



When (Your Spiritual) Life Goes to Pieces, Make a Quilt

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READING

The reading today comes from Eliza Calvert Hall, a Kentucky author and suffragist born in Bowling Green, Kentucky in 1856. She wrote several collections of stories and was best known for her character, Aunt Jane of Kentucky, who was a quilter. Aunt Jane speaks:

‘How much piecin' a quilt is like livin' a life! You can give the same kind of pieces to two persons and one will make a “nine-patch” and one'll make a “wild goose chase” and there will be two quilts made out of the same kind of pieces, and jest as different as they can be. And that is jest the way with livin'!

The Lord sends us the pieces, but we cut 'em out and put 'em together pretty much to suit ourselves, and there's a heap more in the cuttin' out and the sewin' than there is in the cloth.” (caliker).

When (Your Spiritual) Life Goes to Pieces....Make a Quilt

I've always been a bit in awe of quilts. I first discovered these colorful traditional American labors of love while living and teaching high school in Woodstock, Vermont over 30 years ago. I soon learned that you could find the quilt display in the tents or barns at those small country fairs. Places like Tunbridge, VT with a population of ...more cows than people. But there, at the Tunbridge Worlds Fair, among the 4-H displays, behind the biggest pumpkins, purest Fancy Grade maple syrup and best raspberry jam, there..in the corner..in the distance, an outline of these massive quilts would appear....bright in color, with neat squares, some stitched lovingly with fruits and flowers, others in monochrome Wild Goose Chase geometric patterns that looked ultra modern. The Nine Patch quilts, a simple nine square form were probably used for baby quilts to be crawled and played upon, while other styles of quilts served as commemorative pieces in honor of an anniversary, a RETIREMENT or historical event. Yes, all were made out of the same kinds of pieces, but just as different as they could be.

If you set about making a quilt, what would it look like?... Just as we are in the physical process of repainting and replastering our sanctuary, I can't help but think that we are all also in the process of making and re-working our spiritual quilts. Some of us have always stitched our spiritual journeys with Unitarian thread. Many of us, however, were stitching a very different looking quilt... of a faith that we

gave up... to share a life with a partner of another background...or of a faith that no longer worked for us, whose very basis of beliefs we questioned. What has happened to that old quilt? And what has replaced it?

I was jolted awake three years ago when my son, who was applying to Divinity School, was asked to describe my faith while he was growing up. He said that I had “an introspective spirituality stripped of looming Protestant remnants.” I didn't mind the introspective part, but having my beliefs “stripped of looming Protestant remnants” didn't sound too complimentary!...Something had been torn away and left little in its place. Wounded. Void. Without substance. I realized, then, that I needed something more. The old ends weren't tied up. (pause) For example, Do you ever sing a little louder when it's a reworded hymn, whose tune you've sung since you were a kid, and even while you're singing the NEW version, you're thinking of the old words? When the going gets really tough or a loved one is critically ill, do you hedge your bets by sending up a quick prayer to that guy in the sky? And how about admitting how difficult it is explaining to a friend what UU is; why, you could have delivered your old creed effortlessly in your sleep! Finally, do you bask in the comfort and familiarity of celebrating your old traditions when reunited with friends and family? I have done and felt all of these, and while I had cast aside my old Methodist quilt, some pieces of it were still very much a part of my life and I longed for some of the old experiences behind it. I wanted to find a way to reintegrate a few parts of that old quilt, that I had left in the corner, aged and threadbare but still baring a few squares of light.

There's an old quilter's saying, As ye sew (spelled s-e-w), so shall ye rip. And indeed, embarking upon this journey of reintegrating one's religious roots, is messy and takes tough love from yourself and others. There's a lot of doing and undoing. Pulling things apart and putting them together differently. Looking for common threads. Piecing things together with the help of others.

