

# Warp Thread

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Mom and I breathed deeply four times in the cool shadow of Table Mesa. In the distance, a worn road led southward through the Navajo reservation and northward to Shiprock, New Mexico. The white tips of Dibe Nitsaa, Mount Hesperus, the sacred mountain of the North, whispered above. We stretched our arms into a sky as turquoise as the stone in the necklace Mom made me. *Father Sky*. Swollen gray clouds drifted slowly by. Then we folded ourselves in two; our fingertips brushed the red soil swirling about our feet. *Mother Earth*. Mom's eyes remained closed as she inhaled one more time and brought her arms to her chest, the way she normally embraced me with all her might. I wanted to melt there but instead I stood awkwardly beside her, trying to mime a graceful pattern of arm and leg movements that resembled Tai Chi. We faced East (thinking), then South (planning), West (living), and North (wisdom).

Her short black hair settled into a curly halo around her beautiful round face, now unbelievably serene compared to moments earlier when she had slammed her hand-carved weaving fork on the table and said, "Your Rez Mom sucks at this."

"Me, too," I'd confessed. Our placemat-sized rugs continued to turn into hourglass shapes, no matter how many times we warned each other to think "loose."

A few feet away from our meditation, five Caucasian women sat Indian style on tarps or folded Pendleton blankets. Before them, their looms displayed nearly finished rugs, which would soon win awards. Mothers, wives, grandmothers—all of them set aside these roles for five days to camp with no electricity or water on Master Weaver Sarah Natani's ranch. The desert wind tangled wisps of blond and sandy brown hair loose from traditional Navajo

buns at the base of their necks. The sun baked their skin. Stray dogs dozed on their laps. Ants about the length of fingernails scuttled between their toes. Odors of sheep and llama dung wafted from the corrals a few feet away. But they didn't care. They appeared more authentic as Navajo weavers than Mom and I, weaving comfortably air-conditioned within the Natani home. And then, because we stayed at a hotel for the sake of my two-year-old daughter who spent our class time in a Shiprock daycare, we rolled in late every morning with cups of Starbucks steaming in our hands.

I wondered what the other weavers thought about us, especially when Mom, who was the only student of Navajo heritage, had to weave with rubber gloves because the yarn irritated her skin. Mostly, they kept a respectful distance, maybe because we called Sarah Natani, Shinaali' (paternal Grandmother). Mom's paternal grandfather's clan, Bit'ahni or Folded Arms People, is a sister clan to Sarah Natani's maternal clan, Hooghan lani or Many Hogans.

Everyone probably thought I was Navajo too, because I shared Mom's skin and hair color.

My expression of K'é (a Navajo tradition of introducing oneself through kinship terms), which I usually stumbled through clumsily, goes something like this: "I was born in Raleigh, North Carolina, to Auxilia Chow of Shanghai, China, and John Hsu of Anhui, China. My Chinese name means Fragrant Grass. Ursula Knoki-Wilson of the Táchii'nii, or Red-Running-into-Water People, Clan adopted me after Mā Ma died of liver cancer. My Navajo name means Journey with Caring or Journey to Bring out Gifts."

The hot desert air seared my lungs and I began to sputter. Mom winked at me and threw her hands into a sky that was supposed to swallow our sorrows, but I couldn't concentrate. No matter how much Mom loved me like the daughter she never had and tried to caulk the cracks in my grieving heart, I have always felt untethered. I could relate to something Shinaali' Sarah's best student had said when she refused a Navajo man's commission to weave a Navajo rug for him: "Oh no! I'm white. I can't. It's not right."



Shinaali' Sarah was sitting in front of my loom when Mom and I finished our breathing exercise. The rhythmic patting of my Navajo weaving fork against the yarn in my loom reverberated off the walls. Whamp. Whamp. Whamp.

The afternoon sun streamed through a window in the ceiling, spotlighting a coal-burning stove that occupied the center of a Hogan-shaped room cluttered with couches and an assortment of looms. The largest loom, commanding the room's attention, displayed a commissioned piece worth \$6,000. Shinaali' Sarah claimed that the design had no special meaning, but I could see arrowheads within the bands of red and blue geometric shapes, which made me wonder whether the buyer needed protection. A portion of the displayed rug had already been rolled under the loom, while the rest towered several feet above my head. Four of the eight walls to this room had doors that led to additional rooms, so that an aerial view of the home looked like a cross.

