An Introduction to Forest Therapy with Roberta Cassidy

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Guest: Roberta Cassidy

Resources: Meet Roberta

David Lowry: 0:29
And hello, everyone. Welcome to Peaceful Life Radio. I'm David Lowry and with me today is my good friend, Don Drew. So glad to have you here today, Don, and our special guest, but first we want to tell our listeners.

Don Drew: 0:44
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David Lowry: 0:49
Don, who's our guest today and Well, I want to introduce our guest today. She's Roberta Cassidy and she's a PhD from the University of Illinois, but she's actually spent an entire rich experience as a nurse. I first met Roberta as a facilitator and guide for Innovations in Resilience out of Buffalo, Minnesota. A couple things about her. I noticed that she's a board member of something called Creative Nursing, a Journal of Values, Issues, Experience and Collaboration. I just love that name, David. It sounds like something, all of medicine needs. And she's a nature and Forest Therapy guide from the Association of Nature and Forest Therapy. And so that's what we're gonna be talking about today, Forest Therapy. But before we get started into that, Roberta, tell us more about yourself.

Roberta: 1:35
Thanks Don and David. I feel really blessed to be here today to talk about something that I absolutely love and that's Forest' Therapy, Forest Bathing. I've had a long journey, long career as, in nursing and started moving into the well being sphere then came across Forest Bathing, Forest Therapy and that has led me to where I am today doing retreats and guiding folks back to themselves, if you will.

David Lowry: 1:57
What is Forest Therapy?

Roberta: 1:59
Well, I've been working 35 years in, in nursing, primarily in hospital settings. And when COVID hit, that really changed things for me. I really made it clear what was a priority in my life. So I left my position after working with an organization for a good 20 years, as I

recognized I no longer wanted to be beholden to a paycheck at the price of my soul. So, I left in 21 and started walking the woods, four to six hours a day. I'm blessed living in Minneapolis, surrounded by many woods and many lakes. And after spending that time recovering and repairing, it provided me the opportunity to reimagine what was next for me. And I realized that whatever that was, nature had to be foundational to it. I remember a friend, a general surgeon who told me she was becoming a Forest Therapy guide a few years ago. I really didn't think much of it back at that time, and then I looked it up, and I'm like, this is it. This is it moving forward. And it certainly has provided the structure, motivation, and the source to do this work.

Don Drew: 2:58
Roberta, you and I have been together in Guatemala and in Ireland, I believe. I experienced two of your sessions, if that's the correct term. It was really a wonderful experience. But can you explain how Forest Therapy or Forest Bathing is different than just spending time in the woods?

Roberta: 3:15
Yeah. That's a great question because it's the question that everybody has when they first participate. They think I'm going to be some kind of guide who's going to point out the names of trees and flowers and other types of flora and fauna on our walk together. And it's not a hike. It's a slow walk with nature and it's about being with nature and that's how it primarily differs.

David Lowry: 3:37
So, Roberta, you're out in nature, and I'm a newbie, I've just signed up, and I don't know what I've gotten myself into exactly, but it sounds really cool, what will I be doing?

Roberta: 3:49
The first thing we're going to do is get you oriented to the space. And part of that is getting situated in our five senses including our imaginal. Relationship is an embodied experience. And the intent of having a five senses exercise to get you in that space. And once you're in that space, I then, provide you a series of invitations. It could look like go defend a tree. And treat it, if you would, like a friend. Feel it, listen to it, etc. And then, I'll call you back in 15, 20 minutes. Then we come and regroup and stand in circle and have folks offer up what they're noticing as a result of that particular invitation. And through the course of our time together, there may be a series of three, five invitations, depending on our time together. And at the end, we acknowledge, give back, the gifts that had been given to us that we received as a result of those invitations in our being with the natural world.

David Lowry: 4:50
Maybe this makes me a weird person, Roberta, but I actually believe that trees and different plants have their own unique form of intelligence and way of communicating and that actually they could communicate with us if we were open to it.

Roberta: 5:06
You are absolutely right on, and the same could be said for an insect, for a plant, for a pigeon. I mean, life, if you are present and open to it, is filled with an abundance of invitations to better understand ourselves, each other, and our interconnectedness.

Don Drew: 5:24
Yeah, I've spent a lifetime walking in nature, and one of the things I noticed when we were in Guatemala was I picked a tree, and I paid attention to it, I was probably 10 15 minutes, and I just watched this tree, and I was amazed at the number of things that I noticed that I had never noticed before.

David Lowry: 5:42
Roberta, when you see someone for maybe the first time, come into contact with something in nature, maybe it's an insect like you mentioned, or a tree, and they're almost shocked that they've received a message or communication what is that like as a leader when you see that happen

Roberta: 6:02
I love to see it, and I recognize that it has nothing to do with me, because the guide opens the door, and the Forest is the therapist. Nature is the therapist. Of course, it pleases me to see that someone has an experience that they have never had with nature before. And there's a whole spectrum David. There's folks who, nothing really resonates with them. And that's okay, too. We're all in different places in our relationship with ourselves and with the more than human world.

