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What Needlecraft Gives Me

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Knitting literally led me to connections, allowing me to connect who I was to who I've become.

by [Jan Stone](#)



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I'm a knitter now. I hadn't touched a needle with any intent other than fastening a button since home economics — a course still required for girls in the mid-20th century to acquire domestic skills homemakers required. Despite my petulance about that notion, early in the 21st

century, a yarn shop opened between home and my daughter's school. A few weeks later, I walked through the shop doors, and the next afternoon I was participating in its weekly knitting circle. If I'd gone missing, this is the last place anyone would look.

Maybe the window displays caught my eye. Over the weeks, I saw different yarns from gem tones to autumnal shades strewn amid results like mittens, scarves and hats. All the supplies from needles, markers and patterns, matched the blankets, cowls, shawls and other pieces materializing.

Historically, my vision is narrow in the firsts of things. If I must go anywhere unfamiliar, it's for a particular reason — to pick something up, for example. And I do so with blinders. I'm focused on finding whatever it is I've come for, and I'm no less intent getting out the door. Success is in the speed.

Thus, it felt surreal wandering unfamiliar surroundings, captivated by tall shelves of yarn lining every wall. The allure of different colors, weights and textures seemed to summon me into believing I could transform them. Smooth bamboo and shiny steel needles in different lengths and widths hung on racks. Some so skinny, others so wide. I couldn't imagine manipulating needles and fibers into something practical and pleasing; fit for display.

About then the owner approached, asking, "Are you new to knitting? I'd be happy to show you around."

"I've no idea what I'm doing here," I said, unable to hide the utter disconnect running through me.

She laughed, brushing my anxiety aside, and gave me a tour, showing me how new knitters begin. In hindsight, I think we were gauging each other's designs. Was this one giant misstep for mankind or destiny?

“Let’s see how you do with the first step in knitting — casting on,” she suggested. Though nothing more than a slipstitch, I had an embarrassingly difficult time trying to coordinate my fingers with yarn and needles. She sat with me forever that first day, patiently helping me try to master the step.

When she encouraged me to join the knitting circle scheduled the very next day, I remember thinking she must believe I was going to benefit. I trusted her because she was confident despite the hard time I was having learning the firsts.

Casting on is a prelude to infinite possibilities of yarn and imagination. As a writer, it reminds me of the significance of a great lead — a riveting start prompted by identifying the most fitting words, then lining them onto a once blank page with sense and consequence. That afternoon, I showed no success required in creating that critical cast-on row — lining up one stitch after the next with the tension and uniformity critical to assuring a solid foundation.

On my way home, I wasn’t sure what to say if my husband or daughters asked where I’d been so I took the lead.

“I stopped at that new yarn shop this afternoon,” I called out.

“Where?” my husband asked.

“Really? I spent the afternoon in a crack house,” my youngest daughter chuckled, the idea so absurd it didn’t rank further discussion.

True, my husband and children weren’t familiar with my domestic side. For years I was a working mom with a big title and office, traveling and tallying long hours away while my husband kept consistent hours and clean clothes. Once home more often, I was astounded no one expected me to morph into a domestic goddess. Thankfully, it left time for reading, always my favorite hobby. I could lie on the couch, pouring

through one book after the next, moving only when husband or kids blew poofs of air about me as if dislodging accumulating cobwebs. I'm lucky they had a sense of humor about my idiosyncrasies. Not everyone did.

In the aforementioned home economics class, our final sewing project required making a simple skirt from a simple pattern. Despite all the simplicity, the skirt fit my plumper and remarkably humorless teacher, not me.

So, as I sat on the couch that evening determined to conquer that first row, my family maintained its routines while occasionally glancing over at my clumsy efforts.

"This isn't something you have to invest a lot in up front, is it?" my husband asked. "I'm all about you finding a hobby, but shouldn't you look where you've shown some interest?"

"I know. It's weird. Maybe it'll go away soon," was all I could offer.

The next morning, needles and yarn sprawled across the couch verified the whole thing wasn't a dream. That no one yet validated it fueled my courage. Not an expectation cast upon me until I found my way through those doors.

My thoughts raced. "Are there new knitter protocols? Is a knitting circle failure marked with an equivalent scarlet letter?"

Eight chairs waited around one long table, and sweets and caffeine sat in the center to lure the knitters inside. As they arrived, the owner welcomed each as warmly as she had me the previous day.

"We have a new knitter," she announced, "completely new to needlecraft."

I smiled, nodding tensely, then sat down. Next, I began observing the distinct tempo and tone of the knitting circle. Working with exotic yarns like llama, cashmere and silk, the women sat poised, holding needles and yarns in perfect tensions. Over the weeks I watched stiff wool loosen into the more supple tweed of a warm cardigan with Poppy Brown and Cocoa Kiss tones. Lushly dyed and variegated skeins with names like Ruby River and Raspberry Breeze subtly striped into ever-changing red and purple shades.

A tall, animated circle regular counted days to retirement so she and her husband could travel — only to have an annual mammogram rewrite those plans. Somehow able to laugh at the irony, the post-surgical effects of a mastectomy remained woven into her weekly conversation. Tales of hair loss, regrowth and countdown to the five-year, cancer-free cat scan were new, unplanned milestones. A blind woman escorted by her daughter-in-law said little but quietly worked lace projects with skills I couldn't envision regardless of years practiced. One school holiday a 9-year-old sat quietly next to her mom with her first needles and yarn. Eyes shyly lowered, she wound her Poppy Pink hank into a ball, caught up in the chatter. When customers entered, she'd peek toward the door, then back to her project. A slip of a grin suggested recognition of an insider — a collaborator in a club where sacred time and talk connects moms and friends.

