

# HANDS ALL AROUND



A QUILTING MISCELLANY  
BY FRANCES O. DOWELL

ISSUE 2

BEAUTIFUL, USEFUL THINGS



## A Note from Frances to Start Things Off

I recently re-read Alice Walker's short story, "Everyday Use," in which the debate over whether old quilts should be preserved or used comes to life in the saga of the daughter who returns home to reclaim her heritage. She wants to take the family quilts and hang them on her walls, preserve them as art and artifacts. Her sister, to whom the quilts have been promised, won't appreciate the value of these quilts, the prodigal daughter believes, arguing, "She'd probably be backward enough to put them to everyday use."

When I first read this story, I was on the side of the sister who wanted to use the quilts, and to some extent I still am. These quilts were made to be used, after all. At the same time, there are some quilts so possessed of meaning and memories, you want them taken out of circulation and preserved. The quilts in this story arguably fall into this category. "In both of them were scraps of dresses Grandma Dee had worn fifty and more years ago," Walker writes. "Bits and pieces of Grandpa Jarrell's paisley shirts. And one teeny faded blue piece, about the size of a penny matchbox, that was from Great Grandpa Ezra's uniform that he wore in the Civil War."

That's the thing about everyday quilts – they often carry remnants of our lives in them, if not shirt scraps

and pieces of old dresses, then red clay stains from springtime picnics and corners chewed ragged by teething babies. They're documents, scrapbooks, tiny archaeological sites. Dig into them and you'll find all sorts of stories, or the whispers of stories at least. Rumors from a distant land.

This issue of *Hands All Around* is entitled "Beautiful, Useful Things," and you've probably made the connection to the William Morris edict – *Have nothing in your houses that you do not know to be beautiful or believe to be useful*. My favorite quilts are both. As much as I admire show quilts and carefully preserved heirlooms, they often strike me as set apart from the living, breathing heart of things. Maybe this makes me odd, but whenever I come across a photo of an old quilt with holes in it, I get a little giddy. A coddled Mariner's Compass just doesn't elicit the same response.

So my question is, why would my excitement ebb if I learned that the hole-y quilt was actually a bedspread purchased at Sears? Why does a homemade quilt carry different meanings than a factory made blanket similarly employed? Let's ponder this together. Let's consider the possibilities.

## The Impractical Practical Quilt

**1** There's really no practical reason to make a quilt for everyday use. Whether you make quilts by machine or by hand, spend lots of money or very little, it doesn't matter. You can buy a perfectly attractive quilt from Pottery Barn or Walmart in the time it takes to swipe a credit card.

So why do some of us make huge investments of time and often money to make quilts to put on our beds or to wrap up in while we watch TV? What are we getting at? What are we after? No one's going cold if we don't make our quilts.

For me, it mostly comes down to the pleasure of making by hand – the tactile enjoyment of handling fabric, the

way every quilt is like a series of puzzles to solve. I like the cutting out and stitching together. I like the ironing. There is an orderly dance to quilt-making that pushes against the disarray of ordinary life.

There's also the fact that I love quilts. I love to look at them and think about the people who made them. I love them as documents. I love their many layers of meaning. I love how, when you talk about quilts, you can't get away from the metaphors – *layers of meaning, stories stitched into the fabric, piecing together a quilt's story.*

I love how every homemade quilt is its own little poem just waiting for us to figure it out.

**2** Are quilters Luddites in our way? Raging against the machine? This seems like a stretch, especially given how many of us use machines to make our quilts. And it's hard to argue for countercultural status when so many quilters engage in the kind of consumerism that's in lockstep with the rest of society.

But think about how many people you know who actually make goods that they use on a regular (or even an irregular) basis. I mean, people who live on your street. Count up the makers – the woodworkers, the carpenters, the creators of candles and/or soaps. Maybe you have a knitter or two. How about glass blowers? Potters? How many weavers, come to think of it? Unless you live on a very funky street in a very funky town, my guess is that the number of makers on your street is one, which is to say, you.

It's odd how odd it is to make something in our homes nowadays. We spend our time/energy/bodies at work in exchange for currency that we then spend at the store for our bookshelves, blankets and table settings. To cut out the middleman in this process is an interesting and unusual choice. An unfeasible choice for a lot of people.

