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great with child

ON BECOMING A MOTHER

Debra Rienstra



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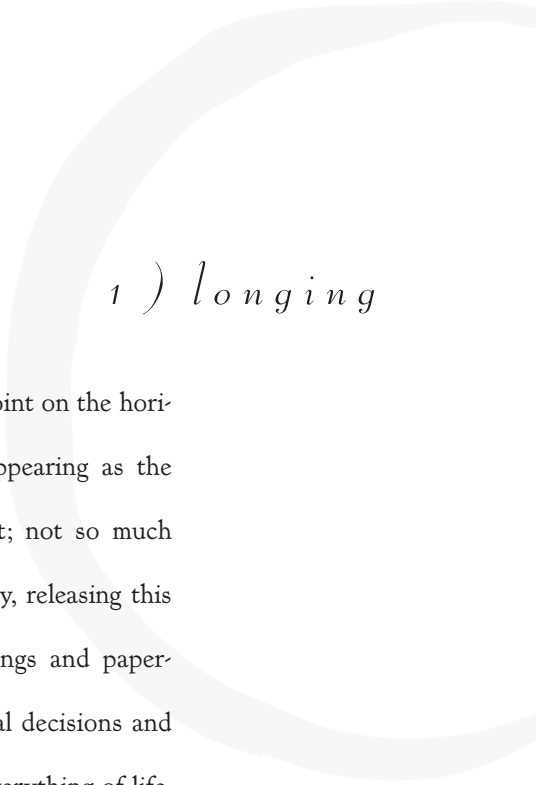
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Thus great with child to speak, and helpless in my throes,
 Biting my truant pen, beating myself for spite,
“Fool,” said my muse to me; “look in thy heart, and write.”

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



1) *l o n g i n g*

Not so much a thought as a pinpoint on the horizon of thought; not so much appearing as the world slowly rolling to reveal it; not so much the world but a breath of eternity, releasing this infinitesimal Yes. Between meetings and paperwork and meal plans and financial decisions and the seemingly more substantial everything of life, it drifts quietly toward resolution, takes hold in a little crevice of mind, and begins. There is time now in the cluttered shuffle of things for only this tiny Yes.

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We have been speaking of it, my husband and I, with few and careful words, as it has a kind of sacred piquance. To speak of it aloud too much might flatten or dishonor it. But this slip of assent will grow.

For me, this Yes arises from within the kind of human hunger that memory forms and feeds. Five years after Miriam was born, three after Jacob, I remember their babyhoods with a mute, heart-clutching nostalgia. This is a fresh longing now for an experience (or the preserved portion of it) I have lived before: first, the deep attentiveness of pregnancy, then the harrowing intensity of birth, then that surrender of the self to demands that press the boundaries of endurance and to a small person who, once here, will make any previous life seem impossibly incomplete.

There are other strands of hunger tangled up in this, too, spindly little shabby ones: a weary desire to escape the routine, the inconvenient, the tedious difficulties of getting up, going to work, coming home. I half know I'm looking for change and variety, excitement, risk, for an escape.

But deeper than all that is the peculiar hunger of the body itself. Not for sexual union, although of course that human longing for intimacy is caught up, masterfully, with the desire to create. The body-hunger I feel is low in the gut, a kind of emptiness repeatedly reaching out to be filled. It is ancient, archetypal.

I came across a strangely unembroidered, uncontextualized oracle in the biblical book of Proverbs that tells me I'm not the only one to feel the womb itself seem to cry out in this hunger:

*There are three things that are never satisfied,
four that never say, "Enough!":
the grave, the barren womb,*

*land, which is never satisfied with water,
and fire, which never says, "Enough!"*

The longing to create life is elemental, on the level of fire, earth, and death. The steadily humming tissues and organs, as they play out their unconscious patterns, long to serve something spiritual, to touch the eternal. Perhaps the mortal body snatches out toward the immortal body. I believe that immortality is not a matter of disembodied spirits floating about in some cloudy afterlife, but of flesh, the carnal, renewed and perfected beyond our imaginings, reborn with all of creation. It does not seem strange to me, then, that our physical bodies lean hard, with our souls, toward the eternal.

L a u g h t e r

I've been taught since childhood that the Bible is an instructive place for exploring elementally human things, and no part of it is more elemental than the book of Genesis, with its ancient stories telling us like vivid and persistent dreams the deep truths of humanity, God, and ourselves. Womb-hunger, I find, is a deep current in the familiar stories of the matriarchs. Sarah, Rebekah, and Rachel are all "barren" for a time until the Lord "remembers" or "listens to" their pleas. For Sarah and Abraham, barrenness is an especially wrenching and puzzling problem, as God promises early in their story to make Abraham the father of a great nation. But chapters go by and no conception occurs. Some commentators, particularly feminist ones, see the pattern of barrenness, delay, and joyful fulfillment in these stories as one important way in which ancient Hebrew writers as-

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serted the superior power of their one, true, and, not incidentally, masculine God over the fertility-goddess religions among which Hebrew monotheism arose. Fertility, these ancient writers wished to emphasize, comes not from goddess-idols or the earth's cycles, but from God alone. This erasure of the power of feminine divinity by a superior, masculine divine power follows the pattern of many Near Eastern civilizations, in fact. The matriarchal gives way to the patriarchal, and a world of woes for women ensues.

