

HANDS ALL AROUND



A QUILTING MISCELLANY
BY FRANCES O. DOWELL

ISSUE 1

SUSTAINABLE QUILT-MAKING:
THEORY AND PRACTICE

A Note from Frances to Start Things Off

Consider the fact that sustain and sustenance are, linguistically-speaking, cousins. They come from the same root word, the Latin *sustinere*, to “hold up, hold upright; furnish with means of support; bear, undergo, endure.” The things that sustain us feed us— they give us physical, emotional, and spiritual sustenance.

Sustainable practices ensure that future generations will be similarly fed and supported. When we practice sustainable quilt-making, we work to conserve resources so that the generations that follow ours—not just quiltmakers, but everyone—will have water, clean air, a stable climate and so on. In essence, we want the future to have a future, and we adjust our actions accordingly.

Sustainable quilt-making practices in which textiles are repurposed—old shirts, moth-eaten curtains, half-finished quilt tops—create community across time by connecting us in tangible and intangible ways with those who came before us and those who will come after.

In this issue of Hands All Around, I’ll be exploring these ideas in more depth as well as sharing stories and reflections from quilters who practice sustainable quilt-making. I’d love to hear your thoughts.

Email me at fmdowell@gmail.com!



Sustainable Quilt-making as a Spiritual Practice

When we practice sustainable quilt-making, our actions play a role in shaping the future. We conserve resources, support sustainable ways of producing materials, and keep fabric out of the landfill.

We are in turn shaped by our practice. Sustainable quilt-making is a counter-cultural act, and whenever we push against the tide of culture, we're re-formed by our efforts—not just intellectually, but spiritually. I see sustainable quilt-making as a spiritual practice for many reasons, but perhaps most prominently because it is a practice of self-giving as well as community-building across time and place.

Part I: Sustainable Quilt-Making as an Act of Self-Giving

How is sustainable quilt-making an act of self-giving? Let's consider what we sacrifice when we practice sustainable quilt-making:

1 Convenience—Going to thrift stores to find material for quilts can be a lot of fun, but it certainly lacks the convenience of shopping online, buying fabrics in the exact colors you were looking for, getting fabric cuts that fit pattern requirements, and on and on. We live in a culture that puts a high premium on convenience. The goal is to get the job done fast with as few obstacles to success as possible. Repurposing materials is not fast work, and it involves risk. Outcomes are not guaranteed.

2 Perfection—Perfection is the idol (and the sickness) of our age. It's hard to shake the sense that if what we make isn't perfect, it's less-than, of lesser value, somehow a failure. So we strive for perfection and one way we do this is to control as many variables as possible in our creative process, which is simply not possible when you're dependent on luck, intuition and randomness in the procurement of the materials for your quilts.

3 Choice—Whether you're looking for materials to upcycle or shopping for sustainably produced fabrics, your choices as a practitioner of sustainable quilt-making will be limited. Limited choices are anathema in our consumer culture; we've come to expect that not only whatever we want or need will be available, but it will be available in every color and configuration. To practice sustainable quilt-making is to give up that expectation. Your choices are at times so limited that they aren't really choices at all. You work with what's there. As they say, you make do and mend.

4 Money—This is particularly true when you're resourcing sustainably-produced fabrics, which generally cost more than traditional quilting cottons. When we're accustomed to cheap goods, it can be hard to pay more for our supplies. When we're used to wielding 40% off coupons, paying top dollar feels painful. Our money represents our time, energy and efforts. When we practice sustainable resourcing, we pay more, but we do so knowing that our sacrifice serves others.



"I communicate the hopefulness in discarded remains in our lives that are often overlooked, forgotten and or no longer valuable but recall the history of their previous breaths and proprietors."

--Artist Tijay Mohammed (from LinkedIn Profile)

"Every quilt is a piece of history. It is a record of the fabric of a given period. Its pattern and design reflect the style of the time. The quilt is an essay about the maker's ability, training, taste and feelings."

--Bets Ramsey, "Recollections of Childhood Recorded in a Tennessee Quilt" (Uncoverings, 1983)

Secondhand Stories

The Quilty Nook (<https://quiltynook.zakfoster.com/>) is an online group created by Zak Foster for people “who are excited about tapping into the power and magic of textiles.” In February 2022, I posted the following query in the Quilty Nook community:

I wonder if anyone here has the sense as you work with repurposed materials that you're in touch with the original maker/wearer/user or if you feel connected to them by working with what they've left behind? I'm not thinking about woo-woo, ghostly kind of connections (tho I'm certainly not opposed to ghost stories—share 'em if you've got 'em!). I'm really pondering more intangible connections. You've felt someone's essence in their old shirt. Working with a thrifted quilt top has made you wonder about the person who made it and ponder what their life had been like. It might also be that you don't focus on the specific maker/wearer, but you're mindful of the history of the fabric, where it might have come from, how it might have been used, etc.

