

# Haven Herald



## Nature and Grief by Sarah Raison

For grieving people, there are many resources —therapists, support groups, books, religious support, friends, and family. But how can something as ubiquitous as the very world we live in—the outdoors, nature—be one of those resources?

Nature is a valuable tool for grieving people because it is everywhere—easily accessible and available to everyone. It is also completely free. And there are many things we can explore and learn about grief through being outdoors.

Mindfulness walks are one way to incorporate the outdoors into the grieving process. In a mindfulness walk, special attention is paid to the feeling of each foot hitting the ground, the pace of the walk, body posture, breathing, the sounds and smells experienced on the walk. This active practice works to bring a person closer to nature and their body. It also helps strengthen concentration, makes you more aware, and connects you to the present moment.

Visualization, or holding images of nature in our minds, can prove helpful, particularly when visualizing images of rebirth in nature—the blooming of a bud into a flower, a plant bulb resurfacing from the ground after a long winter, a new egg hatching or butterfly emerging from a cocoon. This can remind us that we have hope of surviving, even through extreme adversity or loss.

Nature can be very powerful as metaphor, especially during grief, showing us that we can change, adapt, and grow again. Nature can remind us that everything in the world that is alive has a time for living, and that every living thing dies eventually. Beginnings and endings occur around us all the time in nature, with living in between. This is true for all living things: flowers, insects, birds, rabbits, mice, larger animals, and it is true for people too. Each living thing has its own special lifetime, and nature can be a compelling way to connect us to that truth.

## Letter from the Executive Director

Fall brings change and a pace that challenges the more relaxed days of summer. The leaves turn and the air becomes cooler. There is a glow and colorful beauty to this wonderful season. Haven becomes a busier place in the fall, as we begin our six week groups and prepare for our training class for new volunteers and other fall programs.

This fall newsletter will focus on the topic of nature and how it can provide both comfort and healing during a time of loss. For many, a walk in the woods or a trip to the shore can be a welcome escape at any time, but it can be especially helpful for someone in grief.

Nature allows us to see that life is always changing and death is part of the experience of being in this world. It is part of the whole journey of one's life and the ending is just as significant as the beginning. Nature can give us an opportunity just to be and to reflect. It is a constant that can help us find a place of stillness and peace, while we are coping with the pain and sorrow of our loss.

Jill Bellacicco

## What is Shinrin Yoku?

The Japanese practice of Shinrin Yoku, or *forest bathing*, is a therapeutic use of nature. It has been studied extensively and is taking hold here in the US where *The Washington Post* recently described it as “the next yoga.” Why? Because it is accessible and affordable. As an intervention or treatment of mild to moderate anxiety, it works. There are a few guiding principles that make Shinrin Yoku distinct as a practice and a bit different from mere hiking or other outdoor activities:

- Allow yourself a sense of time affluence. There needs to be an intention to move slowly and mindfully without rushing.
- Shinrin Yoku is not exercise. The point is not to cover a lot of ground or exert the body in any way.
- Intention is everything. There should be a spirit of invitation and participation with your surroundings. You want to allow the experience to unfold with loving presence so that you may receive any wisdom or insights that the wilderness offers to you.
- The process is interactive. You want to benefit from the practice. Try to be a healing presence to the environment, generously giving your appreciation and observation.

<https://indyogi.com/shinrin-yoku-forest-bathing-therapy-nature/>

## What Worked for Me by Don Shaw

Shortly after my wife and soul mate of 44 years died, I saw a movie, "The Way." It's about a father whose only son dies in a freak accident while on a walking pilgrimage in Spain. In an attempt to deal with his grief, the father decides to complete the walk his son had just started. By the end of the movie, I had decided I would take this long walk to try to deal with my overwhelming grief.

I took myself totally out of my life here, to be alone, to walk 500 miles, to think, to pray, and ultimately to figure out what I was going to do now that the love of my life was gone. I was desperately seeking to find some peace in my soul.

This pilgrimage, known as the Camino, is a walk that takes about 6 weeks. So carrying everything I would need for the journey in a 20-pound backpack, I walked 500 miles across Spain, alone, and had the most profound life experience.

Stretching myself physically and emotionally for this long period gave me the opportunity to ponder deep questions about life. It slowly opened me to the life I have now and its many gifts.



Through these long walks I've grown to love any kind of walk in the woods, no matter where it is. I no longer need to go to a foreign land to find the peace and joy offered by nature. It's anywhere there are trees, including my backyard. I can feel the healing spirit of the path under my feet, the power of the trees to soothe my anxiety, the sky to open up my soul.

It's been almost 6 years since I lost the love of my life. Now I'm living a full, rich and happy life, with peace in my soul. There are, however, occasional times when the pain of the loss comes rushing back, momentarily taking my breath away. But the pain is muted now and lasts only a few seconds or minutes, before I return to the present. Now these are sacred moments, reminding me of the wonderful gift I had for a very long time.

