



THE GETTING OF WINGS

By

Marian Van Eyk McCain

ONCE, WHEN I was six, I broke apart a chrysalis to see what was inside.

There was nothing inside. Well, nothing recognizable, anyway.

I later learned that after its cocoon is sealed and hardened, a caterpillar slowly disintegrates. It melts into a kind of sludge. Eventually, some time during winter, from out of this sludge of undifferentiated cells, a butterfly begins to form.

Nobody warned me that menopause is a lot like that. Maybe it is as well they didn't. After all, how do you go on feeling smart, sexy, capable, confident and all-round good about yourself if you know you are gradually turning into sludge? It probably doesn't bother a caterpillar, but it certainly bothered me heaps.

Because you cannot come apart without feeling it. And if you are anything like me, you cannot be aware of the coming apart process without panicking. So I panicked.

My pre-menstrual syndrome was no longer pre- anything. It was most of the month, with a few good days scattered here and there like islands in a large ocean. My normally sharp thought processes were going blunt so alarmingly fast that I

thought I was getting Alzheimer's. In place of a brain, I now seemed to have what felt like a wodge of thick cotton. Worst of all, my libido was going through the floor.

No-one had warned me about any of that.

My mother had sailed through menopause - or so she said - with no symptoms at all except that her periods stopped one day when she was fifty-five and never came back. That was it. End of story. Not even one hot flash. All my friends were the same age as me or younger. There was no-one to reassure me.

It was the mid-1980s, and the "medical model" ruled. HRT was rapidly becoming the flavor of the month. But I was an alternative, vegetarian, health nut sort of a person and I instinctively recoiled from the idea of messing with my hormones. I decided to tough it out.

The more I thought about it, though, the more I started wondering if I could do more than simply tough it out. What if I went consciously, willingly into the cocoon and really felt what it was like to be a caterpillar coming unglued? What better way to find out what happens in there than to go in, wide awake and wondering?

I felt like one of those early explorers, heading into the jungle with no map. And since I had been unable to find any decent maps, maybe I would make my own. All I had was one small fragment. It was something written by the novelist, Ursula LeGuin.

She wrote:

"..it seems a pity to have a built-in rite of passage and to dodge it, evade it, and pretend nothing has changed. That is to dodge and evade one's womanhood, to pretend one's like a man. Men, once initiated, never get a second chance. They never change again.. That's their loss, not ours. Why borrow poverty?"

A rite of passage? A second chance? This might be the weirdest journey of my life.

In some ways it was. Especially because, on the outside, I was trying to keep my "normal" life together, while this other stuff was happening on the inside. I was presenting my habitual face to the world, then dashing home to write in my journal, analyze my dreams, meditate, and spend a lot of time just sitting quietly (or crying).

Hot flashes happened, wherever I was. So on the outside, I just made jokes about it like everyone else, took my jacket on and off, fanned my face and drank lots of cold water. On the inside, I was saying to myself: "Steady, girl. You're doing fine. This

is how it feels to melt like a caterpillar." That way, each hot flash, rather than being a pesky nuisance, was a transformational process, bringing me one step closer to my new, butterfly self.

Would that new self ever emerge?

My periods stopped. After I had not had one for a while, I started to regret that I hadn't marked their ending with some sort of ritual. But how can you mark the last of something if you don't know it is the last? When I realized that I would never see my own menstrual blood again, that thought made me inexplicably sad. Yes, I, too, had often referred to it as "the curse." But it was part of my womanliness, for all that. Now it was over. So I had to grieve.

In fact, I did bleed again, a few months later. So this time, I did a ritual, smearing some of the blood on a white seashell and putting it on my meditation altar in a gesture of reverence for what had been such an integral part of my life. After that, I felt different. As though I had turned a corner.

During that long time in the "cocoon" of menopause, I discovered that there were many things which needed to be consciously mourned and let go: my ability to bear children, my youthful looks, my sexual juiciness and so on. There was a lot of work to do. And as I let go of these old definitions of myself, I had no idea what would take their place. It was as though I had to clear the space, first. So sometimes, it was scary.

What helped me the most was the fact that I was documenting the process. The same spirit of scientific curiosity that had prompted my six-year old self to smash that chrysalis and peer inside, was now leading me to study my own transformational process and to write about it. And because I was doing some postgraduate work in psychology at that time, I was able to study not just my own process but that of other women as well and to write my thesis on it.

By then, I had become so fascinated with the whole thing that I went on and turned the thesis into a book.

I was fifty-five years old. A whole new energy seemed to be stirring within me. With the publication of my book, it felt as though I was entering a completely new phase of my life.

Come the day of the book launch, I felt nervous. I had invited everybody I knew. Friends, relations, acquaintances, colleagues - the room was full of people.

Some friends had devised a ritual that would not only mark the publication of the book but would be my official "rite of passage" into the third phase of my life. They had incense and candles and all sorts of hippie things. Here were colleagues in suits and ties who had only ever seen the professional outside of me, yet here I was, making public those strange and sludgy internal processes of my menopause. I took a deep breath and made my speech.

They cheered.

A man in a suit came up and asked me to sign a copy of the book for his wife. He had tears in his eyes. I was utterly amazed.

That was when I realized I had wings. #

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