeling like something of an outsider surrounding matters of menstruation and sexuality. She emphasizes, "And a lot of my girlfriends would talk and talk and talk about every aspect of it, and I remember in junior high and high school I would just sit and listen. I would never contribute to those conversations." For Melanie, topics of sex and bleeding were opportunities for her to feel different from other girls rather than experience any kind of common bond. Melanie's mention of the book, *The Red Tent,* denotes that she is aware that other women are capable of feeling a sense of togetherness surrounding menstruation, and although she quickly disowns any "womanly bond" that the book describes, she does so insistently, as if to ward me off from asking her any questions on the topic and to convince me and perhaps herself that she has no need for such bonds.

Ironically, our interview also later reveals that Melanie's participation in this study became an opportunity for discussing her cycle in a way which she had never encountered before, i.e. on *her* terms. After answering the written questions, she talked

with her neighbor and asked her the same questions which I had posed to her as part of this study. The two women compared answers and shared experiences, and from Melanie's description, they did learn more about one another and did "bond" as women and friends. She even declares, "That was a really open conversation."

When I point out the possibility of "bonding" to Melanie, she quickly shares that she and her neighbor are similar in that they *both* have never "felt that womanly bond." When she asked her neighbor if she had ever "felt that womanly bond," her neighbor responded with, 'No—no way- nothing like that.' It becomes apparent that Melanie wants nothing to do with any kind of womanly bond because she ends with, "She totally knew what I was meaning." In conclusion, the two women made a connection or "bonded" over having the same experience of historically not bonding with other girls or women over any discussion of menstruation. Furthermore, they became closer as friends in sharing that they have never wanted to "bond" with other women over the topic of menstrual bleeding. They discovered a kinship in belonging to a kind of "outcast" club. In sum, at the end of her interview, Melanie still had no desire to be associated with any situation in which women or girls enjoy talking about periods or sex because, for her, it evokes old feelings of shame, embarrassment and of *not* belonging.

In contrast, the rest of the women, in some form or another, all discuss a feeling of connection with other women when reflecting on the experience of menstruation. In different degrees, each participant expressed appreciation for the opportunity to talk about their periods in the study. Isabel, for example, at the end of the interview, when asked again for a numerical rating of her period, gives an "eight" because she is currently

"not cramping" and she adds, "It's always fun to talk about your period." She laughs and then reflects, "Like a little therapy." For Isabel, menstruation is an aspect of herself which she rather openly shares with boyfriends and girlfriends, alike, albeit for different purposes. While the mention of bleeding to boyfriends remains a litmus test of relationship to their worthiness, talking about periods with girlfriends provides another avenue of communication and connection, learning about herself and others. She states explicitly, "I like that menstruating can create dialogue between people." Discovering that a girlfriend shares her same cycle "gives you an excuse to have a good time or pig out or something." For Isabel, "it's just nice to be able to relate."

Similarly, Sharon explicitly states that menstruating is a ground for connecting with other women and likes to feel a part of the "common experience." Having gone to an all-women college, she had the experience of celebrating her menstrual cycle with other young women at "pon parties," parties to celebrate the merging of menstrual cycles, the occurrence of simultaneous bleeding amongst many women. She states that she discovered "the crazy okayness of having periods" during college and that this form of making periods "silly" was a way of countering "that [which] was to be so ashamed of prior in [her] life." With a personal history of irregular periods, however, Sharon depicts herself as not quite belonging to the female common experience which she aptly describes. She remarks:

> It's always been kind of a bummer-because it just seems kind of fun- it seems like they are all bonding about it, you know. Or they are all having their period at the same time or whatever the case may be. I'll be a couple of weeks ahead or a

> couple of weeks behind- a couple of weeks ahead one month and a couple of weeks behind the next month.

Despite her unfortunate timing, however, Sharon says that she is a person who "really feels the need to be a part of something," and that "…I feel that one thing that has bonded me in part to people is a common experience- and it's nice to be able to have a common experience with all women."

Although the remaining participants, Caroline and Regina, are not as emphatic about menstruation as providing a felt connection to other women, each, in her own way mentions the routine of talking about their periods with other women and sharing their experiences. For instance, in a discussion of the particulars of language surrounding menstruation, Caroline notes that she uses the "casual" term "bleeding" with her girlfriends. In the course of that recollection, she surmises that "bleeding" is "more crude" than "menstruating" but qualifies her choice of words based on the particular relationship. She clarifies by saying, "Um, so I think I'm just so comfortable with my friend that I can kind of get crude about it and be like, 'Ugh,' you know, 'It's time for me to bleed. I can't get in the pool.'" Between female friends who understand the nature of menstruation, the phrase "I'm bleeding" is intentionally graphic and becomes shorthand for all that menstruation involves. For Caroline, it quickly paints the picture of all that she is experiencing, including the difficulty of wearing a menstrual pad while swimming. To a girlfriend, she need not describe how her pad would become a giant sponge between her legs, filling with water and ultimately anchoring her to the bottom of the pool. The words "I'm bleeding" says it all. Here Caroline speaks of the importance of

being able to share her uncensored self with girlfriends.

Similarly, at the end of our interview, after the formal questioning, Caroline expressed her gratitude to me for considering her as a participant. When, I, in turn thanked her for participating, she responded by saying that it had been a "neat experience" for her and it made her feel like she had "valuable things to say." She expressed further interest in reading the results of the study. We ended our interview with my promise of a copy of the findings for her. For Caroline, finding others, particularly women, with whom she can speak about menstruation openly and honestly and without apology, is of importance in her life.

Finally, of all the participants, Regina seems most representative of average women with regard to speaking about menstruation to friends or anyone else. In her written answers, she mentions that menstruation is "something that you have to hide and keep sanitary." When I probed this answer further, she replies,

> How do I hide it? –I don't hide it at home. I guess I really don't hide it but it's just not something you talk about with- It's just not a part of, you know, everyday conversation except with maybe my closest –like my closest friends- my regular friends-maybe if they are there on the same day and it's really painful but I don't know- I just feel like nobody talks about it so you just kind of don't talk about it even though it's going on in your life right there and maybe you want to talk about it.

Even though she expresses no real disdain or disgust for menstruation, she speaks mostly of situations in which she handles her period on her own, in silence and in

solitude. She is aware of the fact that no one talks about menstruating, even if they would like to. When she does talk about menstrual bleeding, she notes explicitly that it is in the context of complaining about its presence and symptoms. That is the culturally acceptable context in which talk of one's period is allowed. She says matter-of-factly, "I usually say like I am on my period. I guess I wouldn't say, 'Oh I am menstruating today.' No, I would say, 'I am cramping today'- the only time you would say anything about it is when you are complaining, you know?" For Regina, girlfriends are a part of her menstruating world insofar as they provide a safe place where she may express her discomfort and share a part of herself which is normally kept hidden. Unlike most of the other participants, she makes no mention of feeling a common bond with other women because of menstruation, but there is a simple desire to communicate without censorship.

Relationships to Self

Because of its bodily presence and its recurring, rhythmic nature, menstruation calls out for and even demands, a personal response and particular understanding from each woman, herself. Menstruation is an aspect of woman's being which is not easily fully forgotten, and the questionnaires and interviews revealed that each woman's personal relationships with menstrual cycles are worked out and defined over a period of time and on a distinctly individual basis. These relationships with their menstruating (bodily) selves are at first heavily influenced by the circumstances and attitudes surrounding the onset of the first period as influenced by relationships with mother, father, grandparents, siblings, friends, authority figures or strangers who have meaningful presence in life at that time and who make some kind of attitudinal or

physical impact. All subjects' first encounters with menstruation helped to significantly shape their views and experience of first and subsequent menstruations and relatedness to self.

Within this study of seven participants, only two women have what could be described as more positive, life-affirming first encounters with menstruating. Isabel, for example, knew fully what to expect and had been informed about menstrual bleeding and sex by her school and her mother. Additionally, she describes no shame or embarrassment about bodies and talk about bodies in her household. The functions of bodies were treated matter-of-factly. Although Isabel began her period while her mother was away and had to make do with her mother's tampons, she managed on her own and emerged from the situation feeling accomplished and felt excited to tell her mother when she returned. When asked how she felt about her mother being away for her first period, Isabel remarks, "…it wasn't bad and then 'cause I was kind of excited when my mom came home so I could tell her the news that I was blossoming."

Like Isabel, Alicia had also been thoroughly educated on the topic of menstruation by her school, friends, and mother, and so she knew what to expect. Although her mother never spoke openly about menstruation or sex, except for warnings not to get pregnant, her mother did present Alicia with a "period pack," a pretty little box which contained an "informational guide" on how to handle her period, maxi pads, and all types of candy. Prior to menarche, Alicia lived out her days in eager anticipation of starting her period, because with it came the need to carry a special purse and the privilege to run with the older 'fly' girls. When Alicia started her period for the first

time, she describes how she saw the blood, starting laughing hysterically, and yelled for her mother. When her mother arrived, she simply smiled and handed Alicia the "period pack." Alicia ends the story of her first period by declaring, "The next day at school I was a SUPERSTAR!" She describes being proud and deliriously happy to have finally gotten her period, a scenario which is absent from the other women's protocols.

Overall, the other women's negative first encounters were tied to emotional distress (including shock) as a result of being ill prepared or not being informed at all for the transition to a menstruating body. Caroline for example, does not remember being educated or informed at all about menstrual bleeding. She states, "I remember one day that I sat down on the toilet in my house and saw blood in my underpants. I did not know what was happening and I got scared and I cried." Although her mother did come to her aid and explain what was happening, her mother's information came somewhat after the fact and did not acknowledge her terror, minimizing and dismissing Caroline's perfectly understandable reaction (given the circumstances).

Being misinformed about the particulars of menstruating as well as the sudden immersion into physical pain, physical and social inconvenience, and the experience of embarrassment or shame for various reasons also brought emotional distress to the women. Clara describes feeling duped or mislead about what to expect from her period. From the sugarcoating of the pain she would experience to the unexpected lack of compassion from her mother and society, Clara repeatedly describes feeling caught off guard and experiencing a kind of betrayal.

On a milder level of experience, Sharon remembers starting her period for the

first time and discovering brown blood, which she did not expect. Although not as traumatic an experience as Clara endured, Sharon states that she thought it was “odd since no one really explained this side of it.” Sharon, like most of the other participants, gave accounts of surprise, fear, misinformation, and unexpected pain and judgment surrounding their first encounter with menstruation, which ultimately impacted their subsequent menstrual experiences, their self perceptions, and their lives in general.

Throughout the protocols and interviews, the women described enduring their periods every month and finding different ways of managing, refining their routine, all the while defining themselves as women, rather than girls, over the years. For instance, two of the women, Alicia and Caroline, mention coping with physically debilitating cramps paired with a persistent heavy flow of blood and other symptoms early on in their menstrual history. Before they found hormones as a treatment, however, they describe enduring extreme discomfort and its impact upon their lives.

For instance, Alicia suffered several years of agony not just enduring the physical pain of menstruation but the emotional frustration of being misunderstood, dismissed and downright ignored. For years Alicia suffered the pains of uterine fibroids which caused her contraction-like cramps, as well as headaches, diarrhea, nausea, and emotional distress. Her condition went undiagnosed until she became an adult and old enough to take herself to the doctor.

Ordinarily, Alicia insists, she is “a very cool person.” She emphasizes, “I don’t let too many things bother me.” By contrast, when she menstruated (without birth control pills), she experienced herself as someone who was easily irritated by “the

smallest things," situations like a non-working microwave which she would normally cope with or just dismiss. To make matters worse, she then found herself becoming critical of herself for being so easily frustrated by the simplest set-backs in her day. An added layer of judgment did not help her mood. She says she then felt a whole "attitude change" and found that she did not want to be around people. She was often in such pain that she "just wanted to do [her] own thing and sit in a room and curl up in a ball and you know- wake up in a week." For several years, Alicia made many accommodations handling her bad moods by choosing isolation at times, working out ways to prevent her blood from leaking all over, and in general navigating around her severe bleeding and pain with some personal ingenuity.

Just like Alicia, for Caroline, the cramping was so intense and managing the blood flow so inconvenient and time consuming that she found her "overall feeling of being" affected. She describes feeling burdened by having to change her pads "every hour or two" and beleaguered by the loss of so much blood: "Um before, I just bled so much, it was just like blood was coming out of my body and 'Oh my God, I'm losing precious blood.' Overall, before she began taking hormones, Caroline describes essentially having to be on top of this new aspect of her being at all times, changing pads very frequently, and taking the next dose of pain medication before it wore off. What she depicts is a stressful, almost desperate way of being, such that she might feel like she was losing something "precious" in all her gushing blood.

Even though they did not experienced cycles which were as disruptive, the other participants also adjusted and made accommodations over time for their particular life as

a menstruating beings. Almost all the women mention how they had to define themselves sexually around the very practical conclusions around having sex during menstruation. For varying reasons, most of the women came to the conclusion to abstain from sexual intercourse during their period, because of the mess, the discomfort, or their partner's reactions.

Likewise, Sharon very briefly mentions how her period is sometimes a "nuisance" when she has wanted to have sex and did not feel "comfortable" with it, whereas Regina outright complains that her current boyfriend won't have intercourse with her during her period . She underscores her frustration by saying, "And it just kind of annoys the shit out of me because I am like it's just a piece of my body, what's so gross about it?" Unlike the others who feel uncomfortable while having sex during their periods and so choose not to, Regina expresses frustration at not being able to convince her boyfriend to go ahead with intercourse and that her blood is just another part of *her* which is not at all "gross." Overall, Regina expresses disappointment in not being fully accepted by her boyfriend in her bodily being.

By direct contrast, Isabel finds the topics of bleeding in general and sex during her period provides opportunities to weed out male partners who are not willing to fully accept her as she is, in her fullest, rawest, least censored state of being. The last man who rejected the idea of sex while she was menstruating was given a "lesson" by Isabel in the basics of menstruation, was told he really had nothing to fear if he got blood on his penis and that he should try to get used to the situation. When I asked her what would normally happen if they did not get used to the idea, she remarks,

> Then yeah then I think it's kinda like uh time to move on because I think it's really important because usually I don't know if this is kind of steering off into a different direction here but it's like because if guys still want action when you're, they will get horny when you are on the rag but they are not willing to like go there, usually they are expecting something else like a blow job or something you know, and you think 'Hey how about me? I want some fun, too.' And it's good for me.

In other words, if the man she is dating does not offer her sexual equality, then she surmises that the relationship will not work out, because for her, unlike for Regina, full acceptance in all areas of her life is not something she is willing to negotiate. It seems that Isabel's historical positive, life-affirming relationship to menstruation continues to keep her grounded in accepting who she is and finding others in her life that do the same.

On the whole, the younger the women were as they menstruated, the more embedded they were in the thoughts, situations, rituals, and rules of family, friends, society and the culture at large. The younger they were, the more vulnerable they were and the more inclined to be busy fending off what outsiders deemed "normal" about their own menstruation. Generally, once they entered adulthood and gained more rights as a citizen and began to make more decisions for themselves, they at least had some opportunity and perspective, whether or not they seized it, to sift through their own feelings, thoughts and rituals surrounding menstrual bleeding.

To illustrate this aspect of the women's evolution, at one point, Regina reflects on a time in her life when she was "single" and had the time and interest to track her

own menstrual cycle with the cycles of the moon. In the original protocol, she responds to the request to describe how she feels about menstruation at this time in her life with, "It's OK, I would prefer not to have it, but when it comes on a full moon, I definitely [sic] feel connected with the earth." Upon further discussion she reveals that her interest in tracking her cycle with the moon's cycle was tied to being kind of alone with herself for company during a period in her life. This enjoyable interest in herself and her menstrual cycles faded, however, when she began to have visitors who witnessed her graphic menstrual moon-tracking. "It weirds some people out to see it – this calendar." These others found it too odd, too peculiar, and too arrestingly concrete. Thus, she like almost all the subjects began once again to somewhat unconsciously protect others from the thoughts, sights, and awareness of herself as a bleeding woman with periods.

Finally, as the participants grew older, life as a menstruating woman became easier. All the women describe finding a general sense of autonomy throughout their lives as they lived more years getting used to or getting to know their menstrual cycles. As they approached adulthood, the women give various descriptions of finding their own "freedom" with regard to the kinds of menstrual "equipment" they used, what activities they engaged in, what medicines they did or did not take, and how harsh they were with themselves emotionally. This newly-found literal and figurative freedom for participants gave way to a different understanding of themselves (and subsequently, culture) than when they first started menstruating. Essentially, all the participants describe discovering a new relationship to self, the participant's menstruating self.

Clara, for example, states her matter of fact acceptance of her period saying,

"[Now] I feel menstruation is a part of who I am." Alicia writes of her own period:

> Now that I'm older it's no big deal. I feel like I get it---I finally know how to handle it. When I was young and was in junior high it was cool to get out of class and have everyone know why you're leaving. In high school I was confused because I never knew when it would start and I felt trapped. Once I got to college and was having sex it was a pain in the ass to wait for more than a week before I could have sex. Now that I'm 'grown' I feel like I've got it! I know when it's coming what to do and how long it'll be around…it's no need to be alarmed… But on the same token, with every period I have that's one more chance to get pregnant gone. I'm in no rush to have kids…but I need to get on my job and have a couple of children. And so I feel frustrated.

Isabel, too, comes to a similar place of understanding:

> It's just that it's- it's a part- it's not just my body but it's also kind of regulates what is going on and how I am feeling umm- you get to know your body better- you get the feeling and then, you know, ew I am going to start my period. Even though you might be lost on your day to day life and then you get this sensation or something and then you're like oh yeah my period is coming. Just acknowledging different PMS things and how it just becomes just all becomes so routine just like oh I am changing my tampons woopdedoo- It's not a bother anymore- I think when I was young and had just started it was kind of like weird and crazy and exciting and kind of a pain in the butt because I was always

> worried about like getting- making a mess or whatever- Now it's just like here it is- I am going through my cycle.

Like Alicia, Regina, and Sharon, for Caroline, menstruating throws her into the realization that she is not pregnant, and not having a child. As she doesn't want children, this is a relief, but in addition she likes to know that "as long as I am menstruating, I feel that I am young." Additionally, early in her protocol, Caroline describes how she currently is more health conscious, respectful, and aware of her body in general, and in becoming more healthful, chooses to wear only pads, stating, "…it just seems a little unnatural to me to plug or stop something from coming out of my body by putting a foreign sub- or object like cotton or whatever into a body- into my body part. "But now that it's not like that [painful] , I really don't see it as a drag. Um I feel in a way- maybe blessing isn't the right word but um, I feel- I think it- maybe I just should enjoy it or whatever (Laughs) - that's not the right word either (Laughs) while I can." Although she clearly still has some lingering mixed feelings about having a period, Caroline tries to remain conscious of her body's health and states, "Sometimes, I like to stop taking the pills to give my body a break."

Even though Melanie has had a much more unpleasant relationship to menstruation, she too, marks some change in her attitude and behaviors toward menstruation:

> I am less grossed-out by it and more relaxed. Especially now that I have my two children. I have tangible babies to relate my cycle to, and to see what a cycle's purpose is. I imagine the conversations I will have with my son and daughter as they get older- passing on information in a positive and relatable way. But the

> times before we decided to have children, and now that we may be done with our childbearing times, menstruation really has no purpose for me. It is an irritation and just one more thing to take care of to buy hygiene products for. I loved being pregnant and nursing- and having no cycle for about 2 years at a time. It was great. I could do without cyles [sic], for sure.

While Melanie's written protocol contains mostly negative musings on menstruation, and asserts that it must be purposeful at all times, during her interview she spoke of recently being bold enough to ask a co-worker if she could borrow a pad or tampon. She remarks that she would have never done such a thing in the past and so she feels as if this act is growth for her. She attributes her growth to becoming "desensitized" by the "stuff" of her two pregnancies and subsequent births.

Additionally, I got the sense that the mere presence of this study, as well as her participation introduced Melanie to the legitimacy of menstruation as a topic of "study" and therefore the legitimacy of it as a topic of concern or meaning for women. Before consenting to be a participant, Melanie was especially wary of the project because of its topic and was somewhat incredulous that the written answers she gave were acceptable to study. By the end of the interview process, however, she had talked with a neighbor about menstruation because *she, herself,* was interested in telling her neighbor about the answers she gave and was curious as to how her neighbor might have answered. In sum, it is possible that Melanie initiated a different way of relating to her menstruating self and to other women, as a result of her participation in this study.

While Sharon's early menstruating years were marked by shame and her own

disgust, years later at her women's college, she was introduced to a world which was accepting of all things female, including menstruation. With open talk of periods and entire parties planned around them, Sharon recalls finding a new level of acceptance for her period and remembers "reclaiming [her] womanhood." Reflecting further on her present-day menstrual cycle, she states,

> As I have PCOS- I've come to equate a great deal of health issues with having (or not having) my period. My period has never been crazy regular- and it still isn't. I took pills a few years ago that did regulate me and helped me fall into the deepest depression of my life. I don't see being regular as so important…My period is still somewhat of a nuisance, but it is also a signifier of life. I have vacillated in wanting children. I don't even know that I could have them with my polycystic ovarian syndrome, but that monthly sign of blood is a reminder that I get that choice, and that is a really beautiful thing…I still get a little grossed out by the smell. Sometimes I feel dirty during my period- literally- but it is because I need to clean my body more often than other times. I used tampons for years- and still do a little bit, but I find that I have taken more to using pads in the last several years. This makes for a messier time. I get sad when I still bleed through things that I love or onto my sheets and must wake up at 4am to clean them. Overall, I don't think about it even when I am not having it, and rarely when I am. The onset of cramps…really annoys me and makes me think much more about my period while it is happening.

Finally, Regina who had tracked her cycle with the moon in the past and recently

took herself of caffeine to “remove PMS” and birth control pills to reduce taking “medication,” speaks of finding a new relationship to her “rhythm:”

> …now I can see mood swings- I can feel the mood swings coming and know what it is, instead of waiting till my period and waiting two weeks later and saying, ‘Oh, that’s why I was moody.’ Now like as I get older and my body seems more in a rhythm that I am actually listening to rather than just dealing with…I think I would comment that I just listen to my rhythm a little better- I just paid attention to what was happening in my body a bit more- I guess I was just so concentrated on things happening around me that I stopped concentrating on my body- I never really thought about my body too much and maybe that’s probably a little indicative about how much I answered question number one with like the mechanics of my body and how my body was working with regard to liquor or caffeine. I am really getting to know my body and how it reacts to certain stimuli…But when I think of menstruation I like having it- I mean- I like having you know the blood just means you’re healthy, you’re normal, you have a cycle…I have a secret little box at my office and a box at home for my menstral [sic] gear, so there is a time and place for it in my life. I still have ten or so more years to go, so I guess I’m at a good resolve.

For all of the women, this evolution of self involves recognizing menstruation as at least some part of self, and involves overcoming, in some way, their negative first experiences and their subsequent negative relationships with their own being and female human experience of menstruation. This newly acquired understanding of being, which

now includes menstruating being, also requires a certain awareness of the force of culture and its imposed attitudes, restrictions, and meanings of menstruation.

Relationships to Bodily Self/Bodily Being

Physically speaking, all women describe menstruation as an "inconvenience." Overall, all the women find dealing with their menses, no matter how refined their routine over the years, as "messy" and an irritating interruption into their everyday, non-menstruating routine. For example, Regina calls menstruation a "hassle" and when asked for an explanation says,

> …that's more like the making sure you have all the right you know pads and tampons and it's kind of—I used to be a really like- I would just start bleeding you know and like totally forget that I was going to start bleeding that day and just be like oh I've gotta get a pad and be a big hassle to go to the pharmacy in the middle of the work day or something like that. Now I am getting a little bit smarter and I have my box at work and my box at home so it's not like a surprise. When it comes I am just too lazy or I don't think about it until it actually really comes in terms of preparation…the process all of the having to – having to like deal with blood. It's kind of gross sometimes so- that's kind of a hassle. But you know it's- umm, what's the phrase "A little bit of good and evil all mixed in one."

Likewise, when listing the positive and negative aspects of menstruation, Caroline's negatives include:

> I do not mind the actual blood but the whole process can be

> inconvenient…Sleeping in a stranger's bed makes me a little apprehensive. Am I going to bleed on their sheets? I don't like bleeding on mine and I get tired of buying new underpants if I want to have clean ones…changing my pads, um, it's just not always convenient to leave my situation at work and go to the bathroom or sometimes I'm a little, uh, paranoid about the odor of – and I think, 'Oh my goodness, can somebody else smell what's going on in my body?' (Laughs) and uh

Another example of the inconvenience of menstruation includes Clara's perspective of her "irritability" pertaining to "maintenance:"

> I think what I was thinking about …like getting annoyed at having to go to the store to buy pads and tampons- you know I think they are expensive and yeah, the idea like you have to kind of be constantly self-aware that you have to change a tampon and you know like being concerned about maybe not bleeding through your clothes so that other people would see- and maybe I am not feeling that uncomfortable anymore but I am still irritable, because I still have to maintain you know good pad, good tampon and make sure I am not leaking and do I have enough at home and when I get home do I have enough to get me through the day? You know, if you are traveling that can really annoy me frankly even though physically I feel fine.

The physical pains and discomforts are to some degree naturally burdensome. In addition, the expenses, the extra time and space required for shopping for and arranging placement for menstrual gear, using and making sure of the availability of pain

medication, arranging replacement underwear and other aspects of cleaning up, combined with the relatively unrelenting demand of attending to one's body all make for an experience that is plainly wearisome and repeated on a monthly basis. In essence, all the women, at some point, speak of being called back to their bleeding bodies, no matter how hard they tried to forget, even momentarily, or tried to immerse themselves in the rest of the world. The women's answers remind us that the bleeding body simply cannot be ignored or silenced completely.

Even more obvious throughout the protocols, however, is the participants' description of the experience of menstruation as a "cleansing." Clara notes, "Toward the end of my cycle I will regard my cycle as a sign: My body is taking care of itself, a cleansing process, a reminder my body is functioning as it should." As a positive aspect of menstruating, Alicia lists, "Cleanses us by flushing out unused tissue." She clarifies her remark by adding:

> Well, I think I'm looking at it…but because of the clumps I had. If I didn't have it, they'd just be up there, you know, so I- I don't know why I said that. It seems like it just flushes out your body- not your body- but your uterus, so- and we need that, so-

With even more detail, Caroline reiterates:

> …again with regard to the flow …even though now I find menstruating kind of a cleansing thing I imagine it's maybe not- a detox isn't the right word- but you know, stuff's coming out of my body that needs to get out and –and that's good…I think that because I see most of the holes in my body as exit points, then

> I know that every month I'm getting rid of the build-up in my uterus that, you know, didn't get used as a baby and, you know, blood, that I think it's a good thing. It feels cleansing. I mean it feels- I can totally relate to the fact that it's this cycle and that my body is supposed to do it and it's natural. Um, so when it happens- I don't know, I just feel good about it and I feel like it's cleansing last month's, you know, miss, (Laughs) in a very crude term. Um, because I didn't use it, and so let's get it out of there (Laughs) and I don't know.

Finally, although Regina does not use the word "cleansing," she describes what she enjoys about menstruation and reiterates the similar "feeling" which the women above reference:

> Sometimes I like the way it feels flowing…Uhhh- Sometimes you can feel it flowing- most of the time I don't really feel it flowing out of my body but there is an occasional moment where I might walking or standing and I can feel it come out- I guess those are the times when I am not wearing a tampon and when I am only wearing a pad- when I can feel that sort of how it drains out of me and sometimes it's like oh O.K.- and it's not necessarily pleasant but it is just a reminder that that is going on because I usually wear a tampon so you don't have that feeling- you are just kind of plugged up instead of letting it flow. Sometimes feels like normal.

In summary, the women in this study all assert and insist on the physical discomfort, messiness, and inconvenience associated with menstruation, but just as sharply, they both explicitly and implicitly speak of menstruation as releasing, relieving,

cleansing, and renewing their bodies and themselves. In this sense, when they menstruate it demonstrates to them that things are working as they should – properly, healthfully, and with appropriate vitality.

Relationships to the Culture

Out of all the questions posed to the women in the study, question number two which asks, "What do you think of when you hear the word menstruation? Describe any thoughts, words, feelings, memories or situations that come to mind." provides the most access to the women's impressions of the cultural meanings of menstruation. The answers reveal that the basic, physical inconvenience of menstruating is compounded by a taken for granted, emotional frustration and emotional inconvenience which is somewhat invisibly embedded within the culture. The emotional frustrations brought on by the culture become tied to and anchored in the notion of menstruation itself. For all the women, menstruation automatically implies stealth and the difficulties involved in maintaining stealth in the culture, in everydayness. Ever present in the protocols are depictions of the physical inconvenience of menstruating as exacerbated by the cultural conventions and restraints regarding menstrual bleeding, in general. Every participant finds reminders of the physical and cultural burdens of menstruation distasteful and finds various ways of distancing themselves from any negative association.

One common solution to finding distance from the stigma of menstruating in western culture for these participants involved creating a different word or collection of words for referencing menstruation. For all these women, the word 'menstruation' is impersonal, cold, sterile, and tied to the patriarchal (mostly male) field of medicine and

doctors from which they learned about their biological, ‘objectively scientific’ menstrual cycles. ‘Menstruation’ is also tied to the attitudes and ignorance of the participants’ former teachers and elders from which they learned about their changing bodies. The word ‘menstruation’ harkens back to the all-familiar shame-laden explanations of female development they received in school. For these subjects, the word ‘menstruation’ belongs to world in which they do not want to participate. To illustrate, Caroline states,

> It sounds like such a ‘technical’ word to me. I usually just call it my period…The word menstruation sounds so textbook to me that it is a put off. I rather just use the more casual word, period. The word does not put me in mind of any particular feelings except now that I have been asked, I am looking and thinking about the word and thinking that it is a little ironic that the first three letters are m-e-n.

When I ask Caroline to expand on her written answer, she attempts by clearly depicting two worlds of judgment: a world of (mostly) women where menstruation is accepted for what it is and a patriarchal world where menstruation is unspeakable and a sign of women’s difference from men. Although at this point she, herself, is unclear about what she is explaining, she is aware that when menstruation surfaces as a topic, her first thoughts tend to anticipate and assert the critical, condemning perspective of female bleeding. The intrusive, condemning perspective which takes over, for Caroline even includes an image of a man holding his hand up in front of her, telling her to shut up:

> Menstruation. I’m not sure. Um, I think maybe because there is a- a kind of

> stigma against that word and, but I, I don't think it comes from me first. I think um, growing up in previous circles, uh friends or people that I've hung out with for example, I might say the word menstruation or talk about a woman's period, and I can actually remember a man- after I said the word menstruation, he held up his hand and said 'Ub- shut up, don't wanna hear that. Don't wanna about it.'…I think there are maybe two – at least two views of women's menstrual cycles and for some reason I think of the view that people have that are negative about it. Um, gosh, I'm sorry. I really am not being very articulate about it.

Isabel gives a similar, yet more succinct, impression about the word menstruation and all that it signifies for her:

> The word 'menstruation' makes me think of elementary school, old people and old or conservative ways of thinking about periods. I use the term 'menstruation' when I'm joking about my period. When talking to my friends, I say period or 'on the rag', or just say I'm bleeding. I like to say I am bleeding to my boyfriends. Menstruation sounds medical to me, and kind of takes the personal experience out of what it is, especially when half the population goes through it.

Alicia, too, references the 'old' when speaking of the word menstruation, and adds a connotation of professional carelessness and 'backwards' thinking:

> I think of my relatives down south. Menstruation just seems like an old word to me, and whenever I hear someone who isn't in the medical profession, I wonder where the heck the [sic] came from. And then I think of the nurse at my school who told me that the cause of my 'painful menstruations' I probably had a tumor

> in my uterus…this woman had me thinking I had uterine cancer! That's just ridiculous!...menstruate? I mean, that is such a weird word. Who uses it? No one uses that word- no one that I know. You're on your period. You know- that's what it is, let's just- even though the technical term is menstruation…Who uses that word?...

While Sharon's answer includes the recollection of a sex ed film she saw in sixth grade, reminding her of the shame and disgust she experienced in her early years of menstruating, she also speaks of finding the acceptability of bleeding while in college. For Sharon, the word menstruation, while unappealing to her, overall contains both the criticism found in the culture and her more personalized meaning:

> I don't particularly like the word menstruation…I think about that first sex ed film I saw in sixth grade with the homely girl going up to the counter at the grocery store, pads strategically placed under her magazine, embarrassed by this thing that was happening to her body- and fearing that anyone should find out. I think about reclaiming my womanhood in college- about pon parties and the crazy ok-ness of having periods and talking menstrual talk on an all-female campus…I much prefer the word period.

Melanie, by contrast, finds that there is little to celebrate in her association to the word menstruation:

> The first word that comes to mind is, 'BLAH.' As a young girl, all things personal, having to do with sexuality, nudity, and periods was mortifying to me. I was VERY modest about all of those subjects. As I have matured, I am more at

> ease about cycles. But see! I don't every [sic] use the words menstruation or period. I use 'cycle.' I guess I just don't like graphic words…I think it feels embarrassing, those words, and I think they are still tied to being a young person…For me I guess it's more of an embarrassing and a really private subject and so when you say menstruation or period it's just too private, it's too descriptive- it's happening.

Interestingly, Regina, Melanie's sister, does not have such an aversion to the word menstruation even though she, herself, does not use it. However, when she hears the word she is reminded, in part, of her sexual relationship with her boyfriend and his feelings which also imply a kind of male judgment about her bleeding:

> For me, when I think of menstrations [sic] I think that it is just another hassle that I have to deal with. It's something that you have to hide and keep 'sanitary'. My first boyfriend didn't mind having sex during menstruation [sic], but now my current boyfriend is not interested at all. Even though an orgasm *seriously* helps with the pain…

Lastly, in responding to the question, Clara remarks that she finds that the question makes her "giggle" without knowing why. When I press her in the interview, she relents:

> …It's very medical- You know, it's my period. That's how I have always designated it as, and I think it's one of those open ended questions which just—I don't know—I hope you don't take this the wrong way in terms of the question itself, but it just seems so sterile and so cold, umm so—it's just like a question a man would ask and it's so much more of like it's just something that's so much

> more passionate at least to me the fact that it occurs and the expanses of emotions that happen when you go through it and umm—I guess I think I was giggling because like how you like really answer that question, I don't know that makes no sense whatsoever.

Clara seems so resentful of the word menstruation and all it represents, and she has obviously tried so diligently to banish the word and its world of references from her life that she is almost offended at the question. Clara, like every other participant, states that she does not use the word menstruation and instead opts for other words like 'period' or 'cycle.' These women create another locution to describe an experience which belongs to them rather than describe the experience which belongs to dictating doctors, teachers, or judging others. They assert their own language as women against the tide of shameful, medicalized, condemnation implied by "menstruation" – they take up a different world, a different attitude in announcing their own woman's culture in which they have "period," "cycles," or more openly, "bleed."

Culturally speaking, menstruation, for every woman in the study, is also profoundly relational. Within the culture, the mere mention of menstruation or the physical onset of menstruation calls to the fore a thousand eyes who do or do not see her blood or outward 'signs' that she is bleeding. Whether or not each woman has an overall positive or negative attitude or acceptance about menstruation, every woman makes clear that the world is watching her and would be appalled at any accidental outward demonstration of bleeding.

Alicia recounts an incident in her early days of bleeding in which she felt

exposed and embarrassed:

> Oh my Good- well, in the summertime, I made the mistake one summer of – ah, this is the dumbest thing I've ever done- I wore a maxi pad to the pool, because I hadn't started wearing tampons yet, and I really wanted to go to the pool. I was about 13 or 14 years old, and I felt like I had a on a diaper. And I learned from then- I'm like, you know what, any other time, I'm just gonna stay away, because there was another incident- I was at he pool with a guy who I thought was gonna be my boyfriend, and he was splashing water on me, and it just so happened that I came on my period, and I had on white shorts. And so, as I'm leaving I didn't know there was like a pink stain on my white shorts….So I kinda just- in the summertime I just stayed in the house.

Alicia recalls feeling "DEVASTATED" at the discovery of the pink stain but also recalls that she realized then that she loved D. (her current boyfriend), because he did not tell her about the stain. She says, "He just took his sweatshirt and wrapped it around my waist, and when I said 'What's going on?" he said, 'you better go home and wash your shorts.' Alicia was appreciative of her boyfriend's gesture to cover her leak and shield her from the "embarrassment" of anyone noticing. One has to wonder, what might have happened if her boyfriend had just ignored her pink stain and treated it like a less-embarrassing spill?

In addition to this incident in which she leaked at the pool, growing up, Alicia and her girlfriends scared one another with "horror stories" of menstruation which included the fear of walking down the hallways and the prospect of having a bloody

tampon or pad fall out of their clothing onto the floor. Alicia talks about not wearing skirts to school in order to avoid feeling mortified in the face of the exposure and embarrassment. During our interview, I had the sense that a part of Alicia still believed those stories until we began to discuss them at length.

By the same token, even though Caroline is obviously an adult, she still feels apprehensive when sleeping in a stranger's bed, and wonders "Am I going to bleed on their sheets?" She states further,

> …I'm afraid that I'm gonna have to tell somebody that I bled on their sheets and they're gonna think, "Oh my God, that's disgusting." So, I think in my mind I do worry or perceive other people as thinking it's disgusting even if- you know what- if a girlfriend was maybe having a sleepover here and she bled on my sheets, I don't think I would care.

Menstruation, therefore, not only points to specific relationships within each woman's world, but it also points to their relationship with the world at-large. Who are the people who would call the women "disgusting" for bleeding through their pants or onto someone's sheets? Unfortunately, those people are very real and in some of the protocols, they have been called boyfriend, father, grandfather, and teacher. Even the women themselves have described their blood as "gross." Alicia even feels fortunate to have found a boyfriend who is not humiliating, who does not make one of her worst nightmares come true, even if he is still "squeamish" about her talk of blood and will probably never go into a store to buy her tampons.

On the whole, each woman mentions, in some way, a keen awareness of

otherness while bleeding, particularly male otherness, as males have been the most outwardly judgmental or shaming. Historically, part of the judgment and shaming has been aimed at women's so-called moodiness and irrational behavior as a result of hormone fluctuations during menstruation. Having an awareness of the pre-conceived notions about menstruating women in the culture, most of the participants make mention of their moods or well-being during their periods, even if they experienced no significant changes. They seem to mention their mood automatically, in anticipation of being questioned or judged.

