ACTIVE
PRAYER
SERIES

Knit One, Purl a *prayer*

A Spirituality of Knitting

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Knit One, Purl a Prayer: A Spirituality of Knitting

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To *Amelia Templar,*

owner of Yarn Boutique in Rochester, New York,

and *Lynn Davis,*

owner of Kiwi Knitting Company in Tucson, Arizona:

Creators of Community

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Preface

When I decided to learn to knit a few years ago, I thought I was learning so that I could teach the craft to my granddaughters, then ages six and eight. Little did I know what an enrichment knitting would become for my own life: how it would help me in sickness and in health, in times of tranquility and times of stress—how knitting would become a means of prayer.

I won't pretend that knitting was prayerful at first. Quite the contrary. Learning any new craft takes an attention that is all-absorbing; teaching one's brain to adapt to new movements of the body doesn't leave much space for the spirit to breathe freely. But over the months, as my hands began to move more comfortably through the stitches, my mind began to experience a spirit-filled presence. I didn't think of this as prayer until one day when I bumped into a friend at a lecture where I'd brought my knitting.

The story of how her offhand comment about knitting in prayerful silence utterly transformed my activity of knitting into one of prayer is told in chapter 1. For now, I'll just say that her comment moved me to experience the formation of each new stitch as something like praying with prayer beads.

Like praying with beads, yes; but also more. Because something tangible was being created as the yarn passed through my fingers: I was knitting the yarn into a visibly pleasing pattern as I prayed. This creativity, I came to realize as I pondered it over the months that followed, added a special dimension to my sense of Divine Presence as

I knit. In the Bible, we first meet God as the Creator. "In the beginning," the Bible opens, "God created the heavens and the earth." God goes on to create the light, the water, the land, all trees and plants, all animals and birds. Then God creates humankind—"in his image" (Gen. 1:26–27). Humankind is created in the image of the Creator.

Since we are created in the image of our Creator, it follows that we humans are created to create! Creativity is our calling. We can enact this creativity through any of the arts or crafts, as well as through what we might name the "art of living": engaging creatively in our world to join in the divine work to make it "good." Knitting partakes of this divinely ordained creativity.

So do all the creative arts. I come to the writing of this book after years of writing about how poetry can enhance our relationship to the Divine. Among my previous books are a study of how the figure of Jesus has been treated by contemporary poets of various cultures; an anthology of worldwide poems inspired by particular passages of the Gospels; and some reflection guides on how poetry can be a vehicle for prayer.

What has excited me in writing this current book on the spirituality of knitting is that, while both poetry and knitting are creative endeavors, knitting—unlike poetry—engages the mind and spirit through the work of our hands. Other crafts of course do this as well, but knitting is the work that my own hands love to do.

And I'm far from alone in this love. Knitting has entered a boom in popularity all around the world (an Indonesian Internet knitting site,

for instance, is visited by people from Malaysia, Singapore, Japan, the Middle East, Holland, Germany, and the United States). South American countries such as Uruguay and Peru have been growing their economies through global exports of fine wool and yarn produced by local sheep and alpaca farmers, often working through cooperatives. Current knitters, mostly but not all women, range in age from grade school to grandmothers and cover every occupation. There are many sociological and psychological reasons for the current knitting craze. But one reason, I propose, is that knitting engages our creative spirits in a world where technology and corporate consumerism seem to have everything already done for us. Computers, cell phones, shopping malls, worldwide chain stores, and brand-name products can all be immensely useful; but they don't engage our spirit and can even stifle it. Knitters everywhere are discovering gratefully that knitting nurtures the spirit.

One doesn't have to be a knitter to read this book. I expect that it will be of most interest to knitters, but anyone who does handcrafts or has even considered doing them will find food for thought—and nourishment for the spirit, I hope, as well. For knitters, a pattern is offered at the end of each chapter of the book, fitted to the chapter's theme.

