

Good morning. I'm Ted Pack, our congregation's web master. It is an odd post, compared to singing in the choir or serving on the Buildings and Grounds Committee. I can do most of my work from the comfort of my home, at any hour of the day or night. I sometimes work early in the morning, in my sarong and sweater. I've worn a sarong around the house since I was a Peace Corps Volunteer in Borneo, although mine is flannel, a fabric they don't use much two degrees above the equator. I'm the only church web master in Stanislaus County to wear one, and I'm lucky you are such a tolerant bunch. When I told Bill Greer about my working habits and working garments, he said "There's nothing sarong with that."

The sweater is too much of an old friend to throw away but too moth-eaten to wear in public. It keeps me warm on chilly winter mornings as I labor for the good of Unitarian Universalism. Helen Buchner told me that, in view of its function and condition, I should call it my "Holy" sweater.

Our web site passed the 50,000-visitor mark early this month. I had planned to make a brief mention of that milestone during the announcements one of these weeks. Instead, thanks to an academic debate gone wild, I find myself here, delivering the sermon.

Our own Jane Fenton, who volunteers as a docent at the McHenry Mansion, heard a fascinating lecture there by a lady, on the subject of "Quilt Codes and the Underground Railroad". Jane asked the lady if she would like to speak to us on the same subject. She agreed. The day after I posted her sermon blurb on our web site, I received an e-mail message from a UU in Monterey California, a quilter herself, telling me the codes were a myth. She sent me half a dozen links.

I passed the information on. The Quilt Code lady told the worship committee that she knew the codes were controversial, and she would address the controversy in her talk, if we didn't mind having a talk on a controversial subject. We assured her that we had hosted controversial speakers before, that our fourth principle was "A free and responsible search for truth and meaning" and that we would welcome her. Nevertheless, after a week's discussion, she decided that she didn't want to speak to us. So, on the theory that if I caused the problem, I should provide the solution, I volunteered to speak this morning. That in turn meant composing a 2500-word essay that would amuse, delight and instruct most of you. With luck it won't offend too many of the rest of you, plus it has to have some moral and spiritual insights. Rev. Grace comes up with a sermon like that three times a month; no wonder she needed a sabbatical.

A bit of background; the "Underground Railroad" was not a real railroad. It was loose-knit organization of people who helped fugitive slaves. People helped fugitive slaves from roughly 1780 until 1862, but they didn't call it the "Underground Railroad" until the 1830's, when real railroads became common enough to make the analogy clear. A "conductor" guided the slaves by night, and "stations" were places where the runaways could rest for the day.

No one knows exactly how many slaves escaped via the underground railroad. Most estimates I've seen are in the 100,000 range, give or take 50,000. Some lived openly in the northern states, and even published their stories in abolitionist journals. Some kept quiet. After congress passed the Fugitive Slave Law in 1850, they were not totally safe anywhere in the United States, so many of them continued fleeing north until they got to Canada. Many slaves went south, not north. In New Orleans, for instance, it was easy for a fugitive to blend in with the freedmen.

The people who conducted slaves to freedom used codes. They had, according to published narratives, lantern signals, whistle signals and code words. Did they have coded quilts?

Barbara Brackman, Patricia Cummings, Leigh Fellner and Kimberly Wulfert are all quilt historians with web sites devoted to the quilt code controversy. We have links to them on our web site, if you would like to read more. Go to the page about Sunday Services, find the paragraph for today, and click on the link labeled "Quilt Code Controversy". I drew on all of them for my information.

A number of children's books came out in the 1990's, claiming some sort of codes in quilts. The first and best-known was "Sweet Clara and the Freedom Quilt", written in 1989 and published in 1993. In it, a young slave makes a quilt that is literally a map of the area surrounding the plantation where she lives, which she then uses to escape.

Shortly after “Sweet Clara” came out, Jacqueline Tobin met Ozella McDaniel Williams in a market in Charleston, South Carolina. Ozella McDaniel Williams was a former school administrator and she had a law degree from Howard University. She had retired and was selling quilts. She told Ms. Tobin that specific block patterns in quilts had coded meanings, and they had been used on the Underground Railroad. Ms. Tobin bought a quilt.

