The background of the slide is a close-up photograph of a forest floor. It features a variety of green plants, including broad-leafed species and delicate ferns, growing among brown, decaying leaves and twigs. The lighting is soft, creating a natural and serene atmosphere.

49 days (or 49 minutes) under the Bodhi Tree: Nature-based contemplative practices for the modern world

Matt Bukowski
James Madison University
Association for Spiritual, Ethical and Religious Values in Counseling Conference
July 9, 2017

ASERVIC Competencies

Cashwell & Watts (2010):

- The professional counselor can describe the similarities and differences between spirituality and religion, including the basic beliefs of various spiritual systems, major world religions, agnosticism and atheism. (#1)
- The professional counselor is able to a) modify therapeutic techniques to include a client's spiritual and/or religious perspectives, and b) **utilize spiritual and/or religious practices as techniques when appropriate** and acceptable to a client's viewpoint. (#13)

Need for the study

Crockett, Gill, Cashwell & Myers (2017):

- Technological vs. non-technological biofeedback
- "...there is a feedback loop in which information about the client's experience (e.g. physiological, cognitive, and affective systems) is used to inform the client's self-regulation."
- "...there is a growing need for the integration of mind-body, breath, and awareness-centered approaches in counseling practice, education and research."

Research supporting forest meditation

- Hordyk, Dulude & Shem (2014) - Found that nature experience provided a “holding environment” and promoted attachment behavior.
- Bratman, Hamilton, Hahn, Daily & Gross (2015) – A 90 minute walk in nature vs. a city reduced activity in an area of the brain linked with depression.
- Richardson, McEwan, Maratos & Sheffield (2016) – Meta-analysis of 15 studies found that exposure to nature helped regulate neurotransmitters, hormones and the autonomic nervous system, and hence affect.

Research supporting forest meditation

Stothard, et al. (2017), *Current Biology*:

- Studied 7 females, 7 males, ages 20-36.
- 5 spent weekend in typical environment, 9 camping.
- Campers were exposed to 4x more natural light.
- Melatonin onset moved 1.4 hours earlier in camping group, .98 hours later in the typical (electric light) group.
- **2 days of camping effectively reset the participants' circadian rhythms.**

Wellness in counseling

- Wellness Theory – Myers & Sweeney (2003)
- EcoWellness: Reese, Myers and Lewis (2015) found that EcoWellness significantly accounted for variation in overall wellness scores of 792 participants.

THE INDIVISIBLE SELF: An Evidence-Based Model Of Wellness

CONTEXTS:

Local (safety)

Family
Neighborhood
Community

Institutional (policies & laws)

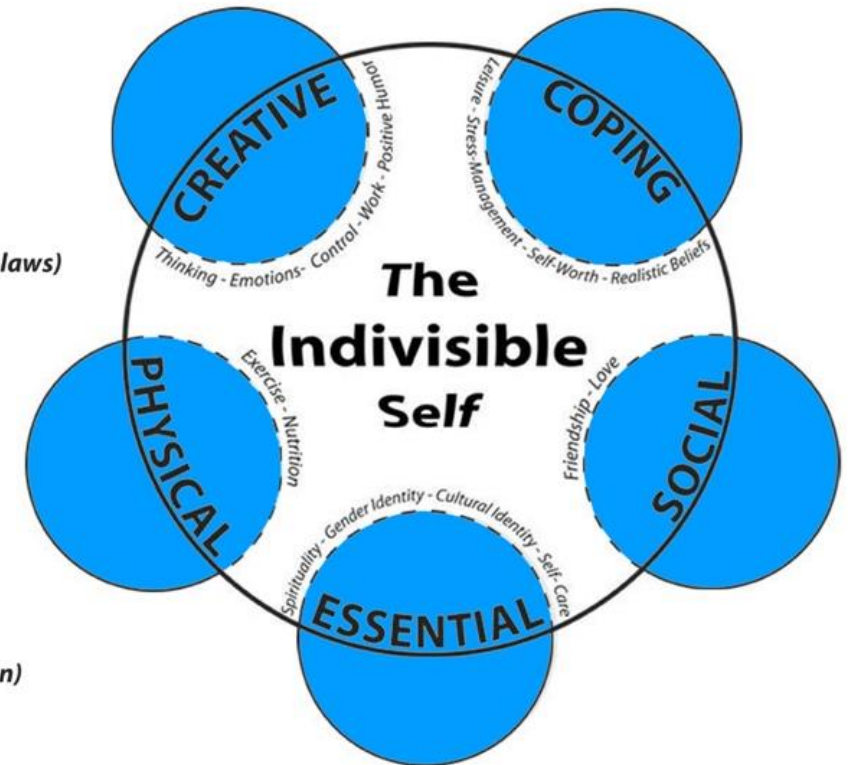
Education
Religion
Government
Business/Industry

