



The soul of nature



Jackee Holder finds personal and professional inspiration in the natural world, and shows us how we can all bring nature into our work with our clients.

Pilgrimage to a tree

I once made daily pilgrimages to a sprawling evergreen oak tree in my local park. My regular morning run was followed by my appointment, sheltered under the leafy green canopy of the tree, performing the 'earth body' prayers I learnt in seminary training as an interfaith minister. This somatic form of prayer, using my body, felt comforting and strangely reassuring. Very quickly, I came to cherish what felt to me to be my own sacred space, in very much the same way as Alice Walker described her relationship with nature: 'I understood at a very early age that in nature I felt everything I should feel in a church but never did!'¹

Our lived experiences cannot help but shape who we are as coaches. Quite soon after this particular tree encounter, not only did I find my way to the other side of a turbulent period in my life, but I began organically bringing the lessons and insights I was learning through my immersion in nature into my work as a coach. I found myself drawing heavily on the many metaphors and messages in nature to help structure the kinds of questions I posed to my clients; questions such as: *'What advice would a wise, ancient tree have to say about your problem, challenge or opportunity*

right now?' The ancient tree carries cultural significance, archived from rituals and ceremonies rooted in ancient communities. It is power encoded. Years later, I recognised that embedded in this question is also the wise resourcing voice of the internal supervisor or internal coach. It is this voice that coachee Alex connected with that motivated her to write and submit the proposal for the bid she didn't feel qualified for, yet was successful in being awarded. It was this ancient wisdom that encouraged Roger to talk to his boss about what was getting in the way of his promotion, that then gave him the direction he needed in order to change.

In the company of trees

When I am in the company of trees, I feel a surge of power and groundedness that activates a deeply rooted confidence. We know from research that spending as little as 15 minutes with trees lowers cortisol levels, boosts the immune system and reduces anxiety.² When I am among the trees, my body naturally slows down and I find myself accessing generative parts of myself. Author Tina Welling reminds us that, 'Nature is our first mother, our first love, our first leader in the lessons of life and the lessons of death'.³





My work with nature is often very visual, particularly when bringing nature in from the outside to inside a coaching conversation, whether in person or virtually. In a group supervision session, I display various images of trees and invite participants to choose a tree that best reflects how they currently feel about their supervision practice. Displaying the images, either across a table or in a huge circle on the floor, gives participants the opportunity to walk, as though in a park or wood, to choose the tree they feel most drawn to. At a BACP

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conference, where I presented a session on reflective writing for creative supervision,⁴ a different tree image was placed beneath the chair of each delegate. This creative practice, 'Tree Metaphors for Creative Supervision',⁵ can be adapted virtually by pasting images of trees into a PowerPoint presentation.

In connecting with the tree image in a development session for trainee social workers, Paul was surprised by what surfaced. He found himself remembering his late father and he became unexpectedly overcome with tears. Reflecting back, Paul described his tears as tears of grief; 'good grief' that he had not allowed himself to express fully in the past. His encounter with the tree had opened up a psychological space for these emotions to be expressed safely. Paul described feeling lighter and grateful that he was able to recognise and express these emotions now and in this way.

Remembering trees

Rooted in my practice, I tend to bring nature-based questions into a coaching conversation when the soil has been turned over and it feels like the right time to seed, plant or root a question.

Angela ran a women's leadership think tank, organising global events. She was a driven high performer and believed passionately in women's empowerment. She was happily married with two children, surrounded by caring friendships and affirming women's networks. She had contacted me because she wanted to learn more about journaling as part of her own personal development and growth.

During one session, as we talked, I shared the story of my daily pilgrimages to my oak tree during a difficult time. Angela was insistent that she didn't have any strong tree memories from her past, but as we spoke, her eyes suddenly misted over, and for a few seconds we sat together in the silence of the moment.

