

Sermon: “On the Practice of Making” (Laurel)

The danger of this article, of course, for those who knit, is that it encourages yarn shopping. I’ll confess I did procrastinate sermon writing by looking at yarn online and imagining all the things I could make. That lovely peach merino, it’s revolutionary! It was just research, right?

I jest, but that feeling of creative possibility is one of the things that kept me whole through the pandemic, which I know a lot of other people felt. I’m sure many of you have seen interviews of Michelle Obama talking about her knitting and how it kept her grounded through all the tumult. Even the climate activist Greta Thunberg knits. There’s something grounding and magical about the rhythm of the needles and seeing something grow from your own hands bit by bit.

In her article, Orenstein lays out all kinds of historical moments when knitting has been a political act, a kind of transgression. Apparently there was a spy named Molly Rinker during the American Revolution who passed information about British troops in balls of yarn. And during World War I, tens of thousands of soldiers were dying from trench foot, so knitting socks became a critical part of the war effort.

So yes, things that have largely been deemed female crafts can be transgressive in ways that are as creative as they are practical.

But I also think there’s something more powerful at work than that. Maybe it’s the minister in me, but I think the fact of those moments of protest point to something deeper. They point to a connection to our ability to create and I don’t just mean in a cute crafty way, I mean in the sense that we are agents of creation. That we are powerful and uncontained. That we are of the world and in the world and we have the capacity to transform it.

As Orenstein writes, “What greater sorcery is there, really, than making something, whether turning raw fiber to thread or raw flour to bread or engaging in the ultimate creative act: conjuring new humans from nowhere at all?”

I always find it sort of curious when people look at something I've made and ask me how I did it. I never quite know what to say. Because they're typically not actually asking for a technical answer. It's more that they're saying "I could never do that" as if I've engaged in some kind of impossible alchemy that belongs to me alone.

Maybe it is alchemy, making, but I don't think it's particularly special, or at least not individual - I think it's innate to being human, a skill passed from hand to hand and generation to generation. But it's also something that has gotten lost in our globalized world. A few generations ago, knowing how to mend and repair our clothes was normal. And you likely knew who had made your clothes, if you hadn't made them yourself. Maybe some people had a greater level of creative artistry, but there wasn't the same kind of disconnect between maker and wearer that there is today.

For example, one of my personal pet peeves is when people don't take the tacks out of their jacket pleats. I'm sure some of you know exactly what I mean and some of you have no idea - that's part of the reality of not knowing how our clothing is made, akin to not knowing what foods are seasonal because we can always get everything now. So if you don't know, I'm talking about the big X stitch that holds together the flaps at the back of a suit jacket or winter coat. That is not a design feature, it's meant to keep the flaps closed during production and shipping. And whenever I see someone who hasn't taken the tack out, I have an irrational urge to go up and rip it open, which would obviously be extremely weird and I have never actually done.

But not knowing how our clothes are made both makes us dependent on others to do so, and means we can't read what's happening with a particular garment. Meaning, who made it, if they were paid a living wage, if it's designed to last or to create further consumption, how were the materials produced - the list goes on. Being able to read those cues is a powerful thing in a world obsessed with fast fashion.

As Orenstein points out:

"Fashion is responsible for more greenhouse gases than international flights and

maritime shipping combined, not to mention a fifth of global plastics and trillions of microfibers: tiny plastic threads shed by clothing when laundered that have become one of the biggest threats to the ocean. Treatment of the industry's largely female workforce in Asia, long a human rights concern, has deteriorated so badly since the pandemic that some activists now refer to it as the "garment industrial trauma complex."

Knowing how to make our own clothing gives us the agency to undo those things or at least not perpetuate them. But even more fundamentally, and I think this is the part that really matters, the practice of making reminds us that we are co-creators of this world, that we have the capacity to transform, that more is possible, even when things feel impossible. So maybe your form of making isn't knitting or sewing. Maybe it's gardening or making bread or painting or tie dye.

There are all kinds of sorcery. There are so many ways to reconnect to our own humanity, to nurture a sense of creative possibility, and that is not a waste of time. Any practice that pushes against despair and cynicism, that helps us experience joy and transformation and our own power, those things are sacred. So why not pick up some yarn or find a sewing class, maybe it'll start a revolution.

Amen.