

Nobody Wants To Talk About It. Period.

Joe, you won't believe this! I am on my third tampon today! You wouldn't believe the blood I'm shedding!

No way, Mark! I'm on my second, but I use the super heavy plus. They're probably more absorbent!

I use the super heavy plus too, Joe! I must be like the world champion bleeder!

*"Hey, Joe, catch this!" (Raul throws a box of "Real Men Bleed Real Blood" tampons across the room to Joe.) "I bought these last week. They're the latest on the market and they totally rule! I can just feel them sucking out the blood!"**

If men menstruated, this is probably how it would be handled--as something to brag about, something to be proud of. And of course, rather than hiding their tampons and trying to deodorize their vaginas, men would toss their "masculine enhancement products" around like footballs, displaying them every chance they got. But men don't menstruate and the social response to menstruation is very different.

After writing "Panties," I said that I would write a column about menstruation. People laughed at me, saying, "Nobody wants to talk about menstruation." (Read, it's not something that men do, so it's not important.) Stubbornly, I checked out a book at the library called "The Curse" to look into the cultural history of menstruation. It was a nice, thick book, weighed about 4 pounds, and had a nice cover. I meant to read it, or at least skim it, but somehow I found myself much more drawn to the collected editions of Lynn Johnston's "For Better or For Worse" cartoon. I finally accepted that I didn't want to read 300 plus pages about menstruation and returned "The Curse" to the library. I did look up menstruation on the internet, but other than several sights about Islamic law on menstruation, I didn't find much. There were a few porn sights showing what I assume to be naked women, pulling what I assume to be tampons out of their crotches**, and a newsgroup of men heralding the virtues of having sex with their "ladies" when they were menstruating. I tried to let the subject go.

But the things that nobody wants to talk about are exactly the things that we need to be talking about. There is something important in the silence.

I know, I know. It's not a complete silence. There are ads about "feminine protection" devises. But that doesn't count as breaking the silence. I mean, what are they trying to protect us from? Oh, yeah, I forgot--the shame, stigma and inconvenience that go along with being a woman. That's why it's called "the curse."

Seen from a more neutral light, menstruation is simply a biological process. And it's important. It is a significant part of the process that allows our species to reproduce. Without it, we wouldn't be here.

But menstruation is not seen in a neutral light. It has been transformed into a cultural symbol of uncleanness and shame. Many cultures have special rules and regulations about what women can and can't do, including, in some cases, participation in religious ceremonies.

While many of the taboos have been dropped under the pressures of modernization, in European-based cultures at the least, the shame and stigma remains. Menstruation is the topic of many anti-woman jokes and putdowns. For example, if a woman is in a grouchy mood or even simply asserts herself, she is accused of "being on the rag." And I imagine that at least half of you groaned when you read about the men who loved to have sex with their "ladies" while they were menstruating.

Most of us learn that menstrual blood is disgusting. Oddly, it tends to be the capitalists who focus on the bleeding part of the cycle. Corporations offer us hundreds of products to "deal with" this nuisance. And because menstruating is affiliated with being dirty, we are offered numerous deodorant products to make us smell "fresh and clean as a daisy." And many of us obediently comply. We shove deodorizing tampons up our vaginas as casually as we put "stick-ups" near the cat litter box. Never mind the evidence that the fabric that many tampons are constructed with has been linked with cancer.

But at least advertisers talk about "it." The rest of the culture doesn't really want to. If you want to kill a conversation, bring up menstruation. If you want people to

think you are a nut case, talk about menstruation in a positive light, as something wonderful to celebrate. I used to have a friend that celebrated her "moon cycle." She even had reusable cloth pads and bought a special bowl to soak them in overnight. She didn't even mind the cramps; she said that it brought her back in touch with nature. People used to think that she was nuts.

When I was writing a paper about the women's movement in graduate school, I ran across a pamphlet that focused on celebrating the menstrual cycle. I was trying to be open minded about it and tried to share my discovery with my office mates. I actually read passages to them. They responded with howls of laughter and groans of disgust. And this was from a group of ardent feminists. One ritual for reclaiming one's "womankind" described in the pamphlet involved getting naked and smearing one's menstrual blood all over one's face and body. And they have a point: if you can smear yourself with your blood, it very likely will normalize it to a degree.

It is this "lack of normality" of something that for most women of childbearing age happens every month that is most odd. This "lack of normality" marks the degree to which sexism still rules in our society. This, I think, is the point that Gloria Steinem was trying to make in "If Men Could Menstruate." We accept our difference as a deficiency, the thing that makes us uniquely female as a curse.

But it doesn't have to be this way. As the feminists of the 1970's used to say, the personal is political. You can challenge the misogyny behind PMS jokes and the conceptualization of the menstrual cycle as a curse. And the good news is, you don't have to smear your menstrual blood on your face to make a statement. One way to buck the system is to begin appreciating your menstrual cycle for what it is, a biological fact that keeps the species going, and let go of the cultural shame and disgust associated with it. Menstruation is a significant part of what makes women female, and accepting the biology behind the female sex is a significant step towards accepting the fact that women are beings worthy of respect. Another thing you can do to challenge the misogyny behind the hoots and groans is to literally challenge it by pointing out that if men could bleed, it wouldn't be seen as a problem.

*This is based on "If Men Could Menstruate" by Gloria Steinem and can be found in "Outrageous Acts and Everyday Rebellions." For another humorous take on menstruation, check out "The Kathy and Mo Show" either live or on video.

**I didn't pay to get the full picture, so I can't guarantee what the pages actually showed.

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