

Into the woods

Forest bathing is a full immersion in nature that heals the body and cleanses the spirit

BY ANNE BOKMA

When Ben Porchuk was a boy, he had a favourite place to sit alone in the woods on his family's farm north of Toronto: a log that had fallen across a creek. "I could look down and see the fish spawning. It was so peaceful — it was my childhood 'sit spot.'"

A "sit spot" is an area in nature someone returns to time and again to temporarily escape from civilization, commune with the woods and meditate on life. It's one of the hallmarks of forest therapy, an emerging eco-spiritual trend where certified guides such as Porchuk charge about \$50 to lead slow and deliberate walks — covering perhaps half a kilometre over three hours — to help people enhance their well-being through connection with the natural world.

The guides offer instructions (referred to as "invitations") that range from exercises in experiencing the forest through all the senses — tasting an edible berry, listening for the farthest birdsong or running a finger over the veins of an oak leaf — to walking barefoot in dewy grass, having an actual conversation with a tree, lying on the ground to observe patterns in the clouds and building a "gratitude altar" with sticks and leaves. The walk ends with a tea ceremony (tea made from foraged plants) and an opportunity for participants to share their observations of the experience.

This is no ordinary walk in the park. Rather, it's a contemplative practice meant to clear the mind and uplift the soul, says Porchuk. Raised in the United Church, Porchuk —

now 46 and living in London, Ont. — considers himself a worshipper of nature. "We've lost our intimacy with the natural world, and this is a way to get that connection back," he says. No actual therapy is involved. "The guide simply opens the door. The forest is the therapist."

Turns out this kind of tree-hugging treatment really works. Forest bathing originated in 1980s Japan as a way to help stressed-out urbanites. The Japan Forest Agency has poured millions into forest bathing research to demonstrate its ability to boost the immune system, lower

blood pressure, enhance mental clarity and improve mood. The idea is catching on elsewhere: the Korea Forest Service is creating dozens of public healing forests, and the U.S. Parks Rx program encourages doctors to prescribe time in nature to improve health.

Porchuk has witnessed firsthand the powerful effects of forest bathing. He recounts the story of a 16-year-old boy with ADHD who climbed a Norway spruce on one of his forest walks a year ago. "His mom had died 10 years earlier, and when he asked for a sign from her, the tree told him to go higher. While he was swaying at the top, he received a message — she told him she was proud of him and was supporting him as much as she could. When he shared this with the group, the other kids stood up in tears and embraced him."

Similarly, Jocelyn Rasmussen, 60, a music teacher from London, Ont., says the forest therapy walk she did last spring, a year after finishing chemotherapy for ovarian cancer, "was like nothing I've ever done. It woke me up . . . to the sensuality of the physical world. It was profound." When she introduced herself to a tree, the message she received "was that I was going to live to be an old lady. It was sweet, and the feeling has stayed with me all this time."

The idea of nature as medicine is hardly new. First Nations people have promoted the healing benefits of connecting with nature for thousands of years. Nineteenth century Scottish writer Robert Louis Stevenson once wrote: "It's not so much for its beauty that the forest makes a claim upon [our] hearts, as for that subtle something, that quality of air, that emanation from old trees, that so wonderfully changes and renews a weary spirit."

Now forest therapy guides are helping a new generation find a sense of wonder — and wisdom — in the woods.

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