

Section 6: Quilting as reflexive response

It is 'I' walking this path, sometimes with others, mostly alone. I carry different things; at times I pick things up and put things down. But as I do I notice I am changing as I am moving on...

6:1 Myself on the path

From my position as woman/wife/mother/midwife/educator/researcher I recognise that I have constructed views of midwives and midwifery over many years, and that, in essence I too am a 'participant'. I am 'close' to the midwives I am talking to in my 'story' but yet I am also different. I also see that I am intrinsic to the study but also extrinsic, as I vacillate between being 'in' with them—having similar feelings, 'knowing', and understanding the world of being a midwife and being 'outside' as an observer, listener, and ultimately story teller (Ellis & Burgher 2002).

As I progress through this study I identify with the personal development Anderson (2004:308) describes taking place through the reflection I undertake. Such research requires reflexivity, which is described as being:

a constantly changing sense of ourselves within the context of our changing world (Etherington 2004:30).

As a way of reaching the depth of reflexivity that this requires I decide to make a textile quilt, illustrating the complexity or 'bricolage' (Denzin & Lincoln 2008) of the study, which would present all the parts of the participants' contributions as a whole, but also in recognition of the creativity required of the participants in the study, and of me. The journey towards this is recorded later in these pages. The aim of the quilt is therefore to illustrate the reflections and responses within my self in the context of the study. But also this is a craft I have not tried before, and allows me to consider carefully what I am doing, by experimenting and exploring using creative and cognitive skills. After each written reflection in my research diary in addition I spontaneously sketch a square, sometimes with colour, that represents that section. The use of colour is sometimes symbolic. In my diary I record the following:

April 5th 2006

My exploration of Kandinsky's (1977) views of spirituality and art has got me thinking about the effect of colour. He writes of blue as being the colour of

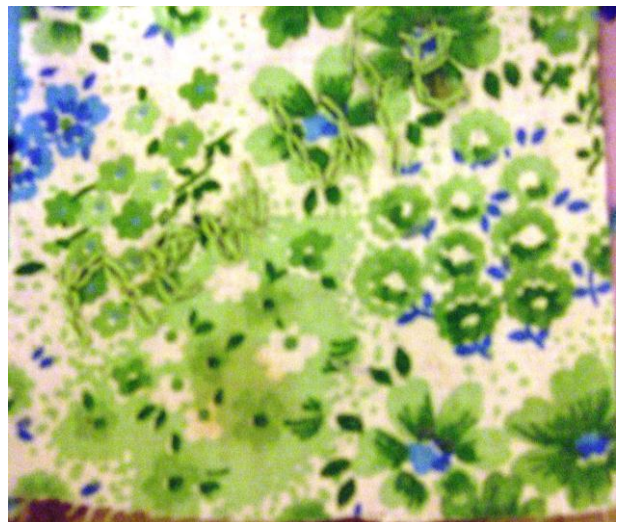
spiritual. I find that interesting as it is not a colour I always go for. Pink is more significant to me at the moment- is this the colour of feminine? Should I explore the significance of my feminine side in all this?



Later I refer to the use of green:

13th May 2008

I go shopping and buy myself a dress. It is green and white. I realise that the colour green has been very present. I have bought a green cardigan recently, and have been using green in my squares. Green has burst from the ground recently, and I have been drawn to the garden...I wonder if this period of questioning and analysis is a 'green' period- a time of real growth and development. Is it that something new is growing in me? I sense that with all that is going on in my life just now.



Each square is thus a symbolic representation of an entry in my reflective diary. Clover (2005) writes:

Symbols make connections between things that are concrete and things that are abstract.

It is an heuristic process (Moustakas 1990) as I explore my reactions of all that is taking place. Through the development of the quilt I am beginning to make connections with the journey of the study and the internal change of my self as researcher. In addition it allows me opportunity to explore my intuitive, spiritual responses and beliefs and demonstrates the external issues that make impact on me.

In the stitching together of the quilt I start with a central panel that was material from my wedding dress. I record this in my research diary:

12th March 2006

I have put off sewing for a long time so actually this process may be a valuable one spiritually for me-addressing a 'me' part that has been neglected. I find a piece of material, and the piece I want for the centre is from my wedding dress. All that is left is the cuttings from the rim at the bottom. I have cut two pieces and have joined them in the centre like a barrier across. The title will go on this piece at the end. Then it dawns on me the two halves are the beginning and the end- the Alpha and the Omega. The sign for Alpha will go on now.



