

Forest Bathing: A Digital Detox for the Soul

Time to reboot back to your factory settings.

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Photo by Mitsuo Komoriva on Upsplash

We were gently reminded that our cell phones had no use where we were going. "Please make sure they are off and stay in your pocket, or better yet, leave them behind."

This unnerved me for some reason. I thought, *dang it! What if I see or experience something that I just know would rock the world of my Instagram followers?* Ha! I shut my electrical lifeline off and jammed it into my pocket. Leave it behind? Sorry, a bit of a stretch for me. I lost this piece of myself once

and it wreaked havoc in my life for days. I zip my pocket to ensure this metal extension of me is safe and turn my full attention to our guide.

The Sacred Ritual Begins

As we meandered to the trail head, she invited us to pick up a rock, pine cone, leaf, or twig that appealed to us. We each stood awkwardly holding our new treasure. She suggested that we walk in silence and take this time to allow this vessel to hold the things flying around in our minds that we'd prefer to set aside for the duration of our time together.

My treasure was a rock that reminded me of Saturn—a ring of white knitting it into a circle. I held it in my right hand as I walked, amusingly attempting to transfer the monkeys swinging in my head into the confines of the entire planet of Saturn residing in my palm. I was trying desperately to hold back laughter at both the amount of things I wished to deposit and the mental effort I invoked to telepathically transfer this madness to a rock resembling Saturn.

It all seemed a bit ludicrous.

I spotted the holding pen for our treasures (sticks arranged in the shape of a square). As instructed, I placed my planet—ahem, my rock—which now carried all of my worries, to-do's, and the taste of unanswered questions about my future that were just moments ago sitting bitterly on my tongue. Walking away, I was still silently giggling. Not in a mocking way, but at the realization this simple exercise lightened my load considerably.

Instantaneously, I felt less scattered. The ache between my shoulders dissipated for the first time since my flight landed days ago. I'm giggling—hey, that's something. My vision expanded, allowing me to take in the vastness before me.

Was this all here just a minute ago? Seriously, I didn't even notice.

Oh my.

Opening the Senses

The six of us walked single file in silence until our leader, Denise, stopped and suggested we stand in a circle and close our eyes. She took us on a dreamy ride through our senses.

We started with our ears, listening for the wildlife around us. I heard birds and the rustle of a squirrel. "Cup your ears like a deer and turn in a circle to see how this action changes your dimension of sound."

We shifted our attention from noises close to us and radiated to those farther away. I detected planes flying in the sky above me. We stayed in silence for many minutes. Trancelike, I listened intently to... nothing. My concentration on sound didn't allow me to think about anything else.

How can this level of intensity bring such peace?

Gently, Denise moved our focus to our sense of smell. There had been a burst of spring a few days prior, but this morning we were crunching across five inches of snow. A spring storm the night before brought delight to fellow conference participants from parts of the world that never experience the sweet magic of snowfall. Their joy was contagious as we all—even those of us on the east coast who had spent the last few months shoveling—became childlike.

The earthy scent was faint. The breeze had a clean essence, a result of the night's precipitation. Perhaps this is what Downy was trying to capture in their "Clean Breeze" scent of dryer sheets. I wished I could capture this air in my water bottle so I could breathe it once I returned to my old city apartment with terrible air flow and ancient ducts.

My mind began to wander—should I renew my lease? Where would I move? I have so much stuff! Moving is so much work. Ripping my roots out of the ground, again. No, I should just renew.

(Monkeys are swinging.)

"I'm going to ask you to shift your awareness to your taste. With pursed lips, I invite you to take a sip of air."

I snapped to attention and focused on the cool thread of air that entered the straw I had formed with my lips, envisioning this cool breath reaching all the way to the area right behind my belly button. My breath left in a reverse path through this imaginary tunnel.

"Now open your mouth wide and gulp the air. Big gulps, it's all yours. Take it in."

I was overwhelmed by the abundance of air available to me. Drinking it—a new concept to me—felt delicious. We each drank from this endless fountain for several minutes.

Landing on an Unknown Planet

"In a moment I am going to ask you to open your eyes. Before I do, I would like to set the stage. You have just landed on an unknown planet. As you open the windows of your eyes, take it in as if you have never, ever seen anything like it before in all your life.

Open your eyes."

Immediately I was struck with the intensity of the colors erupting in front of me. Denise's stage setting had an effect. Like never before, I saw the vivid tones of greens and browns with crisp edges magnified by the supporting white snow and backdrop of deep blue sky scattered with puffs of clouds.