Melanie, for example says, "Sometimes I am a bit emotional a few days before. But during, I am not "edgy" or hard to be around." When I ask her what prompted her to mention "not" being "edgy," she replies,

> I guess because so many people- you know that whole thing, 'she's on the rag' – It seems more like a cop-out to me. That's never been my experience and I have never been that way, where I am bitchy or mean or short with people. Um, so I guess some people's experience is that--.

As mentioned earlier, Alicia describes her old, extremely painful, difficult days of menstruating without birth control pills and blatantly calls herself a "bitch," proclaiming,

> I really was. I was the typical you know, woman who was just such an evil, raving lunatic when she went on her period that- you know, I might as well sit in the house because it beats going out with friends and I'm going to bet into an argument with them and that's goin' to turn into, you know, a whole separate

issue.

It is interesting that Alicia does not take into account the context of her "bitchiness," which is actually, as described earlier, a reaction to the combination of severe chronic pain and the emotional distress of being ignored and misunderstood. She quickly buys into the idea that her behavior is stereotypical and does not consider that perhaps her irritability is warranted and her behavior understandable, given the circumstances. She makes concessions in her life to avoid further difficulty, but she winds up judging herself just as some critical "other" might and colludes with the attitudes present in the culture at large.

Overall all the women relate experiences of shielding men, usually initially male relatives, from the idea of and the actual situation of menstrual bleeding. In the end, despite how self-accepting the women have become with their own bleeding, all of the participants continue to shield men and others, in general, from the realities of menstruation. They do so by altering their language and speaking in a kind of protected code, by limiting when and with whom they speak about menstruation and by hiding the fact that they are bleeding with secret boxes of menstrual gear, not to mention a multitude of other ways.

Summary of Participants' Data

The most immediately striking aspect of the participants' protocols is that, initially, the women medicalize their own experiences of bleeding and relate symptom-cure type descriptions of their periods which the culture considers legitimate. After being prompted, gradually the women relate more contextualized, personalized meanings of

menstrual bleeding which are illuminated in and through their relationships with self and others. On the whole, however, the women are first strongly influenced by the perceptions and lessons about menstruation from the mothers or mother-figures in their lives, i.e., whether or not the mothers talked about bleeding at all, and whether or not that talk was life-affirming. Being informed about menstruation before menarche and how they were informed is important in determining whether their first experiences of bleeding were positive or not.

Additionally, for the most part, fathers represented an initiation into the alienated cultural perception of menstruation and female being as representing otherness. In other words, fathers were mostly away from and distanced from menstruation. However, the participants noted how their mothers and fathers related to one another as men and women, especially surrounding questions of menstruation and female being. The way the participants then relate to their boyfriends/husbands provides a real reflection of what the women actually learned from the interactions of their mothers and fathers, especially in regard to what they would tolerate or allow in relation to menstruation and how elaborately they would shield their men and others from menstrual bleeding.

Equally important in shaping menstrual meanings is what the participants learned from what they were literally taught by authorities, including teachers, books, and religious instruction, which tell what menstruation is and how it should be viewed, handled, spoken of or silenced/ignored. Girlfriends either played a major role as the celebratory or gossiping nucleus of menstrual meanings and anticipations of becoming a woman (the “elite squad”) or they were very much background and part of the

experience of isolation for the menstruating girl.

As adults, they all find some way to show that they enjoy sharing and speaking with other women about their periods, thus talking about themselves and sharing a common ground. In relation to their own personal menstrual identity, the participants all gradually carve out how their period arrives and announces itself and how they receive it and address it. They come to a practical, lived understanding of their own menstruation and call a truce with themselves, accepting the bodily and felt reality of their menstrual being. They all agree that menstruation is messy, inconvenient, a nuisance, and even somewhat painful, but its arrival and departure provide a sense of routine, schedule, and overall sense of cleansing. In a relatively soft and unobtrusive way, all the participants announce, “I am woman, and I bleed, and it is as it should be.” Even with all the constant announcements and bombardments of the culture which insist that women not bleed, ignore their bodies and abstain from any talk of bleeding or having a real body, through all that noise and distraction, the participants still find a personal understanding of their menstrual cycle and who they are in relation to this aspect of themselves.

CHAPTER IV

Comparison of Cultural Data to Participants' Data

Overall Comparison/Contrast

When the cultural meanings of menstruation are compared with the individualized meanings of menstruation from the seven women who participated, it becomes apparent that the cultural meanings or attitudes, like the personal meanings, are mediated through the concrete particular relationships of the women. Whereas the women do not always consciously recognize every meaning of menstrual bleeding they hold, they remember and recount personal stories rooted in relationships, and in turn, these relationships around menstrual themes are influenced by and also express the culture. Indeed, these lively, remembered relationships and experiences around menstruation *are* the culture in its concrete, social and relational flesh, as lived by these women.

Additionally, the way in which the culture surfaces in psychological theory, literature, movies, medical texts, songs, expert advice, advertising, and so on, lies in the formal texts, the performances, or deliberately prepared images. In turn, the texts, the performances and images are the same cultural heritage which appears in the described, intricate details of concretely lived and felt relational spaces. The women of this study, like all women, are constantly informed by their family, friends, strangers, teachers, and colleagues, who are also continually influenced by other people as well as television, film, music, advertisements, medicine and its legacy, and so on. However, the power of advertising, the evocative impact of the ordinary language of degradation, the history of

medicine, philosophy, psychological theory, songs, movies and such are not usually directly present in the women's relational stories. Just as menstruation itself is lived as a concrete, bodily involvement of individual women, so are the meanings of menstruation for the participants of this study lived primarily in concrete relationships. Mother, father, grandfather, teacher, medical doctor, boyfriend and girlfriend are the loci where the meanings of menstruation emerge, together with the concrete experience of monthly bleeding with all its pains and pleasures.

Dimensions of Lived Menstrual Experience within the Culture

Medicalized Menstruation and Personalized, Lived Experience

The first and immediately striking finding of this study is that when the participants were asked to "describe in detail your typical menstrual period," almost all of them spoke as if they were talking to a nurse or medical doctor with many details about timing, flow, PMS symptoms, cramping, regularity or irregularity. Hence, we begin by seeing that the culture is already shining through in that the medical world and its way of thinking is immediately present in their initial description. Further, in this somewhat medicalized, initial narrative the menstruation process itself is described as more or less pathological, discomforting or comfortable, emotionally destabilizing or not, disabling or not, intense or not, the kind of equipment they must use and how often they have to use it. Abiding by the framework of medicine, and particularly the concept of menstruating woman as naturally disordered and troublesome, the participants essentially quantify their periods and tell how moody, diseased, symptomatic or not their typical cycles are. The participants report the medical facts, which crudely follow a

disease model, which in turn means that the women do not initially speak much of their surge of creativity, sexuality, shame or capacity to be self assertive or other more personal and interpersonal meanings of menstruation.

However, when invited to expand their descriptions of periods and even include the positive aspects, the participants begin to offer less pathological terms of menstruation as a part of womanly identity. Despite the fact that all the women have personal opinions and understandings about their periods, they nevertheless seek to find an understanding of themselves and their bodies within the medical world. Their narratives reveal that it is important for them to feel “normal” or accepted within this dominating part of culture which puts them in the double-bind of finding some semblance of normalcy within a disease model.

Whereas most of the women do find some consolation in understanding themselves from a medical point of view, some participants draw a line for themselves with regard to managing their cycles medically. On the whole, most of the participants attempt to achieve a balance between what they think is control over their own body and medical intervention. Thus, the culture with its prejudice toward medical reality strongly influences the narratives and experiences of the participants.

Silenced in the Culture and Expression of Menstrual Experience

The cultural silencing and dismissal of menstruation shows up in the simple fact that several participants were unprepared for the onset of their first period. Being caught off-guard might not be such a tragedy, but the women’s feelings of being uninformed and stranded in a kind of cone of silence, without the proper information to reconnect

with the world again, is a result, in part, of parental neglect but also a result of the culture's lack of regard for menstruation as an important part of female being.

Additionally, it is significant that none of the participants talked to their fathers about the onset of menstruation. For most of the participants, the very idea of their father being informed of their first period involved great shame and embarrassment, and the potential for being subjected to harsh judgment and alienation. For these women, fathers mirror or represent the male-dominated messages of the culture which denounce female being which engages in menstrual bleeding. Through their fathers' actions or lack of them, these women become acquainted with the alienating attitudes of the culture.

Further, the fact that none of the participants use the term menstruation also illuminates the culture's persuasive influence to silence menstruation. All the women in this study prefer the terms *period*, *cycle* or even *bleeding* and deliberately avoid the very word menstruation. These words have been seized by the women as a way to define and describe menstruation for them, as a form of trying to take back the experience from male dominance. Most of them describe themselves as complaining with their girlfriends about their periods, as one place where they can share their pains, frustration, and some details of their life as women. However, in some form or another, all the women also discuss a feeling of connection with other women when reflecting on the experience of menstruation, and in different degrees, each participant expressed appreciation for the opportunity to talk about their periods in this study.

Overall, the general cultural findings show in great detail the sense of weakness, incapacity, and inferiority that has been understood as belonging to the menstruating

woman. The refusal of men to deal with, discuss, be informed about, or participate in the "monthlies," as they are euphemistically called, relegates the woman's status as "beneath his dignity." This was clearly demonstrated in the cultural analysis and shows up with some intensity and frequency in the participant's descriptions, as well. The ancient cultural idea that the bleeding woman is somehow contaminating, dirty, inferior, and must take this aspect of her being away is clearly described by the participants in their relations to men, and the women's protests to this negation, either silent or enacted verbally, is also part of their reactions.

Male Loathing and Internalization, Mundane Acceptance, or Self-Acceptance

In the participants' descriptions, particular men's disgust, negation, and refusal to even hear of or accept the woman's menstruating self is graphic, clear, and representative of the dominant voice of culture. The participants give many examples of men's habits of silencing the topic of menstruation and women, and they also give descriptions of men's loathing, disgust, and anger. This kind of male loathing of menstruation and thus women is vividly found in the cultural data in some of the cruder examples of male humor and song lyrics.

As the participants describe themselves as growing older and more mature, they become more self accepting and have a somewhat different, life–affirming and balanced view of their own menstruation. The women take into account and consider their own feelings more and their own physical state, as well. Each participant develops her own somewhat independent meanings, ideas, and procedures including some appreciation of the arbitrariness of the cultural and conventional meanings. They become better tuned

into their own body and what concretely suits them, thus taking a bit of distance from the established cultural meanings that more thoroughly dominated them earlier. They demonstrate that they have developed a personal idea of what their being means for them, which includes their own relationship to bleeding rather then an erasure of it.

Sexual Availability and Sexual Exposure

Within the protocols, some of the women of this study show a strong fear response to the rejection and loathing that men express toward their menstruation. Reasonably, their fear is perhaps also a response to the intense objectification of them in which there is embedded a sexual objectification, which is explored in the analyses of the culture. Moreover, to revisit the loathing that one woman experienced with her father refusing to go down the feminine-hygiene aisle and another participant's moment of recollection of her grandfather's refusal to buy her grandmother menstrual products when she needed it – both also experienced a kind of being "stared at," "a judging," and felt reminded of that part of themselves which makes them less then men and is considered as sexual and guilty. However, for most of the participants, this aspect of men's loathing remains somewhat buried and implicit.

From a cultural standpoint then, when the average man hears the word *menstruation* or even *cycle*, having grown up in this culture, he empathizes not with the woman and her being, but guided by his own curiosity and interest, with her in relation to his own projects. He imagines instantaneously "down there," "that hole," and then spontaneously inserts his own male meaning, so to speak. This response is in part due to the fact that historically, men are taught that 'woman' is made for him, and for

generations men have acted in relation to women precisely in that way.

In contrast however, women have been taught for generations that they are in the service of men and to put themselves second, if not last. Consequently, when the word *menstruation* is uttered, men typically imagine it as it relates to them, i.e. primarily sexually. And women, having been fed male perspectives and viewpoints all their life, leap to empathize with the male perspective, which, by now to some extent, they have internalized and understood as their own. Therefore, as one participant of this study experienced, if a man rudely shuts her up as she remarks about menstruation, rather than becoming angry and responding to his inappropriate rudeness, she tries to decipher his meaning, and in that way, she excuses his aggressive nastiness.

Additionally, when women respond to the various forms of "I don't want to hear about it (menstruation)" from men, they experience also a certain kind of leering look which perceives sin, dirtiness, and the downfall of man because of woman. In that moment, the woman experiences the whole history of being a chosen scapegoat for all the ills of the world, the Curse. Further, in the cultural analysis of humor, it was evident that the most degrading and hostile characterizations of menstruating women are considered funny and permitted, whereas any such assault on Jewish or Black individuals would be seen as outrageously prejudicial, as well it should.

In contrast, one participant within this study refuses to seriously acknowledge or engage with the sexual objectification and despising of menstruation and of her being. Any inkling of such an attitude in another becomes an occasion for her to refuse and insist on her own right and privilege to "bleed" and be happy and assertive about it. She

does a little dance of self-celebration in front of others which plows over other's objections and she insists that any difficulty with that is their problem and difficulty. This could be interpreted as a kind or reaction against, but as she does it with such élan and good humor it seems genuine enough. Similarly, in the cultural review, Vinnie's tampon case products, music, art, web site, and videos seem to express the same kind of happy, affirming, celebration of woman's bleeding self which wonderfully comes from a man. These exceptions point the way to a different pathway of celebrating and appreciating menstruation, away from the objectifying, sexualizing, and condemning vision which is historically and culturally so powerful.

"Protection" of Men, Culture, and Self Requires Secrecy and Hiding

Because women are attuned to the underlying male-generated sexualization and degradation of menstruation, they fear the shame, humiliation, and exposure to that gaze, and they will do almost anything to avoid it. Not so coincidentally, one of the buzz words used in the menstrual products industry is *protection* which is supposed to indicate that the intended product protects the woman from menstrual leaks. In actuality, however, the advertised *protection* means that the pad or tampon provides the perfect barrier between her blood and the world, her blood and men, and her blood and herself, providing a kind of literal and symbolic eraser. For the woman, in everyday existence, protection simply means that she must hide her menstruation, hide her blood, and hide one whole essential part of her being from the world at all times, but particularly during menstruation.

Overall, as depicted in the protocols, even as the participants mature and loosen

their extreme fears and vigilance, all the women continue to adhere to many of the age-old social customs surrounding menstruation, which include not exposing their blood, their paraphernalia, or their feelings flagrantly. Any woman who lives immersed in the culture knows she is supposed to pretend that she does not have a period. Women, overall, live stealthily; they keep their menstrual gear concealed, and do not complain or celebrate publicly, and they certainly do not reveal their own blood or even symbolize it to others in red ink in a moon chart (as one participant attempted before she caught sight of her cultural transgression). Even as the women mature, they retain the same "discretion" that menstrual product advertisers have been pushing for so many years when they insist that "no one needs to know."

Production and Reproduction

The analyses of the cultural data reveal that historically a woman's sole worth and function is to be productive and bear children. In this sense, the only purpose of menstruation is reproduction and every menstruation is viewed negatively, as a failed pregnancy. One participant clearly views her "cycle" and her own being from this traditional, purposeful point of view and sees producing children as her life purpose as a woman and as the only aspect of menstruation. Within her answers, she is fully representative of the cultural messages, i.e., to produce and to produce effectively and efficiently. After having produced the children she and her husband wanted, she finds that menstruation now is thoroughly meaningless and wonders if it has any medical or other purpose. In essence, she reflects the contemporary cultural idea of the possibility of menstrual obsolescence. For this participant, once her cycle is no longer productive,

bleeding becomes meaningless, and since it is a bother, after all, she would like to be rid of it.

Additionally, the three other participants speak of the issue of fertility and the possibility of producing of children as an important factor for them. Although they all have their own, particular reasons for eventually wanting to become pregnant or even never becoming pregnant, the possibility of such is an issue. Whereas their periods physically remind them that their bodies have the ability "to bear and create life," and thus are a "signifier of life," the culture, through friends and relatives and various mediums portray the image that a real woman is one who produces off-spring is also ever-present in their descriptions as a kind of emotional pressure.

Menstruation as Rejected, Accepted, and Celebrated

The outright, blatant rejection of menstruation, and thus women, occurs most often by targeting women's moods, which is efficiently translated by the culture as PMS. The acronym itself makes a useful tool of menstrual criticism because it provides sufficient abstraction and enough distance from any word containing the word menstruation or symbolizing concrete, female bleeding. Even though, with the best intentions, PMS is meant to define a *woman's* physical and/or mental discomfort as a result of fluctuating hormones, culturally, the acronym often signifies the discomfort and disapproval of those in contact with a woman experiencing PMS, largely men. This emphasis on men not liking PMS is also strongly noted in the cultural analysis in regions of popular culture, in which women are often seen as somewhat monstrous and controlled by raging hormones.

For the most part, the women in this study are aware of the judgments against PMS, menstruation, anything menstrual, and, ultimately, themselves, as is evidenced by their anticipatory qualifying comments about their moods and general well-being relating to menstruation.

All the women answer, in different styles, as if they anticipate some kind of judging of their rationality or sanity or as if they understand that they can be judged as crazy or unstable or that their experience will be discounted, thrown out, if they talk about any change in their moods. Evidently, the participants have internalized the cultural, historical, scientific prejudice that only women experience periods of emotional instability as a result of a fluctuation in hormones. They understand that culturally, the implication of being *menstrual* has come to mean moody, irrational, and even violent, and they fear being held down by these labels. As a result, they all, to some extent, reject their own menstrual cycle as a part of them, thus alienating themselves from themselves to varying degrees.

But, despite being born into and raised in a culture which still actively judges the menstruation and being of women as dirty, diseased, defective, and inferior, the women of this study all come to some kind of general acceptance of their bleeding kind of being. Their forms of acceptance occur in different ways and on different levels of existence, such as choosing their own language around their menstrual cycle.

Each woman participant has figured and configured over time the relationship of her menstruation to the medical tradition and to the practical rituals of attending to herself during that time. She has gained enough distance from the rejecting noise of the

culture to become more accepting, and to grasp where menstruation stands in relation to herself, significant others, and the world, and has developed some concepts of what menstruation is and what it means in her life even though the culture gives very little space for that kind of reflection and actively discourages it.

Overall, in spite of the fact that all the women find menstruating messy, time-consuming, and a practical nuisance or "hassle," and even more so in a culture which routinely silences and degrades their bleeding, some of the women describe small, celebratory moments in their own rituals and relationships to bleeding. Before the participants were fully immersed in the culture as adults, some of them harbored some enthusiasm for getting their period for the first time. They looked forward to telling their mothers, or girlfriends, and becoming part of the in-crowd of maturing young women. For others it was only later, among new women friends or through college experiences, they could live with an openness, and even an attitude of celebration toward female being.

Of all the remarks the women in the study make about their periods, their descriptions of menstruation as a *cleansing* are perhaps the easiest to overlook as significant. In one respect, "cleansing" can be linked with the notion of "dirty" and that age-old notion of menstruation as inherently unclean and the menses amounting to pollution. However, a closer look at the women's protocols reveals that they are not describing an act as much as they are describing a *feeling* or a personal experience. Within this experience that all the women mention, perhaps lies the most important and easily overlooked celebration of menstruation in current culture. The quotes below from

all the participant's protocols express something of the spirit and feel of this cleansing renewal experience, and whereas some meanings are not fully apparent if read by in isolation, a clearer understanding can be grasped when they are read in the company of all the others. They speak of "cleansing," "a natural rhythm," "a kind of healthy detox," "a getting rid of last month's miss," "what my body is supposed to do," "a natural cycle," "getting rid of the buildup," "I feel good and think it's a good thing," "it just feels unnatural to me to plug or stop something from coming out of my body," "I like the way it feels flowing," "letting it flow it feels like normal," "cleanses us by flushing out unused tissue," "we need that – part of who are – does what it's supposed to do," "something happening to our bodies every month – a release that we get that men do not – something powerful in that. I can't name it though," "I regard my cycle as a sign my body is taking care of itself, as cleansing process – functioning as it should," "having a natural ritual or routine," "regulates what is going on and how I am feeling," "getting to know your body better," "now, here it is I am just going through my cycle," "a cleansing cycle or something."

Every participant speaks of some basic valued component or experience necessary to menstruation. Unlike the decades of medical texts which portray menstruating as destruction, deterioration, failed production or failed reproduction, the women in the study portray their reflective or unreflective understanding of menstruation as an established, reliable pattern of renewal.

Participants mention that the actual flow of blood out of the body provides reassurance that she is alive and real, that some things in her world are normal, place her

again in the center of things, and that other things can surely start again or anew. To those women more keenly attuned to their rhythm, to plug or impede the flow, is to stifle the natural path and the satisfying feeling of release from that which is old, expired, or outdated. Menstruation is the occasion for layers of now-irrelevant life-meanings to move on, literally and figuratively. The "evacuation" of self-blood is not to be understood in Greek terms, but rather, compared to the satisfaction of routine house-cleaning, which most women can relate to regardless of whether or not they are menstruating. After all, the house or the uterus is not inherently dirty, but becomes filled or cluttered regularly from the events of life, living and use.

To those participants less attuned to fuller meanings of menstruation, the satisfaction of release is more closely tied to the basic physical experience of a building up of tissue and tension, a feeling of fullness, then release and renewal. The repetition of the physical experience alone is predictable, cyclic, and provides an important sense of personal ritual and marking of time. However, this sense of ritual is attained by women over the course of years and with much distance from the voices of the culture which constantly attempt to distract and alienate women (and men) from menstruation and self.

From the moment a woman is born, she is met with messages, actions, and attitudes which are anti-woman and anti-menstrual. Deny. Forget. Do not feel. By the time she begins to menstruate, she is fairly saturated with the self-negating influences of the culture. Initially, as the participants note she naturally menstruates with a stranger's body, finding her bleeding-being foreign and awkward at most times. With her new body and her new relationship emerging monthly, the woman worries about her bleeding

catching her off-guard, exposing her, and the messages in the culture suggest that she be fearful of its surprise appearance. However, as she can eventually gain distance from distracting memories, people, and experiences, she can get to know her body and her menstrual cycle so that they become understood as familiar, almost homelike as it does for most of the participants. Thus, her menstruation can eventually become familiar in the most intimate sense and more consonant with her concrete, bodily experience, i.e., “It’s a part of who I am,” and thoughts or suggestions to artificially erase or remove menstruation can seem as absurd as removing one’s arm because the sewing industry only makes one-armed jackets.

CHAPTER V

Discussion

The title of this research, *The Bloody Truth,* was so named only after all of the research was complete, after years of studying this topic formally, and years of menstrual vigilance, i.e., paying attention to anything menstrual in the culture, popular or otherwise. I arrived at this title, or, rather, this title arrived at me, after having experienced over and over again, within the unfolding of this research, that, frankly, women have been sold a bill of goods with regard to understanding their menstrual cycles, their bodies, and the overall meaning of their being. In fact, from the results of the research, it is apparent that women, men, and children alike have all been misled for a very long time, even since perhaps the days of pre-history.

Moreover, an overwhelming portion of the "goods" sold over the course of centuries has not just been misinformation but, rather, shame and embarrassment and has perpetuated the perception of the inferiority of women. Meanwhile, however, the fact that this is misleading and essentially false has been overlooked, kept underground, and to this day remains an open secret. With just a closer than average look at women, it is perfectly obvious that menstruation and all other aspects of woman's being are just what they are. There is no "curse," "dirtiness," "inferiority," "shame," or "weakness" about being a woman, except in the complacency of those who sell the image, i.e., culture, and those who numbly accept it, i.e., individual women. What is remarkable is how well this secret has been kept and nurtured and how maintaining it has required so little *conscious* effort. Overall, there has been and is still a particular dialectical relationship between the

culture and women which creates the perfect relationship for maintaining the secret of women's accepted inferiority. The dialectic can be summarized as follows:

From the beginning of life, the young girl and developing woman is essentially bombarded with implicit and explicit meanings from medicine, education, television, music and so on which downgrade her gender, her body, and particularly her bleeding and emotionality. Of course, as a young developing person, she is naturally vulnerable and dependent enough that she simply absorbs these external, cultural attitudes like a sponge. If her family shares these perspectives, they of course, echo the messages, reinforce them and make "natural inferiority" all the more real for her. However, even if her parents maintain a different, inclusive, more accepting position toward female bleeding and being, she cannot help but be somewhat embedded in the meanings that are given to her by culture. There is no possible way that she can escape the culture's shaming messages completely. All of the participants in this study witness to the impact of these denigrating and shaming messages.

Furthermore, by the time the young woman can make her own decisions and act a bit more autonomously, she has usually already "bought into" the image of herself as inferior to males, at least in part. After all, what else is there to believe? And all her friends find themselves in the same boat, managing the secrecy and trying to get through each period without embarrassment. That's just how it is for women, isn't it? The young women who surrender and grasp this inferior stance as identity do so to be proper, civilized, good girls and then women. Eventually, they become strong defenders of this identity, this position as secret second-fiddle, because they have organized their lives

around these meanings, these school majors, jobs, friends, and men. They view their periods as intrusive and disruptive and get through each cycle with as little attention to "it" and themselves as possible. All of the participants in this study were fearful of bleeding through and ashamed of being exposed, and most of them frequently felt the burden and intrusiveness of their cycles into their ongoing life.

Other young women, by the time they reach an age in which they can make decisions for themselves, are more loosely entangled in this cultural identity, less possessed by the whole placement of women as secondary and inferior. Perhaps they questioned attitudes toward women all throughout their development and had girlfriends who did the same, but like other young women, had no other alternative than to become "civilized," quiet young women, secretly dissatisfied with their status in the world. Once out in the world as adults, they learn about women's history or compare their own histories with other women and take note of the differences. Maybe, somehow, they learn about moon charts and track their menstruations or investigate organic or alternative menstrual products. Maybe they commiserate occasionally with girlfriends about the pains and "hassle" of bleeding and the possibility of "breeding." However, over the years, they come to know themselves better through their bleeding, and while they still play by the cultural rules of menstrual secrecy, there is a part of them that finds each period somehow satisfying and a friendly reminder of normalcy. One participant, Sharon went to an all-woman's school and learned to accept and celebrate her menstrual bleeding for the first time. In the same way, Regina, in a time of relatively isolation in her life acquired a moon chart and learned about the rhythms of her cycle with the moon.

Every participant mentioned the way in which menstruation was a renewal and cleansing.

At the same time that young women are discovering themselves, the culture in all its manifestations such as education, advertising, film, television, literature and the like, forges ahead, maintaining the status quo for women (and men). The ideas about menstruation found in all the cultural forms investigated are found to be overwhelmingly male-inspired, male-dominated, and therefore lacking in true empathy for female being. For instance, from a medical or reproductive point of view, menstruation is understood within a hierarchal and production-minded arrangement; therefore, menstruation amounts to hardly more than a natural disappointment to be accepted as natural but kept "clean" and secret. Girls and women are taught this understanding of themselves and it becomes part of their self-concept. Mothers, if they speak to their daughters at all about such matters, teach their daughters this view. "Just play by the rules and you will be fine," is the essential message.

Outside of "professional" or institutionalized forces, menstruation from the average male citizen's point of view is something that reminds him of his sexual "place" in the world, which turns out to be fraught with various notions and emotions of pleasure, sin, "the curse," fear, horror, anger, confusion, resentment, and perhaps excitement. When the topic of menstruation makes a rare appearance in the world, he may laugh, leer at a woman, blush and leave the scene, scowl, show disgust or ball his fists. Rarely does he stop and listen thoughtfully or seriously; rarely does he entertain for one moment this facet of female being. Why should he? It makes him uncomfortable,

and after all, the culture does not require him to do so. He, unlike the average woman, is considered “civilized” regardless of how he reacts to this phenomenon. He, like all men, has been granted a cultural “pass.” Menstruation is lived culturally as an invitation to avoid or dump on women’s being, and as a reason to find her inferior. Men feel the freedom to do so, whether individually or as a part of professions, and women as perfectly trained partners in the culture, receive or tolerate the dumping. On both sides, this seems to be enacted traditionally and unconsciously. Caroline described her experience of being rudely shut up by a man when she spoke of menstruation, and I too, had a similar experience with a medical doctor when he inquired about my research topic, he turned his head away from me, threw his hands in the air, and said, “okay, okay that’s enough” at the mere mention of my topic. All of the participants had experiences in which their bleeding, their periods, or their menstrual gear was to be hidden, kept secret, and remain out of all conversation.

Indeed, women also act and react unconsciously, as part of the cultural, dialectical relationship around bleeding and its tie to inferiority. Women and girls remain largely unaware of or unmoved by the fact that they routinely receive and/or tolerate *male* perspectives of their own menstruations. One of the most remarkable examples of this phenomenon from the research includes how an entire group of women who were an audience to Judy Chicago’s photographic close-up of a woman pulling out a bloody tampon responded with horror at the “bloody penis.” Chicago points out how the women were unable to recognize a visual image of their own being, of something they do every month. Shockingly, they empathized first with a male image, male body and male point

of view. Similarly, in this research, one participant, Caroline, identified that she often had two responses to menstrual topics and the first was usually critical and not her own. Caroline identifies the critical, negative voice of the culture that doesn't come from her first, shouting so loudly in disapproval that she hears this voice before she recognizes her own.

Additionally, simply because women have heard explicit messages from female health teachers, doctors or even their mothers does not insure that they have internalized female-centered understandings about their bodies and place in the world. Until conducting this research, I, myself had no idea the extent to which medicine, education, television, advertising and the rest of the manifestations of menstrual culture had been, not just influenced, but directed by male ideology. Clara's mother took a very dismissive view of her menarche telling her that she didn't get to miss school just because she had a period, and gave her a book that glossed over the menstrual experience from a male perspective. Interestingly, Clara felt a sense of being punished by her period.

Perhaps not so surprisingly, in this dialectic surrounding menstruation, women can become strong proponents of keeping the secret and thus keeping women down in the culture, just as men do. Saying little *ever* about one's bleeding self and trying to get through each period without a leak or an incident is an indication of cultural influence and cooperation on women's part. Becoming disgusted at one's own menses and personal odor, hoping that the check-out clerk is female when making menstrual supplies purchases, hiding supplies from boyfriends, husbands, children, bosses, co-workers, and houseguests, and ignoring derogatory remarks about women's irrationality and periods,

all point to the fact that menstruation is somehow shameful and to be kept hidden. Some participants in this study described embarrassment and shame in the buying of menstrual products, described their own blood as gross, and one spoke of feeling hideous, unclean, unattractive and unfit for society. This secrecy and shame, while now hosted by the woman, belong to the age-old perceptions of females and their bleeding bodies which have infiltrated into predominant theories and fields of thought. These age-old male-dominated perceptions are recycled year after year, becoming more and more a part of the culture's unconscious, and with little objection from women (or men), a part of their unconscious, as well.

Eventually, as women have more experiences in life and mature, they sort out what of the world outside they want to take into themselves or keep and what they want to leave behind, they find some way of making sense of their own bleeding and the value of their being. They either fundamentally accept themselves as bleeding beings or they do not. Even if they do not, they find ways of understanding that story and making their lives "work." Sometimes that involves medications, operations, or making children to prove their worth and provide distraction from cultural and self rejection. Other times they surrender to the strong, overriding cultural portraits of unstable and irrational femininity and label themselves as "bitches" or "cunts" before anyone else can. For the most part, women negotiate their experiences of bleeding in silence and allow their pleasures, their pains, and their own preferences about menstruation to fall away from the deaf ears of culture and into the mute spheres of their own experience and personal history.

In order to have some identity and reality as a human who bleeds, women have to find a way to bring this into some dialogue with the world. As a basic component of human being, completely ignoring or negating an entire realm of one's being is impossible. One way or another, the truth will come out. Talking with others or expressing one's self outside of one's own being is an important part of identity and being a person, and so, too, is having one's picture of self reflected back from the outside world. The culture of menstruation confines women, fundamentally to either of two choices, a kind of cultural double-bind. Either she remains quiet about her bleeding and thus remains "civilized," or she may speak up and talk about this part of herself within the constricting terms of medicine and diagnoses. Some women, in an effort to find a balance between silence and civility resort to the discourse of medicine and pathology, as this is the only acceptable way of talking about one's experiences as a bleeding woman. This dictated discourse, however, is constricted and allows no room for ordinary talk or celebration of the experience of menstruation outside of the legitimated purpose for producing babies. The only other discourse is the language of symptoms, complaints, and being a patient. This is evidenced by the fact that some of the participants went on at some length about PMS and other diagnoses, and gave a litany of complaints and symptoms surrounding their periods.

Thus, in an effort to stay within some kind of dialog or relationship with the world, women sometimes find identity or legitimacy in having PMS and its emotional concomitants, because ordinary talk about anything related to the personal experience of menstruation is perceived culturally as weakness. Most women would rather suffer in

silence rather than call attention to themselves as women, point out their inferiority, and consequently humiliate themselves. In the outside world, diagnoses are permitted but concrete, existential embodied speaking is not. Hence, it becomes possible for a woman to speak to doctors and to others as well about her PMS, a code word for bleeding with its emotional side effects. Regina, for example, mentions talking with her medical and chiropractic doctors about “removing” her PMS. Isabel also talks about the importance of being able to mention aspects of PMS to boyfriends as a relief to herself and to encourage them on their path to female empathy.

Sometimes, for many women, coming to terms with themselves as bleeding humans is a matter of discovering what kind of patients they are or what kind of vaginas, uteruses, and ovaries they have within the constructs of medicine and gynecology, or, at the very least, how normal the length or frequency of their cycles are. Once they find a body and self-concept which fits somehow within the culture, a compromise which allows them to live within the culture, they can accept themselves. They find some balance between accepting the givens attributed to them by the culture and who they can comfortably be. In order to get some kind of medical validation, one of the most powerful forms of validation in the culture, women succumb to a variety of physical, emotional, and psychiatric diagnoses and take these up as parts of their identity. PMS is now so ubiquitous in the culture that in order for a woman to get any further special consideration for her discomforts she must suffer from PMDD (Premenstrual Dysphoric Disorder) or other elaborate psychiatric or physical disorders.

As an alternative to or in addition to becoming entangled in a rather limited

dialogue about one's bleeding with experts in the field of medicine, some women find satisfaction in other ways of expressing their menstrual lives, including talking to other women about just how they live and cope with their bleeding bodies in a world with limited tolerance. Whereas much talk between women about periods seems commiserative, feeling accepted in the most basic, ordinary sense is an important part of being human and feeling sane and is not to be discounted. Most all of the participants in the study said that they had recently had an "open" conversation with a girlfriend about menstruation, and for most, the interview for this research seemed to at the very least, provide the same kind of outlet of expression and a place where they could be honest. Caroline expressed gratitude for being a part of the research and said that being included made her feel as if she had something "important" to say.

A component of this research includes some of my perceptions as a woman who bleeds and as a researcher with special attunement to menstruation. In light of this, every time I read or am reminded of Caroline's remark about feeling as if she had something important to say, I find myself filled with emotion. While I am emotionally touched and gladdened that by asking her to participate (essentially asking her to do *me* a favor) I have, in some sense, done her a favor and encouraged in her a deserved feeling of self-appreciation, I am also saddened, as I have been so many times throughout much of this research, that such a small offering towards female being could garner so much attention and gratitude. Throughout most of the cultural review in this research, I routinely hoped against hope that I would come across some untouched avenue in culture that has a real appreciation for menstruation and female being. As a result, I found

myself in what I can now look back on as a kind of depression, a perpetual feeling of hopelessness for myself and all women, most of whom live in a kind of unconscious despair about the way in which culture regards them. For an extended period, I became hyper-conscious and fell into despair myself, but fortunately I returned with a realistic sense of how things are for women, without the blinders that culture expects women to wear and without the exaggerated, unrealistic perception that women can only be victims in this arrangement.

On the whole, then, this research reveals that women, for the most part, consciously and/or unconsciously experience an imbalance in their relationship with the culture. Historically, women en masse – like many individual women in abusive marriages who wait for their men to change and keep offering them one more chance – have over the centuries rather silently waited for the culture to act more respectfully and decently towards them. Also, historically, women have usually colluded with the unfair and unrealistic demands of the culture by adhering to the insistence on "civilized" menstrual secrecy. By continually concealing their true feelings, their blood, and the equipment of menstruation, women have unwittingly adapted to their mistreatment and made the perpetuation of it easier. Understandably, breaking out of the culturally-imposed stigma of inherently shameful, inferior being, after all, first requires consciousness and then the strength to withstand more shame, embarrassment, feelings of intensified inferiority, as well as the possibility of violence perpetuated by the culture. All of this, of course, becomes more than the average person can muster in mere solitude. However, centuries of women's accommodation of mistreatment has paved the

way for continued disregard of menstruation and the taken-for-granted cultural dismissal of women's true worth.

Furthermore, despite the strides made by remarkable women during the liberation movement in the 1960s and 1970s, women are still bound by this deeply imbedded perception of natural inferiority linked to menstruation and can now experience culture's demand for women to be just like men outside the home – in the workplace. Additionally, despite the fact that menstrual products have undoubtedly improved and the fact that advertising, in order to keep up with the times, speaks of "freedom," "choice," and "active women" more than ever, the spirit and the message of advertising are still the same, i.e., fear- and shame-based, and are virtually identical to original advertisements of the 1930s. Here, in this context, we can understand just how it happened that the Equal Rights Amendment never passed.

Nevertheless, women still remain in the same secondary position and what is required for any change to be possible is a shift in consciousness together with a shift in the culture. The shift in consciousness involves every woman as she awakens to the situation of herself in the culture. She needs to notice and react to the false, misleading, gospel of shame and reject it forcibly, while affirming the goodness and naturalness of woman's bodily and emotional being. The narrative of inferiority, embarrassment, and shame into which women have been inducted for almost forever has to be seen for what it is, i.e., an open secret held in place by a tissue of misrepresentations and falsified sciences, a language of arbitrary denigration and dismissal, and prejudicial absurdities. Ultimately, this scandalous tissue of hostile lies, itself, has to become shameful just as

Apartheid finally became shameful in Africa and was ultimately eliminated.

