When I was a child, I encountered the lure of ribbons on rare occasions. My family wasn’t poor, but we had little more than basic necessities. After we moved off the farm when I was six, we had a ranch-style house with a mortgage (I know now that my parents nearly lost it twice), two cars (both used), and a garage. My father had great foresight in buying the adjacent lot behind our house. He plowed the extra ground to plant a garden, which had previously been my mother’s domain, and grew copious amounts of red beets, carrots, green beans, peas, cucumbers, squash, radishes, lettuce, sweet corn, tomatoes, and any other vegetable he could coax from germination to harvest. Mom canned or froze most of what a family of five needed to stock the cupboard from fall to summer. Since we no longer had a freezer filled with home-grown beef, Dad had an excuse to go into the mountains every fall and hunt for deer and elk. He never failed to home his quarry, and he supplemented the big game with forays after quail, pheasant, and duck, and with trout from summertime fishing expeditions. Such provision was predictable because both of my parents grew up in homes dependent on the harvest. Like most Americans in the mid-twentieth century, they lived in an agrarian society. And the focus of that society was the county fair.

I don’t remember when I first went to the fair, but the sights and sounds of hay and grain, manure and soap, caramel corn and cotton candy melded into a thrill of pleasure, fear, and anticipation. At night, colored lights swirled with the carousel and Ferris wheel, welcoming me with their tame delights. Later, when I was older, I would experience the centrifugal hammering of the Roll-O-Plane and the near-death (or so I thought) experience of having the safety restraint come loose and the door fly open. Only fingertips and toenails kept my cousin and me from being dumped into the crowd below.

During the daytime, the scents of humans and livestock mingled as owners prepared live animals for judging. I think back now and wonder how red-faced men wearing sopping wet work clothes managed the Cinderella transformation to Saturday-night-dance clean, with hair combed back, faces scrubbed, starched western shirts gradually softening from ever-present perspiration, and pointy toed cowboy boots shined and manure-free. All of this done in the blink of an eye after hours spent grooming their animals—and for what purpose?

Then I noticed the ribbons: Blue, red, white, and purple ribbons, all with gold lettering. The purple ones seemed special, with a satin ribbon rosette surrounding a large ribbon-covered button. Ribbons were tacked on stalls and cages, pinned on garments, weighted down by jars. Ribbons adorned jars of flowers and lay next to giant pumpkins. Ribbons were everywhere. Even my older (and only) sister earned ribbons for her 4-H sewing projects—all blue, which were awarded sparingly and were sources of pride. Red ribbons were embarrassments, although most entrants received them; and white—well, you were better off not having entered an exhibit than being shamed with a white ribbon. Purple—those were championship quality, the ultimate, rare. Ribbons were what all the folderol was about.

This wisdom about ribbons was reinforced by my lack of them. Although I had the necessities of life—shelter, clothing, food—my possessions were almost all hand-me-downs—even my Teddy bear. In fact, the only ribbon I remember from my early childhood is the gold satin ribbon that served as necktie and camouflage for the bear’s jointed neck. By the time my sister gave the bear to me, the ribbon had rolled into a narrow wrinkled cord, invisible except for a tight knot dangling, the loops and tails of a once beautiful bow. I owned no ribbons for my long, almost white-blond hair, only rubber bands that strangled my ponytail and broke hair shafts. My dresses often tied in the back, but with self-fabric bows, not ribbon.
Even the hats that I wore to church had elastic bands that pinched my neck, not satin bands of ribbon that could cascade down my neck.

Most of the inhabitants of the coal-mining and farming community where I grew up were Catholic, but my family was Protestant. I envied the kids who went to the rectory once a week after school to learn the catechism. Ritual attracted me, as did the little workbooks the children took home after their first session. I liked to fill in blanks, and the booklet pages sported many lines just itching to be scratched with pencil lead. And then there was the rosary, not only beautiful, but mysterious. Every bead required a secret code, a prayer that pleaded for specific and miraculous things. I wanted the structure, the ceremonies, and the sacraments that meant so much to everyone around me—except my parents. What I wanted most, however, was a white dress like the ones my friends wore during their initiation into the rites of Catholicism.

