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## THE CLASH OF NATURE & CULTURE:

### *Its* Impact On Women

**W**e are born into nature and are an inseparable part of it. Yet modern culture with its overemphasis on materialism and hyper-rationality has left us disconnected from the experience of our natural selves. Just as the natural world has been polluted and desecrated, so have we. The purity of our inner essential selves has been tainted and obscured with the thought forms of a superficial, consumer driven society.

The clash of culture with one's inner nature can be particularly injurious to women, beginning most notably at the time girls enter puberty. The natural changes to both body and psyche signal the onset of the most sensitive time for the formation of a girl's feminine identity. Nature tells her

that she is moving toward adulthood, with the potential for bearing children, as she begins to hormonally embody the feminine qualities of nurturing, empathy, and the ability to merge with another; sensibilities that she first experiences internally, and will later express out in the world. Yet much about today's culture carries the suggestion that her value is based primarily on her outer looks, with little or no emphasis given to the power, depth and wisdom of her inner essence.

The pressure to look outwardly beautiful, along with the prevalent lack of emphasis on a girl's inner nature disempowers her at the core, and results in a multitude of emotional and physical symptoms, many of which can plague her for a lifetime. With a dearth of images of women exuding inner qualities of strength, courage, and the radiance that ema-





nates from innate self confidence, rather than their outward appearance, where is a young girl to go in order to comprehend who she truly is, and how is she to learn about the depths that live within her?

As girls mature into womanhood, two events influence the unfolding of their feminine identity with unequalled impact. One is when a girl's breasts first begin to develop. The other is the onset of her first menstrual period. These times are incredibly sensitive for her psychological and emotional development. The ways in which those around her react to her developing body powerfully influence her ultimate feelings about herself as a woman. Yet the world around her, and those closest to her, also suffer from a paucity of knowledge regarding the profound importance of those changes and their influence on her psyche, and may be less than alert to the nuances of the subtle, yet powerful and far reaching effects on her mental, emotional, and physical well-being.

The hormonal changes within a girl's body at the onset of puberty mark the initiation of a process that will transform her from childhood into adulthood. During this time, her mind opens to a new vision of herself as she begins her journey towards womanhood. Not only her mother, female relatives, friends, and teachers, but also the media's portrayal of women and womanhood provide her with a range of role models to emulate. It is a time when her mind is particularly open and susceptible to new impressions. The growing breasts contain genetic signals and hormones connected to the qualities of nurturing, sweetness, sustenance, love, healing, and empathy, so these emotions also begin to course within her. She becomes aware of her potential to mother a future child, or to give birth in another sense to something unique in the world that expresses her feminine essence. However, since our culture tends to ignore or undervalue the particular attributes intrinsically contained within those budding breasts, young girls can

easily fail to then value those qualities in themselves. Thus, the powerful energies contained within her feminine being can be overlooked, and risk vanishing from her consciousness.

The advent of a girl's first menstrual cycle is a highly significant event in her life because she is now biologically able to bear children. This marks profound changes both in her body and in her life's purpose. The cycle of changing hormonal output begins to effect her physical, mental and emotional states on a monthly basis. The events surrounding the first menstrual cycle, and the input she receives from those around her, are critical to the development of her self-worth, and form impressions in her mind that leave a lasting impact on her sense of identity, as well as her emotional and physical states of being. Seen from a medical perspective, the onset of puberty is a natural biological change in a woman's reproductive development. Yet, what is missing is an explanation of its deeper symbolic meaning and importance as she approaches womanhood.

Whether this momentous change is treated with sensitivity, affirmation, and pride, or neutrality, insensitivity, and derision, it lays the groundwork for the development of female related symptomatology later in life.

Body and mind are one continuous flow of neural and chemical signals. The negative feelings of self that a young girl experiences as she begins to develop trigger the release of cortisol and other stress hormones, which have been found to impact physical health, as well as emotional well-being, far into adulthood. The study of the interactions between mental processes and physical health is at the forefront of the current field of psychoneuroimmunology, or PNI, which examines precise links between one's thoughts and emotions and their corresponding neurological and chemical impact on the formation of symptoms in the body.