But the delay between desire and physical conception in the Genesis narratives is more than a compositional device in service of religious orthodoxy. It is a basic matter of human experience. Perhaps the barren times in these stories, and later, in a more detailed and poignant version in the story of Hannah, emphasize the power of God over the womb, but they also offer a pattern of longing to participate with the creator in the creation of something greater than oneself. Cultural historians might suggest that these women wanted children because a son was their only avenue to status and a remembered name. Barrenness, in their culture, would make them a shamed nothing, a cipher. But their longing, and that of their husbands, spreads outward into the symbolic, signifying all our longings to defy death. It is located not just in their own time and place, but in the human soul.

Moreover, in the songs of joy they sing when the babies finally do come, these ancient mothers recognize the power of God let loose within them. Rather than being silent vessels of the masculine God's power, they are given voices; they express longing and anger and frustration and then triumph when their longings are fulfilled. Biblical scholar Phyllis Trible shows that the God of these narratives is consistently described throughout the Hebrew scriptures as the God of compassion, and the Hebrew verb to express having compassion

(*racham*) is directly related to the word for womb (*rechem*). The woman's womb is the physical metaphor for the abundant love of God. Thus the power of God over fertility remains a feminine power, and the experience of the mother in bringing forth life parallels the power of the Creator to bring forth all things. The words of the First Mother, Eve, on the birth of her first son echo this relationship of co-creation: "With the help of the Lord I have brought forth a man." (The name Cain is a pun on the Hebrew for "brought forth" or "gotten.") The "getting" of a new person is a source of joy and delight, just as the creation of the world is depicted as a source of delight to the Creator, a delight emphasized not only by the declarations of "very good," but also by the earthy wordplay of the Hebrew account. Sarah's response to her son Isaac's birth best expresses this joy. When Isaac is finally born in her old age, she acknowledges both her earlier disbelief at this possibility as well as her joy at the reality of it by naming her son "he laughs"—a cleverly honest name—and she remarks: "God has brought me laughter, and everyone who hears about this will laugh with me." God has done this, and it is marvelous in her weary, shining eyes.

This is the laughter Ron and I hunger and wait for now, the laughter of participating in creation, of letting our flawed, sometimes doubtful, foolish, cynical, selfish, but ultimately loved and glorious selves experience in our bodies the delight and power of God.

A w a k e n i n g

I had experienced the hunger and its fulfillment twice before, and it lay dormant for a time. But it was reawakened the spring my daughter was four, my son was two, and I thought I had become pregnant

without planning to. It began with queer feelings in the stomach and tingling in the breasts. Long before my period was due, I started obsessing: *What if . . . ?* I was rather alarmed; this was no time for a new baby. My job was far too demanding and I was too unsettled in it. And yet, feeling that hunger awakened, I was secretly glad. I began to think of a new baby as an escape. This would spare me the difficulty of fighting that daily battle to do my job well and prove to others that I could do it.

A weird obsession took over. I started composing possible speeches to my department chair. Perhaps I should try the cavalier approach: "Well, you know, these things happen!" Or maybe the detailed, scientific explanation: "It must have been those antibiotics that suppressed the effect of the pill." Or perhaps the blunt approach would be best: "You know what? I'm glad, as this will give me an excuse for a graceful exit from this good-for-nothing job!" Meanwhile, I obsessively noted subtle changes in my body, clandestinely inspecting my breasts about 25 times a day, wondering if it could be true, hoping it was, wanting the inescapable complications of it all. In a spasm of breathless irrationality, I even went out and bought a pregnancy test. It was negative. Well, maybe I took it too early, I thought.

But then, my period came, right on time. And I felt relieved. It was not yet, I concluded in calm and dignified mental tones, the Right Time. I really did have to give my professional work more of a chance. I wanted my son to grow up a little bit more before having a sibling. Yes, this was best. But still I puzzled over why I had experienced what seemed like convincing symptoms. Could it have been psychosomatic? My body's way of fulfilling a semiconscious wish to just give up and get out of my job? A cowardly reaction on my part, if

true. But finally I concluded that my body was probably not doing anything unusual at all; I was simply paying attention for once to a hormonal routine I usually ignored.

