

Sashiko of My Soul

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What is sashiko? Sashiko is a Japanese embroidery technique which is used to repair or reinforce worn fabric. Often the repair is stronger than the original garment. It is done in an artistic highly stylized way. Traditional sashiko used ordinary cheap supplies- indigo dyed blue cloth and white thread. Somewhat like quilting, it is made up of running and interlocking stitches in patterns like Xs, diamonds, waves like water, mountains, geometric shapes, etc. [Hand outs]

Sashiko was first done in the Japanese Edo period, from 1603 to 1867 and was usually used to repair homespun clothing. It was a skill of the lower, working classes. Farmers performed it during the fallow winter months, laborers, fisherwomen, and firemen also used clothing with sashiko. Firemen's coats were home woven cotton and reinforced with layers of sashiko. Prior to use, firefighter's coats were soaked in water and provided surprisingly good protection from fire despite the cotton- based fabric. Gradually, the beauty of the stitching caught on in the upper classes. There are examples of sashiko repairs to valuable silk kimono in textile museums around the world.

Why sashiko? It is simply put, a beautiful repair that makes the object stronger than before. The theme of repair immediately made me think of the 4-H embroidery project posted by a friend of mine. That project is the one in the pictures I sent around. When I had first seen sashiko, I thought the stitching was neat, so I looked it up and did some reading.

The idea of repairing one's soul and making it stronger and more beautiful than it originally was- is at least hopeful, at best, brilliant. There many ways that our souls get ripped and torn just like fabric, especially during this past week. We may feel angry, sad, scared, numb, overwhelmed, outraged, anxious, helpless, and even hopeless that more than half of the US population just doesn't understand what is at stake. The next four years, and with repercussions for the rest of my life could be challenging, or out and out hell on wheels. Many people are

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expressing embarrassment, shame, even rage at their country. These are very patriotic citizens, fully supportive of the processes of the 3 American branches of government, not anarchists. Some people are still stunned 5 days later. It is a time to repair our souls, because we'll need our full strength going forward.

In order to repair our souls, we first have to explore the fabric of what makes up our souls. There are a couple of different models, but I'll make a hybrid of them that speaks to me. I consider there to be 4 general parts to the soul. The mind, our emotions, our identity, and our spiritual essence.

First, I'll talk about the mind. I see this part of the soul containing our cognitive functioning and our memories. Although our cognitive abilities change throughout our lives, this is essential to our being. I think, therefore, I am. I agree with Descartes entirely. If you've ever tried learning to meditate, the "monkey mind" is hard to control. My nose itches, I wonder what to make for supper, did someone just fart? (I hope it wasn't me) I've got to call Clarence, this sweater is itchy, and on, and on. Our thoughts shape our world and our unique experience of the world around us.

Emotions may motivate or paralyze a person and they cause a tremendous amount of damage to ourselves and to each other. They tap into our thoughts and induce memories. They can also motivate or paralyze us.

Our identities contain our personalities and how we see ourselves. Identity is plastic, it changes throughout life as we have new experiences, as examples, education, vocational or professional training, and parenthood.

Spiritual essence is that difficult to grasp life force, energy, chi, that makes us human and alive in this world.

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So where's the sashiko?

Contained within our thoughts are memories, good and bad. Traumatic memories have serious consequences to our souls. Most of us have heard that the

functional neuronal pathways in our brains, which contain a map of our experiences, can be inherited. Traumatic memories can literally show up in the brain wiring of our children. Most of us would rather not pass down our worst experiences, but there is strong neurobiological evidence this occurs. Healthy cognitive function and mental stimulation are crucial to our well-being. Mental illness and its pharmacological treatments have a huge role to play. Good mental health is important to maintain the mind. I have directly experienced changed cognitive abilities in my life as have most of us at some time in our lives. With age, we often experience a decline. Dementia is increasing exponentially as our population as life expectancy increases. Practices to fight cognitive changes involve effort. Exercise is a proven way to assist cognitive function. Games using words and numbers, like Sudoku, Wordle, word searches, crossword puzzles, all help. Use whatever appeals to you.

Next, I want to talk about the most primal and reactive part. Emotions.

As many of you grew up in the 50's, 60's, and 70's (and later depending on your guides throughout life) were taught to suppress emotions that are heavy or hard. "Shut up, dry those tears, or I'll give you something to cry about" may well have been what most of us learned about our emotions. Don't show them in public, or even at all or there is pain or punishment ahead. Many of us weren't taught to sit with them, to figure them out, but to just control, suppress, and swallow them. One of the things we've learned in the last 8 years is that many people were not taught to react based on thinking, but rather their emotions. One of the pivotal moments I had in 2017 was the realization that one of the main differences between the popular bases of the political parties was the ability to modify emotional responses with logic. People were just acting on emotional appeals, rather than facts, all around me. Minds slammed shut and walls were built. This realization helped me to understand the motivations and see the humanity of people again. Now, it's getting harder, not easier, to be polite and different than the majority. Shame, guilt and anger are powerful emotions. They punch big holes in our souls. If nothing is done to process and mend the holes they get bigger, like a run in a pair of nylon stockings. Shame researcher Dr. Brene' Brown, in her book "I Thought It Was Just Me (But It Isn't)", defines shame as the intensely painful feeling or experience of believing we are flawed or unworthy of acceptance and belonging. A wounded soul walking through life with other wounded souls. Shame is a hard nut to crack, even medical and mental health professionals tend to avoid talking about it with their patients and clients. As an

ex-Catholic, shame has been part of the life of my soul literally as long as I can remember. It's something I struggle with daily because of my disabilities. I'm acutely aware and have insight about them. I get out the thread and tie the knot at the end, but the stitching is hard and the material is thick. It's so important to work on the emotions that have done us harm. Sitting with them and working hard to process them is really the only way through.

On to identity. As I mentioned previously, our identities, while having a generally stable personality, do change as we move through life. Roles we take on, like partner, parent(human or pet), grandparent, retired person, and in my case, disabled person. My career as a doctor in family medicine was a huge part of my personal identity. After all, I had 25 years of education to achieve that goal. 10 years after I became disabled, I still really struggle with the loss of an important identity for me. I say I'll always be a doctor (just ask my daughter), but I no longer practice medicine, and frankly, much of my knowledge is quickly becoming outdated. I have had major grief to adapt to this identity change. As long as we can keep our identities intact, or fully accept our changes, we add to the wholeness of our soul. The needle is pulling through the heavy material of the sashiko patch.

Spiritual essence is perhaps the most difficult to access and repair. I have a friend who works in addiction recovery. She is a very spiritual person, incorporating Native American beliefs and practices in her daily life. She has the opinion that soul injuries are a large part of addiction. She has an interesting perspective on alcohol abuse in particular. Hard liquor is often referred to as spirits. Her take on this reference is that people have known for over a thousand years that alcohol affects and injures the soul of people who use it. I have always found that an interesting approach. Cultivating and maintaining an active spiritual life is essential to our souls. Things that repair our souls and keep that stitching going, are things that bring us joy and dopamine release. Enjoying music, time spent with pets, attending a favorite sports event, meditation, time with family, for me, swimming laps, and anything that works for you mend your soul.

I hope this talk has brought you some sashiko of your soul. With self-awareness and work, we can maintain and strengthen our souls, which we need now more than ever in the chaos in our midst. Let's support each other through this. Let's

make our souls stronger and more beautiful, mending them in the process. Keep on stitching.

May it be so.