

Sarah DeYoung: My Seekers Scrapbook

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As most of you know, this is my last Sunday at Seekers for quite a while. As this fact has become more and more real to me in the past few weeks, I find myself feeling more and more divided. I am going to miss the Seekers community to a degree that I cannot yet fathom, but I also know that my assignment here has ended for the present.

In Debra Sokolove's class about Visual Midrash, we spent some time talking about call, and how we as individuals are able to hear God's plan for us. We used Moses and the burning bush as the biblical text from which to draw. In the journal entry that I wrote about this, I said that in my life, I have never had a burning bush experience. Instead, I feel a "rightness" or an "oddness" within my spirit. I described this not so much a burning bush, but just the smoke from the fire blowing in my face when I stray from the path that has been set for me.

I've also discovered other signs that show me where I am supposed to be. When I was in college, my roommate was an incredible Palestinian woman who became one of my best friends. Unfortunately, she had some very disturbing semesters and after taking medication for mental illness for a few months, tried to kill herself in our shared dorm room. Not only was this disturbing for me because of our close friendship, but I was also left as the person primarily responsible for her well being. During that very scary time, I found myself playing the guitar quite often. The one song I ended up playing over and over again was "The House of the

Rising Sun". While not a Christian song in any sense, it brought me comfort and gave me the strength and reassurance I needed to get through a very difficult time. I didn't hear that song again until I was driving down to Washington for the first time after deciding that this was the place I needed to be. I had no job, no real place to stay, and I could count the people I knew on one hand. Suddenly, in the midst of an anxiety attack, "The House of the Rising Sun" came on the radio just as I crossed the line into Northern Virginia and I knew with complete certainty, that no matter how nervous I was, this was where I was supposed to be. I hadn't heard that song again until last week. I was driving home after my first good-bye party, thinking about how hard it would be to leave, and all of the sudden, "The House of the Rising Sun" came on the radio. At that moment, I knew that as hard as it might be, I am doing what I need to stay on the right path.

I must say, that if I was left to my own devices and didn't follow the path allotted to me, I probably never would have come to DC and to Seekers. Inherent in my own nature is a desire to carve a comfortable niche for myself and stay there permanently. However, because I keep hearing songs and coughing on smoke, I am led to other adventures that continue to both challenge me and allow me to grow. It is precisely this feuding in my own self that allows me to sympathize with the would-be followers of Jesus in the passage from Luke. "Foxes have holes and birds of the air have their nests, but the son of Man has nowhere to lay his head." To me, that's not much inspiration to leave a comfortable place and follow Christ. "Let the dead bury their own dead, but as for you, go and proclaim the Kingdom of God". As an incredibly responsible first-born child, I'm not sure how I would feel about leaving all the responsibilities with someone else and go off traveling. And "No one who puts a hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the Kingdom of God". Harsh words for someone looking for safety and stability. What I constantly try and remind myself, is that really, nowhere on this earth is safe

and stable – no relationship, no solid matter, no governmental system. The only thing we really have is faith, and sometimes, that doesn't really feel solid either. I guess this idea of following our faith and "Letting the dead bury their own dead" is what Galatians means by "Living by the spirit and not gratifying the desires of the flesh"; which for me would be staying in situations where I am comfortable. The Galatians passage goes on to say "For what the flesh desires is opposed to the Spirit, and what the Spirit desires is opposed to the flesh; ... to prevent you from doing what you want." I must admit it is true that when I do follow the harder path of leaving my comfort zones I tend to move a lot closer to my real goals and desires. What I ultimately want is to work to protect children. If I had chosen to gratify the desires of my flesh and stay in my home town where I was not necessarily happy or challenged, but I was comfortable, I never would have met the children at FLOC; I never would have found the confidence within myself to know that I can get through law school; and I never would know that I do have the passion to work with children in what can be some very bad situations. I now leave this place, with sadness in my heart, but with new strength in knowing that I am on the right path and am acquiring more and more skills and confidence to do what I feel I am being called to do.

