



## **The Magic of Forest Bathing**

A Vision Quest tale

by

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Our next episode is about a very active couple who were very attuned to nature, but they had been letting boredom set into their routine and didn't know what to do about it. Their daily home and work routines were static, and there didn't seem to be any remedy in sight. They needed the help that a Vision Quest would bring as soon as possible. I started to drop hints all over the place

without any result. Then I managed to have a certain magazine to make its way to their house, and finally, things began to take. Here is the story.

Branch and Evita had been in a relationship for several years, and although they knew that they were still very much in love, a habit of sameness was beginning to set into their life together.

They discussed this problem every so often but didn't make any effort to come up with a decent remedy. At first, both decided that this resulted from living together over time, and perhaps nothing could be done about it. It was decided to simply age together and become more comfortable within existence as time went by. But both were avid souls, searching for something new, and we're not really about to be satisfied with settling for lessor life experiences. So, they kept trying to find ways to renew their spirits even while they were involved with everyday mundane earthly activities.

Then one day, Evita was reading a National Geographic article about an activity called "Forest Bathing". Just the name alone attracted her, so she read the article aloud to Branch, and he was immediately hooked onto the idea. They both loved nature in almost any form and had always enjoyed times spent playing on the beach or boating on a river or lake, or especially hiking in a forest environment.

According to what they were reading, the idea was to immerse yourself into nature and absorb the sounds of chirping birds and buzzing insects, and even listening to wind moving throughout the foliage, around tree trunks, large rocks, and boulders. Things that trigger your other senses come into play as well, such as seeking out the scents of flowers, plants, and grasses while observing the contrasts between greens and other colors that appear in so many different forest displays. This concept, in Japanese, is known as Shinrin-Yoku, where it is quite well known and typical of the Japanese outlook that acknowledges the effect of any great natural experience of great value has to human sensibilities.

Branch suggested that they arrange to experience forest bathing during their upcoming planned vacation to Puerto Rico. In the mountains of Puerto Rico, the tropical forest of El Yunque would be perfect for their first venture in learning how to breathe while trekking in a tropical forest. He, of course, knew that they had actually been breathing the last time they ventured into a forest while in the Catskills in upstate New York. Still, he was also convinced that they had not really and truly been forest bathing because they missed way too much detail and because they had been largely ignorant of what actual forest bathing encompassed at the time. Branch was now convinced that simply loving the experience of being in a forest or jungle was not nearly enough. They both had to

engage as much of their physical and emotional senses into the experience of their surroundings. They could actually be bathing in the atmospheric detail of a forest.

Evita listened to Branch with a certain amount of amusement but loved how enthusiastic he was getting over this new forest bathing conviction. She watched and listened to him and noticed he was acting younger and sexier as the thoughts took hold within his mind. She now couldn't wait to get to Puerto Rico to try this. It was going to be a long two weeks wait for that to happen.

Finally, vacation day arrived, and they were on a Jet Blue flight from Newark to San Juan. They arrived in San Juan just before noon and rented a car at the airport. They then drove about 45 minutes to a small hotel on the lower slopes of El Yunque, where they were to base their exploration of this tropical rainforest. The place was simple but very clean and beautiful, and they had a room open to a large balcony suspended over the jungle itself. They had asked the manager when checking in how far it was to El Yunque, and he said, "You are already well inside the forest, but the main part of El Yunque National Forest is a few miles up the road. But I'm sure you would enjoy a walk through our tropical gardens as a mild introduction to the forest after you unpack. We have family-style dining here at six o'clock, but our happy hour get-together for cocktails starts at five. You will hear a bell

clang when dinner time arrives, so you can leave your watch in your room if you like."

They liked their room but were particularly impressed with their view from the balcony. The jungle tree canopy was actually invading the balcony space a little. Still, an open view corridor through the foliage allowed a view to the ocean and the lower mountain tops far off in the distance. This was heaven as far as they were concerned. This is a wonderful introduction to Puerto Rico and their first foray into a tropical rain forest environment.

They quickly tossed off their travel clothes and were soon into shorts and Tommy Bahama shirts. They slipped into some special leather sandals they had treated themselves for this trip and were then off to see the hotel gardens.

