Quilting In My Family: quilt-making, life, and what it means to be family

An Honors Thesis Project by Cari Watson
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Advised by Dr. Tony Edmonds
To acknowledge our ancestors means we are aware that we did not make ourselves, that the line stretches all the way back, perhaps, to God; or to Gods. We remember them because it is an easy thing to forget: that we are not the first to suffer, rebel, fight, love and die. The grace with which we embrace life, in spite of the pain, the sorrows, is always a measure of what has gone before.

--Alice Walker, "Fundamental Difference"
Dedicated to

Maude, who introduced me to literature and the joy it brings to life; Dr. Flecknestien and Dr. Mesner, who steeled my resolve and refined my abilities in every challenging, tedious way possible (for that is how the real world is); Dr. Edmonds, who swung open the doors of opportunity without even knowing it; Steve, who gives me love and strength effortlessly; and above all, Gladys.
Honors Thesis Abstract

In the spring of 2001 the idea was born: I would make a quilt for my honors thesis project. I would have to learn something new. I would have to work with my hands, my heart, my mind—something I try to do with all my projects. But most of all, making the quilt would challenge me to discover the stories, the legacies, the roles of the women in my family; the women within those stitches. And that was something I had always considered vital. After all, I have always believed that if you want to know yourself, just get to know the people who gave you life, people who mothered you into existence.

The project began when my fiancé’s (Steve) grandmother (Gladys) gave me a puff quilt during spring break of my freshman year. It was the first quilt she had made for anyone outside of the Troyer family. It was an honor. It was a privilege. Through Gladys’ thoughtful kindness, I was ushered into a whole new set of responsibilities and given a whole new perspective. I was quietly given the nod of approval. I was a part of their family and, from that moment, I began to see how I fit into that family circle.

Two years later, when Steve and I were engaged, I started to pursue the project I had envisioned the day I stood—struck dumb—at the beautiful quilt Gladys had just given me. I began in the spring of 2003, consulting Gladys and carefully writing up my Honors Project Proposal. The busy work began on June 30, 2003 and we completed it, five months later, on October 19, 2003—exactly one year after being engaged to her grandson. It was also the day I learned Gladys had cancer.

Day after day, stitch after stitch, I gained new skills. The quilt then, is the visible outcome of the project. However, I also kept a journal, in which I record my joys and
failures, my doubts and discoveries. For me, the journal is equally important. Through it, I chart my journey. Little by little, I wrote down what I learned about quilt-making, life, and what it means to be family. Within its pages, I document the great and varied knowledge I gained about Steve’s history through the eyes of woman who gave his father life. Looking back, I am just thankful that I had the sense to listen. I know this now: what she gave me was more than a skill or a quilt. She gave me a place in the story.

Quilt Journal Cast of Characters: (encompassing over 25 people)

Narrator: Cari Watson (me)
Steve: my fiancé, Stephen Troyer
Grandma Troyer, Gladys: Steve’s paternal grandmother
Mark: Steve’s dad
Susan: Steve’s mom
Amanda: Steve’s younger sister
Kevin and Daniel: Steve’s younger brothers, “the boys”
Margana: Gladys’ daughter, Steve’s Aunt
Grandma (Watson): my paternal Grandmother
Mom: my mother, June
Dad: my father, Tom
Tracy: my older sister
Mark: my younger brother
Real Grandma Beissler: my real maternal grandmother
Grandma Beissler: my mother’s stepmother
Mrs. Yeager: neighbor and family friend
Dr. Tony Edmonds: Advisor and Honors/History Professor

Dr. Joann Edmonds: Associate Dean of Honors College

Vanessa Onnesko: old friend, just had a child

Anna May Troyer: one of Gladys' “grandma friends”

Trish and Eric: friends of mine

Lauren and Kurt: more married friends

Nicki and Taylor: Maid of Honor, best friend

Alice Walker: author and activist. Wrote “Everyday Use,” a short story that focuses on the place of quilts in family history and their tangibility.

Reference Points:

Middlebury, IN: Steve’s hometown, 45 minutes east of South Bend, 15 min. from Michigan Line (Most of his family lives here.)

Bristol, IN: My hometown, fifteen minutes west of Middlebury, five minutes from Michigan State Line (Nearly all of my family lives here.)

Gohn’s Store, Middlebury, IN: Sells fabric and misc. articles to mostly Amish patrons

Harley’s Soda Shop, Middlebury, IN: Miserable little place I worked for over the summer

Singer: Sewing Machines. Said to have revolutionized the world when they first came out. I unearthed my real Grandmother Beissler’s, circa 1941-6.

LSAT: Law School Admissions Test, I took in on October 4, 2003 in the hopes of going to law school in the fall of 2004. I studied while making the quilt.
Meijer: Part of a chain of department stores, this one in Dunlap, IN.

Elkhart Camera: Small camera shop in Elkhart, IN where I tried to get my eaten film developed.

Making the Quilt

I began by choosing the design for the middle of the quilt, called a “bonnet girls” circle. I enlarged the design on a photocopier and then cut out the individual pieces. I then purchased a plastic stencil material, tracing the paper design onto it. Using these plastic pieces, I cut out enough bonnets and dresses, as well as the petals of the flower. Then I sewed on the individual pieces of that design to that center piece and learned how to create the “zig zag fillers” also in the middle. This was accomplished by cutting individual strips of the different colors, then cutting them at a angle and sewing them back together in the design you see here. At the same time, I cut out the squares and, following the pattern, sewed together the individual quarters. When the middle and quarters were finished and sewn together, they were sewn to the batting and back-side by inverting the material. Then, Gladys and I (with a little help from our friends) pinned it in the quilt frame, and (after five hours) finished it by knotting the three layers together. I really do not know how many hours I devoted to the project. I wasn’t really counting.

Quilt Jargon:

Puff quilt: supposedly the “8 Hour Quilt Speed Quilt.” I got the design from Gladys. It differs from a traditional quilt because the three layers (top: sew patches; middle: batting; bottom: regular fabric) are bound together with periodical loops of strings, not individual stitches.
Patterns: I picked out a pattern for the middle of the quilt from a set of traditional Amish "bonnet girls" designs. They are common in our area, and I thought this one represented the Troyer heritage and my purpose: the unity among family members, especially women.

Applique’: To stitch on pieces of fabric to another surface so that the stitches aren’t visible. The flower and “bonnet girls” are sewn on this way.

"Zig Zag" Design: Gladys and I wanted to “fill” the space above and below the “bonnet girls” with a different, interesting design. So, we chose this “zig zag,” made from cut and sewn pieces of the same material.

Thread: all-purpose, off-white works best for appliqué and the machine sewing.

Cutter and Cutting Board: Really nifty cutting device that rolls over the fabric like a pizza cutter. The cutting board itself is marked with lines and measurements, helping to make precise cuts. Gladys has another “ruler” with a “lip” that sits nicely on the edge of the cutting board, allowing you to run the cutter down it for exact squares.

Squares: 4 1/2” by 4 1/2” squares that I cut from five different fabrics.

