

process or Outcome?

My name is Helen Birmingham. I run a company called Untangled Threads, and I'm happy to be called a Textile Artist, a teacher, a facilitator, a fundraiser .. I can assure you that I've been called worse!

In this session, I'd like to really try to draw down to the nub of why we choose to stitch. We are one of the first generations to have the privilege of being able to just stitch for ourselves. Industrialisation has meant that stitching is no longer a necessity or a chore – it's definitely a choice. Not like in *The Song of the Shirt*, by Thomas Hood written in 1843.

With fingers weary and worn,
With eyelids heavy and red,
A woman sat in unwomanly rags,
Plying her needle and thread—
Stitch! stitch! stitch!
In poverty, hunger, and dirt,
And still with a voice of dolorous pitch,—
Would that its tone could reach the Rich!—
She sang this “Song of the Shirt!”

“Work—work—work,
Till the brain begins to swim;
Work—work—work,
Till the eyes are heavy and dim!
Seam, and gusset, and band,
Band, and gusset, and seam,
Till over the buttons I fall asleep,
And sew them on in a dream!

So why do we choose to stitch? Just for the pleasure in the act of stitching, or to make something, or to communicate something, or to learn something. Are we stitching for the outcome or for the process of stitching? Maybe both. ... we'll come back to that in more detail. Ironically, it might be easier to start with what mindful stitching isn't.

Two things which you'll often hear if you are ever brave enough to sew in public are: 'Ooh, what's that going to be?' and of course the really annoying 'How long did that take?'

My reply 'What's it going to be.. 'it already is. It is a beautiful piece of fabric, and I chose to put some stitches onto it'. And 'how long did it take? - A whole lifetime so far!

Get ready for the comment 'Smart arse' usually said over their shoulder when they are walking away, but I genuinely think that unless you can identify with these answers, you aren't really 'getting' the difference between 'Process or Outcome' nor will you be in a position to fully engage with the concept of mindful stitching.

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and 'How long did it take?' A lifetime so far.

But it might take time to get there. You will probably have to unlearn a lot of stuff first and somehow learn to trust your own inner voice instead. I used to say that a good teacher can show you where to look, but not what to see. As a teacher, I can show you technique, skills, history – teach you the language of communication - but it is not anyone else's place to teach you what you should say or what you should think or even what you should do or feel.

I often think of my father at this point: he was an exceptional teacher, in fact he was a favourite teacher of Dr Alec Jeffries – (the man who went on to discover genetic fingerprinting). My father was inspiring. He had the ability to relate facts and figures and opportunities in ways that made sense. But I think he'd agree, he wasn't a great abstract thinker or innovator but he told a good story, and he did like 'rules'. When I used to question him he would answer that rules were a necessary part of society. 'Of course, you can choose not to follow rules, but if you make that decision, you have to be aware that there are consequences.'

Well, the consequence of not following the rule about the back of your sewing being as neat at the front isn't going to disturb morality or social

harmony, or distinguish virtue from vice. We are talking about you, making a choice to sew your own way.

I have made up a print out, which you can download after this workshop, with some key points and references, so for now it's ok to just listen. You don't need to take notes. But if you've worked with me before and have already mastered the art of stitching and listening at the same time, please feel free to start. I'm going to explain what I think Mindful stitching is about, what it means to me, and then I'll pause and leave space for questions before we stitch together. So, if you are familiar with mindful stitching and you'd like to start stitching, do, and the rest of us will join you in a minute or so.

Mindful stitching is focusing on the activity rather than the visual outcome. By that I mean that you concentrate fully on the needle and thread, and try to clear your mind of all other thoughts. You may find that this is something you already do naturally: it may be the reason that you find comfort and solace in your stitching. You can just focus on the needle rocking backwards and forwards as it passes in and out of the fabric. Notice how the furrows, mounds and patterns begin to form.

I don't use an embroidery hoop for my mindful stitching. I am creating the tension in the fabric with my hands, and that creates a classic 'slow stitched' look, with the fabric puckering slightly in response to the stitches. I certainly don't see this as a fault. I am very happy to embrace it. I find that the puckering is always more noticeable when I'm using straight running stitch, and I love it.

What are the benefits of mindful stitching?