So many hues of each color, but the limited number of colors rendered the landscape magnificently simple. Green. Blue. Brown. White. There were twenty shades of green—from the neon of the lichen hanging on the trees to the deep forest green of the pine needles. Each was tweaked slightly as the sun ducked behind a cloud and then returned again, introducing a whole new kaleidoscope of color.

The trees danced slowly with the breeze. Gentle giants inviting me to walk closer, branches open wide, swaying gracefully, ready to embrace me.

Awe. In this moment, taking in this foreign planet with my human senses, I had a reverential respect for every organism around me. The majestic forest left me feeling nymph-like. A teeny part of this vast forest, I was both protector and protected.

Connected.

Exactly! I felt connected to the nature around me. I wasn't some urban creature—"dark coat, tapping thumbs on pad, pressing phone to head, settling buds into ear canals, projecting an invisible shield of music as I move through the crowd, digital companionship warmer than the bodies around me. Every soul on the street sunk within its body."

No, no. My human factory settings were being reset back to where they should be, reconnecting with nature.

The Comparison Game

How easily we become robotic in our concrete cities and skyscraper forests. Head down. Gotta get up, gotta get out. For some reason I had the Black Eyed Peas song "[Boom Boom Pow](#)" spinning in my head. What a stark contrast to what was before me. I wanted to scoop up the words and pour them into my Saturn rock.

Boom Boom Pow! Get out of my head!

I was looking at a massive tree—I believe it to be a Redwood—revealing a charred base that I could actually stand in with arms open wide. Whatever event left the scar didn't seem to stop the tree from growing. It soared healthily into the sky for at least 100 feet.

How does a tree of this size adjust to the hollowing of its core? My compare-and-contrast banter began, taking my "Boom Boom Pow" to a different place. Humans and trees are resilient. We find creative ways to grow around obstacles and challenges as we reach for the air and light that we need to survive. Even the gutting of our core can be overcome.

Hmmm.

Trees and humans also act as conduits—energetic connectors for the elements of earth, sun, water, and air. This path of contemplation left me feeling in complete alignment with this earthly paradise.

I have goosebumps retelling the introduction of my adventure. The experience landed so deep in me that I feel calm merely recollecting.

The Practice Continues

The practice didn't stop at the moment I experienced connection—it went on for another hour. During which time I was:

- Invited to wander aimlessly until I heard the "caw-caw" signaling me to return to the group
- Offered a magnifying glass which allowed me childlike exploration (my nymph self was quite happy)
- Content beneath an enormous tree, sipping tea made from pine needles gathered by our divine leader the day before (Did you know that pine needles carry three times more Vitamin C than an orange and have super immune-boosting power?)
- Moved to lie on the forest floor as it began to snow right onto my face—I saw the detail of the snowflakes and even caught a few in my open mouth and on my eyelash

I was beaming. Peaceful. Grateful.

What the Heck Was I Doing?

Kathy, for the love of Pete, where are you and what are you doing?

Legitimate and timely questions.

I was taking a bath. In the forest.

You read that correctly—I was forest bathing, and loving it.

I'd read about this phenomenon in a magazine at the conference center as I waited for my room to be ready. It fascinated me, and as luck would have it, one of my fellow conference participants, Denise, was a certified Forest Therapy guide who kindly offered to take those of us interested on a forest bathing adventure. (Deep gratitude to Denise for introducing me to this practice.)

