

Serendipity & the Art of the Quilt © Brenda Smith 2006

Thank you for the invitation to speak to you tonight – I am honoured to be in the company of such a talented and enthusiastic group of quilters. Indeed, when I think of the Australian quiltmakers whose quilts I admire, a remarkably high proportion of them seem to hail from this part of the country. If I didn't know better, I would say that ACTEW is adding something to the water and I should drink up heartily while I am here.

But I do know better. Partly because I was an energy and infrastructure lawyer in another life and know a thing or two about water utilities. And partly because I believe there is no magic potion for creative prowess. Rather, you have to be fortunate enough to find your medium and then practice, practice, practice.

Tonight I am going to share some of my quilts and my thoughts on the creative process. I'll also talk about the role of serendipity, the faculty of making fortunate discoveries by accident.

It is customary in these kind of talks to feature one's first quilt. And so I somewhat sheepishly show you the first quilt that I made as a university student back in 1984. As you can see, it is a glorious seersucker affair made from factory offcuts; thick white fairy floss batting; backed with a sheet and hand quilted with very erratic stitch lengths. It's not beautiful but it kept me warm in various group share houses with dodgy heating as I studied law and politics at university and has been used constantly ever since.

I should add that although my mother is an accomplished needlewoman, she had not done any patchwork and this quilt was made without reference to anyone with quilting experience; without reference to any book or the internet; and without the aid of a Rotary cutter.

Fast forward now to 2000. My job as a partner in an international law firm involved demanding clients and frequently killer hours. I'd just come off several months of 18 hour days for 6 or seven days a week when one of my friends announced she was pregnant. So Queens Birthday found me making my first baby quilt using a pattern from the Margaret Rolfe/Judy Hooworth primer – *Spectacular Scraps*. It took me all weekend and my husband was concerned that I was overtaxing myself. On the contrary, making that quilt was absolutely exhilarating. Doing something creative energised me. What serendipity! Discovering the restorative powers of quilting, there was no stopping me. I devoured quilting magazines, books and websites and went on to make a multitude of baby quilts.

I am an enthusiastic advocate of the baby quilt particularly for beginner quiltmakers. They make manageable projects both physically and time wise. The satisfaction of completing projects adds to your creative momentum. Smaller quilts are also ideal mediums for trying out new techniques and mastering technical skills, giving you confidence to tackle larger quilts.

In case you're wondering, I have no training or background in visual arts and, with a couple of significant exceptions, I am largely a self-taught quilter.

While surfing the internet in 2002, I stumbled across an online patchwork and quilting course offered by Linda Kemshall in the UK in conjunction with City & Guilds of London (www.lindakemshall.com). I thoroughly enjoyed this structured course which introduced me to colour theory; principles of design and quilting fundamentals. Continuing my busy legal career, I particularly enjoyed being able to work in my own time at my own pace.

In July of this year, I was also fortunate enough to attend a 5 day improvisational workshop with Nancy Crow at her barn in Ohio. Nancy's workshop reinforced my quilting work ethic – take responsibility, just do it, don't make excuses, learn by doing and do lots.

Similar messages can be found in Twyla Tharp's book, *The Creative Habit*. By way of background, Twyla Tharp is a distinguished choreographer and her core argument is that creativity is less a matter of genius than of disciplined work habits. "Creativity ... is within reach of everyone who wants to achieve it". All it takes is preparation, consistent effort, organization, and commitment. Throughout the 12 chapters, Twyla includes 32 exercises designed to assist you in fulfilling your creative potential, whatever your field of endeavour.

I am not a great fan of self-help books - they remind me too much of the multitude of management fads that I encountered in my legal career - so I am not likely to slavishly follow all of the exercises. However, many segments of *The Creative Habit* resonated with me including this part of Chapter 7 - Accidents Will Happen:

"...there's a fine line between good planning and overplanning. You never want the planning to inhibit the natural evolution of your work...your creative endeavours can never be thoroughly mapped out ahead of time. You have to allow for the suddenly altered landscape, the change in plan, the accidental spark - and you have to see it as a stroke of luck rather than a disturbance of your perfect scheme. Habitually creative people are, in EB White' phrase, "prepared to be lucky". The words here are "prepared" and "lucky". They're inseparable. You don't get lucky without preparation, and there's no sense in being prepared if you're not open to the possibility of a glorious accident."
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Through my quilting, I am also learning to loosen up on some of my lawyerly, control-freak tendencies. As observed in *Art & Fear – Observations on the Perils and Rewards of Art Making* by David Bayles and Ted Orland:

"Control, apparently, is not the answer. People who need certainty in their lives are less likely to make art that is risky, subversive, complicated, iffy, suggestive or spontaneous. What's really needed is nothing more than a broad sense of what you are looking for, some strategy for how to find it, and an overriding willingness to embrace mistakes and surprises along the way. Simply put, making art is chancy – it doesn't mix well with predictability. Uncertainty is the essential, inevitable and all-pervasive companion to your desire to make art. And tolerance for uncertainty is the pre-requisite to succeeding." [page 21]

Against this background, I have now retired from lawyering and happily spend most of my time in my studio, practicing, exploring and always open to the serendipity factor.

An element of serendipity is integral to the art of quilt making. Even with the most meticulous planning, the fusion of colour, shape and texture through fabric and stitching yields often unexpected results. This quality of surprise encourages me to explore new techniques and possibilities and I look forward to many more years of quilting. Do visit my websites and blog to see what I am up to:

www.serendipitypatchwork.com.au - My Serendipity Patchwork & Quilting Website
www.serendipitypatchwork.blogspot.com - My Blog
www.brendagaelsmith.com - My Contemporary Quilts