

“Piecing It All Together”

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Most of you already know that I am a “woman of the cloth” in two ways: as an ordained minister. And as textile artist. These two callings actually share much in common. But that hasn't always been apparent to me. And I have not come by either identity easily. What I want to share this morning is my story of how I have tried to be both, of how I come to be here today, neither famous theologian, nor noted artist - Just a minister-mom-artist-woman passionate about the process of creation and the life of the spirit. And trying to put together the many pieces of my life as well as I can.

A primary belief of mine is that good theology begins with storytelling. Poet Muriel Rukeyser wrote, “The world is not made of atoms, but of stories.” I, like many women before me, have told, and prayed, despaired and rejoiced much of my story in fabric, stitch by stitch.

In my story, there are three main threads. One thread is the story of my struggle to fit within institutional religion and articulate spirituality true to my experience and congruent with my ethics. The second thread is the history of my creative life and the evolution of my understanding of what it means to be an artist. And the third thread is the nearly all-consuming one called motherhood. But, today, I will mostly talk about the first two.

A nineteenth century writer, Eliza Calvert Hall, has one of her characters say:

”Did you ever think, child, how much piecin a quilt's like livin' a life? And as for sermons, why there ain't no better sermon to me than a patch work quilt, and the doctrines is right there a heap plainer'n they are in the catechism. Many a time I've sat and listened to Parson Page preachin' about predestination and free will and I've said to myself, ‘Well, ...if I could jest git up in the pulpit with one of my quilts, I could make it a heap plainer to folks than parson's makin' it with all his big words. You see, you jest start with so much calico; you don't go to the store and pick it out and buy it, but the neighbors will give you a piece here and a piece there, and you'd have a piece left every time you cut out a dress, and you jest takes what happens to come. And that's like predestination. But when it comes to the cuttin' out, why you're free to choose your own pattern... And that is just the way with livin.’ The Lord sends us the pieces, but we can cut them out and put them together pretty much to suit ourselves, and there's a heap more in the cuttin' out and the sewin' than there is in the calico.”

I first read those words in 1979. I discovered them in college while working on a senior thesis. My undergraduate degree was in Women's Studies and I was working on a project to illustrate the powerful place that quilting has historically had in many women's lives.

“Did you ever think... how piecin’ a quilt is like livin’ a life...” from the moment I first read those words, I sensed in them a deep sense of truth. I heard in these words the faint echo of an answer, an answer to a question utterly essential to my being. But I couldn’t even form the question yet, let alone the answer.

In those words of Hall’s were the things I loved most; religion, art, and literature all combined in a way that spoke to me with the truth of scripture. Here was a down to earth image that reconciled my dual passions for the creative life and the life of the spirit. The quilt is a metaphor in which both can reside. But that’s getting ahead of the story.

And it was not so easy in 1979 to see the metaphorical clarity of my being. For a variety of reasons. One, feminists were not supposed to be interested in religion except as an academic exercise. In 1973 Mary Daly published Beyond God the Father, and in 1974 Rosemary Reuther, Religion and Sexism. Institutional religion was the enemy, a big time player in the oppression of women. Back then, “real men didn’t eat quiche” and “Real feminists”, in the academic world, did not go to church. Already, at the ripe old age of 18, I was torn between two deep desires and loyalties; the call of the spirit and my new commitment to the feminist movement.

A second factor that made it difficult for me to name and claim my dual understanding of myself as minister and artist was that quilting was not considered “art.” And by many in the art world it still isn’t. And neither are some of the other textile arts. The art versus craft debate continues. Do you suppose this has anything to do with the fact that the textile arts have mostly been the domain of women? HmMMMMMMMM.

