The Lesson of the Afghan

by MELANIE SVOBODA SND on JANUARY 22, 2018

It is 5:30 in the morning. And here I sit in my bedroom praying. Suddenly I feel chilly. So I get up and grab the afghan from the foot of my bed. It is the one my mother crocheted for me years ago. And it is beautiful. It is a herringbone pattern in bright yellow, oranges, and browns. I sit down and drape it over my lap, legs, and slippered feet. Immediately I begin to feel the warmth—as if the afghan were an electric blanket.

But, I remind myself, the warmth I am feeling is not coming from the afghan. It is coming from me. It is my body that is generating the warmth. The afghan is merely “trapping” my own heat and turning it back upon myself, thus preventing that heat from dissipating into the chilly room.

Conserving self-generated heat is a trick human beings have employed since prehistoric times. Humans used this little trick to stay alive in very cold weather or to be more comfortable in chilly places. In my mind’s eye, I can see people in a cave huddled together under animal hides, or a family in a mud hut curled up beneath a blanket woven of pliant grasses, or small children in a log cabin sleeping beneath a goose down quilt. This morning, huddled beneath my mother’s bright afghan, I feel I am one with all of them.

( Photo by Sr. Sandy, SND )
Sometimes a loved one will reassure us of our inner strength and capabilities. (Pixabay)

There are several lessons here. Here's one: Sometimes we don't appreciate what we have inside ourselves. Sometimes we don't appreciate our own gifts, capabilities, or powers. When we are facing a difficult situation, for instance, often our first instinct is to reach out to someone else for help. Don't get me wrong. It can be a good thing to seek help from others. But let us not forget the powers that reside within ourselves. Each of us has been given gifts and abilities. Sometimes it is precisely the challenges in life that bring these gifts to the fore. The so-called 'hard things' can reveal or develop our inherent powers and capabilities.

Jesus commanded us to love others. That is a difficult challenge to be sure. But Jesus also told us to love God and ourselves. My experience has shown that the more we love and appreciate ourselves, the freer we are to reach out to others in selfless loving. That's a paradox, I know. But Christianity is filled with paradoxes.

Today we might ask ourselves: what are some of my gifts, abilities, or powers? How have they helped to sustain me in the past? How might these same gifts and powers help to sustain others as well?

Let us pray:

Gracious God, Source of all warmth,
give me a greater awareness of my inherent gifts and powers today.

Even our four-legged friends appreciate the self-generating warmth found beneath or inside of an afghan. (Pixabay)
When I encounter difficulties or hard times,
help me first to turn inward and see what gifts you have already given me
to face the challenges in my daily life.

Please remind me to carve out time to love You, others, and myself. Amen.

Today’s song is by Carrie Newcomer. I want to thank Justin Huyck, the pastoral minister at St. Michael’s in Canton, OH, for introducing her to me. This song is entitled “You Can Do This Hard Thing.” The first time I played this video, tears welled up in my eyes. It was the combination of the words, the music, her mellow voice, the images. The song recalled some of the “hard things” I have already faced in my life and the “hard things” I see coming in the future. It also recalled friends or loved ones who reassured me that I could do “this hard thing.” May this song bring you hope no matter what hard thing you may be facing at this time in your life.

Would you like to comment on this reflection or song? If so, please do so below.

**PS:** I have tried to response to all your responses, but I am having technical difficulties with my blog... I’ll try again later. Sorry.
Kathleen January 22, 2018 at 5:34 am
Sr. Melannie,

What a perfect phrase for me today “You can do this hard thing.” Today is the first real day of retirement for me. It is weird and wonderful. It was just what I needed to hear.

Thanks for letting the Holy Spirit speak through you once again.

Kathleen

Melannie Svoboda SND January 22, 2018 at 12:05 pm
Dear Kathleen,

Yes, retirement can be both “weird and wonderful.” I will keep you in prayer during this major transition... Sr. Melannie

Kathy January 22, 2018 at 6:47 am
Thank you, Sr. Melannie, for another meaningful reflection. Love the song! Love it for myself and my husband, and thinking of my four adult kids, in their various life situations.

I also appreciated the afghan reference. I’ve made several afghans for myself and others over the years. More recently I’ve gotten into making quilts. The same idea holds true. I make things for others, to show my care for them, but these are practical gifts that they can use to help warm themselves. Lovely.

Kathy
Dear Kathy,

I admire your ability to create afghans and quilts. As you say, what beautiful gifts they are to our loved ones! Thanks for writing! Sr. Melannie

Michelle January 22, 2018 at 6:48 am

Thank you Sr. Melanie, I so enjoy your weekly newsletter.

