



Detail of a quilt at the 1900 farm at Living History Farms near Des Moines. Circa 1989.

Piecing a Whole

A 2002 Perspective
from Gilbert, Iowa
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During 1996—the 125th anniversary year of Iowa becoming a state—the Friends of the Oskaloosa Public Library invited me to give the keynote talk at their annual meeting. The late Beverly Everett, who coordinated my visit, asked me to send a summary of what I intended to talk about so she could give it to the media. I was not a veteran speaker with a well-honed message. However, I penned some thoughts and told her the title would be “We the People: Iowa’s Sesquicentennial as an Opportunity to Reflect on Identity, Values, Meaning, Change, and Community.”

What I wrote reflects the struggles, questions, and ideas I have had since the fall of 1989 when I began photographing the farm buildings along the road where I grew up. For several years, my project involved the gathering of materials—taking photographs, shooting video footage, conducting oral histories, borrowing photographs, doing courthouse research, and keeping a database of information. It seemed fine in the early part of the 1990s to be doing just that; yet, as time wore on, I became concerned that I would never emerge from the gathering phase and produce something with the materials. Fortunately, a couple of public libraries and some galleries invited me to show an exhibit about the project. Even so, I often worried that when it came time for me to leave this earth, my tombstone would say, “Well, she always said she was going to do a book or finish her video, but the poor soul never did—what a pity.”

In part, the delay in producing a book or video has to do with the fact that I am dealing with current history and my story continues to be played out in real life. My parents still live along the road, and I have no idea when they will choose to move or when health problems will force them to move. The story of my road will take on drastic new meaning for me when my parents no longer live there—or when they depart from this earth.

Another part of the delay has to do with the fact that radical changes are happening in agriculture—in other words, the story of farming is ongoing. It has been said that in Iowa if you watch the corn real closely on a sunny day in July, you can see it grow. I haven’t actually seen corn grow, but the analogy is a good one for describing the changes in agriculture. There is a lot of seasonal routine that makes farm life appear to be the same from one year to the next. However, if you stop and pay attention—for instance as I do as an outside observer with my camera—you can see changes happening right in front of your face. There are the razing of buildings, the removal of fences, the removal of a mile of dirt road, the last hayfield, the last cattle and pigs, the first tractor with caterpillar treads used for tillage, and the first genetically modified seed as evidenced by new corporate seed signs posted along the road. The rate of agricultural change in the last decade, just as the rate of change in society at large, is much faster than our ancestors would ever have envisioned or than I could have imagined as a child in the 1950s.

Another part of the delay has to do with my own maturation and coming to terms with my love/hate relationship with my rural heritage. And as is often the case with someone trying to express herself, there was (or is) that element called the writer’s block.

For a long time, I have known the issues that I want to address in this project, but it has been hard to find a focus among the many threads of thought. It has been (and still is) hard to fathom giving voice to any matters of depth that family members or other people might find offensive.

I've appreciated the opportunity to mount exhibits about my road. I am glad Beverly Everett invited me to speak to the Friends of the Oskaloosa Library. Each of those projects or, should I say, deadlines, was a catalyst for me to form my thoughts and organize my materials one more notch toward ending the gathering phase and beginning the production process.

The letter I sent to Beverly explaining my tentative ideas for my talk is a good barometer of the issues that were on my mind in 1996—not only for her library program but for any eventual book or video I would create. Here is some of what I wrote:

I may speak about the value of the arts (photography, literature, etc.) as a mirror and shield for us to use in understanding who we are and to gain wisdom to meet the challenges that face us. The arts can be like the shield in Greek mythology that Athena gave Perseus so he could slay the monster Medusa and not be killed in the process. I may speak about how I started out with a passion to return to Iowa to photograph the rural scene; that I was drawn to photograph abandoned buildings but that the process led to other interests; that there was an inner eye leading me toward something—toward dealing with my love/hate for my heritage; that my work has given me insights and wisdom and has been a healing process; that my project has put me in touch with many people; and that I have discovered community through it.

