

New Nonfiction from Sari Fordham: “Mending”

Our pre-WWII house has two small bedrooms, a tiny closet in each. I feel virtuous when I fit my clothing into one, leaving my husband Bryan’s clothes to migrate between our daughter Kai’s closet and the hall’s. Once upon a time, an American family fit easily into this house. Perhaps they even kept a car in the garage.

I buy *The Life-Changing Magic of Tidying Up* by Marie Kondo with the intention of paring down my belongings to their essential. I donate and donate. I learn to fold my clothes into origami shapes, but the deeper lesson, to accumulate less, is a harder one to master. Never before in human history have so many beautiful things cost so little. We can’t seem to resist. When the poppies bloom, Kai runs out to pick the prettiest ones. She’s indifferent to their fates—a swift wilting in jam jars of water—because it is the acquisition that fills her heart with joy. I feel the same thrill when the dress I ordered arrives in the mail.

The actual cost is in Bangladesh, where the dress is sewn by women earning too little. Count also the water used to grow the cotton, the pesticides sprayed onto the plants, the insects killed by the pesticides, the dyes thrown into a river, the coal or gas powering the factory, the energy spent on transportation, the plastic the dress is wrapped in, the box used to mail it to me, the tree the box came from. The clothing industry accounts for eight percent of greenhouse gases.

When my favorite pair of jeans gets a hole, I fold them into an origami rectangle and perch them in the back of the drawer. Jeans are the staple of my teaching wardrobe, but I draw the line at worn out knees. One must have standards. I would toss

them, but they have been kind to my post-baby body.

Enter mending and Sashiko stitching. Without the stunning picture—white circles stitched onto navy fabric—I wouldn't have clicked on the how-to article. In the *Little House* books, Mary mended, while Laura explored the prairie. I never wanted to be Mary. Yet here I am, intrigued by the artistry and simplicity of fixing your own clothes.

I borrow a book on visible mending from the library, and Bryan volunteers a pair of his old jeans for the patch. When I invite friends to a mending party, they're enthusiastic. Mending! How quaint! They do not, however, bring clothes to fix—because who mends anymore?—but they bring other tasks and we talk and laugh and when everyone leaves, I'm still mending. I'm enchanted with my progress, which is slow. When the patch is finally finished, the jeans look better than they did when they were new. The stitches travel boldly across one leg and are visually interesting. The reward circuit of my brain, the one activated by pretty things, is pleased with this outcome. More pleased, even, than when buying something new.



Mended socks, by Sari Fordham

I become the house mender, a position I hadn't realized our family needed. I fix the hole in Kai's sweater and then embroider a heart on it. When the dog chews our couch cushion, I announce that I can mend it. The couch is brown, and I first sew as much of the tear together as I can with matching thread. Then I use red fabric for the patch, and red thread to sew it into place. I am satisfied with my choices, which is fortunate since the dog chews another hole in the couch. He does this five times before we wise up and buy bitter tasting spray. Then, I mend the hole the dog chews in Kai's bedspread. I mend Kai's stuffed snail. I mend Bryan's shirt. I mend a second pair of my jeans. I mend my sweatpants. And then, I get serious: I start darning socks.

I have purchased a vintage Speedweaver on eBay and wonder aloud

if mending is just another excuse to buy things. "If you use it, it's not," Bryan says. The 1950s Speedweaver is a tiny loom that makes darning faster and more aesthetically appealing. Though measuring quickness is relative. "I don't know why it's called speedy," Kai says. "If it were really speedy, it would work like this," and she makes gestures that remind me of an electronic typewriter.

"It's okay to be slow," I tell her.

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I'm darning at a time when humanity has both slowed down and gotten busier. The pandemic has arrived in the United States. Everyone I know is baking bread. I repair socks. I have a pile with holes. In the evening, hands busy with darning, I call my friend Youngshil in South Korea and we first gossip about old friends and then we sit with our fears. What do you say? Well, we say a lot. We compare our worries and the responses of our respective countries. "After this is over," she says.

"Yeah," I say. "You've got to come visit."

When I hang up, I feel hopeful, grounded by a web of connections. It's the same web that makes things like viruses spread faster and the planet heat up. Connectivity is vice and salvation. Bryan and I have joined our local branch of 350.org. We're learning the granular details of legislative bills, making phone calls, writing letters, meeting representatives, and amplifying the efforts of environmentalists in other places. If the Earth is to avert disaster, systems must transform. Climate change is a global problem and we can only fix it together.

I repair a hole in the heel of my sock and understand how trivial my efforts are. Okay, do this because it feeds your creativity. Do this to remember the nobility of small things. I thread the needle again, and pull the thread through the colorful fabric of my sock. I tell Bryan that I'm preparing

for the apocalypse, and without irony, he nods.