While we come from multiple backgrounds, there is some universality to this search, and I'd like to talk with you about the 4 steps that I encountered. The first step was realizing that I was in a poor relationship with my previous faith and that, while my initial revolution had been to totally reject it, I now wanted to reengage parts of it, in a healing way. Next, it was time to take steps to respond. So, I backed up a bit, considering the attributes of some of my favorite Christians: the generosity of my green-thumbed Grandfather, who always had extra vegetables from his garden, packed into a bag of groceries for those who would otherwise have gone without; the strength of my mother's faith, that had sustained her through the tragic train derailment death of my 28 year old sister, and still, her insistence that “every knock was a boost”; the acts of faith and pursuit of justice of Dr. Martin Luther King as he dared to have a dream. At times, Christianity had emboldened, inspired and encouraged people to be their best selves. Our Seven Principles inherited and share their values today. Values worth keeping. Common threads.

Then, I discovered the Joseph Campbell videos, which so eloquently merged multiple religious practices and beliefs into themed answers to basic human needs and aspirations. Celebrations of Christmas, Hanukkah and Kwanzaa symbolized our seeking of light, hope and warmth in the darkest days. Easter and Passover celebrated the rebirth or renewal of life; and acts of doing good deeds and supporting the weak and the poor frequently assumed the name of love in its many translations. Campbell's search for common meaning in world religions gave me evidence that reinterpretation of religious beliefs was exciting exploration! It also reconfirmed that we could find commonalities in our

old religions reflected in those newer ones that we were exploring.

Along the way, I learned that it helps to have someone go on this journey with you. You can't do it on your own. It could be a close friend, a parent or child, your partner, a minister, a literary resource. Small group ministry. Or Adult RE. Reintegrating your religious roots is a community project and a work of art of many. And you will need their help!

In my case, the late Unitarian Universalist minister, Forrest Church, along with Small Group Ministry, and my son, jolted my journey in encouraging me to think outside the box and affirming my right to do so. Forrest Church must have run into many ex-Christians stripped of their remnants, because he had so many quips, sermons and essays encouraging us to privatize and reinvent meaning for ourselves. For example, when a young man approached him and told him that he didn't believe in God, Forrest replied, "Tell me about the God you don't believe in, because I probably don't believe in him either."

And just last year, my first small group ministry program included an investigation into many of the words that I had discarded with my Methodist quilt. It was fascinating how, just like the quilters, in our group discussions "the Lord had sent us the pieces, but we cut em out and put em together pretty much to suit ourselves", so while the outcome and definitions were different for each and every one of us, the words now had meaning again.

Once again, I have taken ownership of some important religious words and concepts and made them relevant. For me, GOD is the spark within each of us, but greater than all of us. JESUS was a Jewish teacher looking for a teachable moment. He knew the streets, loved the common people and worked for change from the bottom up, supporting the voiceless, the sick and the weak. Jesus was a true radical of his time. His RESURRECTION, in the historical context, was not a miraculous rising up, but rather, an uprising against the violence of the status quo- a hardened religious and political leadership, not unlike some of the struggles going on in the middle-east today. Jesus demonstrated how REDEMPTION could come from doing good works...standing on the side of love.

Finally, I am most grateful to my son, who faithfully phoned me to discuss how meetings went and what was on my mind, holding my virtual hand in the uncertainty and vulnerability of an exploration, to which his words had awoken me.

My spiritual quilting is far from over, but I have found a few benchmarks along the way that can be drawn from my tradition. Perhaps some of them will be helpful to you as well:

I have learned that....

- Looking backward at our religious beginnings can bring us forward.
- We can build a new relevant religious vocabulary.
- Combine memories with new meanings.
- Celebrate old traditions with new twists.
- Find modern parallels in biblical stories.
- Seek our commonalities with other world religions and philosophies.
- Enjoy the metaphors and simplify the message
- And at any time,

- Reinterpret, relate, rip out and replace as required.

Has your inner voice lately said , “I wish I could get back in touch with my tradition”? I invite you to revise your spiritual quilt ..by recognizing the need to engage in a healing way, ...by working and reworking your responses, ...by letting mentors and friends join you on your journey... and by finding benchmarks to help you draw value from your tradition. As our wise quilter says, “There's a heap more in the cuttin' out and the sewin' than there is in the cloth.”

This process is as stimulating as the results, and you will most likely find your spiritual quilt to be a vibrant testimony of living faith, that, in the quiet corners of your mind, takes your breath away.