



Prayers for the Earth: Woodlands Suite, No. 3, Full of Life: The Spiral Within by Kay Faye Fialkoff



Detail of tulip tree motif from *Prayers for the Earth: Woodlands Suite, No. 3, Full of Life: The Spiral Within* by Kay Faye Fialkoff

Full of Life: The Spiral Within and Morning Delight

By Kay Faye Fialkoff

The author celebrates the culmination of a 28-year artistic journey.

I began developing *Prayers for the Earth: Woodlands Suite, No. 3, Full of Life: The Spiral Within* in the middle of May 2004, while still at work embroidering *Prayers for the Earth: Meadowlands Suite, No. 3, Full of Joy: Late Summer in the Meadow*. It started on a local morning walk in my neighborhood. I couldn't help but notice a tulip tree with low-hanging branches in bloom. I was totally taken by its beauty. With easy access, I drew and photographed on-site. I made it the primary motif for the new design.

As the season progressed, rhododendrons burst into bloom. I've always enjoyed their compact clusters of flowers and big, leathery, paddle-shaped leaves. With just enough sun and shade among plantings on the grounds of a local apartment complex, I drew and photographed them, and used them as secondary motifs.

By late fall, I had developed a basic drawing for a posed black-capped chickadee, as well as for a waterfall and rock design, with only lightly sketched-in water flows, splashes, and swirls. The details would wait until time and opportunity would allow for in-depth study.

Fast-forward to spring 2016: I was ready to put needle and thread to fabric. I was appalled to discover that my neighbor's tulip tree had died. I needed to study the flowers from life. What was I to do? After all, mature trees grow to staggering heights with blooms very high up in the canopy!

Luckily, intuition guided me to take an early-morning walk in a towering tulip tree grove in Saddle River County Park's Dunkerhook Area, in Paramus, N.J. Several flowers had been knocked to the ground during an overnight rainstorm. What a find!

After carefully gathering them up, I took them home and studied their color and structure. Not knowing how long the blooms would last before the petals dropped off, I worked steadily to find the threads that would properly portray the blooms.

To study the leaves for each of the plants, I went on-site and held a Robison-Anton rayon thread card against the leaves in sun and shade to discover a basic green palette. I expanded and perfected the palette as I embroidered each leaf.

With the onset of winter, I began work on the black-capped chickadee. I used the same thread palette and stitches as I did for *Woodlands Suites, Nos. 1 and 2* (see "*Full of Life: The Forest Understory and Verdant Rhapsody*," *Needle Arts*, March 2019). By February 2017, the chickadee was finished.



Detail of black-capped chickadee from *Prayers for the Earth: Woodlands Suite, No. 3, Full of Life: The Spiral Within* by Kay Faye Fialkoff



A Robison-Anton thread card helped the author match threads to nature throughout the project.

River meditation

The river motif took a lot of planning, development, and contemplation on-site, at my drawing table, and on the embroidery itself. It was essential to visit the river and waterfall as much as possible.

On-site, I used Leonardo da Vinci's observation techniques. I beheld the rushing, pulsing, crashing, spiraling water flows in a meditative state. I learned to still the chaos before me. As I put needle and thread to silk, the stitches' forms unfolded in a stream of consciousness. By early May, this section was done.

With perfect timing, rhododendrons were flowering in my next-door neighbor's backyard. Because the flower petals would take on different forms and hues through the flowering cycle, I had to work steadfastly to stay true to my original drawing.



Detail of mulberry tree branch from *Prayers for the Earth: Woodlands Suite, No. 4, Full of Life: Morning Delight* by Kay Faye Fialkoff

My work sessions moved between my neighbor's backyard and my work space. It took 31 combinations of two threads in the needle, all within the red and purple spectrum, to embroider 48 petals.

It was July 2017 when I retrieved my design for *Prayers for the Earth: Woodlands Suite, No. 4, Full of Life: Morning Delight*, which I designed in 2005 while still working on *Meadowlands Suite, No. 3*. This would be my last embroidery for the entire series. *Morning Delight* would reflect my early-morning walks along the Saddle River, with the sun's rays low in the sky, the delicate and graceful calm of the day.