Details of exactly what happened in the years afterwards differ, but eventually Ms. Tobin, who is white, convinced Raymond Dobard to join forces with her. Dr. Dobard is African-American, an art history professor at Howard University and a noted quilter, although not a quilt historian. Ms. Tobin teaches writing; she wasn't a quilt historian either. They interviewed Ms. Williams, who gave them pieces of the story a bit at a time over the course of three years. Tobin and Dobard wrote a book about the codes, “Hidden in Plain View”. It came out in 1999.

According to “Hidden”, a plantation seamstress would sew a sampler quilt containing different quilt patterns. Slaves would use the sampler to memorize the code. The seamstress then sewed ten quilts, each composed of one of the code's patterns. A quilt block named “Flying Geese”, and another named “The North Star”, reminded slaves to go north. A block named “The Drunkard's Path” reminded those on the run to follow a crooked trail (in much the way a drunken man staggers) during their journey. The “Wagon Wheel” told slaves to pack their belongings because they were about to go on a long journey. The book describes 19 patterns and their meanings. The book told a wonderful story – the slaves outsmarting their masters. Score one for the underdog! It came out when there was a demand for things that would get children interested in Black History. Best of all for grade-school teachers, the “coded” quilt squares were easy to make with construction paper. There was one problem – it might not have been true.

Critics of the book said that it had some serious flaws. No other first-hand account of the Underground Railroad mentioned quilt codes. None of the slave narratives collected by the WPA in the 1930's mentioned quilt codes. Some of the “Code” patterns were not used until the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Finally, common sense tells us there are faster ways to memorize things than to stitch them into a quilt, let alone ten of them.

After that first e-mail message I did a little research myself. Before this all came crashing down around my ears, I had no idea quilters could be so passionate about their art. It turns out that quilt code debates are to quilters what steel cage death matches are to professional wrestlers; emotions run high and both sides are out for blood.

There are two extreme positions in the debate. Cynics say Ms. Williams, inspired by the children's book, made the whole thing up to sell more quilts, and that she was reluctant to reveal the whole story all at once because she had to make up new parts between visits. Adherents say that white historians are, once again, dismissing a triumph of ingenuity by African-Americans. Those are the extremes. Everyone I have read and will cite has taken a stance somewhere between those two positions.

All of the sites I found supporting the Quilt Code theory used “Hidden in Plain View” as their only source. The rest say the codes were almost certainly – note that “almost” – a myth and criticize the scholarship in the book.

Christopher Densmore is Curator of the Friends Historical Library at Swarthmore College. The Friends are better known as the Quakers; a number of Quakers were active in the Underground Railroad. Mr. Densmore made a list of specific inaccuracies he found in “Hidden”. I'll mention three of them:

On page 57 it says the American Revolution was over by 1776. It started then. Our nation was conceived in liberty, but it took seven more years for it to be born.

On Page 62 it says George Rawick compiled slave interviews for the WPA from 1936 to 1938. Mr. Rawick wrote about slavery and Black History, but he was born in 1929. He would have been wearing short pants and going to grade school in he 1930's.

On page 172 it says Nat Turner attempted to take a Virginia Armory in 1831. John Brown attempted to take a Virginia Armory – the one in Harper's Ferry - in 1859. Nat Turner led a slave revolt in 1831. His followers killed 55 white people with knives and clubs; they didn't try to take over an armory.

I found an undated on-line press release from American University in Washington, DC. From the file name I suspect it came out February 22<sup>nd</sup>, 2000. It is about Raymond Dobard's visit to the university while on a book tour:

Dobard . . . offered listeners the keys to understanding. The first step the quilting scholar offered is to abandon the inadequate mechanism of Western deductive reasoning. In its place, he invited consideration of a dizzying array of possible ways to interpret messages in the quilts. Read these quilts as one might read poetry, not merely for the linear sense, but for connections evoked in phrases, or feelings that resonate through colliding syllables.

"Western deductive reasoning" is inadequate for many things - hope, faith, love and beauty, for instance. Western deductive reasoning works pretty well for historical facts. I use it every time I work on my family tree.

Laurel Horton is a folklorist and a quilt researcher. She delivered a lecture on the Quilt Codes to the International Quilt Study Center at the University of Nebraska. We have a link to an audio recording of that lecture on our web page. I wrote to her; she replied:

. . . I can now discuss the Quilt Code controversy without getting emotional. I understand that there are powerful reasons why people believe that the code is true. It makes a good story. It's like the idea that Betsy Ross made the first American flag. . . .