However, the call to women, individually or collectively, to become conscious and rise up to put this lie to rest, is still quite incomplete. The culture too has to shift, and it is here that one fascinating transformative possibility has opened through this research, which may not be immediately obvious from a superficial survey of its results. The research demonstrates with particular forcefulness the power of advertising as one of the linchpins to the maintenance of the status quo. The advertisers actually know what they are doing in appealing, with psychological and cultural astuteness, to the feelings of shame, embarrassment and inferiority that women experience in relation to their concrete, gendered body.

However, the advertisers do not just appeal to this motivation in women. They actually engender it and create it by continuously bombarding women with the fear and loathing, like a paranoid delusion, which appears to surround them. The absolutely worst thing that can happen is that the secret comes out (the advertisers of menstrual products constantly say), that your stink comes out (cover it with scents), that your blood will show (leaks happen and we can protect you from them), and that people will be able to tell that you are menstruating (horror of horrors). Furthermore, this bombardment, motivated by a very narrowly conceived desire to sell more products, engages the advertisers in a kind of demonic exploitation, in which they take advantage of the cultural-constituted inferior status of women and her shame as a ‘given.’ Additionally, however, the advertisers are also caught in a narrow web of understanding, and they are missing their chance to get it right, and actually sell more products and make more

money by participating in honest marketing and assisting in the liberation of women from shame and inferiority. Whereas men *and* women are encouraged through advertising to repress and deny their natural bodily being, ignore their needs, and treat themselves as productive units and commodities, they are, however, impacted in particular ways. If a man does not suppress his natural odor, he may be judged as being from a lower socio-economic, working class; however, he is still 'manly' and not an inferior being, as compared to women. Any woman in Western culture, however, who neglects to sufficiently perfume evidence of her living, breathing body is burdened with a certain degree of shame and disparagement, for she is *never* to age, become worn, sweat or smell as a result.

Women, as the participants in this study show, are looking for a release from the burden of the lies and the shameful denigration of their gender. They are ready to be moved by actual freedom and liberation from shame, which the advertisers cynically reduce to freedom from leaks, so as to sell a new plug for menstrual blood. Direct speaking of menstrual products and the truth about menstruation is ready to catch on, if at least a few individuals with an eye to the latest movement of the culture catch on to it. Just as young girls have been inducted into anorexia nervosa and bulimia by the culture that says one can never be too thin or too rich, women can still be saved from this disease of inferiority by seeing clearly that they have been inducted into and sold a false and destructive bill of goods. Therefore, advertising presents a potent possibility for planting the seed of freedom from shame, and it only takes a very few people adept in marketing to grasp onto and positively exploit this opening in the culture.

Back to the Experts: Results of the Research in Relation to the Theorists

Just as the cultural review has shown, the formal, psychological literature portrays a mostly life-negating portrait of menstruation and women's being even when attempting to avoid such a picture. After thorough analyses of the cultural data and of the individual participants' data, in addition to a comparison and contrasting of the two, we can conclude that the predominant message about menstruation from the culture, which also surfaces regularly in the lives of the individual women, is, for the most part, negative and shaming. Thus, the perceptions of menstruation and female being found in psychological theory accurately reflect the dominating images of menstruation and menstruating women found in the culture. In sum, psychological theory has done little to shed light on a woman-centered understanding of menstruation. More importantly, any insight that has been provided into the phenomenon of menstruation has not gained momentum in popular psychology or popular medicine, and so in some ways, it is as if menstruation has never really been understood.

Freud (*SE* 13:33, *SE* 23:47-51), the most recognizable and influential representative of psychological theory, without devoting much attention to menstruation manages to boil the experience down to another symbol of women's helplessness which, in itself, is appealing and also "taboo." Menstruation is virtually ignored from a female perspective and mentioned only in relation to man's desire, a concept which is eerily akin to past and present culture.

One of Freud's disciples, Deutsch (1944), manages to call attention to the uniqueness of the experience of menstruation to female being and also takes into account

the outside, relational influences of a girl's mother on her experience of menarche and subsequent menstruations. She, however, locks menstruation into a Freudian, perpetual trauma of castrated-woundedness and pins all responsibility of a girl's negative experience on the mother. By ignoring any other influences from the culture, including her culturally male-centered understanding, and essentially placing blame on the mother for the daughter's insurmountable unpleasant experience of menstruation, Deutsch's understanding parallels the simplified understandings that have been upheld by traditional doctors across decades.

Of all the neo-Freudians, Horney (1967) perhaps provides the most insightful and descriptive explanation of menstruation which stays close to the experience of women (and men), as is revealed in the analyses of all the data. Like Deutsch, Horney recognizes the uniqueness of the experience to women and places the meaning of menstruation within a cultural context. Declaring menstruation more than just bleeding, (more than a bodily function, she recognizes that menstrual bleeding is related to sexuality, physically and culturally. Thus, as a phenomenon, it is anxiety producing for both men and women. Horney's recognition that menstruation calls to the fore a deep-seated fear and dread of women for men is confirmed in the analyses of the cultural data and re-surfaces in the analyses of the individual data. Although Horney does not stray from the negative Freudian notion of menstruation as a kind of inner damage, she does provide a phenomenology of the experience of bleeding by understanding that the physical preparations of menstruation coincide with various mental and emotional preparations, which she understands as a kind of regular, psychic preparation for pregnancy.

Horney's idea that menstruation is essentially a reminder of sexuality which creates anxiety in both sexes is somewhat akin to Bettelheim's (1971) assertion that the origin of the notion of *penis envy* is actually an expression of *womb envy*. Bettelheim contends that the males of preliterate societies take their fear of menstruation and women and, instead of loathing women and making a taboo of menstruation, attempted to master what they perceived as the power of women by engaging in blood letting rituals. Thus the whole tradition of negating, loathing, despising, and perceiving women as inferior is in Bettelheim's view rooted in a profound unconscious envy, which is repressed. He even proposes that man's pride in his rationality and superiority is a kind of reaction formation to a profound sense of inferiority and incompleteness. The women in this study gave many examples of men's extreme emotional reactivity, even pathological distaste, in relation to their menstruation. In addition, they mostly take for granted that they have to protect men who are too emotionally delicate to deal with menstrual blood.

In the same spirit of affirming women and rejecting a male dominated vision of women as inferior and deficient, Erikson (1968) contends that a truly empathic theory of female human development must begin with the fact that women are biologically and physically different from men. Woman's inner space or uterus must not to be seen as a physical deficit but as a factual condition of being female. He observes female being and bodiliness in light of her natural orientation in the world, i.e., what she is set up to do, what she can do, rather than in terms of what she can not do or does not have physically or psychically. Erikson hints at a comprehensive theory of development which would be oriented around woman's development and take her being into appreciative account, a

project to which, ideally, the present study contributes.

Following this idea that women have to be understood in their own right, Merleau-Ponty (no date), de Beauvoir (1989), and other theorists within an existential phenomenological orientation aim at an understanding of menstruation and female being which takes into account the idea that mind-body-culture are the shapers of menstrual meanings. Merleau-Ponty describes menstruation as a part of development unique to female being, in which simultaneously a new physical and cultural field emerge and require the girl/woman to find her way over time. That each woman has to find her way in a complex cultural/physical field was found again and again in the individual protocols. Within most of psychology and common knowledge, the assumption is made that once menarche occurs and the girl has her equipment in place, so to speak, the change has occurred. However, like the cycles of the moon and a woman's period, the adjustments and unfolding come around again and again, evolving further meanings and self understandings.

Following even more radically on Erikson's and Merleau-Ponty's idea that women have to be understood as women, Irigary (1985 & 1985) proposes a female centered way of understanding that seeks to transcend rather completely the categories and concepts of the world dominated by men. She proposes to deconstruct the male dominated language and introduces descriptive metaphors expressing women's experience: fluidity rather than substantiality/stagnation, doubling rather than unity, and so on. All the women in this study follow in her spirit by claiming their own words for menstruation, e.g., *period* and *cycle* (both of which indicate fluidity and change), and by

forcefully rejecting the use of the word *menstruation* which they associate with expert male dominance.

Elaborating and slightly expanding Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological understanding of the body, Leder (1990) introduces the idea of dys-appearance, wherein the person suddenly experiences the body as focal and no longer taken for granted, as in pain, disease, aging, pregnancy, and menstruation. This dys-appearance is demonstrated by all the participants during their menstrual cycle. A broader understanding of menstruation while taking Leder's ideas further take into account that in the short term for girls/women menstruation is experienced powerfully as a dys-appearance. However in the long term, as a woman matures, menstruation is experienced less and less as dys-appearance and more in regular consonance with her being, until she becomes peri-menopausal when she once again experiences her body's new interrupted rhythm as dys-appearance.

In three unpublished existential phenomenological empirical studies (Miles, 1986; Stehr, 1999; Work, 1998) the researchers were also guided by the idea of obtaining access to women's modes and manners of experiencing. Miles discovered that girls experience a profound shift in all their relationships at menarche, with a heightened feeling of vulnerability in the presence of males. She found as girls discover their own sexuality, they also discover the sexualizing gaze of boys and become highly self-conscious as they view themselves from the boys' perspective. In Stehr's study of PMS and Work's pilot study on menstruation, the girls' and women's sense of heightened vulnerability under the alienating gaze is a central feature of the participants' experience

of premenstrual anguish as well as in their avoiding the sharing of personal experiences of menstruation. And in the present study, this same objectifying and sexualizing gaze plays an important role in the participants' menstrual meanings.

Somewhat in the same spirit of wanting to express women's experience of self and world, Nancy Chodorow, Carol Gilligan, and the Stone Center authors all have worked systematically to unfold, write about, validate, and study female perspectives. They have completed considerable work (Chodorow, 1978; Miller, 1986; Gilligan, 1993) toward the liberation of and inclusion of women, pursuing the idea of developing a psychology which actually includes women in their own right, as other than deficient men. However, their discussions, though illuminating and insightful in a cultural social sense, retain a somewhat disembodied vision of female being. Ironically, in spite of feminist and liberational intentions, they say nothing about menstruation or other concrete bodily aspects of woman's being. They appear to be preoccupied with male-centered views and arguments, and succumb largely to the cultural silence and taboo on discussing menstruation. Nonetheless, their desire and intention to give full voice and validation to women's experience is also one of the aims of the present study.

Overall, the findings of this research reveal that all of the psychological theories surrounding the meaning of menstruation reviewed here provide only glimpses of women's experiences and meaning of menstrual bleeding and fall short of providing full theories of female menstrual experience. Even the feminist psychologists and philosophers are so powerfully and unconsciously embedded in the phallocentric theories of male and female being that they fundamentally remain fixed in the cultural

taboos and stereotypes surrounding menstruation.

In contrast, the cultural, anthropological "blood authors," as I have called them, consist of mostly women from fields other than psychology, and are less-embedded in the cultural, psychological natural attitudes surrounding maleness and femaleness. They are positioned such that they have more distance from oppressive biases and can therefore aptly name the biases and keep them separate from lived, female experience. These authors are less tainted by the traditions of psychology and culture, and so they are able to provide more thorough examples of female being, while also providing profound descriptions of cultural biases against women, nature, and blood. Furthermore, these scholars explicitly expound on and describe the phenomena of menstruation from a variety of viewpoints (Buckley & Goltlieb, 1988; Delaney, Lupton, Toth, 1988; Golub, 1985; Grahn, 1993; Houppert, 1999; Knight, 1991; Laws, 1990; Lupton, 1993; Martin, 1992; Tavris, 1993; Weidegger, 1976). Contributions and insights from these authors and researchers exist throughout the present study and shed valued light on women's experiences of cultural oppression surrounding menstruation as well as offer alternative theories of perceiving female being and menstrual bleeding.

Laws, for example, in researching the biases of British men (1990), shows how the culture is set up for women to easily take in men's gaze and biases. Observing what she calls "etiquette" around menstruation, Laws contends that women abide by the rules about speaking and not speaking about menstruation which men set in place, culturally. Additionally, she discovers that since men's ideas about menstruation are primarily sexualized, that is the connotation which menstruation also holds for women. Women's

shame and embarrassment about bleeding, then, is related not to inherent shame that women hold about their bodies and menstruation but is actually related to the male, culturally imposed sexual fantasies linked to menstruation which women have learned to carry. These phenomena surrounding menstrual bleeding appear repeatedly in this study as women (in the individual and the cultural data) anticipate and respond to the male perspectives that Laws describes. The women's fear and shame about bleeding can be traced back to male-dominated attitudes about women and bleeding and the frequent sexual objectification of women at the mere mention of menstruation.

Additionally, Martin's investigations of science, medicine, industry, and the history of menstruation (1992) found in texts provide insight into all of the ordinary prejudices about women and bleeding which have been handed down through the ages. She details how these ordinary prejudices surface in average men and in the most advanced scientific accounts of menstruation, production, and reproduction. Her discovery of medical metaphors in scientific texts which imply male activity versus female passivity, high-volume male production versus low-volume female production, male strength versus female weakness, and the like, prove especially useful for this study in its understanding of medicine's role in creating meanings of menstruation which continually imply female weakness and inferiority and which ignore women's personal experience and meaning. All of the women in this study initially gave a medicalized understanding of their periods, thus demonstrating medicine's role in the influence of women (and men) and their sense of identity.

Of all the literature on menstruation apart from the psychological literature,

Northrup (1998) provides one rare understanding of menstruation which is inclusive of female experience and which dialogs with mainstream gynecological medicine. As a licensed medical doctor, she addresses the physiology of women with a strong attempt at removing the average biases found in mainstream medicine. Much like Horney does earlier, she contends that women's psyches are intimately related to the functioning of their bodies throughout menstruation. She reaches beyond Horney in her descriptions, however, and offers details of common emotions which coincide with the individual tasks of the ovaries and the egg during menstruation.

Overall, unlike Horney who accepts the idea that menstruation is a repeated "trauma," Northrup dwells with women and their emotions which correspond to their cycles, which, in turn, correspond with the perceptions of women and menstruation in the culture. Her explanations of so-called emotionality are grounded in real, lived experiences of women which are also grounded in biology and culture, which in turn, provides a rather full experiential context. She refuses to accept the common notion that women cry before and during their periods "for no reason" and blatantly rejects the belief that women become "bitches" around the time of their periods just because of hormones.

Throughout her text, Northrup challenges the widespread stereotypes about menstruating women which were found throughout the cultural data and in the protocols and beliefs of the individual women in this study. Almost all of the women participants were already resigned to the fact that they were emotional messes or unstable at times during their periods. Most of them "confessed" to such on their own, as if to intercept

the accusation from me or someone else at a later time.

Furthermore, to some extent, Northrup's theory of menstrual health intersects with Stehr's contention that PMS is an experience of premenstrual anguish which is personally and culturally situated. Northrup reminds women that the more out of touch they are with themselves, the aspect of their being which bleeds and is capable of becoming pregnant or not, the more they will suffer premenstrually. That is, the less a woman listens to her body and her feelings, the more likely her body will naturally struggle and struggle against her refusal to listen. Northrup's picture of women's health, then, includes learning how to become attuned to one's particular female body and learning to shut out or speak up against individuals and the cultural messages which teach otherwise. This was borne out as valid in the present study as all of the women described learning to "listen" to their bodies to varying degrees and seemed to suffer or not suffer menstrual distress accordingly.

In fact some degree of listening to their bodies is almost forced upon women as under normal circumstances, i.e., without chemical or surgical interference, unless a woman becomes pregnant, it is practically impossible for her to completely forget about menstruating. The power of menstruation is that it always calls a woman back to the here-and-now moment, back to her body, back to concrete being, and literally back to her senses. As one participant suggests, when all the world is strange or moving too fast to keep up and just about the time she feels truly alienated from the world and herself, she, like the others, gets a sensation, an inkling that something or someone familiar is about to happen. The arrival of her period marks the arrival of a personal, intimate ritual

which the woman shares only with herself for a few days out of (usually) every month. In this sense, we know just what the slang term *friend* means in relation to menstruation. We can also understand Anne Frank's "sweet secret" and the "fun" of Regina's menstrual gear that is hidden in a "secret box" under a tray in her desk at work. After all, periods provide an opportunity for privacy, for dwelling, for managing one's self without influence or interference, particularly when the culture is disgusted by its presence.

Limitations of the Research

The contributions of the present study to the field of psychology and social action have already been discussed at some length, but, of course it has limitations. One of the most significant empirical limitations of this study involves the quality of the sample. Since the participants were obtained by virtue of opportunity, rather than by voluntary recruitment as originally intended, the sample is biased in unknown ways. (Future research of this nature would benefit from a prior investigation or separate study of how to recruit women to talk about a normally private, culturally forbidden topic.) Additionally, since the participants were acquired from friends and acquaintances, the sample, in part, reflects the results of a network of individuals, i.e., women linked to one another in some way. Because of this linkage, it is likely that they share similar histories, including similar values, educations, and socio-economic backgrounds.

For example, all of the women have educations beyond high school, and though not all have degrees, three of the women hold Master's degrees. Fortunately, the women are all educated in different fields of study, but as a result of their post high school educations, the range of perspectives and answers in this study are limited to that of

educated women, a category I sincerely tried to avoid. Any future study should involve a better representation of culturally diverse women, i.e., women with a range of ethnic, familial, educational, socio-economic and religious backgrounds.

Also, another limitation to the study is that the women were not interviewed for a second time. I think that if the women had been given some time to “live with” or reflect upon the experience of the interview, they could provide valuable qualitative information with regard to any impact of the study on their lives attitudinally or even informationally. Asking the women again how they felt about menstruation at this time in their lives was well-intended but did not allow enough time to pass to make a significant difference.

Finally, interviewing men, rather than relying upon research about men, would have provided another point of entry into the culture. Real men can be questioned and interviewed, just as the women were, and they, too, could be interviewed a second time to see if the whole project had made any difference for them.

Even still, another research project could be crafted around the experience of men and how men’s lives are affected by the cultural beliefs and demands placed on women. Given the fact that women are seen fundamentally as inferior, weak, irrational, and disturbed, what is it like for men to have to maintain the equally false, , demanding and unfair position of being superior, strong, rational, and balanced? That study could supplement the findings of this study on menstruation, but it could also tap into unexpressed regions of being for men, as well. Men might also benefit from recognizing those aspects of themselves which the culture has de-valued since pre-history.

Final Words

On the whole, this study shows that in many areas of the culture there is a thin vein of knowledge, understanding, and intuition which supports an altogether different vision of menstrual bleeding and of being a woman, bodily and concretely. However slight or small it appears, this understanding is lying dormant, waiting for its seed to blossom and grow. Ideally, if this seed were to blossom, women and menstruation would be viewed, as Tavris, Martin, and others suggest, as a taken-for-granted, accepted natural part of woman's being.

In this respect, menstrual bleeding might be viewed in the culture as skin, hair, and nails are viewed, i.e., aspects of the body, all of which shed and renew. All three aspects may or may not be treated with elaborate rituals, but nonetheless, they all involve and require some degree of attention and care, in either female or male being. In the current culture, the importance of one's hair, skin, or nails may or may not be amplified, exaggerated, or become occasions for adornment or regular celebration. The decision is left up to the individual and her peers.

Ideally, by the same token, if women were fully accepted in the culture, menstruation could take on the same sort of physical and cultural meaning. Menstrual bleeding, accepted outwardly as a given of female being could be personally celebrated or not, outwardly announced or not, but could always openly remain part and parcel of the uniqueness of being female. Indeed, such an appreciative acceptance of the female body could herald a world in which bodily being itself might be valued, noticed, enjoyed – not merely as commodity or appearance to others, but as a living reality which opens

us to our human world with all of its particular colorations. Even further, a society which finds menstruation worth mentioning, or at the very least, too important to ignore, would also make space for and conclude that the *whole* of female being is worth seeing, hearing, speaking, and being understood. Within this framework, the *whole* of male being could also take on a new coloration, no longer needing to stand *against* or *opposed* to supposedly inferior female being. As a result, in such a world, all relationships would shift, e.g., between mothers and daughters, sisters and sisters, brothers and sisters, and so on. Relationships between men and women, platonic and romantic, would foster a new sort of non-possessive and non-oppressive love between two sorts of valued beings, both appreciated for their unique embodiment. Neither would ever have to apologize for their particular kind of being again.

Finally, at the start of this research, my director asked one thing of me, which is what she should tell her own daughter about menstruation. Whereas, at this point, her daughter may very well be grown, married, and have her own children, perhaps a granddaughter or two may reap the benefits of this study. Overall, what one *says* to a daughter or a young, developing girl is not necessarily the point. Rather, the point is how a mother or any significant person in the life of a girl regards her own body, her own menstrual cycle and those of others. What makes a real difference is how shamefully she lives or how much she lives without shame. Avoiding conversation about bleeding when it is perfectly acceptable to do so is a mistake and a reflection of one's own absorbed shame about menstruation and about being a woman. Reflecting on and coming to terms with one's own menstruation is the best gift of all for any girl or young

woman. As Northrup asserts, *"Clearly, we cannot take our daughters into a space where we have never been"* (1998, p.161).

However, just in case any mother should go looking for words to actually say to her daughter, which is also not a bad idea, here is a brief something which makes for a perfect beginning or a perfect ending to any conversation:

> Menstrual blood is not exactly like the blood in the veins and the arteries. … Sometimes menstrual blood is pink, sometimes it's scarlet, sometimes it's purple-black, or reddish-brown. It's the special blood in which all our lives started. (Sheffield, 1989, pp. 15-16)

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APPENDIX A

Clara's Answers

1) Typical menstrual period: hmmmm. Let's see … uh, well, huh. Annually I will only bleed about 4 times a year. I might have two months of successive periods with bleeding & then 3-4 months of no bleeding. When I do bleed it's as if I major artery has been punctured & my uterus is shedding multiple layers of old stuff. Regardless of whether I bleed or not, every month I find a solid week of feeling terrible. I'll experience tension headaches, extreme sensitivity to lights/sounds/smells. I feel lower back pain that will eventually creep around my hips to my abdomen. My body seems unable to maintain a stable body temperature: bundling up with sweaters & blankets followed shortly by stripping down to my skivvies. I feel as if I am drowning in my own water retention & my tight clothes are a reminder of this. At the same time, I feel an insatiable thirst. All of these physical symptoms culminate into a general malaise & irritability. I feel unattractive, unclean, hideous & unfit for society. I spiral into a world of self-deprecation. This will last for the first 2-3 days. Towards the end of my cycle, I will regard my cycle as a sign my body is taking care of itself, a cleansing process – a reminder my body is functions as it should. Any irritability remaining is more focused on maintenance.

2) Well reading this question makes me giggle; although I can not articulate why. The word menstruation conjures up simultaneously sentiments of dread & feeling as if I am part of a special elite squad – women. It's a common topic of conversation with girlfriends where we can compare & contrast experiences;

explore & shared new experiences regarding products or home brew tricks to relieve symptoms. It's a general understanding that can be shared quickly with the simple words, "I'm on my period."

3) My first memory of menstruation would be my own menarche. I was in 8th grade, approximately 2 weeks into a new school year at a brand new middle school, transitioning from private religious oriented school into a public school. I felt afraid of the transitions & had a good dose of fear regarding public schools fed into my head; as well as I felt physically ill. I believed I was coming down with the flu. I felt sick to my stomach, feverish, and scared. I found upon going to the bathroom that my underwear was bright vermillion red & soaked through to my jeans, the water was pink. I felt instantly sick to my stomach. While I had been told about periods & their cycles [although I'd like to add it was a superficial explanation] along with all that "blossoming into a woman" crap; it took me a while to make the connection that this blood was mine & it was my first period. I felt dumbstruck & totally confused. "What is this? What am I supposed to do? Why is this happening to me? When will it stop?" I made a make shift cushion of toilet paper into my underwear, went down to my mother to tell her what had happened & could I "please, please, please" stay home from school. She handed me some bulky "night time"; i.e. extra long & thick maxi-pads & told me I didn't get to miss out on school when I had a period. I remember being really pissed off; as well as feeling the terribleness of cramps for the first time. I also had this strange notion that my period was somehow punishment.

4) I feel menstruation is a part of who I am. Over the years I've had my fair share of pap smears & experimentation with birth control pills/hormones to "regulate" my cycle. I've stressed about the infrequency of the bleeding, severity of symptoms, and its relationship [whether myths or truths] to diseases of the ovaries or uterus. Over the last 17 years of worry & stress, I've learned to accept & recognize my body's response to menstruation; as well as what menstruation is for me vs. what I think it should be. I don't bleed every month, that's how it works for me. Sometimes it does hurt like hell & as an adult I stay home from school or cycle. I adapt and change as my cycle changes. Every once in a while I find myself loathing my cycle; although I think it's at those moments I'm either buying my tampon & pads, irate that they are next to the baby diapers in the grocery store. Or the loathing is because my body is changing & I have yet to learn a new way of adjusting with its new presentation.

5) Positive – I find it to be a rather cleansing process. I'll take it as an opportunity to treat myself with extra self-care or to get something I deserve. It's a common bond with all women everywhere.

Negative – At times it can hurt & it's difficult to traverse the fluctuation of emotions. I hate the selection of tampons/pads available to me. It can be mess. I've been blamed as having "pms" when being remotely assertive. Sometimes my "extra care" mentioned above results in gorging on decadent food & laying on the couch all day making me feel worse about myself.

Clara's Telephone Interview Transcript

Background information:
Age: 29
Ethnicity: Caucasian
Occupation: Auditor Accountant
Education: B.A., Masters, Certificate in Accounting.
Religious Background: Lutheran, not practicing.
Current Religious Orientation: Agnostic.

Researcher read participant's written answers to her as follows:
R: What was that like for you to hear your answers?
C: A little embarrassing -- you know you could probably see me blushing if you were here.
R: How come?
C: Huh?
R: How come? Why?
C: Uh, well I think that when you are writing in the moment – I don't know how to describe it – you know it's kind of like you are answering the questions truthfully in the moment but then to have it read back to you is –it's strange. Almost like it's not a part of you – like someone else at that point in time that, who was you is answering.
R: Yeah, and then it's coming back at you in somebody else's voice.
C: Yeah, yeah, something to see like how I was feeling at the time that I answered the questions. I could write my answer differently now.
R: Uh huh, O.K. So what I am going to do is – I will go through each of your answers I have got a couple of questions on or so and so I am going to ask for clarification and they may seem stupid – like the answer is obvious, but I don't want to make any assumptions about what I understand. So I am coming from the position of -- I am from Mars trying to learn about your world and your experience, so they may just seem sort of basic.
C: O.K.
R: Umm, your first answer to the "Please describe in detail your typical menstrual period," You write "when I do bleed, it's as if a major artery has been punctured and my uterus is shedding multiple layers of old stuff." Can you say anything else about that?
C: Umm, I think because I don't bleed every month that it's like my body kind of stores like lines – it's like it goes without that's what it feels like. It just feels like it builds up like this accumulation of like the lining and the blood and when it like ever decides to actually leave, it's like putting three months worth out. I think that's kind of what I meant.
R: And you say, "Regardless of whether I bleed or not, every month I find a solid week of feeling terrible." Tell me about that.
C: Umm, I'll still have like some of the symptoms that I mentioned – just like headachy, crampy, just muscle tightness and soreness, whether or not I am bleeding or not, and

umm, I have always associated just like part of the menstrual cycle without the bleeding because it's exactly how I feel without having to fumble around with tampons or pad and such things.
R: O.K. – And well I guess what I want to question you about – or not question but just highlight and see what you make of it is the answer, the descriptions that you give in number one, how can I put – They are really passionate like you are really trying to get a point across that the experience. They are intense, that's the word I am looking for -- For example, you know, "a major artery has been punctured and my uterus is shedding multiple layers of old stuff." "I feel like I am drowning in my own water retention."
C: I have to say that like as you -- when you read that back to me, one of the thoughts that came to my mind was like, "Damn I hope I am not like histrionic." That was something that came to my mind too in facing the embarrassment of it all.
Like man I am like a histrionic woman – that was something that crossed my mind as well.
R: Oh, really?
C: Yeah, it was – yeah – I think some of it has to do with my writing style and some of it is like that's how it feels at the time.
R: Well, you know the thing that I was – I don't – My questioning wasn't, "Oh do you really feel that way?" It was more of -- when I read it I feel like I am there – it's very descriptive. I can get with you really fairly easily with this description and I am just wondering if you noticed your way of describing and if that fits.
C: Well, I think so – I notice that I think too it's like you know when someone comes up and tells you that they are menstruating – they wouldn't even have to be menstruation but like they are like "I don't feel good today or I have cramps and since it really doesn't describe like how you are feeling. And it's like if you want to know how I am feeling, let me tell you how awful this is and what it feels like. It's like when I had a male friend once ask me about pads and what that was like and I described it as like: "Well it's like you've got a huge chunk of paper in your underwear and you've got duct tape that sticking to the side of your legs." It's descriptive and it really describes what it feels like to actually wear a pad. You know I think he probably understood that better than just me saying it's big and bulky and uncomfortable. Let me tell you about the pain and how uncomfortable it is and how it looks and feels – you know to share the experience.
R: Because when you hear this description back to you – if you listen for your words, just in terms of the experience, does the intensity match?
C: Yeah, probably not every single cycle, but generally yeah.
R: Yeah, at times --yeah. So I wonder if when you feel embarrassed and you worry about being histrionic in your description – I wonder if you are imagining somebody else judging your answer.
C: Oh, sure, I think that just shows my fear of judgment – negative judgment.R: Yeah, because technically, in polite society you don't – one, you are not telling people that you are wearing a pad, and two, if your were giving a description in polite society of wearing a pad you wouldn't say you have got cotton wadded in your underwear with duct tape on your – You know, in polite society. O.K. And the last question I have about this first

answer is, you say "Toward the end of my cycle I will regard my cycle as a sign: My body is taking care of itself, a cleansing process, a reminder my body is functioning as it should. Any irritability remaining is more focused on maintenance." I don't quite understand what you mean there. Can you explain?
C: I think what I was thinking about when I wrote that like getting annoyed at having to go to the store to buy pad and tampon – you know I think they are expensive and yeah the idea like you have to kind of be constantly self-aware that you have to change a tampon and you know like being concerned about maybe not bleeding through your clothes so that other people would see – and maybe I am not feeling that uncomfort anymore but I am still irritable, because I still have to maintain you know good pad, good tampon and make sure I am not leaking and do I have enough at home and when I get home do I have enough to get me through the day. You know, if you are traveling that can really annoy me frankly even though physically I feel fine.
R: So any irritability is the practicality of making sure that you have a supply of whatever you are using and some of the social conventions of not bleeding through and that kind of stuff.
C: Yeah, and you know unfortunately sometimes I forget to change – especially toward the end of the cycle, I am a little bit not up to change as frequently as I should. "Oh, shit I have to go do that." Well, even at the front end when it's a little heavier and you have to change a lot more frequently just having to take a break to go do that, I can be annoyed by that.
R: O.K. and two, question two, is, what do you think of when you hear the word menstruation? First thing you say is, "Well reading this question makes me giggle although I can not articulate why." Can you think about that just a bit more, why it makes you giggle? Oh, can I push you just a bit more?
C: Yeah, that's good – umm, I don't know I think it probably has to do with the fact that no one has really ever asked me what you really think of the word menstruation. It's very medical – You know, it's my period. That's how I have always designated it as, and I think it's one of those open ended question which just
-- I don't know -- I hope you don't take this the wrong way in terms of the question itself, but it just seems so sterile and so cold, umm so – it's just like a question a man would ask and it's so much more of like it's just something that's so much more passionate at least to me the fact that it occurs and the expanses of emotions that happen when you go through it and umm – I guess I think I was giggling because like how you like really answer that question, I don't know that makes no sense whatsoever.
R: No it makes sense, I am just thinking of formulating a question around it. Shoot maybe I'll get back to it. So the word for you conjures up or thinking about what it associates with it's cold, medical, clinical, but if you decode what I am asking you then. Your period conjures up – correct me if I am wrong -- simultaneously sentiments of dread and foreboding for the expectations of the aforementioned symptoms as well as feeling as if I am part of a special elite squad women. Let me ask this first. Did you have to translate, when I asked what do you think of when you hear the word 'menstruation?' Did you have to translate that into, "Oh, that's my period?"

C: Yeah, I just kind of made the question work for me.
R: So is it the word menstruation conjures up symptoms of dread, or is it your period conjures up dread of expectations of symptoms as well as feeling that you are part of a special elite squad – women.
C: I would probably say the word menstruation conjures up the idea of dread and the period is probably more along the line of an elite squad.
R: Oh, O.K. Can you say anything else about being part of a special elite squad of women?
C: Well, I think it's the idea that it does create a sense of camaraderie among women and it's just something – it's an experience we all share regardless of the kind of differences that you have as individuals – It's just something that even periods are so diverse to begin with, it's like a ---- point – you can make bonds with women.
R: O.K. O.K. --- Number three, what's your first memory. You talk about moving and different schools and all this change and transition stuff. And you already afraid of moving and you felt physically ill already. You say, "while I"-- you discover the "pink water and your vermillion red soaked through to your jeans." "While I had been told about periods and their cycles, although I would like to add it was a superficial explanation, along with all that blossoming into a woman crap, it took me a while to make the connection that this blood was mine and it was my first period." So, while you had been told about periods and their cycles what was it that you had been told. Do you remember?
C: Oh, yeah – my mother gave me a book to read. It wasn't actually a conversation that we had as a mom and da – mom and daughter – She gave me a book to read it's – what was it called? Something like, "What's happening to me?" Have you heard of that book?
R: Yeah, I have heard something like it, yeah.
C: It's like one of those books that talks to you about puberty and how your body changes and you know, I was more or less instructed to read particular sections and I just I remember it being – it really explaining. I am not sure if it was that book, but it was something like it. It just kind of explained how this is something that happens to all women and you are going to be bleeding from your vagina and I remember like thinking, well why? You know, why does it happen? I didn't think that – I remember reading it and thinking why does it happen. You know, there was like no association between like the eggs dropping and your body and that this is just how it functions.
R: Oh, so that was the superficiality of it?
C: Yeah, it was more like this is something that happens – you bleed and it happens to every woman and uh whether you want it or not, it's just going to happen. But there was – How to take care of it wasn't really addressed.
R: Or how you would feel or anything like that?
C: Right, like basically I remember it saying something like it will be uncomfortable. A very benign, safe word – it will be uncomfortable and you will have to use a pad and um it will last anywhere from five to eight days. And this very skimming the surface, you know, it didn't go into depth of all the various emotions you could go through or the fact

that ------ for an option or the fact that it has to do with like your ovaries and eggs and how that all works.
R: Um hmm, so in really direct contrast to your description.
C: Yeah, it made it sound like bleeding made it sound really safe and like oh you won't even notice it. Like I really wondered why are they telling me this, it sounds like no big deal – it will just come and be gone and I'll barely even notice it. So I was pissed off to be told like figure out I was lied to by this book.
R: So you mother didn't say anything to you? Just handed you a book.
C: Similarly about sex – I got the book. It's a cheesy little animated book too, with like real cartoonish figures of women on it, like looking all cheery you know by the idea of getting you know their first period.
R: And you say that along with all that blossoming into a woman crap, so where did that message come from.
C: Oh, it was in the book. You know, this is a sign that you are getting older and it brought up the idea of puberty, almost in the same context, like your breasts will start to develop and you are really blossoming out of being from a girl to an adolescent into womanhood, you know, it had a cheery little face on it kind of attitude.
R: Oh, how terrible.
C: Yeah, yeah – Actually, to go back to that elite squad thing – I was thinking about this – My period was in 8th grade and I remember being in sixth grade and there was, it was a private boarding school, and there was this girl and her period started and she seemed at least to me, from a sixth grade perspective, that she was really happy about it and her mom came in and talked to the teacher and it was all on the sly but this was the kind of girl that told everyone. Everyone knew and so it was a big deal for her – like she got special bathroom breaks all of a sudden and she had like a little pouch that she carried around with her to the bathroom that used to be filled with pads and I just – She made, this girl her name was Karen, made such a big deal about it – She's an adult now because she has had her period and she's a real woman and she is getting to experience something that no other girl in the sixth grade got to experience at least in that class with me and I just thought, "Wow, that seems like a really cool thing to have happen to you. You know I want these special bathroom breaks and the special little bag, you know, and then to have my mom talk to the teacher about how I need extra bathroom breaks. Not really understanding what the process was, but that Karen made a really good deal out of it and it seemed like really cool and I wanted to be a part of that. Of course, she was also the popular girl in this private religious school.
R: Well, you must have been somewhat disappointed to have your response to it, because I imagine your mother didn't come in and talk about bathroom breaks.
C: And in sixth grade in a private school, you had the same teacher all day long. There were no periods – you know first, second, third, fourth periods. So you get to public school and you have seven, eight different teachers and it was a very different experience all the way around.
R: So, what I was going to highlight was that you had been told about periods – When did you get your book?