Global (world events)

Politics
Culture
Global Events
Environment
Media

Chronometrical (lifespan)

Perpetual
Positive
Purposeful

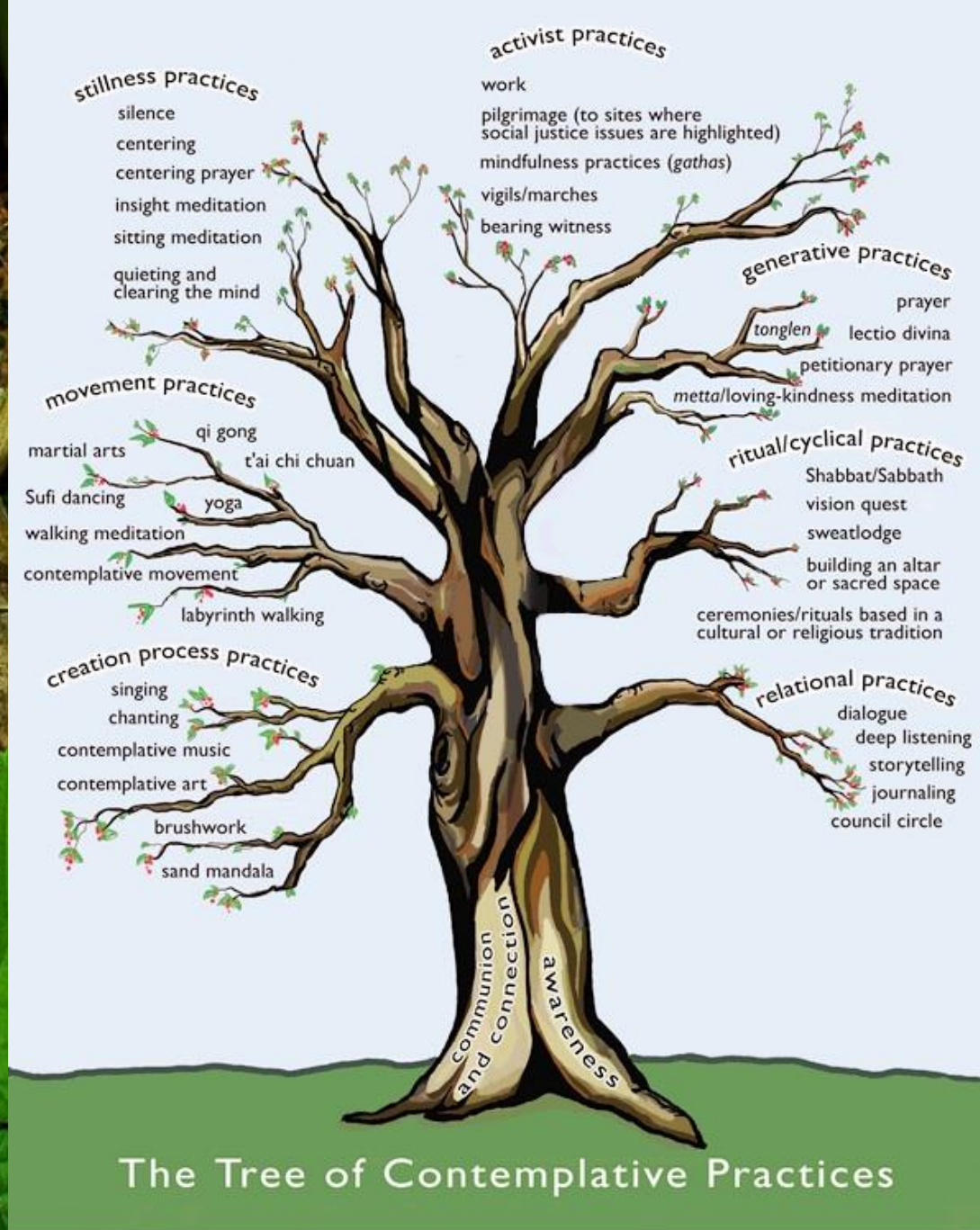


Countering “McMindfulness”

- Def: Mindfulness practices as a way to improve task performance in work settings and alleviate short-term anxiety without changing one's lifestyle (Purser & Loy, 2013).
- Separates mindfulness practices from cultural values and meanings.
- *Atlantic Monthly* – Virtual environments as nature?
- Nature-based practices can be a return to authentic practice.

A close-up photograph of a forest floor, showing various green plants, ferns, and brown fallen leaves. The scene is lit with natural light, creating a soft, dappled effect. A semi-transparent white rectangular box is centered over the image, containing the title text.

Part I: Evolutionary context of contemplative practices



Timeline of cultural change

Stone tools – 2.5 Million years BP

Control of fire – 800,000 BP

– Anatomically modern humans

– Migration out of Africa

– Behaviorally modern humans

– 8000 BCE Agriculture adopted
– 3000 BCE Bronze Age
– 1000 BCE Iron Age
– 545 BCE Birth of Buddha
– 1685 CE Enlightenment
– 1760 CE Industrial Revolution
– 1970 CE Digital Revolution

200,000 BCE

175,000 BCE

150,000 BCE

125,000 BCE

100,000 BCE

75,000 BCE

50,000 BCE

25,000 BCE

0 BCE

Historical example: Ishi, last of the Yahi

