

Perri Klass Turning 50

Knitting is my internal symbol. It represents me.

Metaphors are treacherous. I have not researched this exhaustively, but I am pretty certain that there is no truly original way to compare life to a knitting project—it's all been done before, and most likely done again and again and again. Yes, my children, life is like a cardigan sweater. We cast on—we follow the pattern or we improvise—we choose the best materials we can, but sometimes we learn, to our sorrow, that we have not picked the perfect yarn for the task at hand. We embark on complex multi-stranded patterns, or try to work designs in intarsia with no gaps and no puckering. We must decide, at times, whether to pause and rip back, and redo our mistakes, or whether to rush on past them and hope that time and stretch will be forgiving. Ah, my children, beware most especially the pompous metaphor which leads so naturally into the use of the second person plural!

And what, pray tell, is the metaphorical meaning of a partly knit cardigan packed up in a plastic bag? A back and a right front, say, made in a rather nice silky orange-pink tweed that I happened to get on sale a couple of years ago? Yes, my children, we cast on, we make the back, we make the right front, we get distracted because the left front will just be more of the same, we start making a shawl out of Noro Silk Garden, we move on...I'm afraid it's kind of hard to draw much of a wise life moral from that one.

Okay, here's the thing. I turned fifty pretty recently, and I am in the mood to look for metaphors, or at least to look for illustrations and examples that illuminate my life so far and my life still to come. And maybe if I look for knitting metaphors, I risk a certain amount of repetition (I'm sorry, I'm not doing this on purpose), but I don't want to stretch too far outside the texture of my own life (okay, okay, I'm doing it on purpose) and find myself left with some alien metaphor, however original.

Back in 1954, Mary McCarthy wrote an essay about symbolism. She

had published an article in *Harper's Magazine*, "Artists in Uniform," describing a real encounter she had had—an encounter on a train with an anti-Semitic army officer, a colonel with whom she argued and debated, and with whom she eventually had lunch. In her follow-up essay, "Settling the Colonel's Hash," she described a letter she had gotten from a college professor in response to her story about the colonel. The teacher described her students' discussion of the symbolic meaning of the details: what did it symbolize that the colonel ate hash for lunch? What did it symbolize that there were two nuns riding in the same railway car? McCarthy responded with frustration—the colonel ate hash because that's what he ordered, the nuns were traveling somewhere that day! But then, in "Settling the Colonel's Hash," she went on to consider the question of intrinsic symbols—that is to say, the way that the details of what we wear and what we eat and what we notice do in fact represent us. If the colonel had ordered a fruit salad with whipped cream for lunch, she wrote, "this too would have represented him in some way; given his other traits, it would have pointed to a complexity in his character that the hash did not suggest."

So by those standards, knitting is my intrinsic, my internal symbol. It represents me. And I just turned fifty, and I'm looking at my life, so I'm reaching, spiritually and metaphorically, for my knitting. And of course it's been done before—one of the lessons of turning fifty is that it's all been done before: growing up, going to school, holding a job, falling in love, bringing up kids, buying a house, noticing that your body is aging, coaching little league, changing jobs, giving up a dream, losing a parent. You name it, it's been done before. And sometimes you can learn from the people who've already been through it, and sometimes you can't; there are certain experiences which we apparently each have to undergo alone and for the very first time in human history.

So then, I am turning fifty for the very first time in human history—me, right over here. I would like to thank my family and friends for the wonderful party, and I would like to thank my mother for the terrific toast (she looked wonderful, too, in a scarlet silk Chinese jacket; if only she knew how to knit, I could turn this into an essay about turning eighty, as she did last November). And of course, I would like to thank my kids for their song (to the tune of "Officer Krupke"), though I could probably have done without the line, "Golly, Moses, look, we're barely scarred!" Thanks to the people who came from elementary school and college and medical school and residency—thanks for the lovely bottles of wine. Now, though, let's talk about knitting.

So the first thing I want to say is about counting off the rows. I like knitting gadgets as much as the next obsessed knitter, but for whatever reason, I have never particularly liked the idea of a row counter. I sometimes mark a tick on a scrap of paper to count off each row, but I inevitably get confused. If it matters for the pattern, and I can't tell by looking at the knitting, I go back to the bottom and count. So maybe that says something about how it's the pattern that should tell you where you are, not any arbitrary clicking off of the years.

Yes, let's talk about what you can tell from the pattern. I think that for me, complex knitting is really most satisfying when you reach those zen moments where the knitting itself is telling you what to do next. You look at the row that came before, and you know that the patterning has entered into you and whatever the combination is of knits and purls and yarn overs (yarns over?), and k2togs and ssk's, that's what the pattern demands. Oh, sure, you might glance quickly at your folded-up set of directions, and mutter over the progression ("knit 3, knit 2 together, yarn over, slip slip knit...") but it's not any kind of a surprise.

So then, that's probably the joy and the danger of midlife knitting.