C: Fifth or sixth grade.
R: Oh, O.K.
C: Yeah, it was well before I ever had my period.
R: And you say, "it took me awhile to make the connection that this blood was mine and it was my first period." So for you it was a big leap from like the book, the stuff, the superficial stuff that was in the book was real abstract compared to – no one prepared you for the concreteness of it. Like the actuality of the blood and what to do with it.
C: Yeah – right.
R: And then when you told your mother please, please can I stay home, she handed you some "bulky, night time, extra long and thick maxi-pads and told you 'I didn't get to miss out on school when I had a period.' I remember being really pissed off as well as feeling the terribleness of cramps for the first time. I also had this strange notion that my period was somehow punishment." Can you talk about that a little?
How so?
C: umm, I don't know – I think it was – I you know what I remember mostly it was just like in the context in which it was all happening – we had just moved from a house and we were living in a large trailer my father had rented trying renovate the house and I was sleeping on one of those – those when you pull the kitchen table down in a trailer and it transforms itself into a bed at night.
R: Awful –
C: It was really awful and I shared that with my brother M. who is closest in age to me. I just remember and so we were also going to school while living in the trailer the house was being renovated and going to public school which I did find really scary and different from private school. And I just remember being very disgruntled generally toward my parents and just defiant about the whole experience cause we lived in that trailer for a long time thinking you know well maybe this will shut her up. It just seemed like one added thing like you know instead of you know getting a spanking you are going to get your period. You know what I mean? I just -- I remember the times like it was just like one more thing like I would be punished by living in this trailer, like moving from San Diego to up to Oregon, and my father has house fixing home, and I am sharing this bed with my brother, and I do not like public school people, a little scary there, the girls are so much more mature than I am. Maybe mature on a different level than I was and just thinking that it wasn't very nice you know that my parents were putting me through all this upheaval.
R: Well I guess to go through all that transition and then you are going through a transition with your body; you become self conscious in a different way. I guess it's not the best time to having to be – having to share a bed with a relative or anybody else, you know when you are young and you are trying get a -- to adjust to it yourself.
C: Yeah, I also had this mission too like at the time – I had come from a very very religious school, despite my family's lack of religion and going to a public school for some reason I thought that that transition was like pissing off the higher powers. There was a little bit of that going on too – even though my family wasn't religious, you know you are certainly indoctrinated enough in private school. My parents threw me there for

like the quality of education. I remember going to public school thinking even though we don't go to church on Sundays – these kids were like demons. The kids that had like long hair – the girls were looking a little bit more on the promiscuous side – micro-mini skirts. All the rules that would have been broken in a heartbeat at public school, so you know I felt I was with a bunch of like demonistic kind of kids. Well you know you are going to public school now. You have got to act like a public school girl. Get your period talk like an eighth grader.
R: I have been telling everybody this – it's sort of the obvious, but since this is on the telephone it's a little harder to do an interview because you can't pick up on visual cues, so I can't tell, if you are just like really done with answering and you are just trying to fill – I am being quiet cause I don't want to interrupt anything, an idea or anything you have to say, but if I am quiet and you're done with answering a question, you can just say "I am done." Because I can't pick up on, you know, I am visual anyway, so.
C: You can't see my hands flying about!
R: I can envisage. O.K. – I believe we have twenty minutes left -- Four, describe how you feel about menstruation at this time in your life. You say, "I feel menstruation is part of who I am." Can you say a little bit more about that?
C: Well, I think I struggled for so many years to disregard it, like not – kind of pretend like it wasn't there and you know just kind of power through the day and you know because it was so consistent and that you know it still is – pretty much I guess not embrace it and somewhere in my adult years I just you know kind of decided to address it like – a lot of what was happening like with my cycle was emotional and there was some stuff behind that that I needed to explore and then I – it was time like to take care of myself instead of just powering through the day. I need to find myself my comfort food and take like warm baths and you know try to take it as a time to just do some self care that so often gets neglected generally and umm – stop trying to disassociate it from myself.
R: Yeah, which it seems like is what – which is what you were encouraged to do – like you talk about the way you first learned about it and you sort of dismiss it like it wasn't a big deal and then lo and behold you discover all these emotions and these physical reactions that you have is real different from what was described to you and what you were told to expect. And you say that sometimes it does hurt like Hell and as an adult I stay home from school or work – so as an adult is it fair to say that you get to take care of yourself in a way that you didn't get to take care of yourself when you first started.
C: Oh, yeah, yeah, I mean – yeah I mean I don't have you know parents dictating my life. God I hope they don't anyway. Yeah, you know I take a lot more time and you know – I don't always enjoy it, but sometimes it does feel very clumsy and it feels like oh good things are working. You know, when you are not having your period for a long long long time, it used to stress me out that I wasn't monthly because that's what normal women did. At least that's what I was led to believe and lo and behold no woman is perfect. Every twenty eight days like that's a rarity.
R: I was going to ask you, did you get that from that book too or did you hear that from other places as well.

C: Yeah, when you go to get your pap smear, that was another thing that's like. I would check that I wasn't having it and then you would go to the doctor and tell them that "I don't have it monthly" and "when was your last cycle" and it was like two months ago and they would be alarmed by that and so it would alarm me and I would be stressed out by the fact that like Oh man, January is coming on and I didn't have my cycle. And it was a long time and it was actually interestingly enough it was my first female gynecologist who was completely unconcerned. "Once every two months well that's alright -- If it doesn't come for three months maybe we need to talk about what's going on." But that seemed fine – my pap smears were coming back normal – and she said "Yeah, you know I am not concerned about it." She kind of reinforced the idea that a lot of what had learned through reading the book or other gynecological experiences that I had weren't necessarily true. So yeah.
R: Would it be accurate to say that you sort of had to deprogram yourself over the years.
C: I think so, yeah.
R: And did you learn about the differences in women's periods from girl friends and being able to talk to other women – through communication.
C: Yeah I mean definitely – I mean talking to different friends what is that awful thing – a disease of the uterus –
R: There is endometriosis and that has to do with a shedding.
A: I have had some girl friends that have had that and then I have had some that had polyps and cysts. All of which effect your period on one level or another, and also just being older and when I am in a doctors office now I am a little more assertive about getting information then I used to be when I was younger and umm you know cause even on the media you hear a lot more – it's talked about generally – there's a lot more availability of information then there used to be. There isn't just "what's happening to me?" sort of book that gives you the cheery little cartoonish figure that tells you it just happens and you know there's a lot of variability and it made me feel like I didn't have to conform with the whole idea of having a monthly cycle, but it is kind of a nice reminder to have it instead of dreading its coming I am like good it's here and I still am like functioning on some level. Cause it wouldn't seem me if I didn't have it for half a year of more and it's kind of (garbled recording).
R: O.K. You say, "Every once in a while I find myself loathing my cycle although I think it's at those moments I am either buying tampons or pads" and this is the bit I have a question about for you, "Irate they are next to the baby diapers in the grocery store." Why does that make you irate?
C: I don't know – I mean it's something about it being like – I like it because babies are really cute and all that – but they are also like these vulnerable creatures and umm that need to be like taken care of and you know it's like this separate aisle, you know the whole feminine hygiene aisle – I don't know how it just upsets me that I am standing there you know in the baby aisle. It makes me feel like I am –
R: Like you are supposed to be part of the vulnerable squad of babies
C: (Laughs) I don't know
R: I don't know if that's it or not but

C: Yeah, I don't know it's like having to do with going down this aisle and it's like walking down this aisle with these bright fluorescent lights and you are looking at all these products, you know feminine hygiene products and baby products. I don't know – the association just makes me mad.
R: Umm, infantilizing women?
C: Huh?
R: Infantilizing women or something?
C: Maybe.
R: I don't know – I am just throwing that out.
C: No that would make sense – sometimes tampons are more expensive then diapers. Diapers are expensive but – sometimes you come upon the one brand that you want or that you would like to try out and it's really expensive. And it's more expensive than baby diapers and those are already expensive.
R: Well, one association I had was when you say "irate next to the baby diapers in the grocery store." The association I had was well baby diapers are for excrement and some forms for catching forms of excrement. Do you have any association to that or no?
C: I hadn't really thought that, no.
R: O.K. Never mind.
C: It's an idea ---
R: Never mind
C: You know it's like that aisle – that baby aisle – that tampon feminine hygiene aisle – it's always like a no-man's land for half the population. You know it's treated as this strange aisle that only women will ever walk down.
R: Oh, I see what you are saying now, O.K. I sort of got what you said before but yeah.
C: Yeah, and it's – there's the association with like being treated as something infantile but also it's this aisle that is you know segregated – and you only ever see women down that aisle. Granted it's a woman's thing, but you know you have got these outrageous prices – you've got these and it's a necessity. It's not something you could not go down that aisle for and you know you go down the beer and chips aisle and its got these beautiful displays and all these cost saving coupons you know there's a woman there "Here try this salsa" and its very inviting. And you go down the feminine hygiene aisle and it's like barren, were there is one other woman who is cruising down it real quick to like throw tamp ax in the basket and keep going. It's a different experience then going down you know the aisle with the greater – with the coupons and "try this salsa."
R: I see – and the only time you see a man down that aisle is when you see a desperate father or a desperate boyfriend or husband who's been sent out on a mission and he's only there usually because he's been sent or he's at home baby sitting and he suddenly figures out there's a need for more diapers.
C: I had this weird – my father was driving me down to see my grandmother – momoo and we stopped somewhere – we stopped somewhere to get some good treats for the trip and I went to the bathroom and my period had started – I was thirteen or fourteen at this time so I hadn't had my period for very long and my grandmother was well beyond menstruation and I just knew I was going to have this conversation with my father that

we need to stop at this store which was going to invite a questions like "well, why?" And it was late a night by the time we got into Coosbay. It was like eleven o'clock at night and literally like ten minutes before we arrived at grandmothers, my panties were soaked in blood and well it's just my father and I. So I finally get up the courage and it did feel like a lot of courage to say that "we need to stop." And I think I told you the story before and we stopped and he hands me a hundred dollar bill and it's eleven o'clock at night. And he sends me in to Safeway by myself. And I had no idea how much it cost and I had this hundred dollar bill. And I remember I had never bought my own tampons or pads before ever. So I got in there – I was really flustered and confused – and I remember distinctly that at some point I think my father felt bad and he came into the store and he was standing there at the end of the aisle but he did not come in the aisle.
R: Oh, my God!
C: And I remember when I saw him I just I like I'll just pick something and you know grabbing something and I had paid. You know we get to grandma's house and you know I was very quickly able to tell my grandmother like what had happened. My dad just went to bed and she was like helping me kind of clean-up and you know getting me set up.
R: Oh dear ---
C: That experience kind of reminds me of like the feminine hygiene aisle.
R: Yeah, Dad standing at the end not willing to come down, yeah, not step down the aisle, yeah. O.K. Let's see five is please describing some positive and negative. We have mostly covered these: positive -- you find it to be rather cleansing and I think that relates back to question one where you say – when I do bleed it's as if a major artery has been punctured and my uterus is shedding multiple layers of old stuff. Does that relate to that?
C: Yeah definitely, it's sometimes gross and masses appear and it's painful and it does feel like o.k. they are cleansing – we are pushing out all that old stuff and you know my body is kind of replenishing itself. Yeah.
R: O.K. And negative you say, "at times it can hurt and it's difficult to traverse the fluctuations of emotions." I guess that's pretty self explanatory, unless you want to say anything else.
C: No. I mean it is what it is.
R: O.K. I hate the selection of tampon pads available to me. What is it about the selection that you hate?
C: Umm, I don't know why I wrote that – I think I'd like to see something that looks and feels a little more natural. It feels like bleached cotton in the tampons – even though I use that it disturbs me a little bit. You know, sometimes the cardboard is a little abrasive and you know I feel like there could be a better product out there than what we have available to us.
R: O.K. And "I have been blamed as having PMS when being remotely assertive. Are you thinking of a specific incident there?
C: Oh, DD(specific name), yes. He's one of the – I mean there has been multiple

incidents where I can hear like after the fact comments like "she must have been on her period" but there was an incident with DD where I got rather assertive with him where he more or less told me or asked me. He didn't say I had PMS.
R: How did you respond to that? I can't remember.
C: How did I respond to that? I was angry – I was very angry. And uh, I wanted to beat him silly. But instead I just kind of walked away and like cooled down until I could be at least rational about it, since it was a pseudo professional setting. But, no I wanted to beat him up and you know I'll show you what PMS-ing looks like. Huge therapy like kicking his ass.
R: O.K. and then "sometimes my extra care mentioned above results in gorging on decadent food and laying on the couch all day making me feel worse about myself." It seems like there is a question there but I am not sure what it is.
C: I guess what I was thinking of is sometimes you feel so shitty – it's just a really rough period and um you start self medicating yourself with food, maybe the booze, maybe you are like cycling through some pretty fair depression. You tend to just – it's like a downward cycle.
R: Oh, that points back to what you said about, "it's difficult to traverse the fluctuations of emotions."
C: Yeah, it's sort of like you might be in the downward spiral -- just really depressed so you eat all that comfort food and maybe you self medicate like with some alcohol to kind of numb the pain as well as to numb some of the emotions and that let's you know that just made everything worse.
R: O.K. Umm, the last bit is you rated – you gave your ratings for your feelings about menstruation, uh at the time you gave 9.759. Do you remember how you
C: I was being smart aleck.
R: Apart from that
C: Umm, you know I think some of that had to – I mean at that time when I answered those questions I certainly wasn't menstruating. I also was at a very good place in my life. Umm, and the last piece that I had had were pretty steady – my emotions were steady -- the amount of bleeding was just kind or -- it felt kind of like a decent amount – the sense of flow was probably fairly even and so I was in a good place.
R: and so, on a scale of one to ten, one equals negative ten equals positive which number best represents your feelings about menstruation today.
C: Did you say one is negative?
R: Yeah, one is negative – ten is positive. Where are you today?
C: I would probably go with nine, without the smart ass decimal point.
R: O.K. so you sort of have maintained -- What would a ten be for you?
C: God, you know, I don't think the ten is actually ever achievable. Cause a ten – a ten for me would be umm – being able to control perfectly, you know, my cycle. And I don't think that I can – Well, I know I can never control it perfectly – I don't think it would be achievable.
R: O.K. How about a one? What would a one look like?
C: One would look like? It makes me think of a time when I had what I would describe

as one period – where a one would be like you feel like your whole bottom is falling out, like your uterus is just about ready to fall out of your vagina, and it just seems tense, cramps where it hurts to walk, it's like you're leaned over, doubled over in pain, and umm you just cry – all you can do is cry, for the sake of crying, and the way you feel just throws you down this self deprecating – self deprecating cycle of like -- where you actually hate being a woman and you have this momentary thought of wouldn't it be great to be a man. And you just hate everything about yourself, about your environment, about everything.

R: O.K. The very last question and we are done. When is the last time you had an open, anything goes conversation about your period?

C: You don't mean today?

R: Yes.

C: It's been a long time – a year and a half ago.

R: With a girlfriend?

C: Yes.

Melanie's Answers

1.) My cycle lasts, usually, about 4 days. The first two days are heavy, and then the last 2 are very light. Sometimes on a 5th day, there is slight spotting. I use a tampon and actually sometimes forget that I am menstruating. I never have cramping. Sometimes I am a bit emotional a few days before. But during, I am not "edgy" or hard to be around. I cycle every 5-6 weeks, but not like clock-work.

2.) The first word that comes to mind is, "BLAH." As a young girl, all things personal, having to do with sexuality, nudity, puberty, and periods was mortifying to me. I was VERY modest about all of those subjects. As I have matured, I am more at ease about cycles. But, see! I don't every use the words menstruation or period. I use "cycle." I guess I just don't like graphic words. I mostly don't think about it, except when my husband and I were trying to conceive our children. And then, of course, it was very important. I remember being very reluctant to tell my mom when I started. I was just too embarrassed. She didn't talk to us alto [sic] about it. I never heard a birds and bees conversation. I also remember going to a physical and the doctor, a woman, explained to me some of the things to expect when I started my period. I remember her drawing a picture of a pad, and explaining and drawing that I would pass some squiggly looking solid things, and to not be surprised. That, even now, sound totally gross. I don't have any real

embarrassing situations to recall. But lately, my cycles have been catching me off guard, and starting when I am away from home without any tampons. And surprisingly, I haven't been too shy about asking co-workers if they had an extra one. Some people are just so matter of fact and non-chanlont (sic) about it. That just wasn't me. But I have relaxed ALOT about the subject.

3.) My personal first memory regarding mestruation (sic) would probably have to be the time I went to the doctor, as described above I remember my heart racing and the doctor commenting that my pulse was high. But that everything would be ok and to relax. After the appointment, I ran all the way to my next destination, just so glad to be done talking about such embarrassing subjects. And for some other reason, I have a vivid memory of a few of my mom's menstruations (sic). One morning she was standing at the bathroom counter, getting ready for work, and she looked down, and said, "What have you girls spilled on the floor?" (it was a carpeted floor.) And we all said "nothing." Then she wiped between her legs and discovered it was her, who was dripping blood on the floor unknowingly. My mom is very immodest and open, and allowed us to be in the bathroom with her while she was using the toilet. And I remember, glancing at her while she was wiping, and I saw all the red on the toilet paper. I thought that was gross.

4.) I am less grossed-out by it and more relaxed. Especially not that I have my two children. I have tangible babies to relate my cycle to, and to see what a cycle's purpose is. I imagine the conversations I will have with my son and

my daughter as they get older – passing on information in a positive and relatable way. But the times before we decided to have children, and now that we may be done with our childbearing times, menstruation really has no purpose for me. It is an irritation and just one more thing to take care of to buy hygiene products for. I loved being pregnant and nursing- and having no cycle for about 2 years at a time. It was great. I could do without cyles (sic), for sure.

5.) The only positive aspect I can see is that it is very important in trying to conceive a child. As I stated in the 4th question, overall, I would be happy if I never mestruated (sic) again. I have not read any convincing medical studies on why we should have period of bleeding- as in I don't know that it improves my health. I don't have this "womanly bond" with other women just because we all menstruate. (Like in the book "The Red Tent") For me, it is just a part of life I could do without.

6.) 2.

Melanie's Telephone Interview Transcript

Background information:
Married with two children ages four and two – a boy and a girl.
Age: 34
Ethnicity: Hispanic
Occupation: Homemaker right now – part time working at retail sales.
Education: Bachelor's Degree in interior design.
Religious Background: Christian.
Current Religious Orientation: Christian.

Researcher read participant's written answers to her as follows:
R: How was that to hear your answers – you said that you thought they sounded stupid?
M: They just sounded silly to me – they sounded real thought out and like I actually can write but it's weird to hear your answers.
R: And they are true to your experience? I am imagining.
M: Oh, yeah – yeah!
R: Let's see here. O.K. – Like I said, I am just going to ask you for clarification on some of your answers. Just keep in mind that it's somewhat awkward over the telephone because I can't see you and so it's not a normal conversation where I can see if you are just spent on answering a question. I can't tell if you are just done.
M: Oh, O.K.
R: But I am going to be more quiet then I normally would because I want to give you the space to answer a question and if you are thinking I want to give you time to think. But if you are just done and I am still you know waiting, just say that's all I have to say. O.K.
M: O.K.
R: Now number one, you describe your period and you say that sometimes you actually forget that you are menstruating. You never have cramping and you say "sometimes I am a bit emotional a few days before." Can you give me any examples of that or describe that a little more?
M: Well, even thinking about that I can't even say that I am really emotional before because I just finished about two weeks ago and well I didn't even know it was going to start. So, no, I don't really think so. I don't think I am really emotional. The only tears that I got, and I am pretty much done nursing now but within the last two weeks Jan has stopped nursing. So mid-cycle I would, when I was nursing Jan, it would feel stingy to me. That was my only cue that I might have a cycle starting in a few weeks.
R: Oh, O.K. Well do you know why you said that sometimes you are a bit emotional a few days before?
M: Well, I think sometimes like maybe a commercial will make me cry – little things like that not so much. I am a pretty sensitive person in life and so I don't know that I can

totally say it's because I am going to start cycling or if I am just feeling emotional.
R: It's hard to distinguish the difference?
M: Yeah, it's not like I get really moody, or really sleepy, or really irritating. It's not like I can really distinguish it – like if I had an emotional day before and a couple of days later I start cycling – Oh, I wonder if that's why?
R: Oh, O.K. – So it's something that you may, like after you start, you may look back and go, Oh I wonder if when I was a little emotional about this I wonder if it had to do anything with my cycle.
M: Yeah – (enthusiastically). And then, like I said, I am never clockwork so I never know like, oh and on the thirty-eth I am going to start my cycle again, cause I have never done any. I have never been on the pill, so like a 28 day cycle, I have never had that.
R: O.K. and another thing you say and you just mentioned it again is that during "I am not edgy or hard to be around." I am just wondering, how come you mention that?
M: I guess because so many people – you know that whole thing, 'she's on the rag' – it seems more like a cop-out to me. That's never been my experience and I have never been that way, where I am bitchy or mean or short with people. Um, so I guess some people's experience is that ---.
R: Have you ever known anybody like that? Who's edgy or hard to be around around their period.
M: Oh -- a couple -- of my neighbors about it, and she says she has terrible cycles and just feels really sick the whole time; and I talked to my husband's sister and she says she just feels terrible. Like it's a horrible experience for her every single time, so I guess there are people like that where they physically are ill. They just don't feel there – they don't want to talk to anybody – they want to just leave me alone, so I guess there are people like that. I haven't necessarily been around them – or say gosh are you on your period. I have never – I don't remember that a lot.
R: So it's not something that you have noticed in somebody and asked them. It's something that, if you have known somebody who's maybe had that experience, they have had to tell you explicitly say: I have really hard periods and sometimes I get upset or something.
M: Yeah, I don't remember – I haven't lived with my mom for a long time, since 89, so I don't remember experiences of her being more short while she was having her period. There may have been – I just don't remember.
R: O.K. – In question 2 in asking about the words 'menstruation,' describe any thoughts/feelings, etc. You say, "but see I don't ever use the words 'menstruation' or 'period' – I use cycle. I guess I just don't like graphic words." Can you tell me what's graphic about menstruation or period – to you.
M: It's like the word blood or pimple or a lot of words seems graphic to me.
R: Like, how so? Does it conjure up a feeling or do you get an image or ?
M: Yeah, the whole blood part of it – the whole using a tampon or a pad is all (garbled) not a fun subject, so I guess a little more, a softer word or a word that is a little bit more removed is easier for me to say like the full word I guess. Does that make sense.
R: When you hear menstruation or period, is it that you see the gore only or do you have

feelings that go along with that too.
M: Yeah, I understand. I think it feels embarrassing, those words. and I think they are still tied to being a young person, especially all through high school ages just hearing people talk about their periods or whatever would just – ehh , I was just – I just hated it – hated it – I remember even anything to do with sexual things were just really upsetting to me. Like seeing my mom kiss her husband when they were in their bedroom together. I was so upset about that. Or hearing my mom talk about how young, how baby boys when they are born, are born sometimes with an erection. And I was so mad and so upset and just crying that she was even talking about a subject like that – so I am still very modest, but I used to be very modest. For me I guess it's more of an embarrassing and a really private subject and so when you say menstruation or period it's just too private, it's too descriptive – it's happening.
R: So, it's as if something private is being exposed?
M: Yeah, that's a good way to say it.
R: O.K. And then you go on to say: "I remember being very reluctant to tell my mom when I started. I was just too embarrassed." I am wondering, how did you imagine that she would respond?
M: Just that she would have to show me how to use a pad, what to expect, just that I would have to tell her something so private to me, in such a private area was happening. And that I would have to talk to her about it was very embarrassing.
R: And so, I am gathering from your answer that she wasn't as modest and she would land up talking more specifically about private matters then you would be comfortable with.
M: Yeah, she is not a modest person at all. I don't even know where I got that from. Part of my nature – but that I would even have to tell her what was happening – going into woman's wear – there's a lot that preceded with it, so I was embarrassed.
R: Did you ever tell her or did you just quietly start?
M: No, I told her.
R: How did she react?
M: Like nothing – like no big deal – it's fine. You know, totally matter of fact – this is what you do. She didn't try to embarrass me or anything. I just was embarrassed.
R: Oh, that's interesting, so she responded in a different way then you imagine she would.
M: Yeah.
R: Was that comforting?
M: I don't remember – I think I was just too overwhelmed with being embarrassed about the whole subject. I don't remember being comforted.
R: No, I meant like relieved that she didn't go on and on and make a big deal out of it.
M: No, that's not my mom at all. She's real cool like that – easy take care of business. She's not like a real hoverer – she's not weird about it at all.
R: O.K. and you say she didn't talk to us at all about it. I never heard a birds and bees conversation. Umm, looking back, do you think you would have liked to have had some kind of talk about what to expect, from her?

M: No, it was not a big deal for me. I mean umm I didn't – I mean the doctor talk was enough – that was enough.
R: How old were you then when you got the doctor talk anyway?
M: Oh, seventh grade so it must have been 13.
R: O.K. and the doctor gave you this talk and she – I found that really interesting that the doctor gave you this really explicit talk and drew a picture. I have never heard of anybody doing that. I found that really unusual. Did you have progressive kind of doctors or ---
M: We have to switch the phones – this battery is going to die.
R: Sure.
M: O.K. are you there?
R: Yeah, I am here –
M: Let me put this one back on my charger. O.K., yeah, go ahead.
R: Do you think you have like a progressive, modern kind of doctor or was that just par for the course in your family.
M: She might have been kind of – she seemed more like the natural kind of doctor – like a naturalist. She was a M.D. – a doctor – I don't know.
R: So she didn't – she had more of a perspective of, you know, this is natural – this is normal. You should know what to expect and your body does this – I sort of know what you mean – I don't have words for it at the moment, but I kind of know what you mean.
M: Almost kind of like a hippy kind of – I remember her wearing you know Berkenstocks and really really casual clothes. The office was really almost like in a house. So, she was really really down to earth.
R: So, all that stuff to her – instead of medicalizing it – you know making it you know real clinical and sterile. She made it –
M: Not clinical at all –
R: real graphic and kind of matter of fact –
M: Yeah.
R: You say that when she drew the thing and told you what it would look like and stuff – the pad with some squiggly looking solid things and not to be surprised. You say that that, even now, sounds terribly gross.
M: Oh, yeah.
R: What's gross about that?
M: Globs of clots – yeah, that's gross.
R: O.K. – so you can see it – like when the word is said and when it is described, it becomes real vivid to you.
M: Oh, yeah.
R: And, you say, lately my cycles have been catching me off guard and starting when I am away from home without any tampons. Is being caught off guard necessarily embarrassing to you?
M: Less so then in the past but umm. You know, not this last time, but the time before I didn't know it was going to start and had to ask co-workers – "I need a tampon" – you know – "this happened – I need something" (light voice) or even before I could get an

answer from someone else – right before I had to go to the store or go – right before I asked one more person – I had asked the manager
"hey, I think I am going to have to the store real quick and come back, because my period is starting, is that a problem and she said, no – and then the next person I asked, right before I left, had something for me. So then I said, "hey I don't have to go to the store." So less – you know just like, hey this is going to happen and I am going to take care of it. Does anybody have anything. I don't carry a purse with me. I just carry my organizer or, if I am with the kids, I have my diaper bag but umm I am not a purse carrier where I would just be prepared for anything.
R: Uh huh, what do you think is different now that you are able to say that to your boss or ask your coworkers? What's different about your life now cause you say it's surprising to you that you are less shy.
M: It's and the fact I have two kids now, so – going through all the examinations you have to go through – giving birth – the midwives asking you for several weeks after, "what are you passing?" --- "are you bleeding?"--"what's happening?"– "how does your bottom feel?" You know, all of that stuff has de-sensitized me a little bit – a little bit more than before.
R: And I imagine having babies. You know babies are always puking something up, or excreting something. You are more used to that bodily stuff, huh?
M: Yeah, definitely
R: They kind of force you into being –
M: Yeah, and if you have never been peed on or pooped or thrown up on until you have a kid. You know really – there are a lot of people I have talked to that they say I have never have had any of those things happen to me until I had kids, so yes that's true.
R: So it just makes you get used to it a bit more. O.K. , and so you say that you have relaxed a lot about the subject. I am wondering, before, did you feel like that you needed to be more relaxed or wanted to be.
M: No (laughs) – I mean I think gradually, I mean after getting married and I guess talking about sex more with my friends, you know those kind of subjects are a little less embarrassing, less taboo, more maturity but I never felt like, oh I need to relax about these things. It's been really very gradual.
R: O.K. And it seems just from your description really – that in a way these things come to you more on your terms, whereas what you described you know being younger and being worried about what somebody was going to talk to you about – like being subjected to a doctor's appointment where she is telling you all this stuff that you really don't want to hear. You were still a kid and you didn't really have control over it.
M: Yeah, that's true.
R: And these days, as an adult, you know you are choosing to have children and you choose to have conversations with girlfriends about sex or cycles or whatever.
M: Yeah, that's true. That's very true, because when I told you before, hearing my mom talk about sexual things where I just did not want to hear it – anything about it or walking in on her – that is not part of my world right now. I don't want anything to do with it. That's true – it's more on my terms now.

R: O.K. – Let's see now. Do you remember like number three, you first personal memory with you know going to the appointment and stuff. Do you remember how old you were then?
M: Yeah, I was probably thirteen.
R: So that was seventh grade also.
M: Yeah they were both the same thing.
R: So you are less grossed out by it and you are more relaxed now that you have children. And you say, you imagine the conversations you will have with your son and daughter as they get older passing on information in a positive and relatable way. How – can you tell me how you would make it positive and relatable, for them?
M: Oh ----
R: What would you say?
M: Let me think – I certainly don't want them to feel like sex is a terrible thing or a dirty thing, so certainly I would want to put in context for them – you know, that you really need to be in a loving relationship – keeping it really positive and telling them that there bodies are temples – that they need to respect their bodies – their bodies are beautiful – their bodies are the way God intended them to be – God made your bodies this way and this is their purpose and this is how he has intended you body to be working and to respect your body and so in those way, telling them why your body does what it does and the reason – that seems positive to me. I am not sure how I would do it in the relatable way cause I haven't quite gotten there yet.
R: Yeah, they are little. Do you imagine about what ages you would come across that kind of conversation?
M: Well, I would imagine around eight or nine – that that might be a time when I might need to start talking more about it, umm. Certainly attitudes they pick up on a lot even now, as young young young kids. Your body is beautiful – take care of your body – don't be embarrassed or that's your private area and that's Sharon's private area and we don't touch each other there. Umm, you know lots of things like that – I would imagine talking about it age appropriately, even more when they get to be around eight or nine.
R: O.K. – Um, you say the times before we decided to have children and now that we may be done with our childbearing times, menstruation really has no purpose for me. I am wondering – did your -- when you guys were trying to conceive, did your husband find your cycle important during these time. Like, what is his relationship to your cycle?
M: Um – before hand – I would say to him – Now would be a good time for us to be together. We might be able to get pregnant right now. And then if we didn't get pregnant than I would feel like O.K. – I started we didn't get pregnant. So more generalized conversations like that – not so much like, O.K. Terry my cycle starts on the thirtieth and I am fertile between the fifteenth and the twentieth. You know, nothing super super super graphic like that – way more casual, way more simple –
R: Did he ever ask – Honey, did you start your cycle?
M: No – no uh uh – never – never asks. Never asks and even now we don't talk about my cycle. I don't need to tell him I am having a cycle. Umm, maybe he just sees that the tampon are to the front of the cabinet. Or maybe he just kind of picks up on a few

clues here and there – I never say "Oh, I am having my period right now." So I think he might just pick up on clues.
R: So it's just sort of subtly there or subtly not there -- Is he the kind of person that would be grossed out by it, if he saw blood in the toilet or on you or anything like that? Like does he find it repulsive?
M: He, like as far as like when I was going to give birth – he's always like, oh I don't know how I am going to deal – don't know how I am going to deal. Well in the situation – in the circumstance, he was awesome – he was grossed out by any of that and certainly after a baby is born you make messes, you drip. You know, the toilet is not clean all the time – you know, you try to wipe things up but he saw a lot and he wasn't grossed out by it which he was surprised by and I was surprised by it too. So he was totally fine with me – umm. Outside of the childbirth experience I don't really leave messes anywhere (laughs) – Not so much now so he doesn't see – I roll the pad up and put it in the trash. I used to roll it up, wrap it with toilet paper, and maybe put it in an old toilet paper cardboard cylinder thing.
R: To really conceal it.
M: I would hide it and make sure no one could see it because it just grossed me out – so yeah – so Jerry would never see anything. Maybe the wrapper from a tampon in the trash – maybe but the applicator – nope that would be wrapped up by the – don't want to see it –
R: So you have never really been messy for him to even – to find out if he says: "honey get rid of that – I don't want to see that in the trash – I don't want to see that in the toilet. He doesn't even have the opportunity to get disgusted. (M: nope) – so you don't even know if he would find that offensive or not, huh?
M: No, but I probably would – I would see it and it be like "oh that's disgusting – Yeah no, he would never see anything – I mean except the times after we have had our babies – umm, when there is just so much bleeding and you know – there's just a lot going on and you really can't help it so yeah.
R: Let's see here -- So now you say it has no purpose for you. Menstruating is an irritation and just one more thing to take care of, to buy hygiene products for. Umm, can you – I know there is a question here but I am not quite sure how I want to word it – Umm, I guess I am thinking about what you say that your planning to say to your kids – that this is natural and you know that your body is a temple and this is what your God -- God meant your body to be for and to do and stuff. I am wondering, how does that fit with the – your feeling that it's an irritation and just one more thing to take – Does that make sense as a question to you?
M: Well, I understand what you are saying umm. I don't – For me it seems that – it's a little bit contradictory umm that you – I need to have a reason for things to happen or to be happening and so yeah now that we are done or maybe done having children, menstruation as far as I know has no healthful benefit or purpose outside of conception – so I don't really know what God's plan is for that and why he has women menstruate longer, so as far as trusting him with my body I don't – it's a bit of a contradiction – I don't see why women do have menstruation after they have had kids.

R: Is it that – the umm umm – like the notion that it's part of God's plan and who you are and that – Is that – I know that's a belief that you have and that that's the ideal that you are trying to carry across to your kids, but it's harder in the everydayness to get past that it's an irritation. Does that make sense?
M: Yeah, definitely – not really understanding why – God is there another purpose for this that I don't know about?
R: I see – O.K.
M: There's that contradiction of, O.K. yes, God made my body ,and, yes I need to respect my body, but also trusting God that he know my body better than I do cause he made it, but not really knowing *why* --it's still happening , I guess, yeah it's a contradiction.
R: O.K. – And I guess that partly what you are saying then is that you can forgive its irritating quality if you know your – at least that the bigger purpose is to create children.
M: Yes.
R: O.K. – Got you.
M: I mean – you have been studying this whole subject – Is there a reason that you know of? I mean I have read a few things like – it helps clean out a woman's body and vagina somehow, it's a cleansing cycle or something – I have read that one time but there is no medical reasons –
R: Well, you know, there are those books – there are those studies out there that want to say – yeah, there's a whole book called "Is menstruation obsolete?" Umm – you might be interested in that – I don't know. I have just found that – the point of view that I am taking and why I am studying it is that it just – it is just an aspect of women's being -- umm -- that is often shamed or embarrassed and that kind of thing. And for me it is just a matter of fact part of a woman's being (M: uh huh) umm that I find interesting. I find it interesting how culture treats it – I find it interesting how individual women wind up feeling about it, themselves, etc. So I couldn't cite you, well it's for this purpose – it just is what it is.
M: Right, it is what it is. And, yeah, that's a good attitude to have about it.
R: Yeah, and that's why I am studying it too – it just is what it is.
M: I would be interested to read more about what other cultures, how they treat it or its perspective – or if other cultures are more accepting of it. I know certainly like some religions and cultures are very like shunned while they are cycling.
R: Yeah, most cultures aren't real accepting – to be quite honest.
M: What did you say?
R: I said most cultures that I have studied are not real accepting of it and that's an interesting universal actually, which I was going to ask you about – I have <u>The Red Tent</u> – The next question you mention that you don't have a womanly bond with other women just because we all menstruate, like in the book <u>The Red Tent</u>. I have that on my shelf to read for the purpose of my dissertation, but I haven't gotten to it, but I do know that it is somewhat, like. really descriptive in terms of blood and bleeding and birth (M: Yeah ---). What do you make of all that?
M: Well, the birthing aspect of it was fascinating – umm, I am super interested in

midwifery and babies and all of those things, so like for other people I am not embarrassed about it at all. For myself I am much more private about it, but the book was really really interesting. Yeah, I wasn't --
R: And it's a biblical book too – it's set in biblical times.
M: Yeah, it's about Leah, Rachel, and Issac – they were his wives and their family and Jacob. Yeah, it's a very good book.
R: Well, what is the womanly bond that you are talking about?
M: Well umm, for instance like women who all live in the same home, like mothers and sisters will all start cycling on the same day – it might have that kind of bond like we are all having our cycle – or like in The Red Tent umm all the women's cycles were all the same together so that is why they would go to the red tent and during that time they would pamper each other and talk about subjects they wouldn't otherwise get to talk about freely, and umm they are so together – their periods brought them together for bonding time. So I don't feel the sense of womanly bond with people – with other women just because we all cycle.
R: That's not something you have experienced. You have not experienced being on your period at the same time as like your sisters or anything. (M: No.) It seems like for you, too, in the past, from what you have described, that anytime it came up as a topic when you were younger, it was a source of embarrassment and kind of feeling like the immodest one – excuse me – feeling like the modest one with your immodest mother – like a way for you to feel different rather than the same?
M: Yeah – yeah – yeah that's true. And a lot of my girlfriends would talk and talk and talk about every aspect of it, and I remember in junior high and high school I would just sit and listen. I would never contribute to those conversations.
R: O.K. and then, on that note, you say that you recognize that it's a part of life but you could just do without it.
M: That's very true!
R: O.K. On the last question – on a scale of one to ten, one as negative and ten as positive which number best represents your feelings about menstruation at this time, you answered two at that time. Can you tell me how you arrived at a two.
M: Basically because I don't see any purpose for it now and I would rather it just be gone and so I guess that's a little bit more positive than one, which would be like I hate it I don't want anything to do with it. It's the worst thing in my life. It's not where I am at. I am just like – yeah, okay, whatever, I really don't know why it's happening anymore but okay so two.
R: So what would a ten look like for you?
M: (Laughs) – I don't know anybody who would choose ten. I guess it's – if they thought they were pregnant and they started their period and they were ecstatically happy – that would be a ten I guess.
R: O.K. – and so just to check in again – on a scale of one to ten, one as negative and ten as positive, which number best represents your feelings about menstruation at this time.
M: Yeah, two.

R: When was the last time you had like an open, sort of anything goes, conversation about your cycle.
M: After I did this survey I talked with my neighbor, Kelly and we talked about it more – I asked her the same questions that were on your questionnaire. (R: Oh did you?) – Yeah, kind of told her like what was my answer and what was her answer – what would here answer have been.
R: And why did you want to bring that up with her after you had answered the questions.
M: Because it started me thinking about it – the subject more – and what do you think about that kind of thing. We talk a lot – so I get to talk to her a lot so she was an obvious person for me to talk about it with. I tried to talk about it more with Roberta, but Roberta and I we have really different schedules, so I don't get to talk with her as much. But Kelly, she lives right next door to us and so we are both up late at night, so yeah I got to talk to her about it a lot. That was a really open conversation.
R: Did she have similar answers to you?
M: She was the one who told me about how she feels so terrible during her cycles and knows of other women who are totally incapacitated while they are having their period. Yeah, so she told me about her other friends' experiences -- I was just like Oh, my goodness, how horrible!
R: Makes you feel grateful huh?
M: Yeah, totally. Well I don't know if it has anything to do with the fact that I have never done the hormonal thing with the pill or anything. You know my cycle is completely natural – it's whatever my body chooses whenever my body chooses. For instance being forced into a cycle (R: Or interrupted or anything.) Yeah, I don't know what other people do on that subject. Has that aspect come up at all?
R: Would you say that again – which aspect?
M: That maybe my cycles are easier because I have not done the hormones.
R: You know what, it's just -- people have given me all kinds of different answers and it doesn't seem to -- what I have been talking to people about and the number of people I have talked to – it doesn't seem to correlate with either being on hormones or not. It seems like it more has to do you know with peoples' makeup and maybe certain kinds of stressors or it seems like it could be a multitude of different – I don't know if I am right or not. I am not going to say, it's not because you haven't taken hormones. I don't know – I am just saying I haven't really seen that.
M: Sure.
R: So it seems like this questionnaire and you being kind enough to volunteer for this study has sort of thrown you into – the womanly bond – asking your neighbor friend about her period.
M: Well I asked her, have you ever felt that womanly bond and she said "No -- no way – nothing like that." She totally knew what I was meaning.
R: O.K. – well those are my questions – have you got anything that you want to say or add to your answers of anything. Unless you have any other questions for me. If I get into the study and I need clarification on –

M: Call me anytime –
R: Is that okay?
M: Yeah – that would be fine.
R: I won't be bugging you all the time and I won't be trying to set up long involved appointments or anything – but just if I have a clarification about an idea or something like that.
M: Right – Yeah, no that's fine – I understand it was hard to get this scheduled and I am glad we got it done.
R: I am going to pick up the phone and I am going to stop it.