Middle: the middle section of the quilt that I redesigned to signify the project’s purpose. Usually, it would be filled with puff squares. You can see the pencil lines I used to mark the place of the “bonnet girls,” which I appliqued on.

Quarters: the quilt is sewn in quarters so that it is manageable when sewing.

Top: the four quarters sewn together, and the middle (with the “bonnet ladies” and “zig zag” filler design).

Batting: the fluffy, washable filling in the middle—I sometimes call it “filler.”
Frame: the quilt frame. When all three layers are put together, it is pinned to a quilt frame on all four sides. The frame sits at elbow-height level when the sewer is sitting, so that she can use a needle to sew in the loops (and knot them) that hold the layers together.

String: the string used to knot the layers together. Process is called "knotting."

The Women of the Circle

On August 3, 2003 Steve’s father Mark was in a severe bike accident. While on a ride with Steve, he fell and suffered a severe head injury. Within fifteen minutes of the fall, he could not remember names, how he got home, or what day it was. While Steve was looking into the confused eyes of his bruised and beaten father, almost assuming the fatherly role in taking care of him, I was working on the quilt. He called me scared. Shutting the Singer off I said, "I’ll meet you at the hospital."

Later that day, I recorded the incident. I wrote:

I was there standing with Gladys and Susan outside the emergency room curtains and Gladys starts speaking to me about the quilt—when her own son is in the emergency room—repeating himself and asking the same questions due to his injury. I was amazed and charmed at how concerned and unconcerned she was. And I realized then that every person is his own keeper—and that although Mark was her child, and always would be no matter the age—he was separate and responsible for himself since he left the womb—that in fact, we all are that way.

Yes, I felt connected to these women then, part of this maternal league—a member of a society of secrets that men might never know. We are the
backbone of their maleness!, the strong, the resolute, the observant, using our ingenuity to shape our worlds together and craft and recreate what they know as their reality.

And as I watched Steve tear up as he gave his dad the same answer to the same question he’d asked minutes before, I knew, right then, standing between his mother and grandmother, my place with him as clearly as if they’d ushered me over the threshold of another gaping, beautiful realm of responsibilities—and I became conscious of the part of me that was him seeing his father—this time though, with clear and knowing eyes...

How do you put that in a quilt? How do you put that in a quilt?”

This revelation was a turning point in my relationship with Steve’s family, particularly his grandmother and mother. At that moment I also realized that the quilt had taken on a greater meaning. From now on the quilt would represent my place in the story of his family.

It is obvious then, that I wanted to do the project justice, in every way. The quilt had become more than a material object; it was a tangible representation of all that I was learning about this family and about my role within it. The circle “bonnet girl” design represents the unity of the women in the “story” I have narrated in my journal. It represents my grandmother Watson, Gladys, Steve’s mother--Susan, my mother, and sister. All their strengths and weaknesses, dreams and worst fears, are not really linear. I do feel like a collective embodiment of their lives; my shoulders are not strong enough for that. The world is, after all, the largest of burdens. And so, I do not think that we, women, were made for that kind of responsibility. What I am—at least I think I am—is a
partner in that experience, a voice to join the choir, a contributor, a taker, a redeemer, a fiend. I am all of that—all of them are me. And I too, was then and will be, every single one of them, and those to come. I wrote on October 12, 2003:

“TODAY I want to tell you...about the part of my grandmother’s gene I was to become, the part of my mother that I’m not... the person that I was, the idea, the tendency, the nervous habit, the belief, the idiosyncrasy that I was to become all those years before. Was I the way she held her head? her pen? the look in her eyes? her hands, her hair, her teeth? What I a nervous tugging of the nose or a migraine or a limp? Or was I the stuff she only dreamed?”

We are all part of this evolving, revolving narrative. We, women, are the givers of life and the keepers of that story. Whether we speak it aloud or not, we are the weavers of whole histories.

Perhaps it is fitting that I once thought to dedicate this project, and all it entails (and hopefully means) to and for “our granddaughters, who ever they might be.” Even when I discovered Gladys had cancer, I still believed this to be true. That same day, the day I finished the quilt, and a year after becoming engaged to her grandson I wrote:

And as I held the finished, puffy, wonderfully, colorfully warm, finished, finished puff-quilt in my arms—which had a tiny drop of blood from all of us from pricking our fingers on it I’m sure—as I held it for the first time, smiling, Gladys told me that indeed, she has cancer.

I looked down—I mean my whole being, countenance, face, spirit, soul looked down. Fell down. The unusual, short-breathed shock. I knew what she
was going to say. The disastrous revelation, the disastrous ends. Death entered
the room, and stayed there.

And then I smiled a brave smile. She got lunch ready.

As I wrote on October 7, 2003, “even as I face these difficulties, I know, the circle is yet
unbroken.” Despite what happens, it will never end. At least, as long as I live or a part of
me does, this piece of the story will never die; and that, I suppose, is a legacy worth
living for.

Acknowledgements

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Honors Thesis Quilt Journal  
by Cari Watson  

The following journal documents my Honors Thesis Project, which spanned five months (from July 2, 2002 to November 13, 2003) and included over twenty five people. In the narrative I record my joys and failures about quilt-making, as well as my doubts and discoveries about life. It features the most critical events during the project, including my confrontation with failure, reaction to Mark’s accident (Steve, my fiancé’s dad), and Gladys’ (Steve’s paternal grandmother) diagnosis of cancer. In writing the journal, and looking back now, I realize what I have learned about quilt-making, life, and what it means to be family. As the design in the center of the quilt suggests, we are all infinitely connected in a family bigger than blood-ties: what affects one, affects all.

And so, what began as an idea during the second semester of my freshman year is brought to completion in the following story. As I understand it, the Honors Thesis Project was designed to be the capstone of an honors education, inspiring honors students on to their final and finest undergraduate hour. In seeking out my “finest hour,” I focused on the most important themes in my undergraduate education, my understanding of family, story-telling, and connectedness with the past. This journal, then, is my journey to understand that focus, as well as my humble contribution to that cannon of Honors work they call the “Thesis.”

June 30, 2003

In the beginning…

Today I stopped by Grandma Troyer’s house to pick up some designs for the quilting project. I talked to her a bit at Daniel’s 12th B-day party (Steve’s youngest
brother), yesterday, about it. Before that, I had only a vague idea of what I wanted to do—really, I've tried to come up with something concrete but it's hard, because I've never done anything like this before.

I went home though with a couple of design books, some ideas, and a lot of help from her. I even went home and looked at the old Singer that was my grandma Beissler's (pity she painted over that wonderful wood stand with white paint—what were the 70's all about?). (Grandma Beissler is my mother's stepmother.) Mom's not sure how to use it. It's electric, and seems to work well enough, it's just that neither of us sew, and mom's not into anything that's really crafty—besides scrap booking.

I have a beginning to this project though, and that, at least for right now, is more than I've ever had: a little hope. I can feel the creative juices kicking in—and I can't wait to see a finished project!!

I also think the accompanying paper will be a good one too.