- In 1911 emerged from wilderness as last surviving group member
- Represented direct collision of traditional culture and modern U.S. culture
- Highly developed concentration abilities:
 - Related “wood duck story” for 6 hours
 - Unable to watch a vaudeville show, attended only to audience



Mitigating psychological civilization

Charles Fisher - Brandeis University (2007, 2013)

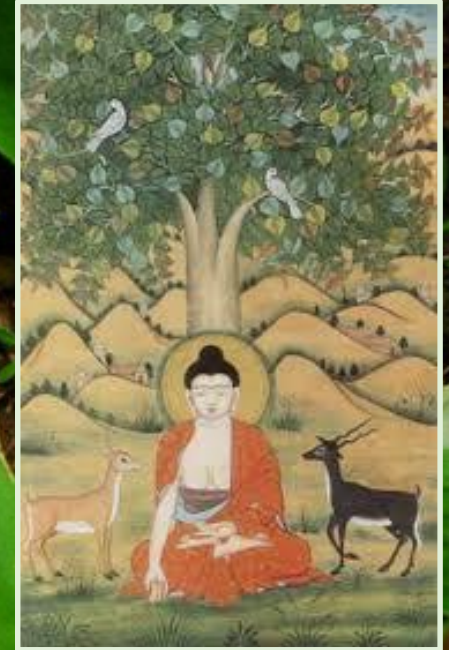
- Hypothesizes that foragers live primarily in a mindful state.
- Meditation, as practiced and taught by the Buddha, represents a way to regain some of the consciousness lost in the transition from foraging to agriculture.

A close-up photograph of a forest floor. The ground is covered with brown, decaying leaves and twigs. Several green plants are growing, including a prominent heart-shaped leaf on the right and a small fern in the center. A semi-transparent white banner is overlaid across the middle of the image.

Part II: 49 Days

Legend of the Bodhi Tree

- Siddhartha Gautama - wealthy young nobleman.
- Grew up ignorant to the suffering of others, became aware after leaving home.
- For years sought relief both through sensual pleasure and asceticism.
- Sat under a large sacred fig tree in Bodh Gaya for 7-49 days until he became enlightened.
- For the remainder of his life (approx. 50 years) taught and shared the knowledge and insight he received sitting under the Bodhi tree.



