

Call of the Wild

by Deborah Witwicki

Justisse Director Geraldine Matus and I both turned 50 this summer. Carrying a century between us, we headed out on the highway to celebrate at the pristine Waterton Lakes National Park, south of Calgary.

While taking a boat cruise across the lake to the Montana border of this international peace park, we learned an amazing fact about pregnancy in momma bears. The boat guide told us that although bears mate in June, the fertilized eggs do not implant until fall, before winter hibernation. If the momma bear is undernourished, the egg will not develop. If she is a healthy weight, the egg will implant and grow into an embryo.

I was in awe at nature's brilliance and kindness in tending our momma bears.

Then, back at work after Labour Day, cups of coffee helping to keep me on task (or so I believe), I read Laura Wershler's provocative and passionate article, *What We Can Learn from the Penguins* (pg. 2). It made me think of how often we disregard the myriad miracles of nature in our own bodies.

When my body tells me it's tired or my soul is overwhelmed with the business of the world, I argue that I have work to do and I perk myself up with coffee. Often, when I have to go to the bathroom, I argue that it is not a convenient time. I'll wait until this article is done. I eat when I'm bored or sad and starve when hunger interrupts my schedule. I am equally cruel to the writer in me -- taking it for granted when the words flow and punishing myself with the blank page when they don't.

As a diabetic, I have become all too aware of the importance of pain. It is because diabetic neuropathy disables pain signals to the extremities, that diabetics cannot feel wounds to their feet, for example, and their body does not rally to heal them. The grizzly result can be



amputation. Yet, I still regard pain and illness as an enemy or a nuisance -- a disruption to my agenda. I don't respond compassionately to their calls.

As Megan Lalonde's *The Healing Power of Self Dialogue* (pg. 4) attests, there are many authorities that feed this war against our own true nature with patriarchal interpretations and diagnoses as well as treatments designed to exploit rather than attend to the wonders of our female bodies.

So I see this fall issue of *Femme Fertile* as a *Call of the Wild*. A call to learn about, embrace and honor our true natures.

Would we be so cruel as to interfere with the wonderous conception of the mother bear? Could we imagine that the modern bear momma wants to get on with having a family so she can get back to her career in the wilds. So we make the egg stick, whether it wants to or not, and both momma and baby die from the strain.

We contributors to *Femme Fertile* invite all women to come to know their bodies better. Embrace "Body Literacy" (pg. 6). Show the compassion, care and respect for our own bodies and souls that as heartfelt women, we would show to any living creature.

Please Keep in Touch

We welcome your questions, comments, story ideas and expressions of joy, pique or outrage.

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A Fortnight Women's Magazine for Maids, Mothers
and Crones

Femme Fertile



What We Can Learn from the Penguins

By Laura Wershler (First printed in The Calgary Herald, August 30, 2005.)

March of the Penguins, the documentary directed by Luc Jacquet, is drawing crowds all over North America. It tells the compelling story of how the emperor penguin responds to what Charles Darwin considered to be all species' strongest instinct — to reproduce.

The penguins walk and slide for some 70 miles to their breeding ground every year. They court and conceive in minus 50 degree temperatures. When the eggs are laid, they are held on the mothers' feet, protected from freezing by the folds of her lower body. Soon afterward, the parents must engage in a death-defying dance wherein they transfer the vulnerable eggs to the fathers so the mothers can make the long journey back to the ocean for food. The fathers stand guard until they are near starvation and the mothers return.

This Antarctic odyssey conveys the seeming grace, courage and dedication with which the emperor penguin lives out its reproductive imperative. It carves into icy relief the exact opposite form taken by our post-modern response to reproduction.

It's not that humankind set out to create reproductive chaos. The moral and religious directives that drenched sex with shame and guilt were, and still are, meant to save us from ourselves. The scientific advancements that have led, directly and indirectly, to a plethora of infertility and endocrine disorders, were initially intended to liberate women and help us responsibly manage our fertility.

When you add in our toxic assaults on the environment and the human body, it is a wonder we manage to survive at all.

The outcomes of this reproductive morass are evident everywhere.



One example is "reproductive tourism," now flourishing in California, where the under-regulated fertility industry is attracting clients from all over the world hoping to circumvent the damage done by personal choices made long ago or environmental influences beyond our control.

