



River of Enchantment

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RIVER OF THE AGES, River of Time, River of All Our Ancestors, reaching back and back. Connected to a place beyond the mind's eye. Like the space-time continuum, this river precedes us and will go on long after us.

When I learned to spin many years ago in Bolivia, I had the image, which has never left me, of entering a jungle river, deep and wide and slow. Like the Amazon, like the Nile. At first my companions were about a zillion indigenous Bolivian ladies in their *traje* (native dress), spinning ceaselessly. Like breathing, like timelessness. Back in the United States, the river became narrower, more like a mountain stream, with hardly anyone around at all.

Little by little, over the past twenty years, I have seen more people falling in love with fiber, more folks coming to the river. The work of the hand has become an anchor in our Brave New Gigabyte World. There's a peacefulness in creating with our hands, mind, and heart, an act more satisfying than the biggest shopping spree. It is precisely because of its repetitiveness that we crave it. Its very slowness is a luxury in our fast and faster world. Hurry up! screams the world, but To where? ask our souls. Knitting, spinning, weaving, quilting, beading—they all offer us a river back to our personal reality.

William Wordsworth (1770–1850) wrote these words in his poem, “The World is Too Much With Us”:

*“Getting and spending, we lay waste our powers:
Little we see in Nature that is ours;
We have given our hearts away, a sordid boon!”*

We fiber fanciers who create in these timeless humble ways can say:

*Knitting and spinning we regain our powers:
Everything we see in Nature is again ours;
We have taken our hearts back, a blessed boon!*

Contrary to what others may think, I have noticed a return to things fiber and things handmade, whether people purchase them or crave to make them. Maybe it's because I live in the Southwest, where we are positively fiber-infested. The love of working with wool never really left here in the first place. The Rio Grande and Navajo traditions are still alive and well. People here are turning back to the art-forms of their ancestors. They are taking classes, attending wool festivals, and traveling to far-off Third World places where fiber traditions are still intact. We must thank these places and peoples for keeping this continuous thread direct from the dawns of history, holding this light and this way. Like the daykeepers of the Maya, whose responsibility it is to honor the sacredness of each day, to assure that each day will go as it is meant to, these people are the Fiber Keepers. And now we are, too.

Today, handspinning and handknitting are much prized precisely for their lumps and bumps and breath, which show signs of life and real people, not metal and robots. In both my yarn business and mill, we are busier each year, the river is more populated. Around here we call this development Backwards into the Future. Back to spinning wheels, hand looms, handspindles, and knitting needles. Back to real fiber. As a spinner, I cannot help but notice how the twist traveling up the loose fiber at once makes it useful and strong and at the same time replicates the very double helices found in our DNA and the Cosmos itself. How can such a basic structure ever be lost to us? We are imprinted from above and from within.

And now it is spring: time of return of color to the landscape, time of renewal. For me, as a plant dyer, it is also a time of hope (not yet dashed by drought or wind or late freezes), hope that all the native plants we gather here for our dyes in the high, dry mountains of Northern New

Mexico have received the right amount of moisture at just the right time in their development to produce abundantly this season. Once we find these plants, we gather them gingerly, careful not to damage their root systems, so they will live well once we leave. We may either preserve them for later or use them right away. Or both. The joyous transition from plant to colors in the dye-pots to colors on our yarns never ceases to amaze me and causes me to ponder and consider, year after year, the fruits of the earth.

Last year the conditions were perfect for a veritable mullein explosion. No need to search it out—this stately green plant (4 to 8 feet tall) with fuzzy leaves and, at the top, small yellow flowers, was everywhere, ready to turn our yarn beautiful pea-soup greens. This year I am hoping that kota, which was sparse last season, has its turn. I am eager to watch as this wispy-leaved weed, with one very small orange-yellow flower per stem, turns my yarn deep burnt siennas, oranges, ochres, peculiar greeny beiges, golds, and pale yellows.

Our first gather of the season is the short variety of Indian paintbrush. The small and luscious red-orange flowers of this plant give us gorgeous champagne beiges. To gather short paintbrush, we kneel on the ground, which always seems appropriate to me because this pretty little plant is our harbinger, letting us know that the earth has provided for us once again.

As a yarn designer and colorist, the yarn is an end for me, a beginning for the knitter. But we are united in being hopelessly enchanted by the very simple sensation of fiber flowing through our fingers, of color flowing before our eyes. May this river of enchantment continue for us, for our children, for their children, and ever on. ∞

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