

## The modesty days are over

I'd like to talk about blood. About shame. About bodies. About hearts. About voices. About language. About compassion and courage.

I once put my head above the parapet to write on Facebook about a bitter first-hand experience of the negative effects of menstruation on the singing voice<sup>1</sup>, having just struggled through a recording session with a recalcitrant voice and an aching womb (and the results turned out to be unusable). The outpouring of gratitude from other women that I had spoken out about this was overwhelming; so, too, was the realisation that many of us are still horribly ignorant about the ways in which our bodies and minds are affected by our menstrual cycles. I was not educated proficiently about this when I was young, and for some reason I avoided educating myself until I was 37 years old. Well, I say 'for some reason', but it's shame, isn't it? This topic is still taboo, even between women. We are still persuaded that we do not have the courage or the tools to tackle this. I am going to pretend I do have courage, today, and I am going to find the bloody tools.

I am a menstruating woman. Every month, at least, I bleed. This is a normal and regular occurrence, of course, but it doesn't mean it is easy. This is a normal and regular occurrence, and yet we still struggle to talk about it. I certainly don't know how to talk about 'it' with ease. I still haven't found the helpful words: I feel caught between the clinical language of 'menstruation', the ugliness of the word 'peeeeeeriod', the inaccurate but gentler option of 'my cycle' and such ridiculous Victorian alternatives as 'my monthlies', 'the curse' or 'the flowers' (ugh). With friends I might embrace the dramatic and say "My womb is falling out"; I'll stick with 'menstruation' here, though (I think it's the neutrality of that word that I dislike — I feel that the scientific term somehow negates the lived experience). Then there's that dirtiest of labels: 'sanitary products'. How to make a girl feel dirty in one blow. Or 'feminine products': OK, I'll take 'menstrual' and 'menstruation' after all.

My menstrual periods are quite heavy, can be very painful and my cycle is quite unpredictable in length. Handling all this is sometimes, frankly, a bit much. Let's break it down.

A heavy period means a lot of blood. Most menstrual products claim to give about 4 hours 'protection' but, unfortunately, what we understand to be an average menstrual discharge is still very much on the low side, based as it is on rather outmoded research<sup>2</sup> with some evident flaws (the oldest calculated menstrual flow with an *equation* rather than by gathering data; another calculated menstrual blood but not menstrual *fluid*). Hence the anxiety that so many women have about leaking — this is a very real threat when the majority of the products do not adequately support us. Yes, I do use a menstrual cup. It's brilliant, I love it, it has changed my life but sometimes, still, my cup overfloweth. On my heaviest days, I can be confident of about 2 hours protection. That may well not get me through a journey; that may well not get me through a rehearsal or an important meeting or a walk; it certainly doesn't get me a full night's sleep.

A painful period saps a lot of energy and requires a strategy for pain management. The body cramps to shed the lining of the womb. A brilliant bit of engineering but, for me, sometimes the pain is completely debilitating. For many years, I got through it by overlapping 4-hour doses of paracetamol and ibuprofen, but the one without the other was most definitely not enough. Beware ibuprofen, readers: since a frighteningly marginal overdose on ibuprofen (I'd accidentally bought double-strength tablets over the counter), I can no longer depend upon that most useful of analgesics.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.cbc.ca/music/how-menstruation-affects-opera-singers-1.5019278>

<sup>2</sup> <https://rubycup.com/blogs/news/how-much-do-we-bleed-during-our-period-my-absurd-journey-through-the-world-of-menstrual-research>

An unpredictable cycle means that it's impossible to anticipate when my attention might be diverted by all these challenges. Special days can be ruined. Already stressful concert days can become utterly isolating. I'm quite used to all this, to battling through, but sometimes it feels nearly impossible. And recently my cycle shifted to being only 3 weeks long, which means about 17 menstrual periods a year rather than 13. Hurrah...