Mom and I approached our looms, which had been set up on a low table beside a life-sized oil painting of Shinaali' Sarah and her husband, a traditional healer I invited to speak at a conference years ago. The first time I set eyes on this pair holding hands over breakfast, I remember telling my husband, "I hope we always love each other in this way."

Shinaali' Sarah smiled; the crinkles at the edge of her mouth accentuated a face loved by a lifetime of sun and wind. Her eyes were not those of an 80-year-old woman, but the kind that enjoyed motorcycle rides at sunset.

"Very good," Shinaali' Sarah said to me. "I just fixed your crossed warp thread." She handed me the batten, a flat piece of wood tapered at the ends for easy maneuvering between the warp threads. Her silver buckle clinked as she stood up. "Also, remember not to leave your batten in the loom. It stretches your warp threads and some people believe it brings bad luck."

No wonder, I thought. My day had begun with a phone call from my husband about our brand new car requiring major repairs. Near the end of her life, Ma Ma attributed her illness to all kinds of superstitions. She had me convinced that it was safer to believe than ignore such warnings.

The traders we visited during the workshop told stories about blind, diseased, or deceased weavers who had broken weaving taboos and disrespected Grandmother Spider Woman (a Holy person who taught Weaving Woman how to weave, and she in turn taught the Navajos). It has been easy to attribute all the bad luck in my life following this weaving workshop to taboos. Even now, five years later, heirloom necklaces that belonged to Ma Ma will spontaneously break on my neck, spilling beads in random directions. An earring I wear will almost always lose its pair before the evening

ends. To this day, I'm still discovering weaving taboos my daughter or I unknowingly broke: do not go between the poles of a loom when a rug is being woven because you will cause evil; do not let the loom of the weaving stand too long or it will tire and hurt you; do not make fun of your weaving or it will get worse and you will be poor.

Shinaali' Sarah patted me on the shoulder as if she understood my angst and warmed me with a smile. Months before the workshop, she had lost her husband to the same disease of which Mā Ma died. A long Navajo skirt swooshed about her ankles as she walked over to inspect Mom's loom. As they began conversing in Navajo, I sat down in front of my loom and stared at the thin warp threads, which function like bones in flesh.

We had devoted a full day to the process of setting up the warp threads. After all, if you don't get the structure and tension right, everything you hang on it falters.

I glanced at the wall where an ancient clock ticked noisily away. In a few hours, we would be wrapping up the last day of a workshop that I realize now I had weighted with unrealistic expectations.

Ten years prior to the workshop, I had the chance to move to the Rez, live with Mom, facilitate a partnership between traditional healers and Western practitioners at Chinle Comprehensive Health Care Facility where Mom works, and learn how to weave from Mom's mother. Jobs, marriage, children, life got in the way, so much in the way that I only see Mom once every two to three years for just a few precious days. When Mom's mother died, I signed us up for this workshop. I hoped weaving would ease Mom's grief and my regret that rankled on those despairing nights when I felt that I had turned down the wrong path and couldn't find my way back to that crucial crossroad. I've always wondered if that missed opportunity resulted in my drift, unanchored to a place or culture. Neither an outsider nor an insider.

On the surface, the workshop satisfied a mother–daughter bond. We celebrated Mother's Day and Mom had a chance to meet her granddaughter for the first time. The artist in us both (Mom comes from a long line of weavers and my bloodline is seeped with painters and photographers) thirsted for this knowledge: a master weaver willing to share techniques and cultural wisdom normally privileged for her descendants, because she believes, despite much controversy, that the Navajo weaving tradition will die if it is not passed on, regardless of ethnicity.

Raging beneath all of this ran a desire I'm embarrassed to admit. A craving that began with Mā Ma's death and was amplified by the birth of my daughter into a desperate hunger to belong to something wise and ancient, bled in streambeds, trapped in rock layers, eroded in the earth.

