

“By turns lyrical, sassy, witty, and reverent, Debra Rienstra reclaims the spiritual power of a woman’s body, mind, and soul.”

• BONNI GOLDBERG, author of *Beyond the Words* and *The Spirit of Pregnancy*

“Celebratory, reflective, and gloriously true, *Great with Child* is the thinking woman’s companion to pregnancy.”

• LORILEE CRAKER, author of *When the Belly Button Pops, the Baby’s Done*

“A polished meditation on the body, on creativity and change, on the relations between men and women, and on our relationship to God.”

• TRUDY BUSH, *The Christian Century*

“Combines a richly informed feminism with an equally informed faith.”

• JILL LIGHTNER, amazon.com

“By about page ten, most readers will wish they could sit down with Rienstra and have a heart-to-heart. . . .”

• LAUREN WINNER, *Books & Culture*



great with child

ON BECOMING A MOTHER

Debra Rienstra



WordFarm

LA PORTE, INDIANA

WordFarm
2010 Michigan Avenue
La Porte, IN 46350
www.wordfarm.net
info@wordfarm.net

Copyright © 2008 by Debra Rienstra

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system or transmitted in any form or by any means, electroic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, without the prior permission of WordFarm.

Cover Image: iStockPhoto
Cover Design: Andrew Craft
USA ISBN-13: 978-1-60226-003-0
USA ISBN-10: 1-60226-003-6

Printed in the United States of America

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Data applied for.

P 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1
Y 14 13 12 11 10 09 08

c o n t e n t s

1. Longing 1
2. Possible Futures 11
3. Loss 22
4. Life 33
5. Weakness 39
6. Waiting 48
7. Fear 60
8. Joying in the Body 72
9. Ordination 90
10. Nesting 103
11. Him 118
12. Fullness 132
13. Danger 140
14. Birth 160

15. First Days 171
16. Breastfeeding 189
17. Later Weeks 211
18. Sleep 232
19. Attention 259
20. Little Man 280

Afterword 286

Acknowledgments 290

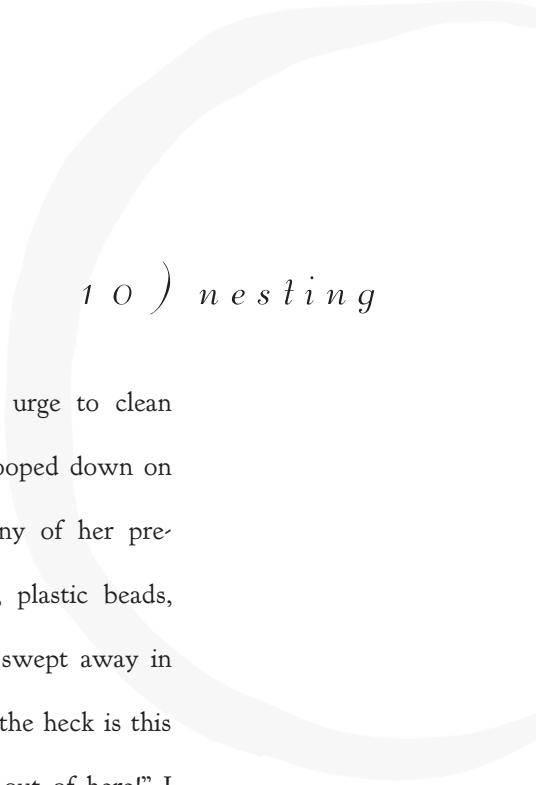
Suggested Reading 292

Permissions 296

Discussion Questions 297

Thus great with child to speak, and helpless in my throes,
 Biting my truant pen, beating myself for spite,
“Fool,” said my muse to me; “look in thy heart, and write.”

SIR PHILIP SIDNEY, *Astrophil and Stella*, SONNET 1



10) *nesting*

It's hit me now, this powerful urge to clean up, throw away, clear out. I swooped down on Miriam's room tonight, and many of her precious little treasures—hair clips, plastic beads, shells from Lake Michigan—got swept away in my ferocious whirlwind. “What the heck is this crap doing in my house? Get it out of here!” I muttered, flinging helpless items ruthlessly in the direction of the nearest wastebasket. When I get in this mood, the other people who live in my house do best to take shelter in some small

inner room, maybe with a mattress over them, and stay out of my way.

