

A Life Pieced Together with Love: Quilted Greeting Cards



Activity, Time and Materials

ACTIVITY:

This activity consists of sharing life experiences and life stories. Inspired by those reminiscences, the elders develop designs to be used in the making of quilted greeting cards. The residents and their helpers create the cards by cutting and gluing fabric pieces arranged in various designs to the front of heavy, folded, stock paper. The fabric is later decoratively sewn in place to the card by a person or persons who can sew and who have access to sewing machines. The completed cards are then returned to the elder residents who designed them. The residents are encouraged to write notes in their personalized cards and send them to family members or other loved ones. An activities coordinator, volunteers, local quilters, or a local quilting guild can direct the plan.

TIME:

Sixty minutes over two sessions. (The time involved is dependent on the number of cards created, the complexity of the designs, the competency level of the residents, and the number of volunteers or others to help the residents.)

MATERIALS:

- Fabric scissors
- Glue sticks (one for each participant)
- Heavy card stock paper (8 ½" x 11") of various colors, with matching envelopes
- New or scraps of cloth material/fabric of various colors, designs, and sizes
- Thin ribbons, lace, rickrack, and other decorative edging material of various colors, designs, and sizes
- The book *Sundogs and Sunflowers: Folklore and Folk Art of the Northern Great Plains*

Note: The card stock paper and matching envelopes can be found at print and hobby shops and in some sewing shops.

“THREE PLAGUES” (LONELINESS, BOREDOM, HELPLESSNESS):

Individuals can do this activity alone or together as part of a group. The group setting is designed to encourage interaction and conversation as a means to make personal connections between individuals and to address a sense of loneliness. Loneliness is alleviated by the time spent together making the cards and reminiscing about the residents’ life experiences. Many of these personal anecdotes also may be triggered by entries from the book *Sundogs and Sunflowers*. Boredom is overcome by the interest one shows in the stories the person is telling, the love of fabric and art, and the creative group process. After the residents design and glue the material to the card stock, they also will look forward to their cards being decoratively sewn and returned to them. Having something to look forward to, like the artistic surprise of a completed project, can help to ease boredom. Loneliness is further addressed by the participants showing their cards to one another in a group setting. As an additional benefit, loneliness also can be averted by encouraging the participants to write a note in the personalized card and send it to a loved one, in this way encouraging a return letter or card. While some participants may have motor skills issues that inhibit participation, they may still be able to participate in the discussion and generate ideas for others, in this way addressing their sense of helplessness. That some cards can be very simply made and still be beautiful will also help to alleviate the sense of helplessness.

ASSOCIATED PUBLICATION AND STUDY OF INTEREST:

The book *Folk Art and Aging: Life-story Objects and Their Makers* “explores the memory-art projects of elders. Whether painting pictures of past events, wood-burning important names and places onto a walking stick, or artfully arranging family photographs, life-story objects often anticipate social interactions and narrative encounters. However, to reduce memory paintings, story quilts, and other forms of life-story objects to mere works of art or storytelling props fails to appreciate the complex and diverse nature of these curious creations and the processes that brought them into existence. These objects serve multiple functions in the lives of the elderly: they are objects to reflect upon; props for explaining events and their meanings; the product of a pastime that fills the lonely hours; mnemonic devices to remind the forgetful; a meditative practice that helps seniors make sense of the past; and a material legacy to leave to family and friends.”

The examples provided in the book teach us how folk arts and folk traditions assist elders “in making sense of their lives, connecting with others, forging a new identity in their later years, and making commentary of the changing world around them.” (Quote from the author in a June 20, 2016, email.)

--Jon Kay. *Folk Art and Aging: Life-story Objects and Their Makers*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2016.

