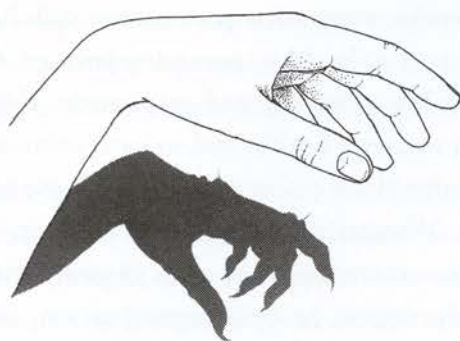


Part 2

Blessing or Curse?



1. Curse

There are few themes recurring so often throughout the modern world and through history as the idea that menstruation is shameful and a threat to all concerned. Defined as a 'curse', traditionally menstruation was thought to give women extra powers to curse (and sometimes to bless). To curse means '... to utter against (persons or things) words which consign them to evil; to damn; to anathematise; to afflict with such evils as indicate divine wrath or a malignant fate; the evil inflicted in response to an imprecation, or in the way of retribution; a thing which blights or blasts ... slang for menstruation.' (Oxford English Dictionary).

The pervasive view of menstruation still has little to do with menstruation as a healthy, natural aspect of the menstrual cycle, fertility, sexuality, creativity and inspiration. I've even heard women who work in women's health (and so have women's wellbeing at heart) express negative views on menstruation. These are public women and role models. Women who should know better. There is a collective shadow over menstruation and menstruating women — we unconsciously negate or deny menstruation, accepting it as a bad thing. A curse.

In February 1986 I was 15 and on a two week school trip to Russia with a small group to practise our Russian and soak up some Russian culture. We were on an overnight train from Kiev to Moscow and I was sharing a sleeper cabin with my best friend, Robyn. I woke up in the morning with blood on the sheets and, as a

way of letting her know my period had come, I said to Robyn, 'I hate being a woman today'. She knew exactly what I meant. I looked out the window, it was light by then, we were moving slowly through a forest of cypress and pine hung heavy with snow. Snow was thick on the ground and on the tracks. It was very beautiful. Later that day, Robyn started to bleed too, and said to me, 'I hate being a woman today too'. It was too embarrassing to say period, although we often called it 'the curse'. Everyone did. (Catherine)

THE SHADOW

The 'shadow' was described by psychologist Carl Jung as our own dark side, characterised by what we judge as 'inferior, uncivilised or animal' qualities which the ego wishes to hide from others as our 'shadow'. Our individual shadow is always the same sex as ourselves. The shadow is something no person consciously wants to be — wild and unsocialised. Yet when we become 'civilised' it's at the expense of spontaneity, creativity, strong emotions, deep insights, the wisdom of instinctual nature, a wisdom that may be more profound than that which any learning or culture can provide. A shadowless life becomes shallow and spiritless, and may result in a collapse into helplessness and ill-health.

But the shadow is persistent and won't easily be suppressed. Through integration, when the ego and shadow work in close harmony, the shadow is brought to consciousness — we feel full of life and vigour, our consciousness is expanded and we feel more physically and mentally vital, alive and vigorous.

The forces of a collective shadow are evident in any mass movement, trend, or gathering, or by the denial and negative attitudes expressed towards it. The writer D.H. Lawrence described the shadow as 'a conflict between the white mental consciousness and the deep red 'blood self''. When a shadow is stringently repressed by society, or when it has inadequate outlets, there is often disaster. Writing in 1918

at the end of World War I, Jung observed that the 'animal in us only becomes more beast-like' when it is repressed.

Even the number thirteen has long been endowed with shadowy qualities, and pops up in stories, folk-law and modern city hotels (which often don't have a 13th floor)! The solar year is divided into twelve solar months, while the lunar year and the menstrual year has months of approximately 29.5 days (sometimes incorrectly said to be 28 days) —more than twelve in a year. Approximately every third year will have thirteen full moons, and a woman with an average and regular cycle will have thirteen menstrual periods.