Earliest Buddhist texts: Pali Canon

Bhaya-bherava Sutta (trans. By Thanissaro Bhikku):

"Yes, brahman, so it is. It's not easy to endure isolated forest or wilderness dwellings. It's not easy to maintain seclusion, not easy to enjoy being alone. The forests, as it were, plunder the mind of a monk who has not attained concentration. Before my Awakening, when I was still an unawakened Bodhisatta, the thought occurred to me as well: It's not easy to maintain seclusion..."



Jesus in the canonical gospels

The Leper's Prayer (Luke 5:13-16)

- **13** Jesus reached out His hand and touched the man. "I am willing," He said, "be clean!" And immediately the leprosy left him.
- **14** "Do not tell anyone," Jesus instructed him. "But go, show yourself to the priest and present the offering Moses prescribed for your cleansing, as a testimony to them."
- **15** But the news about Jesus spread all the more, and great crowds came to hear Him and to be healed of their sicknesses.
- **16** Yet He frequently withdrew to the wilderness to pray.



Jesus in the canonical gospels

Questions about Fasting (Luke 5:33-35)

- **33**Then they said to Him, "John's disciples and those of the Pharisees frequently fast and pray, but Yours keep on eating and drinking."
- **34**Jesus replied, "Can you make the guests of the bridegroom fast while He is with them?"
- **35**But the time will come when the bridegroom will be taken away from them; then they will fast."

The Temptation of Jesus (Matthew 4:1-2)

- **1**Then Jesus was led by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil.
- **2****After fasting forty days and forty nights, He was hungry.**



Muhammad's revelation at Hira

According to earliest biographies (Al-sīra al-Nabawiyya):

- Prior to revelation, Muhammad retreated for a month each year to a cave called Hira near Mecca.
- Muhammad was deeply concerned with the moral, ethical and practical conditions of his people.
- Quested to re-establish a basis for a healthy human relationship with the divine.



Common elements of the long quests

- Intention: to fully master self, serve needs of community.
- Fasting: refraining from caretaking the body and sensuous engagement.
- Extended time: separation from community until the needed psychological/spiritual change or insight emerges.
- These long quests resulted in **reform movements** – efforts to restore community wellness.
- The long quests were preceded by many shorter quests.
- Over time each tradition has venerated the acts of the founder, but simultaneously left their practices behind

A close-up photograph of a forest floor. The ground is covered with brown, decaying leaves and twigs. Several green plants are growing, including a prominent heart-shaped leaf on the right and a small fern in the center. A semi-transparent white rectangular box is overlaid in the middle of the image, containing the text 'Part III: 49 minutes'.

Part III: 49 minutes

Value of the shorter quests

- The founders of many religions utilized meditation in nature as a spiritual practice, and later dogma and institutions were built around their insights.
- Shorter quests exist in other cultures for personal insight, healing, and identity development.
- Could shorter quests and nature-based meditation practices be powerful and overlooked wellness tools for modern people?

Sit area practice

(For health and wellness, not necessarily contemplative)

- Go to the same place every day and sit, alone, with no distractions.
- Begin with 15 mins, progress to one hour or more.
- **Be aware** of everything that is happening inside and outside yourself, without judgement.
- Eyes open or closed, do both with all senses.
- If open, use peripheral vision.
- Do not focus on posture unless it is natural.



Sacred area practice

- Similar to sit area, but with more directly spiritual intent.
- May be several hours to several days (consult an experienced guide in this case).
- Have a specific question in mind, ask for guidance.
- Focus on your spiritual purpose and vision.
- Reflect and introspect on your spiritual life.
- Pray, visualize healing.
- Practice advanced meditation techniques.
- Make an altar congruent with your faith.



Exercise

- Write down 2-3 spiritual questions you have.
- Make them deeply personal, things you yearn to know about yourself, your path, what is most meaningful to you.
- Avoid philosophizing ("how many angels fit on the head of a pin?")
- Try to make them yes or no questions.
- Intend to carry them with you and return to them periodically until you have useful, concrete answers.

