

Patchwork and Community

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Quilts have been made for hundreds of years in many different lands, using available fabrics and a variety of patterns. They have provided comfort and warmth, served as symbols of support and love, hailed as art, offered solace in times of crisis, been created as memorials, welcomed babies, and bound communities together. One quilt may have multiple functions depending on current needs and perspectives.

You may be familiar with the quilts from Gees Bend, Alabama. The women in this small isolated community made functional quilts to keep their families warm out of whatever fabric they could get hold of, in whatever arrangement pleased them. As quilter Mary L. Bennett said: "Didn't nobody teach me to make quilts. I just learned it by myself, about 12 or 13. I was seeing my grandmama piecing it up, and then I start. I just taken me some pieces and put it together, piece them up till they look like I want them to look. That's all." Today these quilts are hailed as great folk art and are displayed at major museums throughout the country. The money generated from the sale of these quilts has saved Gees Bend from becoming an abandoned town. The quilts have literally saved the community.

A different kind of community is created by the Names Project AIDS Memorial quilt. Family and friends of someone who has died from an AIDS related cause create a 3 by 6 foot panel. The panel publicly remembers a person who may have no other memorial. Every panel is unique in its construction, theme, and colors. Some are bright and flamboyant while others are muted and simple. Each conveys its own set of emotions. Eight of these panels are then joined to form a 12 by 12 block. It is the largest piece of community folk art in the world.

This quilt, supportive of community loss, is now so large it cannot be displayed all at once and new panels continue to be added.

The AIDS quilt is a piece of art that operates at two scales -- the entirety of it, impressing you with the expanse of the loss, and the individual panels, each telling the story of one person lost to the disease. You may have an opportunity to see a small portion of this quilt here at our church next winter. We will remember the loved ones of church members who have panels on the quilt and raise awareness that no cure has yet been found for the disease.

Quilts can build bridges between communities, sometimes when least expected. A woman on the West Coast was commissioned to create a quilt that was to be a gift from the City of Poulsbo to the Suquamish tribe to commemorate the opening of a new Suquamish Museum. She titled the quilt 'We Are Connected' and showcased similarities between the two cultures--Poulsbo, which has a strong Nordic background, and the Suquamish Indian Tribe, of which Chief Seattle was the leader. The quilt was presented at the dedication of the museum and was highly praised. She later learned that the quilt mended a rift that had formed between the two communities and was happily surprised that her quilt had such an impact.

Quilts have long been given to people as a symbol of support and encouragement in difficult times. A group of women in the Midwest donate quilts to their local Red Cross. Marlene Henderson, the Red Cross Director, said, "To us, these quilts are pure comfort. Walking into a situation and being able to wrap a quilt around someone's shoulders, watch them hug it and hold it, it's a comforting thing." One of the quilters commented, "The quilts we make for the Red Cross carry more than a monetary value. They are made with a caring heart knowing they will bring comfort to someone hurting over their loss. Like a quilt a grandmother makes for her first grandchild, or a mother makes when her child

goes off to college -- it is made with anticipation and hope that the child will feel the love sewed into it."

The quilt that is covering the altar this morning is a quilt made with that kind of love. It will be given to a family who lost their home due to Hurricane Sandy. Lorraine and her friends each made a square in the same pattern, out of fabric they had on hand. While the squares express the individuality of each quilter, assembled they reflect the love and compassion the quilters have for those who have been devastated by the storm. Families who receive such a quilt have said they feel less alone and are reminded that others remember their plight. Each time they use the quilt they know other people, people they may never meet, care about them.

Quilts also express love and comfort at a more personal level. When I was a child, home from school because I was sick, I spent my days on the living room couch wrapped in an old patchwork quilt. The quilt had some silky pieces and at least a few holes. I don't know who made that quilt or what later happened to it, but that quilt kept me warm and I felt loved when I was wrapped up in it. Given my family's finances, I would guess that the fabric of the quilt was made of material salvaged from worn out clothing. Some of those patches were bright and showy; others were darker, fading onto the background. While stroking the silky pieces was what I liked best, there were other coarser, or functional pieces, that provided stability and contributed to the warmth of the quilt. Each fabric was necessary to the overall assembly and beauty of the quilt.

Look at the quilts we have here today. The individual pieces of fabric vary greatly. There are many unique colors - blues, whites, yellows, greens, golds, browns and so on. Their are squares, triangles, circles, irregular shapes. Looking closely, the fabrics have different patterns: flowers, swirls, dots, leaves, checks. When they are placed next to each other they make something more

beautiful than their individual parts. They haven't lost their individuality but have become something more.

As Unitarian Universalists, we pride ourselves on our individuality but we also say in our values statement that we are a compassionate community. Let's take a look at our roles, how we participate in our church community. Could it be that patchwork quilts provide a metaphor for our community? When we are talk about our church community and how we fit together, we are are considering how each of us fits into that community, the overall pattern of our quilt. We are talking about our individuality, not our "individualism."