The other night I ventured into our basement storage room with that woman-warrior look on my face, ready to open and sort through a dozen boxes of baby clothes. Ron generously offered to help, but minutes later it became clear that it wasn't going to work. He couldn't do anything right. "No, no. Put that box there." "Yes, just take that one out into the laundry room and set it somewhere for a minute while I clear some space here." "OK, now this we'll need after about six months, so put that over there." The look on his face pleaded, "Why are we doing this anyway?" and he had the audacity to utter the following blasphemous thought: "Can't we just pull out the boxes as we need them?" My obvious exasperation sent him retreating upstairs, where he began tidying the mountain of papers and magazines that we must regularly move out of our kitchen. There were to be *no* infidels in my basement. If he couldn't assent to the absolutely imperative nature of the project, I did not want him around.

The traditional wisdom is that nesting is primitive behavior related to our animalian ancestry, in which the female of the species prepares a place to give birth. Makes sense. But I can think of some pretty uniquely human motivations, too. For instance, if I don't clean out the house, where on earth are we going to put all the baby paraphernalia? We need at least a whole room for the crib, changing table, little dresser, bouncy seat, glider rocker, dozens of blankies, and basket of infant toys. So if we ever expect to prepare a nursery upstairs we *obviously* have to begin by cleaning out the basement storage room. Besides, if I don't clean and sort and organize now, it could be three years before I can do anything around the house without either a baby on my hip or all my mental energies focused on preventing a toddler from impaling himself on some sharp household object.

The most amusing part of this nesting urge is the element of anger. Where does that come from? Why does every little bead on the floor and fuzz heap under the bed seem a personal affront? Why am I on this vendetta against all things dusty and cluttery? Perhaps it's my own revenge against that law of the natural world that my scientist brother would label the second law of thermodynamics: all things tend toward entropy. In other words, left to themselves, things fall apart. Keeping them together requires constant energy. This is true both of galaxies and children's closets. So I may well be lashing out in anger at the very nature of the universe here. Well, why not? The universe could use a little sprucing up.

Too bad this anger does not currently seem aimed at the great messes of the world. What might happen if expectant mothers everywhere would band together and sally forth, buckets and mops raised in their rubber-gloved hands, and aim that nesting energy at problems like interethnic violence or environmental pollution? Unfortunately, this instinct seems quite determinedly limited to the small scale—kitchen drawers and car interiors. If anything, I want more than ever to shut the big problems of the world out. I am fiercely focused on bringing a child into a world of beauty, wonders, and love, and I can only make that appearance take effect in my own little domain. My nesting is just for the nest, not for the whole forest.

Maybe I am moving a little unnecessarily beyond the basic, logistical needs of preparing a bed and getting diapers and a few items of clothing together. Clearly, this tiny person is not going to care whether the arms of the pink chairs have been shampooed. All this is obvious to Ron, as his furtive eye rolling reveals. But after all, we are about to welcome royalty into our home. There's something in my motherly soul that urges me to prepare as if for the arrival of a prince. Wordsworth had this instinctive infant regality in mind, I think,

when he wrote in his poem “Ode: Intimations of Immortality” that “trailing clouds of glory do we come/ From God, who is our home:/ Heaven lies about us in our infancy!” Of course, these beautiful lines do make me wonder if Will was ever present at an actual delivery. Probably not. Births are exceedingly earthy affairs, leaving the floor strewn with blood-soaked linens and wads of gauze and various fleshy items that used to be tucked neatly into one’s private insides. But Wordsworth was right about the fresh wonder of a newborn baby’s very breaths. Out of the earthiness, a star of mystery rises. We understand so much about the body and its processes, about gestation, about delivery, about infant physiology. And yet the personhood, the soul-essence of each infant, appears as a mysterious glory.

It’s hard to know how to honor this properly at the moment, or how to prepare for it. So as women have done for centuries in the face of the great and mysterious events of existence—birth, death, illness, marriage—we clean and cook. We turn to the plainest tasks and perform them with reverence and determination. Sometimes with a ferocity that annoys everyone around. It’s simply a time-honored and productive way of dealing with something we recognize is much bigger than ourselves. For so long, so few women learned how to honor the magnificence of existence with the larger, louder poetry of art, architecture, music, and poetry itself. We’ve learned that now, too. But still the simple responses of the hands, or maybe I should say, the hands and knees, remain. In the face of the profound, we begin with the simple, and work.