July 2, 2003

Running to the ATM

Have given $106.03 to Gohn's Fabric store (frequented by Amish) downtown Middlebury, Indiana to buy enough fabric for this puff quilt. I am daunted, yes, by the sheer cost of the thing, but have reminded myself that this only increases its worth. I have always valued the quilt that Gladys made for me some time in 2000, but I had no real understanding (until now) of the COST of the thing, or the hours she must have devoted to it. It means even more to me now and am determined to do as much as I can to do this project right and to bother her as little as possible. I feel that at times she is taken
advantage of because of her kindness and generosity—it is because of this then, that I hope to bear the majority of the weight, worry, and work of my idea.

On a lighter note--It was a sight alright--to see her and me driving a few blocks down to the store in my cherry red convertible with the top down. It was about 94 degrees and hot and off we went to buy fabric with the Amish. I hope my young and novice appearance (and my choice in vehicle) does not make Gladys or anyone else think I’m doing this because it’s cute—or that I, in anyway, have the motives of that main character in the story I hope to compare this project to. (Alice Walker’s “Everyday Use.”)

My motives are honest, my desire too. I don’t want to romanticize anything or make anyone’s character bigger or larger than life. I just am seeking the truth, the stories, the lives, the realities from the eyes and experience of this woman, and of my grandmother (Watson)—in an effort to understand myself. I think. Is that melodramatic? Or is that just a woman from nowhere that actually verbalized the thing that occasionally pokes at our half of the human race?

July 9, 2003

Ho HUM

Well, I’ve been on vacation and have not been able to work on the project, and today could not get a hold of Gladys. It’s a set-back and my spirits are down. Have located another sewing machine—Mrs. Yeagers’ (a neighbor and friend of the family)—that I can use at home. So that should allow me to get the project completed a lot faster—I just need to have Gladys help me along in the beginning here—and after that, it should be up to me.
My belief and faith in the project itself and main idea remains strong. I looked at my schedule for the fall, and am very, very glad that I took the initiative in the spring to set it up in the honors college and Dr. Anthony (Tony) O. Edmonds and his wife, Dr. Joanne Edmonds, the Associate Honors Dean. When this is completed, I will have definitely helped lighten my work-load for this last go-around this fall.

July 14, 2003

Literally...

The first stitch. So new, in fact, that I had to ask myself how one spells “stitch” to even tell you. Stich didn’t look right. Well, I cut up fabric into 4½” squares for the puff quiltly part, traced and cut out patterns for the center design, met with Gladys on Sunday night (to go over these doings), and even located the short story, “Everyday Use,” by Alice Walker for my paper.

And yes, I even got the old Ycager sewing machine out at my house and fiddled with it. I actually taught myself to get it all…oh, I don’t know what a real seamstress would call it…suited up…or stringed up, or something alone those lines. I actually made the First Stitch.

It was kind of exciting. Mostly sad. No one in my immediate family can teach me any of this…no one ever took the time. No one ever had the interest. No one tried to learn themselves. Like I’m doing now. Makes me sad, you know?

But I have baggies full of colorful pieces of fabric and a place to begin with Gladys tomorrow afternoon.
You know, it's like Gladys told me on the first day we did this... (after I had explained that most people "my age" don't know how to mend Anything)... "seems like," she said, "no one thought to tell them how."

How right you were Gladys. How right you were. It's like being part of a lost generation—where our grandmother's made their own clothing and knew how to cook and raise children without much of a fuss, our mothers were told to seek out their rights beyond the home—and here we are—the wandering, tangibly talent-less daughters of these educated, liberated, women of Tomorrow, fumbling to make spaghetti-o's and do practical household maintenance. I can use a computer—use a computer well and do things my grandmother never thought possible. But I'll be damned if I can sew this stupid hem on the clothes I'm wearing (store bought, no less, and made, I suppose, by some 14 year old in Jamaica.) At least, I think, she knows how to sew. She probably sews her whole village's clothes.

What I've been told? They got a hole? Throw them away. We'll buy you new ones. There's something sad in that... isn't there?

**Oh, something else. All this thinking and working about this got me thinking about WHY I am doing this... and what the ramifications are for what I think women's roles are in my worldview and our society. Got me thinking about what makes a woman a woman, and who says so, and how I want to balance that. What I want to DO with that. In the yard today picking up sticks, I was thinking of it all, and I tell you, I might have been a forlorn poet with a beret on her head, a glass in her hand at the bar, and tears for
humanity in her eyes, futilely mumbling are her reflection in the glass, “what does it all mean!” On a slightly less dramatic side, really, ask yourself, what does it all mean?

July 15, 2003

“A flower can’t be blue... can it.”
“No. I suppose not.”
--Gladys and me, trying to decide the center flower’s color from scrap pieces.

When I walked out of Gladys’ home this afternoon I took a spool of off-white thread (that works best for this I’m told), a pack of needles, some scrap pieces, and a new skill. She taught me how to appliqué the dresses and hats in the center design onto the center fabric. She taught me to trace the design onto the center, to iron the appliqué-able pieces just so, how she was taught to stitch them on like that. Right now she’s working on the design we picked out of the book to fill above and below the center piece. It would have been much easier to have just done a puff quilt, but this extra effort of the center design will pay off—it will really reflect what I want to reflect. How we are all connected—all people, all women—everywhere, in what we are, in what we aren’t, in what we try to be. Like that prologue in Indiana Gothic, (Reminder to self: put that in paper) how the guy looks into the mirror and sees himself, and then his dad, and then his granddad, and on and on back, to faces he’s never seen but somehow knows because it’s a part of him—they are who he is.

Also, Gladys and I are getting along a lot better—at least I feel more comfortable around her now, I hate to intrude! She is amazing though, every time I see her she is
dressed in Sunday best and in the yard mowing or pruning or planting or picking things up. Just as she is able to do delicate stitches, she is able to mow her own yard.

I also need to take time to visit my grandma Watson and see if she can teach me a little bit about cross stitch this summer as well. I’d like to cross stitch something into the quilt in order to give it more meaning...I’m still working on that.

Overall, things are going well. Gladys said, “Well, I’m not a very good teacher. I’m not very good at appliqué.” And I said, “You know more than I know.” And I smiled, and I meant it. I doubt she knows how much this means to me.

Oh, and one more thing: our conversation today touched on dead tree limbs (in her front yard), her shrubs (also in the front yard), Harley’s Soda Shop, her neighbors (and how kind they are), her grandchildren, her sewing machine in Florida that her daughter Marcy uses, the car wreck that killed a local Bonneville Mill minister, Barbie Tents she makes for Bazaar Sales for church, and the texture of the inside of a sunflower. To name a few. She’s not a gossip, she is just nice.

The sign reads: “Jesus is the head of this house. An unseen guest at every meal, the unheard listener to every conversation.”

July 16, 2003

The circle

Today I—yes, I, alone—cut out the fabric for the dresses and bonnets for the center circle. I even cut out the flower petals and traced the design. Then—yes, shock and amazement—ironed them into shape. I was impressed. So impressed in fact, that I might just get appliqué one on before I go to sleep, just to see it.