Slowly, Angela brought to the surface a tree memory she had long forgotten about. It transpired that she had grown up with a huge towering beech tree in the garden of her childhood home. My story of the oak tree had triggered this memory of herself as an eight year old, climbing high and sitting on a huge branch of the beech tree. The spot was so well hidden that no one knew she was up there, and she remembered having a transpersonal moment where she felt '...at one with the tree, the world and the universe'. I asked her to describe how it felt in her eight-year-old body. She used words like 'powerful', 'creative', 'strong', 'unique', 'resourceful', and described the confidence she felt at being able to watch the world below from her secret hideaway on the huge branch of the beech tree. This mesmerising memory, ignited through the symbol of a tree, connected Angela to what her inner nature needed right now: spaciousness, silence and time alone. Nature metaphors give us access to different levels of consciousness in often unexpected and dynamic ways.

Very often, the connection to nature comes through a remembering that is steeped in the subconscious, which Toni Morrison captures so well in her observation of the Mississippi River: 'You know they straightened out the Mississippi River in places, to make room for houses and liveable acreage. Occasionally the river floods these places. "Floods" is the word they use, but in fact it is not flooding: it is remembering where it used to be. All water has perfect memory and is forever trying to get back to where it was...'¹

This 'remembering' emerged in a coaching session with a senior research scientist in a pharmaceutical company. Michael began sharing details of the long hike he had taken over the weekend, when he suddenly remarked: 'I like being with the trees. When I am with the trees, I feel more energised and refreshed.' There it was, punctuating the air between us, giving me a way in to explore the nature of his relationship with hiking and the trees.

As the conversation unfolded, I discovered that Michael had spent time hiking in Norway's amazing forests. Suddenly, our conversation opened like the bud of a new leaf on a tree as Michael talked about his love of Norway and its environment and how much he missed hiking when he was back in the UK. Sensing we had turned over the soil, I enquired as to whether Michael was familiar with the Japanese practice of *shinrin yoku* or 'forest bathing'? It transpired that the term *shinrin yoku* was new to Michael's ear, but not to his feet. Sometimes we know what we know without even knowing.

Shinrin yoku or 'forest bathing'

Shinrin in Japanese translates as 'forest', and *yoku* means 'bath'. Originating in the 1990s in the forests in Japan, it stems from the practice of taking stressed-out office workers to walk slowly through the forests and soak up the atmosphere. Findings show that blood pressure and cortisol levels reduce and activity in the sympathetic nervous system drops away.⁶

Michael's enjoyment and vitality when talking about hiking and trees contrasted with his less vibrant energy when we talked about his leadership role in the company. A scientific expert in his field, Michael was a highly accomplished individual. But his confidence wavered beyond the scientific recognition he had achieved. Continuing our exploration into the quality of the thinking space Michael connected with when hiking, and the physical and regenerative gains of spending time in nature, Michael began making sense of ways he could creatively and resourcefully develop his leadership style authentically. Hiking was a means of leaving behind his doubts, an opportunity to take time out to unwind in a natural environment he enjoyed being in, and a generative space for thoughts and ideas to fertilise and incubate. Most importantly, he realised he didn't have to travel to Norway to hike; there were plenty of green spaces around where he lived where he could hike to his heart's content.

Access to nature

In a study conducted at King's College London, titled 'Urban Mind', Dr Andrea Mechelli discovered that those who experienced a daily single exposure to nature showed an increase in their wellbeing that lasted for over seven hours. The good news is that there are similar gains to be had when engaging with nature by accessing green spaces in cities and towns.⁷

But what if connecting with nature in urban spaces, particularly in light of this current pandemic, is not so easy? What of those who cannot access a garden, park or forest? Author and Jungian psychologist Clarissa Pinkola Estes suggests that: 'For some, home is a forest, a desert, a sea. In truth, home is holographic, it is carried at full power in even a single tree. A solitary cactus in a plant shop window, a pool of still water. It is also at full potency in a yellow leaf on the asphalt, a red clay pot waiting for a root bundle, a drop of water on the skin. When you focus with soul eyes, you will see home in many, many places.'⁸

Estes reminds us that it is not necessary to go far or even outside to connect powerfully with nature through a single object. Donna found this to be true by simply looking through her kitchen window.