As I lay awake at 4am this morning, rocking rhythmically as I struggled with the pain and waited for the paracetamol to kick in (unfortunately laced with caffeine, so I've now been awake half the night), I started acknowledging some of the worst times I've had during menstruation. All these things have happened to me:

- I lost one day of a 3-day trip to Dublin with my mum for her birthday because I could barely walk or talk for the pain — I tried, but I had to retreat to bed, and she was deeply shocked by witnessing me in this state;
- I accidentally overdosed on ibuprofen (taken against cramps on a gig day) and ended up with a peptic ulcer, the pain of which was unholy and which is still, about eight years later, triggered by ibuprofen on an empty stomach;
- I have had to rush off stage during a rehearsal because I felt I was about to leak blood visibly;
- I have hurried the 5-minute walk from the tube to my home, hot with shame and panic, as I could feel blood seeping into my jeans;
- I have stood happily in my bikini by the edge of a pond, post-swim, only to discover blood coursing down my leg;
- I have woken up feeling myself leaking, clutched myself as I got out of bed and scrambled to the bathroom, leaving a thick trail of blood spots on the floor — I was in an Airbnb apartment, and I have never been so grateful for lino.

I would like for these experiences not to terrify me. I would like not to carry them alone. They are, I hope, quite extreme, and it's for that reason that they're seared in my memory, but my guess is that they are more common than we acknowledge — after all, I do not have a medical condition. Most of all, I would like to be able to find some way, some words, to communicate that I am suffering without worrying that I am breaking some code of professional or social etiquette. I still pretend I have a headache, for god's sake, if someone sees me taking analgesics. I still struggle to say to my own father "yep, I am menstruating". I am a long way off being able to walk into a rehearsal room and create the conditions for myself in which I can do my work without wasting energy on pretending that I am fine. And that is the point of all this — I don't need sympathy for the sake of sympathy; I want to be able to drop just one of the struggles.

I read that in the past, menstruating opera singers were given 'modesty days'<sup>3</sup>, days off in acknowledgement that they might well need to be writhing around in bed in agony rather than wearing a corset and pretending to be fabulous on stage. How far we've come... I'm not advocating this, really, not least since my erratic cycle would make this quite impossible and I have actually always managed to soldier on, but can you imagine this even being *discussed*?

The other thing that we don't discuss enough is that it's not just one's body that goes through this monthly 'shedding', but one's mind, one's soul, even. In my twenties and early thirties I used to take some small comfort from the idea that my menstruating body was doing something natural that was part of the wonderful system that would one day enable me to conceive, gestate and bear a child. How amazing! And how much I looked forward to those months during pregnancy and nursing when I would be spared the pain and mess of menstruation. I always imagined I would have children but now, at the age of 40, each menstrual period is lacking that comfort; in its stead

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<sup>3</sup> <https://www.csmusic.net/content/articles/sing-through-your-period/>

is grief. Each month, as I shed my blood, the fleshy home I build again and again to hold my unborn child, I also shed some hope. So many menstruating women are journeying through the most intimate and challenging of issues concerning getting pregnant, not getting pregnant, losing or aborting a pregnancy. If we take up the struggle to break the taboo, let us do so by increasing our compassion and imagination, remembering that for many, the emotions that may accompany the blood may also be very painful.

Do not be mistaken: this is not the sort of thing I write or talk about easily. My upper lip is naturally pretty stiff. When weighing up whether to share this, several possible reactions stormed through my head, and it alarmed me to realise that the censoring voices are male. I immediately hear a man saying "Oh god, I don't need to read about this...". I worry that I become "that woman who talks about periods". I imagine saying to a conductor, "Hello, I'm Juliet. Lovely to work with you. If you could beat out this 5/8 bar that would be really helpful. And by the way, I'm in a lot of pain and bleeding heavily today", and foresee only their panic or irritation and the private criticism that this is 'inappropriate'. Where do these voices come from? I don't think I've actually encountered men around me saying these things, but the projection feels so deeply ingrained and, to be honest, not unrealistic. I would say that only two of my partners have proactively engaged with my menstruating body, and I don't believe it's incidental that both had been educated in France, where sex education actually exists and where every woman has a gynaecologist. We don't help ourselves by excluding men from the conversation.

Perhaps I need to be clearer what I expect, though. I am not saying that I need to talk about my menstruation all the time, not at all — it's not that interesting; the objective, rather, is to reduce the weight of shame and suffering that comes along each month. Surely a bit more steady candour would help and we would all benefit from making it something to which one could at least elegantly allude.

I find myself considering the segregation of menstruating women in other cultures and the effective segregation of menstruating women in my own culture, through quite other means and with quite other impacts. I find myself imagining assimilation and acceptance. I have no idea how to claim those for myself, and I still don't feel I have the right language, but I want to try. Because next up it's the menopause. And nobody has taught me how to handle that.

Juliet Fraser, 20 June 2020