Explained aloud to Steve today the meaning of this circle—actually voiced what I hope to represent and write about. It was good. I’m doing something that means a great deal to me—and yes, I’m sentimental—and yes, I value the detail, and the little efforts in life—and I get criticized for that sometimes. But you know, why shouldn’t I value those things? Why not?

July 18, 2003

“I was up late, kinda...sewing.”
“You don’t look like a...(incredulous, absurd look)...err... that doesn’t seem like that’s something you’d do.”
“I know (with an incredulous and silent smile).”

--conversation with a coworker at Harley’s Soda Shop

Today I dug out the old Singer that was Grandma B.’s. I got it to work. I actually sewed scraps together to do what Gladys does with the creases with the poufs—the block part of my quilt.

Would like to take off the horrible white paint to reveal the wood on the stand.

Sewing machine is beautiful. Wonderful really. I feel so much more at home with it than Mrs. Yeager’s (neighbor, friend) updated machine. That Singer suits me somehow. Have begun to wonder what my mother thinks of this. My progress has interested the curiosity and amusement of my sister (who knows as much as I do about sewing) and mild stares from my mother. I wonder if she resents me for teaching myself something new. I wonder if she feels bad because she can’t help me. If she does know something, she hasn’t offered. She did tell me...”once you figure that out (when I was trying to string up
the confounded thing) you can mend your brother’s shirt.” Dad followed shortly after with “do you think you could fix my pants?” I looked at them both from my nest of sewing thread and needles and frustration. I just looked at them.

No, I don’t seem like “that” kind of girl to anyone. I’m not that sewing, “homely” type I guess. What stereotype do I fulfill for them? Hmm? But I want to learn something useful...like how to clothe myself.

It was one of the best moments of my life tonight, I think. Me alone (finally) in the house, a glass of wine, and the Singer unearthed and whirling alone under my happy guidance. It was simple. It was good. And it was real, true contentment.

Lately I think some of my family is wondering why I’m such a recluse. I think they wonder why I like to be alone. Well, I’m never really alone when I’m alone, I suppose. I never feel “lonely.” I feel good knowing I don’t have to be anything other than what I make of myself and I don’t need a crowd around me or expensive GAP jeans and a digital cell-phone that sings to feel I have some worth. I bide my time observing the little things and gauge my life in their ups and downs—and often find my happiness in thinking too much anyway and my success in what I make of the people, instances, and places that set the stage of this life of mine. Shakespeare said the world is a stage and we are merely players on it. Well, right now, I’m a character with a Singer and a new skill. And you see, I smile to myself, on the inside, deep on the inside I created instantaneous, genuine real smile, and that’s all that ever mattered to me.

July 21, 2003

Neat. With a capitol.
Well, the skill level is not spectacular. But it looks neat. I’ve sewed here and there when I can and have only one more little bonnet lady to get on and then erase the penciled-in guidelines and take it to Gladys. I hope she forgives me for how elementary my sewing is. But I’ll get better! I can’t wait to when I can actually get going on the Singer and plug along.

I am really considering refurbishing the Singer’s casing and taking it to school. Yes, School. I’ve been thinking about it a great deal lately and have tried to make little preparations here and there—and of course, study for the LSAT. The great big looming LSAT.

Oh, on another note: by the serial number on the side, I discovered the Singer was made between 1941-1946 (probably the later...four years before mom was born) in New Jersey. The manual that came with it is copyrighted 1941. The sewing machine that I always thought was my mother’s stepmother’s is actually my real grandmother’s, purchased (?) sixteen years before she died of cancer.

Also—I think Mark’s friends (my brother, 18) think it’s real “interesting” that someone my age is sewing on the Sat. night.

Tuesday, July 22, 2003

So ends this part...

I actually completed “appliquing” the women and flower on. I believe and know the sewing to be atrocious, but I am proud just the same. I work a double shift tomorrow (at Harley’s...as a cook, yes, I know) and so cannot sew with or see Gladys, but might be able to stop by her house and get this project really rolling by Thursday. Steve and I
can’t do something... when all they’ve got to do is say, I’m gonna teach myself this... Now.

Somebody at work found out I was making this quilt and he’s like, “you don’t look like a ‘quilter to me’. Why are you doing this?”

And I thought for awhile, and I said, “because I don’t know how.”

So here I am, really doing it... starting to sew the blocks together, and I know it’s small in the scheme of things, but I means a great deal to me, I think about the possibilities now—and it’s nice because I’ve learned something new.

August 3rd, 2003

Have completed ¼ of the quilt and working on bottom right hand side now—not that much more to go. Talked to Gladys about center—she is working on it now—with the zig zag and the ribbon—wonderful.

Gladys and Susan (mother in law to be) and Amanda (sister in law to be) will see my wedding dress (that I picked out), give opinions next week. This quilt has helped me to understand them better, to know them all a bit, and become even more a part of this family. For instance, I’ve gotten to know that Amanda’s name was supposed to be Ashley but Steve’s dad didn’t like it. I’ve gotten to hear stories about everything from Gladys’ business she owned with her husband to troubles at the DMV. I’ve been told the best way to cook chili, make jam, and gravy. I know some about Featherweight Singer Sewing Machines—because Gladys owns one in Florida. She has told me about her hopes for grandchildren and for her family. How Daniel (Steve’s youngest brother) reminds her of his father. How proud she is of Steve. She tells me about her friends with failing health
and her friends that have passed away. But she tells me how she is going out with her friends, or to the bake sale, or how she is making a pie or a cake or things to sell at the Bazaar fair. How Steve’s dad met his mom. About her childhood, about her younger sister, older brother—the old farm. She tells me bits of a life…and isn’t that a beautiful thing?

So anyway, I invited them all to look at the dress I picked out recently, that I think is the one, and I think that in doing so, I made a very smart move. 😊

When at hospital with Steve’s dad (there was a bike accident and he was thrown off and got a concussion in Middlebury while riding) I was there with Gladys and Susan and Steve—was there standing with Gladys and Susan outside the emergency room curtains and Gladys starts speaking to me about the quilt—when her own son is in the emergency room—repeating himself and asking the same questions due to his injury.

I was amazed and charmed at how concerned/unconcerned she was—and I realized then that every person is his own keeper—and that although Mark was her child, and always would be no matter the age, he was separate and responsible for himself since he left the womb—that in fact, we all are that way.

So I marveled at how strong she was,, and lasting…and wise. How she knew, somehow, that no matter what, everything would end up alright.

And we all would be just fine—so why not talk about a quilt.

Yes, I felt connected to these women then, part of this maternal league—a member of a society of secrets that men might never know. We are the backbone of their maleness!, the strong, the resolute, the observant, using our ingenuity to shape our worlds together and craft and recreate what they know as their reality.
And as I watched Steve tear up as he gave his dad the same answer to the same question he’d asked minutes before, I knew, right then, standing between his mother and grandmother, my place with him as clearly as if they’d ushered me over the threshold of another gaping, beautiful realm of responsibilities—and I become conscious then, of the part of me that was him seeing his father—this time though, with clear and knowing eyes...

How do you put that in a quilt? How do you put that in a quilt?