What follows are some of the replies I received. Thanks to everyone who took a moment to share their thoughts with me!



I recently deconstructed a quilt that I found at the Goodwill "Outlet" (i.e., pay-by-the-pound) near where I live. It was a hexagon quilt, made of inexpensive polyester fabrics. The quilt top was entirely handsewn, and it was obvious that someone spent a LONG time working on the top. They even practiced thrift themselves, as a few of the hexagons included a bit of the fabric selvedge.

In stark contrast, the finishing of the quilt was pretty obviously attempted by someone who was not an experienced sewist and did not have a lot of knowledge of quilt construction. Very little of the piece was actually quilted (in random, haphazard spots), and the backing was really poorly machine-stitched to the top. As I removed those stitches, I could feel the frustration of someone forcing these thick polyester fabrics through a sewing machine.

I still wonder: was this the same person? Did the same person--who so painstakingly constructed these hexagons by hand--also try (with limited success) to finish it into a quilt? Or was the quilt top handed down to a friend or relative to finish? How did it end up at Goodwill in the first place?

–Jason Pierson (jasonpiersonquilts.com)

I've just started pulling apart old clothes, clothes that are not suitable for donating and would otherwise end up in landfill. What I've found fascinating is seeing the hand stitching and other construction techniques of the original maker. Yes they were probably severely underpaid in a factory somewhere far away, but their hands made this and I feel connected to them.

–Renaë Coles (@colesradio)



Last year I acquired 10 quilt tops from various sources. Each was its own ghost a soul stuck between pieces and being a finished object.

In November & December I decided to finish one of these quilt tops. A 1960's pinwheel. The top maker was an accomplished quilter to pull off the bold florals. The overall composition is amazing and best appreciated at a distance. I was surprised to find more than 6 pieces sewn in wrong side up. Was it for different textures or were they working in low light or extra fast? It took almost 2 months to hand quilt and bind but I finished this ghost.

—Bex Viets (@hexagontextile)



I am mending a quilt that was made by my great-great grandmother and I felt this strong connection to her as soon as I held and studied the quilt. I've done a lot of learning about her in the last few months, but you can only learn so much about someone who is gone, especially as I don't have a journal from her. The quilt seems to tell me so much about her. I also made memory quilts from my late father in law's shirts. And I love it so much because he gave amazing warm hugs that would just wrap you up--and the quilt does the same thing. I guess any quilt would do this too, but it's really special knowing it's made from shirts he wore. My mother in law and sister in law say they love it because they can remember when he wore those fabrics.

—Jessica Black (@dreams.of.jess)

Much of my work is created using vintage kimono silk remnants. I OFTEN ponder about the history as I'm stitching. Especially looking at the precise stitching of thread that may still be intact or a mended piece. Even a small hole makes me giddy. And more and more I find myself using those elements as focal points to show off rather than hide. I wonder about the story. Who made it? What occasion was this garment originally worn? Where did they go while wearing it? What did they do? And I wonder about the hands that did the stitching and mending in a culture that has fascinated me since childhood when I lived on Okinawa, Japan for a couple of years. I also find myself having the same thread of thoughts when working with vintage textiles especially.

—Angie Collett (@artvisionz1)



“Today I feel like quietly picking apart an old curtain for the back of a quilt, a tender restorative act. I appreciate how the many different tasks of making a quilt speak to the moods of my soul.”

—Quilter Sherilynn Wood, Instagram Post

“Fabric scraps remind me that my actions lead to multiple effects: intended and unintended.”

—Heidi Parkes, IG post 2-22-22

Part II: Sustainable Quilt-Making as a Cure for Loneliness

Time present and time past
Are both perhaps present in time future,
And time future contained in time past.

—T. S. Eliot, *The Four Quartets*

If you only live in the present, without connection to the past or hope for the future, you feel a strange kind of loneliness. You are, as Walker Percy put it, lost in the cosmos. So how do you get found? One way is by entering into community with those who came before you and those who will come after.

There are different ways—authentic ways, which is to say without nostalgia or romanticism—to connect to people who came before us. One is to pay attention to the things they made, attention being, as the French philosopher and mystic Simone Weil wrote, the rarest and purest form of generosity.

