

Knitting as a spiritual practice



Photo by Sue Edison-Swift

To understand the connection between craft and spirituality, you need experience. So, here's a project—a simple scarf—to practice deliberate focus on what you're doing this moment, this stitch and the next.

Have you noticed? Recently, knitting “got religion.” The revival of this once grandmotherly craft took off in the late 1990s. Women circled round tables in yarn shops to learn the basics or to unravel the mysteries of intricate patterns. They discovered how wonderfully portable this new-old craft is, toting their knitting bags to meetings and waiting rooms. And, knitting is happily practical, offering the chance to do something enjoyable and productive during often tedious times. Evidently, football season spikes a big boost in knitting projects, as women plan their strategy for Sunday afternoons, whether or not they watch the game on TV.

It wasn't long before knitting came to church. Prayer shawls captured the imagination and hearts of many women, following the pattern for knitting and praying in the 2003 book, *Knitting into the Mystery*. Prayer shawl ministry blesses both the people who receive the shawls in their times of tribulation or celebration and the knitters who create them.

Knitting has emerged as a spiritual practice—one that opens a way to meditation.

The knitting life

Consider what these seasoned knitters share about their time with needles and wool. You'll glimpse lives that are centered in reality, in the moment, in the *now*.

In the crazy pace of contemporary society, we turn to knitting to slow us down and to relax us. ...The captivating rhythm of knitting gives us a chance to step back and view our lives from a little bit of a distance. ...Knitting can be seen as the very process of slowing down and coming home to ourselves....

Catherine Hinard, “Knitting as Spiritual Practice,” *Knit Lit*.

When I am making a baby or toddler sweater, I think of the tiny life who will wear the sweater. I wish him or her well. Patricia Hewitt, *Bella’s Woolies* (Washington Island, Wis.).

...[T]hrough knitting you can hear and give attention to what’s in your heart and soul—that knitting can be a place of rest and thought and a place for the Divine. Linda Skolnik, *The Knitting Way*.

Knitting is my way of relaxing and concentrating. It’s a perpetual retreat—nice to have that little bit of quiet in your day. Natasha Lehrer, *Esther’s Place* (<http://esthersplacefibers.com>).

In knitting, our focus is on the repeated formation of a stitch. When we use this focus in our knitting it gives us the opportunity to notice what’s going on—to be mindful. Tara Jon Manning, *Mindful Knitting*.

Let your fingers lead you

Listening to knitters who tell about what’s true for them and what’s possible for others in the connection between the craft and spirituality is intriguing and inspiring. What’s needed for understanding, though, is experience. So here is a project—a simple scarf, which, ironically, might be most difficult for experienced knitters who could be instantly bored. But, even that is part of the experience.

The purpose of this project, suggested by Manning, is to bring “deliberate focus” to what you’re doing this moment, this stitch and the next.

The project uses just one basic stitch. The yarn introduces the unpredictability. You’ll choose one skein of variegated color, so you won’t know from row-to-row how the color will flow. (Be sure not to pick up one of the new types that automatically stripes.) And

you’ll also look for one that has uneven thickness in the yarn, a characteristic of hand-spun wools. That adds to the surprises that come the knitter’s way.

I decided to cast myself into this project and now will have a long, long scarf to wrap around my neck when I finish this resource. It will be spring in Chicago, which, most often, is a word that means lingering winter.

The choosing of yarn is delightful and offers you the chance to decide “where” you’ll go during your time on what Natasha Lehrer calls a “retreat.” I headed for real spring—with pale blue, clear yellow and sharp green: sky and lake...sunlight...budding leaves and new grass. The yarn is from Esther’s Place, dyed by Natasha herself. The wool is from a Friesian sheep, one of a breed that naturally produces a thick-thin and kinky strand of yarn.

How to Use This Resource

Knitting as a way to meditation is a solitary journey, so this resource is written for individual use by those who want to develop this spiritual practice whether they are skilled knitters or new to the craft.

Ideas for adapting the resource

- *Members of a knitting circle or prayer shawl ministry might want to come together to discuss their experiences with knitting meditation and share their understandings of the suggested Bible readings.*
- *Offer a pre-program evening to help novice knitters get started.*
- *Match experienced and novice knitters as prayer- and program-partners.*
- *Take a cue from ELCA Youth Gatherings where knitting is a popular activity in the Interaction Center for both girls and boys: invite the confirmation class or high school group to participate in knitting meditation.*
- *Experienced knitters may want to gather weekly during Advent or Lent for a silent knitting meditation, creating prayer shawls for the congregation’s ministry or hats and mittens for a local social service agency.*

New to knitting?

Find a clear demonstration of all the basic techniques you'll need—casting on, knitting (the garter stitch) and casting off—at cyberseams.com (<http://bit.ly/knittingbasics>). When you buy your yarn, ask the knitting shop to turn the skein of yarn into a ball. Or, enlist a friend to help you turn the skein into a ball.

Start a scarf

Here are probably the simplest instructions you've ever read.

1. Match your yarn weight to needle size. Consider if you like the click of aluminum needles, or not. I like the quiet and warmth of wooden needles.
2. Decide how wide you want your scarf to be and cast on the required number of stitches, using the yarn label as a guide to needle size.
3. Knit every stitch, turn to start next row, knit every stitch (the basic garter stitch). Repeat and repeat until you reach the length you want or run out of yarn—whichever comes first.

