

“Life without goodness,  
good thoughts,  
good actions and  
good words  
is like the sky in the night  
without the moon or stars.  
It is like a wheel without  
a hub or spokes!”

Atharva Veda

# mango moon's

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## wheels of change

Story and Photos by Amana Nova

From the moment you step off the plane amidst intense overpopulation and unimaginable poverty you can feel the energy. For me, it is a larger-than-life type of creative energy that seems to flow throughout much of Asia. It is where in the past 15 years I have discovered an unending source of inspiration and a growing arena to do my life's work. And it has been possible because of the many kind and talented people who have crossed my path.

I am frequently asked how my yarn company Mango Moon began. How I started working with women's shelters and sustainable living organizations in Nepal and Indonesia. The simple answer is - I just did it. The Nike slogan has spawned a multitude of businesses and Mango Moon is just one



of them. But the other answer, and the one that continues to carry me down a course of growth and great reward, is that it has been my life's calling.

In the early 1990's I traveled to Indonesia after taking a self-empowerment workshop. During a session about “Finding Your Soul's Path,” I heard my inner voice for the very first time. And in a loud, clear tone it said “Pack your bags, you're going to Indonesia.” (I wasn't even exactly sure where Indonesia was.) I was a single mother with two young children and traveling to Indonesia didn't seem practical - but missions from the heart rarely are.

My goal was to become a young clothing designer and the combination of beautiful batik fabrics and a tropical island were too hard to resist.



Without knowing a soul who had ever been to Indonesia, I felt connected from the moment I arrived. My inner voice had been right - it was where I was supposed to be.

Over the next five years and multiple trips back and forth to Bali, I developed a small company designing children's clothing using native fabrics sewn by the women in a local village. It was my first experience with creating a product that brought income to a group of people whose hopes for a productive future were limited at best.

As I think back, perhaps it was the result of a trip I took to India in my early 20's that has made me appreciate the importance of education and opportunity. I remember seeing people

literally living in cardboard boxes on the sidewalks in Bombay. I saw women teaching their children to beg by punishing them when they wouldn't take an outreached coin. I saw a gorgeous young boy with the voice of a nightingale who had been blinded by his parents so he would have a marketing tool for begging. I still feel sadness when I think about how his parents robbed him not only of his sight, but of his chance to make a better life. If only he had been allowed to keep his eyes, his remarkable voice could have taken him down a very different road. I knew from that point forward that education and tools were the best way to truly help people living in poverty.

Trying to grow a company in a foreign land



and raise two children simultaneously was not without its trying moments; but the friendships I developed with the people in Bali more than compensated for the tough times. They were so generous with their love and kindness even though they had nothing but their open hearts and a smile to share. Their resilience and optimism belied their oppressive circumstances and was an unending source of inspiration.

And then, my own circumstances changed dramatically when at the age of 38 I was diagnosed with breast cancer. Some people call them life threatening illnesses “diseases.” I call them “wake-up calls.”

From the time that I eventually came to terms with my illness, I also knew that my life had to have a higher purpose. It would be a few more years, many thousands of miles, and ultimately an incredible journey into spinning, knitting and dyeing to make it all happen. But the path of my inner

voice has guided me the entire way.

Fortunately, my prognosis was good and with improving health came a renewed commitment to a higher life. Once again I began feeling another foreign “tug.” This time it was to Nepal - one of the poorest nations in the world.

It so happens that I was also just six months into a new relationship with a man (who later became my husband) when he announced that he was going to be leaving on a trip. You guessed it...Nepal! There was no way I was letting him get on that plane without me. But even with limited funds and no specific destination in mind I managed to scrape together the airfare and off we went.

It didn't take long for me to realize exactly why I had been called there. A few days after arriving I met a woman in a remote village who managed a small co-op; she was spinning yarn made from recycled saris. The

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*Victoria's Ventana*

yarn was a beautiful silk blend but it was rough and dirty. But, it became the seed for what is now known as Mango Moon Recycled Silk yarn.

Based on my years of experience in Bali, I was able to begin working with this woman and her limited resources to start making sweaters. But I soon realized that sizing and meeting delivery dates were difficult to control. I didn't want to add stress to the lives of the women we were trying to help. So we eventually refined the quality of the yarn, choosing only silk fibers for our spinning and using several cleaning techniques to ensure the best possible end product. It was a winning formula.

After 5 years of establishing ourselves in the yarn market, I once again began to feel a pull to go back to Indonesia, but this time with a new idea. I wanted to use the same Non-Government Organization (NGO) Sustainable Living Co-Operative model that we had set up in Nepal, to

help the women back in Bali. But, there were several obstacles that needed to be overcome before it would be possible.

I knew the women in Indonesia were adept at weaving, so at least they had experience with fibers, but what they didn't was how to spin. If only they could learn this skill there was a chance we could bring income to the village women. Unable to find even a single spinning wheel in all of Bali, I hand carried my Ashford wheel overseas in search of an NGO that would be interested in our project. This was something that had never been tried before over there and it was much easier said than done.



Eventually we found a group of unemployed ikat weavers from Sumba. It was a start, but the next hurdle was finding a fiber to spin. We needed something similar to the recycled fibers we use in our Nepal but there are no sheep, alpaca or silk fibers available in Bali. The one thing that Bali is known for is its beautiful hand-batik sarongs - could that be our answer?