But, back to the beginning. Yes, I have thought about how “piecing” a quilt is like living a life. I’ve thought about it for years and years. When I was thirteen I inherited an unfinished quilt started by my great grandmother. Though I didn’t know it yet, that quilt led to the discovery of my deepest sense of identity. I think the quilt makes a fine metaphor for life and the spiritual journey. Each of us is a quilt in the making. Our lives are made of many bits and pieces, scraps if you will. Some are lovely and soft like velvet; some are rough like burlap; some are plain and simple. Our lives become rich and meaningful when we piece together the joys and sorrows, the questions and answers, the successes and failures, the longings, the people and experiences that have been the colors and shapes of our lives. This piecwork is the making of our minds and souls. It is a knowing and owning of our own stories. It is the spiritual journey.

In both institutional religion and the formal art world, women have not fared well. Historically, we have been too absent, or too invisible; too silent or too ignored. The art of our lives has been overlooked or undervalued. Only in recent decades have our stories, and the stories of earlier generations been listened to with the

attention they deserve.

In 1980, Carol Christ published a book in which she considered the literary stories of women's lives, authored by women, and used them to create a new model to talk about women's spiritual journeys. In Diving Deep and Surfacing she wrote:

Women's stories have not been told. And without stories there is no articulation of experience. Without stories a woman is lost when she comes to make the important decisions of her life. She does not learn to value her strengths, to comprehend her pain... Without stories she is alienated from those deeper experiences of self and world that have been called spiritual or religious.... If women's stories are not told, the depth of women's souls will not be known.

As textile artist, I see my story as a sampler quilt, each square containing a piece of the whole story. As a minister, I see my life as spiritual journey. It is not surprising that the textile works I do represent interpretations of various places on this journey. And my story, like each person's story, is profoundly unique. But it also shares much of the same material as the stories of other women. Which is not to say that some of my story isn't rooted in the common cloth of human experience, male or female. Some of it is. But some of my story is colored and shaped by being female in a world where men's and women's lives have been different.

One square in my life-story quilt would tell of the creative heritage in my family. This piece, which I did in 1992 is called "Four Generations Handed Down." It includes four generations of textile work in my family, including some squares from that original quilt I inherited from my great grand mother, and her home made gloves.

It includes matching scraps that were found in two separate family households: my grandmother and my great grandmothers. This suggests pretty clearly that they shared their scraps as they shared their lives, living just two blocks from each other in S. Mpls.

When I talk about my creative heritage, I need to talk particularly about my mother. She threw elaborate thematic parties transforming the patio into a tropical island or the dining room into a Chinese temple. She was active in Community Theater, took painting classes, and started two of her own art businesses. She taught me to sew when I was eleven. And she did all that while raising seven children. Everything she did, she did with a fun loving, artistic flare. Now at 80, she designs outrageous hats for herself and all her friends. I grew up surrounded by her creative presence.

WHAT IS YOUR CREATIVE HERITAGE?

*WHAT PARTS OF YOUR HERITAGE DO YOU CLAIM?
WHAT PARTS ARE LOST TO YOU? IGNORED BY YOU?
WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO KNOW WHERE WE COME FROM?*

Another square of my quilt would have to tell about going to Sunday school as a child and being utterly bored. All I remember is being dressed in coat-hanger angel wings for one Christmas pageant and when it was your birthday you got to drop pennies in this little church bank which made the steeple light up. But I loved going to the Sanctuary of the church. I loved the beauty of the stained glass windows, and the deep red carpeting. When I attended the service with my mother, I loved the candles and the singing, and the pregnant silence of prayer. I loved the rhythm of the service and the sense that something important was happening. These early experiences in church and my hours spent wandering in the woods as a child were where I first heard the spirit whisper to me?

WHEN DID YOU FIRST HEAR THE SPIRIT WHISPER?

I would include in my story quilt a square that reminds me of my early years of sewing in 4-H club. At the county fair, part of the judging for the sewing students was to model the garment one had made for the judges. And these judges always asked you where you planned to wear your item of clothing. Well, the girls who made the proverbial navy blue polyester dress with peter-pan collar replied, 'Church.' The answer for the denim jumper was, "School." What did I say about my black-velvet- and- wild-print, ankle length gypsy dress that laced up the front? I did wear it a few times, to the theater. But mostly for dress-up. For even back then, sewing, for me, was not so much an economical way to expand my wardrobe. It was a way for me to exercise my mind and spirit. And 4-H didn't have a category for that.