Both dangerous and powerful, the number thirteen itself came to be seen as a shadow — the number that represents menstruation, the moon, the curse and women's connection with it. Sleeping Beauty's father, in his denial of his daughter's inevitable menstruation, fertility and sexuality, did not invite the thirteenth wise woman to bless her at her christening. To 'forget' the thirteenth wise woman is to deny her blessing of menstruation and as menstruation *will come* it will then come as a curse.

On shadows, perhaps Clarrisa Pinkola Estes has the final wise word: 'The shadow also, however, can contain the divine, the luscious, beautiful, and powerful aspects of personhood. For women especially, the shadow almost always contains very fine aspects of being that are forbidden or given little support by her culture. At the bottom of the well in the psyches of too many women lies the visionary creator, the astute truth-teller, the far-seer, the one who can speak well of herself without denigration, who can face herself without cringing, who works to perfect her craft. The positive impulses in shadow for women of our culture most often revolve around permission for the creation of a hand-made life.' (Estes 1992, p. 236).

THE LEGACY OF THE WITCH HUNTS

The witch hunts of the Middle Ages are a classic example of unintegrated shadow. In Christianity the feminine traditionally

became equated with either the Virgin Mary or with the wicked temptress Eve. Everything of the feminine which was not the impossibly virginal, pure, white and unearthly Mary, became the shadow — the natural cycles of women, the blood, the connection with natural rhythms, the knowing by women of the earth and moon cycles, the natural wildness, the powerful bringing forth of new life. All that was not Mary became 'witch' and was persecuted.

In 1484 Pope Innocent VIII authorised two Dominican priests to write the *Malleus Maleficarum*, a handbook defining what witches did, how they were alleged to do it, and how to sentence them. Over three centuries it's estimated that nine million people (one hundred women to every man) were sentenced and murdered as witches by the church. Burning witches at the stake was designed specifically to kill without spilling blood. The power and danger was believed to be in the witch's blood and the *Malleus Maleficarum* stated 'Thou shalt not spill a witches blood'.

The evils of witches were described in the *Malleus Maleficarum* in the same way the Western Christian Church of the day described the evils of menstruating women. The church identified women with sin and a satanised sexuality, promoting a world and church in which only men and a male trinity had power. If a woman died in childbirth, or while menstruating, her family was not allowed to bury her in consecrated ground.

A fourteenth century Christian church edict said 'If a woman dare to cure without having studied, she is a witch and must die'. 'Study' was church defined and available only to men. This was also a class issue as the poor couldn't afford the fees of male physicians and were succoured mostly by women who had gained some skill in healing. Nature was the teacher of these women, not scripture, and they were reviled and persecuted.

The basis of witch persecution is the profound misunderstanding, mistrust and fear of how a woman's power grows with the moon and comes and goes with it, and how through their bodies and, in particular, through their reproductive organs, women are felt to have

peculiar and privileged access to medicine of a kind dangerously independent of male control. Descriptions of witches read like descriptions of PMS, menstrual taboos and curses.

Given the magnitude of the witch burning and the suppression of women we can only speculate what was lost to the Western world of the natural crafts of women — healing, herbs, midwifery, dowsing, dream-study, hypnotism, sexual fulfilment, all empowered and underscored by a proper knowledge and understanding of the menstrual and lunar cycles.

The witch remains a shadowy image in our society, mostly in fairy tales, but still that of the feminine — dark and wild with secret powers. She is not ruled by the dominant male culture, but obeys deeper, earthier and more universal rhythms and laws. Perhaps it's this archetype we most embody premenstrually and menstrually when we're at our best, most ourselves, most in touch, intuitive, inspired, creative, seeking to redress imbalances, drawing our power from within and less from without. It's also when we're at our worst, irritable, in pain, not ourselves, even violent, as we try to sustain our own or our culture's linear, non-cyclical mode. Perhaps this is why seclusion is good at this time as it supports our tuning-in at this naturally less worldly, more soulful time.