It illustrates how convoluted our relationship with the reproductive imperative has become. And how wrapped up in commerce it has the potential to be.

Reproductive tourism enables menopausal women to get pregnant with eggs donated — make that sold — by college students looking for ways to pay tuition. It attracts desperate couples, with money, willing to risk dangerous multiple pregnancies disallowed in their own countries by laws limiting the number of embryos that can be implanted in a woman. It ignores the imbroglio predicted to arise should the children of foreigners conceived

with American eggs seek U.S. citizenship.

Emperor penguins will always be Antarciticans, at least until the ice pack on which they breed melts away. They have babies when their biological clocks tell

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them to. Males and females share equally the responsibility of conception, incubation and raising their chicks. *March of the Penguins* shows us they do so with what appears to be affection, nurturance, determination, commitment and perseverance.

And what do humans do? We get pregnant when we don't want to and can't get pregnant when we do. Men conceive children, then abdicate all responsibility for them. Women navel-gaze about whether to have babies in their 20s, 30s or 40s and contemplate freezing their aging eggs for future use.

We treat our fertility like an enemy until we want it to be our friend, then wonder why it has deserted us. We expect science to save us from ourselves, but it can't. One day, our labyrinthine efforts to manipulate our primary instinct will collapse under the weight of our unrealistic expectations.

There is little grace, much cowardice and even more disregard in our adversarial relationship to the reproductive imperative. Absolutely everyone must take some responsibility for this.

We have got to get it together about sex and sexuality.

We must learn to honour, not fear or flaunt, the love and desire we feel for each other. Talk to our kids about sex as if we truly want them to have healthy, happy sexual lives and relationships.

Educate girls with foundational knowledge they need to understand their fertility. Raise boys to respect their procreative instincts in ways that foster relationships and enlightened fatherhood. And embrace the complexity of human sexual experience that goes far beyond the boy/girl, gay/straight dichotomies that we waste energy debating.

We have got to get it together about managing and protecting our fertility.

We, both users and providers, must move beyond the idea that drug-based contraception is the be-all and end-all. Seek to understand the blood mysteries of women's lives instead of promoting menstrual suppression as a panacea. Increase the use of effective cervical barrier methods that can also reduce sexually transmitted infections and protect fertility. Disavow religious edicts and cultural constraints against condom use. And engage men's minds in ways that connect them emotionally to their reproductive capacity.

The reality is we will never again live the way we lived thousands of years ago when life was all about survival and the reproductive imperative. People are not penguins. But can their amazing story not inspire us to assess this mess we've created?

It is in many ways attributable to our dishonest, disrespectful and destructive approach to sex, sexuality and reproduction.

Somewhere between the march of the penguins and the California fertility rush, lies a path of harmony and commitment that we would be well served to follow. If we don't, we may find ourselves on the road to oblivion.

Laura Wershler writes on issues relating to sexual and reproductive health. She is the Executive Director of Planned Parenthood Alberta.

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Femme Fertile

A Forthright Magazine for Maids, Mothers and Cronos

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The Healing Power of Self-Dialogue

by Megan Lalonde

Reading about pregnancy and sexuality in *The Healing Power of Illness*, by T. Dethlefsen, and R. Dahlke, provoked a deep anger in me. While I have no qualms with the authors' use of metaphor to understand the nature of health and illness, I believe that their underlying patriarchal assumptions about the female body and experience have the potential to be deeply wounding.



It seems to me that the authors conform to an understanding, quite common in Western thought, that the male body is the normative standard against which female qualities are judged. In such a polarity, the female body is thought to embody traits in opposition to the male body. Hence, if males are creative, females are passive; if males are normal, females are deviant.

The authors state: "A woman's monthly periods are an expression of femininity, fertility and receptivity. She is totally at the mercy of this rhythm." This implies that women are not coherent beings. The image is one of a genderless mind or

consciousness that is at the mercy of an unpredictable cycle, like a tossed ship on a stormy sea. A woman is a cycling being, not a being at the mercy of a cycle.

Such interpretations give us pause to consider that culture creates much of the meaning attributed to menstruation. Recognition of these external influences on our thinking frees us to come to our own positive and personalized experience of being a cycling body.