The Ancient Wisdom Behind the Practice

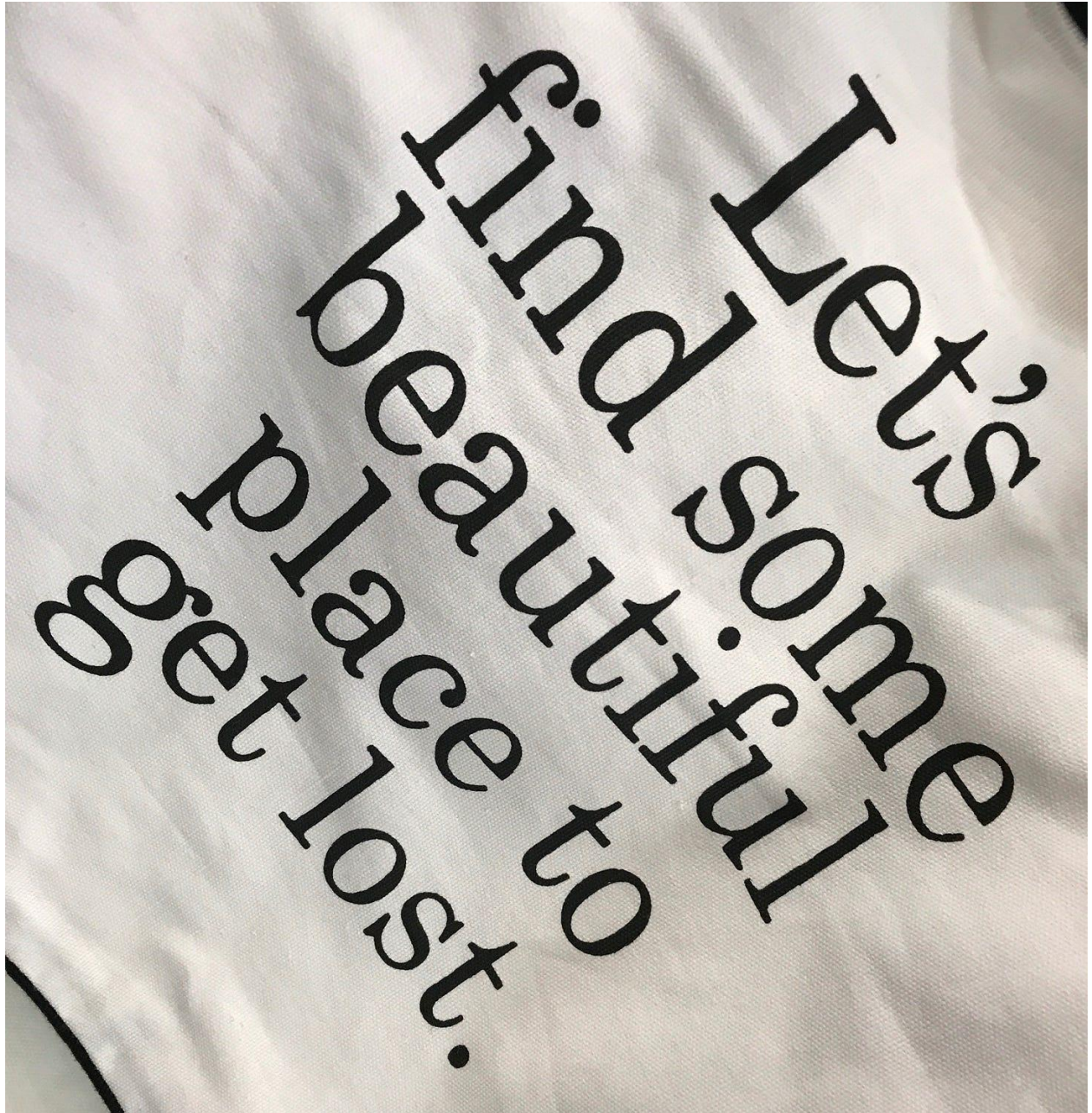
Although this practice was new to me, the ancient tradition of *shinrin-yoku*, or "forest bathing," was reintroduced in Japan in the 80s as a foundation for preventative healthcare and healing. The practice is steeped in scientific research on the health benefits of spending mindful, relaxed time under the canopy of a living, breathing forest.

The studies show that breathing in the phytoncides—essential oils emitted by plant life and trees—reduces stress, anxiety, depression, and anger while consistently showing a reduction of stress hormones. We leave the forest happier, with an overall sense of well-being and an added boost to our immune system.

Shinrin-yoku translates as "taking in the forest atmosphere." And I think it's worth noting here that it's more than a hike in the woods. For me, it was the merging of mindfulness with a hike—a guided effort to be deeply present. The invitation to open my eyes to a brand new planet brought me back to my 8-year-

old self when I truly did walk through the forest in a state of curiosity and presence.

I want to go back. Again. And again. And again.



Ready for Your Own Forest Bath?

If you're feeling all stuck up and dirty (emotionally speaking), I'd highly recommend a bath... in the forest. Here are some resources to get you started:

Find a certified forest therapy guide near you: [Association of Nature and Forest Therapy](#)

Learn more about Shinrin-yoku: [Explore the research](#) and practice of forest bathing

Need the science behind it? [Check out the physiological research on forest bathing benefits](#)

Does a forest retreat sound like heaven? There are [amazing programs](#) available worldwide

Recommended Reading

A few books have come out recently on the topic that offer science, beautiful photos, and lots of ideas:

- *Your Guide to Forest Bathing: Experience the Healing Power of Nature* by M. Amos Clifford
- *Forest Bathing: How Trees Can Help You Find Health and Happiness* by Dr. Qing Li

"That's one small step for a man, one giant leap for mankind." - Neil Armstrong

And sometimes, one small step into the forest is a giant leap for our well-being.





