

saying The WORD

by Eve Ensler

Vagina—there, I've said it. *Vagina*—said it again. I've been saying it over and over again for the last three years. I've been saying it in theaters, at colleges, in living rooms, in cafes, at dinner parties and on radio programs all over the country. I would be saying it on TV if someone would let me. I say it 128 times every evening I perform my show, *The Vagina Monologues* (an evening based on interviews with hundreds of women of all ages and races about their vaginas). I say it in my sleep. I say it because I'm not supposed to say it. I say it because it's an invisible word that stirs up anxiety, awkwardness, contempt and disgust.

I say it because I believe that what we don't say, we don't see, acknowledge, or remember. What we don't say becomes a secret, and secrets often create shame and fear and myths. I say it because I want to eventually feel comfortable saying it, and not ashamed and guilty.

I say *vagina* because when I started it I discovered how fragmented I was—how disconnected my mind was from my body. My *vagina* was something over there, away in the distance. I rarely lived inside it even, visited. I was busy working, writing, being a mother, a friend. I did not see my *vagina* as my primary resource; a place of sustenance, humor and creativity. It was fraught, full of fear. I'd been raped as a little girl, and although I'd grown up and done all the adult things one does with one's *vagina*, I had never really reentered that part of my body after I'd been violated. I had essentially lived most of my life without my motor, my center, my second heart.

I say *vagina* because I want people to respond, and they have. Whenever *The Vagina Monologues* has traveled, they have tried to censor the word: in ads in major newspapers, on tickets sold in department

stores, on banners that hang in front of theaters, on box office phone machines where the voice says only, "Monologues" or "V. Monologues."

"Why is this?" I ask. "*Vagina* is not a pornographic word; it is actually a medical word, a description of a body part—like elbow, hand or rib." "It may not be pornographic," people say, "but it's dirty—what if our little daughters were to hear it? What would we tell them?" "Maybe you could tell them that they have a *vagina*," I say, "if they don't already know it. Maybe you could celebrate that." "But we don't call their vaginas, *vaginas*," they say. "What do you call them?" I ask.

Pooki, poochi, poopie, peepee, poopelu—the list goes on.

I say *vagina* because I have read the statistics, and bad things are happening to women's vaginas everywhere—more than 350,000 women are raped every year in the U.S., and it is estimated that 100 million women are genitally mutilated worldwide. I say *vagina* because I want these bad things to stop. I know they will not stop until we acknowledge that they are going on, and the only way that happens is by creating the safety for women to talk without fear of punishment or retribution.

It's scary saying the word. *Vagina*. At first, it feels like you're crashing through an invisible wall. *Vagina*. You feel guilty and wrong, like someone's going to strike you down. Then after you say the word the hundredth or thousandth time (it's different for each woman), it hits you that it's *your* word, *your* body, *your* most essential place. You realize that all the shame and embarrassment you've previously felt saying the word have been a form of silencing your desire, eroding your ambition.

Then you begin to say the word more

and more. You say it with a kind of passion, a kind of necessity, because you sense that if you stop saying it, the fear will overcome you again and you will fall back into an embarrassed whisper. So you say it everywhere you can, bring it up in every conversation. You're excited about your *vagina*—you want to study it and explore it and introduce yourself to it, and find out how to listen to it and give it pleasure, and keep it healthy and wise and strong. You learn how to satisfy yourself and teach your lover how to satisfy you.

You're aware of your *vagina* all day wherever you are—in your car, at the supermarket, at the gym, in the office. You're aware of this precious, gorgeous, life-bearing part of you between your legs and it makes you smile, it makes you proud.

And as more women say the word, it becomes less of a big deal to say it—it becomes part of your language, part of our lives. Our vaginas become respected, sacred. They become part of our bodies, connected to our minds, fueling our spirits. Shame leaves and violation stops because vaginas are visible and connected to powerful, wise, *vagina*-talking woman.

We have a huge journey in front of us. This is the beginning. Here's the place to think about our vaginas, to learn about other women's vaginas, to hear stories, to answer questions and to ask them. Here's the place to release the myths, shame and fear. Here's the place to practice saying the word, because we know that the word is what propels us and sets us free. *Vagina*.

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