I also found it problematic that Dethlefsen and Dahlke assign women the role of receptivity and men the role of creativity in the biology of reproduction. Emily Martin highlights such thinking in *The Egg and Sperm: How Science Has Constructed a Romance Based on Stereotypical Male-Female Roles*:

A woman is a cycling being, not a being at the mercy of a cycle.

"Take the egg and sperm. It is remarkable how 'femininely' the egg behaves and how 'masculinely' the sperm. The egg is seen as large and passive. It does not *move* or *journey*, but 'is transported,' 'is swept,' or even 'drifts' along the fallopian tube. In utter contrast, sperm are small, 'streamlined,' and invariably active. They 'deliver' their genes to the egg..."

What about re-imagining the woman actively opening and taking in a man, her egg choosing and calling forth which sperm is the best one, then consciously rearranging and repairing its DNA to best fit with her own? That she constructs an entire human being out of her body

strikes me as an essentially creative act in and of itself. Perhaps we could understand sex, conception and menstruation as well as masculinity and femininity as dynamic interplays of creativity and receptivity instead of polarizing them. Both male and female must be open and receptive to the universal life force and active participants in that creative energy.

Dethlefsen and Dahlke attest that "those who have painful periods are in fact finding it painful to be a woman". Are the authors perhaps suggesting, by extension, that if a *female* refuses to accept the "receptive," "passive" and "self-sacrificing" role of a *woman*, she will suffer from cramps? Or could it be that it is painful to be a woman within a patriarchal society? I find the idea that cramps mean a woman finds it painful to be a woman tremendously problematic. I had terrible cramps from menarche into my early 20s, and I spent those 10 years thinking about, dreaming about, writing and reading about myself as a woman. I did rituals for myself; I painted my face with menstrual blood. I still had cramps. I created moon observation rituals; I kept a blood journal, and I used cloth pads. I still had terrible cramps. I read Louise Hay; I said affirmations; I got involved in feminism, women's spirituality... I still cramped. I finally stopped being vegan and started eating meat again. I eliminated grains and most dairy. My endometriosis cleared up, my cramps reduced to almost nothing and my flow lightened. My cramps didn't mean that I found it difficult to be a woman; they meant that I was eating the wrong kinds of foods for my body. I love

being a woman even more now than before because my beloved body doesn't hurt so much. I find a fundamental problem in the belief that if a woman doesn't give into the gender role assigned to her, her body will be uncomfortable and cause pain – it sounds like poor Eve in the garden all over again in a different guise.



but not through intercourse. Freud and his followers would have us believe that this resulted instead from an inability to “give one's self up”. To perpetuate a myth such as this one is profoundly damaging to women and their relationship with their bodies (not to mention their relationship to their mates) because it pathologizes normal female functioning and limits normative sexual expression to a

I did rituals for myself; I painted my face with menstrual blood. I still had cramps.

What I believe is essential in learning from an experience such as this, is that it is my body that led me towards what I believe is my destiny – to work with women and concepts of femininity, menstruation and fertility. I believe that illness can be a gateway to learning and growth, but when one assigns meanings based on set metaphorical interpretations of illness, it limits each person from interpreting their challenges in an individual way and limits also a social and environmental understanding of that illness.

I was also irked by the authors' conclusion: “Frigidity reveals that a woman is not prepared to give herself fully, but wants to ‘wear the trousers’ herself. She does not want to submit or be the ‘underdog’; she wants to dominate.”

Traditionally, frigidity has meant an inability to achieve orgasm from intercourse, but what has been forgotten over the last 200 years is that, in most cases, a woman does not achieve orgasm from the thrusting of a penis in her vagina, simply because it does not provide enough clitoral stimulation. This is why many women can experience orgasm through masturbation

procreative model alone. Imagine how damaging it must be to be taught that sex is *the* way to experience polarities and that orgasm is *the* way to altered consciousness and then not be able to do it in the expected or proscribed way. In addition, so many women have experienced sexual abuse and oppression, which can often make it difficult to express their sexuality with ease and joy. As Natalie Angier theorizes, women's orgasms are deliberately fickle, appearing most reliably when women have a sense of agency and power in their relationships. Perhaps if women “wore the trousers” more often, there would not be such a fuss about frigidity.