I think about my life back in the day, when I cleaned houses for a living. When I got home from work, all I wanted to do was shower, eat and watch TV until I fell asleep on the couch. I might knit a row or two of a sock, but



that was it. It wasn't until later that I had the time, energy and money to devote myself to quilt-making.

**3** I often think about the women who made quilts out of necessity. I'd like to believe that making quilts was enjoyable for them, a break from the more routine chores of their days, the more tedious work that went into keeping their families clothed and fed. I don't know if that's true or not. What I do know from looking at books like Roderick Kiracofe's *Unconventional & Unexpected* is that the world is filled with everyday quilts that are not just pleasing to the eye, but also joyful revelations of the things you can make with whatever will receive a needle and thread.

**4** In Alice Walker's story "Everyday Use," Dee, the prodigal daughter who once upon a time couldn't get away from home fast enough (and now goes by the name Wangero), has a new appreciation for things she once disdained. It's not just the quilts; there's a butter churn and dash she also wants for display in her own home. Her mother looks at it and notices "[y]ou didn't even have to look close to see where hands pushing the dasher up and down to make butter had left a kind of sink in the wood. In fact, there were a lot of small sinks; you could see where thumbs and fingers had sunk into the wood. It was beautiful light yellow wood, from a tree that grew in the yard where Big Dee and Stash had lived."



Her observations remind me of what artist Laura Potter wrote in an essay entitled "By Hand & Brain": "The one sure-fire way to make an individual more emotionally attached to a thing is if they know the person who made it, or had a hand in its making, and if the trace of a hand remains palpable."

And *that* reminds me of something my friend Belinda Alston said in an interview I did with her a few years ago about her quilts: "I've had a friend and a family member say, 'I could just buy that quilt at a local store for twenty-five dollars, fifty dollars.' And I said, 'You won't buy my quilt.'"

Which is to say, you won't find a quilt that bears the trace of Belinda Alston's hand at Target, and if you don't understand the difference, then perhaps it's for the best that Belinda's quilt is unavailable to you.

(I'm pretty sure that if you're reading this, you understand the difference.)

**5** There is something wonderful about covering up with a quilt made by someone you know. Even if that someone is you.

**6** Think about other items which we sometimes make for our homes. Think, for instance, about those curtains you made for your daughter's room three years ago. They are lovely, especially when you open the window on a spring day and they dance a little in the breeze.

But twenty years from now, when you and your daughter are talking about the things she remembers from her childhood bedroom, she won't remember the curtains at all, as beautiful as they are, as perfectly matched as they are to the paint and the carpet.

What your daughter will remember is the quilt you made for her when she was four. It was, we can all admit now, not a great quilt. You hadn't really taken the whole quarter-inch seam thing to heart yet. You'd yet to fully internalize the importance of contrast. These skills would come later, but not in time to save this quilt. And yet your daughter loved it. Talked to it sometimes as if it were a living thing, her special friend, the repository for all of her many secrets and stories.

She never once had a conversation with the curtains or with the adorable sweater you made for her that year you were into knitting. She never even told them her name.



## A Patchwork of Quotes

"[M]y experience has been that the effort to bring something new and meaningful into the world – whether in the arts, the kitchen or the marketplace – is exactly what generates the sense of meaning and fulfillment for which so many of us yearn so deeply."

–**Peter Korn**, *Why We Make Things and Why It Matters: The Education of a Craftsman*

"The simple fact is that quilts were handmade by people for people. Every phase of their production was permeated by giving and sharing. From the trading of scraps and patterns and the actual production in 'bees' to the giving away of the final finished work, quilting was an essentially human activity."

–**The Foxfire Book**, from the chapter entitled "A Quilt is Something Human"

"I would like to suggest that the word 'making' has connotations of humanity, care and consideration. It is a body-temperature word; it has a pulse. A great deal of contemporary cultural production and much that is delivered by the power of new technology, is detached and unsatisfying. It is not imbued with the warmth and compassion (perhaps through the perception of labour) that the word 'making' naturally implies."