*WHERE DO YOU REMEMBER BEING OUTSIDE THE NORM? AND
ARE THERE GIFTS TO BE RE-CLAIMED THERE?*

Another square of my life story quilt would memorialize a certain summer day, in 1976, just after my high school graduation. In the busyness of graduation I had not taken time to read what my friends had written in my yearbook. I graduated from a private school with a religious affiliation and the campus minister had been a very significant person in my life. He wrote in my yearbook only this, ³Isaiah 6:9.² The Book of Isaiah, Chapter six, verse 9 reads, ³Who shall I send and who shall go for us? Here I am, Lord, send me.² In that moment, it was as clear as a bell that I would be a minister, though I didn't have a clue about how this would happen.

*WHAT HAVE BEEN YOUR MOST EXQUISITE, CLEAR MOMENTS OF
REVELATION?*

Juxtaposing that square of revelation would be the one that represents a significant break with institutional religion. Mary Daly's book Beyond God the Father, was required reading for a seminar in the religious studies department my freshman year of college. Daly's book gave me a frame of reference, a language with which to understand my sense of alienation in the Presbyterian church of my childhood and youth, the lack of women leaders, role models, the invisibility of women's¹ stories with which to identify. While reading the first ten pages of that book, my world simultaneously blew apart **and** suddenly made sense.

WHEN DID YOU FIND A NEW DOOR, OPEN?

Next to that square is one showing me standing outside the art building at college, utterly confused. A faculty member had just told me, in a private meeting, that, no, I could not arrange an independent study in quilting because there was no faculty member who could supervise such a class. My college, like most, had no textiles in the art department. When pushed a little more he said, "Quilting may be very interesting to you, but it is not art." Not art? How could this be? Had he ever looked carefully at any amazing quilts and seen the composition, the originality, the compelling beauty? I was young and ignorant of the workings of the art world. I walked out of the art building. Stunned. Frustrated. A door closed and I felt lost.

WHAT WALLS HAVE STOOD IN YOUR WAY?

That's how I ended up doing my undergraduate degree in Women's Studies; I kept bumping into invisible walls barring me from the two places I most wanted to be: the church and art. In feminism I finally found a language to name the walls. I found a community of other women also trying to find their way. I took women's history classes, and understood that it wasn't that women had no history but that the history writers looked elsewhere.

I took every women's literature class that was offered.....I read the modern feminist poets like Adrienne Rich and Marge Piercy. Their words were comfort food to my soul....I discovered the plethora of incredible 19th and 20th century novelists: Kate Chopin, Willa Cather, Alice Walker, and May Sarton. I read and read and felt my soul on fire, thrilled with so many spiritual companions. My young women friends and I talked and talked, ³hearing each other into being.² The music of Holly Near and Cris Williamson played through my mind like so many rosary beads, prayers and hymns for my new spiritual awakening.

And that's what the discovery of feminism was for me. I felt I had been given a new life, been re- born. The women's community functioned, in essence, as my new church. But there was still something missing. Though the community of academic feminists had profoundly nurtured and educated me, had thrown open

the doors of the world again, the women's community was not an intentional religious community, and that is what I longed for.

Another square for my quilt comes from the spring of my senior year in college, when a friend's father died. I went back to California with Carl. A friend of his mother's was a Unitarian Universalist minister at a church in Long Beach. The memorial service was held there. We arrived early that day to set up and prepare food. I wandered around the church and found the pamphlet rack. I noticed something about Beacon Press. I found out that day that Beacon Press, which had published many of the feminist theology books that were so important to me, was the publishing arm of the Unitarian Universalist Church. A church this radical? It seemed impossible. I grabbed a copy of every pamphlet there, and tucked them away for later reading. But as I stood there, I knew in my heart of hearts, that I had found home.

