

Forest Immersion Experience: Mother Nature Promotes Introspection and Healing

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My world seemed a blur of gray buildings and way too many faces. I was in one of those crowded, fast-paced places in life when the invitation came: Welcoming words from friends jumped through the laptop screen and beckoned me to a forest refuge. Each year, the Oregon Holistic Nurses Association holds an annual retreat at Breitenbush Hot Springs in the high forest of the Cascades. This invitation to commune with my holistic colleagues in nature couldn't have come at a better time. It was the memory of past forest immersions that lured me back to Breitenbush.

Upon arrival this year, the healing effects of the forest permeated my senses immediately. The forest was just beyond the threshold of the fall equinox, a time when the entire world gives pause. My awareness was riveted by the visual resonance of tall fir trees, the gold and reds of the turning maples, and the smell of fall's distinct aromas. I was in tune with the still silence and the whole gestalt of the breadth and depth of the landscape. Somehow, I knew that it worked together to bring me home to a healing space.

—Lynn Keegan

Not all healing environments are found within the walls of the clinical setting, or even within the familiar comforts of home. Studies have found that forest immersion or “forest bathing” has many health benefits and can lower blood pressure, enhance parasympathetic nervous activity, and even alter the levels of stress hormones in our bodies. Immersion in the forest opens our senses and activates a biological response to our natural surroundings. It allows us to experience a heightened sense of awareness and connects us to our inner guide. For many, it awakens a primal urge to exist within a natural state of being—to come home to a healing space of unity and wholeness.

How does nature affect us so profoundly? What scientific proof can explain the healing effects of the forest? Recent literature and scientific studies validate what we know intuitively to be

true – that being with intention in a forest sanctuary is healing. A recent Japanese study gathered evidence supporting the efficacy of what they term “forest bathing” as a natural therapy by investigating its physiological benefits using biological indicators in outdoor settings. Investigators made comparisons within a small group of young Japanese male adults to examine psychological and physiological responses to exposure to real forest and urban environments. Subjects participated in a three-day, two-night field experiment. Physiological responses as well

Above: Forest near Breitenbush Hotsprings taken during the Oregon Holistic Nurses Association's annual retreat. OHNA's sixth annual retreat will be held October 13-16, 2013 at Breitenbush Hotsprings Retreat and Conference Center. For more information: www.oregonholisticnurses.org

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as self-reported psychological responses to forest and urban environmental stimuli were measured. The results of each indicator were compared against each environmental stimulus.

Heart rate variability analysis indicated that compared with the urban environment, the forest environment significantly increased parasympathetic nervous activity and significantly suppressed sympathetic activity of participants. Salivary cortisol level and pulse rate decreased markedly in the forest setting compared with the urban setting. In psychological tests, forest bathing significantly increased scores of positive feelings and significantly decreased scores of negative feelings after stimuli compared with the urban stimuli. The results from this study support the concept that forest bathing has positive effects on physical and mental health, indicating that it can be effective for health promotion (Lee et al., 2011).

In an earlier Japanese study, the physiological effects of “Shinrin-yoku” (taking in the atmosphere of the forest) were examined by investigating blood pressure, pulse rate, heart rate variability (HRV), salivary cortisol concentration, and immunoglobulin A concentration in saliva. The findings in the forest area compared to the city area were:

- 1) blood pressure and pulse rate were significantly lower.
- 2) the power of the HF component of the HRV tended to be higher and LF/(LF+HF) tended to be lower.
- 3) salivary cortisol concentration was significantly lower in the forest area.

These physiological responses suggest that sympathetic nervous activity was suppressed and parasympathetic nervous activity was enhanced in the forest area, and that “Shinrin-yoku” reduced stress levels. In addition, the subjective evaluation revealed that feelings of being “comfortable,” “calm,” and “refreshed” were significantly higher in the forest area as compared to the urban area (Tsunetsugu et al., 2007).

A third and similar article reviewed previous physiological effects of Shinrin-yoku and concludes that the results gleaned from these studies will contribute to the development of a research field dedicated to forest medicine, which may be used as a strategy for preventive medicine (Park, Tsunetsugu, Kasetani, Kagawa, & Miyazaki, 2010).

A fourth and final Japanese citation discusses the fact that aromatic substances (essential oils) contained in plants often exert psychological effects ranging from sedative to excitatory actions. From antiquity to the present, essential oils derived from aromatic trees and herbs have been used for their various

medicinal effects. These olfactory sensory effects contribute to the healing essence of the forest (Sugiyama, 2007).

Awakening our Senses

So what do retreats in the forest have to do with creating healing environments? At a material level, the beauty of the forest is integrated with other facets of the forest experience to change our biochemistry. Mentally, our way of thinking slows down to a pace that a deeper part of ourselves can enjoy being one with all of Nature. Metaphorically, and at a deep sensual level, we take the time to stop and smell the forest as one would a rose.

Immersion in the forest awakens our senses to the natural world around us — sounds and sights that our ancestors lived daily. Could one of the answers to that deep feeling of homecoming lay embedded in our DNA? Do we still resonate with our Earth Mother because so many generations of our ancestors lived close to nature? Perhaps, but one thing is certain: In this setting it becomes easier to notice the little things in nature, things we generally take for granted or are otherwise too busy to see. For example, did you know that morning dew clings to blades of grass all day even though the October sun shines all day? In a relaxed forest setting, we have time to appreciate the pearly diamonds glistening from the tiny drops as we stroll casually by. We can gaze in wonder as sunbeams filter through tree branches in an explosion of dramatic light rays that playfully mingle with the landscape below.

