

# Knitting Hats in a Peace of Prayer

A busy mother raises money for a noble cause by blending work and worship

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**C**HILDREN ARE MOST SUSCEPTIBLE to the darkness of Kali Yuga, O Siva. Please keep them safe and innocent. Give them a good education. Sculpt them into peaceful and tolerant adults. Give them good health, O Siva. Aum Namah Sivaya." When I silently repeat this, my prayer, over and over again with the correct posture and deep breathing, it brings me deep relaxation, followed by a feeling of freshness and a sense of joy. External sounds cease to be bothersome because of the quiet rhythm within the mind. This is what we expect the practice of *japa* (repetition) to achieve, a calm and focused mind. But wait a minute, while performing my *japa*, I just finished making a hat.

The connection between chanting *japa* and making hats became clear to me when our son Mahar turned three and was ready to start preschool. Ever since the early seventies, my husband Ehud had made a study of Rudolph Steiner and his progressive theories on education. Ehud had published Steiner's biography and several other books about his work. My own research indicated to me that Steiner's philosophy embodied the core concepts of the *Bhagavad Gita*, the *Vedas*, ayurveda and ancient methods of raising children.

Today, Steiner's teachings regarding education are followed in the Waldorf private schools, which have sprung up all over the world. These schools cultivate a child's innate sense of wonder by encouraging active, imaginative play, working with the hands and developing a connection with nature. Waldorf students are not exposed to television, radio, the Internet, video games, violent toys, fast food or rote learning. Waldorf teachers study the personality of each child and nourish his or her blossoming spirituality, intellect and physique. These schools also support alternative health practices, vaccination choices, the organic food movement and the religion and culture from which each child comes.

Because Ehud and I share the same commitment to creating a *sattvic* (contemplative) lifestyle for our son, we decided to enroll Mahar in a Waldorf school. We were elated to find the Upper Valley Waldorf School near our Vermont home, and Mahar began attending their nursery in 2001. Just a few weeks after he started his education,

a letter arrived from the school asking for a donation. "Waldorf education is for those who seek," it said.

We were pleased to see that unlike some things in life only available to the rich, Waldorf education is provided for those who seek, regardless of whether they can afford it or not. The basic necessities of existence—water, air, and food—are for everyone. A sensible education—another basic necessity—should also be for all, not just for those who can buy it.

"Writing a donation check is such a soulless activity," Ehud said to me one day. "We

should demonstrate our good intentions with actions, too." So I thought to myself: "What can I do to support our local Waldorf school and help make it more affordable?" Just as I began to ponder this question, a dear friend of ours, Mrs. Veronica Cowie, offered to show me how to crochet. Soon, I was teaching myself how to crochet hats, and had an idea: "I can make hats to help the school. If I can find buyers for them, my hat-sale money can be a scholarship fund for the Waldorf School."

Ehud liked my idea. He bought me lots of colorful wool, and Cindy from his publishing



Work is worship: Hat-making time is *japa* time for mother and author Vatsala Sperling

office designed and printed labels and catalogs. Kelly, another employee at his office, took care of phone calls, invoices, e-mails and shipments. My hats landed in eight different retail locations in Vermont, including the Frog Hollow Craft Gallery, where my work was chosen by an eight-member jury. I've had a few painful experiences dealing with retailers, but am grateful that many of them felt honored enough to sell my hats and further a good cause at the same time. Now we are able to send regular checks to the school so that a few more needy children might receive a Waldorf education.

I must say that I'm getting pretty good at selling my hats. After giving the retailers a 45 percent discount, my profit can range from US\$20 to US\$80 per hat. On direct sale without involving a retailer, I can make between US\$30 to US\$125, depending on the complexity of the work. My sales pitch goes something like this, "You may not need, want, or even like my hats, but you must buy one (or a few) because every dollar that you spend on these hats helps children receive a soul-centered and holistic education." The outcome is often pleasant. I have found that people do love to help children. The joy that comes from being able to help is very visible on the faces of these unsuspecting victims of my avid salesmanship.

This one-woman hat company is far from becoming a giant, publicly traded corporation with a head office on Wall Street and production sweatshops in developing countries. Nevertheless, it has undeniable commercial prospects and is certainly a great way to provide scholarships for children.

There is another aspect to hat-making that cannot be shown on any profit-and-loss spreadsheet. When I hold a skein of yarn, cast on my first stitch and begin to create a pattern and color scheme in crochet, the bells of my inner shrine begin to ring. It's *japa* time. As the hat grows in my hands, stitch by stitch and row by row, my mind becomes quiet and focused, deeply engrossed in calling out to Siva over and over again. "O benevolent Lord of creative destruction, please be kind to the little children. Give them good health, good education and a happy holistic start in life so that their tomorrows will hold hope and light and peace. O Siva. Om Namah Sivaya."

As the busy mother of a six-year-old boy, with a full share of familial and social commitments, I have not been able to set aside any specific time for making hats. My sessions last from fifteen minutes to three hours. But all my free time is hat-making time—*japa* time, that is—time to relish the peace and quiet that comes from sustained hand-eye coordination, simple unhurried repetitive motion, and nourishing the hope that every little effort to help children is worth the joy and pain it brings.