

**Branching Out:
Adults With Mental Health Issues
by Margot Henderson**

In 2014, Lapidus Scotland chose Writing Place as the theme for their annual project. The aims were to explore the impact of writing about place on people's well-being and to build partnerships with other organisations working within the fields of well-being and nature connection.

Through working with the Mental Health team in Inverness I made contact with the staff of the Branching Out programme which runs a 14 week course for adults with mental health issues. The course takes people out into the forest to learn bush-craft skills. They invited me to come and spend time with the group doing some Creative Writing.

So on a bright crisp morning in early October, I found myself snaking along the woodland path through Abriachan Forest with a group of adults carrying wood and provisions up to the base camp. As we arrive, the fire is lit, the vegetables for the soup are chopped and I offer a few choice writing prompts. Here are a few examples. We began with

Simply Sensing Being Here.
Just listening, noticing sensing whatever catches our attention...

voices carried on the wind
dark, light, translucent grey
indescribable shades of green Nathalie

the crackle and ping of the fire
engulfing, burning,
simmering the wood

the beautiful song
of a feathered friend
high up in the trees Bethany

Then I invited people to write and reflect on the benefits of Being in the Woods... This Forest Is...

Its easier to relax
outside than inside
in the woods
there's no pressure

Dominic

It gets me moving
It gets me active
It's a place of beauty

You know its always been like that
ever since the Bronze Age
you just wonder what they got up to.
The trees give me a sense of time
1000's of years

A cup of tea tastes better in the woods
The fire gives me a warm glow
peacefulness and a calm head

You go back feeling more relaxed
more at peace with yourself
tired too, which is good

Grace

Tranquility
Its so quiet
No traffic noise
None of the usual humdrum

Walking through the hills and trees
the peace
I look forward to it
It's a break
from the usual routine
You are on your feet and moving about.
I like getting out for a walk
It takes your mind off other things
Its different being outdoors
It's a nice change
a safe environment
You feel freer here

Kevin

David

Then I posed a writing prompt on 'Branching Out'

Branching out is growing me
I am nature

nature is me
branching out is part of me Nathalie

Branching out is growing me in the woods.
Its good to get out and feel
the freedom of the woods Callum

Just like the tree
I shall be free
living my life
as I want to be
Sunshine in my heart Anne Marie

(This was a song which we then sang)

There were a couple of people in the group who wanted me to scribe for them. One woman, who had seemed reluctant to engage was Christine. So I sat with her for a while and this is what she shared...

I live in the woods every day.
God made my Cathedral for me.
Jim Reeves said it.
That's why I don't go to church.
I don't need to.
The carpet that I kneel on
was made by His right hand

I love Abriachan
the peace and quiet
the beauty and the sincerity
of both the people
and the forest
the changing of the seasons.

I grew up on the Isle of Skye
I had a lighthouse for a neighbour.
I used to sit at my bedroom window
watching the lighthouse
light up the cliff.

I am at home in the forest.
Give me a wide open space
any day of the week.
I am glad I am back in the hills. Christine

Christine's initial reluctance, giving way to such a passionate appreciation of nature, expressed in such powerful words, full of cultural references, associations and memories, was a wonderful reminder for me of the depth of this work where simply taking time to be present to ourselves, each other and our surroundings help us to touch and express and share our humanity more deeply.

This way of bringing people together, using words and nature as a stimulus, sharing our reflections and experiences together is what I love most about this work.

In this context, writing offers an opportunity to come back to our senses, to savour the experience, to find a way to express it and to share it with others. It complements the more active engagement with the environment with deeper reflection and appreciation.

In this work I find it helps to prepare well, to get a sense of the group and the space beforehand. So I made sure to walk the route in advance, to sense my own reactions to the environment, to create my own 'Blue Peter' responses. This helps me have more of a sense of where I might want to take people on the journey.

I find the best resources are:
trusting your own felt sense,
following your creative impulse and imagination,
deep listening
and the endless inspiration of nature.

I find there is always a balance of being prepared and being in the moment with the group, meeting people where they are.

Margot Henderson
storytree@hotmail.com