



Keriesa Botha

For many years I have presented The Wise Cycle, a workshop exploring the different phases of the menstrual cycle and its meaning in women's lives. Some of the women who had participated in these workshops started asking me: "What about menopause? How do we deal with this transition?" Investigating the answer to this question led me to discover that menopause could be one of the richest and textured thresholds of a woman's life. This discovery inspired me to develop a retreat called: *The Journey towards Menopause*.

In the retreat, I use the story of *The Handless Maiden* as a map for exploring the issues that arise at menopause through ritual, drawing, movement, free writing, clay work and story telling. The Handless Maiden is the story of a girl whose father chops off her hands, who has to go handless into the world, who meets a king who marries her and gives her silver hands. She lives in his castle and has a child but eventually has to leave, go into the forest, relinquish her silver hands and grow her own hands. After seven years the king, her husband, finds her in the forest. When the astonished king does not recognize her, she shows him the old silver hands and says: "Through my care, my silence and my dreams, these hands have grown back. I am no longer the Handless Maiden you once knew."

The work in these retreats inspired me to do further research on menopause using Psychophonetics, which helped me to deepen my understanding of the psychospiritual challenges

during this time. This year, at the request of women, I have developed a program of workshops which addresses the physical, psychological and spiritual needs of women at this time. I call it: **Seeding the Wisdom Years**. The program runs over four months with a weekend workshop each month:

The *Journey towards Menopause* Retreat:

1. A Biography weekend
2. Meeting the Dark Goddess: exploring blocks and challenges through Psychophonetics
3. Creating a Dream Shield: a painting workshop setting intention for the future
4. In the Silence of the Heart – a day of silent meditation.

These workshops are complemented by two days which I call *Bodywisdom Speaking*: days in which information about nutrition, self care, sexuality and the medical facts and myths of menopause are shared ( this is presented in collaboration with Nola Davidson, a nutritionist and Dr Shakti Malan, a teacher of Tantra.) Then there are also three evenings of storytelling which I call *Goddesses, stories and poetry for the wisdom years*.

This program started in September and although the group is small, the sharing and learning have been very deep and nourishing.

What interests me as an educator, is how often women tell me that they find it so hard to assimilate any reading about menopause. It seems that this knowledge needs to be created and assimilated through sharing experiences and insights in contexts of mediated learning. I love this process of knowledge making.

As a facilitator, it is interesting to note how all the reading I have done synthesizes itself in a new form or wisdom when I have to answer women's questions. I find this new facility growing in me a very fulfilling endeavour.

*Seeding the wisdom years cont...*

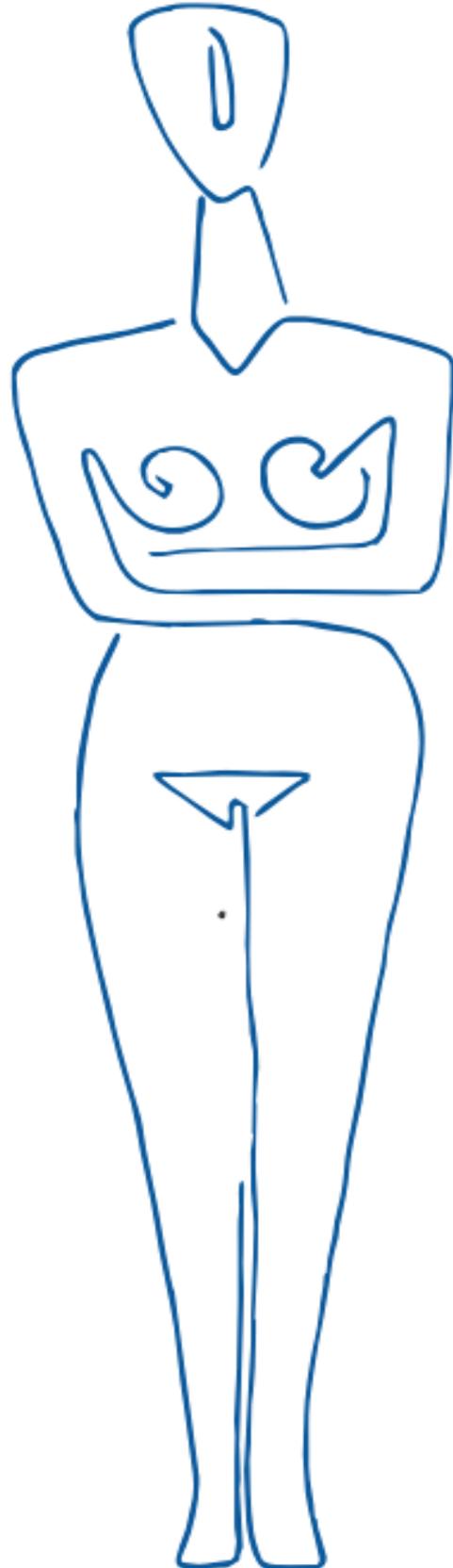
Through my retreats I have observed that one of the core issues women struggle with at menopause is the issue of meaning and creating a deeper level of spiritual depth in their lives. Questions that participants ask are: *I don't know who I am any more. Why are the things that used to work in my life, not working any longer? Why don't my relationships work anymore? Why is my work not satisfying any longer?*

