A Maker's Pilgrimage

an exploration of

craft & contemplation

by

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I am an artist. I am also a monk. These two identities lie close to the center of my sense of self. Perhaps another will come along. Perhaps one of these will drop away. For now, they form a luminescent circle around the dark and mysterious heart of me that lies open only to God.

As both a monk and an artist, I am an amateur. When I was in seminary in New York City, I was acquainted with an accomplished pianist who taught at the Manhattan School of Music. One afternoon, over tea in his apartment, he asked me about my favorite pieces of classical music. After sharing a few favorites, I said with some embarrassment that I was an amateur. I meant that statement to excuse any obvious lack of skill or subtlety of musical appreciation in front of this professional musician. He gently laid his hand on my arm and said, "How wonderful!" Then he explained that the word "amateur" comes from the Latin for "love." An amateur is someone who does something purely for the love it. All the better to listen to music because I love it.

So it is with my knitting, gardening, sewing, dyeing, writing, and praying. I do them, not because they make me money or bring me fame, but because I love them. I don't say that to suggest that those who make their living by their art operate from less pure motives than I do. Not at all. I think that everyone who makes things makes them, at heart, for the sheer joy of bringing into being something that didn't exist before you set your hands to it. If you can make your living by your art, then all the better. I am glad that I don't have to.

Which brings me to the purpose and format of this piece of writing. I have, in previous years, come closer and closer to making money or notoriety from my art. Each time I've gotten close, I've felt compelled to step away. I can't really say why that is, though I suppose this piece is a partial attempt to do so. Whether it is knitting or gardening or writing, my art is profoundly personal. I begin with myself and, eventually, the piece I'm working on brings me back to myself again, hopefully more whole than I was when I started. For me, selling that process makes no sense at all. After all, the process was given to me freely. I have never

paid, at least in financial terms, for the spiritual lessons I've learned. Those have all been grace.

Likewise with the artistic skills I've developed and continue to hone. There are so many talented makers out there who, through social media, blogs, YouTube, and in person share the skills and lessons they have learned, free of charge. For most of human history this is how people have learned to make things by hand: they have been taught at their grandmother's lap or their father's workbench. Although there is certainly much to be cautious of in the age of digital media, I rejoice that we are once again sharing our skills and passions so easily and freely with one another.

In the spirit of gratitude for all that has been and continues to be shared freely with me, I offer this extended exploration of craft and contemplation as a gift to you. Please use it for your own spiritual growth and development; as food for reflection on your life and your art; as inspiration for conversation with your knitting, gardening, and sewing friends; or for any other purpose that comes to

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As I say, I am fortunate that I don't have to make a living from my art. My monastic community supports me in all that I do, both through their prayer and encouragement and also by providing me with money to buy materials and time to create beautiful things. That being said, it is the generosity of generations of visitors and associates of our monastery that enable my community to support my art, and by extension this piece. If you feel moved to so, please consider a donation to Holy Cross Monastery.

Better yet, come and visit. One of the best parts of sharing my process of craft and contemplation with others is bearing witness to the lives that my readers and retreat goers live. I love to hear from you! Please don't be shy about reaching out. You can find our monastery at www.holycrossmonastery.com. You can e-mail me at aidan@hcmnet.org. Even better, you can write me by post at

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The Making Instinct

Making things is one of the most fundamentally human activities, and one of the oldest. It's right up there with loving or praying. It may, in fact, be another form of loving or praying. It often arises from and returns us to the same place as those other two states. We make things because we are so full of life that we can't help ourselves. In so doing we discover a capacity of which we were hitherto unaware, of a power of creation that is fundamentally spiritual. Like making love with another person.

Making things connects us with the unseen forces of the spiritual world. It's no coincidence that the oldest spiritual myths are those of creation. How was the world made? How did human life come to flourish? What is our purpose here? And what is our relationship to the material world around us? Whether we believe in a deity or not, we humans recognize instinctively that making begins beyond ourselves and that through the process of bringing into being something

that didn't exist before, we tap into a power beyond our understanding, a power traditionally referred to as God.