Alicia's Answers:

1.) Growing up my period was Horrible!!! I would be on for 7 to 11 days. I would be nauseous, I had diarrhea, headaches, backaches, chills, and a nasty attitude. And my cramps --- they were so bad I just wanted to curl up and die (at times I thought I was dying). I was a heavy bleeder, I would have to wear a tampon and a maxi pad and would change them every three to four hours. I could feel my uterine tissues passing through and when it finally came out it was in these nasty bloody clumps. I found out when I was about 25 that I have fibroids and they were the cause for my painful periods. My doctor prescribed birth control pill and I've been happy every since. Now my periods are a breeze --- I'm usually on for 2 to 4 days. I usually wear a regular tampon and a panty liner and I don't have any of the problems that I used to have, every now and then my lower back bothers me but that's about it.

2.) I think of my relatives down south. Menstruation just seems like an old word to me, and whenever I hear someone who isn't in the medical profession I wonder where the heck the (sic) came from. And then I think of the nurse at my high school who told me that the cause of my 'painful menstruation' I probably had a tumor in my uterus --- this woman had me thinking I had uterine cancer! That's just ridiculous.

3.) My first memory of menstruation is my first menstruation. I was in the seventh grade at St. Bernard's and my friends and were fascinated with periods ---

periods mean you were older and therefore cooler. All seventh and eighth graders had their periods (or so we though) and they were the FLYEST people we knew. We had taken sex ed in the fifth grade and for months after that we would save our change and during lunch we'd go to the girls' bathroom. Once we all gathered in the room we'd start buying tampons and maxi pads, just to see what they were like, or we'd put them in our purses ----- "just in case". By the time I made it to seventh grade I was ready. My mother had bought me a period pack. It was a pretty box filled with an informational guide on how to handle my period, there were maxi pads and all types of candy. Well the day it happened I wasn't as ready as I though. I had been sick all day--- I had a stomachache like you would not believe, I felt like I was going to throw up and I was in a really bad mood. So by the time I got home I was ready to zone out in front of the tv. So I'm on the phone with my best friend (Renee, who had already come on her period), and I feel the wetness between my legs. I got to the bathroom and try to pee, when I wipe myself I look at the tissue and there's blood. I start laughing hysterically and yell for my mother. She comes downstairs and I show her, she just smiles and goes to my room to get the period pack. The next day at school I was a SUPERSTAR! I wasn't the first of my friends to get their period, but I daggone sure wasn't going to be the last.

4.) Now that I'm older it's no big deal. I feel like I get it --- I finally know how to handle it. When I was young it was in junior high it was cool to get out of class and have everyone know why you're leaving. In high school I was confused

because I never knew when it would start and I felt trapped. Once I got to college and was having sex it was a pain in the ass to wait for more than a week before I could have sex. Now that I'm "grown" I feel like I've got it! I know when it's coming what to do and how long it'll be around. But on the same token, with every period I have that's one more change to get pregnant gone. I'm in no rush to have kids, but according to my family they'll "luv a down syndrome baby", but I need to get on my job and have a couple of children. And so I feel frustrated.

5.) Positive:

- a young girl is maturing into a woman
- family planning great way to determine if you've got to make a quick grip to CVS to get a pregnancy test.
-Cleanses us by flushing out unused tissue
- It's a great unifier and conversation starter --- brings woman together under a common issue most of us face.

Negative:

- Some [sic] many pretty pairs of underwear thrown away because of "accidents"
-Having to carry and extra set of underwear everywhere I go
- Not having children – the pain

6) 8.

Alicia's Telephone Interview Transcript

Background Information:
Age: 31
Ethnicity: African American
Occupation: Administrative Aid for House of Representatives
Education: Four-year college degree
Religious Background: Baptist, highly religious.
Current Religious Orientation: Baptist, moderately religious.

Researcher read participant's answers to her.
The interview is as follows:
R: Okay, how was that hearing your answers? You said you couldn't believe you wrote on some pieces, what you wrote.
A: (Laughs.) Well, I can't believe I just laid it all out there.
R: (Laughs.) Why not? Why do think you went ahead as you did?
A: I didn't- I really wanted to help you 'cause you're a friend of Andrea's and that's my girl. I guess I figured that you've heard worse. (Laughs) When I'm hearing it back, I'm like—I'm a lady. I'm not supposed to have sex until I'm married. (Laughs)
R: (Laughs) Okay, so you're talking about the sex part, not blood or anything.
A: Oh no, no, no. I mean, I'm an open person. I'll talk about anything to anybody.
R: Okay.
A: So I mean, that really doesn't bother me. I mean, 'cause it's something you go through as a woman, so it's like, why be embarrassed about it?
R: Uh huh.
A: And I'm old. I guess I'm too old to even get embarrassed about it. Oh, Lord.
R: Okay. Did you have anything else you wanted to add before I start with questions?
A: Uh, no. I'm good.
R: Okay, your first answer you say growing up your period was horrible and you include what made it horrible and you say headaches, backaches, chills and a nasty attitude. Can you say more about the nasty attitude?
A: Um, I don't know if it was because of the pain or the hormones but I was just- I mean the smallest- I mean I'm a very cool person. I don't let too many things bother me.
R: Uh huh.
A: But, I mean the smallest things set me off. I mean- I remember once the microwave didn't work and I like- you would've thought my mother died. I was an emotional wreak because I couldn't get the microwave to work. You know and then I was in a bad mood because I was thinking about well why did I just flip out because the microwave didn't work? So, it was just- my whole attitude would change. I didn't want to be around people. You know, I just wanted to do my own thing and sit in a room and curl up in a ball and you know- wake up in a week.
R: Uh huh. When you said that you "flipped out" with the microwave, did you cry or did you get angry or-

A: I cried hysterically.
R: Okay…. Um, and then you say your cramps were so bad you wanted to curl up and die- at times I thought I was dying. What was that like for you?
A: It was like—ahh—How can I explain it? I remember I went through a phase where I even tried Lamaze breathing…
R: Uh huh.
A: Because growing up my mother didn't want me to take medicine. Like she would have a cup of tea not realizing that I had these fibroids. And I was like- this isn't working. The pain was just- it kind of felt like contractions. You could almost time it. You know every few minutes, and it would start out really dull and it would get to this sharp pain and I mean I would literally have to curl up and just hold my stomach because it was so painful.
R: Did you really think you were dying?
A: When I was younger, I really thought that because I had the clumps so I could feel the clumps as they were- I don't wanna say ripping- as they were pulling off of my uterus. And with that on top of the cramps on top of the nausea that's what I thought. And this is when you're younger and you're so much more dramatic and I'm already a dramatic person. You know, so sometimes I was just like- you know what, I'm dying. Something isn't right. But then everyone just chalked it up to, you know, you just have bad periods. So, but, there were times when I thought I was dying.
R: So what was that like to feel like you were dying and everybody else was blowing you off?
A: Uh…it was frustrating. I would go to the school nurse, and "well here, lay down," you know, "here's a hot water bottle." But it was like here, you don't understand. I have clumps coming out, and everyone thought I was once again being dramatic, because how could you have clumps? And I couldn't say, well here's the clumps. I mean I did show it to my mother once, you know. It was really gross. I sat on the toilet while one was coming out and I was like, "look at this, you know, this isn't normal." But my mother--she was the type that if you were conscious, then you were okay. And I've never asked if maybe she had the same problem so she kinda knew what I was going through. But it was just really frustrating because none of my friends went through it. Everybody was like- oh, I have really bad periods but it was like- at least one day out of every period, I almost couldn't get out of the bed.
R: Um, terrible.
A: And I didn't know anybody else going through that. It was kinda like- once I was old enough to walk to CVS and start buying my own painkillers, then it got a little better.
R: Uh huh.
A: But it was very frustrating because everyone chalks it up to "every woman complains about her period, so yours is no different than the next one."
R: Uh huh, so you didn't feel like you were truly understood or nobody really validated how bad you felt?
A: Yes.Yes.
R: Okay.

A: I mean I talked to girlfriends and yeah, they had bad periods, but it was just like- no, you're not hearing me, you know. I am throwing up. I got it coming from both ends, you know from every orifice of my body, but you're complaining because you got a little headache and a couple of cramps.
R: And you were still-
A: And it's –
R: Oh, I'm sorry. Go ahead.
A: Oh no, no, no. I'm done.
R: Okay. And so you were still- you wouldn't stay home from school then?
A: No, my mother was not having that. She was not. I had to go to school and just suck it up.
R: So, yeah, that's a funny situation where girls have their periods, women have their periods and they may say that they have "bad" periods and difficulties, then you have this really terrible one where you just literally have to drag yourself in to school. That's a funny situation because normally, if you were just sick and had those symptoms without a period, you might stay home or no?
A: Yeah.
R: You would normally stay home with those symptoms but not a period?
A: Yeah. But my mother wasn't that kind of mother. I guess because we went to Catholic school and she figured she's not spending all this money for you to stay at home, you know. Her thing is, you have to go to school is your job. She has to go to her job, so everybody's going to their job.
R: I see.
A: But, I don't know. I don't know.
R: So then you describe- you found out you had fibroids and you got on birth control pills and you've "been happy ever since." Now your periods are a "breeze." What I notice is that is such a big contrast from your experience before.
A: Yes.
R: It's a big difference. What is the difference in your overall life? Do you feel freer or what?
A: Well first it's not 7-11 days, it's more like 3-4 days and um, or I was such a heavy bleeder that I would go through maxi pads, tampons. I would wear- my mother bought me a bathing suit and it kinda fit tight. I would wear the bathing suit bottoms over my underwear to keep the maxi pad on. 'Cause this was before wings- to keep the maxi pad in place- because I didn't want them to move around because I had so many accidents. I mean so now it's just so light, you know, it's not long, I don't have any cramps, any nausea, diarrhea. Everything that I had before- I don't even- it's not even a factor now.
R: So you don't have the pain that you had, which is a great relief I am sure. You don't have the inconvenience that you once had. I'm wondering, for yourself emotionally, is it any different for you? Do you feel freer?
A: I do feel freer. I feel like, you know, and I don't know if this is because (and I sound like I'm an old lady) but because I've gotten older. I mean, when I was younger, having periods like that, not knowing when they were coming, it kind of- and then knowing the

mood swings that I would go through, I didn't want to go anywhere, because I didn't know, when I thought it was around the time I was to go on my period, I didn't want to go anywhere because I didn't want to have any accidents. Um, but now, it's just- oh if it happens, it happens. And with me being on the pill, I take it at night, so normally I start my period at night, so I'm home. So, even if I'm sittin' in my apartment- not to gross you out- but I just so happen to come on my period while I'm sittin' here watching t.v., I'm at home. I'm not in a class, you know, and it's just, I feel liberated- like I should burn a bra or something (Laughs).
R: Are there things that you wouldn't do before that you would do now?
A: Oh my Good- well, in the summertime, I made the mistake one summer of – ah, this is the dumbest thing I've ever done- I wore a maxi pad to the pool, because I hadn't started wearing tampons yet, and I really wanted to go to the pool. And I was about 13 or 14 years old, and I felt like I had on a diaper. And I learned from then- I'm like, you know what, any other time, I'm just gonna stay away, because there was another incident- I was at the pool with a guy who I thought was gonna be my boyfriend, and he was splashing water on me, and it just so happened that I came on my period, and I had on white shorts. And so, as I'm leaving I didn't know that there was like a pink stain on my white shorts.
R: Um hm.
A: So I kinda just- in the summertime I just stayed in the house. I mean, in the wintertime, well, I didn't really go around friends, because I was- I WAS a bitch. I really was. I was the typical you know, woman who was just a such an evil, raving lunatic when she went on her period that- you know, I might as well just sit in the house because it beats going out with my friends and I'm going to get into an argument with them and that's goin' to turn into, you know, a whole separate issue.
R: Oh, uh huh.
A: Because it is true that when you are on your period, most of your friends are. So it was just a bad scene. So I would just, you know, stay to myself, sit in my room, maybe talk on the phone, and back then there was Atari and I played video games. But I didn't really do anything.
R: Okay. When you found the pink stain on your white shorts, what was that like for you?
A: I was DEVASTATED, but that's when I realized I loved David (current boyfriend), because he didn't tell me. He just took his sweatshirt and wrapped it around my waist, and I said what's going on? And he said, "you better go home and wash your shorts," and that's when I realized, and then it was just like- I am so sick of this. You know, this is for the birds, and I was so over the period thing- at that time I was like 14 or 15 and I was done with the period thing.
R: Um.
A: You know, 'cause I was embarrassed. I was at the pool. Everyone's at the pool. You know, so it was embarrassing- um- and it just really pissed me off, because I didn't know it was coming.
R: So you were pissed off at the unpredictability and being caught off guard?

A: Um hmm.
R: Okay. All right. Going to question two, what do you think of when you hear the word menstruation- you say, "I think of my relatives down south." That's your first answer. What about your relatives down south?
A: Beca… menstruate? I mean, that is such a weird word. Who uses it? No one uses that word- no one that I know. You're on your period. You know- that's what it is, let's just- even though the technical term is menstruation- I, I guess, my aunt used to use it when I visited her in Sumpter, South Carolina every summer, you know. "Oh , Baby, you're on your menstruation." It was just like, "No, I'm on my period." You know, leave me alone. So, I guess that is why. Who uses that word?
R: So it sounds kind of backwards?
A: Yeah, even when I go to my GYN, you know, "when was your last cycle?" "When was your last period?" And that's the doctor's office.
R: Yeah. Even doctors say "period" now.
A: Yeah so, it's just so, I don't know, old-fashioned and country.
R: Okay, and then you say you think of the nurse at your high school who told you that the cause of your painful menstruations was probably a tumor in your uterus.
A: Um hmm (annoyed). Mm, mm, mm. That woman! 'Cause she used THAT word, so you know maybe that's why, you know- and she was country, too.
R: So, pretty ignorant then.
A: Well, I wouldn't say- she just- as far as the nurse goes-I think she just came from- and I am good friends with her son and she is from- we think we may be related 'cause they're from Sumpter, South Carolina. Um, but it's just the way she told me. I mean I freaked out- I called the help line at Kaiser when I got home from school that day 'cause I thought- she didn't- and when you're in high school and you hear tumor, you think of cancer. I'm thinking I had cancer.
R: Well sure.
A: That- tumors!- you know- she didn't give me any guidance. She just said, "Oh, you probably have tumors," 'cause she was used to seeing me every month for at least one or two days out of the month. And I would just curl up on the cot, because she couldn't give me any medication. So, um- so I mean I believed her. She was the school nurse. I have to have tumors.
R: So what happened with that anyway? When you called the Kaiser help line.
A: Well….I told my mother about it, and she's just like, "you're fine." "You don't have tumors." You know so it kind of- that was it.
R: Oh.
A: So it was just like- okay, I don't have tumors. I guess I'm just gonna live with it. But I knew something was- because no one else was going through what I was going through, so I knew something was up. But I just figured- you know what- it's no big deal. I guess I'll just get over it eventually.
R: Like something to grow out of?
A: (Pause) Yeah, either you grow out of it or you just get used to it. 'Cause everyone- you know- you read all the books and they say that as you get older, your period gets

lighter and it gets more easy to manage. You know, so I was just waiting until I got older.
R: Had you been to a gynecologist then?
A: Umm… (says quietly to self) Had I been to a gynecologist? No, I hadn't.
R: Okay.
A: We had Kaiser, so when I did eventually go to one, they didn't have a clue. (Pause) Kaiser is awful. If you have Kaiser, please drop it. But um- yeah, so I didn't go to the gynecologist. (Says silently to self.) When did I first go?
R: Yeah, when did you first go- do you remember?
A: I did go when my mother first found out I was having sex.
R: Um hm.
A: But then when she found out, I was like eighteen. So, I was in college. I got to college when I was seventeen. So, yeah, that was the first time- when I was eighteen.
R: And was it for the purpose of making sure you had birth control and stuff like that?
A: Yes, yes, condoms and the whole- you know- you can get AIDS and you know- your vagina will fall off- that kind of thing.
R: All right- okay. Three- and what's your first memory. And yours was your first menstruation. You were in seventh grade and St. Bernard's- you said that was Catholic school- you say, "My friends and I were fascinated with periods. Periods meant you were older and therefore cooler." Can you tell me more about that?
A: Yeaaah. Well, because at St. Bernard's- the junior high- it went from kindergarten to eighth grade- and the junior high- sixth, seventh and eighth were downstairs. And all of ours, the rest, were Upstairs. And you know, it was like, they were already cool because they got to switch classes, they had schedules, they got to wear the skirts with the vests. We had to wear the jumpers, they were wearing make-up, you know, so they were cooler. They were all on their periods, so you know it was kind of- I guess we were just rushing to grow up. And in the fifth grade we took a sex ed class where they separated the girls from the boys and went over the whole periods, having babies, and blah, blah, blah, blah blah. And so, I mean, once we found out about it- I know once I found out about it, I was just like, "Oh yeah, I can't wait to get mine." You know, I get to carry a purse. Because you know, before that, you have no need to carry a purse as a child.
R: Yeah, right.
A: I couldn't wait because my mother said she was going to buy me my Gucci bag once I turned thirteen, and I thought, I'll be on my period, so I can have my maxi case, you know, in my purse, in my Gucci bag, so I was just- I couldn't wait. I couldn't wait to start my period.
R: You know, it's funny. I have not heard this response yet.
A: (Laughs) I'm a freak!
R: No, no. What I mean is, most people that I have talked to and even read about, their responses to their sex ed films, speeches, and classes, many, if not all have come away with this really negative feeling. You came away with a more positive experience obviously.
A: Yeah, I- I did go into sex ed with a little more- I'm not saying I was knowledgeable-

but my mother had already given me a book on it.
R: Ah, what was your background then?
A: Um, well the neighbor across the street, my babysitter's daughter, got pregnant when I was like in the fourth grade and she was like fifteen, so I guess my mother, to beat me to the chase, got me this book on where babies come from and all this- you know- craziness- and so I was fascinated by it, because it was about sex! I mean, you know, and who isn't as a kid? You know, I was like, "This is so interesting." Before that, I would watch – what was that- "Love, American Style" to watch people kiss. (Laughs) You know, so when I learned all about it, I thought, well, this is kinda cool. At least I know- and once I took the sex class, it was just like, "Oh, okay."
R: Did you notice the attitude of the film, then?
A: Well, it being a Catholic school, it was kinda- I thought it was- at first I thought it was boring, but then you know as they talked about it more and they had the little squiggly with the sperm, I'm like, you know, it's kind of funny. I-I just- I'm just trying to think what else I remember about it.
R: Did your girlfriends find that film kind of funny- or boring?
A: You know what, that may be part of it. I had six friends in school, and we all got a kick out of it. I mean, and I think because one of our friends was older- she had stayed back a year or something- I don't know. And so, and then, I mean we had- we hung out- with it being a private school you would think we were living sheltered lives but-I mean some of my friends, they were out there. So, some of them had older sisters in high school, so it was like, "Oh, okay, now that we know, we're almost grown-ups."
R: Uh huh, and you were in the in-crowd, too, in a way.
A: Yeah, I was. (Incredulous)
R: Sounds like it.
A: I mean, I was the only black girl in my class, so I you know, always stood out, but we- and now I sound like a snob saying this- but yeah we were the in-crowd, actually.
R: Yeah, you were buying maxi pads and tampons.
A: You know they were ten cents and we would go into the bathroom right near our classroom after recess or somewhere in between so no one would notice us and we would clean the machine out. We liked playing with them- dropping them in water to watch them expand and we couldn't understand how they were gonna expand inside of us. We were taking apart the maxi pads to see what was inside. And then take them home with us, so we could do what- I don't know. I mean but- it was- we had a- I had a fascination with maxi pads and tampons. I don't even know how much money I spent, and then it did get to the point where Mrs. Graham, our teacher, I guess, had to have a conversation with the principal because the machine was always empty. (Laughs) And so we weren't allowed to go into the bathroom as a group anymore. We would go in one at a time and go and get like A maxi pad and come back out during recess and be like, you know, look at it like it was manna from heaven, I don't know. But-
R: You know when I read that you all would gather together in the room and look at tampons and maxi pads and be exited, I thought, "Well, congratulations." I have never, and I mean never, been in a situation where those stupid machines worked.

A: Oh, yeah, they worked. (Laughs) And we would take our milk money, 'cause milk was ten cents, and we would use our milk money to get the maxi pads.
R: (Laughs) Oh, that's really interesting.
A: We went to Catholic school. We didn't have enough to occupy our minds, I guess.
R: Well, I have to say that it's refreshing tale- instead of the other. Okay, now the next thing you say is that your mother bought you a "period pack." Now, is this like a common thing in your crowd, 'cause I've never heard of one?
A: I don't know- 'cause my mother has done it for all of us. My little sister started her period just this past year, and my mother had the box all ready.
R: Uh huh.
A: You know, she went and got the period box, and it was just like, "Oh my God," you know. It kind of touched me, 'cause I thought she was too old for that. (Laughs) I didn't think she'd remember to do things like that. I mean my middle sister and I had already gone out and got supplies, so when she pulled it out, it was kind of funny, 'cause we were like- "Oh man, you were ready." She had the books- but the books are so much better now. But um, she had everything LaKeisha needed before she needed it.
R: Wow, that's nice. Did your mother ever say anything to you, or did she just hand you this nice box?
A: Well—she just handed it to me. When I told her, I was downstairs and I checked myself, I saw the blood. I was downstairs in the basement and she was upstairs in her bedroom and we had this vent where if you stood under the vent and screamed up, she could hear us up in the bedroom. So, I'm yelling like "Ma, come here, come here, come here." She comes down to the basement, and I'm like, "Look." You know, and then she just laughed it off and she goes upstairs and comes back downstairs, and the whole while, I've got my girlfriend, Renee, on hold on the phone. You know, so I go in there, and I fix myself up, and you know, but she just never said anything. I mean, she- gave me more of a reaction when I passed my driver's test.
R: Oh, how funny.
A: It was kind of like, "Okay," you know. And I don't know if maybe for her it was like- 'cause I was over-developed. Well, I went from a training bra to an underwire in like, a year, so, you know, and the boys were coming around. So I don't know- maybe she didn't say anything because she knew—because when you think about it- that means at any point, you can get pregnant!
R: Yeah, right.
A: So, I don't know why she didn't say anything. But she was so excited.
R: Okay, well from your descriptions, she just didn't really talk about sex, and I guess that has the direct implication of sex.
A: Yes. The only sex talk we ever got was, "If you get pregnant, you have to get out." That was IT.
R: Okay.
A: I think- and she was younger when she had us, 'cause I know my little sister, uh- they talk about bisexuals, heterosexuals, I mean, and I look at her and I'm like, "This is not the same person I grew up with." 'Cause we never had a conversation about- but then it

is a different world. You know, I mean, ‘cause my little sister was going to go to my old high school, and they had to have a parent-teacher conference on the issue of so many lesbians in the school. I guess maybe that’s why they talk about it, but my middle sister and I- she never talked about sex. It was just don’t end up pregnant. And that was it.
R: Uh huh. So did anyone else in your family get this period-pack, this box with maxi pads and candy?
A: In my mother’s household?
R: Yeah. Is that a family tradition?
A: Ah. I don’t know. I don’t know where it came from. I seriously doubt that’s something my grandmother did. I never heard my aunt talk about it or my mother talk about it. I just chalked it up to her being prepared.
R: Yeah, and creative.
A: Yeah, I mean, it was kind of cute.
R: It is cute. I found it endearing when I read it.
A: (Laughs)
R: So, before you started, had you heard anything about menstruation from your aunts or anybody like that?
A: (Quietly) No, we never did. No.
R: Okay.
A: I’m trying to think. No.
R: Okay.
A: But my mother is the youngest. And so- I mean to the point where she thought my older uncles- my real aunt is twenty-something years older than my mother. She lives in California. My aunt’s daughter, who I call my aunt, is closer to my mother in age, but she never talks about it, either.
R: Oh, okay. So, mostly the people in your family were closed-mouthed about periods.
A: Yeah, oh yeah.
R: When you say that you went to the bathroom and you discovered that you started, you look at the tissue and there was blood, and you “start laughing hysterically and call for my mother.” Why do you think you laughed hysterically?
A: ‘Cause I was overjoyed! (Laughs)
R: Oh! Okay.
A: I couldn’t believe it. It did explain a whole lot. It did explain that day.
R: And then you say, “The next day at school, I was a Superstar.”
A: ‘Cause I had a purse.
R: Ah hah. So, you didn’t have to say anything to anyone then?
A: No, I just got up in class, asked my teacher if I could go to the bathroom, and I then I grabbed- I’ll never forget it- it was a purple purse with a unicorn on it, and it had the little, tiny keychain purse that had the unicorn on it- those little barrel bags. I was so excited.
R: (Laughs) That’s cute.
A: So yeah so, and all my girlfriends knew, because we had called them the night before.

Renee and I had told everybody, so….
R: All right. And then you say, "I wasn't the first of my friends to get my period and I daggone sure wasn't going to be the last." If you had been the last, what would that have meant?
A: (Long pause) Oh my goodness. I don't know. I'm trying- I don't know! What that would have meant! Um- I guess you don't want to be the odd man out. Everyone else is talking about it and you have nothing to say.
R: Oh, I see.
A: And it was Mary Ann Tenada, and we made her feel so bad. 'Cause girls are vicious.
R: Why? What did you do?
A: I mean, we would just- you know- girls we know- and that's why I tell people that women are the most evil- we can be evil creatures- because it was kinda like, we'd have conversations about it, and we'd say, "Oh, you don't know about it."
R: Oh, my gosh.
A: Yeah….and she was so tiny, I wonder if she ever came on her period. She was just so little- petite and tiny. And so I mean, even when we graduated eighth grade, she hadn't.
R: Okay.
A: Oh, man. I feel awful.
R: Don't stay there. Moving on to the next question.
(Laughter from both)
A: I'll have to send her an email.
R: Do you still keep in touch?
A: Yes, we do actually.
R: Oh, now you can ask her if she ever came on her period! Okay- four was describe how you feel about menstruation at this time in your life, and you say now that you're older, it's no big deal, and you feel like you "get it." You finally know "how to handle it."
A: Yeah. It's like an old shoe. I'm mean not an old shoe- but I know when it's coming, I know how long it's gonna be, I know what I need to do. If God forbid I did have cramps, I know what to take for it, you know. Since I know when it's coming, so around that time, I wear a panty liner. 'Cause I know it's coming, you know, so now it's just a part of life that's just, you know, how can I say it? I've- I've adapted and now it's just something that happens, and it's no big deal, it's no need to be alarmed.
R: It's a part of you.
A: Yeah.
R: And it seems to me that these days, in a situation where it seems you don't have much control, as an adult, you do have more control, because you can take the medication you need.
A: Yes- I don't have to drink a cup of tea.
R: Right.
A: And if I want 800 milligrams of Motrin, I can have 800 milligrams of Motrin.
R: Right. You can stay home from work if you need to- if it's that bad.
A: Yessss.

R: Yeah.
A: It's wonderful.
R: And then you say, while in junior high school, having your period was a status symbol, but when you got to high school, you were confused because you never knew when it would start, and then you say, "I felt trapped." Can you say a bit more about that?
A: Um….I felt like I was limited in what I could wear, then you know you have your friends telling you these horror stories- there was this girl walking down the hallway and her maxi – no, what was it? It was her tampon that fell out. I don't want that to happen to me, so you don't wear skirts. So, you know… (Laughs).
R: Now, is that just the craziest thing you've ever heard?
A: And you know, why did I believe that? That's the craziest thing- not that it was told to me, but that I believed it. (Laughs) And I relayed the story to other people as if it were the truth. Now I'm thinking, what the heck? That's the dumbest thing I've ever heard of.
R: It's like an urban myth.
A: Yeah, how could you walk and it just fall out? That's not even possible.
R: So, when you got up to go to the bathroom in high school and you had your purse, I'm assuming you weren't nearly as proud.
A: No.
R: Were you embarrassed?
A: Once you're in high school- when I was at St. Bernard's, it was just, I'm a big fish in a little pond, you know, especially since I got to wear my shirt with my vest, you know. So, up until then, it was just like, "Oh, God," you know. And then you don't want to run out of your own, because then you gotta use those nasty ones in the machines. So, there was ugh- there was always something.
R: Do you find that you forget about it these days?
A: Now? (perks up)
R: Yeah.
A: Oh yes, I really do.
R: It's not on your mind as much, then.
A: No, it's not. It's, it's- now I can even forget it's there, sometimes. And I do, which is pretty nasty. But yeah- it's just so- you know- no big deal. And I don't have to get up as often.
R: Yeah.
A: So-I'm a pro at it now.
R: Okay. And then you say, "Once I got to college and started having sex, it was a pain in the ass to wait more than a week before I could have sex." Do you adhere to the idea that you are not to have sex during your period?
A: Well, I just thing it's absolutely disgusting. I've tried it, and I will never do it again.
R: How so?
A: It's just a mess!
R: Okay.
A: Well, because mine was so heavy. It was a mess! I mean, like you know when I'd go

to bed I'd have a towel, and then I'd have my little swim shorts that I'd wear all the time so nothing would go anywhere- so, the one time I tried it, it was like, "Oh, no- this is just too much. It's not even worth it."
R: So, it's not like you had guys saying, "Oh no, I won't do that. That's terrible?"
A: No, no. It was just all on me. It was just oh- ew… And I don't understand how people do that.
R: It's just too much of a mess?
A: Yes! Mm, mm, mm.
R: Okay. Uh- "By the same token, with every period I have, that's one more chance to get pregnant gone." You say, "I'm in no rush to have kids, but according to my family they'll love a Down's Syndrome baby, but I need to get on my job and have a couple of children, and so I feel frustrated." You said your aunt said something like that to you?
A: Yeah.
R: What did she say?
A: Because my two- I have a half-sister, but I didn't grow up with her- and her and my sister's sister got married less than a year apart from each other and they're both younger than me, so I guess now my family feels that they have to marry me off. So I can have kids 'cause I'm the oldest. On my father's side, I'm the oldest grandchild, so you know- they're just in a rush for me to have a baby. My aunt, we were talking about my half-sister about to have a baby- and so she says, "Well you know, as much as we'd love a Down's Syndrome baby, you need to hurry up and get on the ball." And I'm just like, "Oh my God, where did that come from?" So- and then my mother- she's you know, and then my sister who's married, she doesn't want to have kids. So, my mother's like- "Am I ever gonna have grandkids?"
R: Oh, I see.
A: And then my boyfriend's mother- even though she's got grandkids. So, you know it's coming from all directions- the people I work with- so-
R: Had you thought of that- Oh, I'm getting older. I should have kids. Had you thought of that before other people started pointing it out to you?
A: Um- no. Because I figure women are having babies older and older. I mean, a sixty-something year old woman just had a baby. (Laughs) Not saying that I would do that, but you know. And just because you don't get pregnant doesn't mean you can't be a parent, so- and I knew when my first sister got married, it was all gonna start up with me being the oldest you know. So, I kinda was bracing myself for the whole, "Why aren't you married?" thing. But my boyfriend and I have been together for so long, I guess they thought I'll skip over the whole marriage thing and ask why don't y'all have kids?
R: Oh, I see. So, when you say, "I need to get on my job," are you referring to them? They see this- having kids- as your job, now?
A: Yes. Because what I've heard from people who know me- my boyfriend's trying to make me laugh now- is that oh you love- 'cause I love other people's kids. I mean I- just became a godmother this year and he lights up my world, you know. But they're not mine. So yeah, I could love your kids and spoil your kids to death, because when they start acting like (whispers) the bad-ass kids that they are, I can go home. But they all say,

"Oh you're so good with children. You should have your own." Why should I, you know- so-? I'm just in no particular rush, but everyone else seems to be in a rush for me- for us.
R: Yeah and then you say when you do get your period, it's sort of a reminder of people putting you in that rush.
A: Yeah- because now it's like my eggs have been counted before I was born. There's another one gone.
R: Yes. Okay- where are we at here? Five. Please describe some positive and negative aspects of menstruation. You mentioned positive as "a young girl maturing into a woman" and then "family planning," and then you say it "cleanses us by flushing out unused tissue." Can you say a little more about that?
A: Well, I think I'm looking at it- you might want to cover your ears- but because of the clumps that I had. If I didn't have it, they'd just be up there, you know, so I-I don't know why I said that. It seems like it just flushes out your body- not your body- but your uterus, so- and we need that, so-
R: Well, as you said, it's a part of you, you know. You said your period is just a part of you- of who you are.
A: And there's nothing you can do about it.
R: Uh huh.
A: But I mean it does what it's supposed to do.
R: Right. Okay. Now I'm gonna ask you this because I heard what you said. I assume your boyfriend is sitting there and you said, "You may want to cover your ears." Is he squeamish?
A: Oh my God. I can't even mention- he's sittin' here like go in the room, please. Please, go in the room. If I say 'tampon,' he freaks out.
R: What is that about?
A: He just said "ew." (Laughs) I'm chalking it up to that he's a man and he doesn't understand that it's a natural part of life. The same way that he had wet dreams as a kid, well- get over it. There's nothing you can do about it. I'll just never be that girl that asks him to run to the store to pick me up a box of pads. He'll drive me there and give me the money but he probably will never go in and actually purchase it.
R: Oh. Do you have to conceal your tampons and stuff at home?
A: No. I mean they're under the bathroom sink just because they're more convenient in that spot. But no, I'm not gonna hide it because it's life.
R: Uh huh. But he's still squeamish about it huh?
A: Yeah.
R: I forgot to ask you- how was your stepfather about it? Did he mention it at all? Did you get an attitude at all from them?
A: (Says strongly) I never did. But I know that when my mother divorced my first stepfather and my sister when she was older went to live with him, he made comments. But when we lived with him, he never made a comment.
R: Like what kind of comments?
A: Um, he told her that whenever she changes, to put it in a plastic bag and walk it to the

trash outside of the side of the house. WHO is gonna do that?
R: (Laughs) Not very accepting then.
A: Now I know he never said that when he lived with us, because my mother was the type of person that she was where, you know, he probably would have been told about himself. And then we did have our own- we had three bathrooms. And a lot of times he did use the bathroom in the basement but he never mentioned anything to me.
R: Okay. Okay. And then you say that another positive is that menstruation is "great unifier and conversation starter…it brings women together under a common issue most of us face." For you, how often is it a unifier or conversation starter?
A: Um…I guess I would say often because when I go to get my nails done- it's always like an all-day process, so you know, somehow that topic always comes around because someone's always going through an issue related to it.
R: Uh huh.
A: So you know, we always end up sharing horror stories, you know, giving each other tips over what we've learned, something like that.
R: Okay. Gotcha. Your negative- that's pretty self-explanatory. So many pretty pairs of underwear thrown away because of accidents, having to carry the physical burden of carrying an extra set of underwear everywhere you go. Do you still do that?
A: No, I don't.
R: Okay. And do you still throw away underwear?
A: When they're old and nasty, yeah. But for reasons of accidents- no.
R: Okay. So the more current ones would be- the ones you're struggling with is not having children and occasional pain?
A: Yeah.
R: Okay. Six. On a scale of one to ten, which number best represents your feelings about menstruation at this time. You give an eight. How do you arrive at an eight?
A: Um, uh, because I can manage it now. And it is good to know that it's coming, so that means something else isn't coming.
R: Uh huh.
A: I just feel like I've grown into it, and so it's okay. Even if you have an accident, it's okay.
A: Use some cold water and soap. It's okay! It doesn't have to be a major issue, because most women go through it.
R: Well, what would a ten be like?
A: Oh my God- a ten would be like if I had a hysterectomy and didn't have it at all! (Laughs) Uh, well no- a ten would be like one of those women who only come on for a day. How is that possible? You know, I guess that would be a ten.
R: Like reducing it- still having it but having it be absolutely minimal?
A: Yes- almost non-existent. Just enough to let you know you're not pregnant.
R: Okay. How about a one. What would that look like for you?
A: Oh God, I was a one before. I don't think it could have gotten any worse. If anyone went through a worse time, I would love to meet her and shake her hand. 'Cause I don't think it's possible.

R: I'll let you know if I find her.
A: Please do 'cause I want to hear some stories, 'cause I just don't see how it could be worse.
R: Okay, so you've heard this before but, on a scale of one to ten, one is negative, ten is positive, which number best represents your feelings about menstruation at this time?
A: Today, I'd have to say…..
R: It doesn't have to change….
A: Yeah, I have to stick with an eight.
R: All right. I've sort of asked this before, but let me say this again, when was the last time you had an open, sort of anything goes conversation about your period?
A: Um, with anyone?
R: Yeah.
A: When was the last time? Oh goodness- I'm sure me and my cousins talked about it recently- probably no more than two months ago.
R: Um. Okay. All right. I think I was gonna ask you something. Wait just a minute and let me collect my thoughts here. (Pause) Okay, well I think I'm done with this. I'm gonna stop it and pick up the phone.

