

TALE OF TWO FLORAPHILES

Australian Botany – Class 7 – Main Lesson

“And how did it go?” asked the Aboriginal Elder, his dark eyes sparkling in interest. His pretty companion cocked her curly head and searched the branches of a tall Likely Oak for an answer.

“Well I think everyone enjoyed it; they – I mean we – certainly learnt a lot, and there was a fairly impressive ‘product’ as well!”

“Product? I thought this was a Class 7 main lesson on Australian Botany; as such there should have been an academic emphasis, not one of production!” Large white teeth filled Coolamon’s generous, smiling mouth. Sometimes her mentor is the Mysteries of Nature could be a little testy. Perhaps she’d better explain.

“you see, I combined the main lesson with an afternoon 3-week block on Gardening. Here is where a lot of the theoretical ‘product’ occurred. We actually established a native plant grove at the bottom of the school, planting over an area which had been trampled by the pupils over the years. With a combination of advanced plants and seedlings brought in by the children (obtained from road edges, their own homes – and goodness knows where!), and those supplied by the school, we established our grove/woodlot.

This joined onto the bush over the fence, which leads right down to the creek – and beyond, creating a wildlife corridor. We also made a Nature Walk; where we cut a path through the bush – whew that was hard work! But my sturdy 13-year-olds loved it; we even made signs to name the major or interesting flora.

There was a ‘senses’ strand to the walk. Here people were encouraged to pick a flower, or a sprig of some native herb, and smell or taste it. There was sight testing for camouflage plants (like Mistletoe) and even hearing. At one old tree, if you pressed your ear to it you could actually hear the termites munching away inside.”

The old man stroked the silver-satin petals of a nearby Flannel Flower “How about touch? Our people have always relied a great deal on this sense when entering the Secret Garden.”

“Oh yes, one tangible experience was with a Stinging Tree – ‘Touch Gently!’ our little sign advised. Yes, the Nature Walk was a real hit; my children led the rest of the classes through it. And on the annual Barbeque, the whole school community visited.”

“How nice it would be for the children to visit their trees, say, 25 years later.” Said The Elder appreciatively “But I guess that’s how it is with the etheric plant world; its patience enhances the long-term view of the human being. With tree planting, its’ not a case of tomorrow, but of the next decade or so. This virtue of soul is linked to the quintessential nature of the plant world – innocence.

That's why I was happy to hear that you were teaching this particular unit to 13-year-olds. These children are fast losing their innocence, by the inevitability of growing towards puberty. A joyful immersion in the plant world can soften this 'fall'. They just have to forget about their warring hormones as they help plants grow.

That's why, incidentally Rudolf Steiner said of the teaching of Botany, that we don't, when referring to plant reproduction processes, 'turn the meadow into a marriage bed' – very wry! This astral (read animal) element is simply not evident in plant genetics.

And it's the same astrality which is held in abeyance when the wonderful content of the plant world is being presented to their increasingly turbulent souls. This was revealed by the Greeks – did you know Coolamon? – in their Dionysian Mysteries."

"What? I didn't teach my children that!"

"Well in essence you did;" sighed The Elder as he kicked a smoldering log back into the fire "the Australian Botany unit is part of the Science stream; the 2nd strand in fact, that of Life (feeling) Sciences. In the great Subject Zodiac – that which inspires all teaching for all time – Science, with its sense of touch, is the Cancer subject. The Subject Zodiac works almost exclusively through Rudolf Steiner's 12 senses.

Now the Greeks beheld this cosmic force, not in terms of a 'crab', but of the mighty Dionysus (the Hebrews, interestingly enough through Adam). Dionysus was God of Forests so it's very apt, in your preparation/meditation, to call on him, for science lessons at least. In Aboriginal lore, we have our own equivalent – or equivalents more like it, our spiritual life is much more diverse (and enigmatic!) than most.

So Dionysus had, as do all divine beings, two sides; that which sustains nature, and that which, sometimes to detriment to one party of another, bonds too strongly with it. It was the latter which the Romans encouraged, reducing the sublime nature spirit to that crapulous brawler, Bacchus. This was the decent from the Sun to the Moon realm.

In botany teaching, the inspiration should be largely from the innocent, *luxurious* ('of light') Sun. Indeed to calm one's own moon-astral – dark! – maelstrom, one takes a walk in a garden, in a sun-etheric environment. So tell me, what else did you do?"

Coolamon tossed her dark curls and looked inward for a moment before answering "As my knowledge of Australian plants is not as wide as it could be – often the case with the hapless class teacher, who has to teach such a manifold syllabus! I sought a lot of help.

We visited a native plant nursery for instance, where commercial – and increasingly popular – varieties were described to the children. Then we did a tour, with a well-informed ranger, of a wilderness area. His knowledge was broad too, but of the plants and trees as they exist in their natural environment.

A botanist, one specializing in Australian flora, actually came into the class and gave a talk on the evolution of our remarkable and unique plant community. He was a Steiner man, and even though he didn't use esoteric terms to the children, I could read between the lines, or phrases! He told how that have been – and are – four supersensible earth forces streaming onto Australia.