The choice of this material is significant in that my marriage and family are central to my being. I choose to make a gold 'alpha' sign as an indication of the beginning. I begin to stitch the squares around this central square, with the aim of building up a spiral in reference to Sara Wickham's (2004b:172) 'sacred spiral' of being a woman; the building up, layer-on-layer. She writes:

Because our spirals cannot really be captured on paper: they are in our lives, our cycles, our bodies, our experiences. Maybe one day, when we

have moved further on in our ways of knowing, we will have better ways of expressing these things to ourselves and each other.

Quilting seems a good way to 'express' myself in this study.



However, I realise when preparing for a presentation I am giving that I haven't quite got this right.

1st May, 2007

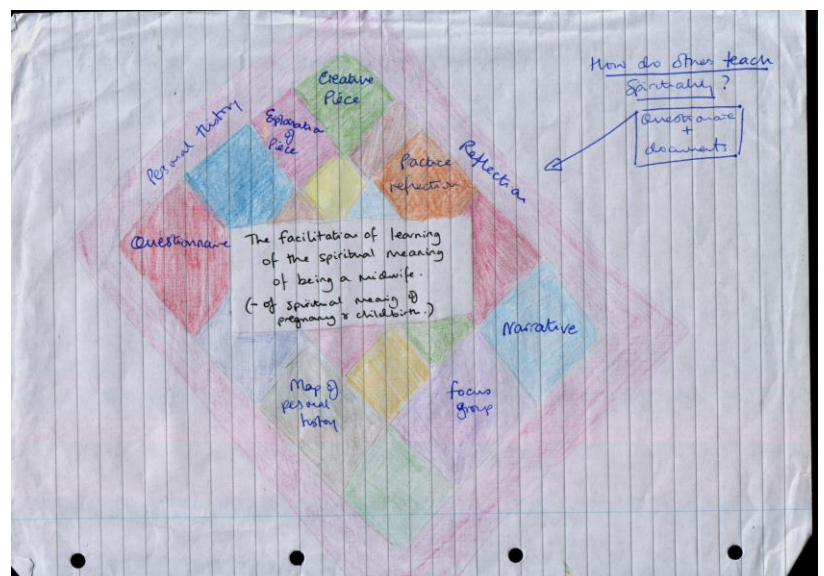
I have found this presentation really hard to do. I have been putting it off, finding all sorts of excuses to not do it. I put the title in the powerpoint and then just look at it; where do I begin? I look at the abstract; why did I choose this? Why didn't I choose something less personal, less meaningful to me, less exposing? But as [my supervisor] said at my last supervision meeting I have to talk about this sometime. I take out the quilt and start taking pictures of it in the garden. My daughters become inquisitive and start asking what each of the squares mean. "You are emotional like me", says my eldest. "Actually, I think it's the other way round", I respond, trying to frame one of the squares... "Hey, you have used some of my material!" she points out.



I explain to her that she has been there in the quilt because she has been doing her textiles GCSE and she has inspired me and because she has been close to my thoughts as a teenager! Her next sister is there too, but not the others, yet, though they will be. "Why don't you just show it to them?" she said. "Because I have to speak" I say, but that seems to be the issue for me. I could stand up and just show this and I would feel comfortable with that. But talking about this is far more challenging.

Because the quilt is part of me. It has become my voice for this study, it is my place to reflect and explore all that has been going on inside. For each entry in my reflective note book there is a square that provides the symbols representing those thoughts and feelings. However, the reflections are not just about the study of others, for more and more I realise I am in this study too. I am dealing with midwives, women, wives, mothers. But I too am a midwife, woman, wife and mother. As I progress, I note that this is not just about my subjects but about me. It contains my supervision meetings, the people I am studying, but also, our holiday, Easter and Christmas, other people and events as well. It is a year of my life.

So why a quilt? It started from a short presentation I gave to my colleagues travelling on the same course. I had finished presenting the aims I had for my study and described to them the different types of data I was planning to collect. I explained to them that I saw this would all connect together somehow like a bricolage, a patchwork quilt, which would make up the information about the whole individual participant. ..I showed a rough sketch I had made of the suggested complexity of the data I was intending to use.



During the discussion that followed someone suggested, I should make a quilt, I think as a joke, but a light switched on in me. I recognised that I consistently encourage others to use the creative aspects of them, yet my own appeared to have been suppressed and I had not crafted anything for sometime. The quilt therefore has become part of this journey, an extension of my creative self.

It is an excuse too for me to find time to sit and be. I tell myself it is for the benefit of the study that I am doing this and yet it is a source for me to find peace in a frenetic life style. I can contemplate and reorder my thoughts as I shape and stitch each square, choosing the materials and colours with care. Clover (2005) writes:

Perhaps it is this slowness and multiplicity that allows for deeper reflections on why one is making the quilt or creating the play, and this act of sustained contemplation imbued in and through the artwork in turn provides a space of critical reflection.

