

*Sightings* 7/13/06

Knitting Ministries  
-- Terren Ilana Wein

Knitting -- that domestic art that most of us associate with our grandmothers -- is experiencing a public renaissance. Coffee shops are frequented by knitters and their portable paraphernalia (sometimes part of a "knit and bitch" group); blogs and communities devoted to knitting abound on the internet; and nearly every library and bookstore now boasts a handicraft section spilling over with how-to books as well as titles like *Zen and the Art of Knitting*, *The Knitting Way*, and *The Knitting Sutra*. But this isn't just a commercial boom; it's also a social and even spiritual phenomenon.

In fact, "knitting ministries" can be found throughout the country (some of them web-based endeavors). These groups range from a few people meeting over coffee to national organizations with multiple chapters. Typically made up mostly of women, these ministries knit for those in need, be they local homeless animals, children living in poverty, or specific groups identified by the knitters. Sometimes the groups pray and knit. Sometimes knitting *is* the prayer, and the knitted object an offering.

For some enthusiasts, then, not only the hand-knit object, but the act of creating takes on religious or spiritual significance. And in fact, once you have mastered the basics, knitting, like all handicrafts, does lend itself to contemplation -- or at least woolgathering (once upon a time, quite literally). While often rote, knitting is also a creative pursuit, inventive and challenging -- and, for many of us, spiritual and meditative. Knitters know how relaxing and refreshing it can be, and many use knitting in a way similar to prayer beads; it is a physical task to focus the mind and soul. The very process of knitting can be a meaningful experience.

But of course there's also the product. At once art and craft, lasting and ephemeral, the knitted object is tangible and imbued with sentiment. Knitting ministries create baby blankets for Afghan children, soft hats for chemo patients or preemies, shawls for those who have lost loved ones, teddy bears for orphans. Some involved in knitting ministries see their handiwork as an expression of God's love, and their hands the conduits of that love. Christian knitting groups sometimes create patterns in their knitted work that evoke ideas of the Trinity. While most organized knitting ministries are Christian, Jewish groups exist as well (giving rise to the groaner "knitzvah"). And, of course, there are also numerous secular groups that knit for those in crisis.

A wonderful example of a Christian knitting ministry can be found at [Soulful Knitting Ministries](#). Here, you can join an international group of women knitting prayer shawls for survivors (and, in one memorable instance, a perpetrator) of sexual abuse. Another example is Newborns In Need, a national non-profit 501 (c) Christian organization that specializes in providing clothing and bedding items to premature and newborn sick and needy babies. According to their [website](#), "creating a warm comfortable world for God's tiniest children is an act of love that blesses the lives of those involved." A Jewish group is more likely to be designated as a chavurah (fellowship group), perhaps organized around a Bat Mitzvah. (Click [here](#) to read an essay by a young woman who undertook a knitting mitzvah for her Bat

Mitzvah.) But most knitting ministries are local and small-scale, operating on a single-congregation model, and can best be found (or founded) by simply asking around.

Susan Jorgensen, one of the authors of *Knitting Into the Mystery*, has remarked that "knitting connects us to the divine deeply and simply." It also connects us to each other and to our pasts. Recently, showing my mother a hat I knitted for my daughter, she remembered a story about my great-great-grandmother, a professional milliner. My female ancestors didn't share my religion, my nationality, or, say, my ability to vote, but they're connected to me through a four-ply strand of wool. Like me, and I hope my daughter one day, these women kept their family's heads, toes, and hearts warm through the work of their hands.

For me, knitting itself is a sort of mystery. At once very simple and very useful, knitting also has deep symbolic meaning. It speaks of women's traditional ways of knowledge, of honoring domesticity, and of acknowledging the powers of creating and giving.

A knitting ministry is domestic and maternal, and its products soft and humble -- but it reminds us that the divine is also in the small stuff.

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