

The Experience of Guiding A Single Person:

A Reflection

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July 15, 2015

The anticipation grew within me as I drove to Ragle Park. It felt like enormous glowing orb in my chest, and I didn't know whether to laugh or cry from the sensation. I was about to guide my first Nature and Forest Therapy walk, and I had no idea what to expect. Sure I had already done the training, read research on the beneficial effects of forest bathing, and scoured my hand-written notes the minutes before entering my car, but my awareness around what the experience of guiding an entire walk eluded me.

I arrived at Ragle Park thirty minutes before the scheduled meetup time in order to center my thoughts, observe the terrain, and to begin the connection with the surrounding trees. Ten individuals had told me via facebook and emails that they were planning on attending this walk, and I planned my invitations accordingly. As I sat at the designated meetup area, I pondered how I was to manage ten individuals on my first walk and how I, as a guide, could facilitate an incredible experience for them. How much time would I give for each invitation? How would I manage the fact that Ragle Park was busy with walkers, joggers, dogs, and children? Would it be 'alright' if there were vehicle sounds? What if someone needed to use the restroom in the middle of the walk? Would I ask them to hold it? All of these questions and more circulated through my quickening mind as I sat and waited. I continued to sit and wait. Sit and wait.

I looked at the time and it was eight-minutes until the appointed start-time, and not a single individual had showed. Dread filled my body as a vision of me packing up and leaving without guiding my first walk entered into my mind's eye. "It's ok, you didn't feel like guiding today anyway" my mind told me. "You have other things, better things to do today anyway. Just get up and leave. No one is coming. Just reschedule and try again another time" it continued. But my body didn't listen. Something inside of me said to continue to sit and wait, for someone

was coming. Someone who NEEDS this practice is coming, and I needed to be there to welcome them. So I waited.

Suddenly, I felt the urge to turn around and look behind me, and lo and behold someone was walking up to me. A dear friend, I'll call her Sherry for the sake of confidence, was strolling up. My heart lept and body kicked into gear to jump up and greet her with a bear hug. "Looks like I AM guiding today" my mind said. "Yes, yes you are. Let's do this" my body replied.

She seemed a little nervous and reserved. She immediately proclaimed to me that she had left her purse in her car, thinking she didn't need it, but realized she left her money in there and didn't have anything to pay me with. I laughed and told her not to worry about it. I simply was thrilled she had showed up, and offered her my gratitude for coming to experience my first walk with me. Her showing up was payment in of itself. With the glowing orb of anticipation still in my chest (only a little more extreme now that someone had showed), I led Sherry to the little grove of trees which was our beginning point, and we began what would end up being an extremely profound and healing walk together.

Like with all walks, I began with the Pleasure of Presence invitation. I realized once I began that I had completely skipped over gratitudes and explaining to Sherry *what* Forest Bathing/Shinrin Yoku exactly was, but I let the thoughts of worry pass through my mind without grasping onto them, seeing as I had already begun. The Pleasure of Presence is one invitation that I felt most nervous about. There is something about using my own voice and words to lead participants through an experience that has always been an edge for me. I always worry about whether or not I will say the 'right thing' in the 'right order', but I followed the adage "go with what is alive for *you* right now" as the guide. And this worked wonders. My body felt like it needed to move a little so I added some light stretching (with eyes closed) to get in touch with

the body, and focused on how the body felt in its space. I had an inclination to open my eyes to see whether or not Sherry was participating because I heard her shuffle and move around, but I kept my eyes closed, trusting that she was having the experience she needed. Slowly and surely I went through each sense, and slowly and surely I felt myself drop deeper and deeper into my awareness.

I ended the invitation with “when you open your eyes, look as though you are seeing for the very first time”. Both Sherry and I stood with our eyes opened, unmoving for what seemed like an eternity, when I realized “Oh yea! I’m the guide!” and turned to face her for our first council. Still feeling only half conscious from the depth of the invitation, I asked Sherry, “What did you notice?” I was not prepared for what was about to come out of her mouth. I was not expecting Sherry, an acquaintance with whom I have know for some time, but rarely spent one-on-one time with, to open up the way she did. I was pleasantly surprised.

