

10-13-17 Forest Bathing

I enter the woods, being careful to watch for poison ivy and to avoid tripping over the green briar, letting the sound of the excavator guide me to my destination.

Crr-ack! Another tree is down.

As I get closer to the excavator, following its track marks, the newly turned organic matter from the forest floor fills me with its rich comforting scent. Sweet pepper bushes are at my side and princess pines are at my feet bringing back fond memories of my childhood and how enchanted I was with them.

As I meet the other people at the site destined for perc tests, we raise our voices to be heard over the machine's hum, whir and rumble noises.

Remnants of old stone walls, covered in lichen and fallen trees serve as reminders of former hard labor by hand and oxen and the fact that this land was once cleared and used for agriculture and homes. This is mostly a young forest of maples and pines, mostly saplings and a few large pines. The oldest of the pines appears to be about seventy-five years old, based on fast growth rate of pine trees, its width, and the medium rough texture of the bark. (The deeper the texture, the older the tree.)

Gentle breezes of dry September air are welcome after the heavy humid air following the recent hurricanes. It is a no-sweat day.

Ferns are waving in the breeze, some the color of golden parchment, a reminder of the fast approaching autumn.

Sometimes neighbors stop by a perc test, out of curiosity or to complain. They forget that this land was developed previously. Current laws are being followed regarding zoning and to protect the environment. The work is permitted. If the town wants open space, there are ways to promote that. Community Preservation Act, Open Space Committee, individuals recording their own land in perpetuity as conservation land are some of the ways to achieve more open space. Some people need the money from the sale and they have the right to sell and to develop within applicable laws.

Today's perc test is for industrial use, for that is how it is zoned. The benefit of that for a small town is that will bring in much needed tax revenue. Much of the

land will remain open and wooded and that is a good thing also; while most residential areas become high maintenance lawns and lots of pavement.

Using the earth with respect and compassion and moderation, that is a good thing, too.

After discussing property lines and the hoped-for location of buildings and septic systems and while waiting for the land clearing to continue, I opened my chair. Most of the time, that chair is for holding my clipboard and water. I walked around to take some pictures of nature; something I always enjoy. Then, I could sit for a while. As soon as I sat, I realized I felt very comfortable. I felt soothed and relaxed; something I very much needed at the time. I took a piece of paper out of my clipboard and began to document what I was seeing and feeling.

That is when I realized what was happening, and why I felt so relaxed. I was bathing. No, I wasn't bathing with perc test water; I was forest bathing. I first learned of the Japanese practice of Shinrin-yoku, meaning "taking in the forest atmosphere" from my friend Gail Briggs. She is responsible for Plympton's access to the wonderful Cato's Ridge, via Churchill Park, an accomplishment achieved by the Community Preservation Act.

Forest bathing has numerous rewards including a boost to the immune system, reduced blood pressure, improved mood and better sleep. It isn't only the Japanese who knew these benefits. People like my son, Eric who hikes every weekend, and many an evening, knows the benefits.

John Muir understood it when he said,

"In every walk with nature, one receives far more than he seeks."

"Thousands of tired, nerve-shaken, over-civilized people are beginning to find out that going to the mountains is going home; that wildness is a necessity; and that mountain parks and reservations are useful not only as fountains of timber and irrigating rivers, but as fountains of life."

My friend Gail understood forest bathing. I thought of her that day when I suddenly realized I felt relaxed and more focused and took a piece of paper for joyfully jotting down some observations.

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