The link between mental health and stitching is by no means a new discovery: stitching is proven to be a means of improving levels of stress, anxiety and depression. The repetitive, rhythmic motions of stitching can create a state which is actually shown to alter brain chemistry; levels of stress hormone, cortisol, reduce when we are focussed on a creative task. Stitching provides a sense of

accomplishment - even if it just a few stitches a day; no matter how slowly, and no matter to what 'standard', the process will give you a sense of development and achievement.

What are the 'rules' of mindful stitching?

Ultimately, there are NO RULES! I find it useful to limit my stitching to several short sessions rather than trying one long marathon; I try to stick to no more than about 10/15 minutes at a time, (but I admit that I do sometimes find it hard to stop, or just don't notice how much time has passed!). If I did want to set myself any 'rules', they would be:

- Find some undisturbed time and a comfortable place to sew.
- Make sure that you relax and loosen your neck and shoulders every couple of minutes.
- Try not to worry about things you wish you'd said or done in the past.
- Or things you wish you hadn't said or done in the past (!)
- Don't worry about what is happening next ... just relax, in the 'now'.

So, let's go right back to the very beginning and ask what do we mean by 'stitch' ? Clare Hunter, in her book 'Threads of Life' puts it more simply and beautifully than I ever could .. so I will read a short passage .. I'll let you know when we might start stitching together, so for now, if you like, close your eyes, and just listen to Clare's words.

Beginning: You cut a length of thread, knot one end and pull the other end through the eye of a needle. You take a piece of fabric and push your needle into one side of the cloth, then pull it out on the other until it reaches the knot. You leave a space. You push your needle back through the fabric and pull it out on the other side. You continue until you have made a line, or curve, or a wave of stitches. That is all there is: thread, needle, fabric and the patterns the thread makes. This is sewing.

And back to me .. I think of it as practising Zen with a needle and thread: a state of calm attentiveness in which your actions are guided by intuition rather than by conscious effort.

It's a form of meditation. It's relaxation therapy, with you as your own guide. It about process, not outcome.

How do I 'feel' the work on an emotional and physical level?

Each time I go back to a piece, I hold it in my hands and try to reconnect with it. I take a long look at what I have already stitched and visualise how I might like to continue. I find it helpful, in the contemplative periods when reconnecting to a piece of work, to let the work suggest a story, a person or an emotion. I try to think about what the work is trying to tell me. It can often be quite a surprise! I let the work take over and try not to fight it. Most of all, I don't unpick any stitches! Instead, I try stitching over them, or adding other layers of fabric on top.

I do find that it is really important not to share my work while it's in progress. Not because I'm being precious, but I am trying to let go of any preconceptions about what it 'should' look like. Remember, mindful stitching is about the activity rather than the outcome.

What different stitches, threads or fabrics do I use?

Look at these samples. You can make a wonderful selection of marks and tones just by using simple stab stitch with different thickness of thread, and different spacing to your stitches. Once again, remember that there are no rules! My personal favourite stitch is bullion stitch and of course the ubiquitous running stitch.

How can you get started?

Of course, with there being no rules, I would say, 'just start!', but I do realise that it's not always easy, especially if you are already a competent stitcher and you need to unlearn all the rules you have spent years mastering.

So those of you who have worked with in the past will already know that it really isn't helpful if I just say 'OK, breathe. Clear your mind. Remember that there are no rules. There is no right or wrong. It's not a competition. Just stitch.' But what is very helpful is to remember that you are stitching as a choice NOT a task.

Most of us need help to learn how to 'clear your mind'. Freedom of expression is something which a lot of us have been taught out of. We have forgotten how to play, and how to trust ourselves. So many times I hear: 'is it ok, if I do this .. am I allowed to do that?. That's the great thing about sewing, you can unpick (but you'll find that you can stitch over the top or you can just learn from it.) This is a poem I wrote:

Mindful stitching offers you a thread ...
just to hold, if that's all you need,
but it is a thread with the potential to connect us
to ourselves and then to weave our threads with others.

If you do decide to take hold of the thread,
take it just for yourself.

It comes with huge benefits and limitless possibilities:
it's up to you where you take it,
I am simply offering you a thread...

... if it ties you down, you can snap it,
or just loosen it if it's too tight.
Let it go completely or leave an anchor stitch,
pick it up again, or just walk alongside it
from a distance.