No one must underestimate the importance of simple work. I will forever remember with deep gratitude the night Ron and I took our new baby Miriam home from the hospital and my friend Jennifer came over and made us omelettes. We were so bewildered with this

infant, but Jennifer's simple act calmed us, and fed us, too. And I envision before me the armies of women who have labored behind the scenes in church kitchens over the years, making the food and brewing the coffee for funerals, weddings, and council meetings. In my neck of the ecclesiastical woods, standard fare at all such occasions is ham-on-bun, potato salad, Jell-O, frosting-laden cake, and coffee, with little bowls of nuts and mints on the side. Sure, women have been marginalized and denied opportunities to exercise their gifts as leaders in the church; they've been showing up at crucial moments and feeding the congregation instead. Welcome them now into full leadership, but let no one denigrate that old work. These women put more wisdom into one swipe of the mayonnaise than could be found in many an hour of council discussion.

My mother taught me to respect simple gestures in times of crisis. She has many spiritual gifts, but I think her most natural and important has been to provide acts of mercy for those in need. That sounds so noble, like winged angels descending, but mostly it amounts to a chicken dinner or a layer cake or a card sent to the hospital. I know one young woman who remembers when she was only three or four years old, and her dad had just left her mom, and they were so poor. My mom showed up one day at her house with a bag of goodies, including some pairs of panty hose. The little girl saw her mom burst into tears for joy over those hose, and to this day she is grateful to my mother.

I try to be like my mom in this way, but there really is a knack to it and I haven't quite got it. When my husband was in seminary, our friends Leanne and Steve had a baby, so I decided to bring them the meal my mother would have made: breaded pork chops, baked potatoes, and fresh green beans. I brought it over, they enjoyed it, and later I called my mom, feeling pretty proud of myself. "That's great,

Deb,” she said. And then, just to make conversation: “What did you make for dessert?” Dessert? Oops. It never occurred to me to bring dessert. Mom would have had a batch of homemade cookies already in the freezer so she could just pull them out as she walked out the door.

I’m not a hugely skillful cleaner, either, despite my Dutch blood. (Those pristine Vermeer interiors? *Nothing* to your average West Michigan Dutch household.) Fortunately, there’s no knack to nesting. The energy and skill wells up from within. Not all the time, though. The urge seems to alternate with periods of fatigue so weighty all I can do is plant myself on the couch, Miriam on one side and Jacob on the other, and read books they fetch for me from the bookshelf. Since Christmas we’ve read half of Laura Ingalls Wilder’s entire opus, and it looks like we’ll make it through every page before the baby comes. Meanwhile, don’t expect me to get up to answer the phone.

H u m b a b a

Do expectant fathers engage in nesting behavior? My mother-in-law vividly recalls how, during her first pregnancy, Ron’s dad ordered one of those “Heathkits” popular in the 1960s, and spent hundreds of his evening hours peering and poking at tiny circuit boards, until he finally succeeded in building his own TV set. “He wanted to be building something, too,” she says.

And Ron does seem to have his own uncontrollable work impulses these days. He toiled in our yard for three solid days redirecting and replacing the edging, adding mulch, planting flowers and vegetables, adjusting the perennials. I don’t think this was directly in preparation for the prince’s arrival, however. He does this every

spring when he emerges from the mental labors of the school year and needs to rest his mind by working his body. Similar to nesting-induced frenzies, though, his garden labors give him a sense of control over the world, a sense that he can stake out a small territory and exercise good dominion over it. I call it the “Humbaba impulse,” after an episode in the *Epic of Gilgamesh*. Gilgamesh and his buddy Enkidu determine to go out and conquer Humbaba, a forest-dwelling giant who more or less symbolizes the wild power of nature. After much hemming and hawing, they finally conquer the beast, extending the borders of civilization and making a lasting name for themselves.

The Humbaba story reminds me that the primordial labor issue is definitely gender inflected. When I read *Gilgamesh* with my world lit class this spring, I thought they might be able to make better friends with the thing if I introduced them to the notion of archetypal criticism, in which readers examine a text looking for universal figures or patterns that might be presented there. So, for example, we discussed the journey-to-the-underworld pattern that appears in many ancient epics, and the figure Ishtar, your typical scary fertility goddess. Since *Gilgamesh* is a thoroughly masculine story, about the development from raw to mature manhood, I thought it might be helpful to discuss some female archetypal patterns we knew about from fairy tales and other sources. We came up with the figure of the virginal maiden, the bride, the madonna, the sexpot/whore, the wise woman (this one appears twice in *Gilgamesh*) and the crone, and we discussed some examples of where these archetypes make their appearances in the latest movies at the cineplex.