The other way I have grown is in my faith journey. I don't think I have ever really talked with many of you about it, and it still remains something I am used to keeping to myself and dealing with on my own. What I have come to realize over the past year and a half that I have been coming to Seekers, however, is that this is definitely a place where I could be more forthcoming about my "Faith history" and beliefs. This is the first attempt I have made in five years to open up the very scarred and sealed place inside me where I keep my questions and my faith journey log. This is a heck of a way to start out, but it's always been my policy to do something all or nothing.

The very first time I came to Seekers was in December of 1996. Pat Conover was preaching about the need to transition from [fear to hope](#). I had to try very very hard not to cry at his words. (This was before I knew that crying was commonplace at Seekers). What I thought at the time I was identifying with was my experience in DC and the anxiety I felt about trying to find a job, a place to live and some friends. I realize now I was so moved by the idea of turning my faith walk from the fear of being punished for thinking differently than others around me – fear of being condemned for supporting people who are normally outcasts in "Christian" communities and fear that there are very few people in the world who claim to be Christians who actually have what I would define as Christian values – to hope that there really are people who are committed to the teachings of Christ and not just petty church politics. I had lived the last four years of my life seeing "Christians" condemn those around them for not being of the same faith as they were, for not being the right sexual orientation, for not being from the right country, or for not having the right views on this issue or that. I watched my roommate and best friends slowly but brutally turned away from the church by people who called themselves Christians. What I was really afraid of was not my new environment, but of trusting in an organization that called itself a church. I was so moved by every part of the Seeker's service that for the first time, I had a reason to break out of my pattern of doubt and mistrust and was actually being challenged to believe in a group of people assembled to worship God. Something I cannot remember doing since I have been conscious of my own thoughts on religion. And here I was, my first Sunday here, being asked by Pat to move from fear to hope. I was hooked. At this point in my growth, I still cannot seem to say the words "I am a Christian" all in the same sentence. I still pause before I mention the fact to people that I go to a "Church". But I do have faith in this community, and I do have hope in the idea that people can come together to worship God and it can be a meaningful and loving thing. If I had not left my comfortable

town to come to Seekers, I don't think I ever would have gotten to this point in my life.

Now again, I find myself being challenged to go from fear to hope. This time, it is fear of leaving this safe, comfortable community and fear that I will never find another place as enriching for me as this one has been. I am being called to trust that there are more groups of committed people out there than just this one. This call is one that is harder for me to accept. Just before I moved to Seekers, I tried to start a community of my own much like this one. There was going to be different types of singing, people would be welcome in whatever clothes they were wearing, kids could sit on the floor if they wished, and so on. Eventually, I just ran out of time and energy. When I came to Seekers, however, I found everything I was trying to create and more. Now that I am leaving, I don't think that I will have the energy or the real experience to start a faith community. Being here, among other things, has shown me just how much my first attempt really was just an experiment. I've now learned just how much I don't know and how much I need to learn and grow before I can start a community that will really work and be effective for its members. I am very worried at this point, that if I don't start something myself, which I already know I am not able to, I will not be able to find anything that nourishes me. I also don't know that I can count on those "conservative mid-western types" to have a group of people that could be committed to such inclusive ideology. I must say that at this point, I feel like I need to be prepared to travel the next part of my spiritual journey myself. In my heart of hearts, I am secretly hoping to find a mentor, but it is not something I let myself plan for. Perhaps I am being too negative and perhaps I have been so spoiled by Seekers that no place ever will quite measure up to what this experience has meant to me, but I suppose at some point, I need to "put my hand on the plow and not look back". I suppose that this fear of not being successful at finding a new community and my desire to cling

to what will be my "old" one is holding me back from really finding an "almost as good" place. I can feel myself wanting to transition from fear to hope, but I still lack the courage to make the jump. I do carry with me a small piece of hope, which says "even if not everything is perfect, I can bring some things from Seekers with me to contribute to the type of community I want to be a part of. Perhaps there is a community out there right now that really could use the little piece of Seekers that I have to offer".

It is for this reason that I made this quilt. It is from here on out going to be called the "Seekers Scrapbook". In making this quilt, I have stitched into the fabric the many, many lessons that Seekers has taught me.