“A recent meta-analysis has shown that loneliness and social isolation are risk factors for coronary heart disease and stroke. These latest findings, specific to cardiovascular outcomes, are consistent with substantial research indicating broad health risks (e.g., immune functioning, cardiovascular functioning, cognitive decline) associated with the quantity and quality of social relationships—including several meta-analyses documenting mortality risk. In the most comprehensive of these, the overall odds for mortality was ... similar to the risk from light smoking and exceeding the risks conferred by hypertension and obesity. Thus, the epidemiological data suggest that having more and better quality social relationships is linked to decreased health risks and having fewer and poorer quality relationships increased risk.” [Abstract]

*--Holt-Lunstad, Julianne and Timothy B. Smith. “Loneliness and Social Isolation as Risk Factors for CVD: Implications for Evidence-based Patient Care and Scientific Inquiry.”
Heart 102, no. 13 (July 2016): 987-989.*

Cover photo: Card with various fabrics stitched directly to and covering the entire face of it. The material is cut and arranged to create a picture. The sun, a house with a sidewalk, and sunflowers are all created using different-patterned material. Yellow thread is stitched, radiating outward from the center of the sun. Made by Linda Suchy.

Activity Plan

SESSION 1 (30 MINUTES):

1. Prior to meeting, the person directing this activity should review the book *Sundogs and Sunflowers* and select a number of items that will be read aloud and shared with the group. The folklore items may be selected generally from throughout the book or by category and chapter for a more specific focus of discussion. Regardless, the selected folklore items should be utilized as the basis for engaging the participants in discussion and the sharing of stories with one another. It does not matter if the subject strays from the folklore example given in the book. The most important element lies in the process of sharing and visiting.

The person directing this activity should sit with the participants around a table to create an atmosphere conducive to group discussion. Provide coffee, tea, other beverages, and snacks as part of the sharing. As people are discussing the folklore items from the book and are sharing their own information, the person directing this activity should jot down discreetly what was shared. That information may serve as the focus or theme for a particular person in the creation of his or her personalized quilted greeting card. For instance, if the person directing this plan wants to focus on holiday traditions like the Fourth of July, readings from the holiday chapter of *Sundogs and Sunflowers* could be shared to spark the subject of initial conversation. In preparation, the person directing this activity should try to anticipate what colors and designs of fabric may lend

themselves to personalized greeting cards for that holiday. If the Fourth of July is the starting point for discussion, material with red, white, and blue-colored material would be appropriate. Designs with stars, streamers, or fireworks on the fabric also may be appropriate. Or, very simply, the card could consist of four squares, each one of which is either white or blue or red.

Again, the folklore readings are meant to initiate discussion. The subject may turn to something altogether very different from the Fourth of July. That is okay, as it is the sharing and interaction between individuals that is most important. However, this also means a wide variety of material with many different designs and colors should be made available from which to choose when the participants make their quilted cards.

2. Elders in care facilities can become lonely and depressed during holidays. Making holiday-themed greeting cards that encourage interaction with friends and family outside of the care facility can help to address these feelings. Yet, what about those times between holidays when there are fewer reasons to initiate interaction? Cards with no holiday focus can be made and are strongly encouraged. The person directing this personalized quilted greeting card activity plan can read a variety of non-holiday-related folklore from throughout the book *Sundogs and Sunflowers*. Using the same parameters as described above, the participants and the person directing the activity

should sit around a table and visit. The folklore read serves as the starting point for the conversation. Again, the person directing the activity should make notes discreetly as to what the participants share. What is shared can serve later as the basis or theme of that particular participant's greeting card. The person directing the activity must keep the conversation going and allow it to take its natural course.

Lots of examples of non-holiday quilted greeting cards can be given that may be inspired by general readings from the book *Sundogs and Sunflowers*. Reading folklore items "9. Dandelion Chins (Version 1)" and "10. Dandelion Chins (Version 2)" from page 260 may inspire people to share with their grandchildren that they once did that. The person directing the activity plan should note the comment for that participant. When it comes time for that participant to create a quilted greeting card, he or she could be encouraged to select yellow and green fabric and cut it into the shape of a flower with leaves to resemble a dandelion. The card, when done, could be sent to that person's grandchild with a note about sharing the tradition of "dandelion chins" many years before.

