



*Director's Corner*

## **Nature Bathing in the Big City**

By Adina Kalet, MD, MPH

*Despite the distressing local and global news and the many worries, Dr. Kalet relearns the importance of getting up early and taking a walk....*

*When we try to pick out anything by itself, we find it hitched to everything else in the universe.*

— John Muir, *My First Summer in the Sierra*

I am a night owl except when I travel east. Then, for a few days, I am transformed into a morning lark. I am at my family's home in NYC for the holiday. This morning, still on Milwaukee time, I am up with the sun and out the door. A pair of lilac hyacinths, probably the result of last Easter's bulbs, have appeared in our neighbor's yard.

Sylvester, our gorgeous 80-pound mutt, and I walk the couple of tree-lined blocks up the hill to Prospect Park, where dogs are allowed to romp off-leash until 9 AM. Local children, guided by adults from the botanical gardens, have attached laminated cards to some of the trees with pipe cleaners. Each label has the tree's common name (Black Locust, Pin Oak, Green Ash, Little Leaf Linden, Northern Red Oak, London Planetree, Tulip Poplar, etc.), its genus and species (*Ginkgo biloba*, *Cornus florida*, *Acer griseum*, and *Castanea dentata*), a few interesting facts, and an accompanying crayon drawing. While Sylvester vigorously sniffs the sidewalk, I read the signs and appreciate the early spring flowers. A few snowdrops remain perky, although the purple, white, and yellow crocuses have dropped their petals already. The hellebores appear restrained and subtle alongside the raucous, crowded bunches of daffodils. This morning, we note the jackhammer-like tap-tap-tap of a local woodpecker, probably Red-Bellied or Downy, echoing in the urban canyon of five-story apartment buildings. Despite stopping to look for a minute, we can't catch sight of the bird but, nonetheless, we know it is there. Sylvester urges me on.

We enter the park and walk along the path toward the meadow. A few blue snow flowers remain on the woodland floor. The birds stay high in the trees; a grey squirrel taunts us from the forest floor before ascending the nearest trunk. As we approach the inner loop road other

larks like me—bicyclists and runners mostly—slow, allowing us to cross. I unhook Sylvester’s leash and he tears off to join the dog party. There are hundreds of canines frolicking. None of the dog owners is in a rush; very few people stare at their phones. The world is bursting with barking and bird songs. The early morning is peaceful.

For the briefest moment, I notice what I am *not* thinking about. I am not grumbling about the inevitable trash littering the Brooklyn sidewalks. I am not attending to the occasional siren or traffic helicopter. I am not wondering about the Wisconsin Supreme Court election or the former president returning to town to be arraigned (violence is anticipated). I don’t dwell on the Nashville school shooting (three nine-year-old children dead at the hand of an adult with known mental health challenges and multiple automatic weapons) or last weekend’s deadly tornados (climate change?). I don’t consider whether the recent assassination might worsen the war in Ukraine, now entering its second year. Nor do I worry about how my friends, colleagues, and relatives overseas are faring despite the unprecedented political upheaval their country is experiencing over judicial independence.

As Sylvester and his compadres mix WWE-style moves with madcap races, I don’t worry about the health and happiness of my kids, my upcoming writing deadline or, for that matter, the preparations for the Seder we will host tomorrow for twenty people. I stay in the present, in awe, naming by sight and sound the birds, trees, and flowers.

### **Nature Bathing is healthful**

In 1982, the Japanese Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry, and Fisheries coined the term *shinrin-yoku*, or “[forest bathing](#),” referring to the act of living in the present moment while immersing the senses in the sights and sounds of a natural setting. No special equipment or hiking are needed. [Studies](#) have demonstrated that as little as ten minutes per day outdoors increases well-being and decreased stress. Being “in the moment” and immersing ourselves in natural environments lowers cortisol levels, pulse rate, and blood pressure. It promotes greater parasympathetic and decreased sympathetic activity.

Undeniably, this mindfulness practice is nothing new, but we need to be reminded to slow down and spend time in and with nature. This practice is, no doubt, an antidote to burnout and a way to remember the importance of inner-city parks and our nation’s forests. Why do we so easily forget?

### **Better work habits**

Since early in the pandemic, I have suggested one-on-one outside “walk and talk” meetings as alternatives to Zoom™. This literally kept me sane during the most isolating of times. On video calls these days, I pay attention to the spaces around people, often noticing pets (“Was that a cat’s tail?”) and plants (“How did you get your orchid to bloom in winter?”). I take brief

breaks to appreciate the falling snow or to fuss over the house plants, exclaiming over a new shoot, dry soil, or wet feet (yes, I occasionally talk to my plants).

These activities have become predictably salubrious. And yet I can easily forget to do them; I might sleep in, sit immobile for many hours, distract myself with podcasts or “death scrolling” news reports, get emotionally hijacked by meaningless, minor frustrations, or forget to appreciate the world around me. Like many people, I do beat myself up for lack of self-discipline until I remember the advice of meditation teachers: “Gently bring your focus back to your breath and begin again.”

Sylvester and I pause to greet a woman peering at the treetop above us through binoculars. She points to a pair of Cooper’s Hawks sitting majestically side by side, surveying the dog party. What do such fierce birds think about? Admittedly, I don’t know much about the inner lives or capabilities of urban birds-of-prey, but I assume they know better than to attack a pet while their human is nearby watching. At least, I hope.

### **The walk home**

It’s time to head back and face the day. Sylvester sits obediently as I clip his lead back onto his collar. Our foray to the park has brought me joy. I feel calm and rejuvenated. As conservationist [Sigurd Olson](#) noted, “Joys come from simple and natural things; mist over meadows, sunlight on leaves, the path of the moon over water.” That is true today.

The stresses and responsibilities of my life will resurface when we get back home, but the moments of joy we experience here in the park make me eager to return once again. I believe Sylvester agrees.

I wish a peaceful, community-infused Ramadan, Easter, or Passover to those who observe these faith traditions. For us all, I recommend rising early to “nature bathe” whenever we can.

### *For further reading:*

Park BJ, Tsunetsugu Y, Kasetani T, Kagawa T, Miyazaki Y. The physiological effects of Shinrin-yoku (taking in the forest atmosphere or forest bathing): Evidence from field experiments in 24 forests across Japan. *Environ Health Prev Med*. 2010 Jan;15(1):18-26.

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<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC2793346/>

Genevive R. Meredith et al., “Minimum time dose in nature to positively impact the mental health of college-aged students, and how to measure it: a scoping review,” *Frontiers in Psychology*, June 13, 2019. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2019.02942>

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