

I wait until I'm alone, then lug the heavy, red Stanley tool kit into the kitchen and plunk it down on the table. I flip open the two metal latches, each with a satisfying clunk, then lift the lid and pull out the top tray, exposing my tools inside. Some of them have overtly sexual names like Tempter, Screamer or Naughty 'n Nice. The rest connote food: Raspberry Seltzer, Peach Gleam, Juicy Tomato. For the next ten minutes my brain activity becomes so slow, it would barely register on an electroencephalogram. I'm painting my nails.

Special occasions call for a cuticle soak and scrub brush but today it's quick and cheap. A scrape under each nail with an orange stick. A pink emery board gives the nails some shape. I'm genetically cursed with weak nails, so I slap on a coat of clear strengthening formula. Nippers tidy up torn cuticles – the result of a nervous habit I can't seem to break. And then comes the most difficult part of all. Whatever color I choose will determine my mood for the next day or two. I watch my fingertips gesture, type and wash dishes throughout the day. And Shock Wave (a fluorescent glittery blue) impacts my state of mind differently than today's choice would. It's a pale pink, to make me feel refined and delicate. Pinkie to thumb on the left hand, thumb to pinkie on the right. Then a second coat before the first coat has dried, with almost no mistakes. Errors are nullified with an orange stick dipped in nail polish remover. And that is how I sharpen my cognitive reasoning skills.

I'm no mental lightweight. I work at home, and my job requires strong attention to detail and a substantial amount of problem solving. But sometimes I need to energize my left brain and let my right brain take a breather. When I get stuck, it helps to paint my nails, steam my face or deep condition my hair. Just like athletes meditate to direct their awareness, I go into the zone when I pamper myself. Distracting thoughts of fear, frustration, and uncertainty melt away as I become absorbed in the activity at hand. Others find this sort of relaxation in gardening. They say pruning dead leaves or weeding a garden has a transformative effect on their outlook. But I live in an apartment in the city, so I've become the walking, talking flowerbed. In short, I primp so that I can be my intellectual best.

Perhaps you think I'm shallow. I used to think so, too. When I was young, I felt guilty about how much I loved pampering myself. I kept my secret hidden, like my women's magazines. I grew up in New England, where hard work and self-restraint are paramount. Most women in New England renounce anything flashy or self-indulgent. There must be some sort of collective memory about arriving on the Mayflower and needing to spend all one's free time canning vegetables for the long winter. All the women in my family are bright, lovely and independent. But they associate primping with vanity or worse yet being vacuous or cheap. Not one of them has ever considered slipping into a hot bubble bath while wearing a mint julep-scented mud mask. That kind of self-gratification is for movie stars, they think.

I tried for as long as I could to agree with them. As a smart woman, I thought I shouldn't spend too much time fussing over my looks. It was time that would be better spent reading Marcel Proust or René Descartes. As a feminist, I feared that primping made me powerless or insubstantial. But then I moved to Southern California and the 3000 miles afforded me a new attitude about a lot of things. I realized I don't primp for men. There's not a man alive who would notice the difference in my hands after I've massaged in a Vitamin C-enriched cuticle cream. I'm doing it for me.

Besides, I get a thrill every time I open my red Stanley tool kit. It has weight and substance, and overflows with brightly colored bottles, which thrill me the way the 64 pack of Crayolas thrilled me as a kid. Expensive bottles of the trendiest shades mingle with countless 99¢ polishes from the drug store, each one purchased as reward for running a tedious errand. I like to layer two colors – like a light pink shimmer over bright papaya.

After the second coat has dried, I meticulously put everything back in place and close the latches. I have achieved inner stillness – and efficiently, too, as it only took about 15 minutes. I return to work with a clear mind and a renewed ability to concentrate and focus. And I won't need to reach for my tool kit again until tomorrow. I have a huge project due and I might need something sparkle-intensive to get me through it.