Forest Bathing in a Working Forest

By Ann Stinson

Spending time among the trees on the border of Gemini Grove and Snag Patch. Photo by Ben Adams.

My ninety-one year old dad works in the woods every day and without fail comes in and exclaims that today's "green infusion" was the best yet. I'm sure he is not the only steward of the land who feels rejuvenated and refreshed after working in the forest. In the last few decades there has been research into the health benefits of being in nature, particularly forests: reduced blood pressure, decreased stress, and improved sleep. The public is becoming more aware of the benefits. In the mid 1980s, the director of the Japanese Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries coined a term shinrin yoku, or forest bathing, to describe the experience of being among trees for the purpose of increasing mental and physical well being. Over time, forest bathing has exploded in popularity around the globe. In the United States, The Association of Nature and Forest Therapy hosts trainings for people interested in becoming certified therapists. Dr Qing Li's 2012 book, Forest Bathing: How Trees Can Help You Find Health and Happiness has sold tens of thousands of copies, and there are designated Forest Bathing Trails in forests around the world.

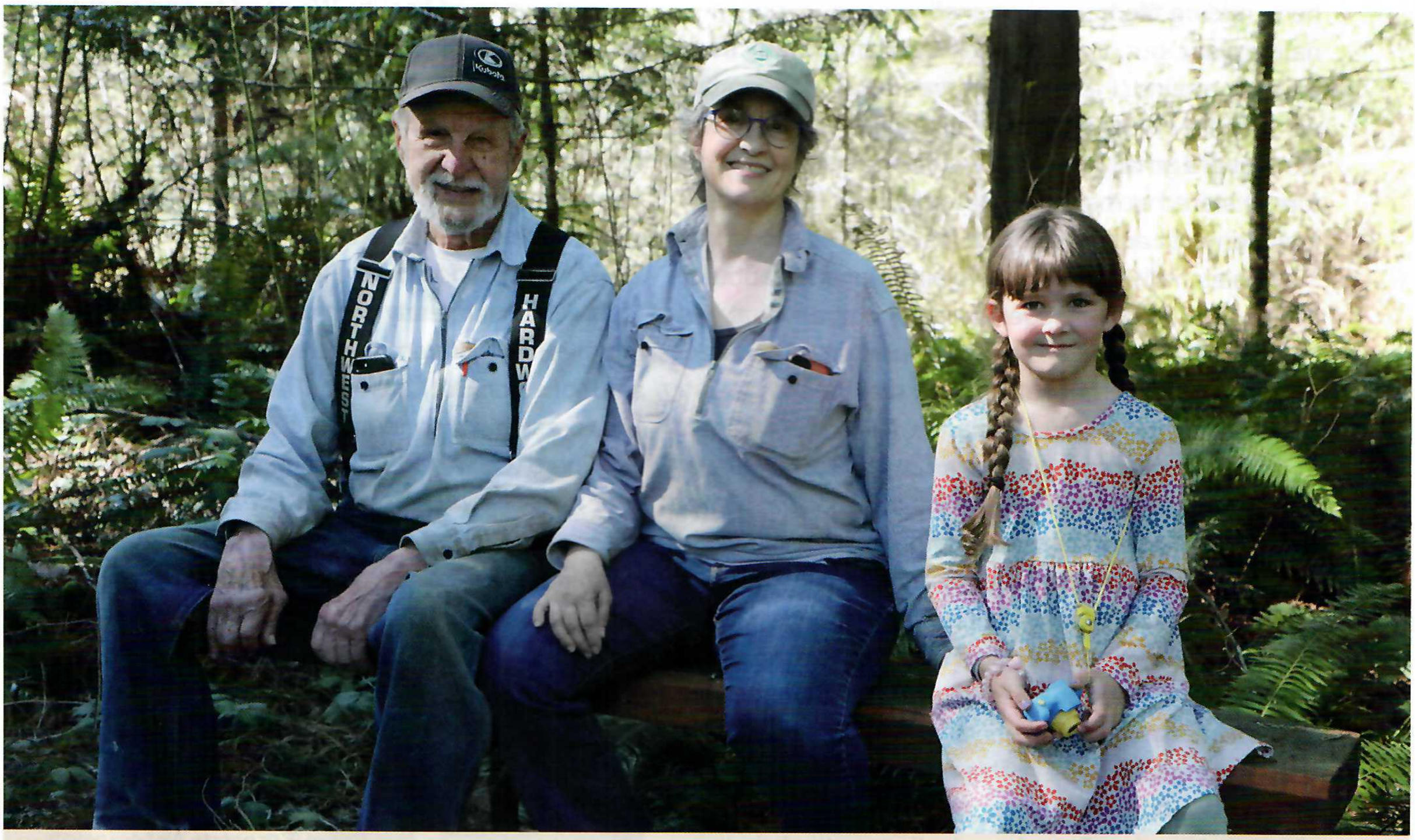
But when the general public think of forests, especially a forest for bathing, they imagine an old growth forest, or at least a mature forest set aside as a park. They do not consider forests that are stewarded for timber as well as clean air, water, wildlife and recreation. I think small forest landowners should change that. I want the forests that we tend, working forests whose wood we all receive and use, to become part of the medicine, the cure for our screen-filled world. It might be an uphill battle to help people see our woods, with some sections thicketed with gangly young trees, some recently harvested, as a place where forest bathing could occur. A couple years ago, a writer for *The New Yorker* wrote "in terms of biodiversity, killing forests and planting tree farms isn't much help; a forest is an ecosystem, and a tree farm is a monoculture." I wrote a letter to the editor arguing among other things that if cougars, hawks, and tree frogs make their home in a planted forest, humans too should see that as a true forest. I would like to see designated Forest Bathing Trails in our working

