

HOW TO MAKE SENSE OF IT ALL

SHIRLEY GLEESON relates the personal experiences that have led to the setting up of an exciting new venture

I have always been deeply connected with nature, often preferring the company of trees to people. Walking amongst trees I feel most at home. I find they are far less complicated and they restore my vitality after being drained by the hectic pace of city life.

I spent most of my early life outdoors. I grew up in the midlands, with the beautiful Birr Castle Demesne on my doorstep. I would rush home from school to run through the magnificent wild flower meadows, sit by the waterfall until it splashed my face and gaze up at the majestic grey poplar, magnolia and giant redwood trees. During my adolescence, particularly in times of stress, I would hop on my bike and cycle the 50km round trip to Portumna Forest Park. Spending time in the forest was my therapy. This is where the seeds were sown for my future career.

When I left school, I studied Social Science in UCD and then Social Work in UCC. Social Work is concerned with 'person in environment', that people and their behaviour can only be understood in the context of their own surroundings. I was always more interested in how the natural environment affects the person, how certain environments such as forests can be health-promoting and restorative, and how other locations such as large sprawling housing estates with little green space can be detrimental to health. As a profession, social work is extremely stressful; every day you are dealing with some form of trauma. In my work, a recurrent theme is that people in times of great stress and trauma find solace by spending time in nature, walking by the sea, sitting on a park bench, walking in a forest.



Shirley Gleeson

In 2008, I trained as a nature guide in South Africa and in 2010 I returned to do an internship with the South African National Parks. It was during this time that I witnessed the power of nature to heal and restore people. I was based on the west coast. I would bring groups of children, from extremely disadvantaged areas who had experienced significant trauma, into the park. I would see them coming alive before my eyes. On arrival, the children would barely speak and be very withdrawn. At the end of their three days, they would be racing around, laughing, rolling in the grass and climbing trees.

Similarly, I would bring groups of older people living in nursing homes into the park. Some of these people never had exposure to the beauty of nature, having spending most of their lives living in townships (shanty towns).

One particular memory will always stay with me. A gentleman who was in his late 70s had not seen the sea for 30 years. He had no family left



and had not been out of the nursing home for over 10 years. The moment he saw the sea he ran straight for it, in his clothes, and lay down in the water and started to cry. We couldn't get him out for at least an hour. It was very difficult bringing him back to the nursing home that night.

Last year I travelled to Sonoma County in the United States and trained as a Forest Therapy Guide. Spending time among the giant and coastal redwoods was spectacular. This was the final piece of the puzzle for my forest ecotherapy work.

Forest Ecotherapy, also known as Forest Therapy in the United States and Shinrin-Yoku (Forest Bathing) in Japan, is gaining international recognition as a form of health-restoring recreation in which nature does the healing. People are encouraged to connect to their five senses through sensory connection invitations and mindfulness activities in a forest setting. A typical walk lasts about three hours

and people are introduced to the wonders, beauty and peace of the forest ecosystem. The pace is very gentle which encourages people to slow down and to come out of their heads and into their bodies. People are supported to connect with nature by listening to the rustling of the leaves and the sound of the birds, identifying and familiarising with the flora and fauna of the forest, smelling the scent of the trees and sap, witnessing the light dancing through the leaves, and touching various woodland textures such as mosses, bark, lichens, fungi, leaves and needles. The guide emphasises the interdependent and symbiotic nature of the forest. The sense of interconnectedness that people experience can be spiritual in nature. I have been privileged to have such profound moments in nature. On occasion, nature poetry is read which can enhance the depth of nature contact through the expressive arts.

After these walks, people describe having more

energy, being more relaxed and seeing the forest with fresh eyes, despite having walked in that place for years. Studies have demonstrated the physical, psychological and social health benefits of forest ecotherapy. These include lowered blood pressure, heart rate, stress reduction, better mood, reduced anxiety, improved concentration, quicker recovery from surgery and improved sleep. Natural outdoor areas and natural elements such as forests, parks, trees and gardens are known to provide opportunities to enhance public health and well-being. Forests are seen as restorative environments and play a vital role in promoting health and well-being in a stressful world. Doctors in the United States and New Zealand are now issuing Green Prescriptions for stress, advising people to spend time walking in nature.

Forest ecotherapy is not on the curriculum of most forestry schools and universities. However, it is gradually gaining recognition as

Shirley Gleeson works part time as a senior social worker in adult mental health. She is currently completing her MA in Health Promotion with NUIG with a focus on integrating nature contact into the health services. She is the only certified Forest Therapy Guide in Europe and has trained in Ecotherapy in the UK.

Diarmuid McAree is former Chief Forestry Inspector of the Forest Service, Vice-chairman of a UN/ECE/ILO Team of Specialists on Green Jobs in the Forestry Sector and a director of Crann – Trees for Ireland.

Donal O'Keeffe is a Research Psychologist working in a Dublin-based mental health service. He is currently completing his PhD on recovery in enduring mental illness.

a vital antidote to stressful living. Members of the Association of Nature and Forest Therapy Guides and Programs are currently training forest therapy guides in the United States and internationally. They will offer this training in Ireland in May 2016, which will be the first of its kind in Europe. There is great potential for the role of forests in promoting the health of the people of Ireland. Utilising forests effectively in health promotion could reduce public healthcare budgets and create new sources of income by creating green forest jobs. The Millennium Ecosystem Assessment has listed ecosystem goods and services utilised in the practice of forest ecotherapy as most important. The potential for the creation of green jobs in this multidisciplinary sector is great as is the provision of more educational jobs promoting these non-timber forest health benefits.

I recently set up Nature Health and Wellbeing Ireland, to offer Forest Ecotherapy Walks to the public. This project is supported by Diarmuid McAree, Forest Consultant and Advisor, and Donal O'Keeffe, Research Psychologist.

Diarmuid and I are both members of Crann – Trees for Ireland. We have run a number of forest ecotherapy walks, funded by Dun Laoghaire Rathdown County Council for the Biodiversity Explore Nature series. These walks were held in September in Barnaslingan Wood, Co Dublin, and were well attended and well received. I recently presented on the health benefits of nature contact at the annual Irish Institute of Public Health Conference in Croke Park. Last October Diarmuid addressed the UNECE/FAO Silva 2015 Conference in Switzerland on the benefits and opportunities associated with Forest Ecotherapy.

More information:

www.naturehealthandwellbeing.ie

