Endless Knots

By Jessica Lipnack

I was born to knit. Learned at my mother’s fingers when I was small, a long yarn stringing me to my foremothers in the White Russian shtetls. By eight, I was fabricating wardrobes for my Ginny dolls.

Hard by the Gestetner machine some years later, I was printing broadsides against the Vietnam War when, contrary to my will, my eyes fixated on the McCall’s Needlework that my Italian tutor hadn’t meant to leave behind.

That could be me, I thought, when I saw the young woman on the cover in a stunning black-and-white Norwegian tunic. Her long dark hair was pulled back in a barrette, much like mine, except hers was bouffant and sleek and mine was frizzy and disheveled.

The sweater, requiring the embroidering of twenty colors into its cuffs and hem, symbolized everything I believed in: hard work, intercultural communication, and hooking the guy on the other side of the Gestetner.

Oxford, England, had a fine yarn shop near my college.

“Mm, isn’t that lovely?” the proprietor remarked when I showed her the picture. “May I ask?” she said most doubtfully. “Do you knit?”

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Perhaps I didn’t look the type, but with me pawing through bins, smoothing yarn through my fingers like a practiced wool-worker, she soon was showing me how to knit “the other way.” With Eastern European hands, I knit Continental, perfect for one-color, simple patterns, and the lazy: small motion makes the stitch. The right-hand needle loops under a stitch on the opposite one, pulling the yarn through with the least possible expenditure of energy. A tiny gesture, yes, but executable at the speed of light; once you get going, you don’t even have to look. When you add a second (or third, fourth, or fifth) color, you need more hands—or to knit the other way. Known as British or American, it’s reputed to be the more modern way, and if that means more carpal tunnel, then it’s delivered on its promise. Each stitch requires heaving yarn from needle to needle, considerably more work.

Which this sweater was. I had to carry two colors across an ornate pattern, meaning I had to knit both ways at once. (Daunting, I thought at the time, but doable.)

All I had to do was knit continuously in the round with perfectly even tension and never lose my place. (This may be trouble.)

To attach the sleeves, I’d have to take shears to my nearly-two yards of exquisite handwork then trust that I could sew it back together without unraveling. The word for this procedure didn’t ease my fear: steeking. (I’m in over my head.)

And, as I descended into the trance that is knitting, I was troubled by its overtaking me. Why was I knitting? (Oh, no, I dropped a stitch in the last row.)

What was the All of Knitting? More than a sweater operating here, that was certain. (Was it the last row or the one before?)
I toyed with the relationship between life and knitting. If I could just follow a pattern, then would something of beauty evolve? (I can’t tell which row.)

Or was each stitch connected to all others, a metaphor for existence itself, its weave so intricately strung that a single dropped stitch in twenty thousand could imperil it? (Oh, god, I just wrecked this.)

That it gave me order in the chaos touching down outside my life? My fellow anti-war activists had blocked the Bodleian Library, swamped the fountains in Trafalgar Square, completely shut down Paris, and I was knitting a sweater from McCall’s. (I may have to take all of this knitting out.)

Had not the sheep from whose coat the wool had come drunk water from the Thames, a tributary of the Rhine thirty million years ago, and thus wasn’t the whole of life right there in my hands? (I have to rip out everything and start over.)

Overwhelmed at times with the enormity of such ponderings, not to mention mistakes, I nonetheless made room for my growing masterwork in my backpack and went about my life in the ancient citadel of learning—knitting.

Tolkien’s son was explaining the descendence of his father’s characters from personages in Norse mythology; I was knitting. I had to put down my needles to accept a port from Mr. Small (which he was), the head of my college, after dinner in the JCR (I never saw the inside of the Senior Common Room). At Long John’s in Little Clarendon, I sipped a dark cuppa, read the International Herald Tribune—and knit.

I was walking to a stop-the-war meeting, knitting, when I stumbled into a newspaper box where 72-point type yelled, “Che Killed in Auto Crash.” What was Che
doing in a car, I wondered, driving to a restaurant? I read again. "Che Kille in Armed Clash." My twisted mind.

When the Gestetner machine guy asked for fundraising ideas at the anti-war meeting, I piped up: "How about a bake sale?"

"Great idea," he smiled. "Let's talk after the meeting."

Knitting, baking, wondering where a revolutionary goes for a really good meal—was I really pathetic or had my strange ways already gotten me what I wanted?

Working feverishly through the Tet Offensive and LBJ's decision not to run again, I finished the body and sleeves, then turned to the felt cuffs and hems. I embroidered the flowery McCall design for a few inches but its ontology just didn't work. I needed to endow my edges with the meaning the times demanded.

