

Feminist Feb 14: V-Day. Love to Stop Violence

V-Day & Eve Ensler's work

In the 1990s, Eve Ensler, a stand-up comedian, thought about writing a monologue on vaginas for her shows. Or maybe it was a conversation on vaginas and sex with friends. The thing is she ended up interviewing women to gather information, ideas... get inspired! Ensler's ad hoc research resulted in her putting together a **book** called *The Vagina Monologues* in **1996**, which became worldwide known among women. Numerous women started rehearsing a few of those monologues to offer performances in their communities -- and it was wildfire. Not only among organizers and actresses. Audiences were profoundly moved. In her TED Talk "Happiness in Body and Soul" (2004), Ensler tells us this inspiring story, and what it led her to.

Briefly, the Vagina Monologues drove Eve Ensler to found **V-Day** in **1998**, a **movement to end culturally bred men's violence against girls and women**. ("Girls & women" means now all kinds of girls and women, human beings subject to violence because they feel they are or they are seen as girls and women: cisgender, transgender, fluid identities subject to gender-based violence.)

With benefit performances, organizers fundraise to create local anti-violence groups, raise awareness and change social attitudes toward this kind of widespread and invisible violence, particularly rape, sexual abuse and incest. One of those projects is the City of Joy in Congo, a safe space for women's lives and development; another is a global street protest action called One Billion Rising.

In **2010** Eve Ensler wrote and released a second beautiful book, *I Am an Emotional Creature. On the Secret Life of Girls around the World*, which addressed the fact that girls come last in patriarchal families, in the patriarchal world. In this book, she used poetry, facts, stories, and commentary... Like with the Vagina Monologues and women, girls have selected parts of this work to create their own plays for their communities.

As a side comment, I would like to mention I have a beautiful poem dedicated to girls, too, in Spanish, "No soy un grano de anís", inspired in a Guatemalan girl. You can find it on the mujerpalabra.net website > Creadoras > Poemas.

Education for Equality at *Escuelas Oficiales de Idiomas*. My work in Advanced EFL Teaching

In March 2007, when I was working at EOI Goya in Madrid, my advanced students and I had the chance to watch a version of the Vagina Monologues in the multicultural neighborhood of Lavapiés, performed by an amateur English-speaking company called the Madrid Players, who put up the show for English learners in Madrid. We cried our eyes out but we also laughed. That's how reading the book goes.

In 2019 in my present school, EOI Fuengirola, in Andalucía, as our community prepared what would be the I Feminist Cultural Week in the network of state-run language schools in the country, some groups took part in a joint One Billion Rising street performance with the town hall, and the teacher who organized that, along with two of her most outstanding students, were interviewed in our local TV.

In class, on Love Day or Love Month as I call it, I usually suggest watching Ensler's Body and Soul TED Talk, watching or reading the monologue "My Vagina Is Angry" or doing the Reading/Speaking workshop I prepared once on "I Am an Emotional Creature." And well, here comes what I wanted to share with you all.

When it comes to offering people the chance of learning about women's vaginas and ob-gyns, it is not strange I am asked why should we deal with that taboo topic in class, or why people not interested in that topic should have to deal with it.

I think I have always given good answers, but not the *definite* answer. The answer which exposes what's wrong with that comment or question, and makes us wiser, kinder. And today I woke up and thought I might give it another try and finally succeed.

You see, I, myself, am a daughter of a patriarchal society and in spite of having realized how our minds distort reality to make it fit cultural values that dehumanize us, those values are in me. I've been brought up in them. That is why I am a feminist. To fight for my freedom and be the juster kind of person I can be. I've been involved in this self-critical struggle since 1989 also because I think this is the only way I can help build a freer and juster society, changing my Self, making my Self better.

So here goes...

In English courses, textbooks include a great deal of topics and students never challenge them. Nobody says: Why should we read about this topic? Everybody understands that using the language is language learning. With each topic, there is a common core of language (structures, tenses, modals, connectors, modifiers, etc.) and then semantic fields and particular vocabulary related to such topic. Perhaps gynecologists and vaginas are not in every single person's life, but many of the topics in textbooks are not in everybody's lives. Actually, some involve the stigmatization of some people's lives, or simply leave more than half of humanity out.

So it is very telling which topics get this kind of questions or comments. I have observed it in society for over 30 years as a feminist activist. It's very interesting, a great source of information of who we are and why it takes us so long to evolve to a less violent and unfair kind of society.