You can pay attention to all manner of things—not just the beautiful things preserved in museums, but also things like the old pair of jeans you’re cutting up for a project. Someone made those jeans, probably in less than ideal circumstances (in a factory, the machine noise making conversation impossible, the floor boss looking over her shoulder, telling her to work faster), someone who probably would have preferred to be doing something else. To take a moment to admire her craftsmanship and to honor her effort is to acknowledge that she existed and her work mattered. When you finish the quilt that she contributed to, you can hold it up and say, Look what we did.

As you piece scraps of fabric that came from other projects or repurpose a flannel shirt, your fingers brush against someone’s personal history. What’s embedded in that fabric? What molecules linger on the surface? It’s hard not to think of who cut the pieces or put the shirt on. What was she thinking about as she cut through the fabric? Where was he going the last time he put on the shirt? What stories linger in the fibers?

Maybe you come across a cache of orphaned quilt blocks in the Good Will and you use them in your own work. You're mindful of the hands that created the block, the person who started out to make something and then ran out of time or money or interest. Maybe she became ill and could no longer quilt. The maker is anonymous, but now, as you work on a quilt, she starts taking shape in your mind. Your attention revives her and reveals her. The two of you, in your way, have become friends.

It may be easier to imagine ourselves in relationship with people who came before us—people who bear names and histories, people who have left traces of themselves in what they left behind—than with people who've yet to be born. It's harder to feel affection for utter abstractions. But when we're mindful of the fact that others will come after us and at this moment we're the stewards of the planet they'll inherit, we're demonstrating a concern for them, unborn and unnamed though they might be. When we practice sustainable quilt-making, we acknowledge our responsibility to the future. We understand our connection. We're declaring a relationship.

In an interview with Sam Harris, the poet David Whyte said, "The ultimate touchstone of friendship is not improvement, neither of the other nor of the self. The ultimate touchstone is witness, the privilege of having been seen by someone, and the equal privilege of being granted the sight of the essence of another, to have walked with them, and to have believed in them, and sometimes, just to have accompanied them, for however brief a span, on a journey impossible to accomplish alone."

When we practice quilt-making with others in mind—whether those who came before us, those who quilt alongside us, or those who will follow—we're creating community across generations. We are seeing and will be seen in turn. We're acknowledging that we are members of one another, and that we are not alone.



"According to the scheme of our present [linear] thinking, every human activity produces waste. This implies a profound contempt for correct discipline; it proposes, in the giddy faith or prodigals, that there can be production without fertility, abundance without thrift. We take and do not give back, and this causes waste. It is a hideous concept, and it is making the world hideous. It is consumption, a wasting disease. And this disease of our material economy becomes also the disease of our spiritual economy, and we have made a shoddy merchandise of our souls. We want the truth to be easy and spectacular, and so we waste our verities; we are always hastening from the essential to the novel; we will have no prophet who is not an acrobat. We want to have love without a return of devotion or loyalty; to us, Aphrodite is a peeping statistician, the seismographer of orgasms. We want a faith that demands no return of good work."

Wendell Berry
"Discipline and Hope," The Unsettling of America

"The way we are, we are members of each other. All of us. Everything. The difference ain't in who is a member and who is not, but in who knows it and who don't."

Burley Coulter, "The Wild Birds,"
a short story by Wendell Berry

"The idea will not perish. What we let fall will be picked up by those behind. I can hear their childish voices on the hill."

Tom Stoppard, The Coast of Utopia





Resources for a Sustainable Quilt-Making Practice

Websites

<https://suzyquilts.com/sustainable-quilting-101-scraps-batting/>

<https://createandsustain.org/https://www.zakfoster.com/>

<https://www.zakfoster.com/quiltynook>

Video: Soft Bulk Podcast

Sustainable Sewing Part 1:

Repurposed Materials & Quilts with Sherri Lynn Wood

<https://youtu.be/wqI7YbgtQra>

Sustainable Sewing Part 2:

Zero Waste for Quilters with The Zero Waste Chef

<https://youtu.be/bd-fuJYKAS0>

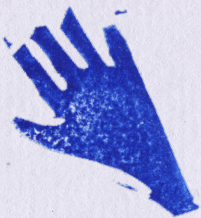
Books (Not Necessarily Quilt-Related)

*Mending Life: A Handbook for Repairing
Clothes and Hearts*

by Nina Montenegro and Sonya Montenegro

Cradle to Cradle: Remaking the Way We Make Things

by William McDonough and Michael Braungart



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