August 5, 2003

The “Ruffler”

Today I completed another fourth...so I have half done! And am taking it to Gladys tomorrow with some buttons to get an update and review...I need to cut some more material...I don’t’ have enough squares to continue.

Have become much more able with the Singer machine. Have become the object of fascination and admiration of my sister, mother, father...well whole family including grandma Watson and some friends of the family who marvel at this “project” of mine. As my brother said, “I can’t believe you MADE that. You Made That.” And that’s just after it’s half done. He also said though, “I mean, I see an old Amish lady doing something like that. But you’re not old, or Amish...” I was touched. You should have seen his face though, it was funny...he really was honestly impressed.
Mom tells me grandma Watson would like to see the progress, and I plan to show her, and get some short lessons on needlepoint to top off the final layer here, but that is about two weeks away, so...

Went through some old powderpuff boxes with misc. sewing machine parts in them (that was with the Singer) looked at the 1941 manual and I have a "ruffler" among other things. Have begun to think that I might be able to make some of my own items for the wedding.

August 7, 2003

One yellow square

So I stopped by Gladys' after a long day at work and she was sitting there after mowing the whole yard herself, and we had a good talk...about all kinds of things, including the quilt. She finished the center piece, and explained to me all about the quilt "FRAME" that we will stretch the finished piece onto to put the little...oh I don't know what they're called, strings through finally. She said if we have four people total it would take like two to three hours.

I was excited about learning something new again about this whole process, and I think, in seeing my genuine excitement, she really realized how much this means to me. It was a good moment this afternoon. It made me feel good about all of this...and all the worries I had in the beginning regarding my motivations.

Have cutter and cutting board (she bought a new blade that works wonderfully!) and am cutting up more blocks. Am much better at cutting them now, and more efficient. (Also got some tips from her on how to line up the seams so the blocks will be more...
square.) Should have the whole thing done in about a week...and the wedding guest list 
(Steve came over tonight and we did wedding budgeting) done too.

What a week! I'm buying my wedding dress tomorrow from Heritage wedding 
shop. I told Steve tonight, "I never really thought about it, but here it is, tomorrow I'm 
buying my wedding gown."

I think I can make the garter myself. Steve said, wouldn't it be easier to buy it? I 
said yeah, but I think that I can make it. And it felt good to say that.

(You know, I tried, in the beginning, to keep to just the quilt in these journal 
entries, but I find it impossible, because too much of my life happens in and between the 
stitches...so forgive me, but, really, all of this is relevant.)

August 7, 2003

On and on we go...

Started working on the third and fourth quarters. Had trouble with them since they 
are opposite the others. Pieced it all together to kind of get an idea of the finished project. 
Am excited by the prospects of getting this done. Now. Have about two weeks until I 
move back to Ball State. Would really like to have it completed by then. Like Gladys 
said, with a quilt frame and four ladies, the knotting could take two hours. Alone, it 
would be more like six to eight.
Sewed on the buttons onto the central figures tonight. Then cut and sewed patches for a long while.

Beginning to think I should review my proposal for this thing. What kind of paper could I write from these notes? How formal does it have to be? Could I do something creative, like meld together these journal entries, and then write a brief reflective essay on it all? Sounds honors collegeish to me.

August 11, 2003

At the strike of twelve

I sewed today for two straight hours. Finished the third panel at exactly twelve midnight. Ran out of yellow and green fabric to finish the last section. Only have two and a half rows left and I’m done, and it’s in Gladys’ hands to help me sew the center piece in. plan on going into Gohn’s tomorrow after work to buy the fabric, come home, cut it, sew it on, then drop off Tuesday morning at her house. I know she’s going on a vacation soon, and would like to get her cutting board back to her.

Right now the plan is that Gladys will help me get the back cut and filler in, and then she will put it on a quilt frame and I will come home from school to help.

***Read over my proposal, and reread “Everyday Use” and decided that this project was never about the “joining of our (Steve and mine) two families” but about the women of our families. The pulse of our families, the stuff that makes us real, and weak, and strong...and well, reproducing.
Grandma Watson came to visit today and I showed her the quilt, and she was impressed. Showed her my wedding gown, and she thought that was lovely too. I asked her if she could show me how to cross stitch before I leave, and she said that shouldn’t be a problem. I would like to cross stitch in the date I think...something on the very last piece I sew in. I believe her spirits to be down and her health not so good.

I was dismayed when she came really, because when she was speaking, Mom was talking on the phone (loudly), and dad had that look on his face when he is not listening, but rather waiting until he can talk again (he just got home from his yearly Watson brothers’ Minnesota fishing trip). I kept thinking, you’re losing something here, people. Do you know? Do you realize? Listen to her! Listen!

I wrote my paper for honors 199 on the stories that Grandma Watson told me. I could write whole novels. Listen!

But they don’t. I think maybe Grandma, even with her pioneering spirit, wonders, do they even really notice me? Perhaps subconsciously...does she look at us and think, “I gave you life. I gave you life, and you can’t even lend me your ear or share your time?”

And I think about things like that you see. That’s what keeps me sewing on that old Singer at quarter ‘til Midnight. (Oh, and by the way, I’ve used it so much, I’ll have to get some oil somewhere to oil that thing up...I think it’s developed a little tiny bit of a squeak from all it’s movement as of late.)

It has also occurred to me...what will I do with this thing, when it’s done, and off display in the Honors college, until we get married? How could I possibly put that many quilts (for I have a few) to everyday use?

And what does that mean? anything at all?
**Took a practice LSAT exam, scored well enough to probably get into IU. Feel as though all of the time I have invested into these projects is paying off. Perhaps, just perhaps mind you, I will make it, after all. And imagine, as a child, they told me I'd never read.

August 11, 2003

First major setback

Five minutes after I completed sewing together the top four quarters, as I went to take the last picture before I give it to Gladys, my camera ate the film.

In an instant, I was defeated. The proof of my progress over the past six weeks has been erased, gone, gone. I feel disappointment like I have not known for quite a while.

My eyes burn with bitter tears. And I am angry, angry, because I planned around my usual flaws this time, planned to make this project better than my others, the best of them all, to be the pinnacle of my college education, to have these pictures map out the progress for others as I have seen it occur, and it was gone, like that, like...that.

And I am burned up and wasted, overexposed to too much human flaw and unfair reality than all the levels of my tedious character can handle, leaving me to wonder at the awesome power, the lasting effects, of failure.

This reminds me of the first time my dentist discovered a cavity in my mouth. I brushed, and brushed, and used Fluoride and went to the dentist every six months like I should, and then, one day, he tells me a part of me is decaying and there's nothing I can do about it. That's what this feels like.
August 12, 2003

“Sometimes...you just have to count your blessings.”
--Gladys

(Oh, and the sign on the wall beside Gladys’ dining table does say, “The Lord is
the head of this house, the silent guest at every meal, the listener to every conversation.”
In order to eat anything you have to look right at it. She raised four children and helped
raise twelve grandchildren that way. Now that’s something to chew on.)

Today I spent about two hours sitting next to Gladys in her home as she worked
on sewing the center in—and we discussed all kinds of things, from the weather, to her
grandchildren, to the wedding (and the guest list), and sewing in general.