forests as well. I'm going to imagine what that might look like in the following paragraphs. I'll use my family's 230 acre forest on a ridge above the Cowlitz River in Southwest Washington as an example.

We'll start today's forest bathing experience here on the wetland trail, a meandering path through 125 year old Western red cedar, Douglas-fir, and a scattering of big leaf maple and alder. This is what most people think of when they imagine a Pacific Northwest forest: thick trunked conifers soaring to the sky, mosses and ferns, a salamander or newt, and perhaps a pileated woodpecker chipping away at a dying tree. We call this area Gemini Grove–both my sister-in-law, Lou Jean, and I are Geminis and we've decided to keep these six acres off the harvest plan. We too love the serenity and spiritual weight of the big trees. On the left of the trail is an old-growth Douglas-fir stump with its springboard notch still visible. A little further on you can see the wetland. It dries up in the summer, but it has recently recharged with the winter rains and it is flowing slowly. Deer drink here. If you look closely you can see their footprints in the mud. Skunk cabbage shoots show their light green tips and camas bulbs are getting ready to burst through the mud. Camas bulbs are a traditional food of the Cowlitz Tribe, the first stewards of this land, and they just finished their fourth year of planting 10,000 bulbs just a few miles west of here. A myth from the Lower Elwha S'Klallam tribe explains the origins of camas: the first bulbs rose from the body of a grandmother who sank into the ground while weeping for her starving children. If you look up, you'll see catkins starting to drop from the tips of Oregon ash branches. Cedar waxwings and chickadees come to feast on them.

Just ahead is a massive cedar tree thrown in the most recent windstorm. Western red cedar are struggling. As our summers become longer, hotter, and drier, many have been dying. Look up over at this one–you can see the brown needle-less top. It will continue to lose its greenery and eventually die altogether. This wind-thrown cedar was healthy, but the ground had been saturated with heavy rain and its roots couldn't withstand the gusts. Let's climb on and walk gradually along its length, getting a sense of its might. At its top, we'll be in another stand of our forest called Two Snag.