I reflect on why it is so difficult to put all this into words and it is something to do with the personal nature of this but also the fear that this is not viewed as academic. It is almost predominantly women's work and not perceived of value. Clover (2005) writes that:

Textile practices have been treated with disregard for so long it is almost inconceivable for some critics and artists to acknowledge them as discursive formations from which meaning can emerge.

I have over the years purposefully put aside crafting objects to replace it with crafting words and enabling others in the craft of midwifery. This is a midwife's role: a bystander in the creative process of others, part of the role is to facilitate another to find meaning and purpose. For my role as educator it is to be a bystander in facilitating students in their self growth and as a researcher to observe others on their journey and make sense of it. As a wife and mother I see now I have become a bystander for my children to create and

make music and dance and act as part of their process of self growth. They no longer need my active participation in their making and creating.

I identify with Ann Rippin (2006) who uses quilting in management studies where she states that for her being 'academic was to be rational, analytical, detached' and that she was told 'to keep the personal' out of her research. But I am unable to remove myself from this research and it is clear to me that I have to acknowledge the effect this process of creativity is having on me. This process is thus heuristic (Moustakas 1990) as I explore my reactions through the quilt of all that is taking place. At the same time, midwifery, with all its feminine nature, has been turning aside from its roots to take a more medicalised and potentially male gendered agenda. Arts and crafts and midwifery have been pushed down and this is where my study comes in.

And this is the process of the quilt, that it has been reflecting my world as well as the study. At the start I intended to present the quilt as a spiral, recognising the spiral of this study and life, layers building on layers. Early on in the process I realised that I had not in fact done this; that I had presented it more in blocks. I unpicked the stitches and reformatted the squares to go round in a spiral.



At the same time, the study was evolving from one direction in to another, and also at the same time my daughter was ripping out parts of her textile project and reformatting it. It was a moment in time when the quilt reflected life and life was reflecting the quilt. At that moment, I realised the importance of

continuing this process and taking more note of what I was doing. I recognise more so that my study is not life changing, is not going to be and also that it doesn't have to be. The expectations of me as a health professional that research has to do that have gone out of the window. But the reflection and the process has made me realise that the quilting is changing me.

The creation of the quilt highlights the personal aspects of my identity as significant alongside the professional aspects of my role as midwife/educator/researcher. For the midwives who are part of this journey the identities of wife/mother/carer will also be important to them as well as their professional selves.

As described in the above presentation quilt-making as a craft is more commonly practised by women, as is midwifery. Its historical roots lie in providing warmth and beauty within the home, but also as an indication of a 'tangible, lasting proof of a woman's skill' (Starr Johnson & Wilson 2005). The suggestion of craft (and specifically women's craft) being 'down graded' to the notion of 'low' art because of its utilitarian function (Gouma-Peterson & Mathews 1987) links with the concept of the perceived value of the craft of midwifery. Wickham (2007) writes of the connection between craft and midwifery practice linking the process of manual skills and dexterity and the process of creation of something. She also relates to the time it takes for these skills, that Clover (2005) also discusses.

Exploration of historical quilting is not unusual, examining materials used, what they depict as well as the social context in which they were made (Wulfert 2005). Quilting has also been used in a limited way as a research tool, for example, Ann Rippin uses it on studies of management (Rippin 2007a, Rippin 2007b), and Lorna Davies (2005) developed one for an MA of women's studies exploring feminist education. Creation of a quilt has been used to elicit response from others (Cornutt 1999) and developed as response to the data from a study about nurses as mothers (MacDonald 1996). However, the perceived lack of value within craft remains and may be disregarded in academic terms (Rippin 2006). To the creator the art has its own meanings. Any observer of this art will subsequently place their own interpretation and meanings (Rose 2001:25).

Ray and McFadden (2001) use the metaphor of the quilt as an image of spiritual development in women. The authors write of the different layers of a quilt, 'crafted over time', of the individuality of each quilt and of their different functions over a life span (p205). They also write of the connection between the squares as being similar to human 'relational encounters' that may be 'hard to distinguish when viewed in the context of the whole pattern of life' (p205). My quilt, therefore, may be not just an illustration of my journey through the research process but also illustrating a significant aspect of my spiritual development.

April 10th 2006

It was inspiring to knit the square to the extent I hunted through to find some knitting I started a long time ago [probably 7 years!]. Actually it was near the end of it and I started to finish it. The process got me thinking of 'unfinished business'- an issue that is constantly being raised in my psyche at this time. I am constantly on the move to start new things, for me to move onto something else- perhaps when things get too difficult or unchallenging even. ..I am thinking this is part of my spiritual journey now that I have to 'complete' things in my life that have been left unfinished or unresolved...Anyway the knitting is now complete and being worn by my youngest, so that's satisfying and is now a square of the quilt

