

An Introduction to Forest Therapy with Roberta Cassidy

Introduction and Welcome

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

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Don, who's our guest today?

Meet Our Guest: Roberta Cassidy

Our guest today is Roberta Cassidy. She has a PhD from the University of Illinois but spent an entire rich nursing experience. I first met Roberta as a facilitator and guide for Innovations in Resilience out of Buffalo, Minnesota. A couple of things about her. I noticed she's a board member of *Creative Nursing, a Journal of Values, Issues, Experience, and Collaboration*. I just love that name, David. It sounds like something all medicine needs. She's a nature and Forest Therapy guide from the Association of Nature and Forest Therapy.

Discovering Forest Therapy

So that's what we're going to be talking about today, Forest Therapy. Before we get started, Roberta, tell us more about yourself.

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 and career in nursing and started moving into the well-being sphere. Then, I came across Forest Bathing and forest Therapy, and that has led me to where I am today, doing retreats and guiding folks back to themselves, if you will.

What is Forest Therapy?

Roberta's Journey to Forest Therapy

I've been working for 35 years in nursing, primarily in hospital settings. And when COVID hit, that changed things for me. I really made it clear what a priority in my life was. 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 at 21 and started walking the woods for four to six hours daily. I'm blessed to live in Minneapolis, surrounded by many woods and lakes. And after spending that time recovering and repairing, it allowed me to reimagine what was next.

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 then, and then I looked it up, and I was like, "This is it. This is it moving forward." And it certainly has provided the structure, motivation, and source to do this work.

Roberta, you and I have been together in Guatemala and Ireland. I experienced two of your sessions if that's the correct term. It was really a wonderful experience.

What is Forest Therapy?

But can you explain how Forest Therapy or Forest Bathing differs from spending time in the woods?

Yeah, that's a great question because everybody has one when they first participate. They think I will be some guide, pointing out the names of trees, flowers, and other flora and fauna on our walk together. And it's not a hike. It's a slow walk with nature and about being with nature, and that's how it primarily differs.

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?

Experiencing Forest Therapy

The first thing we will do is get you oriented to the space. Part of that is getting situated in our five senses, including our imagination. The relationship is an embodied experience. The intent is to have a five-sensory exercise to get you in that space. Once you're in that space, I will provide you with 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 a circle and have folks offer up what they're noticing due to that particular invitation.

Depending on our time together, there may be a series of three or five invitations. In the end, we acknowledge and give back the gifts we received from those invitations to our being with the natural world.

The Healing Power of Nature

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.

You are absolutely right, 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.

Yeah, I've spent a lifetime walking in nature, and one of the things I noticed when we were in Guatemala was that I picked a tree and 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.

Roberta, when you see someone for maybe the first time, come into contact with something in nature, perhaps 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

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 with nature that they have never had before.

And there's a whole spectrum, David. There are folks who find nothing really resonates with them. And that's okay, too. We're all in different places in our relationships with ourselves and with the more-than-human world.

I've spent much time in nature, especially in my early years. My family would go to the mountains and stay for a few weeks. We were right there in nature. And I would notice several different kinds of people 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.

Connecting with Nature

Why do you think people are afraid of nature?

I think it ultimately connects back to the period around the agricultural and Industrial revolutions, in which we essentially became disconnected from the poor. Subsequently, man's dominance and dominion dominated. To dominate nature, right? Control the factors so that we can benefit from nature, which serves our needs materially, financially, etc. 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, remember, to return to today through the practice of Forest Bathing and Forest Therapy, and some of us are on that path. We're not really quite there overall just yet, but I'm hopeful.

Finding Peace Through Nature

So, in our program, Peaceful Life Radio, we're trying to provide some opportunities, ideas, and notions for finding peace, comfort, and

happiness. How does this relate to personal happiness and finding more happiness within?

