



Forest Therapy

BY LEIGH MACMILLEN HAYES

To bathe in the forest is to be immersed in a grace that permeates the world, to feel an immanent power and beauty that is everywhere, whispering.” ~ M. Amos Clifford, founder of the Association of Nature and Forest Therapy Guides and Programs

When some people hear of a forest bathing walk, being immersed in water immediately comes to mind and they ask if they’ll need to take a dip in a pond or lake. Rest assured; there is no swimming involved.

Instead, forest bathing is an intentionally slow-paced walk where participants are encouraged to turn off the cacophony of thoughts racing through their brains and invited to be present in the moment while becoming immersed in their senses and aware of what the forest might be sharing.

Local Forest Therapy Guide Jeanne Christie of Windham, Maine, recently explained to me that the practice was developed by the Japanese when they tried to understand why people were getting sicker when they moved into cities. “When they researched it,” said Jeanne, “they discovered that just being in the woods is good for you. It’s good for your immune system, mental health, and cognitive ability. And so they developed a practice called shinrin-yoku, which translates roughly into ‘bathing in the forest atmosphere’ or ‘making contact and taking in the forest.’”

Added Jeanne, “I think that if we were in the woods all the time, our bodies would not lack things we were getting from just breathing in the forest, so that part of our immune system is in the forest. When you breathe in the forest air, your N.K (Natural Killer) cells, a type of white blood cell that can attack and kill unwanted cells such as viruses or tumor cells, triple in number. Those immunity cells scavenge the body for any cells that don’t look right and get rid of them. But then there’s also the mental piece, which is what the slowing down really helps with.”

While we have three types of consciousness, it’s the latter two that are the focus of forest bathing. The first type, orientation, is a fundamental function that is always on and helps us process our relations in space and time. The second type, the executive brain, involves the frontal lobes that we use all the time; this is the thinking, talking, analytical brain. The third type is the default brain that we only revert to when we find ourselves totally in the present in a non-verbal way that allows us to fully experience the world through our senses.

The key is learning how to become more fully present in that non-verbal space. Perhaps you’ve experienced it as you sat beside a brook mesmerized by the flow of the water, or watched the dancing flames in a campfire, and suddenly realized that no

organized thoughts entered your mind for a few moments.

That’s the “therapy” that forest bathing aims to offer because so many of us spend hour upon hour stuck in our executive brain and at the end of a long day discover we can no longer make even the simplest decisions like deciding what to make for dinner.

“I always tell people when we go on a walk that I am not teaching them something new,” said Jeanne. “I’m helping them remember something they already knew. It’s innate to us as a species. Our ancestors would have spent most of their time in the default brain. Other members of the forest spend time in the default brain. We’re learning that trees are sentient in ways we could never imagine. They communicate with each other. The world around us is far more complex; the idea that we are separated [from nature] is a useful but artificial way of organizing the world. We really aren’t.”

A forest bathing walk is not randomly led. During the six-month training Jeanne participated in several years ago starting with a week at Sugarloaf State Park in Sonoma, Arizona, a lot of time was spent learning a standardized sequence and how to get people into the default part of their brains.

The experience includes a simple sensory invitations from Jeanne, such as this, “We’re going to walk down the trail and the forest

is so pleased that we are here that it has created an art show. And so I invite you to wander behind me and notice all the art that has been left out for you to see.”

Language is important and the key to remember is that these are invitations. Participants may choose to do something else, like watch the clouds. Jeanne tells her

participants, “You can do the invitation I offer or something else. I’m a guide. I’m not a leader. I’m not a teacher.”

Following each invitation and there are several during the span of the walk, Jeanne uses a ceramic whistle to call everyone to a meeting point where they form a circle. From the ground, she picks up a fallen lichen

or acorn or whatever to pass around. The bearer of the item may choose to share what he/she noticed, or pass.

“I’m constantly surprised and charmed by how folks interpret the invitations,” said Jeanne. “I’m really happy when they like it and have a good time, but it’s between them and the forest. Again, I’m just a guide.”

Every forest bathing experience is different and the weather is one factor that influences the variation. In winter, Jeanne might say, “Let’s go find how cold and how warm different parts of the forest are,” or “Notice how ice and snow have formed on leaves,” or “Explore what tree branches look like without leaves.” Even the lack of color in winter is a special offering to consider.

At the end of the walk, Jeanne gathers the group for one final sharing in which she serves hot brewed tea made from something the particular trail had to offer, such as pine needles or wintergreen leaves. A toast is made to the Earth and then as participants sip their tea, they share final thoughts and slowly switch out of the default brain and back into the executive lobes.

An important consideration for any forest bathing experience, but especially fall and winter, is comfort. These slow, reflective walks involve some sitting and one cannot depend on body heat and exercise to stay warm. Snowmobile suits are highly recommended, or at least layers of clothing. Hand warmers are another option. Insulated cushions or three-legged stools are useful for sitting. And a small piece of insulation to stick between your boots and the ground or snow makes good sense.

“When I take people on walks,” said Jeanne, “they see the world through new eyes. When we’re twenty minutes in, I just watch the energy sort of relax and flatten out as they come into the present and fully into their senses. I love it because it’s this magical moment, and so just like they’ve never really seen the woods in summer, they’ve never slowed down enough in the winter. I think people are usually surprised, amazed, and deeply reflective of the world when they do slow down and begin to see and connect to everything that is around them. They usually come away wanting to do more.”

This season, consider letting the forest be your therapist and allow a guide such as Jeanne to open the door to your senses. 🌲

For more information about Jeanne’s forest bathing and other wilderness walks visit www.connecttowilderness.com