It was nice, and it reminded me that good does come of bad. (Mom went to
Meijer, and then Elkhart camera, and they think they can save the majority of the roll of
film...in the meantime, mom is taking pictures for me.) (*note to reader, those never did
come out!)

Today we finished the whole top. The whole top is done. I mean, I’ve gotten all
the squares sewn together, then all the quarters sewn together, and the stuff sewn on the
center piece, and the center piece sewn into the quarters. Now it’s ready for the filler and
the backing. I never in my wildest dreams imagined I’d really get this thing done. My
parents are astonished. My dad said, “That is really...impressive.” And he really meant
that. My real grandma Biessler’s Singer held up enough to do it...in fact I’m taking it to
school with me. How’s that for a girl who never sewed Anything before in her life?

Isn’t that something? I still think I’ll be able to make a good presentation to the
Honors college of all this.
September 8, 2003

Hello again! Just wanted to tell you that I got back to BSU in one piece and that my mother’s sewing machine did indeed accompany me back to my Sheidler apartment (which is pretty nice for BSU housing). I’m planning on calling Gladys next week to see if she could work on the quilt because I have to come home for a doctor’s appointment on the 19th.

Have to get to my fellowship paper! (Have started to arrange details for graduating in December!, and just between you and me, my studying has paid off: my LSAT practice scores have jumped 10 points! I take the test Oct. 4th...did I tell you that? But I’m getting more prepared everyday! Steve and I have an IU visit this next weekend. Talk about planning!)

Back to business though, have reserved the Honors college area for Nov. 10-14 to display my quilt and one evening that week to give my little presentation. I hope it goes well!

Updates to come....

September 16, 2003

Will call Gladys this week! Home on Friday.

September 29, 2003
I'm sorry. I really am. I didn't call Gladys. I'm waiting until after the LSAT (this Sat.) Can you believe it? It's this Sat! all that planning and studying this summer and the last five or six weeks and here it is, the final week. It's almost here. I should do alright. 😊

I just wanted to tell you that in the course of my Fellowship work I have ran across a lot of great stuff on Walker's "Every Day Use" and that, indeed, I have not forgotten about you. I'm actually trying to get part of you in my head as I go. I hope to finish the quilt by the beginning of November...a good thing too, since it needs to be displayed around that time anyway. The paper will be in the progress by that time (hopefully) and during that time.

Have decided that unless I become less busy (very unlikely looking at my syllabi) I will not have a showing on the TR night, instead I'll just display it that week. I just don't have the energy.

Maybe I'll change my mind.

Oh, also, I'm trying to collect all the things for the display (like the fabric squares and such, needles) together.

**Idea for cross stitch on quilt: “For Our Granddaughters”**

Perhaps beginning and last sentence of the honors thesis:

“I was born on the coldest, most god forsaken day of January in ’82. The next day, the newspaper accidentally posted my birth announcement under “Accidents.” I never did get over that.“ With such rocky ground to start on, how does a person build her self-concept? Her self-perception? Where does she begin and other people, places, ideas end? Or do they? Should they? Or how? Is that the right question? The making of this quilt was part of my journey to discover what is means to be a woman in my family, in my community,
and in my time—a Watson woman, a Beissler woman, now welcomed into the Troyer family. The rest of what I write here, I suppose, is what I discovered every stitch along the way.

October 7, 2003

Tried to get a hold of Gladys over Fall Break. Couldn’t.

October 12, 2003

Rumble, ramble in my brain...

I sit with my laptop on top of the desk that contains my grandmother’s 1940’s Singer sewing machine and I want to tell you the story of my life, of the past hour, of today, yesterday and all the infinitely connected days that brings you and me, the whole world together, on this fall. As I look at these barren trees standing like soldiers close together—look, at that one, all yellow— ablaze as though it doesn’t notice the others. But yes, I’m sorry, this is what I was going to say, today, in some majestic voice or tone or ability, no less—today (I can hear it now) TODAY I want to tell you You YOU about the part of my grandmother’s gene I was to become, the part of my mother that I’m not. The person I was or at least part a person that I was, the idea, the tendency, the nervous habit, the belief, the idiosyncrasy that I was to become all those years before. Was I the way she held her head? her pen? the look in her eyes? her hands, her hair, her teeth? What I a nervous tugging of the nose or a migraine or a limp? Or was I the stuff she only dreamed? Maybe I only showed up once. Maybe not at all, but I’m here now Now NOW. And I want to tell you about all those days, those hours, that I resided there, before I came into the world. Did I know it then? Did they know I was to come? No, no, probably not. But I
know them now, and remember them, oh yes, and I’ll tell their stories, and the story of
the children I know limp along, sit smugly now within my chest, and let them know that I
KNOW we are all connected, infinitely. Connected. And I forgive us all for that today.
And I love us all for that today. And I am that today. We are that today.

Oh yes, even as I face these difficulties, the circle is yet unbroken.

October 13, 2003

Gladys

Gladys—what an unbelievable woman. I called her today to plan to work on the
quilt this weekend with her and she tells me that she JUST got out of the hospital for a
procedure to see if she has cancer. Just to make sure, she says. And Steve’s mom, Susan
couldn’t go with her (at the last minute because of work) so she had to go with Margana,
her daughter that betrayed her and her husband more than anyone else EVER has. And
Gladys said, I had to go with someone, they said someone had to come. They didn’t want
time driving myself home. (It makes me want to hold her like an egg, like china. Does
she resent me for it?)

And I found myself filled with compassion and disgust. Empathy and awe.
Margana made Gladys’ business go bankrupt and nearly drove Gladys herself into
bankruptcy by lying and stealing and cheating all Gladys and her husband tried to earn
for HER…and now, Gladys’ forgiveness is so great that she can love her anyway.

She’s amazing.
Okay, a preface for this one: there is a billboard on the corner of W. Bethel Ave. and N. Tillotson a block away from my apartment complex. It rotates its message on many three-sided segments, so the viewer/driver/whatever can see three different ads at the light. Anyway, on the shuttle bus every morning I see an ad for an eye doctor, which then switches to a gigantic eye that’s closed, and then opens when it switches again. So here goes...

Have you ever read *The Great Gatsby*?

Remember that sign that the main character sees, the one with all the symbolism, the one with the eye? For the optimists? Just this big set of eyes staring out unto the dusty road, witnessing everything?

Well, all I know is that, every morning, at 9:14 I look west out of the plexy-glass windows of the shuttle bus at the corner of Tillotson and Bethel and the great eye of God winks at me.

Well, winks at me isn’t exactly true. More like is shut, then opens. This big blue eye—a woman’s eye—is shut at 9:13 and opens shortly after. For an optimist of course, but she looks north, from her elevated billboard, out and beyond Muncie, towards home, towards North—all the things I know and all the places I love, all the cruelty I’ve known. She looks north, with one steady eye, unwavering. Elevated above all the world— She keeps looking north, north, north at 9:14. Out, out, out, away from Muncie, from Ball State, forever outward, forever forward. One big blue, giant Eye. One female Eye, elevated on a clinking sign above me, above the squalor of the streets, the chugging of the bus, the yawning of the greasy-haired guy next to me. In the moment I duck down to see
my miracle of 9:14, I smile. Oh, every morning I smile. I smile I smile I smile a genuine smile. I smile a smile that even trickles down to the icy parts of my heart; I smile a smile that could split the world if it’d notice it.

