

Weaving Lessons

by Lory Widmer Hess

I sit next to Luca on the weaving bench, watching as he throws the shuttle, beats, and changes his feet on the treadles. He looks up at me and smiles, patting me on the shoulder. Back to work, then, with a low grunting sound, a sign of contentment. I smile, too, and walk away. All is well in order, and he doesn't need my help.

It wasn't always like this. When I first met Luca, who lives at the residential home for adults with developmental disabilities where I work, there was no smiling, no friendly pats. As I sat with him on the bench, I was more likely to receive a scowl, even a shove. He would go through the weaving motions for a while, then look out the window, or page through a book of pictures I kept nearby for these moments. He might even stick the shuttle in his nose, a move I had to gently discourage, trying to guide him back to the loom.

Someone had taught him the basics, and he could do each step in the process perfectly, but he lost interest easily. His attention slipped, and he'd tangle the thread or do things in the wrong order. My task was to accompany him, watching his every move, encouraging him to keep going when he stopped, reminding him of the next step if he seemed lost. It was tedious, repetitive work that yet required constant alertness, a strain to keep up for over an hour.

I was also nervous and unsure in my relationship with Luca, whom I didn't know well. His scowls and shoves could easily escalate, and he might refuse to do anything at all or decide to grab any papers in sight and scribble on them or rip them up instead. I was anxious about how to keep him on task without making him feel pushed, which inevitably resulted in him pushing back. I started to dread my time in the weavery each day.

How could he enjoy working with me, though, if he sensed that I didn't enjoy working with him? What if my first priority was to make sure he knew I liked him and appreciated what he did? I made sure to greet him cheerfully, to smile, to praise good work, and to treat mistakes with humor instead of dismay. I kept some other task on

hand for the times when Luca was taking a break—something simple that would satisfy my impatience, without being so absorbing that I failed to notice when he was ready.

The smiles and friendly pats started to come. Luca was more content to sit at the loom, and even largely stopped making mistakes. Soon, I didn't have to sit with him anymore, but as I walked around the room, I could feel how the web of connection between us remained. This web is destroyed by impatience, fear, and criticism, but made strong by respect, appreciation, and joy. I was so grateful to Luca for teaching me how to weave this fabric.

Each day in our weavery I am reminded of the threads that bind human beings together and that we can craft into a thing of harmony and beauty or allow to tangle into an inextricable mess. Working with Meret taught me another aspect of this art. In contrast to Luca's silence, she talked constantly. As soon as I made a move toward her loom, she wanted to know if I was going to weave with her, her words tumbling over one another as she repeated them again and again. Calmly, I said that I had other things to do first, and she had her felting to work on. She returned to that task, her excitement still palpable.

Meret's bubbling enthusiasm was wonderful, but it could easily morph into agitation and anger if she felt frustrated. Equally, it could spiral out of control if she was given unbridled license to do whatever she wanted. Her energy had to be tempered, as did Luca's lethargy. The balancing element was a cheerful, positive mood that told her it was okay to wait, that she was seen and heard, but that there were other people who had needs too.

When it was time for me to sit down with Meret at the loom, she burst into a stream of talk again, asking me what I had for lunch, whether my son had gone to school that day, not stopping to listen to an answer before coming out with another question. "Do you want to talk, or do you want to work?" I asked. "Work, work," she responded, and focused on her loom—at least for a few minutes. Seeing the rug she was weaving grow gave her a feeling of pride and accomplishment, and the repeated physical movements helped to calm the rushing flow of her thoughts. Sitting by her side, I noticed how I, too, became grounded and centered through this activity, called back from worry and agitation to the fundamental flow of creation.

I have frequently observed how the rhythm of weaving has a calming and healing effect. One day, another resident, Jan, was having a hard time. He wanted to vacuum the weavery, a favorite task, but one that had to be limited so that others would not be

constantly disturbed. He was very upset about this. Jan is nonverbal, but his anxiety was expressed in worried frowns, hard breathing, and sudden movements. I reminded him that Tuesday and Friday are vacuuming days, and invited him to sit at his loom.

He picked up the shuttle, and soon came into the comforting flow of the familiar pattern: throw, beat, change. At first he'd still stop often to frown at me and make agitated gestures, but after a while his posture relaxed and he even smiled. I smiled, too, grateful once more for the magic of weaving, for the way it can soothe our worried hearts and bring us back to our most joyful, creative selves.

The weaving together of our differing abilities and gifts into a single fabric of humanity reminds me of the qualities of warp and weft. We, the coworkers, are the ones who have to set up and warp the looms, creating a strong, stable structure that requires forethought and precision. But the residents provide the living, rhythmic activity that gives that structure meaning and makes it useful. When both sides are tended to with care, the result is beautiful.

Our individual selves only truly become what they are meant to be when we are in community with one another, when the warp and weft of our bodies and souls find their meaning in working together. Disabled?abled? We are all just elements in one great creative project in which we each have our part to play. When I began this work ten years ago, I had no idea how much cultivating the skill of our hands would teach me about the wisdom of the heart. In that, our residents have been my best and wisest teachers, and I wish everyone could learn from them. Our world would be the better for it.



Lory Widmer Hess found her life transformed when she began working with developmentally disabled adults ten years ago. She now lives with her family in the Jura mountains of Switzerland and is in training as a spiritual director. Her book *When Fragments Make a Whole: A Personal Journey Through Healing Stories in the Bible* will be published in 2024 by Floris Books. Visit her website at enterenchanted.com.