Writing on the meaning of craft and making has come back into vogue of late. As, of course, has interest in learning traditional handicrafts like knitting, sewing, natural dyeing, mending, beekeeping, vegetable growing, woodworking, and blacksmithing. I think it has something to do with the proliferation of digital media, which isolates us from the physical world, even as it connects us to the global community. All of the books and articles I have read about making in the last few years have come from a secular point of view. And yet, they are also all obsessed with questions of meaning, questions that are inherently spiritual.

Why do we make things? What have we lost with our increasing isolation from the physical world and the skills that have allowed us to flourish within that world? How do we reconnect with our bodies, the earth, and one another? How does the act of making things change us, help us grow, heal us? These are all spiritual questions, and their answer is also spiritual.

Notice I said “spiritual” and not “religious.” Although I think we make far too much of the distinction between the two, it does have its uses. While I can certainly discuss the particulars of making within the context of Christian doctrine, dogma, and liturgy, if I were to do so, I’d lose most of you. These forms have become so tainted with the histories of violent persecution of women, people of color, non-Europeans, and queer persons; with the rape and commodification of the earth; and with the ravages of capitalism that many have, understandably, turned their back on Christian religion.

I am not one of those. Instead I find myself increasingly drawn into the historical language and liturgies of the Christian church. That may have something to do with being a monk. It certainly has something to do with having immersed myself in contemplative Christian traditions for the last decade, which has enabled me to see that dogmas and doctrines are often beautiful and always imperfect attempts to express an encounter with that which is beyond us.

Making things—what I'll refer to as handcrafts or craft from now on—is an inherently spiritual activity. It immerses us, whether we are conscious of it or not, in the deepest questions of human life. When we engage the process consciously, it can become contemplative, which is to say it can enable us to stare lovingly into the face of the Real and thereby be transformed. Like any contemplative practice, craft encourages us to slow down, to connect with our bodies, and to enter a state of timelessness or eternity in which we cease to strive, even as we work for an end. This process is not the same as "meditative knitting," in which you repeat a mantra or prayer while you work, using stiches as a kind of prayer bead, though it can include that way of praying. Rather, the process of making something, beginning with raw materials, engaging our senses and abilities—and our limitations—and following through until we have a finished piece is itself a kind of spiritual inquiry into the nature of reality and the nature of the self. Put more straightforwardly, when I make something, I discover more about who I am, which includes a deeper understanding of the world in which I

live. That this knowledge is usually intuitive and implicit rather than explicit makes it no less transformative.

Craft is also an inherently religious activity, even if not of any particular religion. The word "religion" derives from the Latin "religare," which means "to bind together." In the same way a physician binds a wound, craft, when engaged in as a contemplative practice, binds the fragments of our many selves into one unified Self. Vigen Guroian, an Orthodox theologian and gardener, puts it this way: "When I garden, earth and earthworm pass between my fingers, and I realize that I am made of the same stuff. [...] Man is a microcosm in whose flesh resonates and reverberates the pulse of the whole creation, in whose mind creation comes to consciousness, and through whose imagination and will God wants to heal and reconcile everything that sin has wounded and put in disharmony."[1]

[1] Vigen Guroian, *Inheriting Paradise*, p. 7.

Even if the language of sin and salvation don't speak to you, the point stands. When I dig in the earth, I am reminded of my kinship with all that lives and breathes around me. With every plant I learn to recognize, my isolation lessens. I gather an ever-greater community of living, breathing, and, I would say, loving beings around me, and I am less alone than I was before. The same can be said of knitting, sewing, and quilting, that "women's work" so often exiled from the realm of "art" because of its domestic associations. As I piece together a quilt, my mind quiets, allowing it to come in harmony with my body. My hands move, largely intuitively, holding the edges of the fabric together. My spirit smiles in surprise at the beauty of an unexpected combination of color or pattern. I laugh with joy when a pile of fabric scraps, seemingly all of a sudden, begins to look like a design. In that moment, I, too, am remade and renewed. I am religioned—bound back together again—and made more whole in the process. In the sewing room or the garden I learn that identity is not something I create. It is something

I allow to emerge, seemingly all of a sudden, until a beautiful pattern makes me laugh out loud with joy.