I never told my husband I spent \$150 on a tension cord Shinaali' Sarah braided from raw wool that she had sheared, cleaned, carded, spun, and dyed from her own livestock. I had to own this itchy cord that reeked of llama, which so far has served one brief role: stretching my warp threads tight on the only rug I've ever woven. I am not sure if it was because the tension cord in its unique braiding of white, gray, and dark brown yarn made my loom look more authentic than the bleached machine-made cord from Wal-Mart I used for the first few days of the class. Or maybe I romanticized the cord, believed that it represented lightning and embodied the legend of Grandmother Spider Woman, so that purchasing this tension cord might be the closest I could come to claiming the Navajo culture as my own. It seemed to make sense in a metaphoric way that I possessed something born and bred and crafted on the Rez.

But no matter what I bought or how much I concentrated at this workshop, I felt like I learned little. After all, Shinaali' Sarah had said, "Weaving is more than just an art or craft. It is a way of life, essential to the Navajo culture."

How do you learn a way of life in five days? Was it "wrong" for me to root for a culture I wasn't born with? Did anyone else feel this way?

In later years, the other workshop attendees, many of whom have returned year after year to the ranch, emailed comforting words, confirming that I was not alone in these desires. But in that moment, only my loom listened. Mom had told me once that the loom is supposed to tell you what to do. It's supposed to relax you.

Feeling isolated from the other weavers outside and with Mom laughing at something Shinaali' Sarah said, I stared at my Ganado Red: a rug pattern developed in Mom's hometown. Our Ganado Reds would share the typical black border filled with a red background. For her central design, Mom decided to try a gray and white diamond, which required a complicated weaving of diagonals. I chose the Spider Woman cross, not only because it is easy for a beginner to create but also because I liked the multitude of meanings bestowed in this symbol.

The cross can bring the blessing of rain. The number four is sacred and represents the sacred stones (abalone, turquoise, white shell, and jet), the sacred plants (corn, squash, beans, and tobacco), the sacred rivers (the Colorado, the Little Colorado, the San Juan, and the Rio Grande), and the sacred mountains (Sis Naajini—Mount Blanca of the East, Tsoodzil—Mount Taylor of the South, Dook’o’oosliid—San Francisco Peaks of the West, and Dibe Nitsaa—Mount Hesperus of the North).

In weaving this rug, I hoped it would provide my daughter guiding principles if I ever died as Ma Ma had when I needed her most. I hoped she would trace her fingers along the spirit line I planned to weave into this rug and remember Grandmother Ursula’s story about Weaving Woman and how she became trapped in her rug from working too hard to make it perfect. Grandmother Spider Woman created the spirit line so that Weaving Woman could escape and warn others never to let pride become master of their spirit.

In weaving this rug, I wanted my daughter to connect to something larger than me.



After Shinaali’ Sarah fixed a few things on Mom’s rug, she grabbed a large floppy hat and said, “We are going to visit some trading posts and pick some plants for dyeing. Are you two coming?”

Mom and I were silent as Shinaali’ Sarah slid open her glass sliding door to inspect the rest of the class. Without waiting for an answer, she said, “Don’t worry, we’ll be right back so you can work on your rugs some more.”

The door shut and Mom and I sighed in the same breath. The 30 hours that we had set aside for this project were nearly exhausted. We knew it would be hard to find time to finish the rugs in our daily schedule of cooking, cleaning, and working.

Two SUVs packed with the other women rolled off onto the highway in a cloud of red dust. We jumped in Mom’s car and hurried after them.

At the Two Gray Hills trading post, our class descended upon the weaving tools like vultures. Then we wandered our way through the store until each of us ended up in a tiny room at the back. Woven in elaborate designs of brown, white, and black, Two Gray Hills rugs lined the walls and covered the stone floor in stacks. The price tags ranged in the thousands, except for two

very unusual rugs. The trader apologetically said, “Oh, these were woven by Mary Silversmith, the world’s worst weaver. But we buy her rugs, because she’s probably the oldest weaver on the Rez. Blind as a bat, but still weaving!”

Not only were they priced attractively at \$75 and \$65, but we all fell in love with the abstract designs. It looked like the weaver had smeared her hand through the straight verticals, horizontals, and diagonals normally found in Navajo designs. A thick warp thread peeked out here and there through the unevenly hand-spun yarn. Sometimes the yarn hung loose from the warp. Other times, the weaver meant to use black but stuck in blue yarn instead.

