

Allen Walck: Reflections of a Weaver at Midlife

ALLEN WALCK

There comes a time in life, once the bloom of the rose of youth is gone and before senility strikes, when we stop letting the world around us tell us who we should be, and we learn to be ourselves.

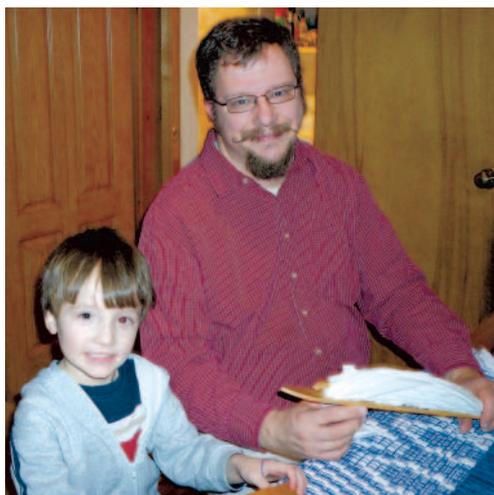
At forty-one, I'm at that point, and I have an announcement to make. I'm a weaver, and I'm a man.

This revelation is not shocking to readers of *Handwoven*, I'm sure, but to the greater world, it's certainly odd. Here is my textile story in a nutshell.

I've always loved textiles, but for over thirty years I felt guilty that textiles weren't manly enough. You know, the "boys play with power tools, girls play with dolls" thing. I am thankfully beyond the age when I care what people think about me. But in my younger years, I always struggled with what I wanted to learn to do versus what the world said I should do. It didn't help that I was *lousy* at sports (think last kid picked on the team), and I still can't ride a bike (but I'm learning to ride a horse now). So for years, I was a closet quilter; then I learned to tat, and then to make bobbin lace. I discovered that I am good with my hands, especially when working with fine things and tiny details.

I was always searching for some new textile direction to explore. For the past sixteen years, I have worked during the summers at Genesee Country Village and Museum in Mumford, New York (www.gcv.org), one of the largest living-history museums in the United States, and I became curious about spinning. I asked one of the fiber artists to teach me, and before I knew it, I had my own spinning wheel. I loved the feel of the wool in my hands and the intrinsic joy of creating something in a way that it has been done for centuries. Then I learned to spin flax. Dyeing followed, even with a failed attempt to produce Turkey red—it came out tomato-soup red, and I got a nasty allergic reaction from the tannin or some mordant.

I became entranced with watching the weaver at the museum, and she said to me, "You know, most nineteenth-



Allen at the loom with his son Ben, enthusiastic bobbin winder and weaver-to-be. PHOTO BY AUDREY WALCK



Allen hand-dyed and handspun the yarn he used to weave this blanket, which won a blue ribbon at a local fair. PHOTO BY ALLEN WALCK

century professional weavers were men." That simple statement was such a relief to me. It would be okay for me to learn to weave. So I talked to the lady who taught me how to spin, and within two days I had a 4-shaft, 30-inch Norwood loom in our house. My wife was tolerant of it, as she has been with all my other goofy adventures (except my handlebar mustache, but that's another story). That was in November of 2006. I sold that loom in April of 2009 because I wanted a bigger loom with more shafts. Now I own an 8-shaft, 45-inch Kyra that takes up the dining room (or what used to be the dining room—the table legs are in the attic and the top is under our bed!). And life goes on. I want to make a PVC loom for my younger son, age five. He is a great bobbin winder and really wants to learn to weave. I am okay with that.

As the years have passed, I have accepted myself for who I am. I seldom hear those voices anymore saying, "Textiles aren't manly enough. Go hammer something." But every once in a while, they surface. Then I hear the museum weaver say, "You know, most professional weavers were men," and I start planning a coverlet or some historic textile to weave, and all is well

with the world. My riding instructor told me once last year when I was having trouble getting the horse to trot, "You think too much." I guess I do sometimes. It is hard, though, to go against the world and what it says we should do, whether it is the "need" to get a smartphone, the "need" to weigh a certain amount, the "need" to wear a certain width of tie or brand of shoes, the need to *conform*. Well, in my own quiet way, I'm a rebel against the modern world. I'm a man, I'm a weaver, and I'm proud. So get used to it, world.

Allen Walck of Avon, New York, is a weaver, spinner, dyer, tatter, and lacemaker who has a long-standing interest in fiber arts. Outside of the textile world, he works in the field of music education and serves as an organist for two churches. He also is employed by the Genesee Country Museum in Mumford, New York, where he teaches nineteenth-century cooking classes.