This scarf is designed to draw you into the experience of the practice of knitting and of meditation. As you begin to knit, you'll notice how different each of the same knit stitches look because of the irregular texture and unpredictable color pattern that your yarn produces. It's mesmerizing and leads to awareness of the ways our own days change. For me, nearly a row of sun yellow stitches lead to the fresh green looped above. Then I see blue sky coming for a bit—and I'm lost in this woolen world. It's a place of wonder where I can sit in stillness.

Manning, a Buddhist, explains the parallels between this type of knitting and meditation. "By simply creating a quiet state of being, you can begin to notice—notice your thoughts, notice your feelings, and notice the workings of your mind and experience," she writes. "Through this process of noticing we can begin to develop a kindness—toward ourselves and our world."

Few Lutheran Christians or other Protestants use beads in worship or in private prayer and meditation. So knitting needles may be our first experience of the rhythmic movement that leads to quiet, to awareness, to observance.

Linda Skolnik, co-author of *The Knitting Way* and a Jew, is drawn to the wisdom of Thomas Moore, who wrote in *Care of the Soul*: "Observance is a word from ritual and religion. It means to watch out for, but also to keep and honor, as in the observance of a holiday. The *-serv-* in *observance* originally referred to tending sheep. Observing the soul, we keep an eye on its sheep, on whatever is wandering and grazing—the latest addiction, a striking dream, or a troubling mood.... Observance of the soul can be deceptively simple. You take back what has been disowned." Skolnik believes that sitting with needles and yarn, knitting row-after-row, day-in and day-out is a way to make observance part of our spiritual lives.

Things seen and unseen

Call it meditating or observing or simply knitting alone, the experience of a daily meeting with yarn and needles can, indeed, ready us for glimpses of the Divine.

Begin with Scripture.

Reflect on one of the Scripture passages below, or on one of the readings from last Sunday's or the coming Sunday's lectionary. Find the assigned texts for Sundays at <http://elca.org/lectionary>. Find a Daily Lectionary at the back of *Evangelical Lutheran Worship* (pp. 1121–1153). In 2011 and 2014 use Year A; in 2012 and 2015, use Year B; in 2013 and 2016, use Year C, etc.

Psalm 46:10 "Be still, and know that I am God!"

Psalm 139:13 "For it was you who formed my inward parts; you knit me together in my mother's womb."

John 10:14 "I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me... ."



Knitting is not the only fiber art that can lead to contemplative experiences. Those who crochet might consider the writing of Cindy Crandall-Frazier, a Quaker, in her book, *Contemplative Crochet: A Hands-On Guide for Interlocking Faith & Craft*, Skylight Paths, 2008.

Ponder those who made your experience possible.

“I like to think about the wool, the way it feels, the sheep who grew it, the shepherds who tended the flock—the whole process of lambing, shearing, spinning,” says Hewitt, owner of Bella’s Woolies (Washington Island, Wis.). And she thinks, too, of those who have come before: “...about all the women through the centuries who have worked with wool to make clothing for their families. Most had very difficult lives and for them, knitting was probably another task to finish before the end of the day.” This mindfulness leads her to gratefulness and to compassion.

Play music from classical or sacred traditions.

“[Music] brings about another road of awareness and can smooth out your knitting path, two roads that run parallel and in harmony with each other,” advises Janice MacDaniels, the other co-author of *The Knitting Way*, who is Christian.

Repeat a mantra as you create the stitches.

Choose a word that fits the rhythm of your knitting. Or adapt the ancient Jesus prayer: “Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner.”

Experiencing your body and mind working together in these ways, you may find yourself in a place where you can listen for God and may hear God.

It just may be that after your scarf is finished, you’ll want to continue this solitary knitting meditation as a spiritual practice. I do. There are organizations who will gladly distribute your scarves. But I also want to knit other things, in other ways, at other times and with other people. All that’s needed are several knitting bags, each holding yarn and needles, pattern and promise.



Kathleen Kastilahn is a member of the Knit Together ministry at St. Paul Lutheran (Evanston, Ill.). As an 8-year-old, she was taught to knit by her Aunt Marge. Kastilahn is pictured wearing the scarf she knit during the time she wrote this program, finishing both on the first day of Spring.

Photo by Sue Edison-Swift

Resources and inspirations

Knitting into the Mystery: A Guide to the Shawl-Knitting Ministry by Susan S. Jorgensen and Susan S. Izard, Morehouse Publishing, 2003.

The Knitting Way: A Guide to Spiritual Self-Discovery by Linda Skolnik and Janice MacDaniels, Skylight Paths, 2005.

Mindful Knitting: Inviting Contemplative Practice to the Craft by Tara Jon Manning, Tuttle Publishing, 2004.

Knit Lit ed. by Linda Roghaar and Molly Wolfe, Three Rivers Press, 2002.

Knit Lit (too) ed. by Linda Roghaar and Molly Wolfe, Three Rivers Press, 2004.

Knitting Nell by Julie Jersild Roth, Houghton Mifflin Company, 2006.

Knitting for Peace: Make the World a Better Place, One Stitch at a Time by Betty Christiansen, STC Craft, 2006.

Did you know?

Women of the ELCA resources, such as this one, are available free to individuals, small groups, and congregations. Covering a variety of topics, we are bringing Lutheran perspectives and new voices to issues that matter. By making a donation to Women of the ELCA, you will help us continue and expand this important educational ministry. Give online at womenoftheelca.org or mail to Women of the ELCA, ELCA Gift Processing Center, P.O. Box 1809, Merrifield, VA 22116-8009.