

Knitting with Simone Weil

The philosopher's call to attention reminds me I'm making a difference.

by [Alejandra Oliva](#) in the [November 2022](#) issue



(Illustration by Federico Gastaldi)

I start my mornings by emailing everyone at my organization a roundup of immigration headlines and news. I've been working on the communications team at the National Immigrant Justice Center since I left divinity school in 2019. I love my job, and on the best days, I feel like I'm really making a difference. On the worst days, though, the days when news breaks about yet another way our country mistreats immigrants and I'm formatting HTML for the press release denouncing it, I feel like my job is grindingly, achingly slow, like nothing I'm doing actually matters.

This is magnified by those morning emails. I've copied and pasted headlines about the continued separation of families, nonconsensual sterilizations of detained immigrant women, mass shootings in Latinx communities by White supremacists, and Haitian migrants being whipped by Border Patrol officers on horseback.

Whatever I do for the rest of the day, the knowledge that this is going on keeps simmering in the back of my head.

There's something particularly agonizing about a dull work meeting during what otherwise feels like a crisis. Yes, it's important to ensure all our projects are on track, the reports and graphics to show the public yet again that there's a problem we've all been trained to ignore. But during a crisis, it always feels like my job ought to be something else—being on the front lines, doing something, anything, with my physical body to help. Instead, there's shared Google Docs and Zoom.

Since my work meetings have largely moved to Zoom, I've been knitting through most of them. Something about the repetitive motions of my hands helps to still my brain to pay better attention to the meeting. There are moments in the pattern—turning a sock heel, splitting off sleeves on a sweater—that require a little more attention and care, but mostly it consists of small, additive motions ingrained into my muscle memory that come together to form a sleeve, a scarf, a blanket. There are times when, amid the triumph of finishing a sleeve, I absolutely dread having to cast on the next one and the interminable rows of back-and-forth stockinette. But then there's a sleeve at the end of it, and eventually a sweater.

Simone Weil, in her ponderously titled but wonderfully argued essay “Reflections on the Right Use of School Studies with a View to the Love of God,” moves nimbly from a teacher's order (“Pay attention!”) to prayer to the bedsides of the suffering. Her argument begins with the kind of attention a schoolchild might turn to a tricky Latin translation or mathematical proof—unfocused, somewhat unrewarding, aware of one's own shortfalls. It's the kind of attention I pay to the stitches clicking between needles during a meeting or to setting up a press release on the website. Weil reminds me that the time and attention taken to getting it right—and to messing up along the way—are as worthwhile when making a sweater as when struggling for justice.

Weil likely wrote this essay in 1942 in Vichy France—at another point when it probably felt like paying attention to Latin exercises or work meetings was perhaps not quite what the moment called for. Weil wasn't one to stay on the sidelines. She was constantly rushing into the fray, whether joining an anarchist military unit during the Spanish Civil War, working in the vineyards and factories alongside the poor, or begging to serve as a spy for the French Resistance despite delicate health. And yet, this is the essay she wrote at such a difficult time: one advocating for the

quotidian actions of a child at school, not the heroism of a warrior on the front lines.

Because for Weil, the attention a child pays to a Latin translation is the same kind of attention you should pay while praying, the same kind you should pay to someone who is suffering in order to make them feel seen and understood. She calls it an “experimental certainty,” a kind of if-you-build-it-they-will-come attitude. If you attend to it, God will be present in your prayers, and change will come.

The little repetitive actions I do at work or in my knitting do not need to encompass the entire project to be effective, Weil says. I think about her essay all the time, because it often feels like the only way to keep getting up every morning and sitting down to collate ten more links on how we are failing those who come to us in greatest need—like the only way to understand how my job is, in some way, leading to change.

But here is where the knitting and the attention and the tiny actions converge. The history of textile arts is full of people coming together to lighten the burden: the American quilting bees of the 18th century, the waulking songs of Scottish women fulling their tweeds, the stitch 'n' bitches of the modern yarn store. Every day I send my email of mostly horrifying links to 200 colleagues, each there for the same kind of work I am. Every day I trade emails with colleagues elsewhere who are dedicated to the same kind of work, approaching it from a different angle, turning their attention to an individual case or a class action lawsuit, to a COVID vaccination clinic or a DACA renewal event.

As some of us work to spin a new reality in which immigrants can have safety and stability in a new country, others weave a net to ensure no one falls through the cracks that are so evident in this reality. Little by little, all of us paying attention—it’s experimental but certain that change will come.

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[Jon Mathieu](#), the *Century's* community engagement editor, engages [Alejandra Oliva](#) in conversation about her article and Simone Weil.