Here's where my now-boyfriend came in handy. A genuine Fulbright scholar (I'd taken a look at the Rhodesies, that clean-cut lot, then moved right along to the zanier Fulbrights, who weren't afraid to protest the war), he was writing, sometimes automatically, he said, his dissertation on Thomas Hobbes's metaphysics. This required his inventing a new math, which he thought might work on my sweater. He'd arrayed his equations across the color spectrum, revealing astonishing patterns like those from a lost civilization. I got the meaning-fraught designs I needed for my edges and, clearly, I'd found someone as peculiar as myself. Thus was born the relationship for which I remain forever grateful to the Fulbright Commission in London.

I worked at a breath-taking clip and my sweater was finished before the end of term. It was a phenome. I was on my way to yet another protest march in London when a representative of Stamp and Company, Fine Tailors, Oxford, appeared at my dorm, for the first of many meetings.
Mr. Stamp wanted me to develop what we now call a label. We tried for a long time to make it work but, in the end, Stamp and Company realized they were really a fine tailor not a knittery and I remembered I was a 20-year-old American on my junior year abroad studying Elizabethan drama.

The year passed and soon I was back in America, as the Brits call it, out of college with nothing but sweaters to show for it. All I wanted was to knit, but, alas, I had to eat.

Thus I taught myself programming. I’d always been good with languages—knitting is just another language that speaks through needles (k1, pss0, k2tog)—so learning BASIC wasn’t much of a stretch.

When I bought my first computer (Wang 600 Advanced Programmable Calculator, b. 1971, d. 1972, $4400, 2K), I was hooked: I’d write a line of code, knit a row, rewrite a couple lines, take out a few more rows. When voice recognition (not to mention speakerphones) arrived, I was in knitter’s heaven.

Before long, I gained a little market buzz through word-of-mouth. Though my handle in the industry, “The Knitter,” was a bit obvious for my taste, I couldn’t argue with my projects: They took me to Japan, Cork, and the Blue Mountains west of Sydney. Everywhere I went—whether to China to localize a new Apple product or to Houston to install enterprise software at an oil company—I met knitters.

“I was knitting my first grandchild’s afghan when my husband died,” the woman next to me on the Bangkok-Katmandu flight said when I whipped out my needles. “It really got me through my grief.” (Oh, for those innocent days when everyone trusted knitters.)
“I taught my wife to knit and it saved our marriage,” my mechanic, intent on saving my bright-red VW bug from the junkyard, told me over a blown engine.

To knit in public is to walk a puppy. Everyone stops you. I kept a small book in my yarn bag for such occasions where I jotted down messages people conveyed in the name of knitting. Here too did I record my own investigations into the nature of connectedness begun in Oxford, to which Gestetner Man contributed his observations.

By the end of the 1970s, I had enough material for a book. I knew a good knitter on West 58th in New York who also was a literary agent; he loved my work; and, in 1982, an old-name New York house published *Endless Knots: The Connection Begins*, presaging by twenty years the new wave of knitters, mixing patterns, technique, and ruminations on life. (“You do knit British, don’t you?” my publisher asked me at the launch party, revealing both his orientation and his not having read my book.)

*Endless Knots* proved an enormous boost to my earning potential, not through royalties, no, no, but rather through the consulting that comes along with writing about anything practical. My writing, my programming, my readers, and, oh, yes, my obsession with knitting…well, I was ready for what was to come.

With the buoyancy my history afforded, I joined the run for the gold in the late ’90s and started my own dot-com: I was passionate about my business, unlikely as its subject was for potential backers to comprehend, and I had eyeballs, as they said way back then.

Tens of thousands subscribed to my now-online newsletter started in the early ’80s and originally sent by mail (on reflection, how quaint) for my *Endless Knots* readers.
With my friend, Lisa, another long-term yarn-slinger, I had founded the Electronic Knitters Association, kicked off in the mid-80s with a face-to-face meeting in a Soho loft. My quarter-century-old specialty mail-order business, selling fine yarn from Oxfordshire, lent itself to online merchandising.

Besides, I knew many players in the computer industry from all my years of programming, and, lucky me, Gestetner Man and I finally had landed along Boston’s famed “Technology Highway,” Route 128, in walking distance of Aesop’s Bagels in Lexington, Massachusetts, where, as one investor whispered conspiratorially to me over an everything-bagel-with-a-schmeared-of-chive-cheese, “At least $2 billion in deals have gone down here.”

“Gee,” I replied sheepishly. “We moved here because it’s in walking distance of my favorite yarn shop.”

