

Contemplative  
KNITTING

Julie Cicora



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To Betty, Virginia, and Ethel,  
my mother and grandmothers who taught me to knit.

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# INTRODUCTION

Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.

—1 Thessalonians 5:16-18

We all know knitters who pray when they knit. They might be making a prayer shawl for a sick friend or knitting a tiny baby sweater for a new mother, perhaps asking God to be with the recipient of each knitted gift as they complete each stitch. The repetitive movements knitters make are calming and healing. Could knitting be a way of opening our hearts to God?

I struggled for years to maintain a regular private prayer practice. I found it difficult to sit still each day in the presence of God. It was so much harder than participating in public worship where there was singing, readings, and preaching. I found the order and content of the liturgy engaging, and there was a palpable sense of God's presence within the community of worshipers. Whenever I sat down by myself to pray the psalms or to say some intercessory prayers or to just sit in silence, my mind would start to race, the clock would slow to a crawl, and all I'd want to do is stop. I preferred reading books about praying rather than actually praying.

When I was in seminary studying to be a priest, a friend of mine gave me the book *Beginning to Pray* by Anthony Bloom. One of the stories he tells is about a woman who struggled with prayer. She felt an absence in the silence. The author suggests that she knit in silence before the face of God. After spending some time knitting in silence, she became aware of a presence in the silence. This made me wonder. Could knitting be a way into contemplative prayer? What makes knitting into prayer? Can our knitting habits inform our spiritual lives? This book is an exploration into the connection between knitting and prayer.

*Contemplative Knitting* is meant for knitters of all levels, and that includes beginners. It is not a book that will teach you how to knit or provide you with any specific patterns. Instead, it will outline some of the physical, emotional, and spiritual advantages of knitting. In part one we'll explore the history of the craft to discover how knitting has helped people stay connected and express love for others. What happens when we consider our own history of knitting? Who taught us how to knit? What was it like? For those of us who learned to knit before the advent of the internet, we had to find a teacher. Learning to knit was about forming a relationship with a patient and experienced knitter, a relationship that we treasured.

If you are considering learning how to knit or if you have just begun to learn, find someone with knitting experience who is open to sharing your knitting prayer practice. This kind of knitting is not about skill, it's about building a consistent practice that will help us deepen our relationship with God.

Anyone who knows how to knit can start a knitting prayer practice. Part two of the book will explain some ways of praying while knitting and give some suggestions on how to start. The spirituality of repetition is powerful. What is difficult is sustaining a prayer practice. We have to plan for the moments when we let go of our practice. There are some suggestions to help us get back on track.

How do we stay engaged with our practice? Part three can help us focus our prayerful knitting efforts around the liturgical year. Perhaps our knitting is something we need to use to pray ourselves through a grieving process or to help fulfill a charitable need in our community. Knitting can also be used as an evangelism tool to bring others closer to God.

Each section will offer some ways of reflecting on our knitting prayer practice. Our stash of yarn can help us learn about ourselves and identify obstacles that might keep us from a regular prayer practice. Reflection is a way to discover more about ourselves and our relationship with God. Adding a daily examen to our prayer practice is a crucial part of our spiritual journey.

This book explores how to use knitting as a tool to lead us into contemplative prayer, but we must be fully aware that private prayer is just one piece of our spiritual lives. We need to be part of a community that is dedicated to following in the way of Jesus. We are part of the body of Christ, and each of us has a role to play given the gifts that God has given us. Being in community helps us discover how we are a part of the body and encourages us to participate in God's mission.

Knitters know the importance of community and of gathering together for a time of fellowship where we can support and help one another grow in our faith. Public gathering as the beloved community to pray, worship, learn, and serve together helps form our spiritual lives alongside private prayer.

I love to knit. I love the feel of the yarn, the click of the needles, and the satisfaction of seeing the stitches accumulate. Knitting conjures up feelings of joy and gratitude that make me thankful for the knitters in my life, the knitters who taught me to knit, the knitters who offer insights into my spiritual life, and those who continue to support me in my faith journey. Maybe knitting is your gateway to contemplative prayer. Maybe, like the woman in Anthony Bloom's story, it will help to quiet your mind and open your heart to the presence of God. Let us begin.

## Take Time to Reflect

### *Understanding Our Preferences, One Sleeve at a Time*

But all things should be done decently and in order.

—1 Corinthians 14:40

I saw a man knitting at the airport. It was 4:15 a.m., and I had to look twice to be sure I wasn't half dreaming, but there he was. One solitary sleeve hung from his needles, the ribbed cuff swaying slightly as he dropped the right needle and used his entire hand to forcefully throw the yarn around the left, pulling it taut and then completing the stitch. He was riveted. His entire attention was focused on the project hanging from the needles.

My first thought was, “Why is he only knitting one sleeve?” Everyone knows that sleeves are knit together on straight needles so they are the same size with the same shaping.

Eventually, if we knit long enough, we develop our own sweater-knitting process. When I’m not knitting in the round, I start with the back. Then, I knit the front, the two sleeves at the same time, piece it together, finish the neck and weave in the ends. Sleeve knitting starts out fast. Cuffs are small and have far fewer stitches than the back or the front. However, as the length grows so does the width, and eventually one row on both sleeves becomes pretty time consuming. This man was going to town on one sleeve!

I didn’t like watching him knit one sleeve because it was not my way. It is no wonder that our creativity and preferences are stifled when more experienced knitters insist on making us do it their way. Preferences are a way of expressing our identity.

I observed two right-handed parents trying to figure out how to show their left-handed daughter, Eliza, how to hold a crayon. She had developed her own way, which didn’t look like anything they had learned in school. Forcing Eliza to change her grip was frustrating for both the parents and child. She even quit coloring for a few weeks.

Whenever I talk with people about prayer, they always want to know the “right” way to pray even though as adults they know there is no single “right” way to pray. Prayer is a way to know God, and how we decide to pray is a matter of preference. It needs to come from our deepest self. God knows who we are and expects nothing less.

One sleeve or two sleeves, throwing or picking, left hand or right hand, it doesn’t really matter, we just need to do it.

### *Reflection Questions*

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1. How important is it to you to knit the “right” way?
2. How were you taught to pray?
3. What is the right way to pray for you?