–**Laura Potter** "By Hand & Brain"  
(<https://medium.com/hand-brain>)

"For some people, making is not about romantic self-expression, nor is it really about creativity or innovation. It is a way to survive. Not a choice, a pastime, or a middle class political statement against corporations and global homogeneity: it is simply the means by which they provide for themselves and their families. There is a huge difference between making things to sell or swap out of a sense of public connectedness or for self-fulfillment, and producing things to make a living. It is hard work. The idea that there is redemptive, meditative or thera-

peutic power in making (or craftsmanship) is a luxurious notion that only we in the developed world could be discussing."

–**Laura Potter** "By Hand & Brain"  
(<https://medium.com/hand-brain>)

"If you can't delight in the everyday

you have no future here."

–**Charles Wright**, "Present Tense"

"While it is possible that a man might sew a quilt, perhaps during winter time when there were no fields to attend, quilting was primarily a woman's task. The makers of these quilts likely gathered old coats and dresses, feed, sugar, flour sacks, and tobacco pouches – anything that could be stitched or 'scraped' together, or 'scarce material' as it was called – for a quilt. These women, like everyone in the family, rose and began work with the sun. In addition to household duties, some worked at the company-owned and contracted fields alongside their families or tended the family plots. Quilting was often solitary work, done after meals had been cooked, children put to bed, and cleaning done. It was a work that they looked forward to; these were rare, tranquil moments of solitude and the pieces they stitched painted a picture of what a 'scraped together life' looked like. These quilts are a reflection of their love for their families, their pride in their homes, and their skill in making something beautiful out of 'making do.'"

–**Natalie Chanin**, "Never Seen a Blanket," *Unconventional & Unexpected: American Quilts Below the Radar, 1950-2000*

"Our local affections will have universal implications."

–**Matthew Loftus**, "Will Technology Enhance or Deplete Relationships?" *Plough*, 2022

"You know, people is just crazy about my quilts. I could of gave away and sold every quilt I got if I had listened to all of them. But I wouldn't do it. I want to keep some of these old-time quilts for myself. I ain't going to sell them. I like my old quilts. I get to looking at them and think about where I was living when I pieced them up and quilted them out. Now the quilts that I don't sell,

what I keep for my own person to use, I put them away after the winter's over. I washes them, and put them up there in my cedar chest, and I stack some of them under the bed tick. Sometimes, though, I just wish I could sit down and piece up quilts and give them all away."

—**Percolia Warner**, from *Local Color: A Sense of Place in Folk Art* by William Ferris

"I'm all for good workmanship but I'm bored with it. When I see a quilt that shows me the soul of the maker, I get really, really excited. Or this woman says, 'I am different and I was here,' or 'I didn't want to follow the rules and I was here.' I think if we could really find the stories behind the quilts that's the main thing."

—**Teddy Pruett**, *QSOS-Quilters Save Our Stories* interview, 2013

"That man is rich whose pleasures are the cheapest."

—**Henry David Thoreau**, *Journals*

"Out came Wangero with two quilts. They had been pieced by Grandma Dee and then Big Dee and me had hung them on the quilt frames on the front porch and quilted them. One was in the Lone Star pattern. The other was Walk Around the Mountain. In both of them were scraps of dresses Grandma Dee had worn fifty and more years ago. Bits and pieces of Grandpa Jarrell's paisley shirts. And one teeny faded blue piece, about the size of a penny matchbox, that was from Great Grandpa Ezra's uniform that he wore in the Civil War."

"'Maggie can't appreciate these quilts!' she said. 'She'd probably be backward enough to put them to everyday use.'

"'I reckon she would,' I said. 'God knows I been saving 'em for long enough with nobody using 'em. I hope she will!'

I didn't want to bring up how I had offered Dee (Wangero) a quilt when she went away to college. Then she had said they were old-fashioned, out of style."

—**Alice Walker**, "Everyday Use"  
(<https://harpers.org/archive/1973/04/everyday-use/>)

# 'On Everyday Quilts...'

## THOUGHTS FROM FRIENDS

**A**ll my quilts are made as everyday quilts. I make each one for a specific person and make them with intent and thoughts and hopes for my people. I like to think that no store bought quilt comes imbued with the love and intent and good wishes I try to sew into mine. It's a way to embody the love I have for my people and physically cover them with my good thoughts and hopes even when we aren't together. I want them to use the quilts until they are tattered and worn. I can always make more. Quilts are meant to be loved and used. There is added beauty (layered beauty) in things that were made with love and then are equally loved by the people who receive and use them... not that I have strong feelings on this topic!