“I noticed how fast-moving and unaware I am most of the time. My husband constantly tells me, ‘You are so intense!’ and only now, after years of hearing this as a descriptor of me, I realize that it means I am TENSE. Like, I am IN-TENSE, as though there is tension IN ME. All the time. And I thought this was normal. I thought I was being productive, but now I realize how unhealthy it is to be so wound up like this. When stretching and moving, I realize that I don’t do this enough. I am never, ever in my body; always living in my brain. And my body is *craving* for me to be inside of her. I would have liked to do about five more minutes of stretching because it felt soooo good. I also noticed the sounds around me, and how often I never hear them. I can even hear the airplanes above me! Incredible! And then, when I opened my eyes, I noticed this tree here was reaching for me. It is like nature and the forest are constantly reaching out to me, wanting me to see them and feel them, but I am always so wound up in my head- in-tense- that

I don't have room to notice them. I really need to slow down and actually begin enjoying life. That is what I noticed."

Whoa. And this was only from the first invitation. My heart swelled with pleasure as I listened to Sherry relay her experience and it was in this moment did I truly begin to understand the power of this practice.

We continued the walk with Notice What's In Motion, and I invited Sherry to go at her own pace- there was no need to be directly behind me- and that I would be setting the general pace. I invited her to notice what grabs her attention, and if she feels inclined, to stop and take a closer look. And so we began our meander through the park. We transitioned from a highly populated area, with cars, dogs, children and runners, to a tranquil wooded area which eventually opened up into a nice field. I noticed within myself that I continuously had the desire to look back and see how Sherry was doing. It was as though my mind was wanting to control her experience, and 'make it' the best it could be. I did glance back a few times to make sure I had not lost her, and each time I saw her 'lost' in her own experience- stopping to look at things closer, touching plants, gazing at the sky. Content with how things were moving along, I then focused on my own experience and set my attention to what I noticed. Synchronistically, as soon as I let go of grasping onto the idea of creating a 'perfect' experience for Sherry, a large, beautiful Red-Shouldered Hawk appeared, screaming its powerful scream, and landed on the top of one of the trees along the trail. I took this to be a timely omen of higher vision and seeing the bigger picture of the experience. The hawk was perfectly placed for where he held our second council together, and punctuated our conversation with its impressive shrieks.

Once again, Sherry's share showed me the depth in which she took the invitation, and that the natural surroundings played a perfect mirror for her. During her share, Sherry explained, "Once again I am noticing how fast paced I live my life. I never take the time to notice

the little things. I am like those little birds always swooping and diving, never taking a moment to breath. I am also like those little flies who just seem to buzz around without any purpose. Although they do have purpose, they are not graceful or methodical about it. I want to be like a butterfly: graceful and unworried about what will come next. I don't want to be like a little gnat anymore. I want to be like a butterfly. I want to notice the beauty of everything around me and to take the time to breath and just be happy with where I am in the present moment. Even after only doing this much of the walk I am feeling so much more grounded. My body and mind really needed to slow down. I like noticing the little things. I especially appreciated looking at that little redwood tree over there (points in the direction of the tree). I want to be like that tree. Happy with where I am in the moment, and not trying to be somewhere else that I am not." As she shared this with me, I noticed a beautiful smile grace her face, as though she was really, truly feeling everything she was saying. I realized I was witnessing someone going through a beautiful transformation, and that the forest and natural scenery was providing her with exactly what she needed.

The next two invitations went in the same fashion. The third invitation incorporated part of the trail that turned into concrete for just a section. The invitation was to, while walking up the little hill the asphalt encompassed, to switch off between walking on the grass and the asphalt, and to notice how your body feels. I developed this invitation because while scouting out my trail in the days prior, I noticed how different my body and legs felt walking on the asphalt versus the cushiony grass. The fourth invitation was to notice what is ALIVE right now. I chose this invitation because the grasslands of Ragle Park appear to be brown and dead in the midsummer heat, and I was curious to know what would stand out with being *alive*. During council for each of these invitations, Sherry continued to deepen in her experience. She began to relate her actions to how they affect her family, and how her choices for 'relaxation' time was

affecting her beloved dog. The asphalt vs. grass invitation illuminated to her that running her 9-year old great dane- who has hip problems was actually probably painful for her dear friend, and felt grief for having run her on concrete roads. Her dog is akin to her child (she has no human children) and only wants what best for her. Yet experiencing the difference in her joints, her feet, and the difference in feelings of 'connection' showed her that she has not been making the proper choices for her family member and proclaimed to me that it was a priority to find a more suitable running trail for her 'running buddy'. With the fourth invitation, Sherry noticed that even when something *appears* to be 'dead', it in fact has complete vitality residing within it. The fallen leaves, the brown grass, the trampled flowers, and even the feathers from a half-eaten bird all felt *alive* to her. It was only the man-made, compacted trail that didn't feel alive. Then Sherry dropped another incredible insight, one which prompted a ten minute conversation past the simple "what did you notice" council.