A number of individual factors contribute to elevating our senses within the forest setting, such as freedom from technology and escape from artificial light (see below). These are but a few of the material conditions that affect our time spent in the forest and enable us to experience healing. And, on a deeper level, what about the archetypal energies that surround and permeate this

continued on page 12

Factors that Elevate our Senses During Forest Immersion

- Fresh air
- Freedom from technology
- Absence of the ever present noise of contemporary society
- Simple whole foods
- Immersion in natural hot springs
- Olfactory stimulation of forest fragrances
- Escape from artificial light

angelic elevation of Mother Earth? Author Toni Gilbert, who is known for her expertise with the archetypes of Tarot counseling, tells us that we live in a multi-dimensional world waiting to be acknowledged and experienced. She says that the mountains are a good place to make contact with the rich life that lies within, while being supported by the divine energies of the forest.

In conclusion, the bounty of benefits gleaned from a forest immersion experience is yet one more way that every culture experiences healing. Time with the natural world of rhythms, patterns, visual sensuousness, and silence brings us home to a place where cares evaporate and are replaced with a sense of oneness with all of Nature. Consider the ways and places that you too can experience healing forest therapy.

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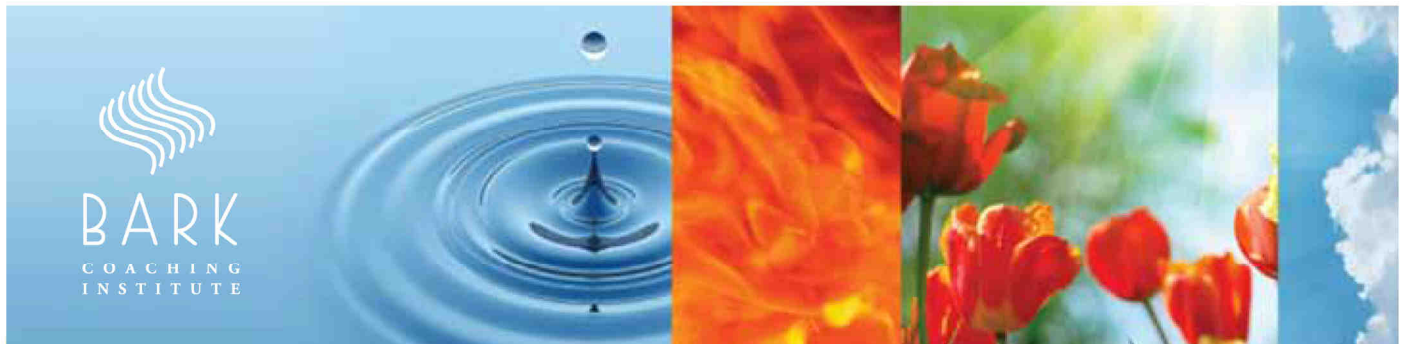
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Toni Gilbert ASN, MA, ATC is a Transpersonal Counselor with a background in holistic nursing. She is the author of two books on the use of archetypes in personal growth and healing. Her most recent book *Gaining Archetypal Vision* (2011) is a Schiffer publication. She is the founding director of the Oregon Holistic Nurses Association (OHNA) Website: www.tonigilbert.com



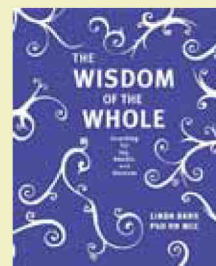
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Dialogue

I sat and listened to a tree
She had a lot to say
And as she let her leaves fall free
Her branches gave a sway-
She used no words to talk to me
Yet her message came through clear
She taught me different ways to see
And how to feel and hear-
So when I got up from her shade
I knew that all was well
For I knew of spirit I was made
And this body just a shell~

Jen Reich
Flagstaff, AZ
10.9.12

Soul Forest #1

The forest brings me to my knees
Staring at the trees in awe-
And in this space of raw beauty
I feel the forest within me-
All the bees and flowers
Rain showers on a cool day
Directing a play within my soul
My role no less or more
Than all who've come before and after-
So let me walk in laughter
Swim in song
Knowing that I do belong
To the beauty of it all-

Jen Reich
California
8.10.10

Soul Forest #2

I walk the woods most every day
It's different every time
Yet when the sun beams through the
trees
I know the term sublime-
For many stories shape a trail
Our footprints form the route
And all the forest holds the tales
Of what our journey's all about-
So when I need reminding
Of who I am and why I came
I listen to the forest
And the forest speaks my name~

Jen Reich
Flagstaff, AZ
9.20.12

Jennifer (Jen) Reich PhD, MA, RN is a poet, storyteller and nurse. She received her PhD in 2011 from the University of Arizona in the College of Nursing. Jen's passion is exploring healing through poetry and story. Her dissertation topic explored the role of story in the healing and wellbeing of professional registered nurses. She has published in several journals and book chapters and is the author of three books of poetry. She blogs daily at www.poetry-not-poverty.blogspot.com. Jen believes that poetry and the creative arts are transformative tools for healing. She aspires to help others use their creative potential to create positive change at the local and global level.