

Plant Dyeing in the Kindergarten

• Linda Grant

Sitting by an outdoor fire on a grey November day, five pots of colored fleece simmering and with a group of kindergarten children gathered close around me, I felt warmed through. I felt warmed by the fire's radiant heat and the children's close attention to all I was doing. The Life Process of Warming was present.

The small wood fire burning out-of-doors is archetypal, as one small child reminded me: "This fire is ancient." Working with the elemental forces of fire and water, and with the alchemy which happens when these are combined with plant materials and sheep fleece, is a deeply warming and enlivening experience. The feeling that lingered after a morning spent dyeing fleece on an outdoor fire was of inner calm, mellow warmth,

and clear perception. I became aware of a deep and even rhythm in my breath. There was a feeling of physical strength and of being fully present.

What forces are at work here? The plant materials are living substances: leaves, berries or bark, holding the pigments that are expressions of the plant's etheric force. It is the living substance that yields the color—decayed plants produce no pigment. The quality of water used is important too. Fresh soft water produces the best colors, and a flowing stream, well-water, or clean rainwater will have a stronger life force than chlorinated tap water. The kindling and logs gathered, sawn, and dried are transformed through fire into heat and ash. Choosing firewood from the log-pile on a daily basis brought me into relationship with

wood through the senses of touch, sight, and smell. I developed an unconscious relationship too with the fleece, getting to know its qualities as you would a new friend. These living relationships stayed alive in me during the weeks spent working on plant dyes and for some time afterwards.

Bringing children into a close experience of all these elements and processes is very nourishing. It is life-enhancing. It strengthens their etheric body which in turn builds their physical body. This is quintessentially the work of any kindergarten.

The element of time, present in any process, was particularly noticeable. Sheep fleece has a sensitivity to sudden changes in temperature, so the dyepot must be brought to temperature slowly, and later cooled slowly before rinsing in cold water. The fleece needs to rest in the dyepot. A fire which blazes too quickly will damage the fleece and produce poor color. Learning to let the process take its time while still fitting the work within the kindergarten's daily rhythm became a valuable lesson for me.

For the children, waiting by a slowly simmering pot sometimes alternated with creative play in the garden. One child wondered if it would work at all as the chestnut dyepot simmered and simmered and simmered! But the slowness of the process is ideally suited to kindergarten children, allowing them to breathe into the process, staying within the dream consciousness so appropriate for them. It is not a hurried activity which could be more wakeful for them. Often, stirring small "sample dyepots" was enough to engage them while the main pot simmered on the fire. Tending the fire by bringing more firewood when it was needed kept them connected to the process. When the dyed fleece was cooled there were many hands eager to rinse it, to hold it, to see the transformation of color! This brought teamwork and leadership skills from the group of children as they decided whose turn it was to fill the watering-can with fresh water, who would rinse and squeeze the fleece, and who would empty the basin after the rinsing.

The rainbow of colors (with the exception of blue) which emerged over the weeks was a joy to behold. The colors shone with light yet held a harmony of their own like a musical scale!

From the gathering of the leaves or other plant material, to the drying, then soaking; to the

simmering and straining, then finally simmering with fleece, the children took a journey through both an inner and outer landscape. They followed the path of a very old craft leading them to a new reverence and awe for the world of nature and our relationship to it.

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