Two weeks ago, Rev. Don talked about individualism, its historical importance for UU's in the words of Emerson's famous Divinity School address, and how it has outlived its usefulness to us today. Individualism is defined as "the assertion of one's own will." Individuality is the expression of self, your thoughts and those things that make you a unique being. It means that we recognize ourselves as part of the human family, a participating member of a community, a small but essential part of this larger and wonderful world. Individuality enables us to be part of a community without getting lost.

As Rev. Fred Muir wrote in the winter issue of UU World,

There is little-to-nothing about the ideology and theology of individualism that encourages people to work and live together, to create and support institutions, that serve common aspirations and beloved principles.

He goes on to say:

We frequently overlook another strand of our tradition in our Association's Principles and Purposes, another story about ourselves that can deepen and grow our future. It is not the language of individualism,...but of

covenant: “As free congregations we promise to one another our mutual trust and support.”

He continues:

We cannot do both covenant and individualism; individuality, yes, but not individualism. Articulating and living our Principles as a commitment to covenant - creating and sustaining a community by “promising to one another our mutual trust and support” - this takes extra effort.

Martin Luther King taught that “the foundation of Beloved Community is the divine indwelling that graces all people.” The Rev Shirley Strong elaborates, “I understand the term Beloved Community to mean an inclusive, interrelated society based on love, compassion, responsibility, shared power and a respect for all people, places and things - a society that radically transforms individuals and restructures institutions.”

How might we design a patchwork quilt representing our church community? We could make a crazy quilt, like the one I loved as a child. Such a quilt can be difficult to assemble because the pieces are of different sizes and sometimes need to overlap, hiding the pattern of another piece. This design cause some individual pieces to stand out and perhaps cover other pieces. If we aren't careful, we could end up with holes or gaps that need to be filled. While this might allow us to retain our individuality, we need to be careful that we don't get so absorbed with our own thoughts and ideas that we are unable to work together to reach our shared dreams.

It seems we might need more structure to create a quilt that is sturdy. When a specific size piece is requested, such as in the AIDS quilt, assembly of the various bits of the quilt is simplified. In such a quilt the materials are of your choosing. You do need to be sure that nothing in your block is sharp or you will tear your piece and those of others. And you block cannot contain any materials

that are rigid, or you won't be able to fold the quilt and move it from place to place.

Is this the kind of quilt we want to create to represent our community? If multiple people or groups are creating the pieces, they have the opportunity to express themselves while maintaining the integrity of the final quilt. The groups are flexible, adapting to new members and new circumstances. They are careful not to have sharp edges and are careful not to harm others.

Maybe we want to be more like the quilt that is on the altar. We have a pattern which could be our values and the covenant we will be working on creating in the next few months, and we, the members and friends of this church, are the brightly colored pieces of fabric that make the pattern come to life. Unlike a jigsaw puzzle that only fits together in one way, the individual pieces can be assembled in a number of different ways to produce different final designs. The relationship of each piece of fabric to all of the other pieces is critically important. Change a color, change the orientation of shapes, change how the colors or the printed patterns line up or are offset - any one or some combination of these changes will result in a totally different quilt being created. You can determine what part of the quilt you will become. You can choose how you want to be involved in our beloved community.

Will you be that brightly-colored square that draws the eye to the quilt but makes the viewer take particular notice of just that one bright block? Or will you be part of the "field", quietly providing strength and substance to the whole? Perhaps you are more comfortable being a part of the border, holding the body together so that the quilt will not fray. You could be a patch of new cloth that becomes one with the old fabric. Maybe you want to be more creative and be one of the designers of the quilt, trying to help each person see how they might fit into the overall design. It could be that you want to follow your heart, finding your own

way, your special piece in our emerging design. As our quilt evolves, the design will change, new pieces will be added, and well loved pieces moved.

We should also consider how our quilt is going to be used. Is it to be a piece of art, to be admired as it hangs on the wall much like Wangero was going to use her grandmother's quilts? Or is it going to be used to keep us warm, provide comfort, and let us dream like Maggie? Whatever style quilt we choose to make, my hope is that it will be used, giving us comfort when we need it, and enabling our shared dreams. Wouldn't it be wonderful if our quilt was so well used that it gets a bit tattered and needs patching with new patches, created using the emerging talents, gifts and energy of our members and friends, old and new alike, moving us in bold new directions as we follow our mutually created shared dreams. While individually we have much to offer, when we join our skills and talents, our community, our church reaches its highest potential. Everyone has a gift that will make us richer and will add to our understanding of ourselves and the world around us.

Jesse Jackson said something like "this country is like a patchwork quilt - many colors, many styles, many patterns - but all stitched together by a common thread." He used patchwork quilt metaphor for the combination of diversity and community. Those words provided the inspiration for words of this song by Pat Humphries:

We are a patchwork quilt
Many colors, from many shores
We keep our own ways,
but together we make so much more.

Here, in this church, we can maintain our individuality and become part of a unique patchwork quilt. As the song says "together we are so much more." We may have several "quilts" in production at any one time. In one quilt maybe you

are among the bright colors of our quilt, perhaps at the center of the design. In another time, or in another place, you may be part of the background, supporting the pieces of the quilt that have moved to the center of the design. However you choose to construct your piece, I encourage you to find your place in the evolving patchwork quilt that is the Unitarian Universalist Church of the Lehigh Valley.