

The Spirituality of Mending
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Excerpt from *The Spirituality of Mending* by Laura Everett,

“There is not much reason to mend a worn sock. Socks are cheap. Overnight delivery can get me a new pair by the time I wake up tomorrow. Darning a sock takes time. And yet, I’ve made the commitment to slow down, stitch more and teach others as I take up mending as a spiritual practice.

I have set out to learn with my hands what I longed for in my life: to repair what is torn.

It seems I’m not alone. I’ve turned to mending, in part, because so much in all of our lives feels as if it is fraying and ripping apart. We talk about “mending the social fabric of our nation,” “tears in community” and “repairing the social safety nets.”

So stitch by stitch, I’m learning to repair.

Mending is reorienting. Our ideas about innovation come these days primarily from the tech sector and those privileged few with venture capital. Mending re-centers poor people, women and people of color as innovators, design-thinkers and problem-solvers.

Mending is an environmental commitment. Amid the Marie Kondo-inspired frenzy to declutter, we fool ourselves if we think that our trashed textiles are gone once we discard them.

Mending is resistance. By mending, I aim to resist the disposability of people and things. Mending honors the maker.

Most of all, mending is spiritual practice. Before any stitch is sewn or any patch prepared, I have to ask myself, “Is this thing in my hands worth repairing?” When I answer “yes,” mending is an act of devotion.”

This sermon topic found its way to me a few months ago. The article popping up on my facebook feed. At the time, it felt refreshing, a way to weave together the physical task of mending, with some deeper ideas of resistance, reuse, honoring our planet. The author offered a rich metaphor to explore how we engage with each other and the world. Since then, these ideas have grown deeper and more meaningful for me, as I have had my own experiences of a torn friendship, and an increasingly broken world.

There is an old joke that goes something like, what jeans are appropriate to wear to church? Holy ones! The play on words of having holes and being sacred. But following this idea that mending can make something into a more meaningful object, perhaps the joke is truer than it knows.

Things break, get worn down, tear, fall apart. And not just things. Relationships, communities, systems. And looking at these less tangible things through the lens of mending, can offer us a lot of wisdom and insight. As Everett says, "Before any stitch is sewn or any patch prepared, I have to ask myself, "Is this thing in my hands worth repairing?" When I answer "yes," mending is an act of devotion."

Spirituality is concerned with questions of meaning - of justice - of salvation. When we set ourselves to the task of social activism, of right relationships, of beloved community, there is an, often unconscious moment, where we ask ourselves this exact question - Is this thing worth repairing? And our action is the resounding Yes, of commitment and devotion.

There are some key components to mending that I will expound upon today. Understanding the cause of disrepair, the cleaning and clearing out that as to happen, the prevention of further damage.

While I have not yet taken up the task of sock darning, I have read about methods for mending clothes. One piece I read talked about the importance of knowing what caused the damage in the first place. You could have had that hole due to a number of reasons – some acidic thing fell on the garment, moth ate away fabric fibres and left small holes, seam stitching frayed the fabric, you snagged the clothing on something sharp, buttons and other fasteners strained the

fabric and tore the area. Another common cause of holes is something like the belt buckle or the purse edge continuously touching a particular area and in time wearing down the place to make holes. She goes on to list 9 different methods to repair holes in fabric - each one specific to the type of damage that occurred.

In this instance, the seamstress is looking for the cause of the hole in a piece of fabric. But what if we extended that to our less tangible concepts mentioned earlier. Let's say you have a friend or family member who's behavior towards you has changed. They may be more aloof, distant. Phone calls come less frequently, conversations are terse. There are a lot of ways we could react. Defensiveness, self-doubt, confusion, but let's say somewhere we are answering yes to desire to mend this relationship. For those of you like me, your mind jumps to "what did I do wrong?!" But, shockingly, not everything is about us. It may be that the other person is going through a hard time - at work, with their health - and knowing this helps determine how we might approach mending.

Some of you may have heard of Christian Picciolini, we is well known for being a former white supremacist neo-nazi. Now, Picciolini, founder of the Free Radicals Project, travels around the world, using intervention strategies and outreach work to help young, predominantly white men leave racist and violence-based groups — both in real life and on online chat boards.

In the continual wakes of mass shooting, racist politics, hate crimes - we ask why? Why is this happening? What has caused this brokenness, these tears in our society. Is it lack of access to mental health counseling? Is it easy access to guns? Is it the very public racism and hate that tacitly condones these horrific events? I believe all of these things contribute to the state of our world right now.