Once I had finished marveling at my own silliness, one thing remained: where before I hadn't been absolutely sure, now I knew that I definitely wanted another child. Making an emergency space for one in my addled mind convinced me that I deeply desired to make a real space for one soon. When I told Ron about this, he needed no convincing at all. "You know I want more kids!" was his matter-of-fact reaction. Perhaps, then, this little practice run was a matter of body wisdom more than psychic foolishness, a hunger cry from within.

The Reckless Yes

So the fitting number of months have passed, and now we permit ourselves to speak the Yes, with words and with our bodies, deliberately and surely.

When I went off the pill I started listening to my body again. I attended to its rhythms and subtle shifts. On the third day of my first non-chemically controlled period, I had a horrible headache all day, the kind of headache that feels as if some tank of brain chemicals had bottomed out and my brain was shriveling up inside my skull. I took Ron's old college textbook for human biology off the shelf and found a helpful chart showing that this is not too far from what actually happens: the levels of both estrogen and progesterone plummet just before the onset of menstruation. This explains the terrible upheaval some women feel in their bodies at this time. The "progesterone plummet" can be fast and severe, making it tough for the body's systems to

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cope gracefully. Then, the levels of both hormones bottom out during the bleeding stage of the cycle. The resulting headache for me on that bottom-out day was a rotten distraction, but it occurred to me that I might better think of it as a kind of ritual emptying, a low point on a curve that could now rise to buoy something completely new and uncontrolled, something outside myself and my ability to direct.

This is why I am fond of this moment of the Yes: it is reckless.

Recklessness and fertility go together. The ancient Greeks knew this in the person of the crazy party god Dionysus. Recklessness is not, of course, always a good thing. Dionysus is also the god of drunkenness, excess, even violence. For some people, the act that engenders conception is most unfortunately reckless, as one or both partners say “yes” only to heated flesh in the moment, or to some confused desire for acceptance and love, and not to the potential consequences. And when there is violence, then there is no Yes at all, but only a male assent to misogynistic violence and evil, and the life that results seems a cruelly ironic backlash at the destructive forces that initiated it. God have mercy.

But even when the decision to have a child is a fully conscious one, it is not without recklessness. Ron and I know very well that another child is laughably impractical. We are both semicompetent professionals, with enough investment in education to strongly motivate us both toward career-minded decisions. Since our two children will both be in school in a couple of years, the careerist thing to do would be to wait out these two years with our current one-main-income arrangement (mine) and then move ahead full steam on parallel career tracks. Moreover, since we are committed to religious education for our children—a soberingly expensive prospect—another child would increase our financial burden for education alone by 50 per-

cent. Combined with the longer “wait” time until the kids are in school and the reduced income during that time, another child is, financially speaking, a mistake.

And it’s not just money. The slow track is hard not because we’re so ambitious for career advancement, but because there are so many things we love to do that we have set aside for a season because our children need our time and energy. When I think of all the music I can’t play, all the books I can’t read, all the exercise I’m definitely not getting, I often drift toward self-pity and sometimes despair. I would never make a different choice. I never resent what I give to Miriam and Jacob. But I do keenly feel the loss of what I give up. Another child will mean more of this, for a longer time.

And besides all that, our house isn’t quite big enough, either. We’re filling up the bedrooms now. Where would we put a nursery?

Well, one can duly note these contingencies, listing them off in late-evening sessions with pencils and yellow legal pads. But pragmatism hardly captures my fancy. Instead, I find the recklessness irresistibly alluring. I greet it with a sense of rebellion against all that is practical and sensible, about me, about anything. My usual taste for control and closure makes this recklessness all the more delicious. It is a relief from myself. I take pleasure now in surrendering to the unknown.

Human beings must begin in recklessness. Even the most carefully planned and intensely wanted baby must begin with the parents saying Yes to something they cannot control. I wonder if creation is always like this. I wonder if God felt reckless when he spoke the first creative word. The Judeo-Christian notion of divine creation through fiat and the majestically ordered poem of creation in Genesis hardly suggest

recklessness, but I like to think of God covering his eyes with one hand, cringing with the wildness of it all, and saying “Let there be . . .” Then, the cautious parting of the fingers, the divine eye peeping through, a reverberant whisper declaring, almost in surprise: “That’s good!”

This giving over of the self to whatever happens, this poisoning of the self for possibility—I could not relish it if it weren’t for the ultimate trust I have in the sense of this universe, in the compassion and power of the Creator, in God’s sharing of hunger and promise of joy, somehow, sometime. This is not, for me, recklessness in a void. The giving over of my tiny helm is a chance to drift on something larger than myself. So I say now: Streams and patterns of cosmic flow, chance and chaos, Providence and Divine Love—now *you* decide. I merely open myself, and wait.