Practical considerations

- Use a backrest if desired.
- Use padding for your hind quarters.
- **Close to home (<10 minutes walk)**
- An elevated vantage point is helpful.
- Being near water (10-100 yards away) is helpful.
- Choose a secluded place, free from observation.
- Choose flat ground or a gentle downward slope.
- Be mindful of hazards, property rights, etc.



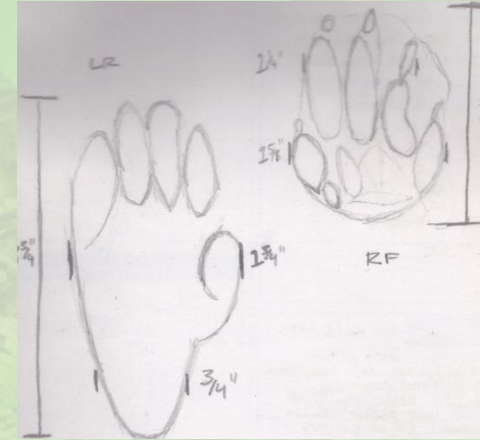
Advanced routines

- On the way to/from your sit area: practice walking meditation.
- While sitting: Wear a blindfold occasionally.
- After sitting: Sketch a quick overhead map and add in daily observations.
- After sitting: Journal your reflections, thoughts, feelings, challenges and success.
- After sitting: Draw something interesting – a leaf, acorn, rock, anything...

Advanced routines

Nature study:

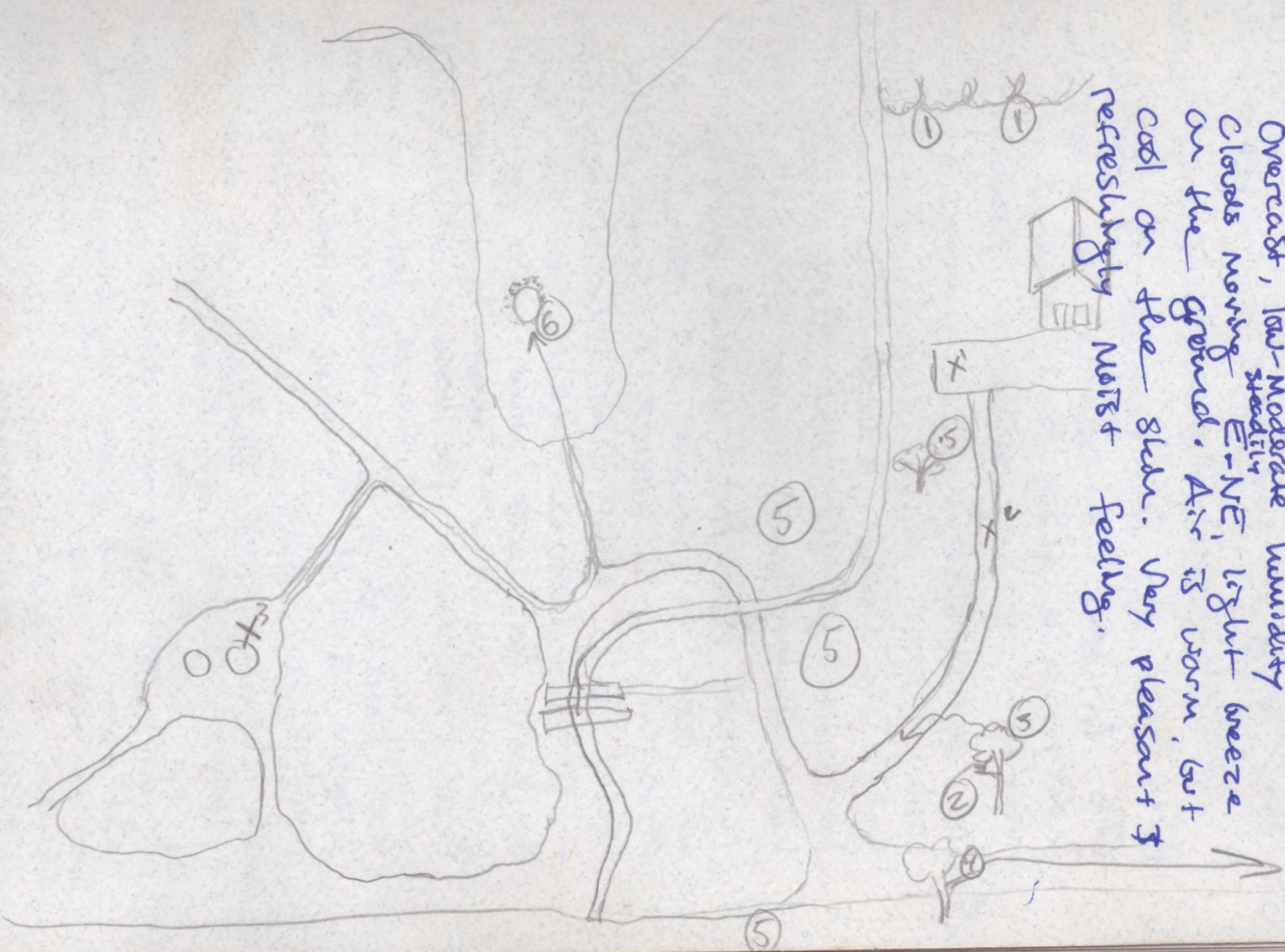
- Wildlife observations
- Weather patterns
- Plants – edible and useful
- Animal tracks and sign
- Ecological interactions