My dot-com vision was grand: to be the global virtual hub (high investor appeal) for all things knitting (market appeal)—everything from yarn, patterns, art, literature, and philosophy to online courses and interactive software. We’d host web seminars with the titans, so to speak, of knitting, sponsor global conversations among knitters, convene the annual face-to-face congress. Our unique software, incorporating my patent-pending method for knitting both ways at once, would become the global gold standard for the craft, transcending differences in knitting styles, cultures, and organizations.

There was much to do to achieve lift-off. The agonizing decision to stare down my capitalistic impulses and go for a .com rather than a .org was only the first of many painful ones. Next came securing an uncontested domain name for my website. Endlessknots.com was already taken by an
online Tibetan Buddhist emporium. I tried the singular, endlessknot.com. Taken. On and on until I finally had to settle on end-lessknot.com, which, as a literature major, has irked me ever since.

Next hiring. I assumed I could be CEO. I mean, I was. It was my idea, my customers, my business.

“You can’t be the CEO,” Bagel Boy said. “You’re just a knitter.” If I wanted investors, he said, I’d have to hire a professional business person. O.K. CEO, formerly a consultant, hired.

“Is a consultant a professional business person?”

Bagel Boy’s jaw dropped at my naïveté. Next, CFO. And so it went down a long line of chiefs, not a one of whom knew a knit from a purl. Never mind that they couldn’t cast on if their lives depended on it (knitting has so many metaphors for life).

I thought the chiefs would do the fundraising after they’d written the new business plan but I was wrong. The CEO came in late one morning with a very sad face. He pushed his chair back from our leased conference table and rested his elbows on his knees, chin in his palms.

“I’ve got to tell you something,” he said. I could tell by his tone I didn’t want to hear it. Had he raided our coffers? Given our plans to our competitors? Embarrassed us before potential investors? ‘I’m blocked.” He spoke with such great pathos that I thought I should call a pastor. “I can’t get past the third paragraph. I think it’s my psyche.”

He just couldn’t write the plan, he said, and asked if I had anything in my psyche that would prevent me from doing so. I was thinking about the payroll, which had grown quite large by now, and, no, I was worried about our fiscal situation not my psychic one. I wrote the plan and went out fundraising alone. (I preferred the chiefs not
come after an investor told me to never come back until I got rid of the CEO.)

You read all these stories about deals breaking over bread. Money raising is meal-intensive, the real hunger never satisfied, I suppose. I did eat a lot but it was not pleasant. The first “angel” investor, as the ilk is known, and a number after him, leaned over as I was about to begin my breakfast pitch (they tend to squeeze a lot in before the market opens), and said earnestly, “Why don’t you give me what I like to call your ‘elevator speech’?” He hooked the air and sat back all smug with himself, thumbs in his underarms, because he’d come up with a catchy new phrase.

Another guy who’d just been on the cover of Business Week as le me plus altra of venture capital arrived an hour late for our meeting. He picked up my business plan, elbowed the guy next to him, pointed, laughed, threw my vision on the table, and left. Another made such strange faces during my pitch that I thought he might be having a heart attack (on reflection, likely gas).

Net gain from taking these meetings? About five pounds.

Meanwhile, quite apart from my own pursuits, knitting took off, proclaimed variously as the new yoga, the new black, the new way to “create abundance through its powers of concentration.” Everyone was suddenly knitting, many of them “again.” Ever attuned to monetary policy as expressed through the markets, entrepreneurs flooded in, with the VCs right behind, damming them up with their checkbooks.

Securing the first million wasn’t all that tough for anyone in 1999. I was having dinner, of course, when things came together. There we were, a half-dozen trustees from
the board of my alma mater, on life support virtually since I graduated (I, ever the optimist, had joined anyway).

"What do you do?" the retired doctor to my left asked. I was a few sentences into my "corporate mission" (I did learn the lingo from the chiefs, god bless them), when the most jovial among us leapt up. "I want to invest in your company," he said, pulling out his checkbook. He was the lead, others followed, and, by the time the meal was over, I had a quarter million in promises. I loved that old-boy network after all, including, as it did, a couple of those Rhodesies I'd spurned back at Oxford.

A few weeks after the checks for the rest of our first million cleared the bank, the chiefs invited me to a meeting. They'd been "pulling all-nighters," they told me, to develop a "breakthrough vision" for the company. We were going to "reinvent knitting."

They saw "so many possibilities." They'd really "been thinking outside the box." They'd decided that we would become a knitting-machine wholesaler (it goes so much faster with a machine, they said) and they were just about to strike a deal worth several million with one of the big-box companies. We'd have a market cap of $200 million by our IPO, based on their spreadsheets.