Mulberry tree motif

For the mulberry tree motif, I reviewed on-site studies I did the previous summer in a small mulberry tree grove, with luscious ripening berries along the Saddle River. With my Robison-Anton rayon thread card, I had matched threads to yield a single-thread color approximation for the leaves, twigs, and berries. My timing was good; when I visited the grove a week later, deer had stripped all the leaves and berries from the low-hanging branches.

Over the development of the mulberry tree motif, I expanded my single-thread palette to 56 thread combinations, with one to four threads in the needle. After six weeks embroidering the branches and leaves, I enjoyed the fruits of my labor by clustering French knots in delicious colors to bring the berries to life.

Flowering dogwood

The flowering dogwood design came from a low-hanging, flower-bedecked curved branch on a neighborhood tree. Cold, rainy weather prevented me from doing color studies in-situ. However, I did take some photos to which I referred when I began developing the thread palette in September.

First, I made a color study of the dogwood's bracts (the brightly colored leaves that surround the center flower cluster) using 10 colored pencils that ranged from Process Red to Mulberry. There were just four threads on the thread card that closely matched the colored pencil study.

Starting the embroidery with the partially opened bracts at the top of the branch, I combined threads from my basic palette. As I worked my way down, I found two-, three-, and four-thread combinations to create subtle variations in color.



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VIDEO DOCUMENTARY

Off the Spool: My Big Adventure with Thread is a 55-minute retrospective of the author's works on paper and fabric, featuring the masterwork series *Prayers for the Earth*. Watch it online at [YouTube.com/watch?v=YMg2l3FLgZ4](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YMg2l3FLgZ4). Courtesy of The Pine Gallery, The Maurice M. Pine Library, Fair Lawn, N.J. November-December 2018.



Using the Japanese embroidery technique of laying and couching gold thread to fill a regularly shaped area, I laid and couched multiple threads along the bracts' curves. The result was a colorful glow with a magnificent vibrancy.

Successfully embroidering the black-capped chickadee demanded greater attention to anatomy than those in the previous three *Woodlands Suites*. The bird was in full flight, revealing the underside of its right wing. I used a black-capped chickadee study skin from Princeton University, in tandem with an article on external bird anatomy. Both were good resources to analyze the underside of the chickadee's tertial wing feathers (think armpit).

Having completed embroidering the chickadee, I moved on to satin stitch the small flock of birds in flight and the Hebrew words at the top of the design (in translation, "Full of Life").

The river in motion

A calm river is a body of water in motion, nonetheless. How to communicate a calm surface in motion in stitches? Through the very cold winter and milder early spring of 2018, I walked along the river often. I let myself be there in the moment, so the river would speak to me.

Eventually I found a solution: I couched eight threads in the needle in gentle meandering curves.

After applying the embroidery techniques for the mosses and rocks that I had developed for the previous *Woodlands Suites*, the work was finished.

This entire endeavor was a marathon that took two years working 20-plus hours a week. It was an especially engaging time to work in the zone.

After 28 years, *Prayers for the Earth* was ready for a major retrospective — and a video documentary!

The *Woodlands Suites, Full of Life*, celebrate biological innovation from the time mosses appeared on the planet close to 300 million years ago to the present. It has been a blessing to bear witness to and celebrate the earth and its flora and fauna with all that I am. ■

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Detail of dogwood branch and chickadee from *Prayers for the Earth: Woodlands Suite, No. 4, Full of Life: Morning Delight* by Kay Faye Fialkoff



Detail of river from *Prayers for the Earth: Woodlands Suite, No. 4, Full of Life: Morning Delight* by Kay Faye Fialkoff

EMBROIDERY PROJECT DETAILS



Prayers for the Earth: Woodlands Suite, No. 3, Full of Life: The Spiral Within, 2004-2017. A 15" diameter design on silk fabric using Robison-Anton rayon threads with arrowhead, satin, long and short, stem, French knot, and crocheted chain stitches. One to six threads in the needle forming 256 colors.



Prayers for the Earth: Woodlands Suite, No. 4, Full of Life: Morning Delight, 2005-2018. A 15" diameter design on silk fabric using Robison-Anton rayon threads with satin, long and short, stem, French knot, couch, and crocheted chain stitches. One to eight threads in the needle forming 303 colors.

"In creating these compositions," the author says, "I followed a concept in the art of Zen, portraying nature over time and space."