I call this phase of questioning and dissatisfaction, the Silver Hands that become visible at menopause. It requires women to look at what the habitual and comfortable forms in their lives are that do not fit their inner yearning any longer and to decide what needs to be changed and to be cut away or to be re-defined. For instance: a woman who was a well known and successful yoga teacher had to face that her yoga school had become silver hands. Her yoga school which used to fulfill her was depleting her spirit. At the end of the retreat she decided that she wanted to teach master classes only and hand over her school to another teacher.

Setting aside the silver hands can also herald a period in a woman's life when she has to endure an in-between-time, a time of death, barrenness and emptiness, a time of not knowing whether anything will emerge again. It can herald a time of depression and facing your shadow.

The deepening of the feeling life and the vulnerability that the hormonal changes bring at menopause can also put women in touch with original woundings that have been suppressed. In order to move forward, these original woundings have to be addressed. I call it going back to where women have lost their original hands, to the place where their connection to their divine feminine self has been cut off.

It is also a time when a woman expresses a deep need to be alone, to have time out and to explore her spiritual orientation in order to allow that which needs to arrive in her soul life.



*Seeding the wisdom years cont...*

I call this yearning the need for forest time, the time for growing new hands. It is as if women need to take time to create a womb space within their being in order to allow for the spirit to arrive. The story of the Handless Maiden ends when the king arrives. He is a changed king, he has been wandering for seven years, without eating and without drinking, looking for his queen. When they meet there is anew union, a new relationship between the inner masculine and inner feminine arrives, a second marriage takes place.

This time of growing your own hands is seen by Dr Jean Shinoda (1994), the well known Jungian psychiatrist, as an in-between-time in which women are often thin skinned and vulnerable but also psychologically receptive and open to new growth. She describes it as time and a place:

*“where glimpses of the eternal and ordinary perception overlaps. Here the invisible spiritual world and the visible reality come together; here intuitive possibility is on the threshold of tangible manifestation.”*

This in-between-time can challenge a woman to re-define her spirituality. One of my clients said after four Psychophonetics sessions: *“Before these sessions I experienced my spirituality as a vacuous, meditative space out there, intangible. Now it has more shape, I can engage with it more, I can embody it.”*

For me menopause has become an opportunity to become a midwife for women’s unique birthing at this time. It has taken me on journeys plummeting the depths of despair and darkness and has given me glimpses of the beauty and courage of the spirit. It has made me wonder why women are not given space at this time of transition.

Through my work I hope to honor the mystery of this threshold.

## Reference

Shinoda Bolen, J. (1994). *Crossing to Avalon: A woman's midlife pilgrimage*. New York: Harper Collins

*Keriesa has been a lecturer, teacher trainer and writer of learning materials for more than a decade. She is a qualified Psychophonetics practitioner and teaches counselling at Persephone Institute in Cape Town.*

*Keriesa has run many retreats on the theme of menopause and has a deep interest in women's cycles.*

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*Cont from page 13 – Bipolar*

Stephen wrote these three verses in place of the last two verses of his poem which gives another meaning...

*...To depths beyond despair*

Cutting deep into my arm  
Will halt the mental strain  
Change the focus from my head,  
To life-reminding pain

In the past I have done it,  
But now I look beyond.  
This thing will pass then disappear,  
A ripple in my pond

As this realisation hits,  
I feel alive once more.  
I summon all my inner strength,  
And fight the mental war.

*Stephen lives in Point Lonsdale, Victoria and was diagnosed with bipolar 4 years ago.*