Appreciating nature on your doorstep

Donna was in a demanding role as a team leader for a busy patient services helpline. She was working long hours, not sleeping well and having difficulty unwinding from work at the end of the day. She described herself as fearful of 'burning out'.

I wondered whether Donna might be experiencing compassion fatigue, but I held this thought lightly as our session unfolded. Turning to the Inner and Outer Nature Discovery Deck (see *Resources*, below), I asked Donna: 'What if you stood still like a tree right now? What would you see? What would you hear? What would you feel? What might you

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get in touch with?' Donna reflected in the silence that opened out between us until eventually she spoke, letting me know that she felt drawn to get up and walk over to the window of the room we were working in overlooking a small coppice of trees at the back of the building.

As she gazed out towards the trees, I invited Donna to feel her feet on the floor and to take a couple of deep breaths. Slowly, I guided Donna to centre and ground herself in the image of a strong, sturdy tree with roots connected to the ground, taking the position of The Standing Tree, arms stretched out wide and feet rooted. I asked her to connect with how she was feeling in the moment, and she responded: 'I feel like time has stood still and that there is space and time for me to breathe in the midst of all the busyness and relax'. From this place we explored what she needed to do more of to prioritise her self-care and wellbeing.

There are no privileged locations. As the writer Scott Russell Sanders reminds us: 'If you stay put, your place may become a holy centre... All there is to see can be seen from anywhere in the universe if you know how to look'.⁹



Cherry blossom mentor tree

Images of trees are powerful imprints. Norman, a senior health professional, had a curvy, twisted cherry blossom tree outside his office window. He would often find himself looking out at the tree and observing the tree's seasonality up close. When we first met in late autumn, the tree's branches were bare. At the beginning of each coaching session we would check in with an outer view of the tree's foliage and seasonal state, then draw the lens inward into Norman's internal landscape and seasons. As winter closed in and eventually gave way to spring, small pink buds sprang up along the tree's branches, about to blossom. The tree's seasonal hibernation and growth mirrored Norman's internal world as he gave voice to a rich repository of creative desires and visualised his career and personal growth as we journeyed together. As Norman seeded his growth, the cherry blossom tree mirrored his growth back to him when it burst into full bloom in the spring.

More recent research has highlighted that office workers who have a view of trees and greenery describe their jobs as less stressful and are more satisfied with their occupations than those who have a view limited to other buildings. Likewise, those employees with a view of nature consider quitting their jobs less frequently.¹⁰

I hope this article has encouraged you to bring nature into more of your coaching and supervision work. My intention is not to give you a formula for working with nature so much as give you permission to bring nature in, organically and wholeheartedly, through nature-inspired questions and genuine curiosity.

Whatever your location, however and wherever you work, think of the nature around you as the wider system. We live not just in buildings, but in the landscapes around us. Our awareness of our climate and ecology has been elevated since the start of the pandemic, and since our access to nature was restricted, we have a renewed opportunity to appreciate its gifts and an increased understanding of the physical and emotional benefits of green space. I believe coaches can find creative ways to be heard as social and political activists in the fight to become caretakers of our planet. We cannot caretake what we do not name or interact with. The future of nature and our climate is in our hands, as coaching responds to the changing times and landscapes – both inner and outer – of our world. ■

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



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RESOURCES



Inner and outer nature discovery cards

Earlier this year, I gathered 52 questions that I have generated over the last five years through individual and group coaching/facilitation, to create my deck of 'inner and outer nature discovery cards'. Working with these questions over the years has deeply resonated with clients across a range of sectors, roles and backgrounds. Questions include:

Where in nature do you feel most alive and energised?

Where would branching out in life/work really make a difference?

What would blossoming look and feel like?

What needs to be rooted right now?

How can you see the wood for the trees?

What are three things you can do to keep yourself grounded?

What are you excited to plant or seed right now?

What storms have you weathered and what have you learnt?

What is ready for harvesting?