After class, though, I wondered, *Where am I in the archetypal scheme?* I’m going to be moving beyond the madonna stage pretty soon, but I really don’t want to be a crone just yet, even though some feminist literature has reclaimed the crone archetype as a figure

of wisdom and prophetic energy. What comes between madonna and crone? What are the archetypal resonances for, say, a mother of teenagers?

This one puzzled me for months. The Bible didn't seem to have any one answer. There are plenty of interesting women in the Bible—Ruth and Martha and Esther and (my favorite) Deborah, and little lessons to piece together from all their stories. And of course there's the legendary "Proverbs 31 woman," who clothes everyone in her household in red, trades real estate, gives to the needy, and wheels and deals in the marketplace. I know there are books out there in family bookstores on "how to be a Proverbs 31 woman." But closely reading the biblical chapter reveals the insidious fact that this woman never seems to sleep. That right there disqualifies her as a model for me.

Finally, while sorting the family laundry and trying to corral dozens of unruly white socks into four piles based on their different owners, I thought of the myth of Psyche. Whatever the archetype for my stage of a woman's life might be, I thought, it surely has to include work. And love. Psyche has both.

I knew the story of Psyche from the secret mythology handbook I use to cram for teaching the ancient Greeks (Edith Hamilton's *Mythology*), and also from C. S. Lewis's masterpiece *Till We Have Faces*. But after going back to these two sources I decided to venture a little farther, and I discovered that Jungian psychologist Erich Neumann wrote an entire book called *Amor and Psyche: The Psychic Development of the Feminine*. So much for my brilliant original insight, although I bet Erich didn't think up his ideas while sorting socks. The more I ponder her story, the more I think Psyche deserves a fresh visit. She captures basic truths about an adult woman's life, offering metaphor-

ical pictures of a woman's inner work as well as reflections of her outer life.

Psyche as Archetype

Psyche's story begins in the beauty and promise of youth, in her maidenhood. She is exquisitely beautiful—so beautiful, in fact, that Venus is jealous of her and sends her son Cupid to make her fall in love with something despicable. The plan goes awry, however, when Cupid himself falls in love with Psyche. So without Venus knowing, Cupid makes Psyche his bride, bringing her to a gorgeous palace, but never revealing his identity or letting her see him. At this point, Psyche reflects the naivete of the young bride, easing the loneliness of her maidenhood by marrying the idea of love itself. The actual husband in her bed remains a mystery to her. Is he a god? Or is he the vile serpent Venus intended her to marry? She is happy with the sweet flowers and soft beds of romance, but she does not fully understand love's ancestry; she does not yet see its potential as hard taskmaster.

Eventually, at the urging of her jealous sisters (more experienced, less naïve women?), Psyche becomes conscious of her naivete and she longs to encounter the true identity of her husband. So she breaks her promise never to try to view his face, and she lights a lamp after he's asleep. She's relieved to find that he is no vile monster, but rather handsome as a god; meanwhile her shaking hand causes a drop of oil to fall on his shoulder and he awakens. Seeing that she broke her promise to him, he flies off without a word.

Now the naivete is gone forever. She has committed a deception to get to the truth. She has rejected living only in an idea, and by do-

ing so she has gained necessary knowledge: she has found that the dreamy newlywed relationship is very fragile and that love is both more beautiful and more terrifying than she had thought. She also finds herself, now, alone.

The solitariness of Psyche's subsequent adventures is frighteningly right if the myth can be read as a parable of adult womanhood. Young women believe that marriage will bring them companionship, but once the honeymoon glow wears off, they realize that they still need to do their inner psychic work alone. Sometimes the young marriage actually breaks up; but even when the marriage presses ahead past naivete, each partner may be surprised to find that real intimacy takes work, and there will be betrayal, disappointment, and lonely journeys on the way to it.

