

SPIRITUAL LIFE

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Quilters hope to link patchwork of views

By Rich Barlow | February 17, 2007

History recalls no instance of a quilting bee having changed the world. But might one nudge humanity, slightly, toward its better nature?

Hoping against hope that the answer might be yes, 30 men and women hunched over tables piled with colorful fabrics in a stately room at Harvard Divinity School last Sunday. The quilters, some of whom had done such work before, earnestly scissored their way through cloth and glued swatch upon swatch to make self-portraits. Some of their designs will adorn a quilt bound for a vortex of religious and ethnic animosity, the West Bank city of Ramallah, where it will hang in a Quaker meeting house.

"The whole Israeli-Palestinian conflict does make me very sad," said Vinny Dorio, a carpenter from Roslindale whose self-portrait included a tear. "Even a little thing like this, just to make this quilt [for] Ramallah, which someone sees and says, 'We have to stop this.' You never know."

His wife, Elizabeth Quinlan, depicted her head with orange fabric atop it, representing fire. A spiritual symbol, the flame represented the burning hope for peace, she said. Considered an element in primitive times, fire also captured her own spirituality, which is in nature. "I grew up with a lot of different faiths, and I rejected a lot of them," she says. "And I'm still kind of searching."

The idea of resurrecting a ritual of neighborliness as an instrument for modern-day peacemaking sprouted in the mind of divinity student Emily Ronald last summer, when Israel's war against Hezbollah terrorists advertised once more the Middle East's pathology of violence. "I felt very far away from the conflict," Ronald said. "As I felt powerless to act, I felt powerless to speak."

Then she met a Palestinian Quaker visiting Harvard during a trip to the United States.

Ronald, who describes her own spirituality as pagan, had worked on the Faith Quilts Project, which ran for three years until ending last year and in which artist Clara Wainwright coaxed dozens of area residents to make self-portraits expressing their religious or spiritual outlooks.

Describing the project to the activist, Ronald intrigued the woman with the idea of designing a quilt for the stone wall of the Ramallah meeting house. The quilts, representing a coming together of different peoples, would express the longing to overcome the human divisions at the house. Because of travel restrictions, Ronald said, "It is very, very difficult for Israelis and Palestinians to gather in Ramallah at the meeting house."

From the self-portraits made last Sunday, Ronald will choose the ones to make into a collage for the quilt. Then she'll ask interested people to help her sew and put batting, the padding, in the final product, which she hopes to finish by summer.

That the quilters talked about faith and the Middle East while they labored was more than just coincidence. Among the quilting bee's sponsors was the Public Conversations Project, a Watertown group that arranges and trains people in mutually respectful discussions of public issues.

Treading gingerly on the difficult Arab-Israeli debate, the organizers of the bee nonetheless asked participants to talk with each other about their views of the conflict and to share bits of themselves, such as their faith, with their fellow portraitists.

A. Reyyan Bilse, a 27-year-old graduate student at Tufts, made sure to depict the Muslim head scarf she wears in her portrait because "that's a huge part of me." Growing up in Turkey, she was close enough to the guns of the Middle East that the strife was omnipresent on the news, and seemingly eternal.

"When I was in high school, we went to Israel as a tour from Turkey, and then I just saw there that they're not talking to each other," she said. "I mean, there are some neighborhoods where Muslim people live, where Jewish people live -- they can't understand each other."

"Women are taking over Harvard today," triumphantly declared Wainwright, who participated in the quilting. She was

referring to the appointment of Drew Gilpin Faust as the university's first female president, but she could just as easily have been noting the gender ratio among the quilters, only a half dozen of whom were men.

Yet, as the tear on Vinny Dorio's fabric face showed, the hope for peace in the room knew no gender division.

Questions, comments or story ideas can be sent to spiritual@globe.com.

(Correction: Because of a reporting error, the name of A. Reyyan Bilge was misspelled in the Spiritual Life column in Saturday's City & Region section about people making a quilt for the Quaker meetinghouse in the West Bank city of Ramallah.) ■

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