

Surgical Menopause - A Blessing in Disguise

I have experienced many blessings through surgical menopause. It is not what I would have asked for or intended, but I'm really grateful for what I have been gifted through this process, and I hope that you too can see the blessings of this initiation, if that is the path which you are walking, or if you are supporting another woman on this journey.

It may sound strange to see blessings in surgical menopause but for many women, there is often relief at having the condition or experience that led to the surgery, removed. I had cervical cancer and although I tried many natural therapies for 18 months to avoid such cancer, once it was diagnosed, I chose quite quickly to have surgery. And almost two years later there is no sign of any cancer in my body, nor the Human Papilloma Virus, which caused it, and for this I am very grateful.

One of the biggest opportunities of surgical menopause, was the time I had to contemplate Menopause, and my life in general. Having had surgery I was required to rest for a considerable amount of time, to heal. It took my body a long time to recover, and I am actually still recovering, though many would not see this. This meant I was not working, and I was not responsible for family. I was primarily responsible for looking after myself and healing.

I was on considerable pain killers for at least six weeks and most of my focus at the beginning really was around the healing of my considerable wound. I had abdominal surgery with the removal of my womb, tissue around my womb, my ovaries and lymph nodes. So it was a challenge, and yet I had all this time.

One of the things we really want to gift ourselves during menopause is time. Time to reflect on what has been our life thus far, what have been the patterns and stories we are living by, and what are the areas of unresolved grief...

And through this reflection, we can also come to imagine possibilities and futures.

How do we want to live the rest of our life?

Are we heading in the direction we want to?

Such a radical intervention, not to mention having cancer, gives you great pause. It also gives you time to be with these questions. I spent many hours in my garden, simply resting, dozing, being with myself... allowing myself the time I needed to reflect and heal. And my healing is ongoing.

Menopause is the last major physical rite of passage in your life until the final one, Death. Your menopause journey is an initiation into death. Having cancer is also entering into a relationship with death, and this is a good thing. Contemplating your finite nature can help you focus on your Life. At Menopause, you are halfway through your life, and usually more, and so you need to get real.

You need to strip away all that is false, own your regrets, and be with what is your life thus far, and how you are going to be in the future. This cancer and surgical menopause grounded me in the response-ability I have to myself to ride this journey with compassion and integrity.

The time and space I was gifted through the surgery is something I cherish, and I wish every one of you could have that too. I know many of you cannot as, work and family or other responsibilities prevent that. But making some time for self is essential. This is the pause in menopause.

You need to slow down and take time to contemplate this journey you are on. Much more being than doing!

Yes, this is a blessing of the “forced rest” associated with surgical menopause, and in my case cancer. People get this, they get cancer is a huge moment in your life, they might not frame it as a rite of passage, but they do support you to do what you need for your healing, and they understand you will “go away” for a while, usually hospital, and then once at home, they get you are still “elsewhere” while you heal. They don’t demand or expect much from you, except to heal. Friends and family generally understand that you will be changed and will return somehow different.

And menopause as a rite of passage is a going away and a return.

Though it’s not really articulated in this way, you hope that each menopausal woman, is given the space to go on the journey she needs to in order to heal her life. You hope she can return, recognised as changed, as the initiate returning as wiser, if not wise, woman. Remembering that this journey actually takes years – and like birth, it takes as long as it takes. Allowing yourself time to experience the full depth of this experience is so vital. So find as much time as you can to be with yourself.

Celebration was another vital blessing of this surgical menopause journey. In preparation for losing my womb I initiated and was gifted womb ceremonies. These were profound opportunities to be with the experience of womb loss, to surrender to the process I was undergoing, and to make sacred this sacrifice of my womb.

The loss of my womb, what my womb meant to me, how sad I was to surrender it, were foci of these ceremonies. I was given the opportunity to share my experience with my friends, to grieve with them, and it also gave them opportunity to reflect on their own relationship with their wombs. Which were for at least a couple of women, very challenging relationships.

And so there were lots of tears. We could all grieve the way in which our wombs are not fully appreciated and celebrated in this culture. We could grieve the traumas that have been endured by these wombs, the babies not born, or still-born. We could come together in this.

I encourage you all to hold a ceremony at the beginning of your menopause journey, to reflect on this process in your life, and to be held by other women in this.

I also had a very small and special ritual with my partner, where we honoured and blessed my womb, for her holding and growing of our beautiful children, for holding our lovemaking, for the creativity, and just for being a part of me. And this was very special too. These ceremonies have given me great strength through this whole journey. I was spiritually and emotionally prepared for what was to come.