You’re welcome, Michelle. It’s good having you as a reader! Sr. Melannie

Carolyn Shalhoub January 22, 2018 at 7:36 am

Thank you, Sr. Melanie, for this lovely reflection and song. It is especially appropriate for me as I seem to have become a worrier lately. I also have a student who, though the course has just started, is worrying about a minor assignment in week 6. I will share with her.

Dear Carolyn,

Yes, worrying can be a real cross. I’m glad this reflection and song gave you encouragement! Sr. Melannie

Carol L January 22, 2018 at 8:28 am

Thank you for this beautiful meditation! I have made several afghans in this exact pattern and even more baby blankets! One of your meditations was in Living Faith yesterday. Made me smile. Today is Respect Life Day. A stark contrast in Washington Friday and Saturday between the positive March message of the pro
lifers and the negativism of the pro choice marchers, as described by our Associate Priest at Mass this morning who was with a contingent of 80 teenagers and 600 total marchers from our diocese. Thank you again for your insights and stretching my horizons!

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**Melannie Svoboda SND**  January 22, 2018 at 2:22 pm

Dear Carol,

Yes, today we celebrate life from conception to natural death. Thank you for the reminder. My post last week focused on the gift of life. Sr. Melannie

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**John Hopkins**  January 22, 2018 at 8:36 am

Thank you, Sr. Melannie. My wife is a weaver, and she has woven some deliciously warm throws. We have them draped over the arms of chairs all around the house. We keep our house cool, even in the winter, and so Kerry’s handiwork is always in use. I have always thought of the fabric as the warming agent, not the “trapping” agent, but, thanks to your blog, I will now think of blankets, throws, and afghans as hand-made sermons reminding me of my innate gifts!

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**Melannie Svoboda SND**  January 23, 2018 at 10:05 am

Dear John,

You’re lucky to be married to such a talented woman! I think I’d feel at home in your house with all those inviting throws all over the place. As usual, thanks again for responding! Sr. Melannie

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**Amy**  January 22, 2018 at 1:42 am

Sr. Melanie,

I LOVE your newsletters – your gifts with word and song shared with others. The timing of this message was perfect as I spent the weekend with siblings, going through our Mom’s house. (She passed in May). Definitely a hard thing, but there was also much laughter and heart warming memories…and afghans.
And now, I enter my week remembering to look inside for the gifts I have been given. Blessings on your week as well.

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**Melannie Svoboda SND**  
January 23, 2018 at 10:08 am

Dear Amy,

Thank you for your encouraging words about my writing. I appreciate them. Many of us know the experience of closing our parents' home. I recall the memories, the tears, and the laughter when we closed my parents' home... You and your siblings are in my thoughts and prayers. Sr. Melannie

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**Jack**  
January 22, 2018 at 9:06 am

Thank you! My mom made many afghans with this pattern. We have them all in the family among me and my children to remember her by. Thanks for sharing and the memories. Jack

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**Melannie Svoboda SND**  
January 23, 2018 at 10:13 am

Dear Jack,

There's nothing like a hand-made afghan or other hand-made item to connect us with its "maker." Family recipes also make me feel close to my mother... I think it's important to stay connected with our loved ones who have gone before us into eternity. Thank you for writing! Sr. Melannie

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**Sr. Regina Hlavac**  
January 22, 2018 at 9:07 am

Awesome. I really enjoyed your story about the Afghan. Also reminded me of my friend giving my Mom a prayer shawl while she was in home hospice. Great imagery. Always look forward to reading your newsletter and listening to your songs. Thanks so much for your pearls of wisdom. Please know you are in my prayers.
Melannie Svoboda SND  January 23, 2018 at 10:15 am

Dear Regina,
When I was ill a few years back, I received two prayer shawls. When I draped them over my shoulders I almost could feel the prayers of the women who made them... Thank you for your kind words about my writing. What a boost they are! ...Sr. Melannie

REPLY

Marla  January 22, 2018 at 9:38 am

Again Melannie, you have reached out and deeply touched my spirit. Thank you for the reflection, the song and most of all your gifted awareness of the deeper meanings in life events.
My mom once made an afghan identical in colors and herringbone pattern. Sadly I have no idea what happened to it but do remember her wrapping it around me as I sat in her lap. Brought tears when I thought of her tenderness.

REPLY

Melannie Svoboda SND  January 23, 2018 at 12:11 pm

Dear Marla,
I remember your mother with great fondness. Obviously she passed on her tenderness and sensitivity to you... Melannie

REPLY

Karen  January 22, 2018 at 9:38 am

So insightful as always. I too have afghans and quilts made by loved ones that are always at the ready but I never thought about them in this context. What an inspiring message for any Monday, but I especially appreciate it THIS Monday as I embark on a very difficult project. Thank you!