The gardens were beautiful. Although not exactly a wild forest environment, there were loads of different kinds of exotic foliage and flowering tropical plants, all bordering against a natural array of native rainforest trees and shrubs. Meandering flat stone pathways led them throughout the landscape, and there were lots of ooh's and ahh's escaping from them as they sauntered along the pathways. Evita stopped and bent down to place a large boom in her hand that she recognized as a bird of paradise. She had a tendency to try to smell the blue and

orange blossoms, knowing full well from her studies that it had no scent, but she felt the need to do it anyway.

There were loads of hibiscus blossoms here and there, offering all manner of petal types and every color imaginable. Some were single petal arrangements, and others were resplendent in double forms. Branch went to marvel at a vine crawling up a rock wall with a solid mass of red blooms and probably eighteen feet high. It was beautiful beyond belief. Evita walked over to join him and told him that it was a bougainvillea vine. As he was staring at the blossoms, she told him. "Most of these flowering plants are foreigners here in Puerto Rico, just like us. The bougainvillea is originally from South America, the bird of paradise, and the hibiscus are probably from southern China but are naive to tropical places worldwide. Many of these plants are from somewhere else but still thrive on this island and appear to be very happy. Branch looked at them and said, "I would be happy here for sure."

They continued their walk-a-bout and were able to find some jasmine and gardenias that provided them with the incredible scents that they sought on other not so odorous plants.

They spent the next couple of hours wandering about the garden with the pathways luring them up and down the gently sloping mountainside. Quite often, they were

tempted to enter into the natural forest where nothing had been introduced. They discovered that the plants in these native areas were just as wonderful as the more exotic foreign flowers and plants that had been in the hotel's planned landscape.

After some length of time, they had not seemingly been aware of, they heard a bell clanging in the distance and realized that they were being called to dinner. They picked up their pace and hurried towards the hotel dining room and realized as they progressed on the path that they were getting quite hungry.

When they entered the dining room, they saw that only eight other people were sitting at a large mahogany dining table and that there were only four empty chairs. Evita and Branch picked out two and sat down while smiling at those that were already seating. They all said their hellos to the new arrivals and received hellos back from Evita and Branch.

A woman at the other end of the table was the first to start a conversation. "Did you enjoy your walk in the garden?"

"Absolutely, said Evita. I've never seen a garden I didn't like, and this particular one Branch and I both loved. And the natural jungle background for this planned

landscaping made both of us impatient to go deeper into the El Yunque forest tomorrow morning."

The rest of the evening was spent having after-dinner coffee and conversation with their new friends. Branch and Evita soon discovered that everyone here was kindred spirits regarding love for forests and were further surprised that the concept of forest bathing was common to the others when she brought the subject up. Evita found this to be a little strange and mentioned it to Branch when they retired to their room that night. "Don't you think it odd that everyone here was familiar with the idea of forest bathing when it was so new to us?"

He said that he didn't think it was. They all apparently had the same interests. That would naturally draw them to come to places like this and other forests all over the world. That response made sense, so Evita dropped the subject.

They were planning on starting out early in the morning, so they decided to sleep early. After some intense cuddling, both were lulled to sleep by the incessant chorus of Puerto Rican coqui frogs that were planning on doing their own brand of cuddling.

Evita had read that there were at least thirteen different species of these frogs in the El Yunque rainforest alone, and it seemed as though thousands of those



species were now hanging out on their balcony. At first, the sound of these amorous frogs was almost more than they could stand. Then they decided that this was what they had come to El Yunque to experience. They settled back into their sheets, enjoyed the fan providing a brisk breeze over their bodies, and soon became one with the coqui cacophony that was somehow morphing into a jungle symphony. Then to make this musical creation even better, they heard the pitter-patter of raindrops sporadically hitting the metal roof of their cabin. This was quickly followed by the rapid staccato of a tropical downpour, which seemed to make the frogs react like they had just ingested a particularly strong dose of viagra.

Branch reached over and enveloped Evita in his arms, snuggled against her, and they proceeded to communicate as best they could with the primary forest rhythm of El Yunque and the Puerto Rican coquis.

All too soon, it was early morning and time to get moving on their forest bathing venture. Both had a good shower and a vigorous tooth brushing. After that was accomplished, both dressed in light cotton trekking clothing, including almost Indian Jones-style hats. They put on hiking boots and laced them up tightly just in case there might be some pesky critters that wanted to invade their boots when they were exploring the forest.