WHEN HAVE YOU SENSED, DEEPLY IN YOUR BEING, THAT YOU WERE ON HOME GROUND?

When I returned to Minneapolis, I visited and quickly joined a Unitarian Universalist Church. Finally, I was back on track. I took a year off to work. In that year I considered the possibility of graduate school in art or theology. Again, the art programs had little or nothing to offer in textiles. I chose seminary.

Through the years I continued dabbling at quilt making. Doing primarily traditional patterns because it was all I knew. At one point, I fell in love with an artist, a man who was a printmaker and a graduate of a prestigious art school. Our house was filled with art, with artists, with the spirit of creativity. This friend encouraged my own artistic endeavors and was one of the first people to tell me what I did not even believe myself, namely, that quilting could be "real" art. His encouragement combined with the artistic environment of our home, prompted me to do a quilt of my own design, to make a radical departure from the kind of quilting I had previously done. This piece, done in 1986, is called "Revelation."

The text embroidered on it comes from a poem by Annie Dillard. It reads, "I had been my whole life a bell and never knew it, until at that moment I was lifted and struck."

The moment I refer to in this quilt is the one, ten years earlier, in 1976 when it became clear to me that I would be a minister. ³I had been my whole life a bell and never knew it, until at that moment I was lifted and struck.² more generally, it is a piece about Revelation: a moment or experience in which an important truth is suddenly clear.

As I look back, how appropriate it seems that this first "art quilt", (a phrase used to distinguish original designs from traditional patterns) how appropriate that the

theme of this quilt was my call to the ministry, my deep commitment to the spiritual life.

I have often felt torn between the twin callings of art and ministry. At times I have felt that each got in the way of the other. At almost every significant turning point in my life, the two have stood before me, seeming to compete for my commitment.

What I needed to do more than anything else was articulate a reconciliation of my two loves, the life of the church and the life of creation. And the perfect opportunity presented itself. In 1994, at an important turning point for me, I found buried on my desk, a proposal form for the Annual Minns Lectureship. The Minns is an endowed lectureship awarded to one UU minister each year based on the strength of their proposal to pursue some topic of relevance to UUism. I decided I would write a proposal exploring the relationship between religion and art.

The process of writing the proposal was absolutely gift enough in itself. Writing the proposal cleared the path, focused my desire, and vision, and created an intellectual and emotional pathway for me to trace my twin passions and to articulate a liberal theology of beauty. I wrote a bridge between the two chambers of my heart, so to speak.

And then the phone call came one day while I was standing in the kitchen, making dinner, spaghetti sauce splattering all over the stove, holding my crying child who has just bumped his head. And the person on the other end of the phone told me that I had been selected as the Minns Lecturer. They would pay me a modest sum to study, and search my own soul, and write and share with others at 5 lectures across the country, what I had come to learn. "Really," I asked.

"Really," she answered. And so I did. And what a great gift it was to be asked to become articulate about who I really was, and what undeniable passions I had, and to shape them into a related whole.

One blessing led to another; one experience of clarity to another. The following year I received a Feminist Theology Award at GA, sponsored and given by the UUWF, to create a series of 12 quilts about the spiritual journey. This show then traveled for 3 years, from church to church. Many of the quilts that you will see today, were made, in part, through that grant from the UUWF.

WHAT PROFOUND GIFTS HAVE YOU RECEIVED AT JUST THE RIGHT MOMENT? WHAT RISKS HAVE YOU TAKEN TO RECEIVE THOSE GIFTS?

I mentioned earlier that one of my primary beliefs is that good theology begins with storytelling. Thus, I have shared some of my story with you. Each of us has an amazing story of how we come to know who we are, how we navigate the

roadblocks to walking our path, who helps us along the way. How we find the pieces that make up the patterns of our own souls. I share my story because we know that in every story that there is something for each and all. You each have your own piecework to do. You each have your own passions and gifts and limitations and choices to put together into a life. You each have your own magical mosaic on which to work.