Originally, I had been calling this quilt "**The Ugly Green Quilt**". When I went to pick out the fabric, I picked out the blues, yellows and purples that resonated with my spirit. When I told the ladies who were helping me that I thought I should have a green in the quilt as well, they promptly decided that I needed a green that would incorporate all of my beautiful jewel-toned colors. What they came up with was a fabric I never would have looked at twice. Instead of matching the rich jewel tones of all the other fabrics, this green could have been used to make camouflage outfits for the Army. One look at this fabric and my heart just broke. I tried to pick out other colors to use instead of this atrocious green, but I was promptly defeated in all of my protests. In what was an unusual move for me, I let them win, and bought the ugly green fabric. As I began to put the quilt together, with dread in my heart for the green that I knew would be the undoing of my beautiful quilt, a funny thing began to happen. Instead of standing out because of its ugliness, the funny looking green began to blend in with the other colors and also to pull the hidden colors out of my jewel-toned fabrics. By the time I had finished, that ugly green had become the best asset that my quilt had because it managed to pull out the richness of all

the other colors in a way that they had not been able to do on their own. My "Ugly Green Quilt" was now in my eyes, the most dazzling thing I'd ever seen.

When I think of how Seekers is the most incredible place I've ever been, I am reminded of what I have to contrast to it. My college experience, religiously, was a very damaging one. Our chaplain actually preached a sermon entitled "God the Father, not the Mother". My church life through Jr. High and High School was also not very positive. From the pulpit, our minister described Mary by saying "in all reality, Mary was not one of the fair-skinned, European beauties, but actually one of those ugly Palestinian women". Old ladies at the church would get upset if children were anything but "seen and not heard" and the oldie but goodie hymns that I had grown up with were too uncultured and undignified to sing before God. I was frustrated, confused and angry. In watching the young people of Seekers stand up and give their confession of faith, I was amazed at the amount of freedom these children were given to be honest at open at where they were in their faith journey. Personally, I never took a confirmation class because I could not stand the thought of saying things I didn't believe in and then becoming a member of a church I neither trusted nor felt safe in. For a while, I felt myself being very jealous of the Seeker's young people because of the wonderful opportunity they had been given to explore their own beliefs with the support of the Church community, but then I thought about my ugly green fabric. Were it not for the unfortunate past experiences I have had in my own life, I never would have gotten so excited about getting involved in Seekers. The contrast between the two places helped me to open my mind to how nourishing this community could really be for me. I have never before been heartbroken if I had to miss a church service. It is because of my old experiences that I am still so moved by this community and how everyone is treated here. I am very proud to have been a part of it.

The second part of Seekers which is documented in my quilt is the idea that "Broken and Dirtyies" are often more nourishing than one solitary perfect item. Ron Arms [talked about this](#) in reference to cookies. I've tried to apply it to my life all over. In making this quilt, especially, I've learned that not everything I will ever do is going to be perfect, and that's OK! In fact it's even better than OK, it's wonderful. I've made so many non-perfect stitches in this quilt that my ego just fell out of the bottom of it. Once I was not taking personally all of the mistakes and do-overs that occurred, I found myself not only calm about trying this new project, but I actually enjoyed it, too! And even with all the mistakes I've made, with all of the mismatched corners that are still in the finished product, I can honestly say that I think this is the most beautiful thing I have ever made. The mistakes, though they used to make me fret, are now my favorite parts of the quilt because they were a very hard and powerful lesson for such a neurotic perfectionist as myself to learn. In this quilt, a new philosophy has been instilled in me, thanks to the seed planted by Ron Arms. From now on, I will not strive to be perfect, I will just strive to do my best and to learn and grow from each experience. If I continue to insist that everything in my life be absolutely perfect, I think my existence would be a very sterile one. Instead, I will now consciously take the errors and inconsistencies of life over the safety of knowing things are absolutely perfect. Kate Amoss told me that the Navajos consider flaws in artwork the "windows" for the soul. If a Navajo makes a piece of art that is flawless, they deliberately add a flaw to the work so that they will not become obsessed with keeping it perfect. That way, they can move on to other challenges, and allow themselves to grow in the messy, perfectionless process of learning new things.