It is for this reason that I use the image of a pilgrimage to describe craft as contemplation. A pilgrimage is an outward sign of an inward journey. For generations, people have walked the pilgrim path to give thanks for or to seek healing, to demonstrate penitence, or to mark some major shift in their lives. Traditionally, these pilgrims have walked, and even in our day of air transportation, coaches, and trains, I still think that walking is an essential element of pilgrimage. A coach doesn't engage the body the way the feel of the cool air on your cheeks or the cobblestones or mud under your feet does. The sight of your eyes through a window is nothing to the knowledge of the nose and the fingertips and the lips. Pilgrimage is an effort, a demonstration of your mettle on the spiritual path, and a way of deepening and confirming devotion to the path.

Craft is its own kind of pilgrimage, a outer flowering of a deeper root. The maker's pilgrimage costs a great deal, and not only financially. To make things by hand requires that we sacrifice the "perfection" and uniformity of factory-made goods and the endorphin high of quickly buying (and often just as quickly discarding) what we want. Instead, we have to learn—slowly—to love our own humanity, which includes both the power we have to create something new and beautiful and the limitations of our skills and imaginations. On this pilgrimage, we arrive home in our bodies, which are the age and the size that they are, and which carry all the marks of the lives we have lived or not lived. Stitch by stitch we come home to ourselves.

Illiteracy of Power

As our world becomes more digital, I find myself wondering what it means to be embodied today. As a Christian, whose central mythology relies on God incarnate—God who clothes herself in the stuff of this dusty world—this

question presses all the more closely. It isn't only a theoretical, theological, or anthropological query, either. It is deeply personal. Our family and cultural histories are written quite literally in the cells of our bodies. Our healing and our flourishing must be, too.

In earlier years I experienced a great deal of trauma, one of the effects of which was that I became dissociated from my body. I had the sense of living entirely from my mind. I hardly felt anything other than a pervasive numbness. As spiritual and psychological writers have been saying for ages now, you can either feel everything or you can feel nothing. You don't get to feel only the pleasant emotions. I had chosen, without being aware of it, not to feel anything rather than to confront the pain of my experiences.

It was the garden that saved me. The monastery grounds, which I now steward, captivated me the first time I saw them—the grand sweep of grassy hillside down to the tall sentinels of the woods and the majestic expanse of silver brown river, all crowned with steep green hills and the Gilded Age silhouette of

the Vanderbilt Mansion. All that space calmed my spirit and fired the engines of my imagination.

Before I entered the monastery, I had no experience of gardens. I knew them only through books as places where the spirit wanders with the feet, nose, and eye. The monastery gardens were sadly neglected, as full of debris from previous seasons as flowers. The only thing that seemed to have survived the neglect, even flourished on it, was huge patches of black-eyed Susan, its chromium yellow carrying the eye from one corner of the guesthouse to the edge of the southern lawn.

As I walked around the gardens, I imagined them restored to fullness of bloom, a kind of proxy, I see now, for my own spiritual restoration. My dreams for the garden were dreams of myself and of my place at the monastery. They laid out a path for me to belong and to contribute my spiritual and creative energy. Even my untrained eye could see these gardens had good bones. Someone who knew what he was doing had laid in structures that continued to form and

support the space—walls of flat bluestone, the outlines of oval beds, masses and masses of hosta and lily of the valley, and periwinkle coating the hillside down from the middle lot. I knew at the outset that the task was to restore what had once been, to uncover the years of neglect, peel back the layers of time, and then to contribute something new to the efforts of those who had gone before.

This project struck me as inherently monastic. It was this kind of work that drew me to monastic life: the sense that I would be joining a tradition that, at the local level, had persisted for 125 years and, beyond the local, was thousands of years old. My work was not to create from nothing, but to find my place in the continual renewal that Benedictines call stability and conversion of life.

On a level deeper than language, though, I sensed that my relationship to the earth would heal me. It was communion with the spaciousness of meadow and river that had given my spirit air to breathe. I knew, beyond knowing, that in putting my hands in the dirt, in roaming the fields and the woods, in breathing the air of open spaces, I would come home to my body and that the strands of my

life that had seemed so disparate would weave themselves together into patterns beyond my reckoning.

My healing has arisen from and returned me to the earth from which all life springs. So it is with all craft and all art, which begins in the landscape of our lives. Even the most abstract paintings recall you to the movement of trees and rivers or the pathos of a heart beating rapidly in love or anger. How much more so the process of creating objects of beauty or utility. Different as traditional handcrafts may be, all of them are inherently physical in their demands and their results. You cannot make a digital sweater. Or, rather, you can make one, but it won't keep you warm when the snows come.