The weeks supported these patterns. Each part of a project from cast on through final blocking was calculated against original expectations. The more I watched, the more I sensed many levels of connection. As they knit, one woman spoke of her father's health coming undone, another about her son's frustration spending last night's game on the bench. One woman planning a surprise 40th for her sister questioned when to tell her mother, if at all, worrying mom might slip, spoil the surprise. But most times, the women boasted about loved ones' successes, pride purled into each celebratory sweater, scarf, throw.

Patience may have been the largest item the shop inventoried as I hadn't a strand of intuition to follow, not the vaguest notion of how to align my fingers with needles and yarn. Nonetheless, the unique personalities captivated me, and I felt new sensations. One tangible, tactile: I'd struggle to recreate a stitch once my eyes left the instructions; instead of winging the whole mess into the air, I was soothed by textures as I rewrapped a stitch around one sleek steel needle and slid it onto the other.

I also sensed a soul stirring. I had no reason to think I could succeed. Yet, for the first time, the last thing I wanted was that swift exit.

Only the blind knitter could miss how intensely focused I was, struggling in learning to cast on before I could move on. My sighs and looks of despair likely prompted others to ask if anyone in my family practiced needlework.

"Mama, my great grandma, did. I don't remember ever seeing her make anything; I only know because I have a throw she crocheted for me," I said, beginning to grasp what a feat Mama's gift had been.

I credit the circle's warmth and patience in forming such a safe boundary I was willing to talk for the first time about why this was hard and my greater familiarity with disconnections. I spoke of never caring about crafts, my abysmal performance in home economics. Then I began addressing my family's immense unraveling. I told of my mom, dad, sister and brother who died, one after the other over a period of only a few years. I began to understand all that loss, so quickly, made it more difficult than I had known to create new connections. I didn't have ill parents to discuss. There weren't surprise parties to arrange.

Because each woman spoke so frequently of family milestones, each validated my belief about families of origin — those who line our heart and soul from the start with a love knit from universal truths. These

women knew me as a wife and mother, but they innately understood me as the daughter and sister of a family passed but still treasured, whose habits and unique characteristics I yearn so much for I find myself looking in the most unexpected places. They were first to untangle the truth others, with nothing but best intentions, tiptoed around. They knew the effects of broken connections; how the undoing can be fast, frightening, frequently futile to mend.

They connected me to the recognition of how those deaths unraveled me. How I'd been left not only with a tattered heart, but untethered to the "me" of a life only parents and siblings stand testament. Big events and little things, common traits, holidays, traumas and triumphs — the combined moments of shared lives make a family a family, I thought.

Now, as I struggle to knit a scarf, hat, shawl — to hug a loved one when my arms can't reach — I think differently of the blanket Mama, crocheted for me. Of course she knew it would outlive her. She raised a family of four and survived two world wars before I even came to be.

I wonder when she had time to crochet. Her days were filled with cooking, gardening, pinning hand-scrubbed clothes from a long line out back. Mostly, I remember Mama at the kitchen counter, the sun shining through the window over the sink while she kneaded and rolled dough for Swedish biscuits. As were they, she too was soft, warm, round; always smelling of cinnamon, cardamom or lingonberries. Those hugs linger in the senses forever.

That she managed weaving rows of red, pink, blue and purple yarns together specifically to keep me warm, along with all else, overwhelms me. How hard that must have been, snuck into the late hours of long days — a labor of love I'd never have grasped had I not wandered into the yarn store.

But I did, and now I understand my needlecraft throw forever will be, even in the worst moments of my life, in every way a reminder I have been loved, I have lost love and I still remain loved.

As my knitting improves, I've surprised a few loved ones with simple projects. I'm certain they're astounded by the novelty of owning a scarf knit by the last person on earth to make anything they'd be caught dead wearing. If I happen to bring up a current project to those who didn't get the press release, they ask, "You knit?" as if they couldn't have heard me correctly or I'd announced I'm competing in an Iditarod.

Shock is then followed by some version of "Who are you, and what have you done with Janet?"

The frequency of this reaction speaks volumes. Through the gift of knitting, clearly I'd underestimated the number of people remaining in my life who know "me." More than a pronoun, "Me," as in someone with distinct feelings, abilities and a youth worth recalling. And in those recollections are many moments, though none connected to needlecraft.

Nonetheless, knowing others consistently find it unthinkable I'd have a thread of interest or patience for knitting means the world to me. Knitting literally led me to connections — joining together who I was to who I've become.

Thus, each, "You knit?" assures me while I may no longer be a daughter or a sister, I've little to fear. There are family and friends in paths remaining who know of my beginnings. Maybe not in the everyday way experiences stack up with parents and siblings. But there are those who I'm connected to who recall other moments that shaped me into the woman I've become.

The yarn store's opening remains an extraordinary gift. Women of every generation and background created a community and camaraderie I can't imagine finding elsewhere. Generously they share the gift of a craft

where spun wool becomes practical and enlightening. Thus, it is amid the clinks and clanks of knitting needles that I find it's my turn to weave together the past and future in my hands and heart. I think of how I can best stitch wraps and hats and maybe one day a throw to help keep my daughters and granddaughters warm. And, as I learn to knit and purl spun wool to conclusions unique and useful, I work with comforting certainty that through these patterns, we all will remain forever connected.

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