But let me pose the key question, if we address the question of vaginas, the question of women's bodies beyond the use of women's bodies by patriarchal society – this everyday bombing of women's bodies as sexual objects that get raped and torn to pieces or beaten up and terrified and so on. Aren't we all born from a woman with a reproductive vagina?

We know our parents are the people who love and care for us on a daily basis, but until 2021 all of us have been born from a woman with the ability to bear children.

Don't you think that if this ability had been Man's, in patriarchy, giving birth to a child would involve true respect and care for whoever gave birth? (not the kind of deficient and hypocritical respect mothers get in patriarchy). Don't you think we would know as much about menstruation as we know about Man's issues around their penises and their heterosexual activities (and even homosexual activities)?

Do you know that most women were shattered by Ana Álvarez Errecalde's picture of her newly born daughter ("Birth of my Daughter," 2005) because even those who had given birth to children, had never SEEN what it looked like? Ana is an amazing artist, and she decided to capture a most extraordinary moment in her life and in her daughter's life. When her daughter was born, when she gave birth, she prepared everything to have pictures taken. Her husband helped her. She looks radiant, her baby looks OK with the posing! I, who have never felt the Call in spite of having a vagina and being fertile, broke in tears when I saw the pictures.

We women have been alienated so of our bodies, we've been taught to feel disgust, to feel our blood is disgusting! Our blood! In a society where the blood of death and torture is in our everyday lives! Isn't that cruel?

I suppose you can easily imagine the verbal harassment this courageous, generous and lucid mother and artist was subject to when she shared these extraordinary photos. On mujerpalabra.net we published some of the comments other kind of people posted to defend her from doubting herself! Her pictures were about LOVE but vaginas were there and vaginas were disgusting. So she was disgusting! So the pictures were disgusting! How can those pictures be disgusting! How can that possibly be!

Today, Ana and her daughter are two of the people who contributed to relevant social change in the way we see and perceive our bodies, our blood. Overcoming disgust and not perpetuating disgust is a sociopolitical issue in defense of love, really!

In 2007 Helen O'Connell (born 1962), urologist, discovered the physiology of the clitoris. Can you believe it? 2007. In all of the centuries of research, patriarchal history and science had not produced a physiological description of the human clitoris. Why would that be? Find what a clitoris looks like if you haven't seen one. So please, read feminists, for gosh's sake!

Now, tell me. Isn't it relevant to learn about human bodies, relationships and experiences, particularly when we know so little, when their nature and realities have been distorted so? When we've been taught not to see, not to understand, not to feel any absence, not to need to know...?

Women in patriarchy have been considered the property of Man for centuries, second-class human beings at His service, which means, Man was the measure of all things Human and women had to conform to that. About reproduction, the most important idea culturally speaking has been that He "had planted his seed" so children were His (carried his family name) and sons were far more precious than daughters.

Consequently, culturally speaking, when Man is paid attention to, women are not missed. In class when the subject of study is related to women, Man is much missed. We start feeling women are taking up too much space. But culture around us shows the opposite. However, we can't see what is there because we see what we want to believe there is.

Women's herstory is part of Humanstory, like that of many other human groups marginalized, defamed, sentenced to poverty, torture, enslavement, imprisonment, murder. Because Herstory has been systematically erased and destroyed, we need to learn to miss it, and to open up spaces

to include it. This entails less space for Man, yes. (Man as the rule, not every single man, if you see what I mean, if you want to understand what I mean.)

What's the problem? Man has been taking up all the space in our Culture transmission. We are wiser and kinder now. At least, we know we can be. Paying attention to what has never received our attention is learning to develop our empathy, which means, learning to develop our intelligence, our ability to live together without exerting violence against each other. If there is something wrong with this, well, it can't be worse than the 95% of what we read everywhere every day.

Women, as well as other human groups harmed by our culture, deserve respect, too. We can be models for other people too, Man included! Sons can read stories where girls are the ones who travel the world and overcome obstacles, create wonders, grow into amazing human beings. What's the problem with that? It shouldn't be humiliating for a boy or a man to have a girl or a woman as a human rolemodel.

We all belong to a species capable of caring for others and being able to cooperate, like we did in prehistory. Some of us have kept doing it whenever we've had the chance, because – I've finally discovered -- we belong to that saga, the saga of people who reject violence and injustice and know that self-respect and empathy towards others builds a better world.