They walked to the dining room with a great hope that they had coffee there and were very happy to see that a small buffet had already been set up. They found their coffee and some tropical fruit and danish pastries and little boxes of cereals and milk. It seems that they were not a very rare breed here as the rest of the guests were also starting to arrive in the dining room looking for early morning treasure. Everyone wanted to have as much of the day available for their activities as possible, so early starts were the norm.

Following a light breakfast, they headed to their rented car and drove up the mountain towards the El Yunque National Forest. It wasn't long before they came to a waterfall on the right-hand side of the road. The sign said it was the La Cocoa falls. They were able to pull over and park the car and then get out to see the falls. It was really beautiful. The water was rushing down the face of the mountainside rather than dropping off a rockery higher up. The water formed a typical fall as it cascaded down. Several people were climbing up the rock base from the road to get to the bottom. Branch, of course, wanted to do that as well, but Evita persuaded him to save their energy for other falls that were to be found further up in the park.

Soon they were back in the car and drove a short distance to the Yokahu Tower. There was a small parking area here, and they were able to leave the car and climb

this tower to have a fantastic view of the ocean and lower forest from the top of the tower. It was similar to their hotel view but far more open and dramatic.

They visited two other waterfalls further up the road and into the interior park area. These were the La Mina Falls and the Juan Diego Falls. The pair could dip into the very cold water ponds, so Evita and Branch frolicked around in a little. Then they were more than anxious to get on to the rainforest hiking itself and its potential to experience their forest bathing experience. They wanted to get on with that agenda, and everything else could take a back seat or at least get hurried through.

They had asked a Park Ranger at the Sierra Palm information area what one of the best and most pristine sections of El Yunque was available for them to explore. They were told by that ranger that the best areas were the Palo Colorado and Sierra Palm forests, and that is basically where they were while they were talking to him. Pointing to a map on the wall, he suggested that they select the trails, of which there are many, that have the fewest people on them to get the most enjoyment from them with less distraction. He said that they could determine which trail by watching people as they started out on the main trail and select trails that they did not. As few people were visiting El Yunque that day, this would be an easy strategy.

They quickly selected a trail and then, hand in hand, started strolling down it and away from the primary trail with the other trekkers going in a different direction. It was very quiet and then, all of a sudden it wasn't.

A few peeps from what they assumed were frogs, and then the familiar coqui croaks began to join in. They could also hear their boots making soft crunching sounds with each footfall on the crushed wet grey rock pathways. Even that sound joined the expanding chorus that made up the jungle music. They couldn't see any of the frogs singing, but the sound they were making called to them in a way that actually seemed to touch them. They felt these sounds on their sensitized skin, and their pores opened up to welcome the sensory notes into their bodies and touched their souls.

Every so often, a bird of some unknown description began singing but did not finish its aria, and that added to this symphony of creation.

Evita and Branch found themselves pressing their hands together tightly as they immersed themselves into this rainforest world. This was an even better experience than they had imagined before they got here.

Eventually, they arrived at a very secluded area on this limited foot trail and decided to leave it and venture into the interior wilds of the rainforest. This was a way

more pristine environment with heavy moss completely coating the tree trunks and a heavy carpet of fallen and dried palm fronds coating the ground, making it hard to traverse the jungle floor. They had to reach down to pick up and toss some of the frond debris so they could move forward.

They found a layer of rocks that provided a place for them to sit down and observe their surroundings. Although it wasn't raining at this time, recent downpours still permeated the forest. The boulders they were on were cold and damp and soaked their bottoms, but they didn't mind. It was all part of the experience.

They had read that there were preferred ways to take in a forest environment. One was to walk through it and attempt to observe everything as you moved along within it, and another was to sit quietly and wait for the forest to come to you and sometimes move past you. Often when mankind tramples through the rainforest, some of that forest tries to make itself invisible until they have passed. To truly feel the forest, it is best to sit silently and let it pass by you or penetrate into you.

