At the age of 14, inspired by Jean Craighead George’s novel, *My Side of the Mountain*, I made a “four-poster” bed of sticks and brush that actually supported my body twelve inches off the ground. I sheepishly felt too old to be playing in the woods. In retrospect it seems like a reasonable undertaking: build a bed among pines, lie back, and sense the world’s spin through needled boughs. I understand now what I sensed intuitively as a teen—time spent in nature or in a garden is a requirement for my well-being.

Reports and ongoing research measure the benefits of interacting with trees and nature. In a study to document the effect of *shinrin-yoku*, or the act of taking in the atmosphere of the forest, subjects were exposed to forest and urban settings in Japan and physiological effects were measured. As might be expected, sitting in and observing a forest produced calmer, more refreshed feelings than sitting in a city.1

Another study measured cognitive benefits of interacting with nature. Research showed that when testing memory, orienting, and executive attention, performance improved significantly after participants walked in an arboretum, but not after walking along an urban streetscape. The study explains that nature “…modestly grabs attention in a bottom-up fashion, allowing top-down directed-attention abilities a chance to replenish.” In contrast, urban environments “…are filled with stimulation that captures attention dramatically and additionally requires directed attention (e.g., to avoid being hit by a car), making them less restorative.”2

Studies documenting the physiological and psychological effect of trees and nature on humans show improvement to attention deficit hyperactivity and cognitive control; reduction in stress, crime, and domestic violence; shorter stays in hospitals, as well as increased feelings of safety.

Trees also influence economics. Workers who have views of nature are healthier, reporting fewer absences, and are more satisfied with work and life. Consider this with regard to productivity and healthcare costs. Perhaps we should include trees in the ongoing healthcare debate: “plant two trees and call me in the morning” might be more effective than legislation. In terms of retail studies and purchasing patterns, people who were shown images of shopping areas preferred those with trees, especially those with orderly canopies. They associated higher product value and better merchant interaction with those images that included trees, even indicating a willingness to pay higher prices. Is it possible that trees could initiate an economic turn-around?

Defining trees in terms of value to humans doesn’t quite capture their greatness—could we call it their souls? Is it possible that research is helping us to comprehend the soul of trees—their immaterial essence? Could it be said that a tree’s effect of increasing cognitive control is an actuating cause? This may be a consideration that scientist Diana Beresford-Kroeger maintains among the trees in her Ontario garden. Botany, chemistry, medicine, and lore inform her questions and lead her to intriguing conclusions. Skeptics may dismiss her; others may say that she’s in the vanguard. Decide for yourself at her lecture on May 20. In the meantime, pause, even for a brief moment, amid the trees.

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