You may find that you just make frustrating knots.
Those knots have a purpose too;
they can be unpicked with care,
or left as a mark or a scar of experience, and
allow you to move on.

Once you have taken comfortable ownership of the thread,
you might try to weave it with others.
If together we can make fabric,
we will celebrate our connection.
Together.

Taking hold of the thread will give you time.
Time without pressure or competition:

Time to sit
Time to think
Time to imagine
Time to engage
Time to be creative
Time for yourself

The cause of the pressure we put on ourselves and this trend towards lack of belief in yourself is exacerbated by social media and dare I say 'encouraged' by the makers of 'paint by numbers' cross stitch and quilting kits. A whole industry has built up around replication, compliance and standardisation. And it's fine if that is what makes you happy, but I'm guessing the very fact that you are here means you are looking for something else.

I'll now show you some samples of my own mindful stitching and I'll introduce the elephant in the room, how you might find your own solution to the conundrum, and how working as part of a group might help you. More of that later.

I tend to stitch for lots of reasons, but in terms of mindful stitching specifically, I will either sew to take my mind off something, or to deliberately focus my mind on something.

Examples

Now, before we try a little bit of mindful stitching together, as promised, are there any burning questions.

I'll read Clare Hunter's passage again, this time as a series of instructions. And just try to think about your action ... Have your thread, needle and fabric ready ... ok ...?

Beginning: Take a length of thread, knot one end and pull the other end through the eye of a needle. You take a piece of fabric and push your needle into one side of the cloth, then pull it out on the other until it reaches the knot. You leave a space. You push your needle back through the fabric and pull it out on the other side. You continue until you have made a line, or curve, or a wave of stitches. That is all there is: thread, needle, fabric and the patterns the thread makes. This is sewing.

Now, if you can sew and listen at the same time, I'd like you to keep going. Relax. Don't worry if you are doing it right. I just want you to stitch. Your stitches will be unique to you, rather like your own handwriting. Fill the whole of your fabric with stitches. You may find that you naturally work in rows or sections, or you might just be completely random. It's your stitching, do what makes you happy. And while you stitch, I'll talk a bit about what the outcome of stitching has been used for historically: Stitching has so many different functions and outcomes, and of course that Conundrum: when you stitch mindfully, you inevitably still end up with a piece of fabric with some stitches on it, and the question is 'what do you do with it?' I suggest making your own Stitchbook. If you look on the website <https://www.untangledthreads.co.uk/workshop-videos> you will find under Full Course from 2022 a video which shows you the design and construction of a stitchbook page.

When you start to look into the history of stitch, you will find using stitch to dominate or control is a central feature of many narratives. But you will also find that stitch is used for lots of different reasons and outcomes. It can be used to demonstrate technical ability/achievement. Embroidery can demonstrate superiority or wealth, distinction or uniqueness. It can tell stories, record historical events, the list goes on and on.

You might look for a commercial outlet for your stitching - to sell for income, or to donate funds or stitch specific pieces for specific purposes. You might use stitch to create clothing, to make soft furnishings, wall hangings.

But what interests me most of all, is using stitch as a means of direct or indirect communication. Historically this communication was often covert, secret, subversive, a means of protest – a way of having a voice – a voice which maintains a sense of self, the voice of an individual, a cry to be heard and an existence to be recorded in time.

And so to Agnes Richter's Jacket.

There are lots of amazing examples of stitching which has been undertaken whilst in captivity or under detention in asylums, but Agnes' example is somehow very special, and being an item of clothing, I think will speak to you very loudly. It forms the inspiration for my next collaborative project, which I will introduce to you soon. Sewing can be unobtrusive. As we have shown today, it can be done in company and still allows the stitcher to take part in conversation. It can be done secretly, and of course, if necessary, it can be easily hidden. Covert stitching can offer a huge sense of independence and freedom of thought.

Agnes Richter was a seamstress. Tiny in stature, with a hunchback. She was born in 1844 and was admitted to Heidelberg Mental Institution in 1893 suffering with schizophrenia. The jacket is the only remaining item

of her clothing (although she was thought to have stitched onto all of her undergarments and the rest of her clothing too) The jacket is housed in The Prinzhorn Collection in Heidelberg.

