

## Elements of Life

My grandmother—we called her Gran—was born in 1882 in Skipton, a small north-of-England town near the Yorkshire dales. Many women, including Auntie Edie, Gran's older sister, worked at Dewhurst's, *the* factory in town that produced sewing thread. Their mother, my great grandma, sewed shirts at home. Gran finished the buttonholes and attached the buttons. She was quick and deft at hand work and sometimes sewed for rich families. She would spend a week at a time at large houses, eating with the children, and sharing the nursery with the nanny. She'd lengthen frocks and coats for growing girls; let out seams to accommodate a pregnancy or the spread of middle-age; make new collars and false hems, change buttons, and add ribbons or bows to keep the ladies' clothes presentable for another season.

In her late twenties Gran married a salesman for a cotton firm in Manchester. He brought home the ends of rolls of cloth, which she made up into frocks, blouses, and shirts for her children—Dad and my three aunts. Later, she sewed for my brothers and me. I'd ride my bike to her house and try to stand still while she pinned up hems and seams, accidentally tickling or jabbing me as she worked, quickly calculating what needed changing to fit. She was queen of making-do. She cut down worn shirts, coats, and trousers and remade them, child size, using the less-worn parts. As a young wife, Gran could not afford to buy buttons and thread out of the same week's housekeeping money. Always thrifty, she might cut shirt-tails, inside pockets, button bands, or the underside of collars from oddments, as these parts would not be seen. This practical economy was an honored principle to live by, repeated like a mantra by my mother: "You have to learn to cut your coat according to your cloth, Gwyneth."

The women I knew as I was growing up all sewed. It was a respected skill—part of what it meant to be a capable woman. In the evenings or on Sunday afternoons they'd bring out their knitting, darning, or hand sewing. They embroidered tablecloths for Sunday best – often as a gift for a birthday or a wedding. Auntie Gwen made leather bags and gloves, and lace edging for white linen handkerchiefs. Auntie Joan was an excellent

knitter. As they set to, admiring each other's work or commiserating over some tedious mending, they'd joke: "Satan finds mischief for idle hands!" They all had their store of fabric—worn pieces that could be re-used, off-cuts from earlier projects, a tweed skirt length, a dress length in a summery cotton, or perhaps a lovely piece, an irresistible extravagance, bought with no practical purpose in mind.

Mum somehow found time to sew clothes for her and for me. She had me standing on the kitchen table for what seemed like hours, turning this way and that, trying not to slouch or wriggle while she leveled hems, grunting instructions, tailor's chalk at the ready and spare pins between her teeth. I remember her bent over the sewing machine in the evening, tackling a pile of mending. She patched torn knees and elbows. She turned collars to hide the frayed part. She repaired sheets by turning them sides-to-middle: cutting them from head to toe, sewing the less-worn outside edges together to form a new middle, then hemming the cut edges. When they were beyond repair, old clothes were pensioned off to the rag bag. One of my jobs was to cut off the buttons and put them in the button tin for future use. We'd never heard the word 'recycling,' but we knew the practice very well.

When I was 5, I began to learn to knit, darn, embroider, and sew from Gran, Mum, and Auntie Gwen. I still remember learning to knot the end of the thread and trying to make even stitches. I started with pot-holders, mittens, and scarves. As a teenager I made a lot of my own clothes, recycling zips and fabric, combining different paper patterns. I worked late at night on the bedroom floor after finishing homework, wanting something new to wear for a party or a special date.

At the outdoor market or in a department store in Manchester, Mum could not pass by the fabrics without rubbing them between her fingers and thumbs—corduroy, shantung silk, worsted suiting—and commenting on the quality. For clothing to hang well, she taught me, the fabric should hang the same way it's woven, with the grain. Cheap clothes are not always cut this way and may have puckered seams as a result. Cheap clothes are

often not finished properly along the seams, or have no spare material at the hem. Cheap clothes will not last, and they invariably have ugly buttons.

