



FAITH

# Power in the blood

Anne Bokma reflects on her last period — and the spirituality of menstruation

ILLUSTRATION BY JEANNIE PHAN

I was 14 when I got my first period at my Dutch grandmother's house. I remember lying on Oma's couch, clutching my stomach to try to quell the strange cramps that had overtaken me. Later, in the wash-room, the rust-coloured stain on my underwear alarmed and excited me.

Oma was excited, too. She promptly called my mother on her party line to pronounce for all to hear in her broken English, "Anne has her *periods!*"

My mother showed up with a package of Stayfree pads, big as a cereal box, and we marvelled over the newfangled

adhesive strip that had recently replaced the seemingly medieval menstrual belt. "You're a woman now," my mom said. Oma beamed. It was my own *Red Tent* moment. But rather than gathering in a menstrual hut in the dusty desert like the women of biblical times, we were together in my grandmother's kitchen, where I was served cups of tea and tiny pink Midol pills to ease my cramps.

Earlier this year, a little shy of my 56th birthday, my monthly menses, typically in perfect sync with the moon's cycle, suddenly stopped. Over 42 years, I've had about 500 periods, bled for a total of around seven years and

made it through some 2,500 alternately weepy and rage-fuelled PMS days.

I should be relieved to be done with the mess and the moods, and yet I feel a tinge of sadness. Having my period made me feel fertile, even when I was long past child-bearing age. It made me feel young and connected to the mysterious ebb and flow of life. My cycle seemed essential to my very femaleness. So yes, a suitable mourning period seems appropriate, especially since my time of the month has come to an end during an epic era in menstrual history when activists are riding a red wave of empowerment.

Efforts to lift menstruation taboos include sports figures such as Olympian swimmer Fu Yuanhui daring to speak openly about the impact of their periods on their performance, and trail-blazing commercials for menstrual products depicting actual blood instead of blue windshield-wiper fluid. There's ongoing lobbying for free sanitary supplies in public places, as well as for mandatory disclosure of the ingredients in pad and tampon products, including potentially dangerous chemicals. On Nov. 8, International Red Tent Day celebrates the spirituality of women's cycles, reclaiming as a symbol of sisterhood the tents or huts where menstruating women were traditionally segregated. There's even a recent video game, *Tampon Run*, developed by two high school girls as a response to feeling like they couldn't openly discuss menstruation.

It seems the stigma around this natural bodily function is fading faster than a droplet of plasma on a super-absorbent maxi-pad.

This wasn't the case during my own teenage years. Before long, the sense of pride I felt at the onset of my period devolved into shame. Menstruation may be integral to half the population, but we aren't supposed to openly acknowledge it. In my Grade 6 health class, all the boys were marched out of the room, lest their tender sensibilities be offended when it came time to talk about periods. Our red-faced male teacher was so flummoxed, he placed a transparency of the female reproductive organs upside down on the overhead projector.

When I asked my mother about using tampons, she squirmed. I squirmed, too, when I tried and failed to insert one for the first time. The instruction sheet that came with the box of Tampax I had secretly purchased was much like Ikea furniture directions — looks easy, but it's harder than you think.

Since I was raised in a strict fundamentalist home where the Bible was a daily fixture, I knew the Good Book was rife with battles resulting in merciless slaughter and gory bloodshed. But it seemed nothing was considered quite as abominable as a menstruating woman.

Leviticus 15 lays out the taboos. Take verses 20 and 21, for example: "Anything she lies on during her period will be unclean, and anything she sits on will be unclean. Anyone who touches her bed will be unclean; they must wash their clothes and bathe with water, and they will be unclean till evening."

And this stigma is hardly unique to the Bible. Every major religion (save Sikhism) has placed restrictions on menstruating women — whether it's forbidding sex or

denying them the right to partake of sacraments, touch holy items, fast, engage in ritual prayers, go on a pilgrimage or even chant. Orthodox Judaism demands that women immerse themselves in a *mikveh*, a ritual bath, following their periods to achieve purity. Even the Buddhists have a problem with menstruation, suggesting that it steals a bit of a woman's life force or *qi*.

The message is clear: bleeding women are filthy. Frightening, even. But they are powerful, too.

Rev. Abigail Johnson, a retired United Church minister in Toronto, points to the New Testament parable of

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the woman with prolonged bleeding who pushes through a crowd to touch the cloak of Jesus and is instantly healed. "At once Jesus realized that power had gone out from him," recounts Mark 5:30.

"Even though there's a negative connotation to menstruation in the Old Testament, we can see in this text that there is a spiritual or energetic power that women have at that time of the month," says Johnson.

In Gloria Steinem's revolutionary 1978 essay "If Men Could Menstruate," she imagines a world where, if men suddenly bled every month, it "would become an enviable, boast-worthy masculine event." Politicians and religious leaders would cite menstruation as proof that only men could serve God and country in combat: "You have to give blood to take blood."

The essay describes menstruation as a "symbolic death and resurrection," and indeed, each cycle represents the potential for an egg to become new life, before the uterine lining is shed in a crimson splatter. It's a miraculous monthly occurrence, far worthier of celebration than shame. A similar spirit animates today's menstrual movement. "The curse" be damned. It's all about period pride.

As for me, I am once again what I was before the age of 14 — period-free. On the plus side, my mood has levelled, the painful cramps and hormonal acne flare-ups have disappeared, and I won't miss those awkward moments at the grocery-store checkout when the teenage boy scans my box of tampons (I did figure out how to use them eventually).

Yet I can't escape the thought that my womb has become a tomb. There will be no more monthly resurrections — the stone has been rolled shut on this particular stage of life. I know I must accept this ending gracefully and get ready for what comes next.

Hello, hot flashes.

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