Slowly, I have come to understand that quilting for me is a way of worship. The word "worship" comes from an old word meaning, "to shape things of worth." one aspect of worship is transformation, transforming the ordinary into the Sacred, the remnant into the Holy. For me, quilting as spiritual discipline is giving shape and color and texture to my inner life. It is about making beauty from what is at hand.

Whatever else art may be, it is primarily work of the soul. When I talk about art I am not talking about art in the modern, Western way, which makes it into either an activity for the exclusively gifted or into a consumer item. Art is very much a sacrament, an "outward and visible sign of inward and spiritual grace." Art is not so much what we make, but how we relate to the world. Not a noun, but a verb. This puts art back in a position to be claimed by the many. Quilting has been a way for me to use a particular discipline as a means of discovering that it is not the art creation itself that matters so much, but what the process of creation teaches.

What has the soul work of quilting taught me? First, it has taught me the beauty and necessity of pattern. Pattern is a fundamental part of our human experience, as basic as day and night, as complex as theology and mathematics. My four year old was suddenly taken with the idea of pattern. One night when we were sitting t at the kitchen table snack time turned into a profound experience in recognizing and making pattern. Long skinny pretzels interspersed with Cheerios can make an infinite number of patterns. Then, suddenly, there were patterns not just in the snacks, but also on the kitchen tile, the wallpaper, and in the order of our days. My son¹'s mind was alight with revelation; he grasped pattern as a way of marking time and space, inner as well as outer.

Pattern is the background against which we can see Revelation, with which we can balance constancy with change. Spiritual discipline is knowing and recognizing the patterns in one's self, changing them if necessary and possible, tuning one self to the larger cosmic patterns, and gracefully resting in this beauty.

The spiritual discipline of quilting has taught me to respect the wisdom of the elders, of paying attention to early lessons. For many years I made traditional quilts. It was all I knew. I delighted in being part of this communion of saints, women (and a few men) who through time have made beauty out of next- to- nothing. After several years, though, I hit a wall. I was suddenly bored. I didn't want to follow anybody else's pattern. I had mastered all the basic skills, but

needed a new way to use them.

And that is the next thing that this spiritual discipline taught me - to take risks, to listen to the still small voice urging me into new territory. Creation always involves risk, whether it be the creation of a new piece of artwork, a new recipe, a new relationship, a new career..... Many of my pieces have started out with a certain plan only to end up quite different than I imagined. Sometimes I have tried one color of fabric in a particular spot, and ripped it out the next day. Even the quilts that I did many years ago which are no longer exciting to me are a visual testament to my journey, my deepening understanding, my growing experience and wisdom.

The spiritual discipline of quilting has also taught me the rhythms of the creation process. Many of my quilt pieces were started, partially completed, only to then spend two or three years on a shelf waiting for the vision to reappear, to clarify. I used to panic thinking the piece was a throw- away. Or I would fight the fallow time and try to force the resolution. Slowly I have learned the wisdom of letting these things happen when the time is right. When the inspiration comes, it sometimes comes with such dazzling, simple clarity that I can only say a quiet, ³Thank you² for this amazing grace. And this knowledge transfers over to my sermon writing. I have learned that my sermon writing also has a very particular pattern. Now, when I hit the wall in my writing, I know to do a load of laundry, or to wash the dishes. If I allow these seemingly empty spaces, the pregnant pauses, yet pay careful attention, the sermon does get finished.

When I am in my studio, I can forget my name, the time, the needs of my children, tasks on my list of things- to- do. This is one of the benefits of spiritual discipline - to be immersed in Holy Time, dissolved in Sacred Space. When I fully enter the work, I return refreshed, invigorated, as if I had traveled to a new land. I can return to my daily tasks with greater joy and deeper presence. The opposite is true, too. When I can't find time in my life for my creative soul work, it is hard for me to give to the world around me, that which I would like to give. For years I struggled thinking that my artwork was selfish. Then I noticed the profound effects it has on everything else that I do. Though I quilt for myself, I have come to understand it as a necessary form of spiritual renewal, a way to fill my cup so that I may fill others¹.