Only through inner peace can the spirit thrive. "Be still, and know that I am God," Psalm 46 quietly exhorts us. After a quarter-century of daily contemplative prayer practice—during which jumpy distractions and mental dartings here and there have been my main experience—I

find that nothing brings me to inner stillness as knitting does. In our stillness, through our stillness, the Transcendent can become known to us.

This is a spiritual truth echoed in all major religious traditions—as I've come to learn gradually in the course of my life. I grew up in a household of Jewish ancestry, and although my parents did not belong to a synagogue and had relinquished most Jewish practices, I loved going to the synagogue with friends on the High Holy Days. Then, as a teenager, I wandered into a Cokesbury bookstore. I had no idea that this was a Christian store, but somehow I was moved to buy a "red-letter" Bible: one with all of Jesus' words printed in red. I'd browse in this Bible—the only one in my home—on Sundays, a day that had come to feel restless to me. I sensed I should be doing something special on Sundays but didn't know what. My neighborhood and high school were almost entirely Jewish, and I had no friends who went to church.

As a young adult, I was drawn, along with my husband, to baptism in the Catholic Church. A marvelous and unexpected result of becoming a Christian was that suddenly I was eager to learn about other faith traditions—Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam. So in this book, although my own spiritual grounding is Christian, I naturally draw on the spiritualities of other religions as well.

There is also another sort of outreach that has come naturally for this book: outreach to community, which is a key dimension of knitting. Knitters often create in order to give their work away to

those in need; and knitters seek out one another for a unique sort of bonding. Knitting's communal dimension will be the specific topic of chapter 3, but I've tried to enact its spirit throughout the book—by giving voice to many other knitters besides myself. The spirituality of knitting is not a me-spirituality; rather, knitting draws us together. So I've folded into the book the experiences and insights of a multitude of knitters: some known to me personally, some the friends of friends, some whom I know only through their blogs or knitting websites. My thanks go out to all these people for sharing their perceptions and stories with me.

In the swing era of World War II, Glenn Miller had a hit song called "Knit One, Purl Two." The song's speaker is a woman knitting for her husband who is fighting in the war overseas:

> Knit one, purl two
> This sweater, my darling,'s for you
> While vigil you're keeping through rain and storm
> This sweater will keep you warm.

I wouldn't claim that the "vigil" here has a spiritual connotation, but I've borrowed the song's famous first line as my book's title. The line has been played with often: Knit One, Purl Too is the name of several knitting shops around the country; a recent mystery novel is titled *Knit One, Kill Two*; there's a knitting blog called *Knit Once, Purl Forever*. In this spirit of play, along with a spirit of exploratory adventure, I invite readers to *Knit One, Purl a Prayer*.

ONE

Knit One, Purl a Prayer

When we knit, we place our attention over and over again on the natural rhythm of creating fabric from yarn.
—Tara Jon Manning, *Mindful Knitting*

Praying with Your Fingers

I had been knitting for about a year and had gotten pretty comfortable with the basics. So, following the advice of my more experienced knitter friends, I began to take my knitting everywhere. One Sunday afternoon at a lecture hall, while I was sitting and knitting as I waited for the speaker to arrive, my friend Amanda passed by on the way to her seat. She stopped to chat and was looking at my knitting, so I asked, "Do you knit, too?" "Just prayer shawls," she said, shrugging.

I'd heard of prayer shawls but hadn't a clue what they were, so I seized the opportunity.

"What *are* prayer shawls?"

"You sit silently in a group," Amanda explained, "and everyone knits while praying."

I smiled a "Thanks," but inside I was thinking, "*That* doesn't sound like much fun!" By then I was part of a Wednesday evening knitting group, in which gabbing was what we all did while knitting, and I loved the socializing dimension of the get-together.

But as with most of my instinctive negative responses throughout my life, I soon had the humbling experience of discovering wisdom and truth in what I'd initially dismissed. That very evening, knitting in bed for the hour or so before sleeping—as had become my custom—I noticed my spirit engaged in a new way. Recalling Amanda's words about "knitting while praying," I found that each stitch invoked a prayer as it slipped through my fingers from the left needle to the right. It was a wordless prayer—just an awareness of Divine Presence. Creating each new stitch was like praying with prayer beads: the tactile passage of material through my fingers, my awakening mind and soul to the touch of transcendent reality.