This quilt is also helping me to remember the incredible women I have gotten to spend time with in the process of making this quilt, and before that, Casey's quilt and just throughout

interacting with all of you in the church community. Perhaps none of you knew how much I was watching and learning from you; perhaps none of you realized how much I was paying attention to the way you handled yourselves; but in your presence, I have found so many fantastic role models for myself that I would consider myself very lucky indeed to one day gain just a part of Miriam's gift for words and stories, Deborah's and Marjory's gift for teaching, Diane's gift for enthusiasm, Trish's confidence and strength, Margreta's gift for color art and shape and many, many more.

You have all meant a great deal to me, and I have tried to learn as much as I can. I'm hoping that this quilt will help me to take a part of all of you with me, help me to see how wonderful and supportive it can be to participate in a traditional woman's activity, help me to feel connected to all of you and to all of the women who have ever been a part of that tradition, and help me to feel energy from that process. For so long, I have been nervous about trying anything even remotely associated with "women's work". To me, that term seemed degrading and unvalued. In quilting, I have found value, pride and strength. I have learned that women's work is only unvalued to those who think badly of women, and that these quilts, along with everything else women do, are a very important part of community. While I still like to see men and women sharing all tasks and would rather not have to have a gender designation on chores at all, "women's work" has lost a lot of its negative connotations for me, and I feel more ready to be comfortable with myself as a woman as a result of this. Marjory's book, "Braided Streams" has shown me many different alternatives to trying to succeed by being "just one of the boys". I now know I can find a different strength in my own gender that will ultimately be easier for me to use and feel comfortable with.

I am very proud to be a part of a community where God is valued for maleness, and femaleness and everything in between.

While I am still struggling to outgrow the ideas instilled in me that say that God is male, I take heart in the idea that God is bigger than male and that there are female parts of God which I can identify with on a much more personal level. The God that I see is a dancing, laughing, warming light and a concerned mother and a protective father and, as Lewis Busch once said, an "antelope God". I thank Seekers for giving me the support and courage to find all of those things in God and set my image of the Creator free from such human constraints as gender. I must admit, trying to picture God now is like trying to picture infinity – it makes my brain hurt with the attempt – but I think it is more than worth the effort, and I am always excited to discover new forms of God.

Finally, the part of my quilt that is the picture of myself at Seekers are the butterfly fabrics that are on the outer border, and then also on the entire back of the quilt. I've never really identified with butterflies before this, but when I got all my fabric home from the store, I realized that somehow, I had picked out two butterfly patterns. I didn't really worry about it too much, but I kept it in my mind just to ponder over. When I was at Kate Amoss' house working on the quilt, however, she pointed out that butterflies are a symbol of rebirth and change. It struck me at that moment how much I have changed and grown since I came to Seekers. I am no longer angry at the church or at "Christians" who seem to do more harm than good. I am starting to put my trust back into organized religion. The fact that I am standing here before you all is definitely something I never, ever would have pictured myself doing four years ago. I guess I do feel quite like a butterfly myself, in that before I came here, my feelings about Churches and Christians were about as attractive as the caterpillar before it spins its cocoon. Now, I'm so filled with the hope that this community has given me, I feel like I could soar. Thank you, so, so much.

I have heard stories of people leaving work behind and moving

to Washington D.C. just to be a part of the Seekers community. Ken Burton is the first one who comes to mind. That sounds like the exact same thinking that Christ must have had in mind when he asked his followers to drop everything and follow him. It must have been a hard call to follow at first, but to talk to Ken, it was most definitely worth it. I can only hope that I am being called away from Seekers to a place that will even half as enriching as what Seekers has given me. I'm leaving with a lot of good memories, with my scrapbook quilt and I am leaving a better person than I was when I first walked in these doors. I would be lying however, if I didn't say that I also feel such a loss of potential for even more things that I could have learned, that it makes leaving a very difficult and frustrating thing. My next adventure at the University of Michigan Law School looks to be a challenging one, but I have faith that the lessons I learned at Seekers will help to make it a successful one. Thanks to all of you, for everything you have done. Whether you have realized it or not, you have all helped me to transition from fear to hope.