WHAT PROFOUNDLY FILLS YOUR SOUL?

The most recent gift of my spiritual discipline is discovering that it can also be a gift for others. Only in the last 10 years have I begun to show my pieces in galleries and churches. I am amazed by what others tell me they see or feel from the pieces. Often times, some very small, private image that I think I have tucked away in a corner jumps out for others and speaks to their spirits, too. Sometimes I have done something in a quilt piece totally unconsciously, only to have a viewer walk up to it and immediately point out what was too close for me to see. It is

both humbling and exciting to speak to another's spirit and heart without words, to be reminded that there is a language of image and color and texture. And this is very much like the experience of releasing a sermon in a Sunday morning. I know the words that are on the page, that I speak, but I do not have any control over how they are heard. I think every minister has the experience of

In ministry I find an infinite number of places, ways in which to be artist for the soul. One example is the creation of worship. Creating worship for me is the creation of a living, breathing, in-the-moment kind of art in which I piece together word, images, sounds - pattern, shape, texture. In worship I work at connections, the relationships between things: the seen and unseen, the known and the barely glimpsed... and then release my creation into the mystery of the community, which adds its own additional elements to the living creation. Making worship continually tries me, teaches me, heals me.

My theology and my art are both incarnational: meaning that for me the Holy might always very present; infusing everything. It is incarnated in all of life and being. It is in the spaghetti sauce, the crying child, the phone call, and the deep yearnings of my / our spirits.

In a poem called "Looking at Quilts" Marge Piercy writes,

Art without frames: it held parched corn,
it covered the table where soup misted savor,
it covered the bed where the body knit
to self and the
dark wool of dreams...

Pieced quilts, patchwork from best gown,
winter woolens, linens, blankets, worked jigsaw
of the memories of braided lives, precious
scraps: women were buried but their clothing wore on...

They issue to us:
Rocky Road to Kansas, Job's Troubles, Crazy Ann
The Double Irish Chain, Tree of Life:

this quilt might be the only perfect artifact a woman
would ever see, yet she did not doubt
what we had forgotten, that out of her
potatoes and colic, sawdust and blood
she could create: together, alone,
she seized her time and made new.

Yes, I have definitely thought about how piecin' a quilt is like livin' a life. By

attempting to know my own sacred story, I have saved my scraps. Slowly, I have pieced my way to a kind of salvation. But I am not finished. The cloth is larger and holds more mystery than I know. Together and alone, we women must seize our time and make new.

I pray to be Holy Remnant. And I trust that my life will be connected to many others, beautiful in their own regard.

I finally understand that my artwork is not only **about** my spiritual journey; it is my spiritual journey. Quilting is my prayer and meditation. Needle through thread is my mantra, my path to comfort and clearer understanding and commitment. As others have their ways, this is mine.

A nineteenth century writer, Eliza Calvert Hall, has one of her characters say:

”Did you ever think, child, how much piecin a quilt’s like livin’ a life? And as for sermons, why there ain’t no better sermon to me than a patch work quilt, and the doctrines is right there a heap plainer’n they are in the catechism. Many a time I’ve sat and listened to Parson Page preachin’ about predestination and free will and I’ve said to myself, ‘Well, ...if I could jest git up in the pulpit with one of my quilts, I could make it a heap plainer to folks than parson’s makin’ it with all his big words. You see, you jest start with so much calico; you don’t go to the store and pick it out and buy it, but the neighbors will give you a piece here and a piece there, and you’d have a piece left every time you cut out a dress, and you jest takes what happens to come. And that’s like predestination. But when it comes to the cuttin’ out, why you’re free to choose your own pattern... And that is just the way with livin.’ The Lord sends us the pieces, but we can cut them out and put them together pretty much to suit ourselves, and there’s a heap more in the cuttin’ out and the sewin’ than there is in the calico.”

