

## Forest Bathing: A Body, Earth, Soul and Community Connecting Practice

By: Justin Ferko, Certified ANFT Guide of Wild Spirit Paths, LLC



Greetings from the Chesapeake Bay watershed and the traditional lands of the Susquehannock people<sup>1</sup>. This is a colorful community of Blue Heron, White Egret, Red-Tailed Hawk, White-Tailed Deer, Silver Maple and more! My name is Justin Ferko (he/they). I'm a Certified Forest Bathing Guide with the [Association of Nature and Forest Therapy](#), spiritual guide, chaplain and educator. Forest Bathing led me to study herbalism with Susanna Reppert Brill at The Rosemary House in Mechanicsburg, PA, to improve my offerings for forest tea. Perhaps

it will help you in your own Earth connection as an herbalist, healer, teacher or guide in your community. I'd love to invite you to an in-person or remotely-guided walk on Zoom: <https://www.wildspiritpaths.com/events-workshops>

### What is Forest Bathing?

Well, learning from past walks that I've guided, please let me calm your fears - you don't need to wear a bathing suit to do this type of "bathing"! *Shinrin yoku*, the original Japanese term, translates into English literally as "Forest Bathing." The "bathing" portion refers to the phytoncides that trees shed to protect themselves from fungi, etc. When walking under the trees we are "bathed" in these invisible-to-us phytoncides, which boost our NK white blood cells. Forest Bathing is a mindfulness practice that can be done by people of any age or mobility in any bioregion, outside or indoors. There are guides who host walks in the desert, at the ocean, in the forest, in botanical gardens and hospitals.

As you can guess from the name, this practice originated in Japan. It sounds ancient but that's only if you think the 1980s are ancient history! In the 1980s, the Japanese economy shifted from agrarian to industrial and technological. People who once spent more time outdoors connected to the cycle of seasons were now working under harsh office lighting and experiencing high levels of stress, which impacted their blood pressure and mental health. (Does this sound familiar?) Medical professionals began to look for ways to help people improve their health given these changed work conditions. They looked to the human-nature relationship and aspects of Japanese culture that we

---

<sup>1</sup> For North America, I recommend <https://native-land.ca/> to identify the indigenous nations who have tended the land where you live and to acknowledge the complex relationship we have with place.

still see in Forest Bathing such as mindfulness practices from Buddhism, forest tea that is a nod to the Japanese tea ceremony and reverence for nature found in indigenous Shinto religion. However, the practice is open for each person and their worldview. Medical professionals in Japan today prescribe *shinrin yoku* for patients who might work 1:1 with a guide or go to *shinrin yoku* retreat centers. There, salivary amylase and blood pressure readings are taken before and after walks to help people see how the practice benefits them.

### **Why Forest Bathing?**

People come to this practice for many reasons. I came to Forest Bathing after working for five years as a Palliative Care and Trauma hospital chaplain. I experienced burnout and needed to do my own healing work which included helping others connect to aliveness and connection with Mother Earth. On the walks I guide, folks have reported coming with curiosity, love for hiking, wonder and awe, a desire for playfulness, grief at the death of a loved one, eco-grief and climate anxiety.

Benefits of Forest Bathing include a feeling of calm, focus and connection. Folks have reported “day at the beach” restfulness. Studies indicate boosted immune systems, assistance with feelings of depression or anxiety.<sup>2</sup>

Forest Bathing is a helpful grounding practice to engage before entering another creative or spiritual practice. It can be done with your dog and with children. One colleague engages folks in a memory care unit with felted animals and a felted campfire so they can forest bathe indoors.



### **So, what is a Forest Bathing walk with Wild Spirit Paths like?**

If you walk with me, we will spend time gathering as a community, perhaps beside Conodoguinet Creek, around a campfire, or in our separate spaces if we're on Zoom for a remotely guided walk. The preset time for walks can range from 1 hour to 2 ½ hours. The process is invitational. I love this! We can let our performative self relax. There is no wrong way to do this. There is no final evaluation or grade. OK - you all get an A+ if you like!

