

The Green Zone

By Patricia Dines



Celebrating Winter

Summerfield's Winter Faire offers eco-gifts and earth-centered festivities

"An old-fashioned holiday outing," reads the invitation to the Summerfield Waldorf School's annual Winter Faire. I'm attracted by the chance to step out of the usual holiday hectic. Plus I remember warmly my past visits to Summerfield, both for the biodynamic farm's inspiring oak vistas and for the fascinating ways the school weaves the land into students' education.

Wanting more information, I talk with Leslie Young, Summerfield's events coordinator. As she describes the festival, I become excited at the idea of exploring the unique locally-made nature-based handcrafts for sale, and perhaps even buying a local biodynamic Christmas tree. (Biodynamic is even more earth-friendly than organic.) Visitors can also take a horse and carriage ride, watch a puppet show, peruse Waldorf-compatible books, or enjoy a homemade all-organic lunch prepared by the senior class to fund their year-end activities. There's also a "Snowflake Shop," offering young children low prices on small donated handmade and recycled items.

But I'm most enticed by the notion of doing the traditional crafting, including dipping beeswax candles, decorating gingerbread cookies, making wool felt holiday bell ornaments, and dying a silk scarf. While other crafts events might use less desirable materials such as Styrofoam, Young says that all their craft materials are natural, including the silk dyes that are homemade by school receptionist and parent Tracy Saucier. Young hands the phone to Saucier, who enthusiastically tells me that people are returning to the natural dying techniques used for thousands of years because of the reduced impact on the earth,

lowered toxic exposure, and beautiful rich colors.

Speaking again with Young, I comment that I enjoy interacting with Summerfield folks. She replies, "Well, it's not just a school, it's a community." The seasonal rhythm of the year's festivals, she explains, helps create this sense of community, encouraging people to connect with each other in meaningful ways while honoring nature.

The school's ceremonies start each fall with September's Michaelmas, when they enact the story of St. Michael confronting the dragon. Their approach is not religious, Young says, but symbolic, offering "living images" that can help us on life's journey. In Summerfield's remake, the dragon represents our challenges, such as winter's cold darkness or aspects within ourselves that we want to change. The goal is not to kill the dragon but to transform it, harnessing its strength to empower our lives.

In another school ceremony, the Advent Garden, parents and young children gather in a dark room. One at a time, each child walks into a spiral of evergreen boughs, carrying a candle, which is then lit. The child walks back out, placing the candle in the spiral. When the room is filled with light, the group sings a thematic song. "It's pretty magical," Young says, adding that when the days become short, these ceremonies help us rekindle the light within.

Summerfield's commitment to encouraging students' connection with the earth is seen throughout the school's work. For instance, it is one of the few U.S. Waldorf schools with its own onsite biodynamic farm, which is integrated into the curricu-

lum. This was part of Waldorf founder Rudolf Steiner's original vision.

During both the regular school year and summer Farm Camp, students help care for the animals; tend the growing fruits, vegetables and flowers; and process and prepare foods. Through this, according to the school's website, they "learn many basic skills that are rapidly becoming lost in today's industrialized society . . . [and gain] a deeper awareness of the natural world."

Summerfield's land steward and farmer Perry Hart writes, "Mother Nature is now ailing and . . . humanity must take the responsibility to nurture our mother back to health."

I feel soothed hearing about these earth-honoring ways. Too often in our busy modern lives, nature's cycles can seem like optional background noise. But for most of humankind's time on earth, we've had shared ceremonies to help us honor and synchronize with the light and the dark, the expansion into summer's expressive sunshine and the contraction into winter's restful introspection. I think that we viscerally long for nurturing relationships with the earth and community. I'm moved by the opportunity to dip into these ancient waters.

Summerfield Waldorf School and Farm's Winter Faire is slated for Saturday, Dec. 6, from 11am to 4pm; \$1 entry fee. Adults-only preview, Friday, Dec. 5, 5:30-8pm; no entry fee. 655 Willowside Road, Santa Rosa. 707.575.7194. www.summerfieldwaldorf.org

© Copyright Patricia Dines, 2008. All rights reserved. (www.patriciadines.info, 707.829.2999)

Published in the North Bay Bohemian, Dec. 3, 2008.