



Trashmagination Podcast #64 – Memory Keepsakes

Welcome to Trashmagination, a podcast about reimagining trash. I'm Carla Brown.

In this episode, we'll talk about memory keepsakes, or items made from clothing when someone passes away. We are heading into the holiday season which can be a very difficult time for people who have lost a loved one. I rely on creative reuse for inspiration. I also rely on it for healing. When I struggle to keep my mind focused or when I feel out-of-sorts, I organize my sewing table. Or I cut fabric into hexagons for quilting. Or I embroider a gift. Or I weave on my loom. My right brain then has time to kick in and I know what I need to do to nudge a project forward.

I believe that it is possible to help process grief and worry by making beautiful things. In addition, when we bring new purpose to an item that was going in the trash or sitting unused, it adds other layers of positive meaning to our efforts.

I read an article about how making art and crafts can be especially helpful to children who are grieving [<https://crhcf.org/Blog/how-arts-and-crafts-help-children-express-grief/>]. It helps children to communicate without words. Working on the craft sets aside a time to talk about the loss. And it lets people take abstract ideas and make them into something concrete.

Sherri Lynn Wood and Passage Quilts

One of my favorite quilters in the world is Sherri Lynn Wood [<https://www.sherrilynnwood.com/>]. She is known in the quilting world for improv quilting [<https://www.sherrilynnwood.com/#/improv-handbook-for-modern-quilters/>]. She created the idea of a "score," like a music score, to help people improvise while quilting. So it's not a pattern that you are following, but a concept. For example, one of her scores is called the "String Score," which means cutting fabric into skinny rectangles or strings and then putting them together in whatever way makes you happy. Or she has a "Floating Squares" Score which involves irregularly cut squares overlaying each other.

In addition to teaching about improv, Sherri Lynn is known for a concept she calls Passage Quilts, which are quilts she makes from the clothing of someone who has passed away [<https://sherri-wood.squarespace.com/#/passage-quilting/>]. She sometimes does this in a workshop with the friends and family of that person, even people who have never used a sewing machine before.

One thing I love about Sherri Lynn's Passage Quilts is that she doesn't cut up the clothing into regular-sized squares or rectangles. She takes out the seams from the clothing and fits the pieces together in whatever way works. I have always used secondhand fabric in my quilting, and I know the exact feeling of not wanting to cut up a piece of fabric to make it a specific size because I don't want to waste a single square inch of it. The way that Sherri Lynn quilts her Passage Quilts is very sensitive to the idea that this quilt is made from the clothing of someone who is dearly loved, and it's not going to be easy to cut up that fabric. The process of disassembling the clothing and sewing the panels back together in a new pattern could be a wonderful meditation.

Please visit Sherri Lynn's website to see examples of Passage Quilts. They tell a story about the people who they commemorate in a way that I find very soothing and beautiful.

Traditional Memory Quilts

Sherri Lynn's Passage Quilts are truly unique, but there are many other types of memory quilts. Many people make quilts that feature squares cut from shirts or neckties. Sometimes to make the quilt more visually cohesive, the fabrics are only from dress shirts or flannel shirts or pajamas. They might only be plaids for example.

There is a lot of flannel and denim in memory quilts, and I think that is because it makes the quilt very soft and heavy, which is so comforting. Many quilters keep the designs simple with big squares.

If you don't feel ready to make a whole quilt, you could make a runner, which is a piece of fabric that you can lay on a dresser or dining room table. Sadie Seasongoods shows how to make one from flannel clothing [<https://www.sadieseasongoods.com/fall-flannel-shirt-and-lace-table-runner/>].

Mary Burgess and Woven Memories

Another artist who creatively reuses the clothing from a loved one is Mary Burgess. Her website is called Woven Memories and she weaves on a loom [<https://wovenmemories.com.au/about/>]. She says she makes bedspreads, bags, scarves and rugs from family textiles. She lives in Melbourne, Australia. In one story, Mary made a rug for a baby from her grandpa's clothing [<https://wovenmemories.com.au/gallery/the-grandpa-baby-rug-project/>].

Memory Pillows and Teddy Bears

Another idea is Memory Pillows. Most are made from a single shirt – like a soft flannel or denim shirt. You sew the body panels of the shirt into a square pillow. Some pillows retain the collar of the shirt at the top. Some people sew a little poem on the memory pillow that says something like, "This is a shirt that I used to wear. Whenever you hold it, know I am there."