---

<sup>2</sup> See this article on Forest Bathing from the American Psychiatric Association  
<https://www.psychiatry.org/news-room/apa-blogs/forest-bathing-benefits-mental-physical?fbclid>

In the ANFT model I trained in, we use the Standard Sequence. This helps us quiet our active minds and rest our sense of vision with guided meditation and a series of invitations with ample time to explore the invitation as given or what arises for you. I develop the invitations in partnership with the land by spending time before our walk to be present to this land in this moment. Invitations will change to work with the land, weather, seasons and our human community. Each invitation is followed by time to share as a group. We end with forest tea and snacks to both honor our bodies and taste the land. This might be tea from plants foraged from the land, such as a light infusion of white pine, herbs from my garden or from The Rosemary House.



I would love to invite you on a Forest Bathing walk with me in-person or online. Until then, one way you can begin to practice Forest Bathing on your own is through Sit Spot. You might use this to get to know the land where you are or the place you forage for herbs and edible plants. This practice helps us with feelings of belonging to the land, of being at home where we live and noticing the changes in the land throughout the seasons.

## **Invitation to Sit Spot**

### **What is Sit Spot?**

Sit Spot is an individual embodied practice of awareness. Sit Spot is an invitation to relationship with the Earth that is your body and the Earth on which we live. You are invited to spend 15-20 minutes approximately 3 times per week or as able to be done at an easily accessible outdoor location. The purpose of Sit Spot is connecting to your own embodiment and the Earth community where you live. In a sense it's a practice of arriving and returning home to yourself, your bioregion and Earth.

### **Where can I do Sit Spot?**

Sit Spot can be done in a variety of places. Start with the natural areas around your home - perhaps a backyard, a planter on a balcony, a common green area, a small park nearby. Find a comfortable place to sit.

If the weather is a challenge (heat, rain, etc) try an alternative Sit Spot from inside. You might look out your window at a tree, the sky, be present with potted plants in your home.

Take good care of yourself and your own mobility and health. This is part of the embodied practice.

### **How do I prepare to do Sit Spot?**

Set aside the 15-20 minutes three times per week for yourself and your relationship with Earth.

Give yourself the opportunity to disconnect from technology and stressors. Turn off all notifications on your smartphone except for the timer feature. Some folks like meditation timer apps because they can use a singing bowl or chime to signal the end of the Sit Spot (Insight Meditation Timer is one such free app.)

### **What do I do at Sit Spot?**

Well- and this might feel a bit edgy - nothing! There is no goal or task to be completed. Showing up with the intention to be present to your body and Earth is the practice.

As you arrive at your Sit Spot bring awareness to your surroundings. Maybe focus on your breath or another practice that helps you to relax and be present.

### **What do I do after Sit Spot?**

How would you like to respond to the time and encounters you had? Perhaps through journaling, drawing, movement, gratitude practice, play, song, etc. Notice how Sit Spot practice informs your day.

### **Here are some resources for you that I find immensely helpful in my own practice of Earth-connection and Forest Bathing guiding:**

M. Amos Clifford - [Your Guide to Forest Bathing](#)

Joanna Macy and Molly Young Brown - [Coming Back to Life: The Updated Guide to the Work that Reconnects](#)

Robin Wall Kimmerer - [Braiding Sweetgrass](#)

Sebene Selassie - [You Belong](#)

Suzanne Simard - [Finding the Mother Tree](#)



Justin Ferko (he/they) is an ANFT-certified Forest Bathing guide, queer spiritual companion and chaplain. Justin facilitates connection with Earth, eco-grief and your exploration of meaning in this climate-changed world offering in-person or remotely guided Forest Bathing walks on Zoom and spiritual guiding: [justin@wildspiritpaths.com](mailto:justin@wildspiritpaths.com) and [www.wildspiritpaths.com](http://www.wildspiritpaths.com)