Family stories can serve as a wealth of ideas for quilted and personalized greeting cards. To begin the discussion and sharing of family stories, the person directing the activity plan could read the narratives on pages 273-276 of *Sundogs and Sunflowers*. Let us say someone shared a family story similar to folklore item "52. Not a Barrel of Fun," which can be found on page 273. A card could be created showing a simple waterfall and a barrel, or simply a barrel of brown fabric overlaid on a blue piece of fabric. The individual

who made the card could send it to a family member along with a note about the family story. The card could then become a treasured memento.

3. Even the viewing and touching of the fabric pieces, new or scrap, might initiate conversation or memories. A participant might say, for example, "This red floral calico reminds me of a sun dress my mother sewed for herself when I was a little girl, and then later she put scraps of that same fabric in a quilt and gave it to me. It always reminds me of her." If that doesn't start a conversation, the person directing the activity might add, "Did you or your mother sew? Where did you get fabric, from a store or from feed sacks?" Allow the participants to feel and examine the material. Conversations, feelings, and memories can be triggered by employing multiple senses.

SESSION 2 (30 MINUTES):

1. After the conversation, bring out the supplies and materials. Tell the participants they are going to create a personalized quilted greeting card based on the previous discussion. Distribute scissors, glue sticks, and card stock paper to each person in attendance. Place the fabric, ribbon, rickrack, and lace edging in the middle of the table.

2. From top to bottom, fold the 8 ½" x 11" sheets of card stock paper. Cut the card stock in half along the folded line. If the use of scissors by the participants is an issue, the person directing this activity plan or other volunteers could first cut the card stock prior to the beginning of the session. Then instruct the participants to fold, again from top to bottom, the cut, half sheets of card stock to form a

folded card measuring 4 ¼" x 5 ½", which can be opened from the bottom or side.

3. Participants should be asked to think of a design they wish to use for their cards. The person directing the activity should help stimulate ideas for each participant's card based on what he or she shared during the previous discussion. This is where the notes taken during the discussion come in handy. Some individuals may need the encouragement, suggestions, and help of the group to develop design ideas. This group interaction is extremely beneficial. Showing examples of quilted greeting cards will reassure and inspire the participants in their creations. Photographic examples are provided at the end of this activity plan, which should be shown to the individuals involved.

The fabrics to be used should be placed in the middle of the table to make it easily accessible to all individuals involved. The participants themselves can sort and select the fabrics they think fit the subject or image they want to convey on their cards. Those participants who have less physical capacity to participate in the entire process can still be of service by selecting and sorting fabrics by color or design from the pile offered.

4. Once designs have been selected, each participant cuts pieces of fabric and glues them to the front of the card. The person directing the activity should stress to the participants that simple or more complex images or pictures may be created, but that the cards do not necessarily have to involve images. The design simply can be blocks of material pieced together like a block quilt. Stress to

the participants not to worry if there are small gaps between fabric pieces or around the edges; that the images for the cards need not be perfect. The cards can be simple, rough, and uneven. The beauty is in the story and in the message. For those participants who may be bothered by uneven blocks or edges, decorative stitching and applied lace, ribbon, or rickrack can be used to offset the unevenness.

If the applied fabric extends beyond the edge of the card, do not worry. Simply turn the card over and trim the excess fabric along the edge of the card stock. Technical perfection is not the goal in this activity. I find the cards are always beautiful, no matter the skill level of the participants, helpers, or sewers.

5. Gather the completed cards. Tell the participants that the fabric glued to the cards will be sewn in place to the card stock with decorative stitching and then returned. Let the participants know when the cards will be returned, so they have something to look forward to. The decorative stitching may be done by an activities coordinator, volunteers, local quilters, or a local quilting guild that has access to a sewing machine. When completed, the cards, with envelopes, should be returned to the individuals who created them. Return the cards in a group setting so the participants can see one another's work.

Note to sewers: If a person wants the thread to show on the front and inside front of the card, use contrasting and bright-colored thread. If a person does not want the thread to show, then use neutral-colored thread.