Peter Korn, a woodworker and writer on craft, speaks to the harmonizing effect of making on body, mind, and spirit:

> In the workshop, wishing just won't make it so. The craftsman is forced to come to terms with the physical properties of materials, the mechanical properties of tools, and the real capacity and limits of his own dexterity, discipline, and imagination. In this way, craft's materiality imposes cooperation on the sometimes discordant factions of the mind. By necessity it reconciles the desire to interpret the

> world in ways that are emotionally gratifying with the countervailing need for accurate information to facilitate effective decision making. Thus the holistic quality of craft lies not only in engaging the whole person, but in harmonizing his understanding of himself in the world.[2]

Making engages and harmonizes all of our senses. When you make a hat, the color of the yarn engages the eyes; the feel of the ply under your fingers becomes an extension of your will; the stitches take form in front of you as a visible reminder of hours spent doing one thing over and over and over again. And yes, we are forced to confront the limits of our abilities, too. Who among us hasn't finished a gorgeous sweater, months in the making, only to find that it doesn't look good on us after all; or that all that intricate cabling is really too heavy to wear; or that that mistake we didn't know how to correct twenty rows in stands out more clearly than we'd hoped? Reality, which is inherently physical, has a way of winning out.

All craft is a response to the physical world around us and relies on generation upon generation of accumulated wisdom in responding to and

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[2] Peter Korn, *Why We Make Things and Why It Matters*, p. 56.

surviving in the conditions this world imposes on us. In his exploration of the meaning of traditional crafts, Alexander Langlands suggests that craft and craftiness are more about wisdom than they are about making. Or, rather, they're about the wisdom of making and the making of wisdom. We have learned, through generations of trying, failing, and trying again, exactly the best ways to respond to our environments. Necessity, as the saying goes, is the mother of invention. I don't know who invented the spinning of fibers into thread and yarn, but I would imagine that having endured the cold of winter, a sheep's wooly coat might look awfully appealing.

Langlands laments the loss of this embodied knowledge, even more, perhaps, than I do. He writes that "We're increasingly constrained by computers and a pixelated abridgement of reality that serves only to make us blind to the truly infinite complexity of the natural world. Most critically, our physical

movements have been almost entirely removed as a factor in our own existence. Now all we seem to do is push buttons."[3]

We might well wonder what it means for our spiritual and emotional wellbeing to be alienated from and unconcerned with our physical environment and our bodies as extensions of that environment. Robin Wall Kimmerer posits that our increasing isolation from the natural world fragments our spirits. In a beautiful essay called "Learning the Grammar of Animacy," she writes that "The animacy of the world is something we already know, but the language of animacy teeters on extinction. [...] Our toddlers speak of plants and animals as if they were people, extending to them self and intention and compassion—until we teach them not to. [...] When we tell them that the tree is not a *who*, but an *it*, we make the that maple an object; we put a barrier between us, absolving ourselves of moral responsibility and opening the door to exploitation. Saying *it* makes a

[3] Alexander Langlands, *Cræft*, p. 11.

living land into 'natural resources.' If a maple is an *it*, we can take up the chain saw. If a maple is a *her*, we think twice."[4]

It is no coincidence that the further removed we become from our bodies and from the landscape, the more rapidly we trash the only home we have. The land is a wonderful resource, and extraordinarily generous in providing everything we use, even down to plastics and rocket fuel. Once, we used those resources in a way that replenished them. Now we use them up with a willful ignorance, as if, once we have wrung this planet dry we can move on to another.

To compound this ignorance, as we become technologically more sophisticated, we become correspondingly more helpless in our physical environment. Just think how distraught most of us become when the internet goes down because of a storm. Now imagine if we had to grow our own food, or make all of our own clothes, or sheer sheep and spin and dye wool. When we had to rely more directly on our own wisdom and that of our forebears in surviving

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[4] Robin Wall Kimmerer, "Learning the Grammar of Animacy," in *Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge, and the Teachings of Plants*, p. 57.

the physical environment, we also had more respect for the abundance that the earth provides. Whereas now that we have little knowledge of how to make things from our world, we also seem to care less about preserving the very source of our flourishing.

