

“Sacred Stories, Sacred Journeys: A pilgrimage of the Justice Storytelling Quilt.” Manitoba

The storytelling quilt arrived in Winnipeg on Thursday, November 22, and will be returning to Ottawa on January 31st. When I chose the above title to the itinerary, I was thinking of the quilt as a pilgrim visiting holy places. It was not long before I noticed that the pilgrim was really me; I was carrying something very holy to places made holy by the people there. Each time I pack and unpack the quilt to continue the journey, my experience is different – it is like layers within myself that are uncovered and allow me to go more deeply into the experience of the stories told and retold through the quilt.

Last summer, Greg and I decided that we would take the challenge of bringing the quilt to Manitoba. We had no idea that it would be travelling to 13 venues and would be with us for two months. The quilt was hosted by a variety of groups: 2 churches, 2 Correctional Centres, 2 professional centres, 1 University, 1 for Board members of another University, 3 Drop-in Centres, 2 Diocesan Centres. The folks who saw, listened to, connected with, planned about the quilt represented a cross-section of brothers and sisters, from the most disinherited to the most recognized – street people, sex-trade workers, family members in conflict, teachers, professors (local and from the third-world), nuns, a bishop, front-line workers...etc. That, in itself brings warmth to my heart that the quilt brings a message that anyone who will take the time to stop and listen and reflect.

The media has been responsive well beyond my expectation. I wrote a press release as soon as I had a few commitments from hosts for the quilt. I forwarded it to newspapers, TV stations, radio, diocesan centres, groups that I knew were connected to Restorative Justice etc. It was followed by a grand silence. In the meantime I continued my “footwork” and telephone calls.

Sunday, November 25 – Marked the first event! A stormy blustery, cold day! And...Grey Cup day!
(Can you read between the lines???)

It didn't stop us – The first group was small, but in a very uncanny way represented a cross-section of folks who would in the months to come be hosting the quilt. And...

Much to my surprise, there arrived a newspaper reporter, cameras and reporters from 2 television stations. The next day, the Winnipeg Sun carried a report and featured a picture of the quilt. CBC-TV sent a reporter with camera the next day. He did the interview and reporting both in French and English. That same evening it was on the local news on both channels.

(Unknown to me for a number of days, City TV, who was at the Sunday event, does community event spots throughout the day every hour. Our spot was on Channel 9 for a week every hour!)

The event in Brandon (21/2 hours drive west of Winnipeg), was sponsored by two United Church groups whose churches were destroyed by fire. Arson was the cause. Members of the two congregations, one from Brandon and the other from Minnedosa gathered around the quilt, in the quest of healing and the rebuilding of their lives and that of their community.

Kateri Aboriginal Church invited a guest speaker who told his own story of healing after being assaulted and left for dead. For his story: www.tylerpelke.ca. It underlined the message brought by the quilt. The quilt was left display the next day.

These two events show how non-threatening and comforting the presence of the quilt is. It offers folks an opening, even, I would say it gives permission to people to ask questions, tell their story and most of the time, becomes a means of getting in touch with their hurts, and brokenness as well as their own experience of forgiving and receiving forgiveness.

I found this extraordinarily true with prisoners, with those who live “on the margins”, with front-line workers who deal every day with the poorest of the poor. I've seen these folks immediately connect from the heart. I've seen in them waiting for the quilt with expectation and receiving it with reverence. One woman, who was a volunteer worker, confided to me, “I don't know if I will have the courage to touch it – My sister was murdered”

I have a feeling that the quilt will go to many other holy people and holy places. I am thankful for having the chance to be part of this journey. It brings many Blessings – with its message of compassion, love and life.

Margot Lavoie