Desert Fathers' Basket Weaving

A few weeks after my conversation with Amanda, my husband and I were paying a visit to a longtime friend who is a monk in the Trappist Abbey of the Genesee in western New York. The Trappists are an order of monks tracing their origin back to the sixth-century Benedict of Nursia, who is considered the founder of Christian monasticism. Trappists are contemplatives, which means that they dedicate their lives to prayerful contemplation of God. Their daily rhythm is marked by periods of communal and private contemplation.

As usual with our comfy visits over the years, George (my husband), Brother Anthony, and I were sitting under a tree in the fields outside the monastery chapel, catching up on each others' lives. At one point, George offered, "Well, Peggy has taken up knitting. That's something new."

I brushed it off. "Oh, that's girl stuff—you guys wouldn't be interested. But I do find it contemplative," I added, trying to make knitting sound meaningful to Brother Anthony's vocation.

"Absolutely," Brother Anthony immediately jumped in, to my surprise. "You know the Desert Fathers would weave baskets while they were at prayer."

I knew that the Desert Fathers were the fourth-century Christian hermits who chose a solitary life of prayer in the Egyptian desert, in order to devote themselves totally to union with God. But, no, I'd never heard about their basket weaving. What fun to find out. "Tell me more," I urged.

Brother Anthony elaborated. "Basket weaving helped their contemplative practice. The body is naturally restless, they said, so if you give it a focused activity, it settles down, calming the mind as well."

Now I was really gripped. "That's exactly what I've discovered in knitting!" How affirming to learn that I didn't "discover" it at all, but that these ancient masters of contemplative prayer had discovered it —had found that creating something with your hands could actually be an aid to settling the mind and spirit into deep repose.

The creative dimension was, in fact, what Brother Anthony then expanded on. "And for the Desert Fathers the creativity of weaving baskets added a contemplative dimension, too: the body busy with a peaceful creativity would be in harmony with the spirit creatively opening to the Divine Presence. In fact, since the *process* of basket weaving as prayer was what mattered to them, they sometimes burned the baskets after completing them."

Meditation

Pick up your needles and yarn for whatever project calls to you at the moment—nothing with a complicated pattern, perhaps simply a stockinette stitch piece or garter stitch square. Sit for fifteen minutes quietly engaging in your knitting activity. Focus all your attention on what your hands are creating.

The purpose of this exercise is to give yourself the opportunity to notice how your mind and spirit can become calm as your hands do their creative work.

Musing now on Brother Anthony's account of the Desert Fathers keeping their hands busy with the creativity of basket weaving in order to settle their spirits into a creative opening to Divine Presence, I have to acknowledge that never has my inner being settled so quietly as it sometimes does now while knitting. My daily morning practice of sitting in what I've optimistically called "contemplative prayer" for over twenty-five years has never, I must confess, brought me to this inner peace of heightened awareness of Divine Presence. Mostly what it has brought me to is a heightened awareness of my to-do lists for the day or a heightened fussing over some interpersonal wrinkle that needed smoothing.

This failure of my contemplative practice is not the fault of my mentors. In fact, my spirituality has been formed by the Trappists themselves in the Benedictine tradition—by Brother Anthony and by my spiritual director of more than twenty-five years, Father William Shannon, himself a scholar of the Trappist monk Thomas Merton. Father Shannon has written several books drawing on Merton's contemplative wisdom, and I've chewed over and over the nuggets from his writing and those of Merton as well. But not until knitting have I experienced anything close to what Father Shannon calls, in his book *Silence on Fire*, the "prayer of awareness."

What Is Prayer?

Prayer. What *is* it, exactly? A book entitled *Knit One, Purl a Prayer* ought to define its key title term, I'd say.

