

by Margaret Klein Wilson

There is a day in August that I yearn for: when crickets begin to chorus, when the light shifts and the nights go cool. There it is, the turn of summer, and with it the urge to make ready once again for the next season. As surely as Monarch butterflies are once more migrating to Mexico and my neighbor repeats his annual stacking of a third cord of firewood, I lift the lid of my cedar chest and breathe in the scent of wool.

The cedar chest is a memory cave. In a moment akin to meeting dear friends after a long separation, I peer in and fondly survey a collection of scarves, sweaters, and mittens dutifully folded away at the first heat of summer. At least eight weeks have passed without wearing wool! My impatience with late July's heat and humidity fade. In that heap of color and texture is the promise that sweater weather is imminent. Here begins my autumnal ritual of renewing my acquaintance with my three-season companions. I'm caught up in the joy of reunion and, on closer observation, practicality. What? Missing buttons? Spaghetti sauce on the elbow of my best pullover? Holes in my cashmere scarf?

Taking good care of my mostly wool sweaters is as kinesthetic a pleasure as knitting them. Mending and washing is to tactile satisfaction what a long conversation is to renewing an old friendship; it's the tea and cookies of a tête à tête with a trusted confidante. With both people and sweaters, you bump into the same elements of memory and context: how the friendship or sweater started; and how they are companion and witness to the events of your life.

The tools of my sweater spa care are basic to most households: quantities of lukewarm water, a mild fragrant liquid soap, needles of several varieties, short lengths of yarn, favorite scissors, and a mesh drying rack.

Before my sweaters get their fall bath, I check them inside and out. With spread hands I trace the fabric for pulls, worn spots, and snags. Moth holes and dried dabs of food on elbows sometimes appear too. I run my fingers along the interior seams to look for weak spots, and then across the inside of the sweater for pulled floats of stranded yarn. Picking up a needle here, a crochet hook there, I settle into the comfortable hum of thoughtful mending, one sewn stitch and new button at a time.

One Fair Isle sweater I surveyed recently recalled to me the artistry and high standards of the knitter, now passed, who improved any pattern she knit and was a generous teacher. Saggy buttonholes were stitched firm, and buttons checked for fastness. Little colonies of "pills" were snipped away at wear point, and in doing so, my annual homage to her work is complete.



An eighteen year old cabled sweater I knit with the first yarn made from my flock's natural colored wool is still deeply textured and handsome. The raised ribbed cuffs and hem are slightly flattened from years of wear and seams are spreading open so I make reinforcements to both areas as I marvel at the yarn's continued vitality and the random slubs of dark and light wool that fleck the rich, mocha tone.

My barn sweaters are my sentimental favorites, imbued with bits of hay from late spring chores along with the embedded tales and tribulations of my shepherding career. I pre-spot soiled areas with a pH balanced soap, smooth out and repair snags, and reweave ends that have been teased out by wear and as my mind wanders back to scenes of late night lambing, bundled up in this good wool.

Stitch, sew, weave, snip. Crickets chirp, shadows play across hills.

The quiet of my task is matched by the stillness of the late summer afternoon.

Hand-washing hand-knit items is likewise a deliberate and straight-forward process. It is both soothing and the safest way to keep them clean. Using my washing machine as a sink, and then

using the spin cycle to extract the water saves me muss and fuss and speeds up the drying time. I fill the washing machine halfway with lukewarm water and a dash of mild soap then agitate the water briefly to make a sudsy bath.

Next I gently submerge a sweater or two in the water and leave it to soak for a time. The machine is turned off until I'm ready to spin out the water using the gentle cycle. To rinse, repeat this step without soap. I then arrange the sweater on a drying rack or heavy towels and shape it to the original measurements. When the sweater is almost dry I turn it inside out to finish drying, sometimes by air and often on the warm cycle in the dryer for several minutes. "Bloomed" in this way they look almost vivacious and are finally ready for the next season.



Once the sweaters are folded and neatly replaced in the chest I have a sense of readiness and with it, the satisfaction once again of having paid attention to that most important aspects of the rhythm of my seasons: having made time to take good care of my friends.