REPLY

Melannie Svoboda SND  January 23, 2018 at 12:13 pm

Dear Karen,
I wish you blessings as you embark upon your "very difficult project." Sr. Melannie
Jean Canatsey  January 22, 2018 at 10:17 am

I really enjoyed the song and the subtle pictures underlying it. The railroad tracks made me think of the many paths I've traveled in my 78 years and the figure walking alongside the tracks reminded me that I've never journeyed alone. The piano has always been a grounding point in my life so I was particularly aware of the fingers on the piano keys. My mother used to tell me that she could tell whether I was “mad or sad” by the way I played. I will watch this video again. Thank you, Sr. Melannie.

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Melannie Svoboda SND  January 23, 2018 at 12:15 pm

Dear Jean,
Thank you for calling our attention to the beautiful images in this video. I too was mesmerized by the railroad tracks especially... Sr. Melannie

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Jean  January 22, 2018 at 10:42 am

Thank you Siter Melanie! Great way to start the week.

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Melannie Svoboda SND  January 23, 2018 at 4:12 pm

You're welcome, Jean, and thank you! Sr. Melannie

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Margaret  January 22, 2018 at 10:48 am

What a comforting thought of the power of our own warmth coming from within just as we radiate Jesus’ love and warmth to others. Song so appropriate too as I'm praying for my son's best friend, Chuck, whose Dad has a day or 2 left on earthly journey. Will share with Chuck that “He can do this hard thing” burying his
father and comforting his mother, with the loving warmth of family and friends for support. Thanks Melanie for your loving messages.

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**Melannie Svoboda SND**  
January 22, 2018 at 12:14 pm

Dear Margaret,

Please tell Chuck that my readers and I are praying for his dad, his mother, and him... Sr. Melannie

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**Margaret**  
January 26, 2018 at 12:24 pm

Thanks so much Sr. Melanie and readers for the loving prayers for young Chuck Kostoupolos. I just watched him and his Mom graciously bury Chuck's Dad, that hard thing that many of us have done. Mr K was laid to rest in his Greek Orthodox tradition which was quite sacred and holy. God bless us all as we continue our journeys to eternal life!

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**Debra Tomaselli**  
January 22, 2018 at 10:50 am

Beautiful! All of it! Thanks for sharing!

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**Melannie Svoboda SND**  
January 22, 2018 at 12:12 pm

And thank you, Debra, for reading and responding! Sr/ Melannie

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**Marie Barth**  
January 22, 2018 at 12:21 pm

I love your afghan piece. I love fabric art. At age 81, I am blessed to live at home even tho disabled. From my bed, I can see and enjoy an afghan I made, one my mother made and a quilt made by my great grandmother. I am surrounded by love. Thank you for your insight and the beautiful song. Meaningful as I approach the second anniversary next week of my husband's birth into heaven.
Dear Marie,

I love your words: “I am surrounded by love.” You have such a beautiful and faith-filled attitude toward life. Thank you for writing! Sr. Melannie

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Thank you for sharing the song today. My friend’s husband died on Nov 11. Then her adult son died on Dec. 26. The song meant a lot to her today. God bless you.

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How nice of you to share this song with her... My prayers are with her today. Sr. Melannie

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Thank you Sr. Melannie for today’s sharing and beautiful song. Five years ago at the age of 78 I was retired from a job I loved for over 20 years. I just wanted to assure Kathleen that there is a definite period of adjustment after retirement but also a wonderful feeling of freedom!

Have a beautiful day,

Joan

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Amen to that, Joan! Sr. Melannie
Joy  January 22, 2018 at 1:08 pm
Grace of god…I did it & continue this hard thing...

REPLY

Melannie Svoboda SND  January 22, 2018 at 1:14 pm
Yes, Joy, doing "this hard thing" is always dependent on God’s grace...
Thank you for responding. Sr. Melannie

REPLY

Sunnie Poplar  January 22, 2018 at 1:58 pm
My daughter just lost her husband on Dec. 29th and it seems you have been writing just for her the last few weeks.
The song was so moving and just what I know her Patrick would say to her, as do I.
Thank you for somehow knowing just what we need for the week. You are a true blessing.

REPLY

Melannie Svoboda SND  January 23, 2018 at 4:16 pm
Dear Sunnie,
My sympathy to you and your daughter on the loss of Patrick. I will pray for all of you... When I write these reflections, I have no idea what my readers might need for the week–but the Holy Spirit certainly does... Thanks for writing, Sunnie... Sr. Melannie

REPLY

Karen Lynch  January 22, 2018 at 5:00 pm
Dear Sr. Melannie,
Every week your stories and the music you choose get better and better! I’m grateful to you and for sharing yourself!

