

Things to Do: Forest Bathing

©2023 Marianne Bickett

First published in the *Sherwood Gazette*, May, 2023

“Many go fishing all their lives without knowing that it is not the fish they are after.”

Henry David Thoreau (1817 – 1862)

My father, who was an avid fisherman, might not have completely agreed with Thoreau’s sentiment, but the point that there are intrinsic benefits to spending time outdoors is well taken. Perhaps you’ve noticed that stepping outside for even a short walk can shift your mood and perspective. If you’ve experienced a sense of well-being and calm after time on the trail or circling about your neighborhood, then you’re in good company. Numerous studies back up your refreshed physiology with encouraging facts, such as reduced blood pressure, lower cortisol levels, and improved immune function. The bottom line is: spending time outside is good for you.

When you do have the opportunity to get in touch with nature, there is a relatively new take on an established concept called Forest Bathing that can literally take you a step further by not taking steps. A Japanese tradition called *shinrin-yoku*, which means “forest bath”, is not about a destination nor miles afoot on the trail. And even though it implies one needs to be in the forest, all that is required is a step outside your door. One critical ingredient to Forest Bathing, however, is a tree. And the more the merrier.

When I taught preschool and young children, one of the most vital aspects of learning I discovered was helping my students to fully engage their senses. This way of experiential learning helps to foster better retention and connections. So, I was delighted to read that the main component of Forest Bathing is just that: attending to seeing, hearing, smelling, touching (when appropriate), and connecting with your surroundings in a deeper and beneficial way through mindful breathing.

The idea is to find a place to be still among the trees. A wonderful aspect of Forest Bathing is that it is for everyone. Regardless of mobility issues, hearing or vision loss, or health status, you can participate in this relaxing activity because there is nothing to do. I pondered renaming this article: “Things To Do: Not Doing” because all that is needed is for you to find a comfortable spot among the trees and allow yourself to become quiet and pay attention using your senses.

Focusing on your breath, it is an easy form of meditation that allows you to let go of stress. Studies have shown that spending time amongst the trees literally bathes us in rich oxygen. Little wonder we emerge feeling renewed. In addition, our brains need time every day away from multi-tasking. Giving your brain a chance to be nurtured by the oxygen of trees and the ambience of birds, aromas, textures of the wild nurtures resilience and gratitude. You can re-enter your busy life with a “cup half full” rather than “half empty” and feel calmer as you build a sense of equanimity.

As easy as it sounds, it often can be a challenge to let go of things, to disengage from our Smartphones and busy thoughts. I'd venture to say, however, the more you forest bathe, the easier it becomes. If this process feels daunting, perhaps the awareness that the forest is a place of refuge for not just for animals, people, and trees, but a refuge for the senses is helpful to keep in mind. Walking quietly with awareness and being respectful of those wishing to find peace will create a harmonious experience for everyone.

Living in the great Northwest we are gifted with a plethora of wondrous trees that offer us a haven from our lives that are mostly detached from nature. They say two hours is a perfect amount of time to forest bathe, however, please do not let that keep you from spending whatever amount of time you can nestled up against a friendly tree. Even getting to know a tree in your neighborhood where you can spend a few minutes to pause while you take in the beauty of your surroundings is beneficial. However, without a doubt, a good forest bath in a beautiful place would be well worth the effort.

Please check out my website at www.MarianneBickett.com under the Art and Nature Tab for great resources on Forest Bathing, and some Forest Bathing activities for families.

Mindfulness Meditation Practice with Forest Bathing:

Please see on my website next to this article to download PDF, thank you!!