

Karma Quilts: Stitched with Love

by Jane Clark Jackson

In her heartwarming book, *My Grandfather's Blessings*, Rachel Remen says, "You do not need money to be a philanthropist. We all have assets. You can befriend life with your bare hands." I am grateful for being able to befriend life with my bare hands through the making of quilts and prayer shawls.

Memory quilts, made using the clothing or other keepsakes of a deceased loved one, bring comfort as reminders of the person who has passed on. Living memory quilts celebrate a special event or achievement and can be made from clothing and other special items. Karma Quilts grew out of my passion for making memory quilts to bring comfort and warmth to bereaved families. It did not feel right to charge for the making of these special keepsakes, which really become works of the heart as well as the hands, uniting me to the family and to their departed loved one. And yet the materials needed do cost money and many hours of time are needed for creating them. When some dear friends paid me in advance for making a quilt for friends of theirs whose young daughter had passed on, the idea occurred to me that the friends and loved ones of recipients could pay forward for the next quilt to be made for another grieving family, in much the same way that Karma Kitchens invites participants to pay forward the next person's meal. Thus, Karma Quilts was born.

I learned how to sew from my mother when I was ten years old, mostly making clothing from patterns. I did not think much about sewing after these early efforts until I was a young visiting nurse in Appalachia and came across handmade quilts made by women in the community where I worked. I purchased a few of these quilts for myself and family members, for precious little money, but enough to help the women support their families. They were made from fabric scraps, mostly worn out dresses, sheets, and aprons, and were more functional than beautiful. But the warmth they provided, and the visible hand stitching, spoke to me of the hard work that went into their making, and of a powerful connection to their creators since each stitch was a direct link to the work of their hands.

Some years later I was inspired by the images of the AIDS Quilt, which consisted of countless numbers of large, quilted blocks, each representing a loved one who had died of AIDS, made by friends and family. I saw a section of the AIDS Quilt on exhibit and was deeply moved by the ability of quilts to tell the story of a life as a living and lasting tribute. At this same time, I was working as a nurse-midwife for the Addison County Parent Child Center in Middlebury, Vermont, where I worked with young expectant parents. The Center had a tireless volunteer in Lauraine Warfield, the mother of co-director, Cheryl Mitchell. Lauraine taught the young parents to make quilts to welcome their babies. Whenever I had a few spare minutes I sat in on some of Lauraine's quilting lessons, and soon became thoroughly enamored with the quilting process as a means of expression and of offering loving care.

The first quilts that I made were baby quilts made for friends and family members. I loved creating the quilts in the quiet and warmth of my home, usually at the end of the workday or during a few stolen hours on the weekends. As a busy mother and nurse-midwife I found the act of creating quilts to be a nourishing and restorative oasis. I started to see potential quilts in surprising places, like in a church basement sale where I found a piece of cotton with the picture of an ear of corn on it, which became the centerpiece for a quilt made to celebrate the summer's bounty, with corn and tomatoes and other fruits of the harvest. I found a vibrant piece of fabric at a thrift store on which someone had hand painted flowers, and that became the basis of a quilt commemorating the garden of my dear friend Marion, because looking at Marion's house from the street one would never guess that behind the house awaited a kaleidoscope of exquisite colors and fragrances that made up her secret garden.

I learned to replicate on fabric images that touched me deeply, like a quilt made for a doctor friend, in honor of the vast plants that lived and thrived in his office windows, in a place where hundreds of people came over the years in pain and left renewed. My daughter, Gail, an incredibly talented and expressive drawer from a young age, inspired a quilt that was several years in the making. She went through a period of drawing mermaids and then she moved on to drawing whales. To show my appreciation for her drawing ability, and to express my love for her, I copied several of her drawings onto fabric through applique and embroidery, creating a quilted ocean full of mermaids and whales.

My interest in memory quilts, initially fueled by the AIDS Quilt, was advanced in 1990 when I had the great good fortune to get in touch with Maurice Donahue of Holyoke, Massachusetts. Maurice had been my father's best friend from infancy. My father had died when I was 14 years old, before I knew the questions I would one day want to ask him about his early years. When I reached out to Maurice 28 years after my Dad's passing, he answered all of my questions. In gratitude for all that Maurice shared with me and my family, giving my father back to me in such a vivid way through his stories, I made a living memory quilt in gratitude for Maurice's generosity and friendship. Each block on the quilt represented something from Maurice's life story, his 4 grandparents from Ireland, his faith, his fellow classmates of the Class of 1935, his friendship with my Dad, his college years, his family members, his devotion to Holyoke and the State of Massachusetts as President of the Massachusetts Senate. Embroidered on one block were these words from a tribute at Maurice's retirement from the University of Massachusetts, "To live in the memory of old neighborhoods, honorable ancestors, is to bless the present, and gift the future with the greatness of the past." On another block I embroidered these words from an Irish poem, "With joy through all your lifetime, count your age by friends, not years."