My girlfriends showed off pictures of their First Communion dresses, cut from the pages of Montgomery Ward, Sears Roebuck, and J.C. Penney catalogs. Pristine white organdy floated over white taffeta linings, with white lace softening the transitional edges, where fabric revealed flesh. Rows upon rows of stitched-down tucks and flat white lace wove in white satin ribbons embellished the dresses—only a step away from the elegance of bridal gowns. The more froufrou, the higher the girl's status, and by extension, her family's. The pictured ribbons glinted with richness beyond my reach. If money had been available for extras, which it wasn't, I might have had mittens or boots or leotards (now called tights) to keep my limbs warm when the mercury dropped to -21° Fahrenheit. But not ribbons.

Every birthday and Christmas, my mother brought the wrapping-paper box down from the coat-closet shelf. The box, large enough to hold a man's work boots, was off limits to my sister, brother, and me; none of us would dream of exploring it unattended. But when the occasion arose, Mom plumbed its depths for paper that met specific criteria: the pattern must suit the occasion; and the object to be wrapped, versus the paper's dimensions, must not require that the paper be cut. Some of the wrappings dated back over fifteen years to 1945, the year my parents married. Every scrap of paper from every gift received was carefully folded along original lines and stacked inside the box, largest pieces at the bottom. Nestled next to the paper was a smaller box ribbon. In contrast to the paper, which had all been recycled year after year, the box held a cardboard tube encircled by new red, green, and white curling ribbon. Mom used the new ribbon only when salvaged tying pieces and ornamental curls were inadequate for the task at hand, which wasn't often. But sometimes she would snip off about a two-foot length of fresh ribbon, spread the sharp blades of the shears, and whisk the rippled strand between the knife-like edge and her thumb, creating a tumble of spirals to cinch onto the top of a package. These curls reminded me of hair fashioned into corkscrews with Mom's curling iron, which she heated in the stove's gas flame. Curls caused pain. The curling iron burned my neck and sometimes my scalp, and when I learned to curl ribbon, I often received multiple spear wounds from fibers reluctant to bend to my will. But curls were special, reserved for important occasions, rare and elusive—like ribbons—and sometimes made with ribbons.

A few summers ago, I began finding gallon-size Ziploc bags—filled with blue, red, white, green, yellow, pink, black, and multi-hued ribbons from swim meets—in the trash basket. The following year, 4-H ribbons were also tossed among the garbage. At first, in a fit of parsimony reminiscent of my parents'
Depression-era background, I retrieved the ribbons, appalled that my children would have so little regard for the achievement symbolized by these awards. I thought about ways to display the ribbons. One mother I knew nailed strips of wood near the ceiling of her daughter's bedroom and tacked the girl's many 4-H horsemanship ribbons on the wood in a long neat row of fringe. I considered sewing the ribbons I rescued to a cloth backing and making pillows, curtains, or bed throws, useful items that would display my children's awards.

I also began to think about my attitude toward ribbons, which bordered on reverence. I valued ribbons, tucking every participation ribbon, every heat ribbon, every place ribbon, and every championship ribbon into a file folder for later reflection. My children were ambivalent about the bright bands of cloth. How could they not want ribbons?

How naïve of me to think that I knew much concerning ribbons. Flat bands of cloth fluttered in my mind, resurrecting my childhood fascination with a thing of rarity, a thing of beauty, a thing to be coveted. Maybe woven into the wispy strands are the souls of people: their wants, beliefs, vanity, values, achievements, allegiances. Teasing the lead end is the future, with the past tugging at the tail. Somewhere in between is bound the present, wrapped in infinite assortments of colors, textures, and materials.

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Ribbons leave a vaporous trail in history. First known as ribbands, these flat strips of cloth, woven by hand from silk, edged the garments of nobles as early as the eleventh century CE. By the sixteenth century, improvements in production of ribbons resulted in a unique textile in which the weft formed selvedge edges, as we continue to see in woven ribbons today. Industrial advancements also permitted greater quantities of ribbon to be manufactured more quickly. A century later, ribbons became popular embellishments on every part of the well-heeled person's costume. For a time, the British Parliament restricted the use of ribbons, allowing only the nobility to wear them, but by the late eighteenth century, all levels of society sought ribbons. American colonists resisted the allure of ribbons because of political animosity toward the mother country, yet by early in the nineteenth century, advancements in industrial capability resulted in an explosion of ribbon weaving factories in Great Britain and the United States. Not only were ribbons used in their loomed form, but needle workers practiced the eighteenth-century French innovation of silk ribbon embroidery, a craft that does not boast comprehensive historical documentation.

