

A red badge of courage, period

BY RACHEL KAUDER NALEBUFF

Eventually, after hearing enough stories about bleeding, you start to see the world differently.

For more than 20 years, I collected intimate personal stories about periods — first as a family oral history project, and then for a book that became a New York Times bestseller.

Most recently, I gathered stories from teenagers, midwives, Indigenous scholars, Olympic athletes, elected leaders who fought to make period products free, friends transitioning genders, grandmothers, and lovers about the experience of having, living with, and losing their periods.

Stories of blood: They are the dramas, the rituals, the silent struggles of our partners, our children, our classmates, our colleagues, maybe the person sitting across from you right now. They are windows onto our ancestry, our great joys, our traumas, and the ways we deepen our understanding of ourselves as we age.

Yet these rich accounts are rarely told. I hope the excerpts below, which come from five different voices in "Our Red Book," become a spark for your own conversations.

Claudia

In Indigenous traditions in Latin America, blood is sacred.

I have a personal tradition of collecting my period blood in a jar with extra water in it, which I use to water the plants. One day, my son, Joaquim, saw me holding the jar and asked me, "What is in this jar?" Because he saw blood, he assumed it had something to do with pain.

So I told him. I said, "This blood made you grow. If we take this blood and we water the plants with it, it will make them grow, too."

He was so excited about the idea of sharing this blood with the plants in our garden.

I felt so emotional, imagining that Joaquim could be the kind of person who could comfort girls when they had their period. And that he could even look at girls with the kind of awe I saw he had for me, like "Wow, this is something powerful and amazing."

Now, every month when I'm about to start my period, he gets anxious and excited. It's time to water the plants! He wants to see the fruits on the tree!

Claudia Pacheco runs an alternative medicine clinic in Curitiba, Brazil.

Kwaneta

In prison, we're strip-searched often. Before we leave our cell. Before and after work. Each time we must remove our pad or tampon. We're assigned one pack of pads and five regular-size tampons monthly. If you're one of the heavy bleeders, women who have fibroids or are premenopausal, the state will not provide you any extra items. You must purchase them. We aren't paid to work in Texas. And nothing is free in prison.

Many of us work in the fields, tending crops under the watch of armed, mostly male, guards on horseback. At the end of our workday, 60 people crowd into a space meant for 30. We must remove our tampons and pads while we wait in line. It's common to see trails of blood running down a leg or to step in blood as we move closer to the front.

They used to have a box of pads for after we were searched — squat, bend over at the waist, spread our buttocks, lift our feet, turn around, raise our stomachs and breasts, tip our noses skyward. Due to budget cuts, we must bring our own pads or tampons. It's bad enough to do such a thing in front of women. But the male guards put on sunglasses and watch us in the reflection of a circular mirror posted outside the stripping area.

During cell inspections, I've seen male and female guards take someone's period-stained panties out of the cell and hang them off a pen, to mock them. I've had guards open every single pad and tampon to check for contraband, contaminating them. There's no need to open a sealed package, but they do. I'm just so thankful I can afford the \$11 box of tampons to replace them.

The solution for many women is to get the birth control shot, thus eliminating their periods and the risk of embarrassment.

Kwaneta Harris is an incarcerated mother of three.

Michelle

Before my chemotherapy started, my doctors asked if I planned on having kids. I was 43 and partnered, and the faint desire to bear children had come and gone a while ago.

"No," I told them. "But why?"

Chemotherapy, I then learned, kills rapidly dividing cancer cells, but it can also damage your ovaries and lead to medical menopause. "Chemopause," they call it. So much was spinning and whirring around me during those months that I honestly didn't give it much



ALLISON LEE ISLEY/WINSTON-SALEM JOURNAL VIA AP
Sarina Horner sought a change to how North Carolina taxes pads and tampons.

thought. Really, the focus had been on losing my hair, not my period.

My partner did a little dance. "Does this mean you could wear a white suit at our wedding?" I stashed away my extra-heavy period underwear and stopped buying Tampax in bulk.

This was one of the ridiculous silver linings that came with a possibly dire diagnosis. I lost my hair, sure, but I also lost the feeling — and the very palpable fear — that I was hemorrhaging on a monthly basis. No more tying sweaters around my waist. No more stuffing wads of toilet paper down my pants when I came ill-prepared to work. It was the dawn of a new era.

Michelle Memran is a documentary filmmaker, illustrator, and writer.

Axel

I was 13 when my period started. I was in class when it happened. All around me, girls bragged about getting their first period, but when it was me, I was ashamed. I hid it from my mom, and I never brought it up with my dad. I was embarrassed and afraid. Like this was the gavel slamming down, deeming me a woman. Inevitable and irreversible.

Almost four years later, I am out as a transgender boy. My parents still don't understand, but they've started the slow process of accepting me. I still struggle with my period when it comes, but it's easier to go through now that I have a support system that respects me and my identity.

Figuring out who I was took a lot out of me, but I don't regret anything. I'll never re-

gret finding myself. And I know I'm not done yet, but at least I have a start.

Axel Gay is a junior in high school who recently came out as transgender to his friends and family.

