

# Learning to Sew

December 30, 2004

A few days ago, I taught myself how to sew. Unlike some members of my household, I already knew the basics of hand sewing. I could return a button to its rightful place, or a near approximation at least. I could darn a sock or fix a hem – although I rarely do.

I went down to our basement and did something I've been thinking about for over a year now. I plucked a sewing machine from a shelf in the basement, expecting great weight and surprised at how light it was. Next to it was a cardboard box, originally from Amazon.com, loosely taped and with a note on top in my father's handwriting: for the sewing machine.

I brought the sewing machine upstairs and set it on my kitchen table, pulling off the white cover, a silly thing, like a tarp. This is my mother's sewing machine.

When my mother died, there was no will, so none of us officially inherited anything. Not too long ago, we divided up some of the major pieces of jewelry – her engagement ring, wedding ring, etc. – and left the rest to be divided at another time. I got the ring we gave my mother for her 60<sup>th</sup> birthday, a mixture of yellow and white gold studded with tiny diamonds. When we gave it to her, I said, "That's a beautiful ring. Can I have it when you croak?" We had laughed at that.

The ring, however, was on her finger for less than three weeks before it came into my possession and the truth is, it's probably not something I'll wear except for special occasions. (See above note about hemming – I'm obviously not a very put-together person.)

This sewing machine was something my mother really loved. She was good at sewing – not an expert, but she could (and did) churn out curtains and valances for her grandchildren's bedrooms and the windows in her house with great ease. She had learned to sew when she was quite young.

I was completely absorbed in learning how to make this machine function. I came across a package of unopened sewing machine needles and it stopped me in my tracks. I realized that my mother must have bought these needles at some point, maybe at JoAnn Fabrics or Wal-Mart, with future projects in mind. She must have bought them thinking that there would be future projects. That there would be a future.

Never would it have occurred to her as she selected these tiny objects and placed them in her basket that it would be me opening them, months and months later, as I wrestled with a sewing machine she had great ease with. None of us could have predicted this. And so I wept when I saw them because it is the smallest things that will bring you to your knees.

I wrestled with the bobbin and the bobbin case, with winding the thread through what seemed like an unbelievable number of nooks and crannies. I fiddled with all kinds of knobs I knew nothing about, guessing at settings, afraid to even open the Pandora's Box of learning what needles size, what tension, what stitch spacing worked with my practice fabric. I didn't even know what my practice fabric was.

I found myself thinking that if my mother were alive, I could have asked her what all of these things meant. I could have asked her to help me guide the thread. But the truth is that even if she had been alive, I wouldn't have asked for her help. I would not have given her the satisfaction of acknowledging that I needed her, perhaps because I knew that she did not really need me.

If she were alive, I thought, I would still be muddling through this on my own, insisting on learning by trial and error rather than having the patience to look up the information. But it's a trick question because if she were alive, I wouldn't be doing this. I wouldn't be learning to sew. I wouldn't be trying to understand this thing she did, effortlessly it seemed, my entire life.