To quote from Langlands again:

> Against a rising tide of automation and increasing digital complexity, we are becoming further divorced from the very thing that defines us: we are makers, crafters of things. When our lives once comprised an almost unbroken chain of movements and actions as we interacted physically with the material requirements of our existence, today we stare at screens and we press buttons. When we made things, we accumulated a certain kind of knowledge, we had an awareness and an understanding of how materials worked and how the human form has evolved to create from them. With the severance from this ability we're in danger of losing touch with a knowledge base that allows us to convert raw materials into useful objects, and hand-eye-head-heart-body co-ordination that furnishes us with a meaningful understanding of the materiality of our world. [...] We must never lose sight of the fact that the most intelligently designed, the most versatile and the most complex piece of kit we have at our disposal is our own body. As John Ruskin put it in 1859, in our hands, we have "the subtlest of all machines."[5]

[5] Langlands, pp. 22 – 24.

The loss of our humanity and of our kinship with the material world, along with the very real destruction of that world, are two of the greatest tragedies of our age. Both are preventable, of course, but in order to avoid either we must be intentional and awake, both to the danger that confronts us and to the possibilities of living differently in this world. We have not fully lost the power or the wisdom we once possessed. But we can observe ourselves in the process of losing it. Which also means that we can also make changes to regain or retain the craftiness of our ancestors.

Craft immerses us in the physicality of making. It connects us to the material world around us, and in so doing it grounds us in our bodies as the primary vehicles through which we experience our lives. We are not disembodied spirits observing an approximation of life through a phone screen. Or we need not be. Our lives happen right here and now in the flesh, over a cup of coffee with a friend; on a walk through the woods; with our hands deep in the soil; or with knitting needles clicking away in our laps. Making things reminds us of our

humanity. It softens the hard plane of the digital landscape, and reconnects us with our bodies, with one another, and with the world around us.

Having made most of the clothes that I wear today, I have a much greater appreciation for the skill and the real cost—human, material, and environmental—of producing them. Because they took a long time to make, I want to preserve them. I want to have them for a long time. And when they do finally wear out, I want to reuse the material that went into them, both because I recognize how costly fiber is to produce, and also because, having put hours of my life into making and maintaining these garments, they are now imbued with a meaning that store bought clothes rarely hold.

So it is with all that we make. Our quilts may lack the perfect seams of a cheap duvet we buy online. They may also go in and out of style over the years. But they hold a human beauty that can never be replicated. It's likely that the quilt your grandmother made is the first thing you reach for when you need warmth. And not only because it provides insulation for your body. These

handmade objects insulate our spirits even more so with human warmth. Wrapped in such a quilt, we are also wrapped in the love of the person who made it for us. That kind of protection and companionship can never be bought. In this way our craft weaves us into a web of connection with our loved ones, with the material world, and with ourselves. Our isolation lessens, and we are made more whole.

A Long, Loving Look at the Real

A spiritual director of mine once provided the best definition of contemplation I have found. Contemplation is a long, loving look at the Real. You might notice that this definition does not include many aspects of what is popularly considered contemplation: prayer, meditation, silence, unitive consciousness, or an immersion in non-duality, much less navel-gazing or caricatures of the monk walking silently down a shadowy cloister. Contemplation is quite simple. It is also difficult, often painful, and nevertheless full of joy and wonder.

Contemplation is, first of all, a long process. It is not something one achieves, ever really, but certainly not immediately or all of a sudden. The practice of contemplation requires daily attention and immersion, over many years. You may experience spiritual highs, but those aren't the point. In fact, as most spiritual traditions will tell you, too much reliance on feeling states can actually become a distraction from the long, loving look. Life is not all happiness and light. Reality is often stark. If our gaze is to rest on Reality, then we must see the pain and suffering in the world around us, the sharp edges and fragments within us, and the existential loneliness that is integral to the human condition. That's not to say that contemplation is only about seeing the difficult aspects of life. But for contemplation to avoid the pitfall of shallowness and self-obsession, it must draw us outside of ourselves to a real encounter with the totality of human joy, longing, and sorrow, most particularly in our own hearts.