Regina's Answers

1.) Well I stopped drinking coffee about two months ago. I only drink decaf coffee. My chiropractor suggested that if I stopped drinking caffeine I could significantly remove PMS (I had mentioned this on a general medical questionaire [sic]). So I did and two months later now I feel a lot better with my general health (less headaches and better sleep) and this also reduced PMS. My medical doctor just asked me if I wanted a prescription for more iboprofen [sic]. Prior to this I would experience serious mood swings. About one week before bleeding I would become seriously moody (sometimes crying in depression) and lower abdominal pain would gradually start and build through the week culminating to the worst pains for the first two days of bleeding. I would usually pop between 12 to 18 ibuprofens per day. Aspirin did not do anything for me. I would usually drink myself to sleep sometimes. As I get older though I notice how alcohol negatively impacts my sleep so I don't like to do that anymore. I mentioned the change in caffeine intake to my older sister and she said "You've always had bad cramps since you were younger". At least my mood swings are gone and the cramps are even close to what they use to be [sic].

I was on the pill for three years between the ages of 18 and 21. During that time my period would only be about 2.5 days with very little cramps. But I'm not interested in taking hormones so I quit taking them.

So I generally have about 1 day of a little bleeding followed by a medium heavy day, followed by a heavy day, and than [sic] the following 2 days it would be spotty or very light. After that my mood gets way better and I feel like my normal self. This last period I felt bloaty for the first time, but could be because I just took a long plane ride with very little sleep. First question done.

2.) I can remember one of my first menstrations [sic] we were at church and I went out to the van because I was in so much pain. I would usually find an excuse to get out of church. It was very painful when I was young, I didn't know about pain killers.

For me, when I think of menstrations [sic] I think that it is just another hassle that I have to deal with. It's something that you have to hide, and keep 'sanitary'. My first boyfriend didn't mind having sex during menstration [sic], but now my current boyfriend is not interested at all. Even though an orgasm *seriously* helps the pain. I try to make the monthly experience a good thing though, it means I'm not pregnant. It goes something like this "Guess what honey!!" "I'm not pregnant" so it's a little bit of a celebration when my period comes. Instead of being, OK, for the next five days I can't have sex. I've had an abortion, and I'm not doing that again.

3.) I kind of answered that in a previous question. I grew up in a household with 3 other sisters and my mom (single parent family, I'm the middle-younger sister) . Menstration [sic] wasn't a big deal, it was kind of the norm, big, huge boxes of pads everywhere. I just told my mom, and she said that's great (wtiout [sic]

making a big deal or anything, she was pretty cool), and told me where the pads were. As if I didn't know. It's funny, my younger sister kept it hidden for years. We finally asked her when she was 16 or 18 and she said she'd been having hers for years.

4.) I have a good rhythm now that I've stopped drinking coffee. It's OK, I would prefer not to have it, but when it comes on a full moon I definately [sic] feel connected with the earth. This happens about 3 or 4 times a year. I wish my boyfriend didn't have this hang up about it.

I have a secret little box at my office and a box at home for my menstral [sic] gear, so there is a time and place for it in my life. I still have ten or so more years to go, so I guess I'm at a good resolve.

5.) Positive: I'm not pregnant. I'm healthy and normal. PMS is a good indicator of my overall health. Good PMS = Good Health. Sometimes I like the way it feels flowing.

Negative: Cramps Cramps Cramps, and some mood swings. Dealing with blood gets kind of messy sometimes. With my current partner sex is limited during this time.

6.) 6

Regina's Telephone Interview Transcript

Background information:
Age: 30
Ethnicity: Latina
Occupation: Environmental Planner, Endangered Species Protection/documentation, habitat identification.
Education: Masters in Regional Planning
Religious Background: Non-denominational Christian – highly religious.
Current Religious Orientation: Does not believe in Christian God, not practicing anything.

Researcher read participant's written answers to her and then interview follows:

R: How was that – to hear your answers?
P: Sort of funny
R: How so?
P Just like – I just kept agreeing – well yeah, yeah kind of sounds funny hearing someone else tell it back to you, It's kind of funny the things I decided to tell you – I am sure there are more stories I could tell – but not really but it seems funny to hear the ones that I decided to say.
R: Yeah and it's odd I am sure to hear somebody else read your answers and I don't read it with the right emphasis probably that you would –
P: I could notice kind of a – a bit of humor – I was trying to introduce humor to it
R: Oh, how come?
P: I don't know – it's just part of life and you might as well just try to have a good sense of humor about it.
R: Yeah O.K. – Did you have anything you want to add before I ask you some questions?
P: No, I don't think so.
R: O.K. – When I ask you questions because it's odd to do over the telephone – I don't have any visual cues – I can't see if you are burnt out, sick of this question or whatever – but I tend to stay more silent then I normally would because I want to give you the space to answer the question and I don't want to butt in, but if you are just done with an answer you can just tell me, o.k. I am done. I don't want you to think I am trying to make you or wear you out on a question, because I can't see if you are done or not.
P: Oh, O.K.
R: Let's see now – in your first answer about describe in detail, you talk about PMS and reducing PMS significantly by going off caffeinated coffee and you mention mood swings – I am wondering have you ever – did you ever notice if the mood swings corresponded with like certain events people or like circumstances.
P: Uh, yeh --I want to say yes to part of the question – that yeah something would trigger me and make me really upset or moody or what not – but then there were – I can

also recall times when I was just completely glum – like totally depressed for no reason – not anything triggering it and then after my period would come and my period would leave I could look back on the last two weeks and go, "Oh that's what it was I was just moody because of my period" and so I kind of started coming to those kind of realizations in my mid twenties and now I can see the mood swings – I can feel the mood swings coming and know what it is, instead of waiting till my period and waiting two weeks later and saying "Oh, that's why I was moody." Now like as I get older and my body seems more in a rhythm that I am actually listening to rather than just dealing with – it's not entirely – it's a little bit of both to answer your question. It's a little bit of both.
R: O.K. but you are saying – that as you have gotten older – Is if fair to say that as you have gotten older that you have gotten into kind of a rhythm with yourself too – like you can –
P: I think I would comment that I just listen to my rhythm a little bit better – I just paid attention to what was happening in my body a little bit more – I guess I was just so concentrated on things happening around me that I stopped concentrating on my body – I never really thought about my body too much and maybe that's probably a little indicative about how much I answered question number one with like the mechanics of my body and how my body was working with regard to liquor or caffeine. I am kind of really getting to know my body and how it reacts to certain stimuli.
R: Yeah, cause you say in addition to the coffee that you have abandoned drinking and stuff that it would just make it worse rather then –
P: Yeah those things would definitely make it worse – for some people – some of my girlfriends knew this right away early on in life but it just – I don't know, it just kind of dawned on me recently to start paying attention to things like that – So I guess it was just – I guess it was maybe I wasn't in very much pain when I was younger and as I have added more stimulis it's just created a hormonal imbalance such that it was getting to be too much to deal with so I did notice it because it was painful.
R: Yeah, it makes sense. O.K. there's a thing you say here that as you get older you notice how alcohol negatively impacts your sleep and then you say I mention the change in caffeine intake to my older sister and she said, "You have always had bad cramps, since you were younger?" What did she mean and what did you mean by that – I just want to be clear on that.
P: I think that I had been very proud that I had stopped drinking coffee – and that my cramps had gotten a lot better and I think she just wanted to remind me that even though – that when I was younger I still had pretty bad cramps -- even though I wasn't drinking coffee. She just wanted to point out that my perceived relationship between caffeine and PMS may not be as strong as I think it is now. The correlation between caffeine and PMS she was just pointing out – that may not be as strong as I am thinking it is now.
R: She didn't want you to be as proud about getting off caffeine.
P: Well, she doesn't drink coffee either. She doesn't like it so it's not like she drinks it and I don't. So I think she was just saying well hey, you always had PMS – you can drink coffee if you want. You were crampy before you started drinking coffee.
R: O.K., gotcha – O.K. in this next section on that answer – I think we kind of covered

this but I just want to make sure. You talk about being on a pill for three years and during that time your period would only be about two and a half days with very little cramps. What was that like for you – to have very little cramps and you say you are not interested in taking hormones so you quit taking them. So what is that about for you?
P: I think that has a lot to do with me when I was younger not paying attention to my body because I didn't need to because the hormones regulated it so much they minimized everything about having my period into pretty much nothing. Like I just didn't even notice it was there barely at all. Umm, so it sounds like a positive thing from the outside, but I'm just not really interested in taking birth control pills anymore or any sort of hormonal thing that I don't really need to. I'd rather minimize my medication, if I don't need it so that's kind of my – that's where I am right now.
R: O.K. What was it like to have a period that was just barely there – that you barely noticed it.
P: It was nice – It wasn't really anything to me – It wasn't really I guess I am having a hard time remembering it. I was between the ages of eighteen and twenty-one. I don't recall it being like a part of my life like it is now – like I always check my moon calendar to see when in regard to the full moon – I am always like – I am always aware of what stage my body is in relation to my menstruation, so when I was younger I didn't pay any attention to that at all. I don't know – I like to do that now.
R: O.K. so at the time it was nothing that you missed really at the time.
P: No – no – I was really young and active and just going and doing tons of stuff and now I have just kind of chilled out a little bit – paying attention more.
R: O.K. Alright, and the very last part of that question you sort of summarize what your bleeding is like these days and then you say, "After that my mood gets way better and I feel like my normal self." Can you describe your normal self?
P: I am typically a pretty happy person who doesn't get riffiled rifled by anything um most things don't really bother me or get on my nerves. I am pretty laid back chilled kind of person and when I am during that time of the month I find myself not so chilled out, not so relaxed, and not so inclined to be humorous about things. So I am not – I don't feel like I am enjoying life as much as I usually do.
R: O.K. – Alright. Next question – Next answer that you have is in regard to what do you think of when you hear the word – And you talk about your first, one of your first menstruations at Church and you say, "When you think of menstruation I think that it's just another hassle that I have to deal with." Umm, is that when you just -- when you think of the word menstruation you think of it as just another hassle to deal with?
P: No, I guess that's -- that's more like the making sure you have all the right you know pads and tampons and its kind of -- I used to be a really like – I would just start bleeding you know and like totally forget that I was going to start bleeding that day and just be like oh I've gotta get a pad and be a big hassle to go to the pharmacy in the middle of the work day or something like that. Now I am getting a little bit smarter and I have my box at work and my box at home so it's not so like – It's not a surprise when it comes I am just too lazy or I don't think about it until it actually really comes in terms of preparation. But when I think of menstruation I like having it – I mean – I like having

you know the blood just means that you're healthy, you're normal, you have a cycle, well for me tends to you know twenty eight monthly cycle. You know our society's calendar is based on a monthly cycle. Occasionally it coincides with the full moon which is pretty cool but guess that statistically that is not such a big deal but it is kind of cool..
R: So when you say it's a hassle, you are talking about like logistically.
P: Yeah, the process all of the having to having to like deal with blood. It's kind of gross sometimes so – that's kind of a hassle. But, you know it's – umm, what's the phrase "A little bit of good and evil all mixed in one."
R: And you also write, "It's something that you have to hide and keep sanitary." So how do you hide it?
P: How do I hide it? – I don't hide it at home. I guess I don't really hide it but it's just not something you talk about with – It's just not a part of you know everyday conversation except with maybe my closest like my closest friends – my regular friends – maybe if they are there on the same day and it's really painful but I don's know I just feel like nobody talks about it so you just kind of don't talk about it even though it's going on in your life right there and maybe you want to talk about it.
R: So you don't mention it at work for instance or anything like that.
P: No.
R: O.K. and you say it's something you have to hide and keep sanitary and you put in quotes. What does sanitary mean?
P: Well, sanitary um – I guess maybe I am kind of referencing my current boyfriend who gets totally grossed about – out about the sight of any kind of blood or any remnants of of blood or anything, like if we are having sex and maybe it's like two days after my period and there's any inkling of blood on the condom afterwards, he's just really kind of grossed out about that. And it kind of just annoys the shit out of me because I am like it's just a piece of my body, what's so gross about it?
R: And what does he say anyway?
P: He just kind of mumbles and walks out (Laughs)
R: (laughs) You say your first boyfriend didn't mind having sex during menstruation.
P: Yeah, he didn't care.
R: So what was his attitude? Like was he just, did he tolerate it, or take it or leave it or what?
P: He didn't care – it's whatever – more lubricant.
R: And what was that like for you?
P: It was nice because I didn't have to worry about like anything – oh here I am on my period kind of thing – It's just like, whatever. "Whatever, that's great and you are not pregnant and there's more lubricant, that's great!"
R: O.K. and then you say that your current boyfriend isn't interested at all even though an orgasm seriously helps the pain. I am wondering, have you told him this aspect.
P: Yeah, I have. Only recently though.
R: Did it make any difference in his feelings or his attitude?
P: I think we are just moving away from like penetration sex and maybe moving into

other forms of orgasm that are like where maybe I can just masturbate myself or a little bit of fondling or whatnot but not necessarily the penetration. We are growing in our relationship and we are moving towards alternatives – I don't think he's going to be changing his mind about penetration anytime soon.
R: So you say that you try to make the monthly experience a good thing – And I am assuming here that you mean a good thing more so for the two of you because you say it means you are not pregnant and it's something like this, "Guess what honey, I am not pregnant," so it's a little bit of celebration. Are you referring to between the two of you then?
P: Yeah, that's kind my how it term it every month.
R: Cause you have already mentioned other aspects for you that it's kind of a good thing – your own kind of personal.
P: Yeah, I guess that reference is, "Guess what honey?" It's kind of for him and sort of like saying, well we can't have sex for the next five days but guess what I am not pregnant, isn't that great? It's how you can term things and this makes for more pleasant life style.
R: And then the last thing you say on that answer is you have had an abortion and you are not doing that again. Has the abortion affected you physical period at all?
P: No.
R: How about your perception of bleeding?
P: It has affected my perception of bleeding, because it's just more of a, like I said before, a celebration that I am not pregnant. I just can't have a baby. An abortion is a really serious thing to go through. I just do not want to go through that again. So I guess that's how I feel about menstruation. It indicates that I am in good health and also indicates that I won't have to have an abortion and go through that emotional experience of making that decision.
R: O.K. – Number three was, "What's your first memory?" And you say you have already answered that pretty much in the other one – But you said "Menstruation wasn't a big deal; it was kind of the norm. Big huge boxes of pads everywhere." You say, you just told your mom and she said "that's great" without making a big deal or anything. She was pretty cool. Was that the ideal way for you to start your period in regards to your mother? Did you want her to kind of go – Oh good?
P: I think that's just kind of referring to the type of person I am – I don't like big to do's about me – I don't like a lot of celebration like birthdays or graduations or any of these kinds of things I guess. I don't like a lot of celebration and maybe that's I try to term that as humility and that's something I try to work on personally. So I was kind of embarrassed – you like uh you know what this is but you are like uhhh I was at least kind of like embarrassed . I get embarrassed about a lot of things though. I didn't want some big dinnertime announcement or something like that and I just tried to be chill and laid back and not made a bit deal out of.. I wasn't sure what she was going to do – sometimes she makes a big deal out of things and sometimes she doesn't.
R: Did she make a big deal out of any body else's period?
P: No.

R: I am curious – What did you already know about menstruating?
P: At that time?
R: Yeah prior to starting.
P: Umm – I think I knew that you got blood every month and it was related to being a woman and being pregnant. I think I knew a lot of the basic facts about sex – maybe no so much about where the penis goes, but you got blood every month because you are a woman between the ages of thirteen and sixteen something like that – and I guess that's about it.
R: Do you remember how old you were? I don't see it on here.
P: About twelve or thirteen.
R: And do you remember where, the information you had, where that came from, where you got it?
P: Probably T.V. or magazines or I don't think any of my older sisters told me, but you can kind of tell what is going on when you are living in a houseful of women and you know somebody has got to make a trip to the pharmacy to get pads and then I'm one of the types who read the boxes for everything. Like I would read the instructions and get out the diagrams and look at it. So I kind of knew what was coming.
R: So but your mom didn't sit you down and have some big conversation with you then either.
P: No – Yeah O.K. -- She asked me if I needed any help with it – She asked and I said, "no I know everything, leave me alone" kind of -- so that was based on my own input.
R: And you say, "It is funny my younger sister kept it hidden for years. We finally asked her when she was sixteen or eighteen and she said she had been having hers for years."
R: How come nobody asked her earlier?
P: How come nobody asked her earlier – Well, my older sister, S-, she didn't get her period till she was sixteen or eighteen and I remember hearing about this – Maybe this is how I learned that she got her period when she was sixteen or eighteen when she was really older and then she would get her period like every two weeks – This was going on for like two years and she has bad cramps. She was like – she was getting into modeling and stuff – she was like doing teenage modeling and I don't know if that was because she was trying to like diet or something. I know – I remember hearing that her period was particularly uneven schedule wise and was not good, So maybe we didn't ask A.- because we had already gone through that before and there wasn't too abnormal.
R: But what you are saying then – I am guessing is that it just generally didn't come up as a topic, like it didn't come up as a topic when somebody got their period it didn't come up as a topic in the family of "Oh guess what such and such got their period today so we can add her to the list."
P: No it wasn't like that at all – I don't – I said I was a little younger, but my next to oldest sister M- I don't recall ever hearing about her getting her period. I just knew it because momma said she had gotten it. I don't know I think maybe because I was so vocal in my disregard my hatred of the pain of my PMS – I was pretty much in pain and everybody knew it, (laughs) and it was so painful for me I just I guess, the more you voice your discomfort the more it hurt, but maybe M- didn't have bad cramps and didn't

hear much about it.
R: So the squeaky wheel gets the grease, kind of thing.
P: Well poor girl – squeaky wheel I guess that's a good term.
R: You write, it's funny my younger sister kept it hidden for years, you term it keeping it hidden for years. What do you make of that?
P: Umm – I don't know -- umm she keeps a lot of secrets that's just the type of person she is – she has a lot of secrets and even to this day but I know that she just didn't feel the need to say anything – It's hard to be heard in a roomful of girls.
R: O.K. so moving on with number four, with describe how you feel at this time in your life. You have a good rhythm now and you say, "It's O.K., I would prefer not to have it.." What would life be like if you didn't have it? Because earlier you said you sort of enjoyed it.
P: Sometimes yeah, it's like a big bowl, a little bit of good and a little bit of bad. Umm, I kind of like it. But if it wasn't there, I wouldn't miss it.
R: You would not miss it?
P: I wouldn't miss it. I am still tending toward I would prefer not to have it. Now that I have it you know whatever try to make good out of it somehow, try to find some good thing about it.
R: You also say, when it comes on a full moon I definitely feel connected with the earth and this happens about three or four times a year. Tell me more about this – If you can.
P: Well, I have – I used to keep a moon calendar which is these diagrams so you have – let me get one out so I can visualize it and tell you about it ---------
R: O.K.
P: It's a moon calendar and it has all of the – it has an image of the moon and what stage it is in by the month, so what I used to do – I stopped doing it – I used to color in red when I would have my period and kind of mimic this style of what this image of the moon looks like, kind of trace how my rhythm kind of coincides with the full moon and so that was kind of fun – it was like you look on the calendar, you are kind of -- you know when the moon is rotating around the earth and who knows if your body is actually connected to that rhythm, but it's kind of fun when it does coincide and you can kind of see as the year progressed how – not how but when you deviated from that a little bit – or when I deviated from that rhythm a little bit. And I don't ever recall placing a reason why it deviated but kind of fun thing to do for a while – I stopped doing it though.
R: How come you stopped? Do you know?
P: I was – I kind of move like every two years – I was on the East coast for two years and in a different part of the state for two years and I think during the time I was doing it, I guess I was single and in a place where I didn't have a lot of friends or a lot of things to do so I kind of got into this – It was a really rural area so maybe I was just bored and was just getting into you know the rhythms and doing a lot of pagan research reading and I was just tracking my menstruation with the full moon.
R: Sounds like you were more alone – and so you had an opportunity to be more in touch with yourself, is that fair to say.

P: That's pretty much what I was trying to say – Kind of had the opportunity to not have a lot of distractions about me and I could – I wouldn't focus too much on it but when it came I would make notations about when it came and how close it was to the full moon – it was actually pretty close. I'll bet you if I got back into it again it would be very close again.
R: Yeah, it's interesting.
P: So, it kind of weirds some people out to see it this calendar because I would have it in my bathroom with a little red pen.
R: What kind of people would be wierded out?
P: Not weirded out but just odded out, I guess – I took it to Ithaca with me for a little bit and my friend was like "Whoa that's just kind of trippy." Like if you have guests over there obviously they are going to use your bathroom. See your menstrual cycle in red on your wall. It's just a reminder of – here's a woman and she goes through these cycles and you can just see it on the wall – it's pretty and you get lots of reactions to that.
R: It is kind of graphic – and you write "I wish my boyfriend didn't have this hang-up about it." How is he about your pads, or your tampons, and you moon calendar.
P: He's a way – I haven't gone into my moon calendar image with him – but in terms of all the menstrual pads and tampons and what not – that stuff gets laid out all the time. He sees that and it's not a big deal, but a big No-no is sometimes I don't flush after I go to the bathroom but that's a No-no during my period because then you can see blood on the toilet paper.
R: What do you think that means to him?
P: I don't know – I actually, it's funny that I have heard one other guy make a reference to that sort of -- I don't want to see it in the toilet kind of thing. I don't know – I think blood really scares him – I think pain really scares him – He's not used to dealing with pain or knowing about pain – Now he has a chronic injury and he has to deal with pain and I think that these guys just aren't used to seeing blood on a regular basis – so when you do see blood and you hardly ever did it kind of wierds you out a little bit – so I don't know, maybe I need to desensitize him a little bit.
R: And you write that you have a secret little box at your office and a box at home with your menstrual gear. I am curious about these little boxes of yours.
P: The box at work is like, you pull out a drawer and there is little tray that holds little things like paper clips and if you lift up the tray it's like a little compartment underneath there that you would really have to dig to find it, so it's like my little covert box.
R: So it is a secret then.
P: It is a secret. A little secret box, so it's kind of fun that way and in my drawer at home it's not really a box it's just my drawer and I have pretty much taken over most of the cabinet space for myself, so this is like ah that's my drawer for my menstrual gear.
R: Yeah, cause you write there is a time and place for it.
P: Yeah, I guess that kind of refers to my sort of vagabond type of lifestyle where you know I was going to school for two years and so you – I didn't really have a spot or place for it, so every time it happens I would be scrambling for a pad or something like that, because I was just too busy to think about what was coming next physically for me.

R: So you are more settled now.
P: I am more settled now and I have like a regular work week and a regular home life that's kind of more easy to predict.
R: And so you say, I still have ten or so more years to go so I guess I am at a good resolve. What is a good resolve?
P: A good resolve means there was – I think last year or so – I was really considering getting a copper IUD. There's a five year birth control method where they put a copper thing up in your uterine to prevent birth. And I was really considering doing that because I don't like dealing with condoms, and I was having really bad cramps and they said it would probably reduce cramps and it would reduce your blood flow, almost like to just one day maybe even if that, and that was kind of appealing to me to reduce cramps, reduce flow, reduce hassle, more sex, but I opted against it. I made the decision not to go that route and so now I guess I am in sort of a resolved where I get my period for about five days out of the month. I am a little crampy, but I made the choice not to have my period – I am sorry I made the choice to have my period even though there are potential options that may remove some of the hassle I have chosen not to go that route.
R: So you would rather have and deal with the hassles that you have described rather than kind of for lack of a better way to put it – rather than kind of mess with your body artificially.
P: Yeah, that's what it is – I guess I'll leave the messing with my body artificially when I get older and I really need it. Maybe I guess I am trying to save up my I don't know. I guess I just want to leave the chemicals for later in life when I really need them, but now when I don't need them.
R: And five was, describe some positive and negative aspects. You write – positive you are not pregnant, I am healthy and normal, good PMS = good health. What is good PMS?
P: Good PMS – I guess maybe I am not referring to PMS – A good menstrual cycle means that it is five days within a day or two of twenty eight days and it's a healthy flow and that means that I am healthy. If I wasn't getting those things then would mean my body telling me there is something wrong.
R: Does that relate to the next line that you have, which is, "Sometimes I like the way it feels flowing."
P: Uhhh – Sometimes you can feel it flowing – most of the time I don't really feel it flowing out of my body but there is an occasional moment where I might walking or standing and I can feel it come out – I guess those are the times when I am not wearing a tampon and when I am only wearing a pad – when I can feel that sort of how it drains out of me and sometimes it's like oh O.K. – and it's not necessarily pleasant but it is just a reminder that that is going on because I usually wear a tampon so you don't have that feeling – you are just kind of plugged up instead of letting it flow. Sometimes feels like normal.
R: So what you like about it is that you know things are working normally.
P: Yeah –
R: O.K. – And the last kind of question about your answers that I have is on a scale of

one to ten which number best represents your feelings about menstruation at this time, you write 6, and I wonder how did you arrive at 6.
P: How did I arrive at 6 – Oh, I guess it is referring to in me that I would previously that I would prefer not to have it even though I made choice to have it. I am little bit on the fence about a lot of things, so I guess six meaning not too terrible a thing to be a five. For me would be pretty low. I guess 6 for me means that it is not so bad.
R: What would a 10 be like for you?
P: What would a 10 be like – a half a day with no PMS and no chemicals.
R: What would a 1 be like?
P: Oh, God – a 1 would be like bleeding two weeks with lots of cramps, and lots of headaches, bloatiness, moodiness.
R: So on a scale of 1 to 10, 1 being negative and 10 being positive which number represents your feelings about menstruation at this time.
P: I guess 6 – 6 or 7 -- I guess I would – if I would change my mind I guess I would move it up a little but I still dislike the cramps and the messiness about it.
R: You don't have to change your mind – I am just checking in again that's all.
And when was the last time you had an open sort of anything goes conversation about your period?
P: With who?
R: with anybody?
P: Oh, when was the last time, I guess it was the last time I was with my sister when we were talking about coffee and menstruation. That was pretty recent about two months ago. No that was just like January. Oh I talk about it all the time.
R: The last thing I have -- it's kind of a funny thing – it's funny I have encountered it before with some people but I am curious. Did you know that there is a U in menstruation? When you write menstruation you leave out the U. Did you know there was a u in there.
P: Vaguely – I am a terrible speller and I always get spell check – I don't have a spell check on my Email.
R: It's not a big deal like were you correct and perfect when you wrote your Emails for this thing -- I was just curious, did you know there was a u. Like is it something that you know about that you say the u because I have encountered people that until recently just discovered that there was a u in menstruation and I am just curious.
P:I think I vaguely knew about it – I don't pronounce – when I say menstruation there is no u in my voice. Maybe that's why I dropped it out of the spelling.
R: I have encountered others who do that to and part of what I have wondered is that it's just a word that is not used ---
P: When I do technical writing at work, it's definitely not about menstruation. I don't write it down – it's just something you say.
R: Have you ever had to write menstruation down? I have been writing it a hundred thousand times.
P: I don't think I have ever written it down? I think maybe read it like maybe – I read boxes of everything I buy – I obviously read the boxes of my tampons or what not.

R: But when you talk to friends what words do you us?
P: I usually say like I am on my period. I guess I wouldn't say, Oh I am menstruating today no I would say I am cramping today – the only time you would say anything about it is when you are complaining you know.
R: Yeah, you are being descriptive about what is going on with you rather, like specifically you are saying that you are cramping.
P: You don't say – I woke up this morning – you don't say I am menstruating this month because that's just something that happens every month.
R: Do you have anything you want to add at this point?
P: No, that's about it.

Sharon's Answers

1.) My typical menstrual period is not one but two. From the beginning, I had what I like to call the long, slow, unobtrusive period. It was the type that lazily entered, spotting for several days before any real stream of blood. It would then peak somewhere between days 4-6, and then leave as lazily as it entered. Often these periods would be between 9-11 days long. There were no pains (I had no ideal what menstrual pains were until much later). It was annoying in its length, but overall I could have these periods and think very little about them. Even on a heavy day (in the middle), I rarely had to change my tampons or pads more than a few times a day. In college, sometimes around 18-19, I got my period for 3 weeks straight mostly spotting. I then didn't have my period for 3 months, and the next time it came it came in a rush. I had serious cramping, it burst forth on day one, was heavy (with cramps) for about 36 hours, and trailed off. This original period lasted about 3 days. Subsequent periods of this type have lasted for up to 5 days. Now I never really know which type of period it is going to be, but it is guaranteed to be one type or the other.

2.) I don't particularly like the word menstruation – mostly because of the sound the ua makes when people say it out loud – for years I didn't pronounce the U when speaking the word. I think about that first sex ed film I saw in sixth grade with the homely girl going up to the counter at the grocery store, pad strategically placed under her magazine, embarrassed by this thing that was happening to her body – and fearing that anyone should find out. I think about reclaiming my

womanhood in college -- about pon parties and the crazy ok – ness of having periods and talking menstrual talk on an all-female campus. I think about pagan rituals. I remember going to my first sweat ceremony and being forced to not participate because I was on my moon-cycle – I still haven't participated in a sweat lodge. I felt disappointed – but part of the reasoning to not have me participate was the supposed power of a woman on her moon – and this tipping the balance of power between the male and female tents. I much prefer the word period.

3.) My first memory of menstruation is hanging out in the bathroom while my aunties changed their tampons. We were a pretty open family – but since I lived with my grandparents (and my Nana was well into menopause – no longer having periods), my exposure was during family gatherings. They were always open (my aunt's), and talked to me abut getting my period well before it happened. My Nana used to save those trial size offerings from the mail – it so happened there were several packages of pads that came. I knew where she had them under her sink – although she never really explained how to use them – or even they were there. My first period came in the morning of my 8th grade year. I was 12. I was bouncing on one of those mini-trampolines as seen on tv, When I finished, I went to the bathroom and there was very brown blood. I thought this odd (since no one really explained this side of it), but I did tell my grandma that morning that I had begun my period.

4.) As I have PCOS – I've come to equate a great deal of health issues with having (or not having) my period. My period has never been crazy regular – and it still isn't. I took pills a few years ago that did regulate me and helped me fall into the deepest depression of my life. I don't see being regular as so important. Although my aunt Priscilla is "like clockwork" and I used to think I need to be to, I've come to recognize that for health reasons it really isn't necessary to have a period every 28 days. My doctor tells me as long as I have 6 a year, that is sufficient to remain healthy and not increase my change for cancer. M period is still somewhat of a nuisance, but it is also a signifier of life. I have vacillated in wanting children. I don't even know that I could have them with my polycystic ovarian syndrome, but that monthly sign of blood is a reminder that I get that choice, and that is a really beautiful thing. I live with roommates, and it is interesting to see how our pheromone patterns work. Everyone (except me) seems to have taken to Caycee's cycle. I still get a little grossed out by the smell. Sometimes I feel dirty during my period – literally – but it is because I need to clean my body more often than other times. I used tampons for years – and still do a little bit, but I find that I have taken more to using pads in the last several years. This makes for a messier time. I get sad when I still bleed through things that I love or onto my sheets and must wake up at 4am to clean them. Overall, I don't think about it even when I am not having it, and rarely when I am. The onset of cramps – which as stated earlier only happens

sometimes for me – really annoys me and make me think much more about my period while it is happening.

5.) I like having an excuse to lie low once a month. I like the idea of release – it feels cleansing to go through menstruation. I enjoy the camaraderie that exists between me and all women/girls based on this common experience. (I had a student today ask if (hypothetically) she ran out of bathroom passes this term and had to go for "girl issues" if I would let her)

I typically get sexually excited just prior to and at the beginning of my period. This is always welcome. The constant monthly reminder that our bodies are capable of giving birth.

I don't like the messiness – having to think about changing my pads/tampons – Being plagued with extra cotton in my underwear. The cramps are a pain – literally. They still make me feel like I need to have a bowel movement. Moodiness that sometimes ensues, although I never catch it – until after my period starts. The stigma around periods in our culture. Although I have so many fly young girlfriends who can get fired up and rally around bleeding – I still am susceptible to the adverts and assumptions that we need to do all we can to hide this part of the way our body works, mask it with scents, etc. The expense is also obnoxious – and I am still pissed that they bleach out most tampons for that "white" effect – things like this get me going.

6.) probably between a 6-8, depending on the month!

Sharon's Telephone Interview Transcript

Background Information:
Age: 31
Ethnicity: Caucasian
Occupation: Teacher, 6th grade Math
Education: Master's Degree in Teaching
Religious Background: Christened Catholic as an infant, taken to Baptist and then Fundamentalist churches by grandmother during childhood. Participant remarks that she "threatened to leave home" if forced to continue to go to church. Describes her "revolt" from church at age 14 or 15 and starting own spiritual development. Considers family as moderately religious during childhood.
Current Religious Orientation: Personal spiritual orientation/life philosophy with no Christian God.

Researcher read participant's answers to her.
The interview is as follows:
R: Okay, how was that to hear your answers read back to you?
P: Um, fine. (Curtly) Yeah, fine.
R: Was it? Okay, I have to say something, too. Doing this over the phone is much different than doing it in person, obviously. I tend to be more visual than anything else, so I don't have, obviously, the visual cues that I would have in a face-to-face conversation.
P: Right. Right. Fair enough- so you don't get to see the eye-rolling, is that what you're saying?
R: Yeah. And so it's hard for me to tell- and if you give an answer and you're just done and you can think of no more, just say so. If I'm really silent over here, it's not because I'm trying to get you to say more, it's just that I'm trying to allow you the space to speak what you need.
P: Okay. I'm done. (Laughs)
R: So that "fine" was just a real "fine?"
P: Um the "fine?"
R: Yes.
P: Well yeah, obviously it's a little strange to hear anything you've written read back to you.
R: Sure.
P: That's my experience, anyway, so there's that critic on the inside that says, "Oh man, you put those words together?!" But ultimately, in terms of conveying more or less what I'm thinking, I'm feeling sure. That's pretty much it.
R: Okay. So content-wise it's right-on, still?
P: Yeah. It's as on as it's going to be.
R: Um, so what I'm going to do is go to your first answer and go to just the bit that I have questions about. The first question is describe in detail your typical menstrual

period- What you describe is- “it’s not one, it’s two.” And you describe the first onset, the way your period emerged, but in college it seems there was a transition.
P: Um hmm.
R: You say, “subsequent periods of this type have lasted up to five days,” and the question I have is when you say, “now I never really know which type of period it’s going to be, but it’s guaranteed to be one type or the other,” I’m just wondering, what’s that like emotionally and practically for you?
P: Ah, Well emotionally- I guess, you know so many women I know keep such good track of when their periods started and they can pretty much figure out when their next one is going to be, because I’ve never been regular enough to be able to do that, um it really doesn’t affect me emotionally, it just so of happens. Like, I mean I can typically tell from the- as soon as it starts, it’s going to be one type or the other.
R: Okay.
P: But it’s not like I do fear ah- the days leading up to it. I don’t know what those days are, you know?
R: Uh huh.
P: So, you know it’s actually something a little bit reassuring about having the second type of period, you know the one that like- gives me the cramps. It makes me feel like I understand some of the common female experience a little bit better than I did with just the elongated um- you know- menstrual period.
R: Um hmm, um hmm. Okay- What’s that like practically for you – you know just in the world on a day-to-day basis when you’re not sure what kind of period it will be, when you don’t have that predictability that supposedly other women tend to have? What’s that like for you in terms of being prepared?
P: Uh, I don’t feel like I’m any more prepared or any less prepared than probably any other women—um, I you know, usually, I say usually, a few tampons somewhere in my bag. Usually I have been lucky enough that even if I have the second type of period, the one where the onset comes on strong, I usually have a little bit of warning before it becomes really heavy bleeding. Uh, so if I was at work I could usually get home by the time I really need to be concerned-concerned.
R: Okay.
P: So, yeah, there’s- there’s no real stress, I guess. I don’t know.
R: Okay. All right, number two is “What do you think of when you hear the word ‘menstruation’….? And your first part is you don’t particularly like the word ‘menstruation’ mostly because of the sound the ‘u’ makes when people say it out loud. Do you get this with other words or just with men-stru-a-tion? (emphasizing pronunciation)
P: It’s normally menstruation. I have to say I don’t know if it’s because my grandmother would say the word. I don’t know if it was initially when I heard the word, the ‘u’ was not pronounced, and so there’s something that like really annoys me about the ‘u’ being pronounced, but that is the way it is spelled, that of course I discovered later. (Laughs) But, oh well that really is the way it is supposed to be pronounced. Uh, I can’t really tell you what it is. I- you know- I really don’t get this with other words- no. You’re right. I

don't.
R: Okay. Does it conjure up a certain kind of mood?
P: (Sighs) Maybe it just is very clinical. Maybe it just- I really do think that so much of my, um connection to this word being said this way has to do with going back to sex-ed courses as a six-grader and some of the pre-puberty stage um and kind of being a little maybe grossed out by it. 'Cause you know when my aunts talked to me, they talked about my period. (Laughs) We never talked about MENSTRUATION (says with a deep, stern voice). (Laughs) And I think it was all so much scarier sitting in that environment and um, watching those videos and having our teachers talk to us about it.
R: Yeah and when you say that it sounds "clinical," what does that conjure up? What do you associate?
P: The clinical?
R: Um hmm.
P: (Sighs) Umm….
R: You mentioned that it pointed back to the sex-ed film-
P: Yeah, well, definitely. In terms of clinical, I guess I feel um, it reminds me when we talk about a vernacular, right? We have certain words that we use, uh, that are more of a kind of free, uh hip, what is like- uh I've just lost my uh- (Laughs)- I've lost the word I want to use. (Laughs)
R: That's okay.
P: Um, gosh, I don't know- it just- the words that we use when are just sort of regular-speak, right? The more technical words that we use when we're doing a paper or you know, talking and that's the way that this feels to me. It's just like one of those technical words. It's not what we have when we're um, you know, shootin' around and just chatin' with each other. We never talk about menstruation cycles. We talk about our periods. I don't know.
R: It's harder to relate to, is that what you're saying?
P: Yeah! Maybe that's what I'm saying.
R: It's a little like you don't say, "I had sexual intercourse with such and such." (Laughs)
P: Yeah, exactly.
R: Okay, I just wanted to clarify- Okay, and so the second part of that is "for years I didn't pronounce the 'u' when speaking the word." I think you already answered this, but just to make sure, why was that?
P: Oh, because when the word was spoken to me, I either didn't hear the 'u' or the people speaking it, didn't pronounce it.
R: Okay-gotcha.
P: I'm actually a lot more okay with 'menstration' than 'menstruation.' (Laughs) Surprisingly!
R: Yeah, well it must be more familiar to you. It's what you can relate to and it makes sense to you. Okay and so when you hear the word 'menstruation' it conjures up sort of that clinical aspect, it's harder to relate to, it's the sex-ed film with the homely girl. I guess maybe I should ask you about this: when you saw the six-aid- excuse me- I'm thinking one thing and reading which doesn't work.