David Lowry: 6:27
I've spent a lot of time in nature especially in my early years. My family would go up into the mountains and stay a couple of weeks. We were right there in nature. And I would notice several different kinds of people, like you're talking about. Some really felt attracted to it, and others could hardly stand to be in it. It was like, is this all there is to do? And I remember feeling surprised by that. Why do you think people are afraid of nature?

Roberta: 6:56

I think it ultimately connects back to around the period, around the agricultural revolution, the industrial revolution in which we essentially became disconnected from poor. And subsequently man's dominance, dominion dominated. To dominate nature, right? Control the factors so that we can benefit from nature that serves our needs, materially, financially, et cetera. Unfortunately, not spiritually. We became disconnected from that piece. Think about indigenous cultures. Prior to those time periods, their experience with nature is what we're hoping to recreate, to remember, to return to today through the practice of Forest Bathing, Forest Therapy, and some of us are on that path. We're not really quite there overall just yet but I'm hopeful.

David Lowry: 7:44
So, in our program, Peaceful Life Radio, we're trying to provide some opportunities, ideas, notions for finding peace and comfort and happiness. How does this tie into personal happiness and finding more happiness within?

Roberta: 8:02
It's a great question. So, a couple of things. If one can be patient and be with a tree, for example, what one notices, probably right off is the stillness and the silence. And, if one can sit with that stillness and silence, one can discover that stillness and silence is within us as well. From my experience, that's an opening to experiencing peace. If we continue to cultivate that practice and being with any form of nature, we begin to see there is tremendous peace as a result of recognizing our similarities and our connectedness. You know, nature isn't judging us. There's no criticism going on. There's no comparison. We're just being with another being. lot of people when they do Forest Bathing, grief and sadness are probably the two primary emotions that show up initially for many people. And that experiences allows them to move through to come to a different place with that. So there are many ways to arrive at peace in simple ways. Just simply being present, attending to the moment and what is happening. Shifting our attention from our inner self to what is happening around us, noticing what's in motion and what's occurring. That is a very quick and easy way to come to peace.

David Lowry: 9:25
Roberta, you mentioned silence and stillness, which I think are prerequisites to happiness. What is it about nature that allows us to do that in your opinion as a Forest therapist.

Roberta: 9:39
It's trust. It's trust that gets established by being with another being in which there's no judgment or comparison. There's no, nothing after you. And that attention is the greatest form of reciprocity in this situation because there is no comparison, there's no judgment.

Nothing is being asked of you other than your attention. And if you can recognize how loving that generosity is at that being, for the role that trees play, for the air that we breathe, for how loving and generous the earth is, I think that really fosters trust and allows us to get to that stillness and silence and increased comfort with being with ourselves.

Don Drew: 10:26
Well, this sounds wonderful. Can you walk us through a Therapy session? And I know it has to be a little abbreviated. But if you could give the folks a feel for what that is like from the moment you, enter the Forest and go through that process.

Roberta: 10:41
Sure. It can be done a couple of ways. And one of the ways that I like to use is called a pulse method. We find a spot. Usually I'm guiding somewhere that I really haven't been before. Oftentimes it's the first time. And so I look for a spot where we could be relatively uninterrupted. Then we gather in circles and I ask folks to get comfortable. That could be lying down, standing up, ensuring that they feel comfortable because at some point I'm going to invite them to close their eyes or soften their gaze and I want to ensure that they feel stable. We do interactions, a welcome, folks just offer up whether or not they've done a session before and why they're there and what they hope to achieve. I like to have people come with no preconceived ideas but that's another story. As I mentioned in the beginning, we move into what we call the threshold of connection. And that is doing an exercise in which we drop people out of their heads and into their bodies through examining the five senses. So, we might ask them, what is the furthest sound that you can hear and what is the sound that's closest to your body? What are you smelling, right? We get them grounded in their five senses. Then, we move into the series of invitations that I mentioned earlier. And it could be find a tree. It could be sit by the water and listen to what might arise for you. Invitations are descriptive not prescriptive. I'm not there to tell somebody how they should feel, I invite people to go where you are guided. After each invitation, we regroup, and I ask them what they're noticing, and really simple as that. What are you noticing? And we hear from each individual if they choose to share. And then we move into the next invitation, we come back and regroup, and the question is, the prompt is, what are you noticing? And then at the end, We come together and we acknowledge what the experience was like. Oftentimes there's a tea ceremony in which we offer up some tea to the land, to give back because of the generous gifts that nature has given us during our time together. And then, people are on their way. And these immersive experiences can last anywhere from 90 minutes to 3 hours, ideally about 3 hours. Because the more time we spend in the invitation, the deeper the immersion, and

the deeper the potential for transformation that can occur on an individual level with greater self awareness and greater awareness of the natural world as well.

Don Drew: 13:01
Roberta, let's talk about this transformation a little bit more here. What are those conditions that make the Therapy most effective?