Oh, I smile on in that moment—as I travel on through this drudgery. In that instant: that’s when I forgive the greasy-haired man his greasiness, my judgmental nature its judgments. Even the rest of the bus for not noticing anything at 9:14, or 13 or 17 or ever for that matter. That’s when I forgive us all. Me for not knowing, you for not trying, you for your laziness, me for my edginess, you for your trepidation, you for not helping that man with the boy at his side with the sign that said: will work for food. Yes, I forgive us all. Even the man with the sign. Even the world that made him make it. Oh yes, even the things I cannot name. Even the things that keep me maimed, contained, fault-filled.

That’s the moment I find perfection. That’s the moment I feel free. The moment I smile as she spies hope for me.

Oh, big eye—spy on. Spy on. Oh spy on for little, little me.

October 17, 2003
Could Gladys have cancer?

October 19, 2003

I do not have time now to write down all the pages and pages of what I wrote in my head driving back today. I do not have the time to tell you right now what I feel like, really. What I see it to be now. But I wanted to take a minute to tell you—so I could get it down while I was still close to the moment—I want to tell you—
1) the quilt is done. Completely done. I went home and Gladys, Anna May Troyer, another one of Gladys’ grandma friends, and I (while Susan looked on near the end) finished it up. We worked from 9am until 1:30. We put it in the quilt frame, and knotted it (or whatever you’d say). It is beautiful and fantastic. She made this lovely luncheon. She was so thoughtful. And as I held the finished, puffy, wonderful, colorful, warm, finished, finished, finished puff-quilt in my arms—which had a tiny drop of blood from all of us from pricking our fingers while knotting it I’m sure—as I held it for the first time, smiling, Gladys told me that indeed, 2) she has cancer.

I looked down—I mean my whole being, face, spirit, soul looked down. Fell down. The unusual, short-breathed shock. I knew what she was going to say. The disastrous revelation, the disastrous ends. Death entered the room, and stayed there.

And then I smiled a brave smile. She got lunch ready.

I don’t think I’ll ever forget that.

Snatches of thoughts while driving back to BSU:

On the corner of Cromwell and SR 33 there is a cold and medieval looking church that has a neon sign that reads: Jesus never fails, unflickeringly. It visually harasses me, and appears like some grotesque juxtaposition in some modernized religious zeal of someone with good intentions. Jesus Never Fails? After this morning, perhaps he doesn’t.

...secret of life, in an envelope, licked shut when we were 8 and 12

...what will we do? Put it to everyday use...

maternal pillars of their families, of the community I knew
looked across the table of all things motherly and they unknowingly initiated me, taught me the etiquette of a whole new world of being

truck driver’s wives with needles in their hands, quilting in their legacy, their memory without knowing it

surrounded by the dusty remains of a well-fought life, in a too-hot room filled with shut-up air—for the outside and the mix-mash of running breezy children is long forgotten here. She’s done her job. And this is what is left. Ornaments, artifacts of a life, and no one left to share them. They’ve forgotten the womb that bore them. What now that it’s cancer filled?

Still sharp minds and dull fingers

I hope, she said, I die in my sleep. I hope, she said, I die a decent death.

I knew, from the start, that there was a great deal I would learn from Gladys. She was wise, she was respected, she was skilled. She bore, wore her age well—each child, each worry, each perseverance—each time she had to overcome the ordinary—was written, filled up the lines within her face. Her determination permanently set there—while mine, mine, mine—even at the age of twenty-one, hung about my countenance, my face like the hallowed out, shadowy remains of a long-suffering disease. Anyone who looks upon my sad-set eyes, sunk into a face of pale complexity—yet still wrinkle free, but not carefree—would see... my youth has long since passed me. Then I remember being born old.

October 27, 2003

The Theme
In These Dissenting Times

To acknowledge our ancestors means we are aware that we did not make ourselves, that the line stretches all the way back, perhaps, to God; or to Gods. We remember them because it is an easy thing to forget: that we are no the first to suffer, rebel, fight, love and die. The grace with which we embrace life, in spite of the pain, the sorrows, is always a measure of what has gone before.

--Alice Walker, “Fundamental Difference”

October 29, 2003

I look at these things (my writings, the quilt) and I wonder: what has she given me? With tears in my eyes I told Dr. Edmonds, I said, I wonder, Dr. Edmonds, “What has she given me here?...I want to do justice to that.”

October 31, 2003

Am having trouble with scheduling the presentation and getting in contact with Dr. Edmonds. The HC scheduled fellowship meetings over me and I was not pleased. Am going to put together some of the display/artist statement this weekend and make the invitations. Have a running guest list. Frustrated.

November 9, 2003

Afternoon:

Last weekend Gladys had surgery. She has great staples in her stomach where they removed her uterus.

I visited her by myself in the hospital that Saturday—the day after the surgery.
She appreciated the visit, and, again, she shared with me more than she’ll ever know.

**Evening:**

Find I am running out of desire to write in journal. Feel as though I cannot do it justice enough. I have completed most all of the work, except updated the journal for the presentation for this TR. Stayed up until 5am last night to do it. The question now is, how does one end such a thing?

Will put up display tomorrow afternoon in Honors College. Perhaps make handouts at Hiatt 24-hour Printing. I wonder how many people will come.

*received internship with the Indiana House of Representatives for the Spring Assembly. If I don’t get into law school…well, this is quite the opportunity.

November 12, 2003

**Tomorrow, really?**

Tomorrow is the presentation. Display is not up do to complications in scheduling. Will be up next week. Have updated journal, made preparations. Only main concern is how to hang the quilt in the honors college.

Have written a family tree (not very good, don’t know why I can never write them well) as well as the abstract and some other things. They seem pretty good…we’ll see what Edmonds thinks.

Believe I will end my journal tomorrow after the presentation. Made 50 invites, invited a lot more via email too. Not sure how many will come. Hope I do not embarrass Steve by talking about his family so intimately. It will be an interesting experience.
Looking back through all of the stuff (I was looking at it to make the display) I couldn’t believe how far I’ve come. I didn’t even know how to run the machine.

Am thinking of making Christmas presents for Mark and Nicki (my friend) on the old Singer.

November 26, 2003

I am home for Thanksgiving. The house has become alive again. I arrived tired and hungry but happy to be HOME. Mark (my brother) came home about three minutes after I did and the house jolted awake. Life flooded in. You could tell. What a difference two people make. If you think about it, it makes sense—remove the person and all you have are the trivial objects they clutter their lives with. Kind of reminds me of this book I had to read for my English film class. The book is called *The Virgin Suicides* by Eugenides. It’s not dark, really. It’s just thought-provoking. Ask me sometime, I’ll tell you all about it.