When I became Executive Director of the Milton Family Community Center in Milton, Vermont, in 1997, I had the opportunity to pay forward my quilting lessons learned years before from Lauraine, through teaching the young parents and co-workers in Milton to quilt, all of whom moved far beyond my simple quilting skills. I was at work in Milton when the attacks of September 11, 2001 took place. In the wake of the events of that terrifying day, like people across the United States and throughout the world, I struggled with how to respond to those events in a way that could add love to our hurting world. My friend and co-worker, Pamela Charlesworth, had attended our simple quilting sessions at the Center. She and I developed the same idea which we shared with each other a few days after the attacks, to create a process for offering memory quilts to family members whose loved ones were killed in the horrific attacks. In that moment, a project that we co-founded known as United We Quilt, was conceptualized. Our goal was to bring comfort to the families directly affected by the events of 9/11/01. We wanted the quilts to be

personalized like the squares on the AIDS quilt, so that each would represent to the family the person whose loss they were grieving. We wanted the quilts to be available at no cost to anyone who would want one, through an all-volunteer effort that we would coordinate. We contacted all relief organizations and companies associated with Ground Zero and explained our project, asking them to help spread the word to families. Simultaneously we reached out to quilting guilds and organizations through a small web site that my daughter set up for us, to recruit volunteer quilters, from as far away as New Zealand and Africa and as nearby as our hometowns and Canada. We matched quilt requests from families with our volunteer quilters and acted as a liaison between the two. Pamela and I were soon conversing with mothers, fathers, husbands, wives, children, fiances, siblings, friends, grandparents, and countless others whose lives had been turned upside down by their losses on 9/11. Each person we spoke with wanted to tell us about the person they had lost. They wanted someone to listen. They wanted to have their loved one's life recognized, remembered and honored as the precious life that it was. We listened with saddened hearts. We answered questions and matched each family with a volunteer quilter, with whom we had also had communications, who could best create for them the quilts that they imagined. When they were ready, families contacted their assigned quilters directly. Personal belongings were exchanged across the miles all with the utmost of trust. Relationships were established. Amazing quilts were created, spectacularly memorializing those whose lives had been cut short, each quilt unique and beautiful like the life it honored. The quilts were made from ties, t-shirts, bathrobes and sweaters, business suits, wedding attire, photographs, turbans, scarves, treasured clothing and personal items. The quilters provided all other necessary materials, including batting and backing fabric. Many grateful families told us how comforting it was to wrap themselves or their children in such personal, meaningful, touchable memories, in quilts made from love that would last a lifetime. Lifelong friendships were forged between quilters and families. In the end, over the several years of the project, more than 500 volunteer quilters created 800+ memory quilts for families. Our United We Quilt motto throughout all of this was from a Mennonite proverb: "Do good and leave behind you a monument of virtue the storms of time can never destroy."

Excerpted from "Kindness," by poet Naomi Shihab Nye

I have continued, on a personal basis, to make memory quilts for families, both to celebrate special occasions and to honor the life of a loved one who has passed on. In the process I have witnessed a shirt that was violently torn from a child as paramedics feverishly tried to save her life, transformed to something that represented not her suffering but the vibrancy of her life as it was made into hearts and part of a teapot that acknowledged her love and concern for others. I have also had the honor of making a living memory quilt as a 70th birthday gift from 115 neck ties that were worn over a lifetime, to help the recipient share with his family members the story of his life as represented by the ties, enriching the lives of his children and grandchildren. In the year after I experienced a brain aneurysm, I made a gratefulness quilt to express how grateful I was that I had more life in which to live and love. After some time, I sent this quilt to Lauraine, my original quilting inspiration, to express my gratitude for all that she had given to me and to countless others through her teaching. The quilt hung on a wall throughout her last years as a reminder of how much she was loved and appreciated.

Quilting has become a meditative practice for me as I piece the quilt tops by machine and

then quilt the three layers together and bind the edges by hand. The slow pace of the hand quilting allows ample time to reflect on and be grateful for the life being celebrated by each quilt. Both the quilting and making of hand knitted prayer shawls link me to hand work throughout time and across cultures, with love being sewn into each stitch. When I have lived under my own cloud of grief, especially after the death of my husband Blyden on April 29, 2012, making memory quilts and prayer shawls has helped me to get out of myself and reach out to others with compassion. The creating provides a means of expressing with my hands what is in my heart when words are not adequate. When things appear broken, sometimes beyond repair, the piecing together can be extremely healing.

I have long been inspired by these words from Pete Seeger, "The patchwork quilt is really the symbol of the world which must come: one new design made out of many old designs. We will stitch this world together yet. Don't give up." With this in mind, bringing new life to uncompleted quilts gives me great joy. Finishing someone else's work that was started perhaps many years ago, without a blue print or pattern of their plan, involves guess work that allows both of us to connect in a very real and tactile way beyond the bounds of life and death, and to meet in a space of timeless creativity.

I imagine Karma Quilts becoming more than I can dream or make possible myself. I envision quilters, so uniquely caring and giving of their gifts, who will want to offer their own local Karma Quilts in their communities, providing memory quilts on a pay it forward basis to bereft families, especially at this time of such great loss from the pandemic throughout the world. Karma Quilts is about the quality of presence, quilters and family members present with and for each other. It is about relationship as they heart-storm together the design of their special remembrance quilts.

If you're interested in learning more about Karma Quilts and how to join in this effort, you can RSVP to join a special circle with Jane [here](#).