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On The Cover:

Thanks to all those who contributed to our inspiring covers!





A Sensory Experience

By Anne Brewer

There is something in the air. Can you feel it? Research shows that millions of people are feeling it, and so can you. This something is coming from the forest in the form of phytoncides—volatile organic compounds that contain antibacterial properties, which are released from the trees, and as it turns out, are good for us. “Forest bathing,” or Shinrin-yoku, as it is known in Japan, has become increasingly popular throughout many parts of the world. Studies have shown that people who spend more time in nature have measurable health benefits. For many of us this does not come as a surprise, but rather, a ritual.

The Adirondacks offer millions of acres of green space in which phytoncides are just waiting to heal us. It is why Saranac Lake residents Suzanne Weirich, and her partner, Helene Gibbens, became certified Nature and Forest Therapy Guides as well as NYS Licensed Hiking Guides. The two own and operate Adirondack Riverwalking, and are excited to bring the practice of Forest Bathing to the area.

Suzanne and Helene invited me to participate in a forest bathing sensory walk so I could experience firsthand what it was all about. They lead sensory walks through all seasons; these sensory experiences could be through a forest, in a river or on a lake—depending on the season and the group. What they offer is a unique guided sensory immersion experience, a different perspective on how to take in nature.

This adventure was rain or shine, and as Adirondack weather would have it, it was a chilly, rainy, late April morning when I met with the pair and three others.

We drove to a “secret” spot; despite the wet weather I was quickly taken with the beautiful location they had chosen. Suzanne guided the experience, and started by giving us some background on forest bathing and some of the health benefits—reduced levels of stress was a big one. I was ready for that. Forest bathing is not about how much distance you

cover during the walk, but rather slowing down and taking time to engage all your senses as you “bathe” in your surroundings.

Suzanne gathered us in a small group and invited us to close our eyes and tune in to our sense of sound. It can be difficult with the busy lives we all lead to take the time out to just stop and listen, but it is so important. This exercise made me think of the quote by Baba Ram Dass, “The quieter you become, the more you can hear.” This was true. I could easily hear the loud whoosh of the wind, but I could also hear droplets of water hitting a small pool behind me. That drip, drip became rhythmic, and soon was louder than the wind. For a few minutes I was only focused on those droplets and the soft splash sound behind me.

We walked farther up the trail and again gathered in a circle to discuss the next sensory invitation. Suzanne talked about movement in the forest, and focusing on something in motion. She does not offer examples, because part of the idea is for each person to experience something unique that speaks to them. I saw a lot of motion, but was mesmerized by the flutter of the remaining beech leaves that had hung onto their branches throughout the long winter. In early spring they are thin and weathered, so just a little wind makes them dance as if no one is watching. I have noticed the beech leaves on other hikes, but this was the first time I really focused on just that movement, that leafy dance.

We gathered together again and shared what movement had caught our attention. It was fascinating and fun to hear how each motion observed was unique to that individual. One person talked about how she watched the trees swaying in the wind from their very tops all the way down to the smallest movement near the ground. Another person talked about seeing things move, but also how he felt motion inside himself based on the time he took to focus on the forest.



One of the last invitations we accepted was the sense of touch. As we split from the group to wander on our own, and connect with nature by feeling it, I was already thinking of ways I could introduce this practice to the hiking groups I lead. Showing them the value of slowing down, and really letting the forest or lake or stream sink down deep into their skin. With respect for nature we touched soft squishy moss, bumpy rough bark, smooth wet rock, a blade of fresh green grass, and a tissue papery beech leaf. Each person chose something different. I liked this part of the forest bathing practice a great deal. Suzanne never suggested what we should or could look for; it happened organically for each of us. She was also careful to remind us to not to disturb or pick the nature, and to leave no trace.

While I was reflecting on this experience I was reminded of a time when I was helping guide a kayak camping trip in the Caribbean. It was a multi-day trip and one of our guests was blind. I was a bit nervous when I first learned we would be helping to guide a blind person through four days of open water paddling and camping on remote beaches. As a guide I started to think of all the potential hazards. I should have been thinking about all the possibilities.

As our group fitted their snorkel masks and fins for a remote snorkel trip I sat in the sand along the edge of the water with Sarah. She had become blind as an adult and had ridden a roller coaster of emotions over the years. However, by this point she was in a great space and was enjoying

the adventure with her daughter. As we sat there she asked me to describe what I saw. I did the best I could to paint the picture for her. She then proceeded to teach me how to really see. Her descriptions of what she was “seeing” were far more beautiful and detailed than any of the ten times I had enjoyed that same view. She tapped into all my senses and gifted me with “creating” an amazing scene of sound, touch, smell, and, yes, sight.

As we prepared to leave the forest we did one last activity, in which we found something that we felt a connection to and just focused on it. I chose a rock seat that was part of a much larger rock wall. I felt thankful to be there, and it provided me with a spot to sit and relax while watching a hawk soar above the treetops. I was definitely feeling bathed by the forest.

With each invitation Suzanne was very open about it being a choice to participate, and also offered different levels of participation depending on each individual’s comfort zone. In the end I feel like we all shared openly and honestly, in part because of the safe and open environment that Suzanne helped create. I will keep our closing ceremony a mystery for you to wonder about, but suffice to say it was the perfect way to wrap up a wonderful forest bathing experience.

If you are interested in joining Suzanne or Helene with Adirondack Riverwalking for a sensory immersion eco-trip, you can contact them at www.adirondackriverwalking.com