Walking got me through the early intense pain of my grief. Now each day my spirit is nourished by walking in nature.

**"I go to nature to be soothed and healed,  
and to have my senses put in order."**

**--John Burroughs**

## A Walk by Orv Grimes

Well, here we are, honey. We turn down onto the trail this way, following the blazes on the trees that we'd always look for on our adventures. The soft crunch of the pine needles reminds me of trails we took as we explored the West, you as eager as I to see what was waiting for us ahead. Two against the world. Two, the incompressible number. I was not a single person any longer. I was half of us.

Here – this little dorky stream. It is going more or less straight, but still it wanders and bends. Not much to look at. It has serious doubts that it will ever amount to anything. Look, though, at this other stream: larger, straighter, flowing with confidence. And now, a miracle. Forces beyond our understanding decide that the two streams will come together. The smaller one can only bless his good fortune. He has a purpose. He is enriched beyond measure.

Here, honey, is our first look at the main stream. It magnifies what the smaller streams gave to it. We cannot tell whether this drop came from one smaller stream or the other, but it does not matter. We hear the drops gurgling and laughing as they set out.

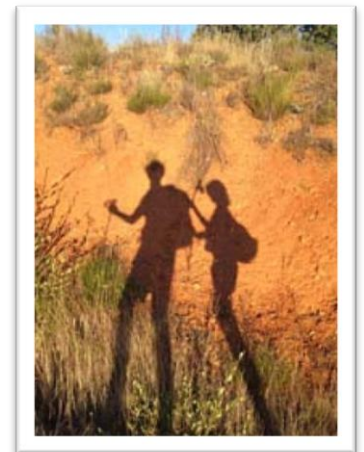
Right here, two drops pause along the bank. They stay behind as the main part of the stream tumbles over a rock and flows on its way. The drops think this is just fine. You already know what they say. They say to their fellow voyagers, “You go on ahead. We have made a joyous life here in this corner of the stream. We do not wish for more. We will stay here.”

The drops, after circling in the eddy for a while, have now been carried back into the main current. They are flowing downstream again. They travel fully as fast as the others. Slowing down or stopping is beyond their powers. Their fondest wish -- to have tomorrow be the same as today; to renew the gift of time; to always see the light in each other's eyes -- has been denied.

Wait! Look: We have come to a swamp. The water is completely still! Maybe what we yearn for is possible after all. We are now at the other end of the swamp. Beavers have built a dam. That could stop the flow for good.

But it does not. The water pours over the dam, and rushes onward. It seems to be moving even faster now, as it plunges across the beach. The drops merge with countless others in the vastness of the sea. The journey is done. But the drops do not disappear. We both are sure of that. They merely change form. They may rise in a cloud, or merge into the ocean, or fall as rain. Their identities can no longer be recognized, but their essence has been preserved.

Honey, this walk is one more journey that we have taken together. It has been a privilege, as all the others have been. What we have will last forever. And when I return here for another walk through our lives, I know that you will be waiting for me.



### HOW HAVEN IS FUNDED

Haven is classified by the Internal Revenue Service as a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization. It is funded mainly by donations from individuals in the community who wish to support our work and by those who donate in memory of a loved one. Donations are tax deductible. If you are interested in making a donation, please contact Haven at (703) 941-7000 or at [havenofnova@verizon.net](mailto:havenofnova@verizon.net)

Haven of Northern Virginia, Inc.

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## **Fall Schedule**

Six-week Suicide Loss Support Group  
Tuesday, October 3 – November 7, 2017  
7:30 – 9:00 p.m.

Six-week General Bereavement Support Group  
Wednesday, October 4 – November 8, 2017  
7:30 – 9:00 p.m.

Six-week Widow/Widower Support Group  
Saturday, September 30 – November 4, 2017  
Time(s) to be determined.

Call or email Haven to register for the groups.

Drop-in Suicide Loss Support Group  
1st and 3rd Saturdays of each month  
11:00 a.m. to 12:30 p.m.

*Haven also offers individual support by phone and in person; please call to schedule an appointment. For immediate support without an appointment, a volunteer is available on a walk-in basis Monday through Friday between 10:30 a.m. and 1:00 p.m.*

### **Contact Information**

Haven of Northern Virginia  
4606 Ravensworth Road  
Annandale, Virginia 22003  
Phone: (703) 941-7000  
Fax: (703) 941-7003  
E-mail: [havenofnova@verizon.net](mailto:havenofnova@verizon.net)

### **Hours of Operation**

Monday through Friday  
9:30 a.m. – 2:30 p.m.  
[www.havenofnova.org](http://www.havenofnova.org)

Messages may be left on our voicemail after hours