I may also speak about rigidity; about the hazard of not being able to talk about tough issues; about people becoming divided and labeling each other and not really knowing who each other is. But I would also talk about how we may not even know ourselves as individuals very well because (for the most part) our culture is one that stays on the surface of things. Where is it that we can feel safe to explore who we are as individuals and what our passions are all about? Can we truly have healthy families and communities if we follow the advice that says, "If you can't say anything nice, don't say anything at all"?

What do we see about ourselves and our heritage when we look at an exquisite photo of an abandoned farm or of draft horses at work, when we read a memoir of rural life or listen to Garrison Keillor spin a tale, when we hear the hymn "Tis a Gift to be Simple" or "For the Beauty of the Earth," or when we see a film such as *Country* or *Field of Dreams*?

What do we yearn for in the past and what do we hope for in the future? Do we dare dream? How can we be imaginative in hard economic times when there is a movement for our culture to be more rigid and intolerant? Can we let our imaginations lead us into creative and wise solutions? People need more than bread; they need roses too. A person needs to nurture the soul, belong to community, reach for the future, and become all of who she or he is meant to be as an individual. And finally, if our communities aren't what they used to be, how can we find new ways to establish a sense of community?

The title I gave Beverly for my talk could easily be converted to fit my road project: “We the People: A Rural Road Project as an Opportunity to Reflect on Identity, Values, Meaning, Change, and Community.” Of course, the project is not a democratic one; it is my project and in ways is a portrait of myself. I recall a portrait photography class that I took at a community college in Napa, California. We spent the initial class sessions in tedious discussions, trying to define portraiture. In the process, I realized that any work of art is a self-portrait of the artist. An artist who chooses a bright and cheery scene and portrays it with glossy colors is creating a reflection of that dimension of herself. An artist who instead picks an isolated and somber scene, perhaps a lone corncrib in a hayfield, and renders it in black and white photography or in muted tones, is creating a reflection of another part of who she is. Some artists stay on the surface, avoiding deep inner joy or consternation. Some artists seek to create work that is soulful. I am one of the latter.

Granted, this is *my* project. The themes, the written essays, the oral history remarks, the photos, the layout, how it is edited—all these elements have been dictated in an unilateral way. On the other hand, I have deliberately chosen to include the stories of people who have lived along my road rather than focus on a singular autobiography or family history. Hopefully, the inclusion of multiple voices will add interest to the project, not only because of the variety of stories, but because of the variety of mindsets.

It is easy to fall back on stereotypes and assume that all people from small-town, rural Iowa would think alike. Instead, it is fascinating to discover how people, who all have lived along the same road, can be the products of different myth systems: different ways of seeing things and different values. It is valuable, however, that this project is the work of one person rather than by a committee or by other democratic processes. The latter usually has a way of watering down a creative project—taking the bubbles out of champagne and the fizz out of a bottle of pop. Also, not many people would take the time to gather all the material and then churn away with it to produce a quality final project.



Sometimes this work comes easy, even the writing. But often—especially with the writing—I feel like I am entering a dark tunnel or deep abyss. I wear a miner’s helmet but it has a weak battery, and the light is dimmer than heck and practically useless. Yet I continue to enter this inner darkness to explore who I am, to understand what this project means, and to decide how I will interpret the experience of growing up along that road. By entering the abyss, I learn that it is not as important to be able to see with my eyes; instead, the key is to explore what I feel. The process is called soul work. The abyss is the space where a person can hear the still small voice of God as Elijah did. It is also a space where I can connect with my subconscious self. I discover memories that are asking for attention, and I must again experience those forgotten fragments of my life, whether painful or beautiful, in order for healing to occur. The inner abyss is not full of death as is often associated with darkness. Instead, by entering it, I can discover a source of light to illumine not only the journey inward but the journey outward as I connect with other sojourners.

I recall conversations I have had with a spiritual director named Zoila, who is an Episcopal priest. We met in 1983 when I was in my second year of studies at a Presbyterian seminary in the San Francisco area. The next year, I interned with a congregation in St. Helena and in 1985, after graduation, returned to that town and focused on photography and developing a small

business called Gunder-friend Productions. I opted to not seek an ordainable position for a variety of reasons. The key was my realization that I was more called to use my creativity and become an artist than to be a generalist as a pastor with the responsibility of encouraging the talents of parishioners.

