

Can the Red Tent Ritual be Relevant to Society Today?

By Victoria Karalun

Native Americans honored the time of menstruation with the 'red tent' ritual. Women would live in a separate lodge while menstruating. During this time, a woman was considered to be more creative and in tune with the spirit world. I find this ritual to be attractive and believe that it can be relevant to the present day.

Menstruation is generally a time of altered state for a woman. In many cases, it is difficult for her to continue her regular activities as if the menstruation were not occurring. Society as a whole does not aim to understand this conflict of biology versus modern lifestyle, and expects the woman to hide it. Instead of telling her that she is more creative or has heightened perception, both positive qualities, she is told that she has PMS – a syndrome. Often, this causes the woman to feel ashamed of her body and the process of menstruation.

I do believe that this altered state can be used to harness a greater level of creativity or spirituality, but our present society does not place value on this and instead expects the woman to continue working her usual jobs. This prevents a woman from reaching her potential and exploring parts of femininity that we are not currently raised to understand. When a girl begins to menstruate, she is usually given a tampon and told to wear 'granny panties' on these days. The suggestion is that she should literally plug her body to hide what is happening, and consider herself to be less desirable. She should put a figurative mask on and not consider herself to be attractive or powerful.

Despite, or perhaps because of this, there has been a recent surge in the red tent ritual being symbolically utilized by a small number of women in the U.S. These women recognize the benefit of honoring the feminine power of menstruation, and though it is not realistic for a woman to live in a

different place regularly during menstruation, coming together in a group with other women to celebrate feminine energy for a short time can symbolically fulfill the desire of fellowship and understanding that the red tent originally created.

My own experience in this area began in 2013 with an invitation from a friend to attend a 'red tent'. I did not know what to expect, but wanted to see what it involved and keep an open mind to what it could bring to my life. The event was held in a dimly-lit room draped with red cloth, and included belly dancers, storytelling, food, singing, and drumming. It was an intense and uncomfortable situation for me as I was not used to this atmosphere of people openly sharing feelings and some topics that are usually off-limits. I was more of an observer than a participant, but could see how deeply the experience affected other women in the group, and was fascinated by this world that I had not known existed.



[My friend Heather and I at the first red tent event I attended; you can see that she is used to this atmosphere and therefore energized, while I am not and feel uncomfortable.]

Shortly after, I happened to be hired by the San Diego Birth Network to photograph another red tent event. This one was larger and since I was in my comfort zone behind the lens and not expected to participate, I was able to get more of a sense of the value of this type of gathering. Each woman was invited to step to the front of the 'tent' and talk of her experience of childbirth. No other woman was allowed to speak while the story was being told, to create a quiet listening environment in which the storyteller was able to feel heard. I noticed that the effect of this was that each woman who spoke was able to process a situation that was likely unresolved, and as a result of being listened to, she was able to emotionally bond with the other women at the event.



[A new mother telling her story at the San Diego Birth Network red tent event.]

Being someone who chases discomfort to learn more about people and society and feeling that there was a lot more to learn on this subject, I decided to delve deeper into the world, and discovered a business called Sacred Pregnancy which printed a quarterly publication and held retreats for birth workers in the style of a red tent. I contacted the owner of this company and she hired me to join a retreat the following month. In total, I traveled to and photographed ten of these retreats in 2013, and wrote a regular column for the magazine. The red tent environment I had experienced so far had somewhat prepared me for what I might find at one of these retreats, but it didn't come close to the week-long celebration of womanhood of the retreat, which I imagine is closer to the original red tent experience.



[Namid, receiving an 'honoring' in an outside bath in a commune in Topanga Canyon.]



[A group honoring at the Topanga retreat.]



[A participant of a retreat in Virginia having a tear wiped away.]

The first retreat I went to was held in North Carolina in February. I arrived at the large house on the tip of Cape Hatteras having very little idea of what to expect and feeling terrified but excited to walk in. I was to live with fifteen women in this house of four stories for the next week. Since I was last in and arrived only minutes before the start of the retreat, I was put in the ground floor bedroom with three others, on a mattress on the floor. There was snow outside and a gap under the door to the outside, so my strongest memory is of shivering all night and walking up many levels of stairs every morning to a bright and warm kitchen and living area on the top level. This feeling of living in discomfort and the unexpected was to define my time at the retreats, and I found it valuable as a tool of understanding myself and others. Indeed, if I hadn't been pushed so strongly out of my comfort zone, I don't believe I would have forced myself to find the value in the red tent experience.

At first remaining at arm's-length distance in order to observe, I was soon persuaded to fully experience the retreat, and to not only photograph, but also participate. It was daunting. To immerse oneself in the experience was to drop any inhibitions and be entirely open to and trusting in others. I was not an open and trusting person, and I believe the other women at the retreat took great delight in pushing my limits. Over the course of ten retreats, I spoke of pain and love, I swam in two oceans, I took around 100,000 pictures, I hugged trees and people, I painted women and allowed women to paint me, I opened to religious concepts I had not taken seriously before, I slept in the open under a moon rainbow all night with a new friend in Hawaii, I danced naked in a sequoia forest and in the ocean in Mexico, and I met many women who I believe I will be friends with forever. (My old friends thought I had gone mad.)



[Me, staring down a high rock I was trying to encourage myself to jump into water from, after I was painted and honored, in Maui.]

It was at the fourth retreat I participated in that I experienced what I view as a spiritual awakening. I spent many hours meditating under the sequoia trees and the moon, and later I grieved leaving this outside, communal, creative, loving lifestyle when the last retreat ended. In no small way was this life-changing for me, and it has shaped my life in many ways since.

I was able to attend a Sacred Pregnancy retreat with my friend who had originally taken me to my first red tent event, and our friendship has a very close bond in part due to this force of gathering-of-women. Since I applied this tribal ritual to my own modern life with profound impact, I believe that it can be relevant to and find a place in current society, symbolically if not actually during menstruation. Further, my own spiritual awakening during this time strengthens the premise that this type of gathering facilitates a heightened awareness of and link to the spirit world.

Seventy days of intense feminine energy turned me from somebody who was closed to people to somebody who embraces those I have in my life. It turned me from cold to loving. It helped me to work through old pains and patterns that were holding me back and keeping me small. It showed me that I am capable of finding the best experiences in life when I am most uncomfortable. Perhaps that is also the case for women who are menstruating. Perhaps if we view menstruation not as a time to hide and feel ashamed but instead as a time to use the feeling of discomfort to love, to be loved, to express ourselves creatively, and to push beyond previously held limits, we could again feel the power of the feminine that the red tent sought to achieve, and bring some much-needed softness to our hardening world.



[My meditation time in the Sequoias.]



[My friend Heather and I come full circle and experience a retreat together; I am now comfortable in this environment and have a spark in my eyes.]

References:

- <http://www.cycleharmony.com/stories/menstrual-myths-a-rituals/menstrual-rites-of-the-native-americans>