But this is probably one of the hardest words in the language to pin down. In the most general way, any definition of prayer will have something to do with the relationship between human beings and the Divine—and with this relationship from the human point of view. Prayer, that is, is something that people do, not God. But beyond this general statement, definitions falter. Can we say that prayer is human speech to God? No, because much prayer is wordless. Prayer, I suggest, is our human longing for communication with the Divine.

In all major religious traditions this longing pours forth primarily as praise of the Divine. The Rig Veda, one of the ancient scriptures from which Hinduism was born, begins "I magnify God, the Divine Fire." Similarly, Mary the mother of Jesus, while pregnant and visiting her cousin Elizabeth in Luke's Gospel, begins her famous hymn praising God with "My soul magnifies the Lord" (Lk. 1:46). "Magnifies" here is sometimes translated as "glorifies." The point is the same no matter which word expresses it: awareness of God's graciousness moves people to grateful praise. So there is the Jewish prayer of praise on lighting the Sabbath candles at home: "Blessed are You, Lord our God, King of the universe, Who has made us holy through His commandments and commanded us to kindle the Sabbath light." And the core prayer of Christianity, the Lord's Prayer, starts with praise, or "hallowing" of God's name (that is, of God's very essence): "Our Father who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name." The comparable prayer for Muslims, recited at each of

their five daily prayer sessions, is the opening verse of the Qur'an, known as Surah al-Fatihah or The Opening, which begins "In the name of Allah, Most Gracious, Most Merciful. Praise be to Allah, the Cherisher and Sustainer of the Worlds; Most Gracious, Most Merciful; Master of the Day of Judgment."

But like the Lord's Prayer, which shifts halfway through from praise into petitioning God ("Give us this day our daily bread"), the Fatihah moves, toward its close, into petition: "You do we worship, and Your aid we seek. Show us the straight way." And petition is surely the form of prayer that we practice most often—no matter what our religion or even if we profess no religion. It is the cry of "Help!" to our transcendent Power. At the Fatihah's end, the longing for help is a prayer for divine guidance on the path of life. In Jewish worship, a privileged prayer is the Y'varech'cha, the high priestly prayer from the book of Numbers: "The Lord bless you and keep you; The Lord make his face to shine upon you, and be gracious to you; The Lord lift up his countenance upon you and give you peace" (6:24–26). A petition for peace and for divine light also informs the beloved Om prayer of Hindus: "Lead us from the unreal to the real, from darkness to light, from death to the Immortal One, Om peace peace peace." Many yoga traditions today open their practice with this prayer.

But prayer as petition can get out of hand. It's one thing to pray (as the Lord's Prayer ends) "Deliver us from evil"; it's another to pray for delivery of an email acceptance of my latest book proposal. In

Mark Twain's classic novel *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, Huck starts off assuming that prayer is of the latter sort: simply asking for stuff you want to get. "But somehow I couldn't make it work," he complains. He'd prayed for a fish-line and hooks, but got only the line, and "It warn't any good to me without hooks." So in disgust he gives up on prayer. As well he should, since prayer is not bombarding God with our current wish lists.

All major spiritual traditions offer a model of prayer as, rather, *listening*. Perhaps most engagingly in the Bible is the episode (1 Kgs. 19:11–12) of the prophet Elijah hearing God's voice on Mount Horeb, the place where Moses had received the Ten Commandments. Fleeing from his enemies to a cave in the mountain, Elijah hears God announce that he will soon be passing by.

> Now there was a great wind, so strong that it was splitting mountains and breaking rocks in pieces before the Lord, but the Lord was not in the wind; and after the wind an earthquake, but the Lord was not in the earthquake; and after the earthquake a fire, but the Lord was not in the fire; and after the fire a sound of sheer silence.

It is in this "sound of sheer silence" (other translations say "a tiny whispering sound" or "a gentle whisper") that Elijah finally encounters God.

