

Family Ties: Tradition and *The Keeping Quilt*

(teacher written model)

In every corner of the global village, in every culture of the human family, in every age, traditions play a part in people's lives. Centuries ago, a tribe on the Celtic forest danced on the winter solstice, praying for the days to become longer. A child in America, today, puts her lost tooth under her pillow when she goes to bed, in hopes that the Tooth Fairy will arrive. A boy in Afghanistan puts his forehead to the floor and faces Mecca, praying, five times a day, as have his forebears for centuries.

All of these are traditions. In a variety of ways, they are woven into the fabric of people's lives. They are customs, acts that people are used to, ways of organizing one's day or living in the world that people accept as a given. Traditions vary enormously - from the light-hearted to the serious, from the family-based to the culture-based, from the religious to the secular, from the uplifting to the destructive.

The Keeping Quilt by Patricia Polacco is a story about tradition. Anna and her family are poor Jewish immigrants from Russia. In that first generation to live in America, Anna's mother makes a quilt from scraps of clothing from the whole family. That quilt, the "keeping quilt," is passed down through the generations of the family. Using the quilt for important family events becomes a tradition for this family. The tradition of the quilt holds the family together across the generations.

Weddings are a joyful family event for this family. Beginning with Anna's wedding, the family uses the quilt as a "huppa", a sort of canopy under which Anna and her new young husband, Sasha, exchange their wedding vows. They "promise each other love and understanding," and are united for life. The keeping quilt has helped enlarge the family. It has made it possible, through Anna's wedding and the children she and Sasha will have, to bring a new generation of children into the family, keeping them together. When a new child does come, baby Carle, she is wrapped in the keeping quilt as she is welcomed into the family.

Over the years, the family continues to use the keeping quilt to celebrate family births and weddings. The weddings themselves change as the family's way of living

changes. At Anna's wedding, for example, the men and women must celebrate separately, while at her granddaughter Mary Ellen's wedding, they celebrate together and people who are not even Jewish come to the wedding. But even with these changes, the keeping quilt remains, holding the family together in love for each other.

The keeping quilt also holds the family in love in times of sorrow. When Anna is dying, at age ninety-eight, she is covered with the keeping quilt, and her children and grandchildren weep into it. The quilt seems to remind them of how much they are still bound together, even as they are losing someone they love.

What does *The Keeping Quilt* tell us about the power of tradition in people's lives? Perhaps it is reminding us that simple traditions can be part of what holds a family together. For the family in the story, the keeping quilt symbolizes the love that binds the family across the generations. Even though parts of their lives change, even though people die and leave the family, the love that they have for each other does not change. Tradition can remind all of us about what we value most deeply. In this way, tradition can enrich and add meaning to our lives.