

## **INSIGHTS**

# **Natural mythopoesis in the forest school context**

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It's a chilly March day, the Sun glimmering weakly above the old Bramleys in the orchard. Inside our story den – a branch-and-tarp-covered structure – I'm outlining the narrative of today's story-quest with a small group of children, aged 5 to 8.<sup>1</sup>

“In our story,” I begin, lowering my voice to draw them in, “There's a Winter King and his goblin followers. The Winter King has captured the Spring Princess and has been holding her prisoner all Winter. Meanwhile Mabon, the Sun Hero, and his band of adventurers find out where she's being held and plan to rescue her. So they build a special bower for her, and then set off to the Winter King's palace. They can't hurt the Winter King, or any of his goblins, because he's an important part of the year; also, the Spring Princess is under a magical spell, which makes her want to stay. And so, Mabon and his friends have to persuade her to leave. Then, they have to bring her back to their bower without her feet touching the ground, otherwise she'll fall back under the Winter King's spell. And that's it! Over to you!”<sup>2</sup>

At this the children begin clamouring to choose their roles. Daubs of face-paint and

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<sup>1</sup> *Wood Dragons*, our Forest School group meets weekly for whole day sessions with mixed age groups of up to 12 children

<sup>2</sup> This story quest was adapted from John Hodgson and Alan Dyer's wonderful book, *Let Your Children Go Back to Nature*. In this particular story, gender roles are rather traditional and I have accepted them as such, in large part because the two girls in our group are at the younger end of the age spectrum, and are not sufficiently confident to participate more dynamically. However, as I hope the other examples of story quests in this account will indicate, I try to vary the way that the children interact, often through teamwork with ungendered characters, e.g., as elements, and ultimately I hope that as the girls' confidence grows, they will take on leading roles in our story quests.

coloured strips of cloth denote the different groups, and then they set about organising themselves, the Winter king and his blue goblins making an ice palace, while Mabon and his adventurers, adorned with yellow headbands, start building a pathway leading towards the Winter King's quarters.

Throughout the preparations, I'm on hand, along with my colleague, to observe, encourage and, where necessary, to facilitate their ideas. Finally the children are ready to begin, and the story is enacted. Mabon and co are somewhat shy with their persuasive language, but at last they encourage the Spring Princess out of the ice palace and she makes it along a series of improvised steps to the bower, where the adventurers welcome her.

Moments later, specks of snow start to fall and the boy who's been playing the Winter King races up triumphantly shouting, "See, my magical powers haven't all gone!"

This is my favourite moment in the whole process. It shows me that the children have integrated the story and, in spontaneously responding to the sudden change in weather, this child now has a deeper awareness of the movement of the seasons, how they tend to blur, teeter back and forth before establishing their pattern. Later, during their free play, I hear the children incorporating characters from the story-quest into their games, and am gratified at how this serves to extend their imaginative range.

In the tick-box world of mainstream education, I'd justify the activity by enumerating the range of experiences from which the children were benefiting – physical movement, practical skills, language development, teamwork, social and emotional development. But within the Forest School context, a significant reason for sharing stories that relate to the natural world is because I believe they contribute to the child's ecopsychological development.

This, I hope, will nurture his/her expanded sense of self, which understands our deep interdependence with the Web of Life and the cycle of the year. Being outdoors all year round, Forest School children become adaptive to all weathers and learn the self-responsibility of dressing appropriately (something the Scandinavians, who pioneered nature nurseries, have long understood.) And by witnessing changes in weather, light levels, temperature and the natural world around them, they begin to develop the "ecological self" inherent in a more Nature-

based culture than our own.

When story-quests haven't featured in our sessions for a while, I notice that the children's play becomes characterised by guns and warfare, with the boys in particular enacting violent characters. Seeking "enemies", the children can become polarised, and aggression sometimes builds between them. I wonder if this is just a "natural" stage in child development? Then I consider statistics such as that the average Western child is likely to have witnessed over 18,000 murders and 100,000 acts of violence on TV by the time they finish their schooling, and ask how this affects them? <sup>3</sup>

One day my colleague and I could see that the aggression was spilling over into real conflict, and so in the next session I introduced a story-quest with the objective of reuniting the group. This time it involved one tribe composed of the 4 elements. We began by talking about them, dispelling any preconceptions that fire was best by looking at how they interact. Having chosen 4 colour-coded groups, the children then ventured into the woods where they met Artemis – a puppet who requested help in freeing her protecting Dragon from a spell. Played by an adult, the Dragon had been bound with "chains" (Goosegrass served well for these), and could only be freed if the tribe worked together to accomplish a series of elemental tasks.

Again the story influenced the children's play that day, some retaining their elemental characteristics, and on occasion reminding each other, "We all have to work together!" This not only helped to dispel the dynamics of the previous session, but I could also see that the story was contributing to their imaginative capacities and potential for myth-making.

Since each session is responsive to the seasons, weather, needs of the site and interests of the children, our practice of mythopoesis has worked its way into all sorts of activities, even our practical skills. Noticing that the hurdle which had served as an entrance/exit along one of the orchard's boundaries had collapsed, we decided to involve the children in constructing a new gate. Beginning in January, we encountered Janus, Roman guardian of gates and doors, and in pairs became living statues looking forwards into the future, and backwards over the past year.

Then, having studied the parts of doors and gates, the children embodied a gate with posts, hinges and a latch, and practiced some designs. Later we coppiced

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<sup>3</sup> See Rose Dyson, *Mind Abuse: Media Violence in an Information Age*

some Hazel and, over the course of the month, worked on knots and lashings. Finally, our two simple gates were inaugurated in situ with a simple ceremony improvised by the children, and culminating with cries of “Open sesame!” This not only served to mark the group’s achievement, but endowed the whole process with rich meaning – far more than could ever be discovered in a trip to the local DIY store!

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