However disturbing I found many of the ideas put forth in the book, there is still value in experiencing mind, emotions, thoughts and life circumstances in concert with health or illness of the body. I believe that the key is to open a contemplative dialogue with our bodies, listen and allow them to lead us where we need to be, without judgement or preconceived ideas about where that may be.

Megan Lalonde is a student of the Justisse Holistic Health Practitioner Training Program.

How can the comfort of familiarity rise up like a god, as if change itself had become something demonic?... And so, the simple truth...the tracks we have walked in for so long become our lives, in themselves a prison.

Steven Erikson, Deadhouse Gates

The Body Literacy Imperative is Born or Who Stole the Birth Control Pills?

As active minds and imaginations come together at conferences, things can sometimes get out of hand.

In the case of the *Society for Menstrual Research 2005 Conference* last June in Boulder, Colorado, it was one woman's birth control pills that got out of her hands.

In jest, the artificial-hormoneless woman declared that she knew just the culprits responsible for her missing pills: Planned Parenthood Executive Director Laura Wershler and Justisse Healthworks for Women Director Geraldine Matus.

Conference participants had to agree, the woman had pretty solid circumstantial evidence. Matus and Wershler had earlier made an impassioned case for women's rights to self-knowledge and the choice of holistic care to tend to their reproductive and overall health. Their presentation -- *Recovering the Blood Mysteries: Psycho-Physiological Rationale for an Interactive and Affirming Reconnection to the Menstrual Cycle Through Fertility Awareness and Holistic Reproductive Health Care* -- resonated with health care professionals and lay-people alike.

As it turned out, the woman recovered her pills after she reflected on her own reproductive health and determined to chart her menstrual cycle. So, we think it was Goddess who intervened.

Many participants discovered that we women have been missing something far more important for far too long: **Body Literacy**.

The dynamic duo coined the term to help get the message across that discovering our own bodies and responding to them is not a whimsical pursuit but rather an essential knowledge vital to our wellbeing.

What Does Body Literacy Mean to Me?

Femme Fertile contributors speak to what body literacy means to them to initiate what we hope will be an ongoing discussion with you about this provocative concept:

The concept of body literacy occurred to me after I read a novel illustrating the disempowering impact of illiteracy. The inability to read diminishes self esteem and opportunities to participate in the exchange of ideas. The connection to the lives of girls and women is obvious – the education of girls is a key strategy in all international development work. It struck me that most educated women in developed countries live with another kind of illiteracy -- they are not taught to “read” or understand their own bodies. On the contrary, they are taught to distrust their bodies and accept various artificial means to “manage” them. Learning to observe, chart and interpret her menstrual cycle events is the only way a woman can acquire body literacy. Otherwise, she must hand

over power and decision-making about her sexual and reproductive health to medical care providers who themselves are often body illiterate. Body literacy enables a woman to understand how her health and wellness is connected to her menstrual cycle. She can then engage in meaningful discourse with care providers and be a full participant in decisions made about her health. **Laura Wershler**

*It is my assumption that we acquire body literacy over time through a continued sharing with peers and wise elders. That sharing includes a detailed understanding of how our **whole** body works and how that understanding may be meaningful for us. That understanding includes the science of our bodies, but also its mysteries – beauty, blood, and heart – and our response to them. Body literacy is a deeply intimate and holistic relationship with our bodies and the selves we are that dwell in our flesh.* **Geraldine Matus**

Those of us who have grown up in Western culture tend to perceive ourselves as being composed of two distinct aspects: a mind and a body. As a consequence, we often have difficulty expressing or consciously experiencing ourselves as embodied, emotional beings. Body literacy, or learning to read and understand the language of our body, is the first step in the marvelous journey of reconceptualizing and then experiencing ourselves as deeply whole, integrated and intuitive beings. It is the beginning of a lifelong dance with/of ourselves.

Megan Lalonde

Now, Dear Reader:

Won't you please join in? With words, a dance, a poem, a prayer -- explore what body literacy means to you. And if you're inclined, please write to *Femme Fertile* and share with us at editor@justisse.ca. (Full contact info on pg. 1)

Woman to Woman

Reproductive Health Care Practitioners Answer Your Questions

Hot Flashes at 24

I am 24 years old and hoping to start a family in the future. For the past few months, I have been experiencing hot flashes and dizziness. I am worried that I may be going into menopause prematurely. I am also concerned about whether I will be able to get pregnant in a few years?