She had broken every standard of quality a collector looked for in a rug. Does the rug have straight edges and square corners? Nope. Are the lines within the rug straight and consistent? What lines? Is the pattern centered on the rug? What pattern? Will the rug lie or hang flat? Never. Is the warp covered? Maybe 80 percent? Are the colors consistent? Definitely not. And yet, we all fought over purchasing Mary Silversmith’s rugs. And those of us who didn’t go home with one worried we’d missed out on owning something rare.

Maybe her design was intentional. After all, the silhouette of a bear could be seen in one. She could’ve been ahead of her time. But more importantly, she showed us that it’s okay to mess up, bend rules, and not fit in.

On the way to the next trading post, Shinaali’ Sarah stopped our caravan alongside hip-high bushes growing beside a stand of junipers. As soon as we gathered around her and settled down, she said, “This is sage.” Her fingertips lovingly stroked the leaves. “Plants are alive. You must give them a good talk. Say a prayer. Ask for permission that we can cut some to dye yarn this afternoon.”

I waded through the bushes with Mom away from the other weavers. The sage brushed the sides of my legs, releasing its sweet aroma. I closed my eyes and inhaled deeply, feeling its medicine calm my anxieties. For a brief moment, I felt as if I’d lived here all my life.



When it grew harder to see by sunlight, Mom and I peeked at each other over our half-finished rugs. Sweat dripped down the sides of our faces. Our hair frizzed in the heat and our hands rubbed stiff necks.

How had we turned something relaxing into something stressful? Mom chuckled and said, “We might as well go get my grandbaby and some ice cream!”

We carefully packed away our looms and wrapped our weaving tools in towels. Hugs and promises to keep in touch were exchanged with the other weavers. Then we loaded up the car and Mom blasted the air conditioner.

Just as I thought that maybe Mary Silversmith had rubbed off on us and given us the courage not to be self-critical, Mom gripped the steering wheel and said, “I concentrated so hard today and I still fucked up!”

Her sentence froze the space between us. I panicked. We stared at each other, faces bleeding color, realizing several taboos had probably been broken by her words.

Minutes crept by until the tension in the air snapped. We giggled until our stomachs hurt.

Mom wiped the tears from her face, looked up to the sky, and said, “Oooo Mom, I hope you didn’t hear what I just said.”

When I caught my breath, I said, “Mom, I love you. You are so funny.”

She grabbed my hand and pressed it to her heart. “Thank God I have a daughter. I tell you what,” she said. “I’m never going to show my rug to anyone.”

I basked in a mother’s love that I thought I had lost forever.

Mom floored the pedal once we exited the dirt road from Shinaali’ Sarah’s ranch. As soon as our wheels thumped against the highway, I said, “Mom, I want your rug. You have to send it to me, when you’re done.”

She looked at me and laughed. “Okay. You have to send me yours too.”

“Alright,” I agreed. At that moment, grounded by the Rez, I did intend to send her my rug.

While I was still finishing my rug, Mom mailed hers to me and I hung it in my daughter’s room. On evenings when my daughter demands that I read her a children’s book about Weaving Woman that Mom gave her, I lift her up to the rug so she can run her fingers along the spirit line and we reminisce about our first grandmother-mother-daughter trip on the Rez. She talks about the sheep on Grandma’s ranch and I remember how many rules Mom and I broke.

When I finally finished mine, I wouldn’t let anyone see it, not even my husband. I decided to weave another rug for Mom, but I have not warped my loom since the workshop. A bucket’s worth of the expensive yarn Shinaali’



Sarah recommended sits in my closet: Brown Sheep, Lamb's Pride, worsted weight, not bulky, not sport, single ply. I tell myself it's because I'm worried about breaking taboos, but perhaps I am not allowing myself to live in *hózhó*.

*Hózhó* is the Navajo word that embodies a philosophy of beauty, balance, and harmony. When a weaver weaves, she is promising to walk in beauty or live in *hózhó*, straddling the borders of good and bad, sickness and health, happiness and sadness.

Today, I still haven't found the courage to show Mom my rug. Maybe I don't want her to see what a bad weaver I am. Maybe I'm afraid I'll embarrass her. Or worse, perhaps, I still can't believe that she loves me as her own.

I tell myself that *hózhó* is too difficult to achieve thousands of miles away from Mom and the Rez. But when I dare to examine my Ganado Red gathering dust at the bottom of a drawer, I wonder if the real problem is a crossed warp thread within.

