by Kay Gardiner and Ann Shayne

Getting the Stank Out

Dear Problem Ladies:

I have a problem. A friend just adopted a baby boy, and I knit him a blanket. I washed it with a wool soap, and I noticed that my hands smelled a bit sheepish as I was squeezing out the excess water. The blocking worked . . . but the blanket still smells like sheep. In fact, the whole room in which the blanket is lying smells like a barn. A nice barn, but a barn. Really, it probably smells like alpaca since that's the fiber, but I've never been close enough to an actual alpaca to differentiate it from a sheep. Anyhow. I hate to embark on the process again as I'm not fond of blocking, but I will if it will get the smell out. Plan B: taking it to Dillard's and spraying it with each and every sample scent out there. What would you two do?

Sara

Dear Sara:

Your question sent the Problem Ladies into a reverie of nostalgia about all the barnyard animals with which we bonded at the New York Sheep and Wool Festival in Rhinebeck. Once you've had an up-close-and-personal encounter with a tender-eyed Cotswold, you never look at a skein of yarn the same way. For one thing, once you pat a sheep or an alpaca, you instantly see just how grungy their fleeces are (think the shag carpet off a freshman guy's dorm room floor). It's incredible, actually, that a raw fleece ever transforms from a dense, dirty, hay-filled animal pelt into a ball of lush, tidy wool.

Fleeces are processed in many different ways, and strong chemicals are sometimes used. In your case, we're guessing that your yarn may have been processed in some low-impact manner that didn't nuke out all of its natural barnyard splendor. One of the Problem Ladies has experienced yarns that never lose their sheepy smell, despite several washings with gentle wool soaps. With sheep wool, the odor is usually lanolin, but alpaca don't have lanolin, so that can't be the problem.

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It sounds like you don't want this baby to feel like he's living in a barn. (Though there are some super-famous stories about babies who started out in mangers, so it might not be all that bad, actually.) We suggest trying another wash. It'll take a while, but it's for a *baby* for Pete's sake! Get busy! With a blanket that's headed for a baby, you need to keep things sweet and gentle. Use Dawn dishwashing liquid—the original blue one—making sure it doesn't contain the enzymes that tend to weaken protein fibers. Using room-temperature water, let the blanket sit a good half hour or more. Rinse it with the same temperature water, without agitation, and let it dry. Then do a soak in a white vinegar bath—a couple of tablespoons of vinegar into a sink full of room-temperature water, followed by an agitation-free rinse. Many knitters swear by the redemptive power of a little vinegar to erase smells and to restore sheen to silk yarns.

We will point out that if you use a flavored vinegar, you're going to end up with a baby blanket that smells like a salad. Of course, a tarragon-scented baby blanket might be an upgrade.

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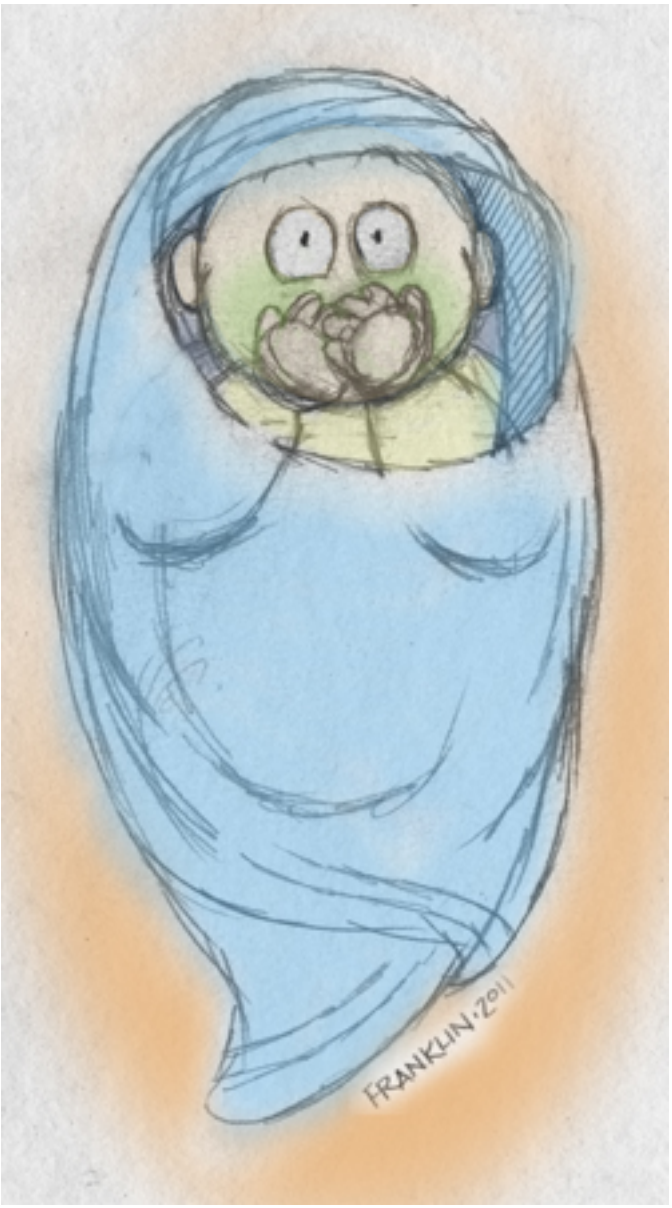

Should I Knit When Others Are Not Knitting?