Knitting a Prayer

Anthony Bloom, an archbishop in the Eastern Orthodox Christian Church, recounts in his book *Beginning to Pray* his experience with a Russian woman in her nineties whom he visited in a nursing home. She begged his advice on how to pray, because her prayer life, she felt, had been fruitless. "These fourteen years I have been praying the Jesus Prayer almost continually, and never have I perceived God's presence at all." (The Jesus Prayer, central to Orthodox spirituality, is simply the line "Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy upon me.") Bloom blurted out in response: "If you speak all the time, you don't give God a chance to place a word in." Then he suggested:

> Go to your room after breakfast, put it right, place your armchair in a strategic position that will leave behind your back all the dark corners . . . into which things are pushed so as not to be seen. Light your little lamp before the icon . . . [Orthodox homes traditionally have an icon altar, often with an image of the face of Christ.] Then take your knitting and for fifteen minutes knit before the face of God, but I forbid you to say one word of prayer. You just knit and try to enjoy the peace of your room.

At first, Bloom writes, the woman was suspicious that this advice was superficial. But when she returned to see him some time later, she announced, "It works!" Bloom was eager to hear her elaboration, so she

told him how she had followed his instructions to neaten her room and then settle herself peacefully before her icon. She continued:

> After a while I remembered that I must knit before the face of God, and so I began to knit. And I became more and more aware of the silence. The needles hit the armrest of my chair, . . . there was nothing to bother about, . . . and then I perceived that this silence was not simply an absence of noise, but that the silence had substance. It was not absence of something but presence of something. . . . The silence around began to come and meet the silence in me. . . . At the heart of the silence there was He who is all stillness, all peace, all poise.

The woman had knit herself into the silent peace at the heart of the Divine Presence.

"The silence around began to come and meet the silence in me." The Desert Fathers explain that once our hearts can be silent enough to meet God's silence and peace, then our prayer can issue in thoughts or words or song or wordless gratitude. The vehicle of the communication with God doesn't matter; what matters is our openness of heart. One of the Desert *Mothers*, in fact—Mother Theodora—said, "It is good to live in peace, for the wise person practices perpetual prayer." And what is perpetual prayer? It is standing (or sitting) "with the mind in the heart before God." So said the great Russian Orthodox spiritual guide Bishop Theophan the Recluse, who drew his teaching from the Desert tradition. "Every prayer must come from the heart,

and any other prayer is no prayer at all. Prayer-book prayers, your own prayers, and very short prayers, all must issue forth from the heart to God, seen before you."

This prayer of the heart, this opening of my spirit to whatever the Divine might be wishing to communicate to me: this is the form of prayer that knitting offers me.

Prayer

Creator, Heart of our very being—
May my heart open to your life beating within me,
May the ears of my heart hear your silently powerful presence,
May I live each moment in your peace.

Prayer Shawl Ministry

After settling for some weeks into this prayerful dimension of knitting that I'd discovered—and then had discovered that I hadn't at all "discovered" it, but had found for myself what has been known by the wisdom of ancient spiritual traditions—I remembered Amanda's comment about knitting prayer shawls: "You sit silently in a group," Amanda had explained, "and everyone knits while praying." By now I was humbly embarrassed by my initial dismissal of the value of knitting in prayerful silence. And I was curious about this thing called Prayer Shawl ministry. So I put "prayer shawl" into my computer's search engine—and sat dumbfounded watching page after page of entries pop up, nearly all linking to a Prayer Shawl group at a particular church congregation or parish around the country. I stopped after opening about fifty pages (and I was nowhere near the end of the

listings), stopped in awe at what a powerfully healing movement the Prayer Shawl ministry has become.

It began as the brainchild—heartchild, really—of two women in Hartford, Connecticut, Janet Bristow and Victoria Galo. In 1997, after graduating together from a program in women's spirituality at the Hartford Seminary, Bristow and Galo pondered how to put into practice the newly deepened and broadened sense of God that they had experienced in their program. God, they had learned, has feminine dimensions: mothering, comforting, creatively caring. How could they carry this nurturing God out in the world to others?