A CROSS CULTURAL CURSE

The power and the danger, the positive and the negative, the blessing and the curse, are inextricably linked together in a complex web. Common features across cultures are seclusion, taboo, fasting, physical restriction and sometimes, even abuse.

In some cultures women are secluded on their own, and in others in a women's menstrual hut, or tent. The seclusion in some cultures is a desire to isolate the polluting or cursing influence, and in others it's seen as a time for women to be separate from the world of every day concerns, to contain and focus the internal powers of this time in the cycle. Although the menstrual hut can be seen as a place of power or

pollution, menstruation always confers a different status, usually with negative connotations that evoke shame along with implications of power and potency.

In Ancient Persia menstruation was considered acceptable only when it lasted no more than four days. During this time, women were isolated in special rooms. After four days, if a woman continued to bleed, she received one hundred lashes and was returned to isolation for another five days. If she continued to menstruate after this time she received a further four hundred lashes as it was believed that she was possessed by a bad spirit, and a 'purification' in the form of whipping was thought to be the cure.

When an Andaman Island girl tells her parents her first blood has come they weep for her, in shame. The girl bathes, then must go into isolation for three days, usually in a specially constructed hut. There she must sit quite still — for the first twenty-four hours she is stripped of all her ornaments and is tied up with cords. She is given a backrest but must not lie down, go to sleep or speak. Her seclusion goes on with less severity for three days. Every day she must wash herself clean of the impurities of menstruation, bathing in the sea for a long time. She then goes back to normal life, but is still expected to bathe every day until her next menstruation.

While Indian village girls are often celebrated with gifts, song and dance at their menarche, there are many taboos relating to where menstruating women may and may not go and what they can do because of the potential harm they may cause. Tantric practitioners in India prize menstrual blood as a powerful substance, all the more from untouchable women, whereas in the general society it's thought the most polluting substance of all.

A menstruating woman is seen by Hindus as impure and are treated like an untouchable, the lowest order of the Hindu caste system. Hindus also believe that a menstruating woman is under the moon's influence and should be treated with respect (as in distance) and care. The Hindu *The Code of Manu* states that a menstruating woman shall be put apart for three days — she is not to look upon anyone until the

fourth day when she bathes. Orthodox Hindus are particularly concerned about the touch or glance of a menstruating woman, which is said to spoil food and curdle milk. Not supposed to bathe until after she has finished menstruating the woman then washes thoroughly to become completely purified and renewed.

Chinese tradition speaks poetically of menstruation as the Red Flood, Peach-flower Flow, or the Red Snow. In ancient China it was customary for a woman to separate herself from normal worldly activities during this time — she was not supposed to cook or take part in any family duties or religious rites, and her forehead was generally marked with a red spot to indicate her condition.

When a Muslim woman's period arrives she traditionally recites the Kalima, an article of faith. This ritual marks the beginning of her period of pollution which bars her from fasting, reciting daily prayers or touching the Holy Koran. Within the Islamic holy book the scriptures say that women are subordinate to men because of menstruation.

The traditional Judeo-Christian teachings are that menstruation is polluting and a menstruating woman needs to be separate for seven days, as anything she touches, or anyone who touches her, will be unclean. Orthodox Jews require that on the seventh day after menstruation ceases, the polluted woman has a mikvah, a ritual bath, to cleanse her.

The Christian Bible (Leviticus 15:19-33) describes, for fourteen verses and in great detail, the forms of a menstruating woman's uncleanliness and the means by which one can purify oneself after touching her or her things, or eating any food she may have prepared. 'And if a woman have an issue, and her issue in her flesh be blood, she shall be put apart seven days: and whosoever toucheth her shall be unclean until the even...' Leviticus was quoted as the ultimate authority by Senator Ervin in a US Senate session as the reason for not ratifying the Equal Rights Amendment as recently as 1972.