Another type of memory pillow involves embroidering something that the person wrote on fabric in their handwriting. This could be a little note from a card that they sent for example.

A more challenging type of memory pillow is to make a teddy bear. One of my favorite podcasts is While She Naps, and the host Abby Glassenberg is an expert at making homemade stuffed toys. She posted a tutorial on her website for making a memory bear from sweaters [<https://whilshenaps.com/2018/04/how-to-make-a-memory-bear-a-free-pattern.html>]. This involves felting the sweaters by putting them in a dryer. She even added a little fabric tag that said "Love from Granny" to the bear.

I will also share a great sewing tutorial for making a teddy bear from fabric other than sweaters.

Memory Ornaments

As I mentioned, the holidays can be a difficult time for those who are grieving, and that's why I really like the idea of Memory Ornaments. You could take a single shirt or pajama set and make quite a few ornaments which you can then give to family and friends as you commemorate your loved one.

I have seen a variety of designs for these ornaments including birds, stars, small teddy bears and hearts. It could be any shape that relates to the person's favorite things – like their favorite animals or hobbies. In the show notes, I'll link to two blogs with step-by-step instructions on making bird ornaments from shirts [<http://viewfromthefridge.com/special-homemade-christmas-gift/> and <https://cutesycrafts.com/2013/12/papas-bird-ornament.html>].

Another idea involves the smallest size of bamboo embroidery hoop that is about 3 inches across. You take a small circle of fabric from the person's clothing and stretch it in the hoop, then tie a bow. This idea works even if you don't sew.

Memory Scarves or Broaches

One idea is to make an item that will give comfort every day because it becomes part of your routine.

For example, you could make a scarf for family members and friends from flannel shirts or pajamas. One pair of flannel pajama pants could make four scarves [<http://gina-michele.com/2012/10/diy-free-people-checked-shirt-scarf-2.html>]. This is a nice reminder that you can take with you every day.

There are also simple flower broaches that you can make from wool or other fabrics that you can pin on your coat or hat [<http://upcycledcreatively.blogspot.com/2012/01/upcycled-felt-rose-tutorial.html>]. Some of these flowers incorporate buttons too, which is a great way to celebrate someone's button collection.

Memory Denim Bags

A beautiful way to reuse old denim jeans is to sew the legs into a basket or bucket [<http://www.curlymade.pt/2014/09/diy-upcycled-denim-bucket.html>]. This is a beginner level sewing project. It could sit on your dresser filled with other mementos of your loved one.

Memory Rug

This next idea requires a slightly more involved level of skill, but it is to make either a braided or hooked rug from the t-shirts of the person who has passed away [<https://www.thewonderforest.com/2015/01/how-to-make-no-sew-round-braided-rug.html>]. I am an avid rug hooking artist so I love this idea, but I understand that not many people do rug hooking and even fewer do it with recycled t-shirts. I talked about rug hooking in my second episode of this podcast [<https://trashmagination.com/podcast-2-hooked-rugs-fabric-gift-bags-and-family-comic-books/>]. These days a similar craft that has become more popular is called punch needling [<https://amyoxford.com/pages/faq>]. This goes much faster than traditional rug hooking and I want to give it a try.

Artists Who Make Memory Keepsakes

These ideas are collected on a Pinterest board [<https://www.pinterest.com/Trashmagination/memory-keepsakes/>]. Or if you don't like to make crafts yourself, there are many artists on Etsy who make almost all of these items for you.

- Fat Panda Toys (South Africa) - <http://fatpandatoy.co.za>
- Magical Treasures by Rebecca - <https://www.instagram.com/magicaltreasuresbyrebecca/>
- Sew Tilley (UK) - <https://www.instagram.com/sewtilleyhandmade/>
- Teddy Bear Lane (UK) - <https://www.instagram.com/teddy.bear.lane/>
- Umm Mu (Qatar) - <https://umm-mu.com/>

Thank you!

Thank you for listening! I would love to hear your stories about any memory keepsakes that you have made at trashmagination@gmail.com.

Until next time – best wishes for the holiday season – remember to ask for help - and may you see creative reuse as a source of strength and healing in your life!