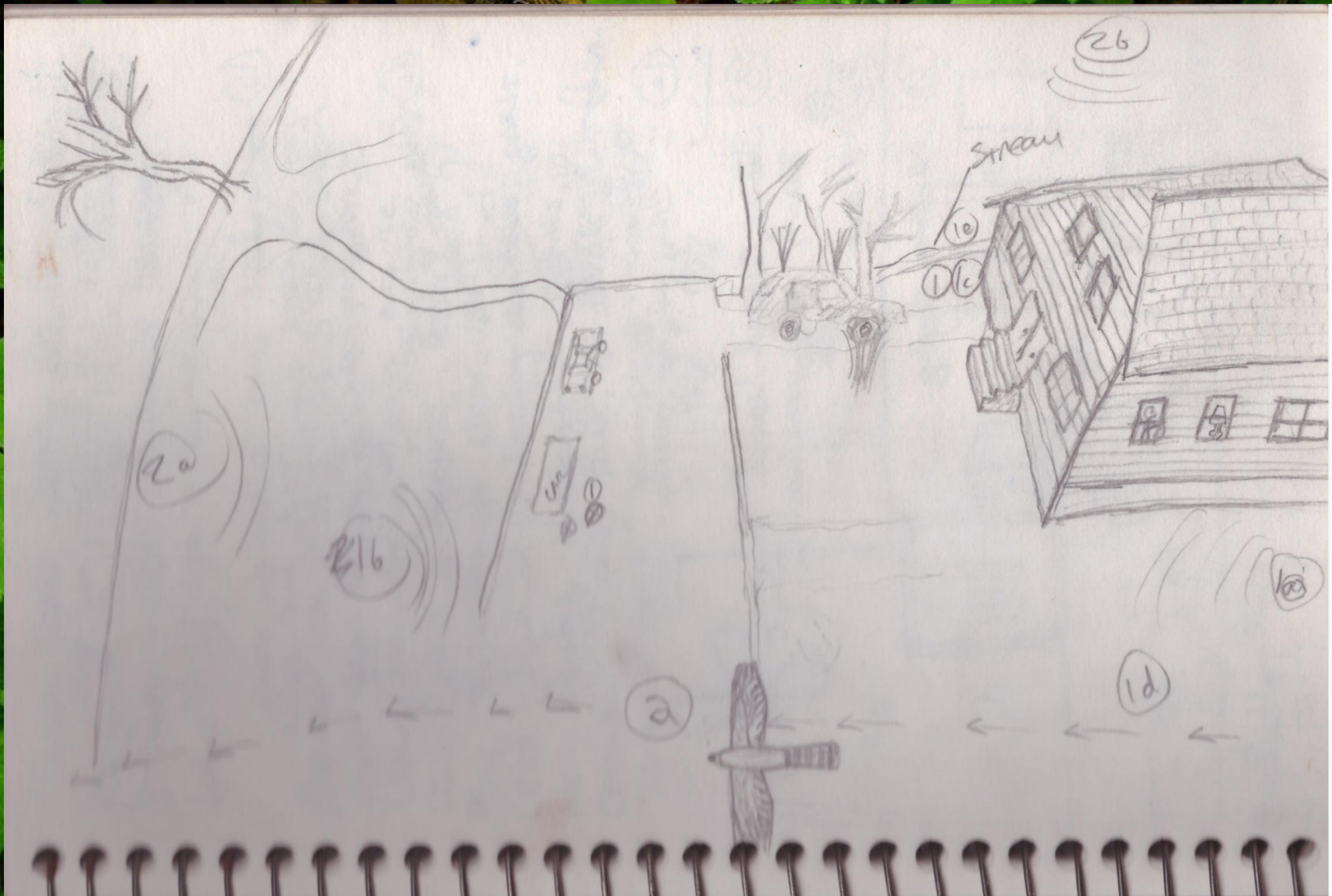


8/17

Weather 7:30-9:00 AM

Overcast, low-moderate humidity
clouds moving ^{steadily} E-NE, light breeze
on the ground. Air is warm, but
cool on the skin. Very pleasant &
refreshingly moist feeling.





What happens when you sit...

- Fox family
- Chickadee nest building
- Flying squirrel runway
- Non-technological biofeedback!
- You develop a relationship with the place, comparable to a friend vs. an acquaintance.

Earliest Buddhist texts: Pali Canon

Bhaya-bherava Sutta (trans. By Thanissaro Bhikku):

"Unflagging persistence was aroused in me, and unmuddled mindfulness established. My body was calm & unaroused, my mind concentrated & single. Quite withdrawn from sensuality, withdrawn from unskillful mental qualities, I entered & remained in the first jhana: **rapture & pleasure born from withdrawal, accompanied by direct thought & evaluation.**"



Overcoming barriers

- Fears, irrational (e.g. woodland marauders) – REBT: rationally dispute
- Fears, rational (e.g. dangerous wildlife) - Peterson's Field Guide to Venomous Animals and Poisonous Plants
- Distraction – Return your focus to your intended activity and the present moment
- Discomfort - Adaptation-level phenomenon
- Shame, negative judgement by self or others - Remember your purpose
- Self-doubt - Remember your purpose

Shinrin Yoku – Forest Bathing

- Became part of Japanese national health program in 1982.
- Japan has spent millions on efficacy studies.
- Demonstrated reductions in blood pressure, glucose levels and stress hormones.
- Gaining prominence as a wellness intervention in U.S.
- Should this be incorporated in counseling?
- Training = nearly identical to sit area practice.



Clinical applications

- Sit area practice may be appropriate for clients that are interested in nature, have access, and seek a holistic wellness intervention.
- Sacred area practice may be appropriate for clients with above, but also a clear spiritual motivation and intent.
- Limitations: both require time, access, commitment and high degree of self-motivation to utilize.
- Limited social support may be a barrier.

Exercise

- Return to your list of questions, review them, notice how you feel, and if you feel you have any more clarity.
- Sometime today when you have a few minutes alone, review them again, take a walk outside or look out the window, and contemplate these questions.
- If you feel compelled, take them to the forest.
- If you feel you have an answer or new questions arise, write those down as well.

Conclusions

- Three spiritual reformers regularly practiced forest meditation.
- Shorter versions of their grand revelatory experiences can be practiced by modern people.
- These practices can support non-denominational spirituality, religion, and/or wellness.
- Forest meditation is a viable wellness intervention in counseling.

Grandfather tree...where you'll find me



bukowskimatt07@gmail.com
Counselors nature corner - facebook

Conclusions

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