

'Forest bathing:' Could it really save your health?

"For in the true nature of things, if we rightly consider, every green tree is far more glorious than if it were made of gold and silver." – Martin Luther

Today marks the summer solstice – how will you spend the longest day of the year?

Why not try "forest bathing?"

I first heard of forest bathing while on the trail of Robert Frost, venturing into the woods behind Dartmouth College Observatory to view Michael Lundeen's Frost sitting on a granite boulder, makeshift lapboard on his knee, about to pen "Mending Wall." Michael Choukas, Jr., Dartmouth College Director of Alumni Affairs Emeritus, an old family friend, led me there, and happened to mention a new book by his daughter Melanie Choukas-Bradley – *The Joy of Forest Bathing: The Mysterious Japanese Art of Shinrin-Yoku* (August, 2018).

Shinrin-Yoku translates as "forest bath." "Forest-bathing" – or a simple



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walk in the woods – might be the newest "old" idea revolutionizing health care, influencing traditional medicine in surprising ways. Somehow, I think Frost would have approved.

To find out more about the history and science of forest bathing, I recommend *Forest Bathing: How Trees Can Help You Find Health and Happiness* by Dr. Qing Li (2018), a fascinating read by one of the two most famous forest bathing scientific researchers in Japan.

Why Japan? If necessity is the mother of invention, leave the invention

of shinrin-yoku to the Japanese – an island that is two-thirds covered in forests, cohabitating with some of the most densely populated cities in the world. Tokyo houses 6,158 people per square kilometer, compared to 1,800 in New York City. Yet, Japan's forests stretch for 3,000 miles, from the subarctic Hokkaido in the north to subtropical Okinawa in the south, crossing the forested Japanese Alps in the middle.

The Japanese intrinsic cultural connection to Nature is thousands of years old. The two religions in Japan – Shinto and Buddhism – both integrate the concept of spirit with nature. Dr. Li: "In Shinto, the spirits are not separate from nature, they are in it. They are in the trees, in the rocks, in the breeze, the stream, the waterfall...everywhere in Nature." Likewise, for the Zen Buddhist, "The natural world itself is the whole book of God. ...

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Palmer Koelb, founder of Shin-Boku Nursery, Wentworth, New Hampshire, owns the largest Japanese tree nursery in North America.