She explained, "For a long time I haven't felt alive. I have felt like a robot just going through the motions of life, and trying to do what I thought was right. I believed my vitality had left me and my mind continues in the rat-race and self-depreciation that only seems to diminish the little vitality I contain. But I now see that I am alive. I do have vitality. It is always in me, innate in nature and will never leave me. I just need to learn how to tap into it and to quiet my mind for long enough to find it again. I am thankful for this invitation because I see now what I once thought was dead is actually still alive and vibrant. Like when I hold this brown leaf, I can still *feel* its *aliveness*. How wonderful and amazing it is to know this now."

I piggy-backed off of her statement and asked her, "Well, what makes you feel most alive?" And this is when the conversation got deep. There is too much to write and reflect here, but in this moment I was grateful that it was only her and I on this walk because it gave me the opportunity to help her look deeper into what she was noticing. Had there been others present,

there would not have been time or space to have such an in-depth conversation after a single invitation. It was in this moment that I realized how potent a one-on-one guided walk could be.

These last two invitations were in preparation for the Sit Spot invitation, which I had allotted 30 minutes for. I wanted to make sure there was ample time for Sherry to sit with the forest that had already provided so much for her. The invitation was simple: find a spot, take a seat, and see what you notice. I told her we would be sitting for 30 minutes and that she would know the time was up when she heard me begin to play the harmonica. We parted ways and I went to find my own spot. A great oak tree called me to it and I sat beneath its branches, surrounded by thicket and blackberry bramble. I felt as though I was in a waiting room; giving space for Sherry to experience the forest on her own, in her own way.

It was an interesting experience being a guide during the sit-spot invitation because my mind was acutely aware of time. I thought about setting a timer, but I did not want the ugly interruption of the peaceful surroundings with my blaring alarm tone. So I settled with checking the time occasionally to make sure I didn't leave Sherry sitting for too long. Yet, I found myself checking the time pretty much every 8 minutes. This habitual checking made it difficult for me to drop in myself, and I felt somewhat frustrated at myself for being so neurotic about checking the time. But I went along with it, accepting the experience for what it was and accepting that I was a guide and not a participant. The forest was working its own magic within me by working alongside of me to support Sherry in her process, and I was grateful for this.

After thirty minutes, I got up, made my way back to the trail and began to lightly play my harmonica with simple and melodic tones. It took Sherry a little bit to hear the music, but eventually I saw her emerge from the forest and she was grinning from ear to ear. I thought to myself, "This is a good sign." There was a group of people already sitting in the spot I had planned for the tea ceremony, and I told Sherry that we were going to find our own little place to

sit down and reflect on the day's experience. We meandered down the trail a little ways, and found a perfect protected area to sit. It was like our own little tea-room: a much better fit than my original tea-ceremony spot. We were enclosed on almost all four sides by low-hanging branches of young oak trees, and little yellow birds were flitting about. It felt right.

I brought out my tea-ceremony supplies and began to pour our cups. In the tea I placed lavender from the medicine garden at the front of the park, almost-ripe black-berries, and redwood-tree needle tips (the young green sprouts found at the ends of the branches). The tea was a beautiful rose/purple color and the enchanting smell of lavender wafted through the air. I made a toast and expressed my gratitude for Sherry accompanying me on this walk, ultimately initiating me as a Nature and Forest Therapy Guide, and to the land of Ragle Park for holding space for us to do this work. We took a sip together, and thus began what would be an hour-long tea ceremony council.

The following dialogue is paraphrased and truncated for the purpose of this story. This tea ceremony represent the culmination of a 2.5 hour transformational process for Sherry and it was during the ceremony did the true healing capacity of a one-on-one forest therapy walk reveal itself.....

Me: Thank you Sherry once again for showing up for this walk and giving me the time and space to share this practice with you. I am very curious to know what the experience was like for you, and to hear anything you would like to share regarding this time spent together.

Sherry: Well, to begin, this is exactly what I needed. To slow down and to really notice the world around me. Beginning in August, I am starting a full-time position as a school teacher, and I realize that I have let the memories of the past year of hardships really color my experience this summer and in thinking about my new job. I realize I have been stressing myself out over the *potentials* of the future rather than being in the present moment, here and now.