The Quilt Code is another one. A lot of people on both sides of the controversy become very emotional when confronted with people who disagree with them. I don't like being upset and angry, so I have worked hard to not take any of this personally. It's a fact that there's no historic evidence for the Code's existence. It's also a fact that a lot of people believe in the Code. It's just hard to face both facts at the same time.

I have some first-hand experience with those emotions Ms. Horton mentioned. The Quilt Code lady's husband has a Ph.D. in History. He firmly believes slaves used the quilt codes. I called and left a message on his machine asking him for some links supporting the code theory, because I wanted our page devoted to the controversy to be balanced. He never replied. Instead, he told members of our worship committee he was insulted by my question and later asked a third party to ask me never to call him again. All this over quilts! I was as surprised as if he had challenged me to a duel to the death over the relative merits of red sauce or green sauce on burritos. I was also taken aback at his idea of scholarly debate.

The entire experience was an education. In the course of my very brief research, I found two web pages devoted to the quilt codes on the National Security Administration's web site. One presents the codes as fact and doesn't mention the controversy. The other says, "Most historians consider the stories involving the quilts to be more legend than fact". The NSA's left hand doesn't know what its right hand is doing, evidently. One wonders if there are other places where this is true.

Our fourth principle is, again, "A free and responsible search for truth and meaning". I've been looking for the truth about Quilt codes for the past two weeks. How should one go about searching for truth?

One way, drummed into me by 30 years of genealogy, is to consider the sources. An appalling number of my fellow genealogists are convinced that their ancestor came to the USA after poaching the king's game. Why, I always ask them, would anyone want to boil the royal Scrabble set? After the laughter dies down I ask for their sources. Usually it is a family legend. Sometimes they re-evaluate their family legend, sometimes they don't. We genealogists are used to discrepancies in birth years and birthplaces; it is one of the facts of life in our hobby. With a couple of census entries, a christening record, marriage license and a tombstone, we can usually pin someone's birth year down to a three-year span, and their birth place to a specific state, if not county. We tend to be wary of facts with just one source.

Another way is to look at the whole work. Many people mistrust "Hidden in Plain View" because of the historical inaccuracies. I mentioned some before. Why would a few trivial mis-statements matter? Those of us who watch lawyer shows on television know that if you can catch a witness in one mis-statement, you can destroy his entire credibility. Those of us who have served on a jury know that in real life, most witnesses get caught in a mis-

statement or two, and the case usually goes to the side with the fewest mistakes. The fundamentalist Christians are convinced that if any part of the Bible is mistaken – including the lines from Genesis I read at the start of this service – the rest of the Bible is worthless and their entire moral code goes down the drain. Evolution, therefore, is more than an odd theory to them; it is a threat to their way of life.

Christopher Densmore, the museum curator I quoted before, very kindly wrote to me about the controversy. He said Ozella McDaniel Williams could have made up the whole story to sell quilts then adds:

Or, somewhere behind the story as told by McDaniels, there [could be] some authentic account, but one so garbled to be virtually useless.

He went on to say:

This latter gets into the problems of human and cultural memory. I know of examples where family stories passed down through generations remain quite accurate but many others where details become blurry or confused. Two of my grandparents were born in log cabins in Minnesota in the 1880s. I realize that I can't distinguish clearly between things I might have learned from them as a child, the Laura Ingalls Wilder stories or just some account of "pioneer living" picked up from a visit to the museum.

I put a small example of the memory problem into the order of service, at the top; that quote, "Another fine mess you've gotten us into" is not accurate, although most of us geezers will think we recognize it immediately. Oliver Hardy actually said "Another NICE mess you've gotten ME into", in half a dozen movies. Humphrey Bogart never said "Play it again, Sam" in Casablanca. Although it was the tag line for many of the movies, Sherlock Holmes never said "Elementary, my dear Watson" in any of the stories or novels. So, when you search for truth, remember – memories may be faulty.

One final note: The Quilt historians I corresponded with were all calm, polite and more than willing to share their opinions and their reasoning with me. Any debate involves some heat and some light; if there were no emotions involved, life would be dull. A search for truth means being willing to listen to the other side, if you expect them to listen to you. If you can listen without too much heat, you have a good chance of shedding light in return.