

Me and My Uterus

A few days ago, a good friend posted on her Facebook wall that her Obgyn had said her uterus—that was carrying her four-month-old baby—was “tres beautiful.” When I read this, I couldn’t help but think about mine, and all the problems it has been causing me for the past thirteen years. On April 27th, I am saying good-bye to my uterus, and I have to admit, my normally sanguine disposition has been darker as I contemplate “to be or not to be” a *complete* woman.

Let me take you back a few years: it was 1999, and my menstrual cycles started arriving like the Red Sea (sorry guys, I know women’s bleeding is only slightly palatable). For years I went to doctors and tried to find out why my periods were so heavy. I was given pregnancy tests, my contraceptive was changed several times, and then they concluded that I was just “stressed out.” As I struggled to find out what was wrong with me, not one single doctor ever suggested an ultrasound. If one had, I would have learned that I had a fibroid in my uterus.

Fibroids, non-cancerous growths, are very common in women. Dr. Parker explains on his website “More than 75% of women can be found to have small fibroids using an MRI” though, for the majority of these women, no treatment will ever be necessary (www.fibroidsecondopinion.com). Treatment for me was necessary. Soaking one tampon or pad an hour is *not* normal. Oftentimes, I would go through two or three. But my healthcare provider never checked for fibroids—despite them being so common in women and directly linked to heavy periods. So my fibroid continued to grow and grow and grow.

If only I had known then what I do now. I would have forced them to give me an ultrasound or MRI. But like many women—unfortunately—I did not know my body well, and no one ever told me about fibroids. So I suffered with heavy periods and made Tampax rich.

Then on the 22nd of December 2004—what should have been my one year anniversary—I was rushed to an emergency clinic in Peru because I was hemorrhaging in the restroom of the school’s bathroom (I was teaching overseas at the time). Within 12 hours I was in surgery, a fibroid—the size of a lemon—was removed from my uterus. Peruvian gynecologists, unlike most doctors I have encountered in the U.S., believe in keeping a woman’s reproductive system intact. In fact, “Hysterectomy should be the solution of last resort” (www.fibroidsecondopinion.com). Here in the U.S., hysterectomies seem to be the first resort (except for doctors like Dr. Parker whose website is a wonderful resource for any woman fraught with fibroids).

Now, eight years later, once again I am struggling with fibroid invasion and will be having a Supracervical Hysterectomy (removal of the uterus, keeping the cervix and ovaries) as a solution for my excessive bleeding. After reading several articles and watching several videos by HERS (Hysterectomy Educational Resources and Services) Foundation, who are against hysterectomies unless absolutely necessary (i.e. cancer), I became very confused. I read that “the uterus supports the bladder and the bowel,” and when a hysterectomy takes place “all ligaments must be severed.” And these ligaments “provide structural integrity and support to the pelvic area and pelvic bones”; furthermore, when ligaments are severed, there is “unnatural shifting on the bones and organs inside the pelvis” making the pelvic bones move and widen, which affects hips, lower back, and skeletal structure. Many women experience a variety of problems such as “loss of sexual function, bowel and urinary issues.” After the hysterectomy, women tend to have “protruding bellies, no waist,” and sometimes there is even a “change of personality”!

YIKES. What did I sign up for? All of a sudden this *solution* sounded very Draconian!

I took all these questions to my Obgyn/surgeon who said if I wasn’t comfortable with the procedure, she would gladly refer me to a specialist who removes just the fibroids. So I got back online and read reviews about the myomectomy surgeon. Oh my God. Out of 45 reviews, almost half were negative calling him a “butcher,” saying that all he cared about was his “\$200,000 car.” Several patients said that even though his “bedside manner was nice” after the surgery, when he gets paid, it’s strictly “9 to 5.”

I felt like crying. My choices left me nonplussed and petrified. Why is it that I had to move to Peru to get the care I needed and deserved? I am, thankfully, one of those who actually has health insurance and yet, treatment here, in my country, has been poor. If I had more time and energy, I would possibly look for a decent myomectomy surgeon that is covered with my insurance, but, frankly, I am beat.

I have three fibroids as well as polyps in my uterus, and doctors seem to believe that if a woman doesn't want children (or has already had them), then this is a good option. In fact, one male doctor in his 70s told me: "Just get rid of the whole damn thing!" Obviously, he is not a woman. Because women understand, this *is* a big deal. Another good friend, Claudia, who doesn't have children told me in an email: "I am so attached to my reproductive system even if it never got used because I feel it is part of what makes me a woman."

To be fair to the other side, I have spoken to or read about a plethora of women who are very satisfied with their hysterectomies and have not had the side effects that the HERS Foundation reports. For every negative story, there seems to be a positive one. And I hope mine will be a positive one too. After April 27th, no more periods and no more fibroids. I should be elated—but I'm not—at least not right now. Going under, taking off my wedding ring, and having surgery again leaves me a bit weak psychologically. Ask me in a few months . . . maybe I will be delighted. Long-time friend, Tamara, who is fifty-four-years-old and had a hysterectomy ten years ago told me, "It was the best thing to ever to happen to me! I love the freedom!"

So what have I learned through this experience? To avoid becoming inundated with online reviews, blogs, critiques, letters, websites, wiki this and wiki that URLs? No. Any information is better than not knowing. I do understand that my research led me to the worst case scenarios, but I would hope all women understand their bodies and their choices before undertaking any surgery or major decision.

Like indelible ink in my mind, an article I read in *Ms.* Magazine when I was twenty-eight has stayed with me through the years. It was about a young woman who was scheduled for an elective hysterectomy. She knew she didn't want children, but actually taking out a body part that would make it final was a stark realization as to what she was doing. I am at peace with my decision to never have children, and am blessed with a wonderful, supportive husband. I can't say I am 100% at peace with my decision for the hysterectomy, but I must listen to that voice inside me that has never led me astray. Because of the choices I have and because of my particular situation, in a few short days, I will bid adieu to my uterus. Elated for friends who have healthy uteruses and can provide a safe home for their growing babies, or can keep them because there is, indeed, an attachment, I have come to the conclusion that mine must go. Maybe I would have kept her if she were "tres beautiful" like Andrea's. But, alas, with growths and tumors and polyps (and all the other fun stuff that some women are saddled with), maybe, just maybe, my uterus is telling me it's time for us to part ways. And even without her, I have faith that when I look into at my husband's loving eyes, I will feel very much like a *complete* woman.