Not Ready for Menopause

Dear Not Ready,

Hot flashes are typically associated with perimenopause or menopause. Decreased levels of circulating estrogen levels trigger changes in hypothalamus communications to the central nervous system. This causes vasomotor changes – temporary sweating, blushing, and flashes of heat that last from a few seconds to a few minutes and may affect part or all of the body. Hot flashes are commonly associated with an imbalance of estrogen and progesterone; in particular post-ovulatory low progesterone levels.

Thyroid disease and other disorders may also cause hot flashes and/or dizziness. It is best to consult with your health care provider as soon as possible. Have her assess your basic health, in particular thyroid function, and estradiol (E2), progesterone, follicle stimulating hormone, luteinizing hormone, testosterone, insulin, and cortisol levels. If you chart your menstrual cycle, note where in your cycle the hot flashes occur and advise your health care provider.

If you have noticed growth of facial hair and/or excess weight gain in your abdominal area or

have difficulty losing weight even with reduced caloric intake, you may want your health care practitioner to rule out other endocrine disorders such as PCOS (polycystic ovarian syndrome) or Syndrome X (an endocrine disorder marked by insulin resistance).

If pregnancy in the next few years is on your agenda, the sooner you attend to this concern the better for your long-term reproductive prospects as well as your overall health.

Broccoli Benefits,

Is it true that broccoli keeps my cervix happy when I am on birth control pills?

A Veggie Lover

Dear Veggie Lover,

Your cervix loves vitamin B9 or folic acid. Folic acid is found in broccoli and other brassica vegetables such as cabbage, cauliflower, brussel sprouts and bok choy, green leafy vegetables, and fruits such as strawberries and oranges. Cervical cells depend on folic acid, more so than most other body tissues, for health.

Folic acid is important for cervical health, neurological development of the foetus, and adult brain and neurological function. It assists in the production of DNA and RNA, especially during the rapid growth that occurs during infancy, adolescence and pregnancy. Folic acid and vitamin B12 together regulate red blood cell formation and normalize iron metabolism.

Adequate intake of folic acid during the first 12 weeks of pregnancy is critical in preventing



miscarriage, and birth defects such as spina bifida, cleft lip and palate, limb defects, and some heart defects. As little as 1,000 mcg (1 mg) can be preventative.

Folic acid reduces a woman's risk of human papilloma virus (HPV) infection, the most common cause of cervical cancer. A low folic acid level decreases the body's ability to fight HPV infection. Remarkably, adequate folic acid intake helps prevent early abnormal cell changes (abnormal PAP test) from progressing to cancer.

Birth control pills and other synthetic estrogens interfere with folic acid metabolism. Women on birth control pills are encouraged to supplement with up to 5 mg of folic acid per day and have regular PAP and folic acid blood level tests done. About 5% of women are functionally deficient in folic acid, even with normal blood levels, and have an unusual need for folic acid.

To keep your cervix and body especially happy, you may wish to learn to chart your cycle and practice natural birth control.

Just Ask Us

If you have questions you would like to ask us, please contact us:

Woman to Woman

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Some Closing Thoughts

When she's not being a counsellor, an holistic health practitioner, a teacher, a wife and mother, our Justisse Director Geraldine Matus sometimes finds time for poetry. We thought it apt to close this issue of *Femme Fertile* with a poem she wrote about a conversation she had with women who were exploring a core aspect of body literacy: what they called their vulvas.

What's in a Name

*I call mine
"Chipenka -- little
bird".*

*Shame calls hers
"down there",
"my privates".*

*Propriety named
hers by her
husband's name, when married
Promiscuity chose an acronym,
fashioned from the initials of all
her lovers -- supercalifragilistic-
expialladoshis
Prudishness pursed her lips in
silence, desiring courage to
change the topic.*

*Mystery boldly announced her
christened treasure's name a
secret.*



***Watch for the Winter
issue of Femme Fer-
tile for more on inti-
mate women's issues
and body literacy.***