If contemplation is a long process, it is also, when practiced over the course of a lifetime, a process that draws us ever deeper into the heart of love. Now we

enter the mysterious darkness at the core of life, a darkness so dark it is also light. Paradox takes over. In the process of contemplation, our gazing on Reality eventually, of its own accord, mellows into love. We come to love, even if we never really understand, the difficulties of our lives and the life of the world. We come to see that sorrow and joy are not, in the end, so different from one another; that our pain has drawn us into the process of healing and the search for fullness of life; that the loving heart beating at the center of Reality is a broken heart, because only a broken heart has enough room to love.

Again, this mellowing into love is not a way of excusing trauma or oppression or heartache. It is, instead, a moving through those experiences into something deeper, into a place within ourselves or the world that was never hurt to begin with, that couldn't be traumatized or oppressed, that has always remained free, free especially of the tyranny of our obsessive self-will.

There is within every living being a place that has always been and will always remain whole. This place is where our soul meets the divine life. It is the

place within us that has always dwelt in eternity, which is to say in the ever-present now, the place that time cannot touch. As we learn to look lovingly into the eyes of Reality, we find that Reality is looking back at us just as lovingly. Held in the gaze of the Real, we are revealed as the glorious, powerful, beautiful, fragile beings that we are. We come to see our truest Self, our own particular, irrepeatable expression of Reality. In the light of that gaze, we cannot help but shed the layers of skin and stone that keep us walled off from love.

Rilke points to this process in his poem "Archaic Torso of Apollo":

We cannot know his legendary head

with eyes like ripening fruit. And yet his torso

is still suffused with brilliance from inside,

like a lamp, in which his gaze, now turned to low,

gleams in all its power. Otherwise

the curved breast could not dazzle you so, nor could

a smile run through the placid hips and thighs

to that dark center where procreation flared.

Otherwise this stone would seem defaced

beneath the translucent cascade of the shoulders

and would not glisten like a wild beast's fur:

would not, from all the borders of itself,

burst like a star: for here there is no place

that does not see you. You must change your life.[6]

Yes, we must change our lives. Or, better put, we must allow our truest life to emerge from the deep places within us. This process is more about letting go, undoing, and stopping than it is about taking on, practicing, and engaging, though, of course, it includes those things, too. Still, those of us on the spiritual path must always guard against the modern-day form of what Martin Luther called "works righteousness," which is to say the heresy that we can accomplish our own transformation. We cannot. What we can do is show up for our lives, turn our gaze in the direction of Reality, and allow ourselves to open like the rose warmed by the sun.

[6] https://poets.org/poem/archaic-torso-apollo

Perhaps the most direct way that craft engages us in the practice of contemplation is in the encounter with beauty. From the first moment that humans began creating objects, we have also looked for ways to make them more beautiful. I suspect that our ancestors recognized the inherent beauty of the human form and, indeed, of all the created world, and sought to contribute something of their own to the beauty that surrounded them.

So it is with us. Most contemporary makers make not primarily to have a useful object, but to have something beautiful. The slowness of the creative process only adds to the beauty, as does the idiosyncratic nature of anything handmade. No two sweaters, made with the same pattern and the same yarn will look exactly alike, even when the same person has made both of them.

Our communion with beauty is the truest kind of contemplation. Most English translations of the first creation story in Genesis read that God created the world and called it "good." But the same word translated as "good" could also be translated as "beautiful." There is the sense that the truly good is also

beautiful. And that beauty is, by its very nature, a form of goodness. When we lose ourselves in beauty, we lose ourselves in awe at that which is greater than we are.

In that losing of ourselves, we also, paradoxically find ourselves. Or, to put it another way, we are found, found to be good enough just as we are. There is an undeniable wholeness to those encounters with beauty. In those moments we are no longer separate from what we observe, or what we create. There is only color, pattern, texture, breath, sound. Perhaps that is why beauty is so sacred. In encountering beauty we become subjects again, rather than objects of self-improvement schemes, therapies, or development programs. We cease striving and simply are. That pureness of being—what the Christian tradition calls singleness of heart—is the goal of the spiritual life.

It is also the promise of the life of one who makes things. Slowly, over the course of a lifetime, stitch by stich, we mellow. Like a shirt grown soft from years of use that eventually frays and becomes part of a quilt, our own hard edges can

soften. Our broken hearts can mend. Our gratitude for the abundance of our lives, for all the beauty of this extraordinary world, can surge forth. We can be found again, found to be simply ourselves, and those selves both good and beautiful.