6. Encourage the participants to write short notes in their cards, perhaps sharing the significance of their personalized story cards, and then send them off to loved ones.

OPTIONAL SUGGESTIONS:

1. Think about linking this plan to the pen pals activity plan whereby students from a local elementary school interview the elders to satisfy their history, social studies, state studies, and other educational requirements. The elders would serve as potential first-hand sources of information. Then the students could create quilted greeting cards based on the elders' interviews and send the cards to them. This would address the students' education as well as the elders' sense of loneliness and helplessness.

2. The discussions and shared memories of individual participants as pertaining to their quilted greeting card could be written and elaborated upon at a later date. Those texts could be matted and framed with the participants' respective cards and developed into an exhibit. The activity plan based on creating an exhibit can be used to guide this effort.

AUTHOR • LINDA SUCHY:

Linda, of rural Mandan, North Dakota, is a traditional quilter, weaver, farmer, and teacher with decades of experience. Sewing has been a favorite activity ever since her mother taught her to sew on a treadle sewing machine. Her family sewed most of their own clothes and anything else they could, as doing the sewing themselves saved money and made their clothing both personalized and unique. Her mother developed early onset Alzheimer's and eventually was no longer able to quilt. Linda helped her father care for her mother at home for over twenty years before her mother passed away. Caring for a person with Alzheimer's is physically and intellectually challenging and emotionally depleting. Linda's art has evolved over many years and was influenced by several of her mother's peers, whom Linda sought out for support. As a result, her art most certainly reflects the inspiration of all these individuals' life values: independence, courage, determination, the ability to see beauty in small things, the ability to create beauty out of next to nothing, and to never waste. Linda likes the creative process and the interaction that comes from working with others. She likes creating story quilts that embody the essence of the culture and environment in which she lives. This is important to Linda, especially now, "When everything can be bought in a store and there is no story behind it."

(All artwork by Linda Suchy. Photos of artwork by Troyd Geist, North Dakota Council on the Arts.)