Research by Ahkter Ahsen, Karl Pribram, and others who study the impact that negative cultural attitudes and influ-

ences have on the women's symptomatology, have found that women who had negative experiences when they first developed breasts, or at the onset of their menstrual cycles, have stronger PMS symptoms such as cramping, bloating, irregular menstrual cycles, heavy bleeding, ovarian cysts, and increased moodiness, as well as more general symptoms such as depression, anxiety, low self-esteem, headaches, insomnia, and others. Most of these women were also shown to suffer increased difficulties as they entered menopause.

A great many women I have encountered in my practice report having experienced some form of emotional pain, rejection, or confusion as they began to develop. For example, the kind of jokes and disparaging comments about budding breasts, which are often made by the boys of their peer group, or even, occasionally, by other girls, bring many girls a deep shame and humiliation. Other women recall feelings of vulnerability and inadequacy when suddenly confronted with sexual attention from older boys, which at that age they were not equipped to handle. Some reported feeling inferior because they were the last in their class to develop. Deep isolation was experienced by many who felt alone and puzzled as to what was happening to them, since no one adequately explained to them what was going on with their bodies.

At one time or another, most girls experience some degree of self-contempt when comparing their natural bodies to the media images of the ideal feminine desirability. Feelings of fear, confusion and inadequacy were also experienced by women whose mothers treated their developing breasts and first menstrual cycles with indifference or insensitivity, or who failed to offer genuine praise in their process of becoming a woman. Ahsen and Pribram found that the origin many of the symptoms that women suffer from in their current lives originated in the events that occurred when their bodies were changing from girlhood to womanhood.

Typically, the first information a girl receives is through her mother, a school health class, or through friends. Within a girl's peer group, friends generally lack sufficient experience and wisdom to discuss it correctly, and often pass on frightening or inaccurate information. In health classes the knowledge is often presented in a dry, impersonal manner, explaining the biology of ovulation and menstruation, while overlooking the associated emotional components. Mothers often find it difficult to discuss sexuality with their daughters, imparting discomfort along with the information, which the daughter will sense and internalize. Even mothers who are comfortable discussing their daughters' physical and sexual development might talk about it in a practical and helpful manner, yet may not be enlightened about the deeper symbolic meaning of the event. Thus the knowledge passed on to girls about what is going on in their bodies is very often lacking in richness, depth or meaning. Conversely, in pretechnological societies the onset of puberty, and monthly menstruation, have often taken on almost mystical meanings, surrounded by rituals deeply embedded in the culture.

I recall working with one girl who was just beginning to develop breasts and was unaware that they were showing. She was in a physical education class, wearing a T-shirt and was instructed to do jumping jacks. As she was jumping up and down,

a boy in the class began to make fun of her bouncing breasts, taunting her and ridiculing her. Thus the first awareness she had of her feminine self was associated with deep humiliation. When she went home and told her mother what had happened, her mother did not respond empathically, but told her that they would remedy the situation by going shopping for a bra. Without knowing it, the mother's response left her daughter feeling confused and unimportant because she did not attend to her daughter's embarrassment, nor did she explain with care what was going on in her daughter's changing body.

Another patient, a 40-year-old woman, told me that her first menstrual period occurred while traveling by train with her mother and an aunt. She had not been prepared for it, and was frightened when she saw that she was bleeding. She thought that she was dying. When she told her mother and aunt about it they merely said, "Oh, you are now a woman." She did not understand what that meant or how it related to her sudden bleeding. They told her to put some toilet paper in her underwear until they could get something more adequate for her. Not much more was disclosed about the event at the time. The insecurity and fear generated from that event was suppressed in her until, many years later, she began to discuss it in a therapeutic setting, and came to see that the headaches, cramping and bloating she experienced during each menstrual cycle originated from that event on the train.

It is a sad commentary on our society that our young women are desolately immersed in a culture that little understands the power of their feminine essence. The profound rite of passage that occurs as girls first make the transition from childhood towards becoming a woman is the optimal time to teach our girls to embody and honor the feminine within them. It is a time to impart to them factual information about the changes going on in their bodies, but also to convey the immensely potent and benevolent power they carry within themselves for a future world they will soon inhabit. For it is precisely the qualities inherent to her feminine nature—nurturance, empathy, love, which can bring about cohesive understanding of the unique role enlightened women can perform in healing a damaged world. Therefore it is imperative to fully understand and honor this time of transition in the young girls around us, as they contain within themselves the precise attributes necessary for a new and life affirming vision of life. ■

*For more information on this topic read Dr. Akhter Ahsen's book, "Menstruation and Menopause: Imagery Therapeutics In Social Context."*

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