Branch and Evita were beginning to see the advantage of just plain sitting there on the rocks. They could quite suddenly begin to discover smells they had not been aware of before. Many tree scents were emanating from each hardwood or palm tree, and

somehow they could differentiate between them. The bark had its own peculiar smell that was separate from those from the trunk, and each of those scents was entirely different from the ones emanating from the leaves. Although Branch and Evita couldn't understand how they could be this discerning, they knew they could indeed do exactly that. When they were growing up and discovered maple trees in the Catskills and Adirondack mountains, they knew that the maple tree had many scents and even a unique taste to their sap. Still, it never occurred to them that every tree might also have its own olfactory identity. But here they were, inhaling the reality and magic of these jungle trees.

Now they settled into a status of being at one with the rainforest instead of being a visitor. They began to see an enormous amount of activity through their shared space. It had seemed before they took this position that they were the only active things moving through the jungle. When they looked in one direction, they saw an army of little fire ants moving in and over and around the leaf. Most individual ants transported impossibly large leaf and twig segments while others were obviously directing the army's movements. It was fascinating to truly realize that these creatures were as involved with their lives just as Evita and Branch were with theirs.

Being very still, they also saw some subtle movements on tree limbs and suddenly realized that they

were insects called walking sticks. They are generally nocturnal insects that can be found all around the rainforest if you look closely. They were able to blend in well with their surroundings. Now looking even more carefully, they saw tree snails moving about their domain and many types of anoles or lizards moving, sometimes slowly and other times very, very fast from limb to limb.

Suddenly various birds were flying in and out of their area. They saw Puerto Rican Amazon parrots, then a Puerto Rican Tanager, a Spindalis and a Vireo, and the Puerto Rican Bullfinch. Where did they suddenly come from? Oh!, and there was a vividly blue butterfly fluttering in and out of their space. And then another and then another. And out from under a dead tree trunk came a small mammal. It was a forest mouse, and it obviously felt that it was OK to come out and say hello. Branch and Evita knew they had arrived and were obviously part of this tropical world now.

As they began to understand that a forest's true beauty was the effect it could have on the one experiencing it, a strong feeling came over them, and they seemed to know what they were now required to do to truly 'bath' in this environment. The overhead sun was streaming down through the leafy canopy and creating magnificent, glorious rays of streaming gold. They became aware that those rays were causing droplets of water on the leaf surface to shimmer and glow. Each

droplet became an individual brilliant gemstone and reflected unbelievable, beautiful colors that were beyond Eviata's ability to describe. She reached out to touch an individual bead of water, and it exploded into iridescent streams of constantly changing rainbows. She drew her breath back sharply in sheer pleasure.

She looked up into Branchs' eyes and saw the same colors reflected in them that she saw in the water droplets. She then stood up and grabbed Branch by his hands and pulled him upright as well. Without a word and not caring if anyone might come by their private space, they both threw off each other's clothing. They intuitively knew that it was inappropriate to wear clothes in this place and at this moment. They were in nature, and nature was in them. They were not moving towards a sexual act but were experiencing and sharing the love on a very universal and even a more intense spiritual basis. Creation was in control here, and they had surrendered their very souls to that control.

They could feel that every sound, every fragrance, and everything they touched contributed to this moment. They invited nature to enter through their ears, eyes, nose, and mouth and sensed all else with their bare hands and feet when wriggling their toes in the soil. At the same time, they listened to birds singing, insects and lizards and little mammals scampering about, and the breezes rustling in the leaves of the trees. And they noticed the



different greens of the tree leaves and the sunlight filtering through the branches, and they all contributed to the finished master portraiture of this forest. They were smelling the fragrance of the forest and tasting the freshness of the moist air as they took in deep soulful breaths. They were now bathing in this rainforest, and it was magnificent.

All too soon, they reached a stage in their forest experience when they knew that they had to return to what was their own time and place. Gradually, they settled back into that feeling that they were simply visitors in this realm once again. The sensory feelings largely abated, and all those creatures that lived here understood that it was time to retreat within the forest and not continue to announce their existence. Only a few birds darted in and out of this space. The frog sounds softened considerably, and the chirping and croaking became occasional and not continual.

Branch and Evita were saddened by this happening but were still very happy that they had experienced this incredible sensation of forest bathing. They put their clothes back on with great regret and turned to walk out of this magical place. They looked back and emotionally left one more great surge of love in this glade as a farewell gesture to this forest, and all that abides within it.

Although the couple regretted having to return to their normal routine, they somehow, perhaps because of the intensity of this forest bathing experience, realized that they could remind themselves to return to nature, no matter where it was located, and return as often as possible.