Somewhere along the way, ribbons took on significance as badges of merit or distinction, perhaps as an outgrowth of use by nobility to denote affiliation with honorary orders, the military, and nation of origin. Today, ribbons proliferate in sporting, academic, military, and political arenas, still delighting the eye of both the jaded and the uninitiated. By assuming the status of symbols, ribbons have broken out of the loom.

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Military ribbons are codes of a sort. While standing at attention or meeting on a sidewalk, a soldier, sailor, flyer, cadet, or other military member can interpret the rank, experience, and honors of an officer in full dress uniform from the ribbons displayed within the periphery of the subordinate's vision. Until my children began advancing in the ranks of the Civil Air Patrol (CAP) cadet program, I didn't realize
that the small sections of grosgrain secured on a slider and attached to a ribbon mount could convey so much information. From the purple and white of the Curry Achievement ribbon denoting Airman rank, to white with red and blue stripes for the Earhart Award and Captain's rank, the kids added and replaced and reorganized their ribbons as they studied, tested, and developed leadership skills. They added others for additional activities like Encampments, military-style summer camps; the International Air Cadet Exchange (IACE); and Blue Beret, a Cadet Special Activity for which cadets are selected and trained to assist at the annual Oshkosh, Wisconsin, Experimental Aircraft Association show and fly-in. Such a visual system based on ribbon symbols makes sense when large numbers of people are dependent upon leadership established by rank. A military member must recognize a superior officer immediately, proffering appropriate deference and responding to orders. Conversely, the officer must be cognizant of subordinates and enforce military protocol. And the wearing of ribbons on uniforms instantly separates members of military and military auxiliaries like CAP from civilian ranks.

I wonder about the truncation of service ribbons. Short sections of multi-striped grosgrain (or starred, as on the ribbon denoting the Medal of Honor) bump up against each other, a graphic résumé more attractive than the written form submitted with job applications. To add to the width of the rows, to replace small ribbon mounts with larger, more capacious holders, to determine situated authority based on fragments of color, to crave more ribbons ascribed to greater acts of glory—this seems a part of early orientation to military structure. But the ribbon attributes only the honor, not the duty and sacrifice snipped off on the frontal edge or the aftermath filled with phantoms at the rear. Military ribbons disconnect from roots, other than absolute obedience, and point to the next inchoate success. As an outsider, not affiliated with the military, I want to lengthen the ribbons, especially for those who follow orders, to tie ribbons down in family and community and catch the future in strong, bright loops.

When ribbons are used to represent significant issues affecting community, the effect can be immediate and lasting. I remained relatively oblivious to yellow ribbons until Thomas Sutherland, a former professor at Colorado State University (CSU), was taken hostage in 1985 by Lebanese terrorists while teaching at American University in Beirut. Until his release in 1991, every tree on the CSU Oval wore a carefully tied yellow ribbon, a constant reminder that this man remained in captivity. Without the ribbons, I, like many students and visitors, would have had only occasional thoughts of Sutherland's plight, of the safety of Americans in foreign countries, of negotiations and lack of negotiations. The ribbons were omnipresent, insisting that we not forget. I have not forgotten.

The Yellow Ribbon Movement began in 1981 thanks to Penelope Laingen, wife of the U.S. Chargé d'Affaires in Tehran. Remembering the song, "Tie a Yellow Ribbon Round the Ole Oak Tree," recorded by many different artists in the 1970s, and popularized by the group Tony Orlando and Dawn, Laingen's intention was to give Americans a positive outlet for responding to the 444 day Iranian hostage crisis.6 (The community in which I then lived—Loveland, Colorado—opted to keep the Christmas star burning on Namaqua Hill for well over a year, until all hostages were released.) But a folklorist and librarian, Gerald E. Parsons, traces the origin of the tradition, as the visible expression of a wish for a loved-one's return, back to the mid-1950s. Based on an oral tradition concerning the return home of a convict, the man was to look for a white ribbon on a particular tree. If the ribbon was tied there, it meant that the man was wanted; no ribbon meant he should stay on the train, to keep going. The legend says that the tree was "white with ribbons," so the convict was welcomed home.7

After a little more than three decades and a proliferation of ribbon campaigns, I've lost track of what most movements promote. I almost didn't catch the shift in focus from the importance MADD (Mothers
Against Drunk Driving) attached to red ribbons that they tied to car antennas, mirror, and door handles, to the highly promoted Red Ribbon Campaign against drugs, begun after Enrique Camarena, an agent of the Drug Enforcement Agency, was tortured to death in 1985. Perhaps there is good reason to merge the issues since drugs and drug abuse present the motivation for caution, and the causes arose at about the same time. Something inside me resists ribbon campaigns, much as I resisted contributing to the plethora of American flags after the terrorist attacks on 9/11. Too much exposure seems to make people numb or angry, much as television and video game violence is purported to cause children to escalate behavior to more violent outbursts.