Gradually, it came to them that their mutual love of knitting could be the vehicle for carrying forth God's loving care. And shawls seemed a natural. "Shawls," as Janet writes on their website, have been "made for centuries universal and embracing, symbolic of an inclusive, unconditionally loving, God. They wrap, enfold, comfort, cover, give solace, mother, hug, shelter and beautify." Vicky began by knitting a shawl in a spirit of prayerfulness for a friend going through a divorce, and then she brought the completed shawl to their women's group, where everyone spontaneously blessed it. And here the essence of Prayer Shawl ministry began.

Some fifteen years later, Janet and Vicky get a thousand hits a day on their website, shawlministry.com. The site is meant to encourage people everywhere to form their own Prayer Shawl groups, and that is exactly what has happened—as my Internet search for "prayer shawls"

attests. Groups find their own ways to knit prayerfully. Sometimes it is in silence, as my friend Amanda said; sometimes it is with a sharing of details about the intended recipient of the shawl—a cousin with cancer, a neighbor recently widowed, a friend laid off from her job. And not all of the recipients being prayed for through knitting are suffering. Shawls are also made for celebration: of childbirth, of marriage, of retirement.

Generally, though, a Prayer Shawl group begins with a vocalized prayer. Many of these are collected on Janet and Vicky's website. This popular one by Cathleen O'Meara Murtha, DW, captures the spirit of them all:

As we gather in community to share our prayer, our stories,
the work of our hearts and hands, we pray for God's blessing on our endeavors:

A blessing to my mind—
to be free to enter this time of contemplative activity . . .
A blessing to my hands—
to be the source of creating something of beauty and love . . .
A blessing to my soul—
to be open to the promptings of loving and caring . . .
A blessing to my yarn—
to be shaped into patterns of loving and caring . . .

A blessing to my needles—
to be the holders of stitches as they become a whole garment . . .
A blessing to my knitting—
to be a work of heart and hands, body and spirit . . .
A blessing on the one who will receive the fruit of my prayer and my knitting . . .
May this shawl be welcomed in the spirit in which it was knitted . . .
May we become one with the One who knitted each of us in our mother's womb . . .
I join my blessing, my prayer, and my knitting with women all over the earth in this common effort to bring healing and wholeness, comfort and celebration.

Inspired by first hearing about prayer shawls from Amanda, then finding for myself that the passing of yarn through my fingers over needles was like praying with beads, I've now come to sense something more happening—more than praying with beads—as I let my knitting become prayer. Like the Desert Fathers weaving their baskets to facilitate their contemplative prayer, like the knitters in Prayer Shawl ministries, I watch with astonished gratitude as a beautiful and useful object is created through this work of my hands.

PATTERNING YOUR PRAYER

Bookmark

A nice first pattern is a reversible bookmark; I've designed a couple here.

Gauge: 5 or 6 stitches = 1"

Yarn: Choose a DK weight yarn, which is thin enough to fit smoothly in your book. Berroco Comfort DK is a nice choice because of its sheen.

Needles: Use needles size US6 or the size needed to obtain gauge.

For beginners: Your local yarn store will show you how to cast on, how to do the basic knit stitch, and how to bind off when you're done. You can also find many excellent instructional videos by searching the Internet.

Pattern for beginners:

Cast on 10 stitches.

Knit every row (called garter stitch) until you have the length of bookmark you want. Mine is 7" inches long.

Bind off, leaving at least a 6" tail.

To make a tassel for your bookmark:

Take a yarn needle and thread the tail onto it.

Weave the needle along the bound-off stitches until you get to the center of your bookmark.

Cut two 8" pieces of your yarn.

Fold them in half and tie them around your tail at its base.

Cut all 5 strands to the same length.

Pattern for experienced knitters:

Cast on 10 stitches, then try the minirib pattern below. This will keep you interested while still being repetitive enough to be meditative.

Rows 1 and 2: Knit.

Row 3: P2, *K2, P2; repeat from *.

Row 4: K2, *P2, K2; repeat from *.

Rows 5 and 6: Knit.

Row 7: Repeat Row 4.

Row 8: Repeat Row 3.

Six repeats of rows 1–8 will give you a good length for a bookmark. Make tassel according to the instructions.