By the time you're fifty, you ought to be pretty good at recognizing your own patterns, and at working skillfully within the constraints that those patterns impose. You may need to consult your instructions—or your other talismans—every now and then, but really, you are checking on what you already know. You have a certain skill and confidence in the management of your own life. I know how to do the things that I do—routinely, if not perfectly (what woman with adolescent children can claim to know how to do it perfectly? What doctor?). And my challenge is probably to keep an eye out for new patterns that I don't in fact know quite so well, and take up something that's a little frustrating, a little more line-by-line and stitch-by-stitch, a little more dependent on my ability to read the instructions and follow them closely, like they really matter.

But enough pontificating—let's get to the real question: my fiftieth birthday knitting resolution. You know about fiftieth birthday resolutions, don't you—they come in two categories, let's call them knit and purl, or, if you prefer, right side and wrong side. Right side resolutions are the ones you make long in advance, looking at that impossible milestone (What, me? Fifty? You've gotta be kidding!) looming up ahead. Before I turn fifty, I better get in shape, start eating healthy foods (after all, doesn't this mean I'm middle aged?), organize my desk, finish some of my old knitting projects. Now, to be fair, these are resolutions that I also make every year at New Years, and there are certain phases of life when I feel like I make them every morning, or rather, every night. But for my fiftieth birthday, for some reason, I really thought I was going to do it. I wasn't going to be left facing my birthday

and making those same old wrong-side resolutions, the ones you make at the last minute, as the clock ticks away the final seconds into what was going to be your new era: starting tomorrow, when I am fifty, I am going to turn into a whole new person. No, I was going to fix up my life in advance of this milestone, and start my second half-century already made over into a newer clearer-minded me.

And never mind about the healthy eating and the getting in shape, I was really focused on those unfinished knitting projects. I was going to go through them and triage them and pick at least one or two and get them done. And I actually dragged out quite a number of them—that pink-orange silky tweed sweater, the one I mentioned earlier! That intarsia patchwork jacket! That evening bag knitted out of shiny plastic cord! Oh, and here's another sweater—that red and brown cardigan I thought would make a nice sweater to keep in my office! What's the moral here, I thought, I never finish sweaters for myself. I buy yarn on sale, and I talk myself into the idea that I would wear a sweater, even though I usually don't wear sweaters (and it's my understanding that the biological changes to be expected around fifty are going to make sweaters less useful, not more useful), and then I get distracted after the back and part of the front, or in one dreadful case, I lose interest halfway through both sleeves at once.

And that, of course, is not even to mention the projects never started, the ones that live out their thwarted lives in my stash. I thought I might get to them some time after I turned fifty, once I had finished the others. There I would be, snug and smug in my pink-orange sweater, or my red and brown sweater (well, actually, in all probability, sweating), happily reacquainting myself with the vision of the blue-striped kimono jacket for which I bought a whole bag of wool, or the variegated feather and fan shawl.

Needless to say, I didn't get to that new clearer state. No way. I turned fifty with all those knitting projects tucked and zipped securely into their bags once again. I finished the things that I've begun most recently, and I made a few fruit hats—a friend came

to town with his six-year-old son, who was wearing a blueberry hat that I had made him years ago, and my thirteen-year-old demanded to know why I didn't make him a blueberry hat. If you'll wear it, I'll make it, I said. So I made it, and he wears it. Once more, clarity and inner peace has eluded me; the lesson of fifty, as of many artificial milestones, is that you're still the same person when you get to the other side. I mean, become a parent and you'll never be the same person again—maybe you won't even ever be the same knitter again. Turn fifty and hey, guess what, same old you, just getting more mail from the AARP.

So here I am, same old me. But knitting is my metaphor. Some people could talk about life as planting a garden, or building a house. Not me. I'm in the middle of my knitting project. I can hope that I've learned a few things about what kinds of materials I work with best, and what makes me most comfortable next to my skin—but I can take another kind of comfort in the idea that I will at some point make a foolish choice, or fall madly in love with yarn that just doesn't work for me, because I will be swept away by its beauty and color and I'll talk myself into another misadventure. But in the meantime, I know the value of a comfortable yarn, and a good fit, and I'm enjoying knitting along at a nice comfortable pace, without counting rows, letting the pattern guide me, and trying to get the tension right. There it is, that's my metaphor. And the most important part of it is, you have to take it stitch by stitch, and enjoy it stitch by stitch, or we wouldn't do it—but there's a different pleasure which comes after you've been knitting for a while, and you hold your work out at arm's length (ah yes, another biological aspect of turning fifty!), or set it down and pick it up again. One way or another, you suddenly find yourself looking at it differently, in a way that takes you beyond the stitch-by-stitch perspective, and marveling at how far you've come, at the pattern and the texture, at what you have managed to create.

Perri is the author of *Two Sweaters for My Father* (RXR, Inc.). Perri's new book, a novel about parent practices and pediatric practice, *The Mercy Rule*, will be available in July (Houghton-Mifflin).