One of the more interesting ribbon movements, however, makes use of jack-of-all-trades duct tape. The Duct Tape for Peace Campaign seeks to “nurture a peaceful, just and equitable America,” a worthy pursuit, but lacking in definition. For example, we claim that our court system imparts justice, but does every defendant have access to effective legal representation? Money matters. Whoever has the fattest bank account has the best advocate and greatest endurance. When I consider applications for duct tape, I envision broken objects bound together forcefully with little likelihood of escape. Perhaps America is lacking in peace, justice, and equitability, but duct tape seems more a restriction on freedom than an enhancement. On the other hand, a doctor once told me that duct tape supposedly had been found to be more effective—and is much less painful—for removing warts than applications of liquid nitrogen. If duct tape can take warts out of flesh, could it also take war out of Americans?

Not likely. With the advent of the Iraq War, Americans began making widespread use of slap ‘em on, peel ‘em off magnetic ribbons with which to display patriotic fervor, preferable to the sticktoitiveness of duct tape. Like their three-dimensional predecessors, one strand of flat, flexible magnet ribbon forms a two-dimensional loop with tails floating down symmetrically from their intersection. The first patriotic magnetic ribbons I saw were adorned with bunting—red, white, and blue—followed later by the appeal to pathos inherent in a new issuance of yellow ribbons, this time embossed with “Support Our Troops” in smooth calligraphy. Since I had never applied a bumper sticker to my car, I was horrified to see these ribbons adhered to vehicles’ rear panels, fenders, and sometimes doors, thinking that sticky goo fastened them to the surfaces. I expected the paint to peel, fade, or dull, and removing the decals would always leave a shadowy image. But eventually I saw the ribbons packaged near a craft store checkout and realized that some entrepreneur had come up with a solution to the presumed temporality of war. A magnet can be applied and removed, which suggests that, likewise, America can begin and end a war of its own making. The magnetic ribbons shout explicit support for troops and implicit support for our military machine, and the affiliative adornments can be removed with a flick of the fingernail. Unfortunately, troops can’t be deployed and brought home with such ease, nor can an individual’s vote alter the prevailing view as expeditiously as can the fingernail remove a symbol of support or outrage.

A new ribbon came to my attention recently, yellow like the “Support Our Troops” appliqué. But rather than copying the full-fluttering limbs that drift gracefully from the more familiar ribbon’s loop, the designer amputated the right appendage above the crossing, forming a question mark and commanding the reader to “Question War.”

The question is the answer.
I still have the only 4-H ribbons I ever earned: A red ribbon for knitted blue slippers and another red ribbon for a lavender hand-stitched gingham apron. I've relented and thrown away the ribbons my children chose not to keep. I save other ribbons, gifts from friends or children I once knew well, as bookmarks. At my last garage sale, I bagged and sold spools of ribbon left over from years of craft projects. My sewing box continues to boast an unused ribbon mount from CAP days. The saved ribbons revive a rich tapestry of meaningful memories; others, cheapened by entrepreneurship and proliferation, have lost their value and been discarded.

Our eyes are trained to seek ribbons. When I visit a craft or fabric store, I finger the ribbons and let the light flash on unpinned tails. I feast on the visual display of ribbon—rainbow colors and tartan plaids, velvet plush and iridescent organdy, grosgrain and satin, floral and craft, narrow streamers studded with rosebuds and wide ribbon woven with Greek keys. During a visit to a Goodwill store this weekend, I stopped to enjoy a shelf filled with rolls of delicate organdy ribbon embellished with bright flowers.

Where ribbons exist, we covet them. Where they don't exist, we construct them.

Perhaps someday a duct tape ribbon will secure peace. I think of my grandchildren and wonder what kinds of ribbons they and their generation will make—what they will wear and win, keep and throw away, imagine and invent. The sort of ribbon they prize will likely be different than mine, but I hope that when a flat satin strand slips between their fingers for the first time, they intuit the potential for ribbon that exists within their grasp.

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