Psyche, distraught with the disruption of her contentment, resolves to find real love. She knows that the love she lived with was the son of Venus the beautiful and powerful, an unpredictable figure who amuses herself both by delighting and enslaving. So Psyche ends up trudging off to meet Venus herself and plans to try to win her over through subservience. Perhaps then she can find her husband again and rebuild some kind of joyful life. Venus, meanwhile, is after Psyche, too, intending revenge. They meet; Venus laughs at Psyche in scorn and proposes to train her in the service of real love. Suffering is the method Venus has in mind, and she sets Psyche a series of four tasks or labors, analogues to Hercules's famous twelve.

So Psyche finds out that winning the favor of real love, getting it on your side in order to reclaim its satisfactions and rewards, entails work and trials. At the outset, each task seems impossible, but nevertheless it must get done. I think the labors of love, so to speak, that Psyche undertakes are resonant to every mother and wife and profes-

sional, or every woman—single or divorced, mother or not—who wants to find connection and selfhood.

Psyche's first task is to sort an enormous pile of tiny seeds, all different kinds, into separate piles. There's a time limit, too: it has to be done by nightfall. Now this is a labor I understand. Sorting laundry, sorting out dresser drawers, sorting my piles of papers at work, sorting my priorities so I can sort out my schedule: literally and figuratively, many of my psychic tasks involve sorting, and there's always a time limit. Cleaning and clutter-purging counts as this kind of labor, too. In fact, if I were to rewrite the tale, the task would involve gathering the seeds from under beds and couches, then sorting them, then wiping up the floors afterward. Perhaps because the literal sorting and cleaning is a picture of inward sorting and cleaning, this kind of physical work does not always feel like a hardship; there is a deep satisfaction in it. One of my colleagues told me that after she had surgery for a skin condition on her face, she couldn't lean her head down. So she perched her glasses on the end of her nose and sorted out all her recipe boxes. She said that afterward, she felt her whole life had been refreshed and renewed. I think therapists ought to order all their women patients who suffer from anxiety or depression to spend an entire day cleaning out all their kitchen cupboards. It could spring them months ahead in their progress toward good health.

Psyche has no idea how she can possibly manage the sorting task she faces. But friendly ants show up and do the job for her. The ants have been seen as symbolic of instinct, but I think they represent persistence and determination. Ants are not brainy creatures; they're very primitive. But they're organized and they plug away till the job gets done. Sometimes, that's what it takes. I often get all tangled up in worry about the things I have to do, and the solution is to stop fret-

ting and get moving: make Miriam's lunch, bring the clean towels upstairs, then go to bed.

Psyche's next task is to fetch the golden wool of some very big and fierce sheep. She almost despairs at this one and thinks seriously about drowning herself in the nearby river, but instead a tiny reed whispers to her and gives her a great idea. She has only to wait till evening, when the sheep come to the river to rest. On their way they brush past the prickly bushes and she can simply walk over and gather the wool that gets caught there. Neumann suggests that the sheep's wool represents masculine power, a persuasive notion since the sheep are aggressive and have big horns. But the fleece can be anything rare and precious that can only be obtained if one is willing to face danger: the completion of a goal, a reconciled relationship, some accomplishment at work. Now if this were a myth about the male psyche (which one famous Jungian believed it was), then the way to get the wool would be to go crashing in there, maybe with some flaming prickly bush branches, frighten the sheep half to death, and overpower them. But Psyche has to use a patient strategy. The time will come. The reed, I think, suggests an inner tenderness and quietness that Psyche listens to in order to find her answer.

This part of the tale validates that waiting mode so characteristic of women's lives, that mode of which pregnancy, I've already come to learn, is a vivid picture. Waiting is part of the task. Not a passive, helpless waiting, but rather a time of patient attention motivated by strategic knowledge and sustained by confidence that the prize will be hers.