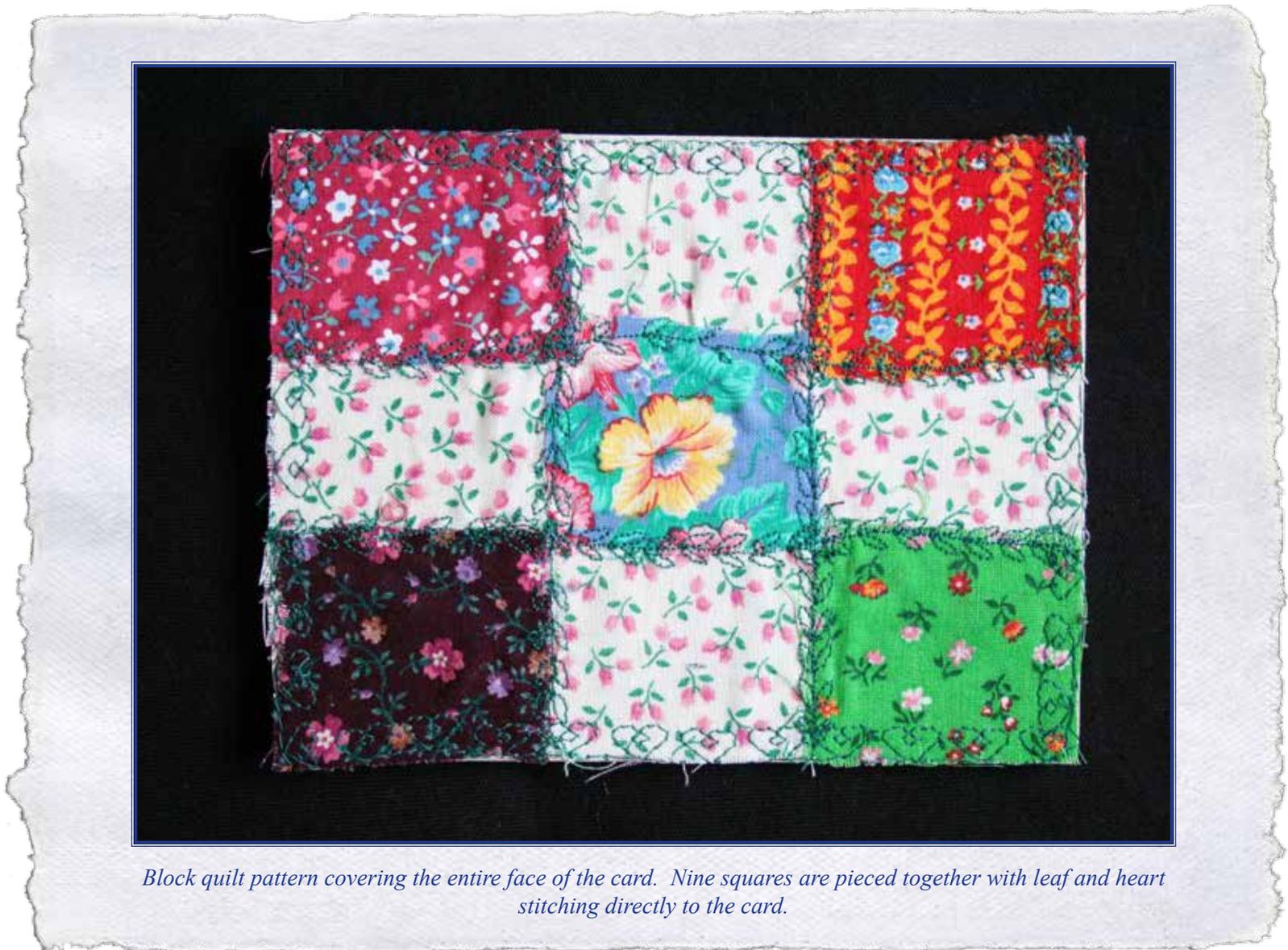
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Examples of Quilted Greeting Cards by Linda Suchy

(Each card is 4 1/4" x 5 1/2")



Block quilt pattern covering the entire face of the card. Four squares are pieced together with stitching directly to the card. The patterns on the fabrics include butterflies and dragonflies, with butterfly lace stitched to the center.



Block quilt pattern covering the entire face of the card. Nine squares are pieced together with leaf and heart stitching directly to the card.



Card depicting a memory of children sliding down a snow hill on a toboggan. Note the irregular-cut, patterned material that is coordinated to reflect a starry winter night. White-embroidered white material adds contrast, texture, and interest for the snow hill. The pink material next to the white material has shiny specks in it, which imitates the shimmering of snow in the starlight. The pieced material does not have to be cut perfectly to achieve a beautiful design. Irregular stitching is applied for interest.



Card made with fabric, which consists of two large rectangular blocks with the slightly smaller rectangle set on the top of the other, thereby creating a lighter-colored border. The material is stitched to the face of the card with part of the card stock exposed to create another border. This card depicts a "Farm-Truck" license plate, and was inspired by a conversation Linda had with an elderly farmer who enjoys showing his old trucks and truck license plates to visitors.



Card, with crazy quilt pattern, that is made by using fabric of various designs and colors stitched to and covering the entire face of it.



Card with flying geese quilt pattern, which is formed of small, triangular-shaped pieces of cloth stitched to the face of it. Note that the fabric does not cover the entire face of the card.



Card with log cabin quilt pattern stitched directly to and covering the entire face of it. A small block with an image of a teddy bear sits at the center. Lace is applied to the edge of the card over the fabric. For those participants who may be bothered by their material not being cut or stitched to perfection, one can easily hide the irregularity by applying lace, ribbon, or rickrack over the area.



Card with various fabrics stitched directly to and covering the entire face of it. The material is cut and arranged to create a picture. A goose, pond with fish, sunflower, bumblebee, clouds, sun, and a hill with two people flying kites are created all using different-patterned fabric.