

A psychologist whose work we have read recently advises people—especially as we grow older—to select a new activity each month to try. This should, he says, be something that is not particularly easy for us to do. It isn't necessary to take on a lifelong pursuit of any of these projects. It may well be that when the month is over, a person might never think of spending any time with that particular activity again. On the other hand, one might find something that is so compelling and interesting that it becomes part of a lasting routine.

Some interests, of course, are rekindled at particular times of the year. That is what happens to us this time of year when the garden seed order arrives. One might not think that it would be exciting to wade snow from the mailbox the two tenths of a mile to the house with a box of garden seeds that won't be put in the ground—or even in seedling trays—for at least another month and a half. And yet, this is what happens with those activities we all have that are significant and joyful parts of our lives.

But, something really different? It takes a little thought to even come up with an idea that is new to us, a little bit difficult, and yet an notion we find compelling. We have chosen to follow this path off and on for years. It has led to some spectacular failures as well as some successes. I suppose even the failed projects are successful in one way or another—at least, we know we won't do THAT again!

This month of January I made a sweater. It was certainly not the first sweater I had knit, but it was the first attempt I had made to knit a sweater without a pattern. I had read a book that described knitting in “the old way,” using percentages to decide on the number of stitches for various parts of the sweater. I decided to give it a try.

Still, there were other decisions to make—yarn, color, pattern stitch or plain. What kind of sleeves and shoulders? How long? How should I finish the front? If I wanted a cardigan, could I make it in a different way that would allow me to knit “in the round” instead of back and forth?

Some of these decisions involved the psychologist's advice. I wanted to do something that would be at least a little difficult for me. And, it was. But, I found help in many different places. I consulted resources on the internet and “googled” my way to some answers. I tried some techniques to see if I could do them. I looked at a picture my friend Susanne had e-mailed of a sweater she had knit for one of her sons—that showed me what to do with the sleeves and shoulders of my sweater—and I even asked Runo, “What would your mother have done with this?” She was an expert handcrafter.

I had spun the wool for the sweater from two sheep—one black/gray and one white—that I had shorn several years ago. I separated the black ewe's wool into three colors—dark, medium, and light gray. I dyed some of the white sheep's wool bright red. Then, I started to knit.

After all the spinning, dyeing, and knitting were done, I sewed the sweater parts together, and then I did the scariest thing of all. I made what is called a “steek” that turned my pullover sweater into a cardigan. I fearfully took my sharp sewing scissors and cut that sweater right straight down the front from neck to ribbed hem. The instructions for “steeking” tell the intrepid knitter to sew on both sides of the cutting line, securing the stitches on each side, ensuring that the sweater would not ravel into a pile of fluffy yarn. This prospect was not one that I cared to see come to pass, as it was not only the work of knitting that would have been destroyed, but the shearing, washing,

carding, and spinning of those fleeces. But, I was not sure I could sew this very soft yarn in a way that would have made it safe to cut. So, I tried something else. before I made that cut. I took out a piece of styrofoam and my needle felting kit—a wooden knob hat held six very, very sharp barbed needles. By repeatedly plunging them into the knitted material, the front opening of my sweater changed from a pliable knitted fabric into felt. I stitched along the front of the sweater, sewed on some Norwegian pewter—like clasps, and put on my sweater.

February is just two days away. I have not yet decided on a challenge for that new month.