Psyche's third task is to collect water in a flask from a waterfall whose source is the river Styx, border river of Hades. The trouble is, no one can reach the waterfall because of all the steep, slippery rocks around it. This time, an eagle appears, seizes Psyche's flask, fills it, and

returns it to her. Then she must walk it back to Venus. One interpreter believes the water represents emotion, and Psyche must find a way to contain her emotion to bring it into the service of love. To do this, she needs intellect and reason. Neumann is a little hazier on this one, seeing the river as representative of the “paternal uroboros” (i.e., cosmic circularity) with Psyche’s job being “to encompass this power without being shattered by it.” Another simpler and more helpful way to look at it is to see the water, with its connection to the world of the dead, as all the dark things a woman must face: grief, fear, illness, pain. These will defeat her unless she finds some way to contain them. So perhaps my mother’s cakes and sympathy cards, ham-on-buns at funerals, and Jennifer’s omelettes are all ways of putting the waters of life and death into a flask so that they do not overwhelm us. The eagle, I think, represents wisdom, faith, and vision (and is not necessarily a masculine principle, as Neumann believes). These come to assist Psyche from a divine source, mediated through centuries of human history and tradition. They are the energies behind simple acts in the face of powers far beyond us.

Finally, Venus sends Psyche on an errand to the realm of the dead. She must carry a box to Proserpine and fill it with beauty to bring back to Venus, who feels she’s getting a little frayed around the edges. Psyche receives help this time from a tower who whispers instructions to her. Among other directions, the tower tells Psyche that several seemingly worthy people will ask for her help, but she must ignore them. That’s part of the task. Psyche makes it to the Queen of the Dead, obtains her beauty charm, and returns. On her way back, however, her curiosity overwhelms her and she decides to peek into the box. After all, these labors haven’t done much for *her* beauty, either. So she opens the box hoping to freshen up a bit. Inside she finds: nothing. She falls into a deep sleep.

This task, I think, is actually quite directly about beauty. Women need to reconceive what it means to be beautiful as they age, as they approach the realm of the dead. Maiden freshness doesn't last forever, and each woman needs to work through what her deeper beauty will be. One good possibility is to serve others, to gain value by being needed. But this can be a trap, a distraction from real beauty of the soul, as many middle-aged women have found after overworking themselves into illness all in the name of "service." The tower strikes me, then, not as a symbol of masculine culture, as Neumann has it, but as a symbol of inner fortitude, self-esteem perhaps—an instinctive, solid perception of where to place the boundaries in order to protect and value her soul.

Psyche looks into the box out of vanity, thinking maybe she can revive her maiden beauty—a temptation we know is hard to resist, bombarded as we are with advertisements for youth-preserving cosmetics and diets and surgeries. But the box is really empty, and that's why Psyche falls asleep. Her lapse into trusting old forms of beauty subdues her consciousness. Thankfully, Psyche receives understanding and forgiveness for this slip-up. Cupid comes to her and awakens her, assures her that all will be well, and tells her to complete her errand. Meanwhile, he advocates for her among the gods, and they agree to make her immortal.

Oh, and one more thing. While Edith Hamilton and C. S. Lewis never mention this part, Neumann preserves a key element of the tale found clearly in the Latin source: through all of these labors, Psyche is pregnant. Of course she is. Pregnancy is that complex inner work, so beautiful a picture of love's labors, so full of the potential for maturing and strengthening womanhood. Finally, united with Cupid and residing on Olympus with the gods, Psyche gives birth to a daughter, whose name is Joy.

So Psyche gains, after much labor, a love far more tested, lasting, and expansive than simple romantic passion. She has had to make use of resources, both inside and outside herself, that she didn't realize she had at her disposal: persistence and determination, patience and strategy, faith and wisdom, and an inner strength and self-assuredness. That there are no specific figures in the tale clearly and simply representing the important people in a woman's life—the husband, the children, the parents and relatives, the coworkers, the friends—makes the tale, in my mind, better able to offer wisdom to women in many situations. The basic psychic elements are still there—the labor-intensive nature, literally and psychically, of a woman's life; the struggle to keep going despite discouragement, difficulty, and self-doubt; and the essential goal toward which all the work is aimed: enduring, mature love.



My sister-in-law Janelle made a cross-stitch and framed it for us one Christmas. It sits on the windowsill above our kitchen sink, and it says *Work is love made visible*. Janelle got the idea from a similar plaque that hung in the kitchen of her uncle's family during the many years that he and his three daughters and son cared for Aunt Judy. She had multiple sclerosis, and each year she could manage less and less until finally she needed round-the-clock professional care. Hard work is the hard truth about love.

I usually take little notice of the plaque in my kitchen. It's usually splattered with dish soap, which I suppose is appropriate. One of these days, on a kitchen rampage, I'll clean it off and think about how that truth is programmed into my body. Nesting is a way of making that inner, loving work visible as we prepare for our prince.