Over there are the two snags we left during the harvest–we often see red tailed hawks, ravens, and sometimes an osprey perched on the tops. All around us are six year old trees, one of the youngest forests on this ridge. We logged in 2018 and



On the bench are Doug Stinson, Ann Stinson, and Azalea Adams (my cousin's daughter). Photo by Ben Adams

replanted with three species; Douglas-fir, Western red cedar, and Willamette Valley Ponderosa Pine. We're experimenting with the pine–it is resistant to a fungus that infects the Douglas-fir, a fungus that has always been in the soil, but is killing more trees as they get stressed by heat and lack of rain. Reach out and touch the tree closest to you. Most of them are now taller than us, especially the ones here that get afternoon shade from Gemini Grove. Can your hand circle the stem? Does it bend easily? Can you shake a raindrop into your mouth? Go wander around for ten minutes, find a stump to sit on. Count its rings and feel your mortality, look at the ground and notice the entrance to a turret spider's nest, or perhaps you'll see a rabbit bounding out of sight. Note the other species that have planted themselves here: Alder, big leaf maple, osoberry.

Next we'll walk down the gravel road to a twenty year old stand, again a mixed forest of pine, fir, and cedar. These trees have just started getting out of their teenage thicket stage, my least favorite stage. When conifers are between twelve and twenty in the Pacific Northwest, it is hard to even move between them. Their branches tangle with the undergrowth and it can seem impenetrable. But some animals find safety in this. A few years ago, I was working here, ridding the trees of strangling honeysuckle, a native plant, but one that will kill or damage any tree it wraps around. I finished one tree and moved to the next. There on the branch of a Douglas-fir sat a saw-whet owl, a small brown and white feathered creature. It stared at me, motionless. I stared back for a few moments and decided to leave its tree alone.

This stand will be commercially thinned in about five years. We'll hire loggers from a company that has been doing this work for three generations. They'll come in with their cut-to-length harvester and take out the smallest or defective trees, leaving the largest to grow with less competition for sunlight, moisture, and nutrients from the soil. We'll leave those to grow for another forty or fifty years before a final harvest. Why don't each of you go find a tree that you think will be chosen to keep growing. What is happening around that tree? What animal is using it for what purpose? Are there chanterelle mushrooms or salal below? Imagine you can see and hear all the CO_2 it is absorbing from the air. This is the photosynthetic magic of wood being produced. Compare this to the clang and smoke of steel production, or the grinding and dust of cement being made.

Let's walk back through Gemini Grove to get to our newest clear cut. Right along the edge of the grove is one of my favorite spots. This moss hanging from the big leaf maple is called "Old Man's Beard" and makes great crowns for children. Last summer this slope had the best trove of trailing blackberries–they like a mix of shade and sun that Two Snag and Gemini Grove provide. They were my brother's favorite. When he died, he had blackberry scratches on his hands. He made pies. I make a much simpler berry buckle.

Here we are, at our youngest forest. Can you see the trees? They are just starting to stretch out above the ferns and fallen-over foxglove stalks. It's their third growing season here after getting their start in a nursery. We've come through and mulched most of these seedlings with newspaper, cardboard, or old burlap bags. We did that in the spring when the trees were really hard to find in all the new growth. It was like an Easter egg hunt, with "I found one!" shouted between me, Dad, and Lou Jean.

Many people ask, "Why do you clear-cut, can't you just thin and maintain a variable age forest?" Douglas-fir and pine need full sunlight to grow. In the shade, they are spindly–Dad calls them noodle trees–and don't thrive. I think the main objection to clear-cuts is aesthetic. We need to change our understanding of beauty. We need to find beauty in destruction, not just for the potential it creates, but the sensory pleasure of the chaos itself. Right after the harvest, I brought my four year old goddaughter to stomp in some puddles here. As we left the older trees, she stopped short and said, "it's a city of sticks!" We used sticks and mud to build a house for a newt and found soft mullein leaves to line the floor.

I wish it were early summer. Last year in June we counted fifty different flowers blooming here. It was a riot of color. But, there is always something to see. The forest is never dormant.

Where would you make a forest bathing trail in your forest? Who can you invite? Let's share the healing benefits of our trees with others. And in the meantime help people see our working forests as true forests.

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