P: Right.
R: This bit where you say "that first sex-ed film that I saw in sixth grade with the homely girl going up to the counter at the grocery store, pads strategically placed under her magazine, embarrassed by this thing that was happening to her body and fearing that anyone should find out." What did you feel or think or whatever when you saw that film?
P: Well, it's kind of hard to get back into that ten year old mind and body to remember exactly what I thought-
R: Yeah.
P: I mean it--it –and it's also really hard for me to separate what I was thinking then from the transition that I've made up until this point now. And I do know that was- that was the most I mean I don't remember anything else from that film except for that moment where she is in this grocery store and its obviously something really to be embarrassed about – and so, you know, she is putting these pads under this magazine and jerking away when she has to go out through the check-out counter. Umm, I think maybe the reason that is intense is that, of course, I then had conversations with my grandparents afterwards about that – more my grandmother than my grandfather – and you know she would tell me that you know he refused – my grandfather would refuse to get her pads when he was at the grocery store. I think that like that is heavily part of the extension of you know – why is this such a big deal? Umm, you know, is it really that awful- umm I think that that's the stuff that's conjured up for me then and over the years.
R: So it really umm – it really conjured up a lot of questioning for you.
P: Definitely –
R: And so looking back now – I know you said it's hard to get back into the mind of that age -- but looking back now what do you think you decided from after watching that and after asking these questions. What do you think you decided about life or this aspect of woman's life.
P: It was -- interesting – umm interestingly enough umm my period came a couple of months after my grandparents got divorced, so I was living in -- (blurred) – household and it was pretty easy to be really open with it then when it actually came, but that is not really what you are asking. Would you ask the question again?
R: Sure – when you saw that film, and you know it reminded you that your grandmother told you that your grandfather refused to buy her pads and stuff and you started asking why is this so horrible – when you started asking yourself those types of questions, did you come to – looking back now do you think you came to a decision about something, about bleeding for women. Did you decide or was it still open and up in the air – like what is this? Is it really that terrible?
P: I certainly think that during my growing up years I didn't see it as a positive thing at all and I thought it was something to be embarrassed about and something to be grossed out by. I definitely feel like I bought into the cultural stigmas about – well at least some of the cultural stigmas I was exposed to – you know Southern Oregon, umm, I definitely it was not a topic of conversation I ever had with my friends. Although you know we all recognized that, well that's not entirely true -- I mean every once in a while somebody

would have a hard day and they would talk about having cramps or something. But it just it really was still something hush hush – it was still something sort of like swept under the rug, you know you don't really talk about it – you don't really think about it – you certainly don't you know get political about it. Not in high school for God's sake. So yeah, I did buy into some of these cultural pieces – I bought into the fact that it was kind of gross and messy – I bought into that it was something to be really embarrassed about, umm, you know the constant fear when I was on my period of bleeding through something in a public setting was really a prominent feeling for me.
R: Did you ever bleed through in a public setting?
P: Yeah, yeah – I did I bled through in high school once. Although I had a sweat shirt that I was able to you know cover myself with – I think that was the only time. I did actually have a friend though, a very dear friend in high school, who bled through and I gave her sweaters or whatever and told her to go to the bathroom she might whatever. So you know we basically gave her the tools to get out of there as necessary.
R: Looked out for one another.
P: Right, but the system always created that fear – when is this bad thing going to happen to me?
R: Okay, and so it looks like – looking at the rest of your answer, the next part is: "I think that reclaiming my womanhood in college." -- It looks like you made then a transition in attitude and maybe you know everyday practice about bleeding and what that means and how you feel. And can you clear up this – Is that accurate that you sort of- P: That's absolutely accurate yeah, I definitely feel like you know I go a woman's college which surrounded by a bunch of women who are there to basically empower themselves, and part of that process is taking the one thing we all share, which is bleeding monthly, and making that a really powerful and positive thing. And I realize when I wrote "pon parties" that would probably be confusing – that I should have explained it a little bit more thoroughly.
R: No, that's all right – Well, how about just explain it now, if you don't mind
P: And it's really no big deal – It's just the idea that you can – and a "pon" is the latter part of a tampon --
R: I wondered if that's what it was.
P: And just the idea that like you can have a party – you get on the same schedule. You live with seventy other women, there's a lot of people who are on the same schedule so you know the time when you are all menstruating together – you know having your periods together – the idea that you can all go out and throw tampons at each other. You know, it's really very dumb, but like it was just a way to make silly something that was to be so ashamed of prior in my life.
R: Okay, okay – and you write "and the crazy okayness of having periods" – can you say something about that?
P: The crazy okayness – I just – you know, again, I was in such a little bubble – when I went to college and it was um things that you have to deal with outside of that little bubble do not exist there especially when it is all women – the crazy okayness just I mean you know – If you bled through something it would not be ever the way it was

prior to that and the way it would be at the present time now – I would feel pretty embarrassed if that happened to me at work or at school. But you know there it was kind of eh – whatever. Umm I don't know just the ability to talk about it and to talk about the process – it was just much more open. It was probably the most open time and it was nice to go from the high school experienced where it was so closed to this sort of openness and you know I mean you kind of retreat back a little bit – like now its not so open in my life but its not not open.
R: So you found sort of a medium ground maybe – from it not being allowed to it being fully allowed – to back in the world with the other –
P: other gender (laughs)
R: the other gender (laughs)
P: There would be that.
R: And so I imagine that's where the "crazy okayness" of it is because before it was absolutely – but closer to not o.k. and to have it just okay and out in the open to come from that point of view it must seem a little crazy.
P: Yeah, yeah – it was.
R: And then you say: "I think about pagan rituals" and you talk about your first "sweat ceremony" and being forced not to participate. Can you tell me what that is, your first sweat ceremony. Was that at college – at school or was that ---?
P: We were actually at Ashland and it was New Years Day and I was in college at the time I was back on vacation and it was sort of a New Years Day cleansing ritual. A mentor of mine from high school – and a bunch of the people I used to spend my time with were all going to this sweat lodge and I couldn't actually tell you the details about it because I really don't know since I actually never participated, but there was all of this excitement around it. It was a Native American tradition – you know, they put these really hot rocks in these tents and you literally sweat. And the women have a tent and the men have a tent – and they are on the same ground area – they are near each other but not right next to each other. You keep bringing in hot rocks – you know, it was something I was really looking forward to and then, of course, then I found out once a got to this place that I couldn't participate because of my moon cycle. And, of course, I didn't even know what my moon cycle was at that moment – My moon cycle, what's that? – you know and somebody had to explain to me. And then I was there and I sort of got stuck up in the cabin, waiting for everyone else to participate.
R: Well, I have a really dumb question which is – How did they know you were on your moon cycle? Had you talked about it or ?
P: No, actually what happened is right before we were all getting ready to go in they just said – just as a reminder anyone in here on their moon, three days before or three days after, we need to ask you to stay up in the lodge because you know you have got too much power at this time you know entering into your body and that creates imbalance between the tent – I don't know -- I am pulling -- I have one of the world's worst memories so you have got to understand I am pulling through something that happened like many years ago.
R: That's fine -- Did you and do you believe that the moon, there is a tipping of the

balance of power?
P: I feel like that is probably very typical in some traditions. I imagine Native American traditions – I didn't see it as a negative thing. I don't think it was like, ugh you are on your moon, gross get away. It was much more of an empowerment thing – but at the same time do I feel that way --?
R: Yeah, do you buy that?
P: Umm – I don't know – Do I personally if I look in my heart, do I really buy that – I don't know – there's too much stuff around me to tell me to buy you know all that stuff – women on the rag – hear what you hear – Oh, you never know what she is going to do. I do think there is a power – there is a transition that happens to women during this time – I don't think that we are going to go out and kill people and I don't think that we are that horrible or obnoxious but I do think that – I mean something is happening to our bodies every month, you know, umm there's a release that we get to have that men do not, and so I do think there is something powerful in that, you know. I can't name what it is though.
R: Okay, that's fine – let me see here. And so you said you felt disappointed not to participate – What was that disappointment about?
P: Oh, it was just about wanting to participate and not being able to. That's all.
R: Alright. Moving on to number 3, your first memory. Umm, let's see – your first memory is hanging out in the bathroom while your aunties' change their tampons – What was their mood and what was your mood at the time?
P: I didn't really think of it in terms of mood – I just you know you are a kid and you are there in the bathroom and you are visiting your aunty and they are changing their tampons. It was never really embarrassing or mortifying. Like practical – I have got to go to the bathroom and change my tampons.
R: So it was more matter of fact.
P: Yeah, it was very matter of fact – it just was what it was, you know. It's life.
R: O.K. – umm you say you are a pretty open family – you lived with your grandparents. Your nanna was well into menopause -- no longer having periods. Did she, even though she no longer had periods, did she still talk at all about periods generally or specifically at all or was she not a talker.
P: I have to say, I don't remember – and I don't know if I don't remember because she did or she didn't. The only people I really remember having conversations with me about my period before it happened was my aunts.
R: And what did they say?
P: I mean they just kind of gave me the birds and the bees talk if you will – they just told me that something would be happening to my body. But it was a very – like an overview – I talked to class a few years ago and she thinks its great and I mean and the information that I -- we gave to those kids is so much more information than I ever got and I think that maybe just being in an environment where you – Maybe as a teacher I knew more of what to be sharing with them umm because I had learned over time that these are the kinds of questions that kids ask. Brown blood stains – I didn't know that it would be brown. Like it should have been red – isn't blood red – your mind has this

image of whatever you have. I had this image that you know this red blood was going to be flowing out of me – I didn't expect it to have, you know, like the lining part, so I sort of thought of it more like blood like if I was going to poke myself in the finger that was going to be coming out of me as opposed to chunky in -- whatever.
R: Yeah, I was going, that's another thing I was going to ask you about – when you saw that it was brown you sort of thought that was odd. How did you feel? Were you scared, startled, confused – what's a good way to describe?
P: I knew what it was – I was just startled probably more than anything – just kind of taken a little – I was prepared for this is going to happen to my body. I wasn't prepared for when and then it happened and it didn't happen the way I had envisaged it happening – so in that sense it was a startle – and I never really felt like I could – I mean as I got older I was finally able to be a lot more open with my grandmother. But at that time in my life, for whatever reason, I didn't think I could ask her a lot of these questions and you know – it was more she could help me through life the details – O.K. now we got you the pads. Yeah, great we will take care of that, but it wasn't like if you have any questions please ask.
R: So it wasn't like an open door policy –
P: Well, not really – I had really like "when a child is born," I really recall this – I think that was what it was called "when a child is born" -- I had these books – I distinctly remember these books that totally went through the whole pregnancy process – They showed in kind of vivid detail so I definitely had some connection between like the female body and somewhere in there it talked about getting your period and so I had read a little bit of information – kind of knew what to expect – I had these conversations with my aunts and had friends at that point – a lot of them who had gotten their periods although we didn't then talk about it that much so –
R: Did you get the books from your grandmother or did you acquire them on your own.
P: They were in my book shelf so umm – I would say that they – and I don't know if they got put there by her for this very purpose you know – making sure that there was something there for me to read although –
R: Like the pads under the sink?
P: Kind of like that.
R: Uh huh, I was going to ask you – you say "although she never really explained how to use them or even they were there." What did you make of that at the time – do you remember or what do you make of it now even?
P: She may actually at one point have pointed them out to me – I just think it was all very like okay here they are – you know – there just was no process. You know there was no – part of that is my nanna – I mean she is not somebody to think about doing that – umm you know it was very clear to her what she went through and after raising here five kids I just don't think she was back in that state – of like oh yes this is something else I need to explain. She probably only had to explain it to one – and the oldest daughter send it to the rest of them –
R: and the books are on the shelves –
P: and the books are on the shelves right.

R: Not a lot of verbiage around it then.
P: Not really.
R: When you did tell your grandma you had begun your period, what was her response?
P: Umm, in terms of – actually o.k. the other distinct thing I remember about my starting my period was her insisting on telling my grandfather which I thought was extremely embarrassing. Umm it was this big deal, because suddenly I was now a woman, um of course we have got that thing going on with the whole period thing too. And umm that seemed so odd to me. I remember my other grandparents in L.A. saying, "Well maybe finally you will lose some of your baby fat."
R: Oh ---
P: So like I had some of these interesting –
R: that's pretty horrible –
P: Yeah, I just had some of these interesting things like little things that happened when I first got it – you know it was supposed to be something I was really proud of, supposedly, although it was just so odd to like have that – I don't know, I just always feel like how can I be really proud of this, it was never really something I could – that we really talked about you know – like sort of made to be this big exciting adventure – umm so
R: But it also came with the embarrassment and the pointing out of some alleged baby fat and stuff like that.
P: Right yeah – so --.
R: And so specifically with your grandfather, what was embarrassing about that?
P: Well he was a guy, you know – that was the big thing – you are a guy, you are the other and I have this thing now and you don't umm and I think that I had also – I think at that point I had also known – I had conversations after that video umm – I think I was aware that he was pretty reluctant or refused to buy tampons or pad or whatever it was that my grandmother had needed – that that was something he didn't like to do or refused to do if she needed them and so I think that was in my head you know – and trying to make sense of you know – why is he so proud that he is unwilling to go. All that stuff was part of it.
R: Yes, you already knew – you already were aware of some of his attitudes which were somewhat rejecting or at least not very open. O.K. Alright – moving on, describe how you feel about menstruation at this time in your life. You say, "As I have PCOS, I have come to equate a great deal of health issues with having or not having my period." Can you tell me what polycystic ovarian syndrome, what that entails for you? I know you say your period has never been crazy regular and it still isn't and so how has that? Can you just talk about that?
P: Yeah, absolutely. I knew I had PCOS for years refused to go to the gynecologist and actually really didn't go to the gynecologist – I had to go once when I was living in M – the first time when I was about twenty one – umm it was because of something. There was a particular reason that I thought I had to go – I don't think it was a checkup but maybe I could be wrong, but I thought there was a reason that I needed to go. The second time that I went was about three years later when I was about twenty two or

twenty three because I had genital warts and I had to get them burned out and that was my only reasoning for going and then I decided that I didn't want to go and I didn't go again till I was about twenty eight and after I turned twenty eight I think. I had a lot of major issues with my body and I knew -- my period was just one of them of the many pieces. I believed I had PCOS because I had a friend who had PCOS and she had some of the same symptoms that I did in terms of I had – I have extremely excessive body hair – I have irregular periods – I have male patterned ways of carrying my weight in my stomach area – a little less hippy – so all of these pieces were pieces that were kind of looks like to me and I assumed I had it and I just think that I got it confirmed by going in – I have cysts on my ovaries -- there are hundreds – PCOS is like saying I have cancer, you know there are so many different types of cancer – there are so many different types of PCOS – I can't tell you what my strain is. That's what my doctor at least is telling me – giving me the information. To me I am trying to live with it now – I am never going to have -- the cysts will be there – I have seen them on ultrasound – quite fascinating. I don't really think I'll be able to have children because of it – but then again I am not in a situation where I am in a relationship that would allow me to have children so it's kind of this funny weird I don't know.

R: Well you answered my question about what it entails for you. O.K. Let me see here – you also say. I took pills a few years ago that did regulate me and helped me fall into the deepest depression of my life – that sounds really terrible. Can you tell me what happened – I imagine that was hormones.

P: It was awful – my life bottomed – once I went to the doctor and went through all this testing – doing these things I needed to be doing for years and she decided that I had PCOS and she decided to put me on a pill and this could be a good thing. It will regulate you. It may sort of decrease the amount of pain you have, we don't know, we will find out. But more than anything it was really about regulating me – that was my understanding at the time. I don't ever recall her giving me any information or background about the side effects of the pill and since I had never taken any sort of drugs on a regular basis, it didn't occur to me to think of it as something that was creating this depression that I just got further and further into. Umm, there were some external pieces that added to it most definitely – I moved in by myself down on the peninsula – I had nobody around. You know definitely pieces that were not positive at that point, umm.

R: You had life changes going on simultaneously to exacerbate it.

P: Right, but all in all I finally went back – beginning in January of that year. I started the pill in October – beginning in January I started to exercise every day – in fact I did exercise everyday for like sixty days straight – I was keeping track. Umm and I had changed the way I was eating – I was eating all the healthy stuff and I was still in the deepest depression of my life. So bad -- And usually in the past, if I am working out I feel really good about myself. So, it just wasn't happening. And Amy actually was the person who told me I should probably go see somebody and then I went back and had a doctor's appointment that summer. And she said, oh well you know this depression is probably caused by the pill and I thought, well then I am getting off of it right now. I Had no idea that that was really what it was. She has since given me something else that

she wants me to take that is not a pill that will not regulate me but I haven't done it. I mean for the past year and a half I refuse to take this medication because of this past experience that I have had.
R: Well, you write you know that – you write that, where did that go, I just have it from memory. I can't find it. You write that you have come to accept that you are not regular. I don't see being regular as being so important. So it sounds like doctors or your doctors anyway push wanting you to be regular and you are finding that what seems more comfortable for you is to not be regular. Does that make sense at all? Does that fit?
P: Absolutely, but I do have to say that even my doctor, the one who gave me the pills, said that. She is really one of the people who helped me get to that point, cause she was really clear with me. She said – you don't have to – if you don't care about being regular and I don't because of my sexual orientation it hasn't really been an issue for me I think that maybe heterosexual women might need that a little bit more, but I don't – and so I have no real need to be regular mentally or emotionally and she said as long as you are getting six periods a year, you really are fine. You don't increase your risk of certain types of cancer and she is like if it less than six than you really should be concerned. Well, I probably get nine to ten a year so it's not an issue.
R: What was it like not to be regular when – In the past, prior to all this, did you think you were supposed to be regular?
P: Yeah, I did. I think that I mentioned an anecdote about my aunt P-. The woman could tell you the time of day she was going be – six days in she would know she was going to get up and have her period and lo and behold there it was. She could just time anything.
R: Right, so what I wonder is, what was it like not to be regular when you thought you were supposed to be?
P: I knew I was off – I knew I was off -- I had all of these – I knew something was wrong for so many years before actually going to the doctor and finding out what was wrong. And it sucked and I never – actually at sixteen going to find out why I had such excessive hairiness. I didn't really put two and two together with my period because they always said; it takes years for your period really to become regular. That it is not necessarily the fact that the second you have it, you now will have a period every twenty eight days or every thirty days. So that was not – that wasn't the biggest deal although that became more of a deal as time went on. Here is yet another thing that is going wrong with my body and here's yet another thing and so that.
R: It's not much longer – are you doing okay?
P: I am fine – I am totally fine.
R: The next thing I want to ask you about: you say "my period is still somewhat of a nuisance, but it is also a signifier of life." Can you just speak to that for a bit?
P: Oh, the nuisance part or the life part or all of it.
R: Yeah, all of it.
P: Okay, umm – My period has been a nuisance at times – when you are wanting to have sex and didn't feel comfortable with it. There have definitely been times when I

have just been messy and I bled through stuff. Umm, I mean there are times I wanted to (blurred) and can't – things that I miss in my life as well, so kind of it's a nuisance but there's a lot of nuisance that's part of life. In terms of signifier of life – I mean just the opportunity to me – it's such a representation of you know the body's ability to be able to bear and create life – I don't know – It's not like every single month that I bleed I think, oh here's another month that I am not pregnant. As I am not out there actively trying to get pregnant, but you know I – it is –
R: It's a sign of the possibility –
P: Yeah exactly – it's a symbol and it's – that's pretty exciting and it's something you get to deal with it – totally awesome and it may not be something I ever choose to be – but it's still so cool that this could be a possibility.
R: Uh huh, okay. Then you speak to – you mention the bit about wanting children. You say, "I live with roommates and it's interesting to see how our feminine patterns work." Everyone except me seems to have taken to C-'s cycle. What do you make of that, that everybody but you, it seems.
P: I think that C- has extremely strong pheromones and I think that she pulls people into her cycle – there are times that even that – this happened to me in college too – other times when I was with a bunch of women. Most of the people, if not all of the people, with the exception of me will kind of get on one person's cycle – and maybe they actually influence each other a little bit more than I believe – and just kind of get on each other's cycle rather than on one person's cycle. It's always been kind of a bummer – because it just seems kind of fun – it seems like they are all bonding about it, you know. Or they are all having their period at the same time or whatever the case may be. I'll be a couple of weeks ahead or a couple of weeks behind – a couple of weeks ahead one month and a couple of weeks behind the next month.
R: Okay. Alright – Next I still get a little grossed out by the smell. Can you talk about that –?
P: Can I talk about that (laughs)
R: How come, I guess or how so? How so do you get grossed out?
P: It's just pungent – it's strong you know, and I think that I mean I think part of it really – I think that that part had a lot to do with cultural stuff for me. And stuff that I still haven't really recovered from perhaps from the get-go – we will get a little bit about this in the next written questions. I do think that the whole idea that women are supposed to smell is just not a fresh smell – you know it's very much about this blood coming out of your body – and so in the (blurred) times there are definitely times I get grossed out by it and I think a lot of that happens frankly because I don't shower all the time (you probably don't want to know this about me) – especially during the winter and during the winter I'll can easily go a couple of days. I am not somebody who in the winter showers every day and so what I find that I get used to that pattern and when I am on my period like if I don't shower every day I get grossed out by it, you know. I can't do that – it's just kind of blank.
R: Would you say that you yourself – you are turned off by the smell or does it remind you that others may smell you?

P: Yeah, I would say yes to both.
R: Okay, okay – well let me push that a little bit further. If others smell you what does that mean?
P: (sigh) Maybe it's a little fear of the animalistic – I don't know – that's what dogs do – I don't know I mean I think that if others smell. I just feel that part of my upbringing is that that was not okay.
R: You might offend?
P: Yeah, sure – of course.
R: Umm, moving on – you say you used tampons for years and still do a little bit but you have taken more to using pads in the past couple of years. Why the twansition – Why the transition? (laughs)
P: Well, let me twell you (laughs)
R: Please do
P: I feel the other reasons have had a harder time putting something in me – and but I think that part of that probably happened when there was all – I don't know if you were privy to these E-Mails but when the whole bleeding thing came out – you know, and there were all these E-Mails and I tried them out for years (blurred) but meaning there was more then this – but it became this kind of this big deal. I remember when I was living up in Oregon and all these people were sending E-Mails and it became kind of a topic of conversation – you can bleed on this cotton there is bleach on the sponges.
R: Oh, Dioxin –
P: I don't even know – It was really all about bleaching tampons and whatever mental reasons and all, it seemed more okay for it to be a pad and not inside me than a tampon that is inside me.
R: So it seemed healthier to use pads.
P: A little bit yeah – I also think that umm – I mean at that time I think that tampons are for when I am coming on strong – I am much more likely to use pads if I am having a longer period – because it isn't really necessary to use tampons – there's not enough blood to warrant it. So –
R: Okay, okay – umm, let's see. You say "overall I don't think about it even when I am not having it and rarely when I am" – It seems like I want to ask you something about that but I don't know what it would be exactly.
P: Well you want me to expand my thoughts about rarely when I am?
R: Sure. Maybe that would be helpful.
P: I really don't think about my period at all when I am right in the middle of it – umm what I mean by rarely when I am is that especially because one of the main parts of periods I have are really quite elongated meaning no cramping during the period – so there is no reason for me really to be thinking about it – It's not like I am thinking, "Oh my God, I am bleeding." Because I will never bleed through stuff during those kinds of periods and very atypically –
R: As you describe it, they are unobtrusive.
P: Right, exactly – there is no cramping. Really all they are is long and like the only thing I really think about is "oh, it's still there." As opposed to really anything else so

that is what I mean by rarely – However when I have these shorter more intense periods I do think a lot more about them because they do create cramping and it does make my body so yuck – I just want to lay around.
R: And you say, "It really annoys me" when you have cramps – "it annoys me and makes me think much more about my period while it is happening." Are the cramps annoying or is it annoying to make you have to think about your period or maybe both.
P: (Sigh) – It's just a bother when you are really not thinking about something – when I am thinking about something, its a little stress – Oh when do I need to go to the bathroom next, do I need to go change my tampons, do I need to do this. Or the presence of cramps like lets you know you are in the middle of your period, you know, serious cramps can knock the wind out of you too – all those things are the things I don't have to think about in the other type of period, so when they do happen they kind of make the other one better.
R: Okay, five is describe some positive and negative. And you write, "I like having the excuse to lie low once a month." How do you lie low?
P: Oh, I mean frankly when I am having my period and it was a hardship period I would just stay in my bed all day and watch DVD's and feel like I had an excuse to do that as opposed to the non-period days which if do that I'll feel more guilty. That's all – I if I get my period and I am at work and I am having intense cramps, it's definitely a reason to stay home and not have to go and work out – sit around and let my body do what it needs to do.
R: A reason not to be like externally productive.
P: Uh, kind of, but it's not really about being externally productive, but it's really an opportunity to rest like a physical moments of rest – I really think my body does need it during that time.
R: Okay, yeah – and you write "I like the idea of relief that feels cleansing to go through menstruation." Can you describe how it is cleansing?
P: I think that, I don't know, maybe it's not going to sound like anything, but I think that the idea of working out and releasing toxins from my body and I think of my period in a similar way – obviously there is a lining is ready to go – I don't know, I just see the idea of releasing something as a cleansing process, whether it is toxins or uterine lining or whatever.
R: Okay and you say I enjoy the camaraderie that exists between me and all girls/women based on this common experience.
P: I do – I mean I think that I am somebody in life who really feels the need to be a part of something, and, you know, obviously the creator of a family in our communities and I feel that one thing that has bonded me in part to people is a common experience – and its nice to be able to have a common experience with all women. I mean I am very – I have worked and I don't know if you know this, but I have done a lot of work around women's issues and women's rights and have directed a woman's research for a couple of years and obviously women are kind of a big deal to me.
R: Oh, I didn't know that.
P: Yeah, to me, so you know I do like the common experience – it's pretty powerful.

R: And so you have that feeling despite not having the – not being on C-'s.
P: Oh, God yeah I still feel like a woman – yeah, sure of course.
R: Okay and I just had a question about your sidebar here about your student today, asked hypothetically if she ran out of bathroom passes this term and had to go for girl issues, if I would let her. I am just curious, how did you respond to her.
P: I looked at her -- I said, "Courtney, what do you think?" And she said, "I think you would." And I said, "Yeah you are right." But I'll bet you anything that if you go up to a male teacher, they are going to be so much more likely to let you go and not want to hear anything about it. I said, "Of course – I would never make you stay here if something like that was going on." Whatever and it was one of those little moments and it happened to happen right before we had our little interview, this experience.
R: Okay, alright -- Down to negatives – you say "cramps or pain literally, sometimes makes me feel like I need to have a bowel movement, moodiness that sometimes ensues although I never catch it until after my period starts."

Isabel's Answers:

1.) My typical menstrual period begins about every 28-29 days. I currently have 2 cycles. One cycle has 3-4 days of heavy flow and cramps and lightens up by day 6 or 7, at which point it's done. Cycle two has 2 days of heavy flow and then practically stops and is done by day 4, but I experience cramps the whole time. I've noticed a shift in my periods over the past year. The heavy days are heavier than they used to be. I now use super plus tampons and have to change them every 3-4 hours. Plus, I didn't use to have 2 periods. I feel like there are some changes going on.

2.) The word 'menstruation' makes me think of elementary school, old people and old or conservative ways of thinking about periods. I use the term 'menstruation' when I am joking about my period. When talking to my friends, I say 'period' or 'on the rag', or just say I'm bleeding. I like to say 'I'm bleeding' to my boyfriends. Menstruation sounds medical to me, and kind of takes the personal experience out of what it is, especially when half the population goes through it.

3.) My first period. My mom was out of town, so I was left with only my mom's ob tampons and my dad. I had started some time late in the day at school in 7th grade and when I got home, I had some blood on my shorts, but no one seemed to notice. I think I had some cramps too. Anyway, I couldn't really gigure the tampon thing out (I needed/wanted someone to demonstrate getting the tampon ready and how I should position myself, not just look at some pictures). I attempted, but didn't get it in right. So, I found some medical gauze and made a

make-shift pad. I was embarrassed to talk to my dad about it, but was excited when my mom finally got home.

4.) I suppose I'm slightly annoyed and worried because my period has been changing, although it is regular. I think it is also annoying because my cramps last more than one day now, when I used to only cramp one day per period from age 13 until maybe 26. I hate that I have to dish out so much money on products (especially because I use organic, which costs more, but I know is safer for me than tampons that have been bleached with chemicals). I like that menstruation can kind of be a test for romantic partners. If a man isn't willing to have sex with me when I'm bleeding, then he's usually not going to be around long. A man should experience it. I like that menstruating can create dialogue between people. I might find certain aspects annoying, but the ritual of it is my life and I know what needs to be done. I also like that I have learned more about my body because of my periods and I like to be able to share what I've learned.

5.) Some positive aspects of menstruation are: getting to know your body, having a natural ritual or routine, a way for women to connect, it can help you reference time- like you'll be bleeding when you go to Hawaii, so you better take some tampons. Negative aspects: seems to be a cause for diseases, the expense of dealing with menstruation (tampons, pain relief, stained undies), embarrassment if you have an accident (like a leak, not a car accident), people (usually men) fear the blood! I feel like the importance of the positive outweighs the negative.

6.) 7, it might be higher if I wasn't cramping at this exact moment ;)

Isabel's Telephone Interview Transcript

Background Information:
Age: 28
Ethnicity: Caucasian/ Hispanic -- Mom Hispanic – Dad White
Occupation: Retail Merchandiser.
Education: Bachelor of Art with Minor in Women's Studies.
Religious Background: Catholic- went to church every week – moderately religious – except father.
Current Religious Orientation: Agnostic.

Researcher read participant's written answers to her. The interview is as follows:
R: What was that like for you – to hear your answers?

I: Uh – kind of weird because I was thinking of myself – visualizing myself reading it out of like a finished study as somebody else – so its kind of interesting. Uh, I don't know if I felt maybe a little uncomfortable.

R: How so?

I: Uh, I guess its just weird to hear it come back. Its one thing to be actually speaking it myself – but to have somebody kind of like repeating my words I guess. Its just weird.

R: The purpose of this – just to let you know again is I am making absolutely no assumptions about what I understand about your experience, unless it is very clear to me. So when I ask you something that seems obvious and even stupid, I am asking it from the point of view of like, if I am from Mars explain to me your situation because I don't want to make any assumptions about what I understand your experience to be. I want to understand it as you understand it. So, your first answer you write that your typical menstrual period begins about every twenty eight to twenty nine days. You say, I currently have two cycles is that two different cycles or is it going on in the same month of what is it exactly?

I: Its two cycles going on so like every twenty eight or twenty nine days I'll start my period but one cycle will be like a week long and then you know twenty eight days later I've got a cycle that's just like a few days.

R: O.K., I thought so -- So you have got like a alternating cycles, in a way. Two styles maybe and in the end you write that you didn't use to have two periods – "I feel like there's some changes going on." Can you say a more about that?

I: Um, I don't know (What do you make of that?) I mean, you know how apparently your cycle changes a lot when you are young until you are about eighteen. Well, I felt

like mine was pretty similar all the time up until the past couple of years and I have just noticed its changed a lot and I don't even know if I can pinpoint the two cycles specifically because I feel like its maybe its kind of getting difficult to really like analyze exactly how long its lasting and how many days I have cramps and stuff like that.

R: It's getting harder to track? They are not as definite as they used to be maybe?

I: Yeah, but they are still every twenty eight to twenty nine days. So I mean that makes me not really want to not feel like I should worry about it, because it is still regular but it's just that the duration of it and the consistency or whatever of it is kind of varying.

R: So is it fair to say that your period used to be more reliable in terms of what you could expect.

I: Yeah, absolutely.

R: O.K. – o.k. – and if you have something you want to say or clarify that I don't ask you, just leap in o.k?

I: O.K.

R: Number 2 is about the word menstruation and you say when talking to your friends you say "period" or "on the rag" or you just say "I am bleeding." And you say, "I like to say 'I am bleeding' to my boyfriend." Why is that?

I: Uh, I guess it's just kind of test, you know, to see who's scared because some guys won't go – won't go there at all and some guys don't care – maybe they had families or something and so some people are just more comfortable than others and I feel like that's a pretty big part of who I am both physically and emotionally you know with PMS or whatever so I like to have sex when (laughs and voice raises) I am bleeding so you know it's like don't pull that on me – if they are not going to, if they can't handle it then its not going to work out.

R: So if they say – if they don't really balk when you say, "Oh, I am bleeding." If they don't balk at the word or balk at the idea of having sex with you when you are on your period, do you continue to say "I am bleeding." to them?

I: Yeah, it just becomes – its you know it just becomes like kind of desensitized to it I guess so it's not like an extra – it just becomes part of –

R: The lingo – the communication and then if they do kind of balk or look really squeamish when you say, "I am bleeding," what do you tend to do with them after that (I laughs) or reject you you know while you are on your period sexually what do you do

with them

I: Umm --- uh -- My most recent experience with someone that didn't -- that was really afraid of doing it, I got him to do it (laughs again lightly trillingly). Yeah, you know I just kind , kind of explained you know look I mean its not going to hurt you – it happens every month but you know, he just didn't like the idea of seeing blood on his penis basically – but yeah I just try to explain to them, hey you know this is what goes on and you should really kind of get used to the idea.

R: And if they don't then –

I: Then yeah then I think it's kinda like of time to move on because I think it's really important because usually I don't know if this is kind of steering off into a different direction here but its like because if guys still want action when you're, they will get horny when you are on the rag but they are not willing to like go there, usually they are expecting something else like a blow job or something you know, and you think "Hey how about me I want some fun too." And it's good for me.

R: And so if like the last person you sort of convinced to go ahead and go through with it, did they still seem -- were they still attractive to you. (Yeah) O.K. That makes sense to me. The next bit is "Menstruation sounds medical to me and kind of takes the personal experience out of what it is, especially when half the population goes through it." Can you expound on that a little bit.

I: Yeah, I felt like that might have sounded kind of weird.

R: I think I get it but I just want to make sure.

I: Um -- It just sounds rather cold and not – kind of like getting a broken leg or having a disease. It's -- I guess medical terms usually don't really say what people are really experiencing on a personal level and you know when I have my period I don't think, "oh I am menstruating" – I think I mean it's not like I am not sitting on the toilet saying "Oh, look there is menstruation in the toilet, it's blood." It sounds abstract.

R: And the last bit, "especially when half the population goes through it."

I: Right, when half the population is women so we are all having our periods and

R: Would you say that the word menstruation is sort of – it sounds so medical that it doesn't even sound like it belongs to women necessarily.

I: (Laughs thrillingly) – it starts with the word men

R: Yeah, this is true

I: You know – yeah it sounds like you know medical and medical I guess in my head I think like doctors and then I think men that have come up with all of the terminology and you know have been recognized for all breakthroughs in medicine and stuff like that and I don't think it really does any justice what it is.

R: O.K. – O.K. I've got you -- and by the way, this is -- if I seem awkwardly silent sometimes it's because I obviously can't see you and I can't pick up on visual cues like if you are done with answering my questions. I don't want you to feel like, if you are done answering it and can say no more about it, I don't want you to feel like you just have to keep producing for me just because I am over here silent. It's just because I tend to very visual anyway and on the telephone I can't pick up on your visual – you know the whole rhythm of the conversation is sort of off for me – Just so you know that.

I: O.K.

R: O.K. So question number 3 your first memory, you say your first period your mom was out of town "so I was left only with my mom's OB tampons and my dad." What did that mean for you?

I: Eventually, it would make for a great first period story. (Laughs). Uh --- uh It was just kind of --I mean I felt like it was kind of cool because I was left – I felt – I guess I put myself in a situation where I was left to my own devices – I mean not that my dad would have had any problem with taking me to a store and buying tampons or whatever but it was just like we never really talked about those things -- Anyways my mom was always the one that was more talked to us about sex and stuff like that and she is a female (laughs) so she can relate, so I guess I just, yeah it wasn't – it wasn't bad and then cause I was kind of excited when my mom came home so I could tell her the news that I was blossoming.

R: I am curious about what did your, what kind of knowledge did you have that prepared you for that moment? What had you heard? What had she told you? What had you learned?

I: In elementary school we had learned about the reproductive system or whatever. We learned about menstruating – about you know about menstruating. (Laughs) I feel like I was fifth or sixth or seventh grade – somewhere about 5th grade we learned about that stuff. I had already practiced wearing pads to see how they felt and to see if I could see them through my clothes, you know. I remember being younger when I had done that and I am sure it was because I had just learned about my body.

R: Do you remember what your mother told you?

I: Uh – hmm --- What did my mother tell me -- Don't get pregnant (laughs thrillingly). She would joke around it and stuff – but I don't know, it think it was pretty like general – it wasn't like – It was more like men and women you know have these parts – Your brother has a penis you know and you have a vagina well that's not a really good way to go about it, but you know when these parts come together you know you can make babies and blah blah blah – and then I remember her talking about the period about how like you know about your ovaries and all this you know good stuff -- Actually I remember now that I guess when I was younger – She told me this. I don't remember this part but she had talked to us about penises and vaginas and we hooked on to ring around the rosey around my grandpa and I was I was bleeding the song saying "boys have a penis girls have a vagina (both laugh) -- so she told us before about our bodies.

R: So way well before any noticeable changes occurred. But where did you get the pads to practice with?

I: I think that must have been when we had learned about our women bodies – I think they must have given us a pad or something. And my mom had pads so I am sure they were around and so –

R: What kind of school did you go to? Do you -- like elementary school.

I: They were a regular public school – but I know it was pretty conservative because I know in high school we didn't learn anything – it was just kind of look through the book and fill in the answers and then we would go over the answers together.

R: So there was no verbal discussion.

I: No – In seventh grade though in my health class there I remember watching a video on the reproduction and I remember specifically seeing an actual birth – So I don't know they give us the good stuff when we are young – and then in high school when our hormones are raging we don't learn crap.

R: So all but nothing, huh?

I: Yeah also when I was fifteen my mom had gone to a health benefit and she came back with a condom package and it had instructions in it – I took it to school and "check out what my mom gave me".

R: Did she talk to you about it or just hand it to you?

I: She just said it was a benefit you know and she hoped that if I needed it I would use it.

R: So she was fairly casual – like not – she wasn't easily unnerved, but she stressed the importance of it at the same time?