Although recycling isn't particularly popular in Indonesia, the cross threads that are removed when making fringe at the ends of the sarongs are normally thrown into the rivers or burned as trash. I figured we could spin the recycled fringe fibers into a yarn, create work for a village and clean up the rivers at the same time. Perfect!

But still, there were hurdles. We needed to create a finished product that people would enjoy using; one



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that was soft and beautiful. After six months of trying, we had only been able to spin heavy coarse yarn that were good only for use in carpets.

I was beginning to lose hope and thinking that I would have to give up but it was the village women themselves who convinced me that it was worth persisting. I decided to give it a bit more time.

Finally, several months later, I received six gorgeous skeins in the

mail just days before the TNNA (The National Needlework's Association) trade show. There was no time to prepare a knitted sample, but I wanted to see what the reaction from the retailers would be, so I brought some along for display.

The response was beyond my wildest dreams. Everyone loved the new yarn and the Sarong/Bali Sky was launched.

But, there were still more obsta-

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cles to overcome. With a fistful of orders and only one spinning wheel in Indonesia, we were suddenly in a mad crunch to meet the demand. How could we get enough spinning wheels to Bali? Our company Mango Moon knew this was the right investment to make. We contacted Ashford Handicrafts, the largest spinning wheel maker in the world, and thanks to Elizabeth Ashford and her team, an order of Ashford wheels was soon dispatched to the project. We will be forever grateful to them for their support in helping make the Indonesian Sustainable Living Project a reality.

I believe it is human nature to extend a helping hand to others in their time of need and spinning wheels became a very practical way of helping to make the world a better place.

Although it is true that the products from our women's groups are beautiful, it is really the knitters them-

selves that have made Mango Moon a success. And it is also the compassionate nature of those who buy our yarns that have created the resources to allow us to do what we do. I don't know of a more caring group of people than knitters and weavers. I am always so pleased when people tell me that they like working with our yarns because of what our company stands for. It's as if there is an invisible yarn that ties those who make our yarns in one end of the world, with those who knit with them at the other.

As we continue to grow from our meager beginnings of only 20 women in Nepal processing our Recycled Silk, to now more than 200 women hand spinning and kettle dying our newer yarns including Tie Dye Viscose and Chunky Cocoon Wool. I continue to be both humbled and amazed. And, we have recently expanded into Bolivia where women are hand spinning natural 100% alpaca.

I often think of the parable so many of us heard as children: You can give a family a fish and feed them for a day, or you can give them a fishing pole and feed them for a lifetime. And that has been the mission of my inner voice as it leads Mango Moon. It all began with helping just one woman, who helped her village, who helped their families and so it goes - one sweater at a time. I wasn't the one who started Mango Moon it was Mango Moon that started me. WF

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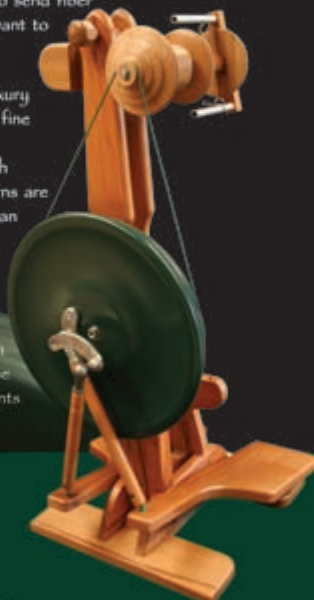
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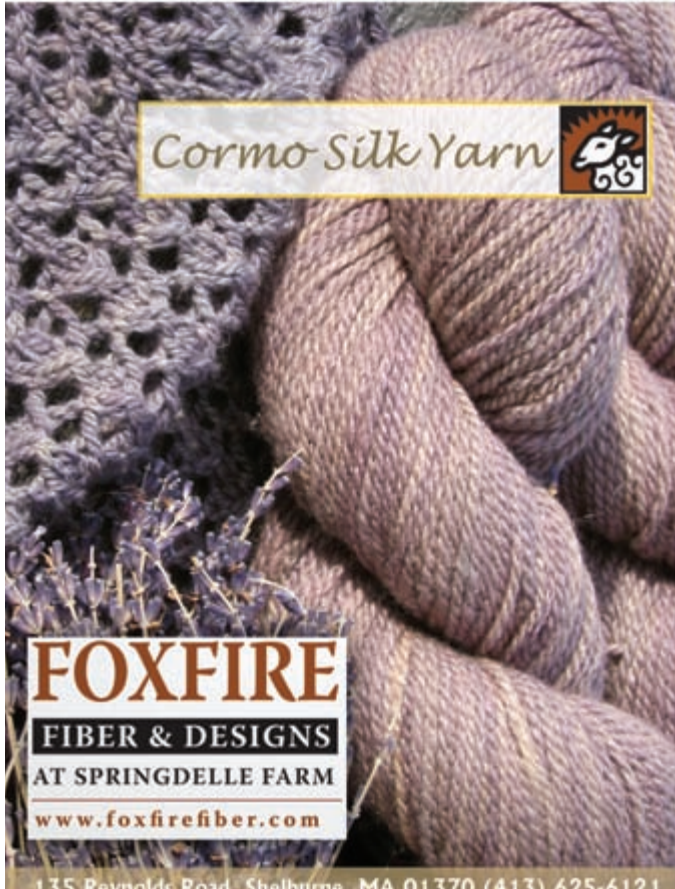
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