

On Being a Weaver:  
Memories of the Women's Pentagon Action, November 17, 1980

by Mina Hamilton

*I had not planned to be a weaver. In fact, when I joined the march I'd no idea such a wild and bold idea was a part of the day's plans. And yet weave I did. Here's the story.*

Carefully planned by a wonderful group of women, including Grace Paley, Maya Angelou, Anna Gyorgy, the Women's Pentagon Action was quite orchestrated. The plan was to grieve, to rage, then to circle around the Pentagon. (At the last minute the circling was nixed.)

We were about two thousand women bundled up against the Fall chill. We had marched across the Arlington Bridge in Washington DC. We had marked our grief by planting cardboard grave stones in a patch of lawn. We'd had a moment of silence. And, drawing closer to the Pentagon's massive stone edifice we'd burst into screams, shouts, whoops. It was our time of rage and we were making an incredible racket.

I was standing about twenty feet from the Pentagon's massive stone edifice screaming - at the top of my lungs.

And then...

I saw the weavers.

Up on the granite steps leading to one of the Pentagon's entrances there was a handful of women - perhaps nine or ten - very quietly and very intently creating a web of red, orange, and yellow strands of yarn. This horizontal web stretched between several of the metal banisters that divided the flight of steps. And to weave this web, which was at hip height, they were crawling about underneath it.

To my complete surprise, I found myself half-running, half-walking very swiftly across the approximately twenty feet of pavement that separated the crowd of protestors to the Pentagon steps. I lay down on my back on the stairs and scooted up underneath the yarn. (Once you were underneath the web, you were out-of-reach and could not be arrested.) Someone handed me a ball of yarn.

Suddenly, the other demonstrators were far, far away. Here was a simple task: push the wool up and over a thread, move to another location, make a loop, push the yarn through, move crab-wise along the steps, scoot over to a co-weaver, exchange your ball of orange yarn for one of crimson red. Be quick. Be calm.

From the vantage point of 2016 and from the viewpoint of post-9/11-terrorist-attack-hyper-militarized-police-days it is well-nigh impossible to imagine the scene. First, one could march right up to one of the Pentagon columned entrances - as had our determined crew of women protestors.

Yes, there were extra policemen and security guards on duty. Yes, some of them had a bit of swagger. Yes, we knew they had guns on their hips, but they were standing about looking a bit confused (we were making a terrific racket).

Second, although these guards had pistols, they carried no other accoutrements of war. There was no tear gas. There were no bullet-proof vests. Nobody had their fingers lightly resting on the trigger of a military-assault weapon. Nor were batons out, ready to deliver a bone-crunching thrashing. Water cannons, pepper-spray, orange plastic-crowd-control mesh were nowhere in sight. Twenty-ton, armored personnel tanks were also missing.

Nary an attack dog was in sight - with or without blood dripping from their tongues.

Neither were these guards wearing black metal helmets or plastic face-shields. No the policeman had cloth caps (with rather silly visors) and the security guards were wearing baseball caps. (An image not yet appropriated by Trump and his pals.)

No one was screaming orders or threatening arrest.

Most importantly these guys had faces you could see. *You could read the expressions on their faces.* You could see their eyes, see the twitch in a cheek. In short, one of the basic means of human communication - what we are doing with our facial muscles - was a possibility. We were humans together in this odd moment.

Not that the moment wasn't scary. Yes, we weavers focused on our weaving...Still there was a prickly awareness: Ahh, the cops are there. What are they going to do? So we continually cast quick glances in their direction.

Some security guards looked embarrassed. After all, they were confronted by something on-the-face-of-it absurd.

Women screaming and beating on pots was one thing. Women quietly weaving, however, was way - way - off-the-radar. No doubt it was emotionally confusing. Not only was it on some level utterly harmless. It also was peculiarly female. Who knows which of those guards had a beloved aunt or grandmother they'd seen knitting? Who knows what memories of a favorite sweater all that yarn evoked?

Some of the guards seemed stunned. Indeed, they'd been disarmed. **You cannot shoot down a skein of yarn.**

After some minutes of work, we weavers quietly passed along the message: they don't have the tools with which to cut the yarn! (One of the weavers had overheard two security guards talking. A guard had gone off to find knives or scissors.)

Elation.

I remember lying on my back, my arms lifted above me, busy with my yarn. Yes, biting at the edge of my being was fear. Would I be arrested? Would I be hurt? But I also remember the feeling of joy upon hearing the word, "scissors." They would have to ask a Pentagon secretary (doubtless a female) for that.

I imagined a guard leaning over a secretary's desk. Then, a tad sheepishly, "Excuse me, do you have a pair of scissors?"

"A what?"

"In fact, several pairs of scissors."

Meanwhile we had more time for our endeavors...more yarn...more weaving...

Was I a weaver for ten minutes? Twenty? I do not know. Time slid out of its usual borders.

Quietly, doggedly, we continued building our web, gradually getting closer to the top of the flight of steps. I remember looking up through the now-dense - and impenetrable - tangle of brilliant red, yellow and orange hues, feeling how utterly right this moment was.

Years later I would learn that the action was designed to reweave - metaphorically, the web of life that is torn asunder by bombs and missiles. But, at the time, all I knew was wow, for a few moments, we had won. A handful of women had blocked one segment of the stairs leading into the heart of the US military.

Then, the signal for the end: A Pentagon staffer, all military efficiency, came briskly marching up the steps. He was off to the side - where we had not yet cast our web. Even so a button on his uniform became entangled in a skein. Mad as hell (but also trying to maintain his dignity), he yanked and pulled. Finally, he freed the button and strode into the Pentagon.

By now I had reached the top of the stairs. Out of the corner of my eye I saw a security guard with a knife. He'd started to cut the multiple strands of yarn.

These weren't violent slashes, just methodical strand-by-strand cuts. In fact, the task required two hands. One to hold the yarn taut, the other to cut through - and that was just one strand. Removing the web was going to be laborious - and take quite a few minutes.

Still, I knew our time was up. I slipped out from underneath the web and stood up. A guard and I exchanged a shy smile. I walked back down the Pentagon steps to re-join the phalanx of protestors.

I never met or knew the names of any of the other weavers.

As far as I know, none of us were arrested.

One thing is certain. Each of us was changed in many unfathomable ways by that moment of power, that moment of saying no to blood, death, and war. That moment of saying yes, we will re-weave the web of life.