



# Burning Desire, Telling Truth

Hard-wired for Survival (detail)

**Making tapestry art is, for me, a wonderful, healing practise of mindfulness and self-compassion. My work gives expression to the beauty that emerges when we embrace the wounded places within us.**

Like every artist, my personal journey through life strongly influences my work. My grandparents, and women ancestors before that, worked in the linen industry in Coalisland, Co Tyrone, Ireland. Textiles are in my blood. As a teenager (born in England), my refuge from struggle and pain was in textiles. Seeing the dresses that I designed and made, my mother's friends remarked that I would be the next Mary Quant. But despite this passion, and evident talent, my mother steered me towards training in a 'proper' profession; my first job was as a nurse, moving into working in palliative care, and then training to become a clinical psychologist and mindfulness teacher.

Having to engage with my own childhood wounds, and my work as a clinical psychologist, made me deeply curious about life journeys. Becoming a teacher of both Mindfulness Meditation and Mindful Self-Compassion shook up my life and set me on a path where I am now, to quote Joseph Campbell, the famous researcher on mythology, "following my bliss!" The

catalyst came on a Mindful Self-Compassion retreat on Holy Isle, near Arran, Scotland. I recall my visceral response to the question: 'What burns most in your heart that has to be done in this lifetime?' Having just been through serious surgery and the loss of my oldest friend through breast cancer, that question revealed the silver lining – returning to my love of textiles.

Recovering from the surgery, I knew the importance of creativity in the healing process and followed some basic weaving instructions from a friend. I attended courses by outstanding artists Caron Penney, Rebecca Mezoff, Fiona Hutchison, and Pat Johns. After so many years in 'proper jobs', I left the NHS and I now weave full-time (except for a few hours a year tutoring student mindfulness teachers and offering occasional mindfulness courses). I'm an avid follower of art and, probably due to the psychological process connected to her work, I am very drawn to Louise Bourgeois.

How does it feel when you sit at your loom to weave, with fibre in hand? The focus required in the making of



a piece has a devotional feel for me. It is an embodiment of mindfulness. I linger with the breath, and what arises is a much-treasured place of peace, a softening, a homecoming... an adventure. I value slowness so, as best I can, I create space in my life (going against the tide of our ridiculously fast-paced world), and aim to work from the heart – that place of softness and ease. Nature and poetry that speak to present moment experience are also inspirations for my work.

Mindfulness and self-compassion inform my life on many levels they have increased my resilience and taught me how to bring kindness and gentleness to myself in times of difficulty. So, when self-critical thoughts creep in about my work not being good enough, or the tyranny of perfectionism arises, or I question whether I'm entitled to be in the tapestry and/or art world, my awareness that these are simply thoughts offers a choice of how to respond in a way that diffuses the unease.

Mindfulness has been the subject of extensive scientific research. It is proven to be effective in helping to respond creatively to stress and other life challenges. Jon Kabat-Zinn, who devised secular mindfulness courses for dealing with stress, defines it as,

*"The awareness that emerges through paying attention on purpose, in the present moment and non-judgementally, to things as they are."*

This is combined with certain attitudinal qualities, including patience, beginner's mind, acceptance, and I would add generosity and gratitude. Research on mindfulness has extended to include fascinating links to recent findings in neuroscience.

I summarise the theme of my work as 'Threads catching light'. It symbolises the gold that emerges from those wounded places in ourselves when they are 'broken open', the beauty that can blossom from within us when we can tenderly embrace those wounds. I love how the Japanese art of *Kintsugi* uses gold and precious metals to repair broken ceramics; the gold shines out from the very place where the piece was broken. Embracing our human frailty also means finding a way of being with our imperfections, even celebrating them, and so I make space for this honouring of impermanence and imperfection, known in Japan as *Wabi Sabi*.

Much of my work (using copper and brass wire or metallic threads) depicts the healing

effects of mindfulness and self-compassion, as understood through neuroscience. A piece called *Hard-Wired for Survival* (depicting a single neuron firing) refers to how neuropsychologist, Rick Hanson, describes how our brains are hard wired for survival and not happiness, which gives us a natural 'negativity bias'. Thus, it can be helpful to actively cultivate our happiness. I find this such a helpful idea: when I notice my own negativity bias in action in the form of unhelpful thought patterns, I can step back and see what's going on, rather than get drawn into habitual tendencies or 'zone out'.

*Mirror Neurons: the Empathic Brain* (which I was thrilled to have selected for the Cordis Showcase last year) depicts mirror neurons, which are the part of the brain that give us the capacity for empathy. Without these we would not be able to feel compassion for another or share their joys and sorrows on a feeling level. *Soothing the Traumatized Amygdala* expresses how the practice of self-compassion, releases oxytocin (the 'love chemical') and soothes agitation of the amygdala (our reptilian brain) where there has been trauma. I can personally testify to the healing nature of this practice. I love how the neuroscience research ties in with such a deep subjective, emotional experience.

In my recent first exhibition, one exhibit (a series of five) called *Blessée*, which is French for 'wounded', was placed behind a screen with an invitation to spend a short time alone with it, taking part in a brief recorded mindfulness practice; many people found it deeply moving. (The piece has mosaic gold glass woven into it with steel wire.) When my work touches people in this way, and helps them to feel a connection with our common humanity, instead of feeling alone with the challenges that life inevitably brings I am deeply moved and satisfied.

I am currently working with two deeply gifted colleagues, and friends, to develop retreats 'Exploring the Threads of Creativity and Mindfulness'. It is my deep wish that others can experience and cultivate feelings of joy - vital to balance the suffering in life - through creativity. Our lives are precious and fragile: I strongly encourage asking the question 'What burns most in my heart that has to be done in this lifetime?' I hope it brings you deep riches.

**Jo Gosling**

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Photos by Jo Gosling



Mirror Neurons;  
the Empathic Brain (detail)



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Traumatized Amygdala