Dear Problem Ladies:

I saw a thread on Ravelry recently where a lawyer wondered whether it was okay to knit during continuing legal education classes. Lawyer Problem Lady, what do you think?

Dying Slow Death at CLE

Dear Almost Dead:

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This is a fascinating question for every knitter who comes up against the opportunity to knit through some boring event. Is it disrespectful? Do you look like a lightweight? Is it distracting to the nerds around you who are taking notes on “Winning the Slip-and-Fall Case”?

Our answers: possibly, possibly, and possibly. The true question is whether you care. It’s up to you. Most continuing legal education (CLE) courses seem to have a requirement that your conscious body be present in the room with the speaker. Beyond that, attorneys do all sorts of stuff during these required courses: check email, kill at Sudoku, and occasionally even listen.

If you *want* to knit during class, there’s a sure-fire way to avoid feeling sneaky or nervous about it. Find a class on a topic that is outside your usual field of practice, and/or is being taught by somebody who is not in the topmost drawer of the legal filing cabinet. Using either method (or even better, combining them) will ensure that nobody you know, or nobody you care about, is there. You can pull out that tea cozy in the shape of a clown head, or those mohair hot pants-in-progress, without fear. Your classmates have no idea who you are.

We have gone on record regarding places we have tried to knit and failed (the Walmart checkout line, a funeral). But we’re basically knitting libertarians: if you find yourself with a sliver of time and a pair of needles in your hands, it’s time to knit.

Southern Problem Lady, living as she does on the buckle of the Bible Belt, has been asked on several occasions about the propriety of knitting at church, which one might consider continuing education of an eternal sort. She thinks that idle hands make the Devil’s work, so she is pro knitting whenever possible. She has been reading a lot about the Puritans lately, and they believed that works were a way toward grace. Who knows, right? If you knit through a church service, it might put you a step closer to salvation. At the very least, you’ll get some mittens out of it. She knows a number of churchgoers who draw the line at knitting during an actual worship service. Sunday school? Fine. Lining up for communion with a ball of mohair trailing down the aisle behind you? Get ready for some serious stink-eye at Coffee Hour.

Swatchitis

Dear Problem Ladies:

Is there a cure for swatchitis? I’ve knit up an *entire skein* of beautiful, one-of-a-kind yarn that I acquired without a pattern in mind, or maybe with too many patterns in mind—as swatches. The yarn is delicious; swatching it is too much fun.

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Susan

Dear Susan:

The only cure for swatchitis is more yarn. We heartily endorse the idea of knitting lots of little squares. If you keep this up long enough, you will definitely end up with a blanket or seventies-looking art garment. Keep swatching!

When Money Actually Does Sort of Equal Love

Dear Problem Ladies:

I can't find the pattern that you were just blogging about. Would you please send me a copy of it so that I can make it myself?

Clarissa

Dear Clarissa:

We can't do that, no matter how much we love that wacky lace bed jacket pattern and want to cover the world in wacky lace bed jackets. It's a form of stealing, not to be too blunt about it. When somebody goes to the trouble of creating a pattern, and a magazine goes to the trouble of printing and distributing it, they're doing a very kind thing: they're giving us cool ideas and instructions. They deserve to make money from this.

Sometimes it feels like we are the last remaining believers in the importance of copyright. Suckers! We're total suckers. We make our kids buy their music on iTunes, not because we're sanctimonious or because we like getting emails alerting us to 99-cent purchases of terrible pop songs. It's just that, if you live in a town like Nashville, where there are hundreds of musicians waiting tables and looking sort of hungry, you feel for them. They're working really hard to create something for us to enjoy. Sure, they're feeding their souls by writing tender ballads, but they're not feeding their faces. They deserve to get something back from us, money, in particular. Liking a band on Facebook is one thing, but paying them for their work is the ultimate indicator of admiration. We feel that knitting designers are likewise worthy of our dollar-based love.

Think of it as love. You're giving little, limited-edition engravings featuring portraits of dead presidents to the people who add to the fun of that thing we love to do. "I love your wacky bed jacket pattern: here's six bucks of love."

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The Most Burning Question of All

Dear Problem Ladies:

Toe-up or top-down for socks?

Patty

This is such a litmus test, such a measure of human nature. Working a sock from the toe-up suggests that you know how to do Judy's Magic Cast-on or otherwise begin a sock from pure nothingness. You are a magician. Top-down tells the world that you are either a) confident that you have assessed your yarn needs for this sock or b) don't really give a crap whether you have enough yarn to finish the sock or not. The pragmatism of a toe-up sock is appealing: by ending up there at the cuff, you can complete a sock with a shorter or longer cuff depending on how much yarn you have. Truly, though, when does a person start a sock these days with a mysterious amount of sock yarn that may or may not be enough to complete two entire socks? Everybody in the world has bales of sock yarn clogging up their drawers. We're all lousy with sock yarn. We think this scenario is baloney. We've never come across a person limping along in an incomplete top-down sock with their toes poking out.

We are not prolific sock knitters, at all. One of us never makes them; the other has a tired Ziploc bag in her car at all times with a chronically unfinished sock at the ready for emergency knitting situations when no other knitting is available. Three socks in four years may be the number of socks coming from that effort. That sock is always a top-down sock, because it's the only pattern she knows.

It seems that most avid sock knitters get to the point that they'll knit any kind of a sock: top-down, toe-up, or even diagonal if you're Cat Bordhi. Our conclusion: knit them all. There is no bad sock.

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