Voices of Sisters
Spirituality



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As the days shorten and the darkness lengthens, as the trees shed their leaves and stand silhouetted with their branches bare, I am always drawn inward. It feels the right season to reflect on what is happening and what is yet to come.

This year — although different in so many ways — holds this same allure for me. As I began to reflect on this year of the pandemic and the presidential election, I found myself flooded with multiple thoughts and images. I felt disoriented and full of contradictions. Emotions kept tugging at me.

Finally, a patchwork quilt emerged as a way to reflect on this time.

Here are some of the patches that are making up my quilt:

- One full of mirrors: The election of Kamala Harris, as the first woman vice president who is also Black and Indian American, has changed the image for all little girls and women everywhere. Each can now look at themselves and see the possibility that they too can achieve such things.

- A dark red square: The tenor of these last months and weeks was ugly, and the worst within us was stoked and enflamed. Potential violence was always poised to erupt.

- Patches for everything that COVID-19 has taken from us: loved ones, milestone celebrations, absence of family and friends, closed businesses, lost jobs, cancelled meetings, in-person education. …

- Patches for things that COVID-19 brought us: understanding who the essential workers are, renewed respect for front-line health care workers, random acts of kindness and compassion, more time and a slower pace (for some).

- A picture of the first Thanksgiving: another time in which we needed each other to survive. European settlers survived that cruel winter only because Native

Americans who already called this land home helped them.

- A map showing President-elect Joe Biden's win of the Electoral College: For the majority it was a weight lifted. Regardless of whom you voted for, he is a president who will be president of us all.

- A map of our country divided into red, blue and purple: It is a painful acknowledgment that the divisions among us are deeper than desired. There are fears on all sides. There are needs on all sides. The path to healing is not clear.

- A picture of poll workers and vote counters throughout our country: volunteers who keep the electoral process transparent and legitimate, and for whom we are grateful. Yet they are now being unfairly attacked by those who cannot accept the election outcome.

- A haunted house: Filled with our fear of the other; fear of no longer having privilege; fear of never having our rights acknowledged and respected; fear of getting sick; fear of socialized medicine; fear of climate change; fear of economic loss and jobs; fear that the country I loved is being destroyed; fear that Black Lives Matter will be forgotten; fear of a status quo that oppresses too many; and other real, imaginary and played-upon fears with the potential to incapacitate.

These are just some of the patches that flood my vision, and I started to realize that what I am quilting the patches upon is what is holding it all together for me. The background material is the fabric of my faith, my spirituality.

Jesus was a teacher, not of dogmas or doctrines, but of a way of living. He asked people to follow him; to see how he lived; to watch what he did and to do the same. He spoke to an individual heart, and hearts changed. He spoke in parables and metaphors, offering a new way of seeing things.

Jesus lived out of a contemplative heart. He knew how hard it was to choose values and ways of being that were different than the prevailing ones. He challenged the values of his culture and religion. He lived out of a spirit of abundance — pay all laborers what they deserve regardless of how long they worked; forgive your wayward child and provide a lavish welcome; embrace everyone — outcasts, women, Samaritans — as equals. Being a good leader was serving others. Suffering and pain were part of being human.

And of course, the clear mandate to "love one another as I have loved you" (John 13:34). Love your neighbor, the other, as yourself.

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When reflected upon individually the patches are separate and isolated from each other. When the patches are sewn together, creating one quilt, something else emerges. Each patch becomes part of the whole. The human experience is laid before us in all its dimensions. All of it reflects the creation that God so loves. As humans, our free choices shape how that creation evolves over time. Jesus lived on earth revealing the abundant love of God. He asked us to follow him, for within us is also that divine life wanting to emerge.

As I reflect on all those patches as a quilt, I see them held together on the fabric of an incredible mystery, that humanity and divinity dance together in us and in our world. Only by quieting ourselves and entering the deep spaciousness within do we allow God to be God in us. We consent to the divine love to transform us and our world.

I will continue making this quilt and reflecting on how everything is part of the whole. Over time I hope my choices will be clear, and I will act courageously as Jesus did to contribute toward moving our world a little closer toward the Kindom of God.

[Nancy Sylvester is founder and director of the Institute for Communal Contemplation and Dialogue. She served in leadership of her own religious community, the Sister Servants of the Immaculate Heart of Mary, Monroe, Michigan, as well as in the presidency of the Leadership Conference of Women Religious. Earlier, she was national coordinator of Network, the national Catholic social justice lobby. You may be interested in the current ICCD program, "Enter the Chaos: Engage the Differences to Make a Difference," offered online. For information go to

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