

Nobody talked about these things. It was all in the songs and myths that belonged to the ceremony.

(Delfino Cuero)

My Grandmother Is Visiting Me

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L'auteure, une femme Ojibway qui vient de la péninsule Bruce en Ontario, explique le besoin pour les femmes de célébrer les rites de passage de l'enfance à l'adolescence au moment de la menstruation. Traditionnellement les cérémonies au moment de la puberté étaient un honneur pour les indiennes.

I remember one school lunch hour: we girls sat chatting in the sun on the school steps at the south entrance. That day I relish above all other school days. We, each in turn, revealed to the group experiences with our monthly "periods." We talked of the various "old-wives' tales" we had heard, the up-to-date information from our mothers, the embarrassment of being caught unprepared, and the whispers behind our backs when we had to leave school with a girlfriend for a discreet visit to her house. Some of the younger girls surprised us when

they spoke up: others sat listening attentively. Our talk drew to an end and we linked arm around waist until there was a chain of about twelve of us spanning the school-yard, laughing and dancing in the sun while our younger sisters, cousins, and friends watched.

There was one older girl who had participated in our talk but refused to join our dance. "I don't know what you girls are being so foolish about," she admonished. "Ah, come on," we sang. We had been discreet in the sharing of this information and we had *needed* it. She herself had come into her cycle almost a year and a half before most of us. Yet, as we rejoiced in our new-found identities, acceptance, and understanding, she hung back in defiance of our "childish behaviour."

In retrospect, we had intuitively initiated ourselves into womanhood, a traditional practice long lost to our reserve and our people.

Now, some twenty years later, I have three daughters, the oldest I am expecting, soon (all too soon), to come into her "Changing Woman"

times. In this day and age and because of my past experiences and the unsanitary propaganda which has plagued us all, I become increasingly concerned as her time approaches. I look back to that solitary young woman who refused to acknowledge herself as one of us and sat disdainfully on the school steps and I want my daughters to feel comfortable and positive about approaching womanhood.

Years ago, or so it seems, I did purchase a copy of *Our Bodies/ Ourselves* and found out things my mother never told me, things she probably never understood, and I have shared this book with my daughters. At times we have sat down together and looked through the book with an explanation here and there when needed. Sometimes, I have seen them carry the book off to a quiet little corner. Once I even found bookmarks inserted in the pages (pictures) that held significance for them: the life cycle from the development of a relationship to the birth of a child and then to growing old. Yet, having done all that I can possibly do for

my daughters, I have not done enough. Some embellishment is needed.

From what I have gathered in talks with my women friends and associates, as well as from a few men and through reading, there might well be merit in reviving old ways, (some) traditional practices and ceremonies. (I say *some* with hesitation because one of these practices, "the menstrual hut," is surrounded with so many negative connotations which I am not fully prepared to contest. I would be drawing from the "oral tradition" and coming head-on against the one argument which is an everlasting pain in my side: "That which is not written down" or recorded will not substantiate any argument to refute the negative attitudes and connotations surrounding a great many of the traditional practices.)

In their zealous attempts to destroy "pagan" ceremonies the newcomers to this continent unwittingly destroyed "the moral, educational, and ethical systems" by which the "primitive" indigenous nations lived. After disease and warfare took their toll, the rest were left to flounder on the brink of extinction and confusion as their traditional teachings were lost or swept to the roadside.

No people goes down until their women are weak and dishonoured, or dead upon the ground.

(a Sioux proverb)

In the recording of our cultures by non-native observers, many of our legends and myths have been misinterpreted. Our first (Ojibway) woman, Geezhigoquae, is given very little recognition and is portrayed as being incidental. The Great Spirit, we find, "had brought into existence *his* vision." A good example of this patriarchal view appears in Basil Johnston's well-acclaimed *Ojibway Heritage*. (Johnston was educated by the Jesuits.) So heavily laced is it with Christian dogma that one has to search the debris to find balance and the other half of our beginning(s).

Subsequently, each Indian woman to arise in recorded history is also incidental, or a deviant of some sort. The fabled Indian princess Pocahontas is the prime example; underneath her fall the various squaws. Here in Canada, the *Indian Act* attests to this. "An Act Respecting Indians" it is entitled and, encoded deep inside, we find that *only men* are considered "Indians"! Indian women are considered so only if they marry an Indian man.

So many time I have heard the traditionalists speak of the "power" a woman has during menses. The way they tell it is positive and spoken of with reverence. The terms they use are poetic and meaningful: "Changing Woman" — "My grandmother is visiting me." The "rites of passage," puberty ceremonies, were/are looked upon as gifts to women, a time of joyful recognition in the change from girlhood to womanhood. Such recognition was/is felt to be fundamental in the growth and development of a healthy woman and her survival in the community. These practices varied from nation to nation, but in general the pubescent girl was isolated from the community and during that time attended to by female relatives who instructed her in "the skills and character essential for her survival in the community." When this time passed, the new woman was presented to the community through ceremony. In some cases, as with the Apache, these were elaborated with a "giveaway" (potlatch), while others were kept very simple.

Today, native women are

"reclaiming our power on the female side of life" through the formation of "Women's Dance" groups and "Women's Circles." Along with education in nutrition and health, they are instructing and providing reinforcement for young girls in caring for themselves emotionally. I believe that "the old ways" evolved somewhere in time and history, not without purpose. Women, in the traditional world of the native North American, still understand their bodies in terms of cycles, seasons, and phases: Mother Earth, Grandmother Moon, reflections of ourselves, daughters of the first woman. Is it not time to dust Grandma off, to stand her on her feet? For some day my daughters will be grandmothers, if they choose.

So many times in near panic, I have considered taking my daughters off to the wilderness or back to the reserve, where I would build a high one-windowed tower or plant a prickly bush around my two acres, far away from the unsanitary propaganda, Barbie dolls, commercialized womanhood, and struggle to be accepted as a woman. It is not that I want to place my daughters on a pedestal. Heavens, those kind of girls have to be looked after and pampered.

I have already approached a woman about the approaching menarche (first menstruation) of my daughter(s). Soon we will be making plans: A Rite of Passage for my daughters, not a struggle into womanhood. That's what I want for my daughters and my heart will sing because I am a woman!

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