Nowadays, sweatshops in US and European cities, and factories in Thailand, India, China, Honduras, Mexico, or the Philippines churn out masses of inexpensive clothing, and I rarely find time to sew. Doing some simple mending or altering a shirt I've bought to make it fit better or look more my style is as close as I usually get. Even in this limited way, I enjoy this old skill. I still look critically at ready-made clothes to see how well they are finished. I browse in fabric stores and fantasize about sewing projects I'll do one day. I have my own button tin and a fabric stash in a bedroom cupboard—colorful pieces from trips to Africa and Asia, beautiful silk blouses that are worn or no longer fit, and some fun bits, exchanged with sewing friends, in colors I never wear.

Coming to the United States in the 1980s I saw American pieced quilts for the first time. I learned to piece simple Amish patterns from books, working small squares. I marveled at the patience and the hundreds—or is it thousands—of hours it must take to make a double-bed-sized wedding quilt by hand. This old-established women's contribution to the household economy was being recognized in some circles as an art rather than a craft. I wondered about the groups of women who had worked together on quilts for newlyweds and newborn babies, or to record family and community events, sharing news and talking about their lives as they sewed. Information about the “underground railway,” a network of those who supported runaway slaves, was coded into some old quilts. Queen Lili'uokalani and friends depicted details of Hawai'ian history in a quilt they made after she was forcibly deposed and Hawai'i annexed as a US territory. This seemingly innocent and domestic pastime had a much wider cultural and political significance.

I was invited to contribute squares for group quilts: to welcome Suzanna's baby (Emma) and Molly's baby (Charlotte), and to mark Nancy's retirement from the college library. Later, I took the coordinating role and completed other joint efforts to welcome Gabrielle and Aya into the world.

The September-11 attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, and the immediate US military response made me furiously angry, scared, and sick to my stomach. It was an extremely unsettling time. I knew that much long-term, careful work for peace, sustainability, and true security could be reversed by this crisis. President Bush tried to coerce our support: “Either you are with us or you are with the terrorists.” Many of us joined marches, rallies, and vigils to express our opposition: to define other places to stand. Our local independent radio station, KPFA, broadcast the voices of people from all over the world talking about this catastrophe. Unlike many people in other parts of the country, we heard strong criticism of the Bush administration and the worldwide system of US militarism, domination, and arrogance. Day after day on KPFA we heard political analysis repudiating the bombardment of government propaganda and lies that argued for war.

As well as participating in rallies and demonstrations against war, I longed to do something creative and tangible to express the core of what matters. Years before, I’d made some rough sketches for four fabric hangings, each to represent an element—earth, air, fire, and water—the foundations of life. I dug out the sketches. I searched through my fabric pieces and sorted them by color. I looked out buttons, yarn, embroidery thread, rubber stamps, and markers. Much of the fabric in this project is recycled from clothes that had become too small, faded, or worn. Small scraps are from pockets, collars, sleeves, and the umpteen shoulder pads I’ve taken off store-bought clothes over the years. Some of the buttons had been on Dad’s shirts or clothes I wore as a child.

I also combed the fabric store looking for particular designs, textures, and colors. Waiting at the check-out, I noticed a top-of-the-line sewing machine, priced \$4,500. It worked away by itself, computer controlled, embroidering an elaborate 5-color design. According to the manual it can reproduce 300 patterns. You put the spools of thread in place, choose the design, and press the ON switch. While it sews for you, you can do your laundry, pick up your kids from school, go to work, or sleep through the night. Sold

in the name of creativity, to me it seemed the antithesis of creativity and the ultimate in de-skilling.

That machine confirmed my decision to do this project by hand, to luxuriate in the process of resolving the thousands of little decisions about shape and color; to enjoy making each and every stitch on a trial-and-error basis, which means that much has also been unpicked and re-sewn. I lived with this work for eight months—the panels-in-progress taped to the wall or spread out on the table and moved to make way for meals. I sewed and looked by turns, enjoying the step-by-step unfolding of concept to product, especially savoring those moments when scraps I'd cut away and set aside suddenly became just the right piece.

I remembered the women in my family who started me on this path. I gained new respect for their skills and all they'd taught me. I wished for many more hours in the day, for sharper eyesight, and more-nimble fingers. I looked at the shapes of waves, hills, clouds, tree-trunks, rocks, flames, and flower meadows more closely than before. And I felt more intimately a part of the vibrant, complex web of life, wanting to live in ways that reverence, safeguard, and celebrate these vital elements that nourish and sustain us.

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