Perhaps being in the public health system is also beneficial as there was two months between diagnosis and eventual surgery... And it was in this time that I went bush, went birdwatching, went floating in the rivers, felt deeply held in the currents of life as I contemplated loss, and death. Being in nature is so healing. She shows us the way, always. She shows us how natural and healthy these cycles of life-death-life are. And she is so damn beautiful.

Take yourself into her embrace, find spots to listen to birdsong, the flow of water, the breeze through the trees. Being in nature is so restorative and reminds us how natural our menopause journey is.

And for those of you not losing their womb, it may be that you grieve, and bless your blood, which will cease during menopause. And it can come as a shock to women who haven't really enjoyed their blood time, to come to this great altar, and begin to understand the depths of the learning, the rounds of initiation that your blood gave you.

Think about how you might want to celebrate/grieve your womb/blood loss. These ceremonies were "formal" ways to grieve this loss, this huge loss. There are times still now when I cry, but ultimately, I have a sense of Okayness about this journey and I know that these rituals really grounded me in this. I had time to say goodbye.

My perspective was that I was sacrificing my womb, for something. I didn't then know what for, but I knew that this was sacred. The word sacrifice is to make sacred, and so I made sacred this radical hysterectomy, this surgical menopause. My womb was an offering back to earth. I knew this was a special and significant moment and I made it sacred. And you can do this with your journey.

Our menopause is sacred. It is a powerful initiation into us, and the more you recognise this, the better. Importantly if a woman's attitude to menopause is generally positive then her experience of symptoms is generally less.* This is such an important message for you to hear, because it is the framing of menopause in our culture, and therefore within you, that can radically alter your experience of menopause.

One of the big differences of surgical versus organic menopause is the suddenness of the menopause journey. Within 24 hours our oestrogen levels plummet. There is no slow ratcheting down, as once the ovaries are gone from our body, our bodies capacity to produce oestrogen is radically reduced. The levels of testosterone and progesterone also plummet.

Although the adrenals and fat tissue will continue to produce small amounts of oestrogen these levels are fairly minimal. So the symptoms associated with menopause may come on more quickly and with a higher intensity than for other women – and it was suggested to me that my experience of symptoms may be severe.

But I have found that this framing of my menopause as a sacred rite of passage, as an opportunity of huge growth has meant that whatever I am experiencing, is okay. At least most of the time.

When you understand your menopause as a Rite of Passage, as an initiation into the next phase of your life, you have some perspective on what you are experiencing and can see value in the challenges. So part of the work for the community, including the medical community is to frame menopause in a powerful way.

The current discourse is often fear based and controlling. And you may feel you are a victim. But reframe this! Reframe yourself as an initiate – one who is becoming a Wise Woman, a Maga, Magissa – the Magician. Own this experience as yours, however it looks. This is a time for stepping into your power.

There have been some really challenging moments, such deep despair, but again I have framed this within the context of the cycles. Knowing that the descent phase is

the place of regeneration and growth. We women descend into our power – as your menstrual cycle has been teaching you each and every month.

The wisdom of the Life season of Maga teaches you this too – it is a time to be in full recognition of the power and blessings of the descent phase of your life. You have moved through the upswing of Maiden and Mother and are becoming more fully present to the pull of the Maga and Crone energy.

You may no longer have the “high” of ovulation, you may not have the same hormones stimulating you in that way, but you have a steadier energy – once you get through the initiation of your peri/menopause dance.

And what a dance it is! I am still dancing though this initiation and despite the challenges (hot flushes, mood swings, vaginal dryness to name a few) I am relishing this opportunity to step more fully into myself.

I see the Magas out there and I celebrate their wisdom, their way. I honour their commitment to themselves and to the world. They know themselves, they meet themselves and others from this deep wellspring of knowing.

There is no one else to do this journey work for me, there is no other me, and there is no other you. So celebrate your unique Menopause journey. Celebrate this dance with descent, welcoming the wisdom that comes.

References

*Women with a negative attitude towards menopause were associated with more frequently reported symptoms compared to women with a positive attitude.” **Relationship between women’s attitude towards menopause and quality of life.** [Yanikkerem E¹](#), [Koltan SO](#), [Tamay AG](#), [Dikayak Ş](#).in [Climacteric](#). 2012 Dec;15(6):552-62. doi: 10.3109/13697137.2011.637651. Epub 2012 Feb 15.

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