Religious denominations and seminaries place a lot of emphasis on discerning who is genuine pastoral material. I have often said that the seminary atmosphere was like “Mirror, mirror on the wall, who is the most pastoral of us all.” I once told Zoila that seminary was too much like a vocational school in that it trains pastors for specific congregational roles rather than understanding there is a whole spectrum of callings in life. She pointed to the term *vocational* and said it is derived from the Latin term *vocare* which means “to call.” In essence, she meant that regardless of the fact that the seminary process was a training ground for pastors, it had served me well in helping me discern my call to work with photography and express myself through the arts.



Finally, in the summer of 1993, I decided to move back to Iowa, a step I had dreaded for a long time. Although I felt more truly myself in California, I also knew that in order to take my road project seriously, I had to return to my home state and be more accessible to my hometown area. Being here with my own apartment and car is much better than trying to conduct the project by commuting between Iowa and California. To have remained on the West Coast, I would have needed to pay high airfares, then either rent or borrow a car, and stay with people at the risk of overdoing my welcome or the risk of trying to accomplish too much in one trip before heading back to the West Coast.

It was difficult to contemplate the move back to Iowa but easy to discount the value of my work. It was also easy to question why I had gone to seminary and tempting to think of myself as a failure compared to other graduates who had gone on to be ordained and take pastoral positions. But Zoila did not criticize my choices. Instead she encouraged me to pursue the call to work on my Iowa projects.

Zoila had a neat way of reframing my misconceptions. When we first met in 1983, it was at the beginning of the Lenten season, and I asked if she expected me to give up something for Lent. Instead, she asked me what it was that I wanted to take up—perhaps regular walks in the green hills covered with oak trees in the Mt. Tamalpais Watershed behind the seminary. She also had a way of reinterpreting liturgical symbolism such as the eucharist. She saw beauty and soulfulness in my photography. She knew my story about my rural background, seminary journey, longing to find a career niche, and dreams of being of service to humanity. She often said that I should think about my work in the framework of providing bread for the world.

One of our most poignant conversations occurred in January 1993. Zoila suggested that I was not creating something new under the sun with my road project. Instead, she said I was working with something that already existed. She went on to explain that I was bringing together aspects of different peoples' lives and shaping the pieces into a form that people could use to reflect on their lives and to find sustenance. An image of the Lord's Supper flashed through my mind. I suggested to Zoila that it would be a significant ritual if each person who came to worship brought a scrap of bread representing his or her brokenness and that those pieces would be joined together through the mystery of the liturgy to create a loaf

of bread to be used for Holy Communion. In other words, the liturgical leader would break apart the newly created loaf and offer the bread back to the people to feed them at a deeper level. Indeed, the word *liturgy* means “the work of the people.” Zoila agreed and said that the process I described was what communion was all about—that together, our brokenness can be transformed and made into bread for one another and the world.

The work of a liturgist, theologian, or artist is to work with common, or perhaps even mundane, elements of life and use them to interpret life in meaningful ways. The challenge is to work with these elements in a mystical or soulful way that allows the spirit to move through them. That is what Garrison Keillor does when he takes scraps of small town, rural Minnesota life and spins them together in ways that feed the souls of his listeners.

I also liken the process to what I have learned in the past several years about making quilts. I never thought I had it in me to make quilts, but often after I came back to Iowa, I stayed with a friend, Ruth, and her family in Pocahontas in their big Victorian house. She was an excellent quilter but a conventional one and a purist, sewing her bed-size quilts by hand. One Christmas vacation, after I realized that a person could piece a quilt with a machine, Ruth got me started on making my first quilt block. Then I was hooked. It was not long before I asked Mother if I could have the Singer Featherlite portable sewing machine, which our family obtained in the late 1950s for 4-H projects. The Featherlite is a durable and smooth-running model coveted by many quilters.

During the 1990s, I also recall meeting a man named Carmon, who is a textile artist and had a fabulous exhibit of quilts at the Unitarian-Universalist Fellowship in Ames. His genre was entirely different than Ruth's. Instead of conventional quilts, his pieces were prophetic and included found objects such as a jacket pocket, a zipper from a pair of blue jeans, a photo of J. Edgar Hoover, or fabric he had silk-screened with the staff, musical notes, and lyrics of the hymn “'Tis a Gift to be Simple.” Carmon also coordinated three large quilt panels—each some 14 feet high and six feet wide—for a mural that hangs in the main meeting room of the fellowship. When Carmon designed the quilt, he incorporated many small pieces of fabric that members donated to the project to represent their lives or the life of the fellowship. And although Carmon did the master planning, many hands worked on quilting the finished panels.