When asked about what it was like being part of a white supremacist group, Picciolini said, "It absolutely provided camaraderie that I hadn't found in real life until the age of 14 years old. I grew up fairly alienated and bullied. It empowered me at first. It was the first group of people that accepted me as a family, that filled me with a sense of purpose. Fourteen is a really magical age when it comes to extremism or radicalization. And that's for far-right groups or whether it's ISIS or even gangs in inner cities. It's the time when young people are really trying to develop that sense of identity, community and purpose. They're breaking away from their

parents for the first time. And if young people are feeling marginalized or maybe they're vulnerable and they get detoured by what I call 'potholes,' the things in life that we encounter, things like trauma or mental health issues or poverty or joblessness or even privilege which can keep us in a bubble. Those types of things detour people as they're searching for identity, community and purpose. On the fringes there is always somebody with a narrative, ready to give it to you and [to] certainly blame somebody else for the pain that you're feeling." He goes on to say, "I think we're failing young people. You know, radicalization does not start when somebody finds an ideology. I think that the pre-radicalization stage starts the day we're born, when we start to hit those potholes in the road. And if we can't fill them, we get detoured to very dangerous, kind of fringe areas. And I think that we are failing young people in the sense that we are not serving their needs. We're not amplifying their passions... I do a lot of listening and I listen for those potholes. I try and introduce them to the people that they think that they hate because oftentimes they haven't had those interactions, where somebody goes into a room thinking that they hate somebody else and walking out knowing that they have so much more in common with that person than they have different. It's a very compelling moment to witness."

These "potholes" as Picciolini calls them, are what he sees as the cause of radicalization - and they are where he focuses much of his attention in his work.

Sometimes preparing to mend something can be a big part of the repair. Some of you may know that I used to work at a local factory making backpacks. One of my favorite parts of that job was repairing damaged or incorrectly made bags. It was a creative task. I would have to figure out the most efficient way to take the bag apart to get to the damaged piece to replace it. Then out came the seam ripper and scissors, carefully deconstructing the pack until the point of repair was reached. A new zipper, or piece of web, or even a whole panel of fabric would be put in place, and then I would re-sew what I had undone, and voila, as good as new.

This speaks to the need to dismantle something before rebuilding it. This can be as true for a backpack as it is for our personal growth. Often we need to engage in unlearning before we take in new information - mending unhealthy behaviors and attitudes. I think of this as the "don't just put a bandaid on it" aspect of mending.

Just because something could use mending, doesn't always mean that something awful has happened. Unlike so much of what surrounds us in the news, a world that needs mending because of painful realities we find ourselves in, sometimes things just wear out.

Being well worn is not something to look down on. Breathing new life into a whole pair of jeans is part of the creativity of spirituality - we can make real a resurrection with our own work. In Everett's article she talked about how there are two paths of mending - one that returns the item to a "like new" appearance, where the work of the mender is so meticulous as to trick the eye into never knowing there was a repair made. And another that showcases a repair, a vibrant color of thread, a funky patch, that says, hey, someone cared enough to put me back together and keep me going.

My husband now runs the warranty repair department at the local backpack factory where I used to work. He has told me that a lot of people want their packs repaired in visible ways, like a badge of honor. Especially because this company is known for the durability of their packs, such repairs say, I am hardcore!

In my life as a chaplain, I recall visiting an older woman in the hospital after she had come out of a knee replacement surgery. She told me that her doctor let her know she would have a sizeable scar from the operation. I started to say something about how scars can be beautiful, and she shouldn't be embarrassed, when she continued and said, "Isn't that great? Everyone who sees it will know I've lived a hard life and overcome and accomplished things, so much so that I wore through the first knee God gave me. Unfortunately I don't think the one the doctor put in will last as long!"

Sometimes in the process of preparing to mend something, we may find that it is beyond repair. I considered having a story for all ages today, and reading a book called, *Joseph Had a Little Overcoat*. The main character is Joseph, a 40-something Jewish farmer, who has a little striped overcoat. When it is old and beyond repair, Joseph makes it into a little jacket, then the jacket becomes frayed and worn, he then makes it into a vest, then a scarf, then a necktie, and finally a button. Then Joseph loses the button and makes a story out of it. The book beautifully illustrates how we can transform things to give them new purpose instead of disposing of them.

The final thing I want to talk about is the prevention aspect of mending. Sometimes we can prevent things from breaking down, or at least lengthen their first lifetime if we address things before they start. If we know why something needs mending, see patterns that lead to wear and tear, we can be proactive about it. We could reinforce the knees of a pair of pants we wear when gardening before they start to grow thin. Preventative medicine is another area where we take steps before a problem arises. Vaccines, regular screenings, and so on, can help us need less intervention down the road.

Going back to Christitan Picciolini, prevention is a part of his work as well. He says, "Nobody is born racist. And while we certainly see the results, the monstrous results, of the things that these racists do, in my work I have to believe that at some point that person was pure and maybe couldn't find their way. That's my job to see the child and not the monster because I have to believe that there are other people like me that were intercepted at times when they were vulnerable and ultimately could find the right path...people tend to think that what I do is very specialized. And certainly because I am a former extremist, I have a certain credibility talking with people who are still extremists, but I think all parents, all psychologists, all teachers, can do what I do. It really is just identifying vulnerable young people and then amplifying their passions [and] trying to fill those voids in their life, because I've never met a happy white supremacist. I've never met one with positive self-esteem."

Mending is an age old art, in which the old can become new again, in which things left for dead can be resurrected, where transformation can happen, we can reorient, repurpose, reuse, resist. We can prevent wear and tear. We can enter into the creative process of nature - death and rebirth - We can hold the gentle fragile world, ourselves, eachother, and ask "Is this thing in my hands worth repairing?" And we can answer "yes."