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 are also within us. From my experience, that's an opening to experiencing peace. If we continue to cultivate that practice and be with any form of nature, we begin to see tremendous peace by recognizing our similarities and 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. A lot of people when they do Forest Bathing, grief and sadness are probably the two primary emotions that show up initially for many people. That experience allows them to move through and come to a different place.

So, there are many simple ways to arrive at peace. One is to simply be 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, is a very quick and easy way to come to peace.

Roberta, you mentioned silence and stillness, which I think are prerequisites to happiness. What about nature allows us to do that, in your opinion, as a Forest therapist?

It's trust. Trust is 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 or 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.

Well, this sounds wonderful.

A Typical Forest Therapy Session

Can you walk us through a Therapy session? I know it has to be a little abbreviated, but could you give the folks a feel for what that is like from the moment you enter the Forest and go through that process?

Sure. It can be done in a couple of ways. One of the ways that I like to use it is called the pulse method. We find a spot. Usually, I'm guiding somewhere that I haven't been before. Often, 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 or 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 offer up whether or not they've done a session before, why they're there, and what they hope to achieve. I like to have people come up 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. That is, we do an exercise in which we drop people out of their heads and into their bodies by examining the five senses. So, we might ask them, what is the farthest sound you can hear, and what sound 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 finding a tree. It could be sitting by the water and listening 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 they are guided. After each invitation, we regroup, and I ask them what they're noticing, and it's as simple as that. What are you noticing? And we hear from each individual if they choose to share.

Then we move into the next invitation, come back, and regroup. The question is, the prompt is, what are you noticing? Then, in the end, we came together and acknowledged the experience. Often, 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. 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 awareness of the natural world.

Transformation Through Forest Therapy

Roberta, let's discuss this transformation a bit more here. What conditions make Therapy most effective?

It's not a formula about what will work and who it will work on; these are the characteristics of the individual. Don, I would say that it's at work on people, even though they may not know 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 the first time you move through a learning experience. We're all on our own path and whether or not they're receptive at that moment consciously or unconsciously. As I said, I just opened the door as a guide in the Forest as a therapist. And they will be met with exactly what they need when needed. 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?

As she says, it is a raising of awareness, mindfulness, and communion with living beings around you. One exercise was when we were in Ireland, and we didn't have 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.

Don, thank you for that because you're absolutely right. In my experience, and I'm still very much a novice in this work I would offer up that it's a lifelong process. I struggle with the language because we often look at and treat nature as something that's exterior and that we walk into, but rather,

we are already in it by 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 in different groups to have a functional, optimized nervous system. However, there are environmental factors that come along that disrupt a cell. But left unchecked, those groups 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 the right relationship with the whole.

I love what you said. We're already in it, but we are not realizing that we're in it.

We've lost our awareness.

We've lost our awareness, and we're mistreating the planet because we've lost that connection. When people go through 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?

As you're asking, 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, I recognize that I am loved and that the earth gives to us unconditionally. I feel less alone. I feel generally more peaceful, and I can be in the world but not be of it, if you will. That doesn't mean I'm passive or disconnected, but I see that there are forces much larger and greater at work. For the most part, we can't control it. Maybe we can barely influence it. And that the earth generally 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 how the rhythm of the seasons is 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.

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

How to Get Involved

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?

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 of thousand certified nature and Forest Therapy guides through the Association of Nature and Forest Therapy and growing. It's an international movement as well.

Very good.

Upcoming Events and Conclusion

So do you have anything coming up soon in terms of sessions?

Yeah, so it's not directly related to Forest Bathing, but I'm also certified as a guide for the work we connect. It's a work established in the 70s by Joanna Macy in response to environmental crises, a concern when nuclear power was proliferation at its peak. What this work does is help folks move

through and have courageous conversations about what's happening with the climate, but it's also going to be applied to the workplace. I'm right now focusing on nurses. And I bring elements of the natural world into these workshops and webinars. Again, fostering the understanding of our greater connection and that what's happening, maybe even nursing or education in your community, is happening more significantly and is getting played out in the larger natural world as well, although it might look a little bit different.

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