—*Jennifer Hague (@oneofthetribeofjennifers)*

**I** sleep under a patchwork quilt every night that was made by some unknown person in my husband's family. It's funny because I don't \*love\* the quilt exactly but it is \*my\* quilt and feels like home because I sleep under it every night. A few years ago I started mending it, which has been an ongoing project as tears and thin spots keep surfacing. The repair process is slow and perhaps is taking more time than it would to make a new quilt from scratch, but I love preserving the quilt we have and to some extent transforming it with the new patches and fabrics I am adding.

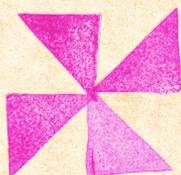
—*Barbara Cameron (@threegirlpileup)*

**W**hile I can certainly admire a quilt that is meticulously pieced and quilted, hanging on a wall, there is something really wonderful about a quilt that is used and loved. The only quilts that I've made and actually kept for myself are definitely utility quilts: intended to be used all winter long, snuggled up on the couch. While I made them with care and attention, I'm not precious with them: they have stains (primarily from the dogs!), some stitches occasionally come out, and they get machine-washed several times a year. But oh, how much I love pulling them

down out of the closet when cold weather approaches!

I recently noticed that a friend had a quilt crumpled on the floor behind the desk at her business. It was obviously old, made with log-cabin blocks; and my friend said that it was made by a distant relative. She uses it to keep her feet warm while sitting at the desk, and she absolutely loves it. I know that some folks would shudder at the thought of keeping grandma's quilt on the floor; but I just love that it's still in constant use and is still loved and treasured!

—Jason Pierson (@jasonpiersonquilts)



## On Parenting and Imperfect Quilts

By Jess Janae Black

**M**y first quilt was made with pieced fabric strips and squares from vintage linen napkins. Once a week I dropped my three kids at the sitter's and worked for a few glorious hours in the corner of my dining room. Some days they would all nap at the same time and I'd unfold the desk in my sewing cabinet and get to work.

I didn't know anything about quilting – only that I loved fabric and wanted to wrap my children in an embodiment of my love. This quilt would be the perfect twin sized covering for my son's vintage metal bed. I mapped out all the measurements carefully, but when I put it together the pieces never seemed to line up. I'd heave a sigh of frustration and hastily stitch on another piece or two. Imperfect quilts and imperfect love are the only kind I have to offer.

I finished hand quilting while sitting in the backyard, listening to early spring birds and basking in the sun. The stitching lines were drawn with children's craft chalk: orange, blue, and bright pink. When I pulled it out of the washing machine for the first time, those lines held fast on large patches of

white fabric. Craft chalk is not the same as tailor's chalk! The stain finally faded after a few aggressive washes.

Like the quilt, my parenting was not going according to plan. The quirks of an imperfectly sewn textile make it human. Was the humanness of my parenting beautiful? The hurt on my child's face when I overreacted was much worse than seams that didn't line up. But the days filled with my blunders were also the days I learned to surrender; letting go of the idea that I could somehow try hard enough to do everything right. Wonky stitches and uneven patches brought visual interest into my quilt – they told a story. My short-comings as a parent led to soul-stretching moments of vulnerability and warm apology hugs. Mothering is still more complicated than making a quilt, but they're both messy and flawed offerings of my heart.

Once the quilt was finished, I wrapped it in paper and string for my son's fifth birthday. We celebrated in the midst of a pandemic while packing for a sudden move. The comforter traveled with us as we moved six times in the next two years: a thread of comfort in a world of chaos.

Just yesterday, my son cloaked himself in this handmade blanket to warm himself in the cold Montana spring. In its two years of life, it has warmed beds and cozy winter movie nights. As it soothed our hearts and insulated our toes, it developed its own soul. After several washes, the texture became puffed and crinkled. The colors faded, and some threads popped loose. It's not an art object, and it would never win a ribbon, but it does what it was made to do: wrap us all in love.

*Jess Janae Black is a textile artist who writes creative non-fiction about textiles and the human experience. Jess draws inspiration from her ancestors and our interconnectedness with the natural world. Her work can be found on her website [jessjanaeblack.wixsite.com/website](https://www.jessjanaeblack.wixsite.com/website) and on Instagram @dreams.of.jess.*



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