I was horrified. Knitting machines? What about the craft, the feeling of fiber as it slides through your fingers? What about the three-needle bind-off? What about all my knitters who wanted to talk to one another online? A deal with Wal-Mart wasn't why I'd gotten into this, I said indignantly. They nodded to one another and looked at me as if I were mad.

The chiefs were sure they were right but my canny investors didn't buy it, sending the re-inventors back to the
drawing boards to develop a "value proposition" more in keeping with the times.

After a few retreats at cushy resorts, the chiefs returned with the "perfect solution," a virtual knitting machine they'd "branded" as VIRTUALKNITTINGMACHINE.COM (one word always to be written in all-caps, they insisted; I tried to explain that capitals, never mind extremely long domain names, were out on the web but alas...). It lets people "take the work out of knitting," they said, quoting what they thought would be a selling point. How little they knew knitters.

People could order a custom version virtually, they said with emphasis, of any sweater in her (the market) choice of color and fabric (mass customization). It required only her scanning a picture of what she wanted, then posting it to our site, along with her measurements.

I had many issues with what they proposed: 1. In the old days—the early 2000s—for most people, posting still involved stamps. 2. No knitters I knew—and I knew plenty—had scanners. 3. Requiring women to upload their dimensions to the Internet—were they insane? Remember: This was back in those innocent days before your social security number was Google-able.

At least their final step, checking out, showed intelligence, ka-ching, however, see below.

We (our website to be precise) would then "interface" (a favorite word of theirs, though sometimes they pronounced it "interfaith") with a virtual knitting factory in India, which would custom-manufacture the design and DHL it back overnight. By the time all was done and paid for, the customer would be out $500. My final quarrel: Not many people I knew were going to pay this much for a sweater, least of all knitters, who could buy the finest yarn for half
the price plus gain the enjoyment of doing the work themselves.

Our dear investors, more impatient by the day, said it was "good enough," asking only that the chiefs work some flash into our website. They wanted to see the sweater "evolve," they said, to raise "customer satisfaction with the online experience." Frankly, much as I respected the funders, I just didn't see the same market they did but what did I know?

It didn't take long before the chiefs burned right through the first million, and, when the first-round money ran out, so did the chiefs. One went on to manage a llama farm, a mistake he didn't catch until someone corrected his spelling. He thought they were Tibetans, having seen our correspondence regarding our domain name with some real lamas; another went back to a website he'd founded, paynoblills.com, his specialty.

Even as my own business drama swirled out of control, the number of dot-coms in service to knitting rose, each with a slightly different slant. One focused on tools only—pins, needles, and cable holders—but no yarn. Another tried to make its kill with a global community of practice for knitters. Again where others saw dollar signs, I was dubious about "the business model," but who was I to argue with capitalists?

Many of these upstart competitors were my old customers, some with the chutzpah to quote me on their websites, implying I'd endorsed them. I didn't really mind, since everyone knew I was the original, or so I thought until I was set straight one day at a second-round fundraising meeting.

The incident did not transpire in fact at a meal. On the contrary, our "hosts" didn't even offer coffee or water,
though they both had drinks. A “venture anarchist,” recently a dancer and young enough to be my daughter, stood in first-position to interrogate me about my business plan, while her “venture mentor” looked on. With that annoying tone of voice that has nothing to do with asking anything, the dancer ventured, “Aren’t you a little late to the party?”

When I related my indignation at the investor’s remarks to Lisa, my devoted old pal from the Electronic Knitters Association, she said, “Did you tell her it’s your party and she’s not invited?” Reason had ruled in the offending moment, though, on the advice of my therapist, who earned much from this encounter, I did leave a blistering voicemail for the venture dancer some weeks later.

Along with so many other fledglings in the year 2000, I was defeated in my second round of funding.

Well, enter the old bromide: Stick to your knitting. I just kept casting on and, truth told, it hasn’t worked out all that badly, even if I have had to forgo cashmere to pay off the lawyers and accountants the long-gone chiefs hired to satisfy the investors (talk about knitting in the round).

Even with its sufferings, end-lessknot.com has remained true to its purpose. My site is the virtual crossroads for knitting, a hub linked to countless others. My method for two-way knitting is available in software. I sponsor global knitalongs, give Master Workshops, consult to the industry, and am designing new software that allows networks of knitters to collaborate.

And I am still standing, OK, sitting, knitting, wondering why this is my life, linking the next stitch to all that have come before.