I: Yeah – (yeah) um hmm -- definitely she had told us throughout the years you know that if you are having sex, be safe and then when I turned 18 and I was going off to college – I went for my first exam and she was telling me you should talk to the gynecologist about birth-control and I was like "Why?" I am not having sex yet – and I just don't believe in the hormone stuff anyway. But yeah she was like realizing you are going off to college – you are eighteen and she was actually saying come along you might want to switch into this.

R: I am happy for you (both laugh).

I: Yeah – definitely – like a lot of people the first time they have sex it's like a bad experience – mine wasn't because she had been a strength and understanding about when you're ready for that kind of stuff –

R: She helped you personalize it, I imagine? In a way or at least prepared you to do that of something.

I: Absolutely –

R: So how did your mom respond when you finally got home and you told her.

I: She seemed happy – not like excited or thrilled or anything like "Oh, you are like a little woman now."

R: So there was no like celebration or anything like that but there was a pleasant acknowledgement of it. To go back just a bit you said that when you started late in the day in Seventh grade when you got home I had some blood on my shorts but no one seemed to notice. What difference might that have made to you? If you had had blood on your shorts and someone had noticed it?

I: Oh, my God it probably would have been so embarrassing -- I mean you know when you are like 13-14 people are the same/equal – well I probably don't know any better anyways just that it was the first time I started my period and to have someone else point it out – Hey what's that, uh that might have changed my life for ever. O.K.

R: My next question is, you said you were embarrassed to talk to your dad and you mentioned that you just didn't talk to him about things like that. Your mom talked to you about sex and stuff and plus he was a man. But did you tell your dad at all?

I: Yeah, I did –

R: While your mom was away?

I: I don't remember if it was while she was away or shortly after cause she was like -- I think I told him after my mom had come back and the next time I needed feminine hygiene products he took me to the store.

R: Do you remember how he responded?

I: He was actually just normal – oh O.K., you need to go to the store to get you some stuff..

R: Did he not say the word?

I: No – he asked for pads tampons – I think he doesn't seem to know understand what the hooplah is what the defensiveness – observance is about pads and tampons and stuff like that.

R: I think that pretty much covers that question. Four is describe how you feel at this time in your life – Let's see here -- We somewhat discussed how menstruation is a kind of test for romantic partners – if a man isn't willing to have sex with me he won't be around long. O.K. "A man should experience this." We have touched on this before and we may have covered everything but just to make sure. What should they experience?

I: um – I guess kind of a woman's bodies when she is having her period – you know some kind of understanding rather than it being so distant like that's something those people have to deal with – it's like – I mean like – I guess like a heterosexual man anyways – I don't know if a gay guy wouldn't need to worry about you know – I mean if you are in a relationship with someone that bleeds once a month then I think that it's nice to have some sort of understanding so if you have to go to the store and get the tampons you know what you are looking for and

R: So is it fair to say that they should experience all of the woman that they are with rather than this portion that's not very messy ---

I: (Laughs thrillingly) Yeah – yeah absolutely. And maybe you would give them a little kind of insight into to see it or to know that it happens is one thing but to like feel their blood on you would kind of give you a better understanding that this person bleeds once a month and her hormones change and you know maybe a better understanding of PMS and the kind of mess that you can have –

R: So real intimacy in other words –

I: Yeah – to know it intimately is to know the person maybe more intimately too.

R: O.K. And then you say I like that menstruating can create dialogue between people. Does that relate to what we were just talking about?

I: It could be a romantic relationship or friendship or just

R: How so with like girlfriends with friendships male just friendships.

I: I am sorry?

R: How so with friendships with girls or just friendships relationships.

I: You can find out that you have some of the same – maybe you have similar cycles or PMS or remedies for things – things that help people bond or like cycles if you are like living with all females living together you all start to get the same cycle. That's always funny to talk about because its like, "Ah my period is out of whack now" and then you realize that Jenny over there is now number one control for your period and and it's under her cycle.

R: How do you generally feel when you find out that someone has a kind of similar cycle to you or a similar remedy or something..

I: It's just nice to be able to relate – umm it's about things – gives you an excuse to have a good time or pig out or something.

R: O.K. – O.K. I gotcha.. You say, I might find certain aspects annoying but the ritual of it is my life – How do you mean it's your life?

I: It's just that it's – it's a part – it's not just my body but it's also kind of regulates what is going on and how I am feeling umm – you get to know your body better – you get the feeling and then you know ewe I am going to start my period. Even though you might be lost on your day to day life and then you get this sensation or something and then you're like oh yeah my period is coming. Just acknowledging different PMS things and how it just becomes just all becomes so routine just like oh I am changing my tampons woopdedoo – It's not a bother anymore – I think when I was young and had just started it was kind of like weird and crazy and exciting and kind of a pain in the butt because it was always worried about like getting -- making a mess or whatever – Now it's just like here it is I am going through my cycle.

R: To what do you attribute that adjustment in your attitude – that it's not a bother anymore – to what do you attribute that?

I: Probably that I have had a period a month for how many years – 16 years or something so it's like living and breathing and eating and crap- fuck-- but it's just that I am used to it I guess.

R: It's just like practice – it's just become part of your life. O.K. You also say " I also like that I have learned more about my body because of my period and I like to be able to share what I have learned." Does that relate to the dialogue that you like between people – I like to be able to share what I have learned?

I: Yeah the dialogue between people – yeah that's good.

R: O.K. So, five is some positive and negative aspects. Positive you mention getting to know your body, ritual routine, and a way for women to connect. I think we have just covered that.

I: Reference time, yeah.

R: O.K. Now the negative aspects you mention: seems to be a cause for diseases. What are you referencing here or referring to –

I: Just your reproductive system – How you can get sick just whatever I mean my sister had cysts and total problems with her reproductive system and that can effect whether or not you can have babies. Also I think – My mom has had a hysterectomy and it seems like it's one of those things you probably don't want at the beginning like menstruate but you get used to it but then when something went wrong and you had to get a hysterectomy or you know have your whole like woman insides taken out I don't think anybody would jump at the chance to get rid of that – I guess because it is your life the rest of your life something that has helped you to get to know your body better and not that I am fan of breeding but I think I still like the – I still like I still have that option.

R: The potential to. O.K. Another negative aspect is "embarrassment if you have an accident like a leak."

I: Like a car accident (laughs) –
R: Have you ever had an accident?

I: I don't know if I have – No, nothing that was ever, that anybody else could ever notice. I was in that first period but –

R: Do you know anyone? Have you ever met anyone who has had an accident that someone else noticed that they bled?

I: Oh, I notice my friend cause I had walked her to a communal bathroom and there was blood on the floor and I was like "whoa where did that come from?" and she was like on the toilet and she said "That was me I'll be out in a minute to clean it up." Oh, I said, "sorry girl."

R: It was confined to the bathroom?

I: Yeah.

R: And how did she respond – when you noticed?

I: She was a little – like frustrated. Because I don't think she was – she wasn't expecting it.

R: She wasn't embarrassed, but she was frustrated?

I: Yeah.

R: O.K. You also say, "people usually men fear the blood." You have already mentioned this with boyfriends that you have noticed that they are fearful of blood. Can you think of any other situations where you have been aware that men are fearful or other people are fearful of seeing blood or hearing about it – menstrual blood?

I: Umm – Not really, no.

R: O.K. The last bit on that question is, well you say – you kind of summarize by saying. "I feel like the importance of the positive outweighs the negative." Can you speak a little bit more to the importance of the positive?

I: Well, the positive ones are just so relative to knowing your body and I think the negative are like frivolous things like money.

R: Cause for disease, expense, and embarrassment

I: Well, what to do, we all get embarrassed at one point or another. (Laugh together) I just feel it is truly important to know your body and your cycles a good way to do that cause I know that -- I couldn't wear a tampon forever -- I didn't – I kept trying but I wasn't I just wouldn't put it in right and I was even a fricking swimmer and I don't know how I managed that -- to go from that to now knowing that if it's going in wrong for whatever reason I can adjust it with my finger you know – such a different way of dealing with my body instead of it being all new and weird and uncomfortable now it's just like yeah

R: O.K. – And now last on a scale one to ten with ten being positive, you said seven and it might be higher if I wasn't cramping at this moment. On a scale of one to ten how would you represent your feeling today?

I: I'd give it an eight – that's my final answer.

R: And how do you arrive at eight today?

I: Because I am not cramping and, uh, it's always fun to talk about your period, (laughs). Like a little therapy.

R: What would a ten be like for you?

I: That's an interesting question (laughs) – I don't know – I really don't know how to answer that – Maybe if my period was totally – if I was having a regular cycle each time maybe if it was totally predictable.

R: Going to the opposite end of the spectrum, what would a one be like for you?

I: Probably if it was like sporadic or causing some health issues. Yeah, if I didn't know when I was going to get my period or whether it was going to be like – I think I would find that pretty annoying – or if I had to be one of those people who had to get like prescriptions for the cramps. So – or if you had to wear a frigging diaper bleeding so much bleeding so much – So glad that's not me.

R: When was the last time you had an open anything goes conversation about your period?

I: I am sure fairly recently – I am sure I had some chit chat with one of my friends? I just can't pinpoint. In part because I have a bad memory – It's kind of you know what it's been in the past month – yeah actually my last – my most recent period which was like last week – I don't wear underwear and I kept on – I guess I thought I was done and then I wasn't and I then I was like bitching to my friend – Like Oy, all my clothes are bloody

R: I think those are all my questions. Do you have anything you want to add or anything?

I: No – I guess is that the end of everything or is there more left in the study? No tis the end of everything – unless you know if I go through since I have to transcribe the tape – what you said and what I said and if get along and need some clarification, do you care if I give you a ring and ask you. Now I get to go and thoroughly look at everyone's answers.

Caroline's Answers

1) Well, I have been taking birth control pills, on and off, for about four years. Because of that my menstrual cycles are regular when I take the pills. When I stop taking them I don't menstruate at all. (Sometimes, I like to stop taking the pills to give my body a break) On my week to take the inactive pills, even though I take my last pill on Saturday, I do not start bleeding until Wednesday. The flow of blood is medium from Wednesday to Friday. Saturday is light and though I start my new week of active birth contol on Sunday, I have a little spotting throughout Sunday. I only wear pads because I do not like the idea or the feel of tampons. I have very little or no cramping. Occasionally, I feel a tension in my back for a day or two. Overall, I do not have anything to complain about with regard to my overall feeling of being during my period. Especially since menstruation before birth control pills was terrible. I often had very painful cramps and occasionally they would b e immobilizing. Pain relievers were the only way to deal if I wanted relief. And the flow of blood was super heavy.
2) It sounds like such a "technical" word to me. I usually just call it my period. Or, for example, I might say to my girlfriend who sometimes invites me to swim in her pool. "It's my time to bleed," or "I am bleeding this week." The word menstruation sounds so textbook to me that it is a put off. I rather just use the more casual word, period. The words does not put me in mind of any particular feelings except now that I have been asked, I am looking and thinking about the word and thinking that it is a little ironic that the first three letters are m-e-n.

3) I do not recall how old I was. Maybe 12 or so. I remember one day that I sat down on the toilet in my house and saw blood in my underpants. I did not know what was happening and I go scared and I cried. I yelled for my mother an she came running up the stairs to the bathroom very concerned and when she realized what was going on she was relieved. She was good about explaining it to me. It made me feel relieved. I think I felt a little silly for crying afterword..
4) I feel a sense of relief when I menstruate because if I am menstruating it means I am not pregnant. I never want to have a baby. Even though I am taking birth control pills, I sometimes have an irrational fear of becoming pregnant. Also, in my mind, as long as I am menstruating I feel that I am young. I see the next stage of aging in my life not happening util [sic] I stop menstruating. I know that it is not necessarily true but I tend to think that way. I hear my older friends talk about menopause and nobody has made it sound so bad but it seems that menopause coincides with other things happening that just normally happen when a woman is "about that age." It seems that when women stop menstruating it just so happens that they feel more low energy or saggy, or need more naps. All of a sudden cuts don't heal so quickly, Etc. If menstruating is all I get for being young that I'll take it. With that said, I actually have a good feeling about getting older.
5) Positives. Menstruating means that I am not pregnant. It is cleansing for my body. Negative. I do not mind the actual blood but the whole process can be inconvenient. Examples, cramping is a little harder. Sleeping in a stranger's bed

make me a little apprehensive. Am I going to bleed on their sheets? I don't like bleeding on mine and get tired of buying new underpants if I want to have clean ones. Pads are uncomfortable. So are tampons. And they never keep me 100% dry.

6) My experience is at a nine.

Caroline's Telephone Interview Transcript

Background information:
Age: 31
Ethnicity: Caucasian, White
Occupation: Copy Clerk Production Manager.
Education: Current College Sophomore, Major undecided, considering Occupational Therapy.
Religious Background: Nazarene Church, considers family at the time "moderately" religious.
Current Religious Orientation: Does not believe in Christian God, currently not practicing "anything."

Researcher read participant's written answers to her as follows:
R: "What's it like to hear your answers?"
C: "Um…interesting. I don't know. It's different. Uh…I've had time to reflect, but they still resonate with me. Like, I feel all those things… I feel like they are pretty right on."
R: "Okay. Good. Well, I will just continue then. Um…question #1, your second sentence you say, 'When I stop taking them (birth control pills), I do not menstruate at all.' What do you mean by that exactly?"
C: "Well, when, like okay- I don't like the idea of taking birth control pills or really any medications. Like- I am the kind of person who doesn't even like to take aspirin." Laughs
R: "Okay."
C: "So… but I do feel that they are the best way for me not to get pregnant. However, sometimes when I give my body a break from pumping all those chemicals into them, so I might go off the pill….I don't know…I think last year in 2004, I stopped taking the pill for about six months. For all that time, I didn't believe I had a period."
R: "Okay. So what I wondered…I wasn't sure. What you just said was one possibility. What I wondered, too, was when you are not on pills at all, before you started taking them, how frequent were your periods?"
C: "Um… they were pretty regular. They were once a month. It wasn't always every three weeks. I might have had only two weeks in between. Sometimes I might have had even four, but it averaged out to twelve times a year."
R: "Okay. Alright that's just what I was unsure about. And then you've answered my next question about giving your body a break. I just wanted to clarify that. Okay, the next bit is about your response, 'I only wear pads because I do not like the idea or the feel of tampons.' Can you say more about that?"
C: "Well, yeah. One- it just seems a little unnatural to me to plug or stop something from coming out of my body by putting a foreign sub- or object like cotton or whatever into a body – into my body part. So, um….it's kind of invasive."
R: "Okay."
C: "And I'm not really concerned but sometimes it's always in the back of my mind that

toxic shock syndrome…Laughs… and I mean I realize it's a very rare thing, but geez…why take the chance if you don't have to… um…that idea I don't like and then the feeling. I could always feel the tampon inside of me and it's uncomfortable sitting or whatever."
R: "Okay….um…the next bit that I'm wondering about is that you say 'I don't have anything to complain about with my overall feeling of being during my period.'"
C: "Yeah…I guess for me that encompasses…like for example I don't think I get any more moody than I, than I am when I am not on my period. So, I don't have anything to complain about there. I can't say I'm crankier. Um…like…you know…like I think I did write I get a little tension in my back sometimes, but that's….on a scale of one to ten, it's closer to one. It's not really worth complaining about. And uh…I, I don't know I guess. I'm not sure what else I can say about that."
R: "That's okay. How would um…how would your overall feeling of being when you're on your period taking the pill then compare to when you are not on the pill? I guess, what was your overall feeling of being then? Was there anything, to use your words, to complain about then?"
C: "Well, yeah, like looking forward to my period was a kind of dread because before I started taking birth control pills um… the amount of blood flow was super heavy, um…it was more inconvenient to me to every hour or two to you know, have to go change. And the cramps were amazing. I mean they truly were immobilizing. Sometimes if I didn't have pain pills I was just doubled over in my bed or on the ground or whatever. So, it was a really uncomfortable experience."
R: "Okay. Okay. And actually I guess that answers my next question….well, just in case it doesn't, can you explain any difference in your life between having a heavy flow, not on the pill, and having a light flow on the pill? I think you might have just answered that."
C: "Um…again with regard to the flow, it's just inconvenient and plus I always kind of thought that…it was …even though now I find menstruating kind of a cleansing thing I imagine it's maybe not- a detox isn't the right word –but you know, stuff's coming out of my body that needs to get out and-and that's good. Um before, I just bled so much, it was just like blood was coming out of my body and 'Oh my God, I'm losing precious blood.' (Laughs) So…Yeah.
R: "Okay, that's clarifying to me. Thank you. Uh…Lets see… the next bit…the word menstruation, you say it sounds 'technical' to you.
C: "Right."
R: "Uh, this is sort of an aside to this question, but I just want to clarify something that you say. You say, 'I might say to my girlfriend who invites me to swim in her pool, it's my time to bleed or I am bleeding this week.' What does that mean? Just the communication."
C: "Uh, well I guess in a way instead of saying I'm menstruating, if I say I'm bleeding, I think when I say I'm bleeding, it's more casual, and actually it's a little more crude when I think about it. Um, so I think I'm just so comfortable with my friend that I can kind of get crude about it and be like, 'Ugh,' you know, 'It's time for me to bleed. I can't get in

the pool.'
R: "Oh, that was my question. Does that mean you can't get in the pool?"
C: "That's right. That means I wouldn't get in the pool."
R: "Okay. Alright… Okay, and you say that 'the word menstruation sounds so technical to me that it is a put-off. I'd rather just use the more casual word period.' Can you explain how it is a 'put-off' to you?"
C: "Well…I, I thought about it. Give me a second to re-group."
R: "Sure."
C: "Menstruation. I'm not sure. Um, I think maybe because there is a- a kind of a stigma against that word and, but I, I don't think it comes from me first. I think um, growing up in previous circles, uh friends or people that I've hung out with for example, I might say the word menstruation or talk about a woman's period, and I can actually remember a man- after I said the word menstruation, he held up his hand and said "Ub- shut up, don't wanna hear that. Don't wanna hear about it." And you know, I, I don't know, for some people that's kind of a- they see it as something yucky or gross that a woman does. Now my current circle of friends, my girlfriend will talk about having her period with me, you know, in front of her husband. And he's very calm about it and he might even have something to say in her defense about it, you know, as a testimonial, like 'Yeah,' she gets, I don't know, 'really crampy,' I mean he's very open and relaxed and um, I'm not sure where this is going.(Laughs)
R: "That's okay. I'm with you."
C: " I think there maybe two- at least two views of women's menstrual cycles and for some reason I think of the view that people have that are negative about it. Um, gosh, I'm sorry. I really am not being very articulate about it."
R: "No, I think I am understanding what you're saying. You're saying that when you hear the word menstruation that calls up kind of a reminder of all those negative connotations."
C: "Yeah, Right."
R: "The stigma that you mentioned."
C: "Yes, yes."
R: "Okay- I got 'cha. You're being very articulate."
C: "Oo, good."
R: "Makes sense to me. Okay, now the last thing you write is that 'It is a little ironic in thinking that the last three letters are m-e-n.' Now I can imagine what you mean by that but I want to make sure of what you mean. Can you say a little more?"
C: "Well, when I think of root words, although I don't really know the origin of the word menstruation, the truth is the root word might not be men, but I'm looking at the prefix and it's men, and it's ironic that here's this thing that wholly belongs to a woman (Laughs) and it starts with the word men. I mean, I'm sure there's no connection at all or whatever, I don't know, but um…. there's the word men."
R: "Okay. Um, now number three is your first memory of menstruation and you recalled when you first started to bleed. I'm just wondering, do you remember what you had been told or heard, if anything, about menstruation prior to this?"

C: “Honestly, I don’t recall- I don’t think- I don’t think my mom really talked to me about it beforehand. If she did, I don’t remember.”
R: “Okay.”
C: “I think that’s why it was such a big surprise. I mean I was truly- I panicked (Laughs). When I looked in my underpants and saw the blood and I cried and I yelled for my mom. I mean, I didn’t know what to expect.”
R: “Sure. So you don’t remember being prepared about it at all, either hearing anything from anybody at school or girlfriends or anything like that.”
C: “That’s correct. I don’t recall any kind of warning or any information.”
R” “Okay. You also write that when your mother came in, she was relieved to see what was going on. You write she was good about explaining it to me. What did she explain?”
C: “Well, I think she just explained- she put it in brief terms that this is something that happens to every woman when they come to a certain age. It’s different for every woman, but we all go through it, and it’s your period and you bleed every month. I think that’s the gist of what I remember. I don’t think that branched out into why, you know, reproductive reasons, but it- she did make it make more sense to me.”
R: “Okay. So she normalized it.”
C: “Right. That’s a word for it.”
R: “Okay. And you write, ‘It made me feel relieved,’ and so how were you relieved?”
C: “Well, I –knowing that it was supposed to happen- and even before she told me about it- I was like, ‘Oh my God, I’m bleeding. I must be hurting or something.’ But you know after finding out that it happens to everybody, it- it indeed sounded like a normal thing, and I wasn’t so scared.”
R: “Okay. Um, and then your final sentence is ‘I think I felt a little silly for crying afterward.’ Looking back now, do you still feel silly?”
C: “I don’t. Um, because I can put it in context of how I emote now. And truthfully, I am a really emotionally charged person, and I cry a lot, and I’m not- I feel good about that actually, and so if crying is how I need to deal with something in the moment or how I need to emote and work through a feeling, then I honor that and even though I didn’t know that when I was thirteen, um, I think it was a natural reaction to, you know, the little girl experiencing some unknown thing in her body, and so I totally don’t feel silly about it now.”
R: “Oh, sure, yeah. Well, good.” (Laughs)
C: “Yeah, really.”(Laughs)
R: “Okay. And four is ‘Describe how you feel at this time in your life.’ Um, you write, ‘I feel a sense of relief when I menstruate, because if I am menstruating, it means I am not pregnant.’ And then you also write, ‘Also in my mind, as long as I am menstruating, I feel that I am young. I see the next stage of aging in my life not happening until I stop menstruating. I know that it is not necessarily true but I tend to think that way.’ Can you expand on that just a little bit?”
C: “Yeah- um, when I think about the human life span, I think in my very crude mind I divide it up-at least for women- in three basic sections of time, when you’re born until you start menstruating, when you start menstruating and then you have that whole span

of time until you stop at forty or so, and then after forty, I see that as the third chapter of aging (inaudible). But if I think about it, it's not necessarily true or right in my mind, but in crude everyday terms, that's what I feel."
R: "Okay. And you also say, 'If menstruating is all I get for being young, then I'll take it.' Can you clarify that just a little bit?"
C: "Um, well, When I- it's really- when I say that- in a context of my earlier menstruations which were terrible with the pain, the cramping and the heavy blood and all that, and I was really regretting it all my life. Like, 'Oh my God, I'm going to have to do this until I'm forty?'
R: "Um huh."
C: "But now that it's not like that, I really don't see it as a drag. Um, I feel in a way- maybe blessing isn't the right word but um, I feel- I think it- maybe I just should enjoy it or whatever (Laughs) –that's not the right word either (Laughs) while I can. I know it won't always happen and when it stops, but that will be a meaningful time in my life- menopause-which is a great unknown to me. Um, and I don't think that menopause is necessarily scary, but um, at least I know what it's like to menstruate and I can deal with it every month. I know what to expect.
R: "It's familiar."
C: "It is. It's familiar and one thing when it stops, uh, I don't know how I'm gonna react. (Laughs)
R: "Okay and then your last sentence is 'With that said, I actually have a good feeling about getting older.'
C: "Yeah, I feel- maybe hopeful isn't the best word- but um, I don't know. I don't know if I feel prepared- well, I don't think people can feel prepared for something like menopause. You just do it. Whether you want to or not or whether you deal with it well. Uh, I like to imagine that I will deal with it very well, but I think maybe in the back of my mind, there's always some apprehension because I do hear my mother talk about how depressed or moody she gets if she doesn't take her hormones or estrogen or whatever it is that she needs- likes to take. My mother has gone through- she is in menopause now."
R: "Oh, okay."
C: "I don't know."
R: "That's- I think that's pretty clear."
C: "Okay, good."
R: "You know, doing this over the telephone is much harder because we don't have visual cues."
C: "Right."
R: "I tend to be very visual, so it's harder for me. (Laughs) But I don't want to cut you off, but I don't want you to feel like you just have to fill up air time, either. So, I got that, unless you have something else to say."
C: "Good. I don't."
R: "Okay. You have the positive and negative aspects. Positive is 'Menstruating means that I am not pregnant,' and the one that I wanted to ask you about is 'It is cleansing for my body.' I think you mentioned something about that earlier but in this context, can you

just speak to that a little bit?"
C: "Yeah, well, I like to think of- when I think of all the holes that I have in my body (Laughs), you know that my mouth is an entrance, that my ears are maybe an exit, you know for ear wax or whatever, but I tend to think that our body does have these exit points. Oh- you know- even my pores are exit points, and maybe it's because um, I'm kind of a health- I'm not a health nut, but I just take care of myself, and I do consider good health a high priority in my life, so I've done a couple of detoxes, dietary detoxes, and I think that because I see most of the holes in my body as exit points, then I know that every month I'm getting rid of the build-up in my uterus that, you know, didn't get used by a baby and, you know, blood, that I think it's a good thing. It feels cleansing. I mean it feels- I can totally relate to the fact that it's this cycle and that my body is supposed to do it and it's natural. Um, so when it happens- I don't know, I just feel good about it and I feel like it's cleansing last month's, you know, miss, (Laughs) in a very crude term. Um, because I didn't use it, and so let's get it out of there (Laughs) and I don't know."
R: "Did you have that kind of overall reflective feeling of cleansing, um, before when you had really painful periods? When you weren't on the pill, did you tend to have that feeling?"
C: "No, I didn't have that at all, actually. I didn't- that was a time in my life where I didn't consider dietary health or exercise, so cleansing anything in my body didn't have any meaning for me.
R: "Okay. In the end you say that you don't mind the actual blood but the whole process can be inconvenient."
C: "Right, just, um, changing my pads, um, it's just not always convenient to leave my situation at work and go to the bathroom or sometimes I'm a little, uh, paranoid about the odor of – and I think, 'Oh my goodness, can somebody else smell what's going on in my body?' (Laughs) and uh"
R: "And you mentioned that sleeping in a stranger's bed makes you a little apprehensive- Are you going to bleed on their sheets."
C: "Right and you know what I was menstruating. I was visiting a girlfriend in Pittsburgh and I was on my period and I didn't have any clean clothes, so I borrowed an outfit of hers and I did bleed on her pants, and she was so sweet about it. I was so mad. I was like, 'Oh, Jesus, this is embarrassing,' and so I don't know. I think with things like that, I'm always a little, uh, I don't know, nerve wracking. I'm paranoid. (Laughs)
R: "Uh huh, would you say that at times like that – that what you talked about earlier – that stigma view of menstruation comes in?"
C: "Well, I don't know if it's so much about stigma. Well, yeah- you know what- I'm afraid that I'm gonna have to tell somebody that I bled on their sheets and they're gonna think, 'Oh my God, that's disgusting.' So, I think in my mind I do worry or perceive other people as thinking it's disgusting even if -you know what- if a girlfriend was maybe having a sleepover here and she bled on my sheets, I don't think I would care. I think I would be like, 'Well, that's just what girls do.' (Laughs) So… it's probably me projecting my feelings- or maybe projecting isn't the word- but you know what, I

imagine all these other people having thoughts and feelings about things that might not be true."
R: "Um hm, imagine their judgements and stuff like that."
C: "Yeah, right."
R: "Okay. Let's see here. Well, I'm just thinking about your situation, you know, given your background and stuff, and in your case, how might growing up with the personal care residents, the elderly folks, have impacted your experience of menstruation or your perspective, if at all?"
C: "Um, well I don't know that it has, but I can say that 97% of our patients were women. My mother actually stopped taking men after we had a couple that for example, men because they can, tend to pee on the wall more. And they grope you, and it's not even conscious or maybe they are aware, I don't know. But it just was so much of a hassle, we said no more men, so most of the time it was women. I feel that- I really don't know if there was a direct impact but if there was, since it was female-oriented, I think it would have been a very acceptable- that's not even the right word. Menstruation was a very normal, acceptable, uh, part of what women do. Uh, I don't know. I don't think I have anything else to say about that."
R: "Okay. When was the last time you had an open, anything goes conversation about your period?"
C: "Whew. Oh boy. Um…"
R: "If ever, I guess."
C: "I honestly think I have…, but you know what, I think it's been so long that I can't recall."
R: "Okay. As an adult, I imagine?"
C: "Right. As an adult."
R: "Okay. And um, you've heard this before, but I'm going to ask it again."
C: "Okay."
R: "On a scale of one to ten, with one being negative and ten being positive, which number best represents your feelings about menstruation at this time?"
C: "Um, I would go with a nine because, as I said, it, overall, it's not bad. And I only don't give it that one more point because mostly the inconvenience of it. Because of having to change my pad and buy a lot of new underpants, run my sheets into the shower right away with peroxide and cold water, things like that."
R: "Um hm, okay, and that was going to be my last question. How did you arrive at a nine?"
C: "Right." (Laughs)
R: "Okay. Do you have anything that you would like to add?"
C: "I can't say that I do."
R: " Okay. Well, I think that that is it."
C: "Oh, hey, I want to thank you for considering me for this."
R: "Oh, sure!"
C: "I don't know, I feel glad to help and it's been a kind of neat experience for me and it makes me feel like- I don't know it's always nice to be asked for your time and these

questions have kind of made me feel like I had some valuable things to say."
R: "Oh, absolutely."
C: "It's just neat."
R: "Oh, good! Well, I am really grateful. You know this is not a very easy topic- that most people want to leap right in and talk about."
C: "Actually, I can't wait- I would love to- I want to know what your—"
R: "The findings are?"
C: "Yeah, I really do."
R: "I'll send you a copy of the dissertation. How about that?"
C: "I would so appreciate that."
R: "Okay, I will do that."

APPENDIX B

AC/DC Song Parody
By Bob Rivers

See her stumble out of the kitchen with a blood-curdling scream
She's not the girl that I first met
This one's pretty mean

My woman chewed my head off me
Just the other night
She's got the mood, she's gonna brood
What gives her the right?

Well it's PMS, She's all uptight
PMS, And she'll pick a fight
PMS, she's on overload
PMS, Watch her explode!

Her brand new jeans are popping their seams
They're as tight as a clam
She's public reservoir number one
Hoover Dam
So bring home some chocolates, it might save your life

Tell her you love her and hide all the knives
Her friend is back in town!
Don't you mess around with PMS

She's all uptight
PMS, and she'll pick a fight
PMS, she's on overload
PMS, watch her explode!

"Honey, where are you? Who ate all the Dove bars? I really don't enjoy picking up your smelly socks!" Crying…. "I want to be held." Crying….. "Oh, oh leave me alone! Where are you going?! Come back here you coward!"

OHHH, What a bitch!

Laughter from woman… "I try."

PMS Treatment

By Earl Pitts

(Army bugle)

You know what makes me SICK? You know what makes me so angry I just want to lay down and roll around in a room full of thumbtacks. Me and Earl Junior was watching movies this weekend on cable TV. We watched this scary werewolf movie- see this guy- he knew he was gonna become a werewolf 'cause it was a full moon. So he got some of his buddies to take him out to this barn and chain him to a big beam. The next morning see- his buddies go up to get 'im and he ain't like a werewolf. He's more like whipped pup- all bloody and scratched up and from knawing at his chains all night. Well, I'm watching this and thinking- there's one great treatment for PMS. Forget this understanding hormonal urges stuff. Wouldn't it be a lot easier to live with women if we could just stake 'em in the backyard a couple days a month? Kids be scraping food scraps on a food plate after dinner: "Daddy, I'm gonna go out a feed Mom. Okay, but don't get to close or she'll bite."

When you get down to it, your werewolf is the perfect symbol of PMS: I mean- going out of your mind onc't a month – coming the next day having that terrible feeling of not knowing if you killed somebody- Thinking that you probably did. Perfect example- last night I'm sittin' there watching the game and hear, "Earl Pitts, you better get up here this instant! And I shout out, "Sorry, Dear, it'll never happen again!" Yeah. "You don't even know what I'm taking about!" And I said, "Yeah, but does it really make any

difference?" See, if she'd been tied to that big tree in the back yard, I wouldn't 'uv missed the play of the game.

Wake up, America! (Patriotic Music begins)

Hey, man, you wanna see something scary? You watch an old werewolf movie and instead of seeing Lan Cheney (actor's name), imagine it's your old lady. Then do what I do onc't a month- pop a top on a Silver Bullet and wait her out. I'm Earl Pitts, American, PSO.

Excerpt from Radio Broadcast

By Madd Maxx

…Do you wanna hear about my homelife?

I sure do.

Welcome to hell, Verne. Goodness sakes! I'm mad 'cause Mad Maxine ain't shut up for three weeks. She says, "I got PMS. I got PMS." I said, well you're about to PMS-me off!

Raucous Laughter from DJs

I'd like to fire the little feller that invented that PMS crap. Where'd that come from? We been around here on this earth for thousands of years, and all of a sudden in the last five years, everybody's got PMS! Goodness Sakes! PMS – We had another name for it ten years ago.

What's that?

BITCH!

(Raucous laughter)

Makes me so mad, I don't know what to do! Used to, I could go to work to get away from a bossy woman. Now I got a new boss that IS a woman!

(Laughter- "Ooo…)

Goodness Sakes! And I work construction!

That's what I thought, yeah. (Laughter)

And this woman, I'm telling you, she don't like men.

Is that right?

She ain't got no use for men. I mean, she ain't got NO use for men, and if you know what I'm talking about. It makes me so mad. She's got more flannel shirts in her closet than George Utley in Newhart, you know what I'm saying?

Laughter

I'll say it while I'm at it- she's a LESBIAN. A LES-BE-UN! Lesbian- where did they get that name? Go try to figure them out- boy, that name even sounds mean, don't it? Lesbian- I can hear it- "A gang of roaving lesbians were spotted outside town. Everybody shut your doors and lock your windas. The lesbians are coming!" (Incessant laughter) Goodness sakes! I'm expecting on the news to hear "American Navy F-14 shot down two lesbian jets in a dogfight yesterday." Give me a big ol' break and kiss my big ol' butt! Lesbians ruining my life!.....

PMS

By Jeff Foxworthy

Due to a hormone change, women do have a legitimate reason for being in a bad mood once a month. (Laughter) They do! And if you're a sensitive man, you can see this coming on. It's like with my wife- if I wake up in the morning, and I roll over and look at her and her head's on backwards, you know (Laughter). She's going "Gooood Morrrninng" (in The Exorcist voice) (Extended Laughter). I'm going "Where am I going to find an exorcist on a Saturday?" "Honey, could you put the bed down, I gotta pee. Just put the bed down, ah- ight?" (Laughter) But that's not her fault. That's hormones' fault. You just might as well check into Ralph's PMS shelter for men. (Laughter and applause) 'Cause a week is a terrible thing to waste.

I'm just thankful men don't have to go through this stuff. I ser- if we did, we would say things like- "Hello, Phil, look I don't think Ed's going huntin' with us today. Naw- he's crampin' REAL BAD." Hell, I just don't wanna be in the woods with him with a gun, if you know what I mean? (Extended laughter and applause) We'd be dangerous animals! (Laughter) Bringing each other home on the hood of the car- "Call me bloated!" (Laughter)

Does your wife ever warn you before she gets mad at you? My wife warns me- like we'll be on a long trip somewhere in the car- My wife'll go- "If I don't git somin' to eat soon, I'm gonna git uh headache and be in a bad mood." (Laughter) That must be a woman

thing. You don’t see men runnin’ around sayin’ “Harold, if I don’t git a taco, I’m gonna scratch the hell out of the dashboard, here. I ain’t kiddin’ ya. You better pull it in right now.” (Laughter- a woman yells “Oh, yes!”) And you can be in a bad mood if you don’t eat- you can be in a bad mood if you eat too much, too can’t cha? That’s the best birth control in the world. You can’t have sex if you eat too much. (Laughter) You don’t want anybody on top of ya. You scared you make noises. You never seen your Aunt Doris at Thanksgiving going, “Harold, give it up and give it up now.” (Loud laughter) “Damn the black-eyed peas.” (Laughter and applause)

APPENDIX C

Original Consent Form was printed on Duquesne University, Department of Psychology Letterhead.

Consent to Participate in Research

Researcher: Carolyn A Work, doctoral candidate for Clinical Psychology in the Psychology Department of Duquesne University.
Director: Dr. Eva Simms

Participant's Name: _____

- I do hereby consent to participate in a qualitative research project to investigate what it means to menstruate.

- I understand that this research is to fulfill partial requirements for a Ph.D. in Clinical Psychology and that the information I provide may be included in a dissertation and/or publications.

- I am aware that my participation will require me to provide written and spoken descriptions of how I have and do experience menstruation and the spoken descriptions of how I have and do experience menstruation and that the spoken descriptions will be audio-taped. I am aware that I will be contacted for a follow-up interview to answer questions the researcher may ask in order to clarify issues pertinent to the research questions.

- I am aware that all personal data will remain confidential: only my age, ethnicity, and my general past and current social information will be included in the written study. I understand that the descriptions I provide will become the property of the researcher but that care will be taken their security and my confidentiality by removing all identifying information. The follow-up interview will be audio-taped and later transcribed, and to further protect my confidentiality, audiotapes will be kept in a locked drawer by the researcher, and all identifying information in the transcriptions will be deleted. After the completion of the research, audiotape will be destroyed by the researcher.

- Whereas some women may find it beneficial and interesting to discuss their own experiences and to contribute to research, some women may find themselves a bit disconcerted by recalling their relationship with menstruation. I am aware that if I experience distress at any time due to my participation in this study, and want help, appropriate steps will be taken to assure that I am referred for therapeutic assistance.

- I also understand that if I have further questions regarding the nature of the research or methods of data collection, I am free to contact the researcher, Carolyn A. Work (412-551-0534), her advisor, Dr. Eva Simms (412-396-6515) or the Institutional Review Board Director, Dr. Paul Richer (412-396-6326)

- I am aware that I may withdraw my consent to participate at any time. A request indicating my desire to discontinue participation will lead to the removal of any data that I have provided from this or any other future studies.

- I am aware that in exchange for participation in this research a $25.00 donation will be made to a woman's charity of my choice (one of three offered), in my name if I desire. Receipt will be provided.

_____ _____

Date **Participant's Signature**

_____ _____

Date **Researcher's Signature**