It is made from brown wool and coarse linen with embroidery stitched in red, yellow, blue, orange and white thread, on both the inside and the outside. The jacket's seams are facing outwards and the sleeves are attached the wrong way round, so that they face the back. The sweat stains on the lining and the shoulder seams don't match, so it is assumed that Richter turned the torso of the jacket inside out at a later date, so the embroidery would no longer be legible on the outside, and that she could begin stitching again.

The jacket has layer upon layer of embroidered text, some which has been worn away completely, and most of the words are illegible. Some phrases can be deciphered though. One reads poignantly 'I plunge headlong into disaster'. She stitched her words onto a jacket she had made herself and fitted to her own deformity and it is complete with sweat stain and smells. It is a significant and emotional object which was an important form of self expression for Agnes. In the jacket's darts and stains are genetic evidence of her body and in the embroidery are her words. And yet, it's ironic that the largely indecipherable text keeps her secrets, locked inside, confined and restrained.

I have made several pieces of work which feel important to me, inspired directly by Agnes's Jacket and I'd like to share 2 of them with you. Poem stitched deliberately when waiting which is ultimately about my mother. and Maternal Palimpsest – which is about my relationship with my daughter.

So that brings me onto my new project, and my request for stitchers to help me.

Process or Outcome? This project aims to create a collaborative artwork which promotes 'stitch' as a means of encouraging mindfulness. Its secondary aim is to focus attention on the danger of devaluing the tangible outcome of therapeutic stitching by viewing it purely in terms of the level of craftsmanship achieved. The true value may lie within the act of creation.

It is hoped that upwards of 500 participants will stitch two Hundertwasser-inspired motifs onto sections from a decommissioned WW2 Italian Army blanket. (each 8cm x 10cm) When completed, the sections will be returned to Untangled Threads, and will ultimately be combined to create two tailored, 'hand embroidered trench-coats', which will stand facing each other in an exhibition setting.

What I am asking you to do may initially feel like a contradiction: I am asking you to work intuitively, but at the same time I am giving you incredibly tight boundaries with fixed instructions. I am asking you to trust the process, and at this stage, let me worry about the outcome.

I would like you to focus simply on the process of stitching. DON'T OVERTHINK IT. If you can, treat this as an opportunity to relax, to enjoy the motion of the needle and thread; let your stitches form waves and patterns which are only considered by you in the moment. The marks you make will ultimately be unique to you (like your own signature), but in order to maintain some cohesion and consistency in the final outcome, I am asking you to stitch within some very strict guidelines.

You will see that a lot of decisions have already been made for

you ... (fabric, thread, colours, even the overall structure of the design using iconography from Hundertwasser's designs) ... but the stitches themselves are in your control. Within the context of the project, at this stage, you don't need to know that together we will be creating a visual metaphor for concealed emotions, covert messages, 'the hidden thread'. You just need to stitch.

When your 2 sections of stitching are complete, you will be asked to sew a black felt dot onto the front, and attach a paper label to the back using bondaweb and a muslin cover. Full instructions for this are in the instruction leaflet and in the accompanying video.

Each coat will contain one section of blanket from each participant. Even though the coats will have been stitched by the same hands and they will have been created from the same construction techniques and materials, one of the coats will be made with the 'right side' visible, whilst the other will have the 'wrong side' showing.

By using Hundertwasser's iconography and the psychological interpretation of Agnes Richter's jacket, this piece of work will look at ideas around evolution, connections, memory, heredity, cognition and emotional intelligence. The 'fingerprint' of each participant will also be highlighted. In forensic terms, the discovery of genetic fingerprinting in 1984, had a profound influence on our understanding of how the physical trace of contact is left behind. Every contact leaves a trace (discovered by Dr Alec Jeffries (remember) one of my father's students).

So that's me done. Don't forget that you can download an approximate transcript of this talk from my website, which will contain details of my inspirations and how you can get involved in my project.

Any questions: untangledthreads@aol.com

www.untangledthreads.co.uk

www.helenbirmingham.com

Readings from: Threads of Life by Clare Hunter
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The Song of the Shirt
by Thomas Hood

<https://www.untangledthreads.co.uk/workshop-videos>

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