The first are those of Polaria, coming up from the *south*. These bring hardening forces; that's why so many Aussie plants are harder than their fellows on northern hemisphere continents. You know the kind of thing – hardwood, sclerphyll ('hard leaf'), hard fruits – gumnuts and the like. This also explained why the hardest expression in the south of the continent, softening as one goes north.

From the *north* come the forces of Hyperborea, a kind of 'Sun' evolution. These are weak (unlike their equivalent in the south) by the time they cross the Equator and reach our golden shores. After all, hyperborean does mean 'beyond the north'. We see its influence in the wonderful variety of leaf form. Many of our tropical trees are deciduous, the Red Cedar and Baobab being examples. Both these trees deciduate, but only briefly, and just prior to flowering in late winter."

"You're right, this Silky Oak does likewise."

"Does it? Anyway, spiritual streams from old Lemuria sweep tirelessly onto our *western* shores, they bring the forces which support 'moon' flora, in particular the Australian legumes. All the wattles are nitrogen (the moon chemical) fixing pod bearers; as it that wonderful symbol of the West, Sturt's Desert Pea. We feel so strongly connected to this western power in Australia that the wattle was chosen as our emblem for the whole country."

"And if we Aborigines had a plant emblem, it would be ours as well. After all, we trace our origins back to The West, to Lemuria."

"So we do – the 4th Creation stream comes from the *east*, in an indirect way, all the way from the 4th epoch in world evolution, Ancient Atlantis."

"Ah, our equivalent is the Rainbow Serpent".

"yes, this soggy world, Atlantis, gave rise to the ubiquitous and oft-dripping Cryptogramae ('secret seed'). These are all the spore bearers, fungi, ferns, seaweeds – the Seaweed Sea itself, the Sargasso, sits right on top of the Atlantean epicenter. Oh, and there are the mosses, algae and lichens as well. These mostly soft plants are far more prevalent on the eastern coast of Australia, and fade away westwards. West Australia has a very desiccated flora indeed."

"So what else did you do?"

"Um, we had a native plant seed-collection program, even putting our excess in little bags and selling them. The children love seeds – we had quite an attractive display in the classroom, along with our native flower arrangements. Some of those giant gumnuts from southern and western Australia are just stunning. Then so are many of the bizarre seeds from our tropical north – like those shiny beauties from the Matchbox Vine; or the little Black Bean boats!

Pat of the artistic essence of the lesson was drawing, especially arrangements like I just mentioned. A popular and colorful one was a painting of Australian (many of course are found elsewhere as well) tropical fruits. They come in the most fantastic hues and shapes, from rose-pink Wompoo berries, to dark-plum Blach Apples – oh, and of course the massed yellow fruits of the Personnia – lovely!

Another unit of work was based on bush food and bush medicine. I asked my Grandmother – she's full blood Aborigine you know – to take us for a walk in the bush. It's amazing how much knowledge our elders, er, you, still have. One child tried to pick up a bullant with his toes – and it stung him! (No surprises here!) He jumped around like a willy willy until Gramma squeezed the juice of the common Bracken Fern onto the bite – the relief was almost instant.

She showed us so many edible plants on our walk, that when we got back to school for lunch, no-one was hungry! Talk about the 'language of nature', Grandma's got a master's degree in it."

"Hmmm, I wish I could have gone along; but talking of language, did you allow the pupils to express the wonders of the plant world through The Word?"

"Oh yes, there was quite a lot of poetry writing; they particularly like one exercise based on 'plant communities'. Here they wrote in the 1st person – I am a Waratah...Moreton Bay Fig...Huon Pine...whatever. The budding poets then had to describe their 'friends', in both form and personality, those friends commonly found in association – in floral community.

This really increased the children's observational powers, as they had not only to consider the plant in isolation, but those which offer mutual support as well. One popular plant community with these children of the sub-tropics was the rainforest – palms, vines, epiphytes, canopy trees, fungi. Very imaginative some of these cameos were too, including the odd villain (often human!) as they did; he who serves his greed by decimating a particular plant species.

One was in the heathland community; there were millions of Christmas Bells growing, turning the whole swamp-scape – in December – into golden red. But then the people from the town discovered that the beautiful blooms were not only decorative in their own homes, but fetched good money at the local produce markets, or in the pubs. Within a few years, there were almost no Christmas Bells left – to the despair of the old Paper Bark, he who told the story!

Greed, ignorance and exploitation of the plant world was also addressed in some of the class discussions we had – particularly on forestry. Here we resolved to put our writing skills to – beautifully illustrated – appeals to the authorities to pursue a mixed species plantation policy; one which included a determined withdrawal from so-call 'sustainable' native forest harvest."

"And not before time!" rued The Elder as he admired a towering Rosewood on the edge of the clearing "Many years ago I used to live across the road from the sawmill (talk about noise!!); a common delivery on the timber jinkers would be a single log, a giant of over 2 meters in diameter. Today the trucks carry 20 to 30 longs in a load, not much more than beanpoles really. They have almost exterminated those great monuments of the forest, the mighty see trees – those with hold the long-term memory of our people."