

Self-Cultivation Investigation – Option 2

There is a regular scene at my house at around 9 o'clock at night. My dad is in his favorite spot on the sofa in the family room, with the foot rest up and a computer on his lap, lightly tapping his feet together and watching TV. My first younger brother is taking up the entire kitchen table with college textbooks, various papers, and notebooks in front of him as he surfs the web with headphones in his ears that are not playing any music. My youngest brother is fast asleep on the carpet in the family room even though he laid down only two minutes prior. And my mom is sitting in the recliner quietly crocheting yet another scarf or baby blanket. My mom has spent countless hours crocheting. She has done it on long car rides, during free periods while substitute teaching, and at hundreds of games and practices (my brothers and I have played on a plethora of sports teams). In our basement there are bins of yarn and completed projects of hers – scarves, hair ties, blankets, and more – that have yet to find a home or use. For as long as I can remember, I have known her to crochet. But until recently, I never looked into why she did it.

My mom learned how to crochet when she was thirteen years old. Her mom taught her just a single stitch, as that was all she knew. With only a brief introduction to the craft, my mom stopped less than a year later when she entered high school, as she had gotten more serious about dancing. She continued to dance through college, and did not dabble with a crochet hook again until she was married, before having kids. She went on a business trip to California – my newlywed parents were living in New Jersey at the time – and brought yarn and a crochet hook

with her. In addition to sightseeing, she started crocheting a baby blanket in her downtime. Still only knowing a single stitch, my mom sporadically crocheted on and off for the next three years until my parents moved to our present home (still in New Jersey). She met one of our neighbors, Mrs. Angelica Pataki, who showed her some dishcloths she was crocheting. Inspired, my mom bought a pattern book, and was captivated. She was mesmerized by the numerous different stitches that could be used to make infinitely many patterns. Excited, she talked to her older sister about it, to my dad's mom about it, and to her friends at her congregation about it. She and her sister went to A.C. Moore, and they both started new projects. My mom has been crocheting ever since.

With some downtime over consecutive college winter breaks, I decided to try my hand at crocheting. I was interested in only a couple projects: the first winter I made two handwarmers, and the second winter I started a copy of a blanket my mom made. So when I asked my mom what qualities she thought were necessary to excel at the activity, I expected to hear such character traits as having an aesthetic eye and being patient, as those were my takeaways. Following somewhat in line, she said crocheting requires tenacity to see projects through to the end. But then she caught me off guard and said that it requires love. "You're giving your time to someone else, and the end product is kind of priceless," she explained. "I think of the person I'm making it for while I'm doing it." Most projects she works on are to be given away as gifts, not to be kept. As the projects I worked on were of selfish intent, I was clearly missing an entire dimension of crocheting.

Moreover, the idea of philanthropy came up repeatedly when talking about the crocheting community. Mrs. Pataki is involved with an organization called Project Linus that provides handmade blankets to children that are seriously ill, traumatized, or otherwise in need. Her

daughter Priscilla has donated crochet hats to the non-profit organization Angels of God that works with a local church to provide clothing to the needy. My mom mostly gives to friends and associates. She is always giving, and she is happy to be part of a community that does the same. In his article “Joy within tranquility: Amazonian Urarina styles of happiness”, Harry Walker writes about the work of the Urarina in a way that is very much analogous to the work of the crocheting community:

Through their work, which ideally becomes a free expression of their life, people affirm themselves as well as those nearby who use or enjoy what they produce, whose needs they satisfy, and who in turn complete and confirm the worker in their thoughts and love. This kind of work is thus inherently communal, even when performed alone. (Walker 2015)

My mom also informally teaches others how to crochet. She gets excited when she sees her “students” progress, especially because they will often get excited themselves. So not only is she a member of the crocheting community; she is helping to expand it.

In regard to pleasure, crocheting affords my mom what Walker would define as tranquility. He describes this concept of happiness as “a relatively long-term, relational condition implying emotional spontaneity and a flexible, freely chosen work routine that allows for merging of action and awareness” (Walker 2015). What are most hobbies but spontaneous and flexible, performed in one’s leisure time? While conversing, my mom attested to this: “A pattern moves you. You find inspiration in different places.” As a substitute teacher that is often called in the morning of her potential workday, she has a work schedule that is constantly in flux. And the multitude of colors, different kinds of yarn, stitches, patterns, and projects does nothing but stimulate the imagination and foster creativity. For my mom, crocheting possesses the two

aforementioned qualities in at least three different ways. From my experience, upon reflection, crocheting seems to be satisfying because one is able “to achieve small goals from the materials at hand” in a relatively short amount of time (Walker 2015). Projects do not take up too little time so as to feel trivial, but they do not take up so much time that the participant gets disinterested and abandons the task (many hobbies seem to fall on this “sweet spot” of time required to see encouraging results).

More than just filling leisure time, crocheting gives my mom a bit of peace during difficult times. She allows herself “to be absorbed into or lost in the interaction” and finds “a space of calm carved out within a hostile cosmos,” (Walker 2015). While I have not tried crocheting while particularly distressed, the activity can certainly be relaxing. You get into a rhythm and “stop being aware of [yourself] as separate from the actions [you] are performing” (Walker 2015). The rest of the world fades away, your problems with it.

My mom likes having something to show for her time, even if she does not hold onto her projects for very long. Of course there are “minor” annoyances that are part of crocheting, such as untangling yarn, losing a hook, or counting stitches. The worst stressor is making a mistake, such as skipping a stitch, and not catching it until much later. You then have to undo all of the work you have done since making the mistake to fix it. But these troubles are worth enduring, at least for my mom, for all the good that comes from crocheting. And the hobby is alluring: rarely can she carry her crochet stuff around without attracting the interest of a stranger who will ask, “Whatcha working on?”

*** Names in this paper have been changed where possible to protect the privacy of those interviewed.

Works Cited

- Walker, Harry. 2015. "Joy within Tranquility: Amazonian Urarina Styles of Happiness." *Hau: Journal of Ethnographic Theory* 5(3): 177-196.

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