REPLY

Melannie Svoboda SND  January 25, 2018 at 2:11 pm
Dear Karen,
Thank you! And I'm grateful to have you as a reader! Sr. Melannie

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**Barbara Knapp**  January 22, 2018 at 7:06 pm
Dear Sr Melanie, I have been enjoying your thoughts ...I wonder if your order has any affiliation with the Sisters Of Notre Dame, that have their mother house in Kentucky...and used to care for children at St Aloysius Orphanage? Thanks, Barb

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**Melannie Svoboda SND**  January 25, 2018 at 2:14 pm
Dear Barbara,
Yes, we are the same congregation as the Sisters of Notre Dame whose provincial center is in Covington, KY. Thank you for responding! Sr. Melannie

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**Dolores**  January 23, 2018 at 2:00 pm
Reminded me of the prayer shawl group at our parish...they have made, shared and given to many ...recently for a liver transplant given to a baby from a one of our parishioners (a stranger located via social media).

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**Melannie Svoboda SND**  January 25, 2018 at 2:18 pm
Dear Dolores,
Those prayer shawl groups do a beautiful deed with their talents! Sr. Melannie

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**Barbara**  January 23, 2018 at 2:31 pm
Dear Sister Melanie.
I love your weekly blog posts. Today's was heart-warming and encouraging. I have been recovering from a mid-October fall in which I sustained very slow healing
injuries... and feeling discouraged that I still do not feel like myself. I have had wonderful care, but I have not given any thought to my own inner resources which have definitely helped me to ‘do many hard things.’ Thank you for reminding me of the inner strength and grace that I have received over the past weeks. Thank you for today’s song which has been an inspiration. Blessings!

**REPLY**

**Melannie Svoboda SND**  January 25, 2018 at 2:24 pm

Dear Barbara,

I'm sorry to hear about your mid-October fall... and your slow healing... But I'm glad to hear you are receiving wonderful care... and your “inner resources” are helping you through the “many hard things” involved in the healing process. I'm so glad the reflection and the song inspired you! Sr. Melannie

**REPLY**

**Tom**  January 23, 2018 at 8:54 pm

A good reminder: Even though we so often yearn for the warmth of another, or The Other, we cannot forget or dismiss how much our inner warmth will add to the relationship.

**REPLY**

**Melannie Svoboda SND**  January 25, 2018 at 2:25 pm

Dear Ton,

As usual, thank you for your unique slant on this topic... Melannie

**REPLY**

**Georgia Auckly**  January 24, 2018 at 8:44 am

This is a good reflection on our ability, with God, to help ourselves. It is indeed a beautiful song also and I like the image of two railroad tracks which to me show how the sad and the happy have to be lived at the same time.

**REPLY**

**Melannie Svoboda SND**  January 25, 2018 at 2:31 pm
I liked your “take” on the image of the railroad tracks, Georgia... Often the sad is merely the “other side” of happy. For example, we suffer the pain of loss when a loved one dies because we loved that person so much. Thanks for writing! Sr. Melannie

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**Pat**  
January 25, 2018 at 10:38 am

Another great reflection, Melannie. Thank you. I place it among all of the “wisdom literature” gathered within me and keeps me warm.

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**Melannie Svoboda SND**  
January 25, 2018 at 2:32 pm

Thank you, Pat, for responding! I appreciate your words! Sr. Melannie

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**Mary**  
January 25, 2018 at 11:30 am

Later in the day after reading your reflection, I was babysitting for my 1-year old grandnephew. I came across a small afgan my mother (the baby’s great grandmother) crocheted before she died. She made it as a gift for her grandchild, without knowing almost 20 years ago, whom it might go to. Every stitch was filled with love for a child she would never know on this earth but whose soul I’m sure she met before he was born.  

Thank you, too, for introducing me to Carrie Newcomer. I’ve been listening to her music all week.

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**Melannie Svoboda SND**  
January 25, 2018 at 2:20 pm

Dear Mary,  
This is a lovely story! I especially liked: “Every stitch filled with love for a child she would never know.” Thank you for sharing your story with us! Sr. Melannie

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**Tom G**  
January 25, 2018 at 3:00 pm
Thank you, I need to hear this.

REPLY

Melannie Svoboda SND  January 28, 2018 at 8:44 am
You’re welcome, Tom… I needed to write this because I needed to hear it too! Thank you for writing! Sr. Melannie

REPLY

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