I still quilt, but I am not a conventional quilter such as Ruth nor an innovative one such as Carmon. I visit the quilting stores now and then—it seems there is one in every significantly sized Iowa town these days—to stock up on material and eventually find ways to use it. My repertoire includes pillow covers, place mats, and quilted vests. My approach is vastly different than the old-time process in which a quilter used scraps left over from sewing projects, material from clothing the family had outgrown, and chicken feed sacks made of cotton. It is amazing how those artisans could piece something together that was functional yet beautiful, providing both warmth and nurture with value not only during their lifetimes but in the lives of their descendants.

Quilting has been one way to learn to trust the creative process, especially since I do not use prescribed patterns or kits. A person cannot rush a quilt. It takes a long time, patience, and plenty of attention to detail to make one. That is also true of a long-term project such as my book.

Another interesting aspect of quilt making is the role of intuition. Sure, it helps to know math and have an aptitude for geometry, but a large portion of my quilting involves playing around with colors and fabric designs. I may get obsessed and stay up all night hauling out swatches from my stockpile of fabric. I place them on a large desk to see what goes together. Sometimes, two fabrics that I thought would be great partners simply do not go together. Sometimes, I have to dig to the bottom of my stockpile before I find a nearly forgotten piece of fabric that ends up working perfectly in the new project. However, I cannot force these choices. Intuition is important. In addition to playfulness, a creative project involves a spell

or two of musing to discern what the design will be. Sometimes, the final design is vastly different from the one I had in mind when I bought the fabric.

All this is true of my road project as well. I may have had a notion of where I wanted to go when I started this book, but putting it together has meant a long process of staying up late at night and digging into the stockpile of written materials and photographs to discern what fits together and in what pattern.

The final parallel between making a quilt and developing this book has to do with how new ideas or possibilities occur during an artistic endeavor. Sometimes, as I begin cutting fabric and sewing pieces together, the creative muse nudges me and suggests that another color or fabric pattern would work better than the choices I had made at the outset of the project. I have heard writers say this happens when they work on a novel. An author may think he or she knows the plot of a book when starting the first chapter, but in the midst of writing, a new character or story line appears that demands attention. It has been important for me to shift from the gathering phase of my road project to the production phase of putting this book together. Engaging in the creative process provides a new way of learning about myself and the culture in which I grew up. And a few new characters and story lines have appeared that demand attention. But most importantly, the act of writing—deciding what needs to be said and in what tone—helps me learn more about myself and the culture of my youth. Indeed, the process helps me find my voice and has brought about healing. As one friend, Mary Helen Stefaniak, who is a writer and reviewed some of my work in 1995, said, one of the themes of my project could be “The softening of hard feelings and rigid boundaries.”

Just as any quilt should be appreciated as a whole without peering closely to see the flaws in how the pieces were cut or stitched, I hope readers will view this work as a whole and not get hung up on any parts that may be uncomfortable to read. As in any work of art, it is important to have a range of light and dark features, a spectrum of color tones, and a variety of textures to make a meaningful whole. I have attempted to assemble the elements of this book in a thoughtful and fair way with no intention to harm anyone.



I recall that Mother, when she was director of the Rolfe Public Library, orchestrated an oral history project for the town in the 1980s. She hoped that all the members of our family would make a tape. I was living in Fargo then, and in 1981, just before I headed west to seminary, I wrote an outline and then sat on my living room couch with a tape recorder and recorded my thoughts about my life and decision to enroll in seminary. After listening to the tape, Mother wrote me a letter and said that I had been blunt in my remarks. I responded that the word “candid” would have been a more appropriate description than “blunt.”

How a quilt or my road project is perceived depends on the eyes of the beholder. As I mentioned before, some people still cling to the adage, “If you can’t say anything nice, don’t say it at all.” However, it is important for people to know themselves and give voice to that which is calling for expression—not only for the health of the individual but for the health of society.