



Without renouncing our status as “modern women,” we can begin to reclaim our native connection to the earth, the moon and our own sacred, cyclical, powerful nature.

In the Flow

The Intimate Ecology of Womanpower

by Marcy Axness, Ph.D

We all recall, I'm sure, the first childbirth class we attended; for some of you reading this it may be a very recent memory—or it may even be yet to come! There we gather, in a room full of pillows, partners, and blossoming mothers-to-be, to receive the great secrets about this most mysterious process of labor and birth... anxious to learn just the right breathing formula, just the right mantra for a successful labor, a good birth. (And maybe the epidural protocol, just in case.)

But guess what? Childbirth preparation begins long, long before a woman steps into that classroom: our most potent lessons about our birthing capabilities begin as we perceive our own mother's attitudes about her body and its creative functions. It is this intimate ecology that my column explores this Earth Day issue, in honor and appreciation of birth and environmental activist Jeannine Parvati Baker, who dedicated her life to raising (or more accurately, *restoring*) women's—and men's—awareness of their connection to the earth and its cycles, and of the innate wisdom and power that resides in each of us.

What was your mother's attitude toward her period? This sets the tone for how we embrace, or subtly (and not-so-subtly) reject, our awesome creative powers as women... which is certain to fundamentally impact how we labor and birth! In Parvati's landmark book *Conscious Conception* (written with Frederick Baker and Tamara Slayton) she invites women toward “an increased sense of trust and appreciation of their reproductive cycles—an invitation to reflect upon these cycles as a means of soul-making and spiritual development that will vibrantly color all aspects of our lives.”

And all aspects of our daughters' lives! Whether our daughters are teens (like mine) or just wee babies, it is in their interest as future fertile and well-birthing women that we as mothers do some womanly self-inquiry, and perhaps heal an intergenerational passage of attitudes: Are our bodies a locus of integrity, honor, power, or are they reservoirs of “unfresh” odors that need to be tamed with FDS? Are we empowered by the life-

giving energies of our miraculous, mysterious body, or are we diminished by the onslaught of cultural messages that casually characterize those energies and power as “the curse,” and by commercials that counsel young women about the best product to medicate away the entire experience, cheerfully pronouncing “your period is more than a pain (it's bloating as well!)”? And, saddest of all, are we too familiar with apologetic monologues in which uncomfortable mothers hastily explain to their embarrassed daughters about “that time of the month” in terms that engender disgust and shame (or at the very least, apprehension) rather than a sense of the sacred privilege and power of fertility unfolding within them?

True, privilege and power aren't usually associated with our “visit from Aunt Flo”! But Jeannine urges us to reconsider the true meaning of our monthly moon time: “Menstruation is the red flag that salutes the hard work of the preparation for another conception. Modern women suffer premenstrually because they do not fully comprehend the magnitude of the psychic and nutritional preparation that is required to build a healthy lining for an embryo. Your body has not slackened off from its commitment to reproduction and pulls from every cell to fulfill this mandate.”

In other words, our body and psyche work hard to create conditions for new life and our obliviousness to that fact (for many) brings suffering. In traditional cultures who abide by natural cycles of many kinds, menstruating (and likely pre-menstruating) women typically withdraw from many of their regular duties and activities, to have time and space for contemplation and self-nurturing. To me it makes sense that the modern woman might become irritable or snappish, as something primitive in her may be urging her toward solitude but her culture has raised her to be machine-like: an unpausing, linear automaton rather than a cyclical, sacredly fertile woman.

Dr. Jackie Guiliano, a professor of environmental studies, points out that early people knew they had to understand nature's cycles and work with them, particularly the cycles of the moon. The new moon heralds the sowing of seed or the

harvesting of crops. During the waxing moon, all things that need to grow must be tended to. She reminds us that a woman's menstrual cycle is indeed a powerful force that intimately connects women to the Earth and the moon; the average menstrual cycle is 29.5 days, the same as the cycle of the moon. Before the era of artificial light or chemical contraception, women may have ovulated and menstruated throughout the world at about the same time because of the moon's influence! (Many women today have experienced the synchronization of menstrual cycles among woman who are living or working together... do we pause to consider how amazing this is??)

In her writing and worldwide teaching Jeannine Parvati decried our modern alienation from our own bodies, from our knowledge of them and our trust in them. Not only is this bodily knowledge and trust fundamental to healthy birthing, it extends beyond individuals to our collective mother, our planet Earth. Jeannine believed that the “lack of attention to the care and maintaining of this planet is sharply reflected in the way we have ignored the messages from our own bodies.” Womb ecology, world ecology.

At any moment we choose, without renouncing our status as “modern women,” we can begin to reclaim our native connection to the earth, the moon and our own sacred, cyclical, powerful nature. We can take note of the moon's cycle, and begin to notice how much more successfully, for example, big projects and important events tend to flourish when scheduled during a waxing moon... and how much more intimately we can “go deep” with friends, lovers, children—and most of all, ourselves—during a waning moon. (And vice versa: if you're hoping to attract a big audience to an event during a waning moon, you may be disappointed; but your small audience will want depth! The moon influences us all, whether or not we take notice.)

We can take some healing cues from Jeannine Parvati's stories about the evolution of her own “menstrual consciousness” in her classic *Hygeia: A Woman's Herbal*, such as how she came to recognize the inherent grief during menstruation: “I

intuited that there was no need to create a dramatic upheaval in my home, in order to get my mate to ‘make me cry’... I could re-own those feelings myself, and have a good cry, letting go of the egg, the hope, with my tears. Then the blood flowed easier and more pleurably.” We can return our monthly flow to the earth, which—as “out there” as it sounds to us “civilized” gals—isn't that hard and is surprisingly satisfying. I drop my organic cotton tampon into a cup or so of warm water in a pitcher dedicated to this purpose... let it soak a bit... then squeeze it out completely. It's an awesome fertilizer for your roses! But more importantly, points out Jeannine, it's a good way to “get in touch” with your period. “Handling your ... blood helps to discharge lots of our self-disgust, so inculcated by media, myths and poor health. ...The handling of our own secretions will prepare you for the sometimes bloody experiences of childbirth, and other crises. Blood will cease to ‘freak you out.’”

I can think of no better childbirth preparation, for ourselves, and for our daughters.

*In appreciation of
Jeannine Parvati Baker (1949–2005).
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QUANTUM PARENTING
(818) 366-7310
www.QuantumParenting.com



Marcy Axness, Ph.D., is an early development specialist, adjunct professor at Santa Barbara Graduate Institute, and counselor specializing in fertility, pregnancy psychology and early parenting. She is mother to Ian, 18, and Eve, 15.

Reach her at 818-366-7310, or via her website at www.QuantumParenting.com.