This has really caused me to have a lot of anxiety and restlessness. I constantly think about “what ifs” and “who knows”, and I always go to the negative side of things. I never seem to envision a positive outcome for myself, which essentially is creating a negative experience. This experience today, especially the sit spot, gave me a clue as to how my **perspective** has been effecting my life experience. While I was in the sit spot, I was sitting at the bottom of a slight hill, looking up. I realized that from this perspective, I could see so much more of the Earth and what is happening on the ground. Normally, we do look at the ground and see the myriad of activity and life unfolding on the ground. But from where I was sitting, my perspective was different, and I could see so much. This reminded me that the perspective I had taken of my future job was limited. I was only seeing one potential. I wasn’t seeing the ground. I was seeing everything above ground and not seeing the beauty of what is actually in front of me. I realize that I have an opportunity- not a sentence- to help these children re-learn healthy habits. I get to help reshape them into pleasant human beings- rather than giving up and accepting them as rude hellions. During my sit spot I was also noticing lots of shadow play. Shadows from the trees, shadows from the ferns, shadows from the bird above. Everything has a shadow. I was living in my own shadow! I was not allowing my own light and potential to shine forth and instead was keeping myself extremely busy and intense, limiting my perspective of my life. I just want to feel whole again. Vital. I want to feel alive, and this way I am living my life is hampering that.

M: Wow. It sounds like you really received many messages from the forest today.

S: Yes. You know, I love spending time outdoors. Unstructured time. This was structured, but not in a constrictive way. It is like the tree that was reaching for me. It is like Nature has been calling me to her yet I have been so wrapped up in my head that I haven’t been able to listen to her. I am training to be an animal communicator, and I have been having a hard time working on my case studies because I am so up in my head, when really the entire

practice is about being in my body and listening intuitively to the animal for communication. It is nearly impossible to do this when you are in your head. This practice has shown me that I have literally been blocking myself from doing what I love. I need to meditate. I need to sit and be still, yet I have such a hard time with it.

M: Is this practice you feel you could do on your own as well? As a way to drop into your body and center yourself?

S: Yes. Nature is the best way to center myself, and these activities we did really helped me see this. I want to find a nicer path to take Elisa (her dog) for a run, and actually take the time to notice what is around me. I also want to be in my body more. You know, since we are here and talking about bodies, I have been thinking about going off of hormonal birth control, which I have been on for 20 years. Twenty years! I feel like I don't know my own body AT ALL. I have no idea what is it like to even be NORMAL in my body....

...it was here that Sherry and I ended up having a 45 minute conversation about the choice to go off of the pill. I choose not to input the details because I do not feel inclined to write this part of the story. However, the way the rest of the conversation unfolded was beautiful and enlightening- a woman who dreams of reconnecting to her body, the same way in which she was able to reconnect with Nature.

There were many tears shed during the tea ceremony, and the importance of the guide being able to hold space became very apparent. Sherry thanked me for my gentle demeanor, and I reminded her that I had no judgement of her life experience or what she was saying. I am simply there to listen and bear witness to her process.

Being a guide is much like being a coach. A guide and a coach is there to open doorways for individuals to choose to walk through, and what happens when they walk through them is unknown. If emotion is brought up, then we are there to simply 'hold space' and not give

advice. Nobody really wants advice unless they ask for it. We are there to be *witnesses* to an individual(s) as they go through their own healing process, and this is the beauty of being a guide/coach. We have the privilege of witnessing transformation in an individual(s).

Forest and Nature Therapy with a single individual allows the guide to dive deep into the healing process that is initiated from the forest. I believe that the extra time and attention I was able to give to Sherry allowed her to feel comfortable enough to go deep inside and actually LOOK AT what needed to be *looked at*. Just after this first walk I am convinced of the potency of this practice, and the potential to help individuals and groups alike. What could this practice do for individuals on a continuous one-on-one basis? What could this practice do for couples who desire to find love and reconnection once again in their partnership? What could this practice do for families who feel estranged and disjointed? What could this practice do for corporations who want to have a more cohesive flow among their employees? The applications are endless.

I am really grateful for how deep this experience went for Sherry on my first walk. Although I was initially disappointed that more people did not show up, I truly believe it was the perfect first walk for me as a guide. I would not have changed it at all, and it makes me very excited for my future as a guide, and the future of the practice itself.

Thank you Ragle Park- the land, the trees, the plants, the birds, the insects, the animals. Thank you for providing such special medicine to me and to Sherry. May you continue to share your medicine to those who need it. I look forward to our next encounter.

Thank you. I love you. Omitakoyasin. All my relations.