Mindi

Entering menopause, I feel a deeper connection to my ancestors who had to leave their homeland. I am a refugee now. After all, women leave so much behind when our periods are gone. Yes, we leave behind the inconvenience and the pain. But we also leave a large part of our societal worth, our sense of identity. And who is there to welcome us older women as we arrive on the shores of menopause, with our lack of estrogen, our saggy skin, our dysregulated body temperatures, our graying hair? America does not have a seat of honor for its aging women. It doesn't always even have a seat. Sometimes we must sit our creaky bones down, right there in the dirt.

"What is the purpose of the woman without a period?" we ask ourselves as we struggle to learn a new language so we can be heard, wear clothes appropriate for our age so we can be seen, and scramble through our baggage for any kind of currency to use here in the world that is the same but seems so different now.

No one wants to talk about menopause. It feels like an ugly word with negative connotations but only, I think, because it remains under-discussed.

I'd like to say I am happy here now. And I think I will be able to say that eventually. Right now, I'm tired from the long voyage, from the lack of journeying companions, from the need to redefine my body and my cultural relevance.

I think I will like the lack of catcalling, the worry of an unwanted pregnancy or unwanted sexual advances, the cramps and the constant buying of supplies, and the freedom I had all along (but didn't fully realize) to dress, act, think, and talk however I wanted. I do look forward to the wisdom, the simplicity, the lessened sense of drama in this new place.

Mindi Rose Englart is a writer, artist, and high school teacher.

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BETH WOLFENBERGER SINGER

Local heroes in loco sweaters

Some fitting extra layers, for the first-ever post-Roe Women's History Month

It's **Women's History Month**, so I could draw a normal portrait of Marie E. Zakrzewska, who founded a hospital in Boston in 1862 despite having been ostracized (a lot) for being a woman doctor.

But I'm feeling kinda chilly after having a constitutional right stripped from me in June, so let's draw her in a **SWEATER**.

WOMAN-THEMED, AS ITS DESIGN REPRESENTS THE 4TH CENTURY BC BELIEF THAT THE UTERUS WAS LINED WITH TENTACLES AND SUCKERS.

Likewise, Rebecca Lee Crumpler, who in 1864 in Boston became the first Black American woman to earn an MD in the US, amid plentiful (!) roadblocks, seems to me like someone who could use a fashion update this year.

SWEATER NODS TO THE ASSERTION, REPEATED BY SOME AUTHORITIES FROM THE 12TH CENTURY, THAT THE UTERUS HAD SEVEN SEX-SEGREGATED BABY-MAKING COMPARTMENTS.

Hey there, Mary Jane Safford, one of the first female gynecologists in the US back in 1872 — and also a Civil War nurse, a surgeon, and a BU prof.

Do I have a quirky turtleneck for you.

ARROWS DENOTE THE LONG-HOLD ANCIENT GREEK NOTION THAT THE UTERUS WANDERED ABOUT WOMEN'S BODIES, MEAN-GIRLING OTHER ORGANS AND SOMETIMES CAUSING SUFFOCATION.

Poppycock.

As for Linda Richards, who became in Boston possibly the first professionally trained US nurse?

The perfect cardigan for a Supreme Court ruling that doesn't pass the smell test.

HAS A BEDBUG MOTIF.

SQUISHING THESE INSECTS WAS ONCE THOUGHT (NOT BY RICHARDS) TO YIELD A STENCH POTENT ENOUGH TO REPEL A WANDERING UTERUS BACK INTO PLACE.

Here we see determined (understatement) Mary Eliza Mahoney of Dorchester, the first Black graduate of an American school of nursing, in 1879.

HER TOILING MERITS A COLLEGIATE SWEATER, THOUGH IN THE 1870S WOMEN WERE TOLD THAT THE INTELLECTUAL EFFORTS OF COLLEGE LIFE COULD RENDER THEM WISER BUT TRAGICALLY STERILE.

And here we pay tribute to Mass.-born Clara Barton, founder of the American Red Cross. Sorry about this sweater, Nurse Barton.

COMMEMORATES 1967 BOSTON MARATHON RUNNER KATHRINE SWITZER BEING TOLD BY A DOCTOR THAT RUNNING SUCH A DISTANCE WOULD MAKE HER UTERUS FALL OUT.

Oh, it would be nice to celebrate Women's History Month as if anatomy myths were extinct and the quest for reproductive freedom hadn't been dangerously rewound.

MILTON'S SOPHIA FRENCH PALMER, FIRST EDITOR-IN-CHIEF OF THE AMERICAN JOURNAL OF NURSING, DROPS IN HERE FROM 1900 TO REMIND US THAT THE INTERNATIONAL SKI FEDERATION PRESIDENT SAID — IN 2010 — THAT LANDING A SKI JUMP WOULD BURST A WOMAN'S WOMB.

Instead, times are extra weird, so we'll just leave one last sweater here.

local hero sweater Try me on for size?

FEATURES FRANCES SLANGER, RAISED IN ROXBURY, A JEWISH MILITARY NURSE KILLED IN 1944 WHILE HELPING TO FIGHT FASCISM.

Slanger liked to point out that a fire reduced to a single spark can blaze back if carefully tended to.

I'm hoping that applies to imperiled rights as well.

Beth Wolfensberger Singer is a Boston-area artist and writer. You can see more of her work at bethwolfensbergersinger.com.