Roberta: 13:07
It's not a formula about what's going to work and who is it going to work on and this is the characteristics of the individual. Don, I would say that it's at work on people, even though they may not be aware of its impact on them. And I think that's true of most things we do in life, right? If you're a particular type of learner, you might have to do it six or seven times before you really get it, but it's working on you in the first time that you move through a learning experience. We're all on our own path and whether or not they're receptive in that moment consciously or unconsciously. As I said, I just opened the door as a guide in the Forest as a therapist. And they're going to be met with exactly what they need, when they need it. I have no attachment to the outcome because it's their experience. It's not about me. It's their experience with the natural world. And what might unfold for them.

Don Drew: 13:55
It is, a raising of awareness and mindfulness and communion as she says, with living beings around you. One exercise where we were in Ireland and we didn't have really a Forest. And we found ourselves turning over rocks, for instance, because there was just this wealth of all kinds of insects and so forth. And I found that to be, I mean, I would never take time, even when I'm doing walking meditation or whatever, I never took time to realize this world that exists.

Roberta: 14:22
Don, thank you that because you're absolutely right. In my experience, and I'm still very much a novice in this work because I would offer up that it's a lifelong process, I struggle with the language because we oftentimes look at and treat nature as something that's exterior and that we walk into, but rather we are already in it by virtue of the rooms that we're sitting in and the light that is upon us, the air that we're breathing, we're in it already because we're part of a larger system. I like to think of it as a, so let's say you have a nervous system and they're primarily composed of things. cells, right? And those cells are not individual actors. Rather, they have a particular function, right? Structure is function. And they all behave different groups in a way to have a functional, optimized nervous system. But there are environmental factors that come along that disrupt a cell.

But left unchecked, those group of cells can develop into something that's quite destructive, and I think about cancer cells, right? Then before you know it, you have A brain tumor because of some rogue cells and it just doesn't disrupt the nervous system, it disrupts the entire being, depending on its location. And that is the same for us in nature. We are part of something much larger. We are part of a nervous system, if you will. And so Forest Bathing, Forest Therapy is really about bringing us back into right relationship with the whole.

David Lowry: 15:57
I love what you said. We're already in it, but we not taking the time to realize that we're in it.

Don Drew: 16:03
We've lost our awareness.

David Lowry: 16:04
We've lost our awareness and we're mistreating the planet because we've lost that connection. When people go through the Forest Therapy, Roberta, as you have for these past several years, how are you different, quantitatively and maybe qualitatively as a result of spending time doing this?

Roberta: 16:21
As you're asking it, I feel a bit overwhelmed because it's been one of the most incredible experiences of my life. And that experience looks like a greater capacity to see that I am connected to something much larger. Some people find this through religion and in some ways it's a similar experience, but in that recognizing that I am loved, that the earth gives to us unconditionally. I feel less alone. I feel generally more peaceful and I'm able to be in the world but not be of it, if you will. That doesn't mean I'm passive or disconnected, but that I see that there are forces much larger, greater at work. For the most part, we can't control it. Maybe we can barely influence it. And that generally the earth moves toward homeostasis as our bodies do. And there's beauty in that and there is assurance in that and it's just helped me learn to trust the flow of life and to see especially how the rhythm of the seasons are also the rhythm of my life. And they are a source of support and validation when I am struggling because I've gotten disconnected or a little bit too small minded.

David Lowry: 17:37
One of the things I get to do every morning that I look so forward to is take a small walk in my neighborhood. I'm very fortunate to live in a neighborhood that has a nature trail in

it. And I see rabbits, squirrels, insects and creatures, and it's so, wonderful to walk through that. But as you were describing I think one of the things I've noticed, and I am certainly not as experienced as you, is there's a whole nother universe about us that we haven't been paying attention to and we go on our way totally oblivious to the fact that there's a whole nother universe at work real life around us, pretty fantastic when you think about it.

Don Drew: 18:15
Roberta, we've got listeners all over the United States how would somebody learn more about or participate in Forest Therapy? I know you're now in the Chicago area. How might they find opportunities to experience Forest Therapy?

Roberta: 18:31
I think you could easily do it as a Google Forest Bathing near me. And I think you're going to come up with a collection in your area, maybe perhaps a little bit further out if you tend to be in a little bit more of a rural area or too urban of a situation, I suppose. But yeah, I mean, there are, I think, a couple thousand certified nature and Forest Therapy guides through the Association of Nature and Forest Therapy and growing. It's an international movement as well.

Don Drew: 18:56
Very good. So do you have anything coming up soon in terms of sessions?

Roberta: 19:01
Yeah, so not Forest Bathing directly related, but I'm also certified as a guide for the work that we connect. And it's a work that was established in the 70s by Joanna Macy in response to environmental crises, a concern when the nuclear power was in proliferation at the peak. And what this work does is help folks move through and have courageous conversations around what's happening with the climate, but it's also going to be applied to the workplace. I'm and right now focusing on nurses. And what I do is bring in elements of natural world into these workshops and webinars. Again, fostering the understanding of our greater connection and that what's happening, maybe even a nursing or an education in your community is really happening at a larger extent is getting played out in the larger natural world as well, although it might look a little bit different.

Don Drew: 19:57
Well, that sounds really wonderful, Roberta. Thank you so much for being with us today, enlightening us on Forest Bathing or Forest Therapy, giving us some new ways of thinking about how we might find and bring more peace into our lives.