Anyway, the presentation right? Well, it went well. The lobby was filled with some of my old friends (some of whom I haven’t seen in years!) and Dr. Mr. and Mrs. Edmonds’ students. Only one other professor could make it. In fact, none of the professors that I dedicated the project to could make it. So that was a bit of a disappointment.

Overall, it was a success because people ate the cookies. Steve helped me set up. We hung the original quilt on the wall and the new one (the one Gladys and I made) by it. I also brought pictures and artifacts for a quaint display. It was a cozy little atmosphere. Steve also helped me read when I couldn’t read without crying. Yes, that’s right. I couldn’t get through the dedication without crying. I couldn’t get the M in Maude’s name
out. I tried three times. I was fine at first, looking at all those curious faces...and then...I realized this was the end. *The end.*

Tears come to my eyes when I relive that realization. I’ve worked so diligently for seven semesters and in that moment—standing before them all—I realized I had finally pushed the rock *all the way up* the hill. The honors thesis project—the one within these pages—was done! My tedious classes, those depressing treks across campus, the relentless rain and snow, the monotony of 18 credit hours, the horrible food—it was all over. My diligence had paid off and suddenly I stood with a chunk of my life completed. It felt as though I had been climbing Everest blindfolded. I realized that for months now I had simply been circling the summit—not knowing I could look up or out. So, during that presentation it was like seeing for the first time my reality as it was now known to me: real, hard, and clear. I cried because the view was just that beautiful.

I also told those peering honors freshman that my honors education was the only redeeming thing about my undergraduate education. The Associate Dean of the Honors College was pleased. I was just being honest.

Steve’s dad (Mark) managed to come. He was the only family member there besides Steve. I don’t know if Mark knows what to make of me. I know they all approve of me and like me, but all the same I was talking about *his* mother and *his* family. They’re just my “family” by association and proximity. I hope I’m not just discouraging myself. (I do that.)

I read the abstract to the audience and then tried (tearfully) to tell them about Gladys’ handiwork and cancer. I also tried to tell them about the process of making the
quilt. I was so emotional though that I became instantly unorganized and was forced to improvise as I went.

Dr. Edmonds assures me that the students thought it was great and inspirational. I think (I know) I could have done it better (more organized), and in doing so done justice to Gladys. But, I did my best and the Honors College seems pleased.

After I read some things I fielded questions. I had also handed out these cute pamphlet things that described the project. Those were useful. A lot of questions came from the handouts since (I am sure) I was incoherent when explaining it myself.

After the presentation people were kind, as they shook my hand and asked questions. They filtered out, some confused (I’m sure). Others I think were thoughtful. (Oh, how embarrassed I was for people who get embarrassed when someone else cries in front of them! I wasn’t embarrassed by crying—hell, that’s life. But goodness, how bad I felt for all those people...)

Later I put the quilt and some text and artifacts in the Honors College glass display case. I put a few good excerpts from the journal at eye level so they could be read in progression. I think that was effective. I also put the dedication in the display and I got a call from Maude a few days later when I wasn’t at home. My roommate picked up the phone I guess and almost hung up on her. I haven’t heard back from her since.

That’s okay.

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You have no idea how much I want to write something profound here. When Dr. Edmonds (Mr. or Mrs…) reads this or someone else or me years from now (which might as well be another person) I want to have put something down that is worthy of a literal
or figurative underline, something that one says "hmm" or "ah ha!" to when reading.

Sadly I find myself unable or inadequate. Five months after starting this project I am nothing but myself. This project and pages simply chronicle the events of my life. Right now I find that narrative tediously mediocre. (Others, however, seem to find my mediocrity fascinating, as it is not their own. I have had several requests for copies of this journal...which amuses me to no end. Why is it that we are so eternally drawn to other people's impassioned struggles? Why do we find meaning in other people's triumphs and failures? Why do we measure the purpose of our lives with another person's measuring stick? I don't know! It confuses me the more I think of it.) I suppose I am not meant to know...

I will admit though, that this project has defined and made clear my place within my family (particularly Steve's family). That was the initial goal. And, I have been challenged. I have overcome the stereotypes and domestic ignorance that has held me back in my mind and my heart. I learned how to sew! I created something from lengths of material. I created a new narrative.

So, yes, when it came to the presentation I just stood there. I can see all their faces still, looking, peering, wondering, pleasantly curious. It was a weak moment but it was my own. People from all dimensions of my life (old and new, near and far, ordered or obtuse) met in one room to form one audience. It was my voice that told them the story of Gladys and Steve and me. It was my voice, my words, which pieced together the fragments of our lives. It was me who, right then and there before them, quilted in our family.
I want to tell you one more thing. (Can you bear it?) My friend from film class put this whole project in perspective for me in a few simple sentences. My hope is that by telling you this I’ll make this painstaking read worth the time and effort. All I know is that what she said changed my way of thinking.

You see, my film class friend is not an honors student but she came to the presentation anyway (she is so kind). A week after the presentation she came up to me before class. She looked at me. I mean looked at me. One of those times when all the spinning parts and parallel realities of our lives slow and focus in on one person or one thing. All the racket of my life diminished; my mind took notice of her, sharpened the lines of her face, her fragmented shadow on the floor. My contacts swiveled into focus.

I became aware her whole person—this whole universe embodied in flesh—who brushed the fringes of my life. (I mean, have you ever really done that, taken notice of who fills the voids?) Anyway, she said, “Cari, I didn’t know anything existed like that.” I was confused at first. To tell the truth, I didn’t know what she was talking about. She squared her shoulders to face me directly, leaned in, and repeated slowly without hesitation, “I didn’t know anything could be like that.” There was a silence. She looked at me intently and I blinked.

Then I realized she was talking about the quilt. In an instant, I burned to ash and raised again a better, stronger woman. Someone understood what I had tried to do.

I managed a weak “thank you.”

And then, quite honestly, it was as though good existed in my world and a bridge was built from one island to another. There was something new that connected me to her and it was the realization that there are things in life bigger than film class, that hallway,
this school, even us. I placed hope somewhere deep inside a pocket untouchable for eternity. Something sure seeped into my structure. Something real connected my mind and body and my past and present. I was finally at home within myself.

That moment is what this quilt has meant to me.

November 29, 2003

Yes, just one more thing. The night I gave the presentation (when I was standing there in front of a room full of faculty, friends, and fellow writers) Steve stood up to say that Gladys’ surgery was affective. He hadn’t told me that before. She will recover. When he said that, the girl from film class said a quiet Hallelujah. She meant it. She really did. Her Hallelujah struck an Amen in my soul like a golden hammer on a silver bell. It was harmony, it was sincere, and it felt like nothing I’ve ever felt before.

Later, at the Troyer Thanksgiving I saw Gladys sitting around her dining room table. She was surrounded by her children, grandchildren, and their families (and the Lord himself, as she has Him so austerely mentioned above her head). Yes, looking at Gladys, Susan, Mark, Kevin, Daniel, Amanda, and Steve I knew what I was thankful for. And you now what? We went around the table and each said what we were thankful for. They were thankful for me.
The invitation and handout are located in the back pocket.