



Bonus Interview: Linda Lombardo, Forest Therapy Guide

Deb Elbaum: Welcome to *In the Right Direction* podcast, where we believe you get to choose what's on your plate, you can manage the overwhelm, and that change is possible. I'm your host, Deb Elbaum, and I'm here to share insights and strategies to increase your happiness one baby step at a time. Let's dive in.

Hi everyone, it's Deb. Today I have a bonus interview episode. I talk with coach Linda Lombardo who is a forest therapy guide who uses forests and nature in her coaching as a way to help people feel grounded and intentional about their lives. In our conversation, we discuss the physiologic and emotional benefits of forests and trees, how you can connect to nature, even if you're not near a forest, and I share my story about a tree that I call my tree. Let's dive in. Hi, Linda.

Linda Lombardo: Hi, Deb.

Deb Elbaum: I'm so glad you're here today. Thanks for joining me.

Linda Lombardo: Well, thank you for inviting me. I'm always delighted to talk about forest therapy and coaching.

Deb Elbaum: Yes, forest therapy. Let's dive right in. You are a forest therapy guide. What does that mean?

Linda Lombardo: Well first, it means that I've gone through training, and I've been certified by a group called the Association of Nature and Forest Therapy Guides and Programs, and that was in 2017. There was an immersion of- a full week's immersion in the Berkshire Mountains which was just beautiful. And then following that there was six months of practicum that included oh so many things. It included certainly some walks where we- we would do walk reports afterwards, and work with a mentor to see how did the walk go, where was our learning, what might be something that we wanted to work on the next time.

And then there were journals that we kept. Some of them were about the local animals, and we were drawing, not taking photos, because you really do learn about- about an object when you draw it much more so than when you photograph it, although I'm a nature photographer. So, it was so hard for me not to just go and photograph things. And tea plants and poisonous plants, and migrating birds, and just all sorts of information that we wouldn't normally share on the forest therapy walk, but for a guide to have that information. It's like our headroom or inventory or toolkit, as you might want to call it, that we know more than we're going to share. And if the time is right, I mean if the time comes up, then you might share something more than just the connection with the forest.

Deb Elbaum: Yeah, so that's who you are; I'd love to hear about what you do. You take people, you connect people to nature to forests, guide people on walks. What might a typical coaching forest walk involve?

Linda Lombardo: So, there's always some protocol, just as if you've ever gone to yoga. You don't dive right into the postures. There's always some stretching and warming up; maybe there's a meditation, and at the end, there's always something that kind of brings you back into the- the world you've separated from during the time that you've been practicing. So, the protocol in a forest therapy walk is very similar. You are- you're slowing down, you're arriving, so presencing. And then it really depends on the client's agenda, what happens next. For example, one thing I might do with a new client is I might invite them to wander and gather some forest treasure. So, it might not- It may- It may seem very random, and yet it's designed with a purpose.

So, they're drawn to certain objects, whether it's colors or textures, and when they bring them back, I ask them to arrange the items in a circle and then ask them to sit in the middle of the circle of all those treasures, and we begin our work there. We begin talking from there. And as we talk, I might intuitively ask them to pick up an item or say to them, "I'm going to invite you at any point when you're talking. If you want to pick up something, go ahead and do that." Like what object might be calling to you right now. And it could be a pinecone or a branch or a leaf or a rock, and that object becomes part of the story the client is sharing, or it can be a disrupter to the story, but only the client can tell which it might be.

Deb Elbaum: Who are the people who you think are drawn to this the most? What types of people?

Linda Lombardo: Well, I certainly think being a nature lover helps. And being in the awe of nature brings us into something called the liminal space, and that's the space in between everything. And as a coach, you know, one of the things we all tell our clients is to find a quiet private place to be, free from interruption. But usually that means the client is in their home, and they're surrounded by their possessions, or they're on a phone, or they're on the computer; they're on Zoom. And what I've learned is that when I take a client into the forest, whether it's a person that I'm taking physically into the forest, or we're in two different locations and we're on some kind of technology together, we can still enter that liminal space together. And, you know, it's like how we always have our best ideas in the shower or in the car. We're separated from what might interrupt us or distract us. And I believe that the forest is a place that we used to call home, so just being there makes us more permeable to our feelings and our thoughts and our ideas.

Deb Elbaum: It's so true, I find nature is such a place where I can think more expansively. And for me, it happens to be the beach, the expanse of the beach, in addition to the forest, and I'm wondering if there's something really special about the forest with the trees and the animals that might be different from mountains or a beach.

Linda Lombardo: You know, Deb, I think it's all nature. And so, the term forest therapy, or forest bathing, it kind of narrows down the possibilities for what happens. Whenever I'm in a place that might have a beach or has some kind of a water feature, I definitely go to the water and use that. And, you know, the mountain, whether it's the mountains, or it's farmland and meadow, all of that is nature, and a forest therapy guide, whether you're coaching or not, is going to change their invitations, which is what we call those moments where we might say, "Go out and connect with a tree," or "Go collect things in the forest." Those invitations are going to change depending on your location and the time of year and what you think the client might require. Sometimes I actually say to the client, "Let's- Let's walk down the trail, and you tell me when you want to stop somewhere." So there's a partnership between me and the client. There's a partnership between me and the forest. And I invite the client to create that partnership with the forest as well.

Deb Elbaum: Yeah. And as you're talking, it strikes me that many people might say, "Well, I walk in the woods. I walk with friends. I walk on walking paths." And what you're talking about is a really different experience. It's about being in the moment, fully present, and attuned to the world around us rather than attuned to being on a phone or talking with a friend.

Linda Lombardo: Absolutely, yeah, there is something there, and it is that- that permeability that I spoke of. You breathe the fresh air, the smell of what's in the forest or the beach (because you're a beach lover) the smell of the ocean water or the sand, the feel of the sand. We automatically let down some- some of our covering, some of our shell, and- and it makes it so much easier to- to talk about things that are very personable- personal or are very- make us very vulnerable. Does that make sense?

Deb Elbaum: Yeah. How- I'm curious because I think about people in corporate, right? So people who are so busy who think, "I might have no time to do this" and "How can this help me" and "I just have to- I have so many things on my to-do list that I have to do." How do you- how do you encourage people, business people, all of us who are so busy in our lives, to take the time to connect to nature.

Linda Lombardo: It really doesn't take a lot of time. I may be out with a client for 90 minutes. I may be out on a forest therapy walk for two or two and a half hours with an individual or a group of people. And yet, if you- if you take lunch (I know a lot of executives don't take lunch or they take it at their desk) just go out and find a tree somewhere. I remember I was- I was doing a class in a hotel, and I really wanted to ground myself. And it was so funny because I didn't really want to go outside. I didn't want to be that far away from the room that I was going to be working in, so I looked around the hotel for a plant. And I found a potted plant; I found a dieffenbachia of all things. And I- and I stood there and really just kind of stood next to the plant. I was just conscious of my breathing. And- and I didn't get much of a response from the plant. I always say, "Well, it's a dieffenbachia, it really, you know, didn't really care." And- and yet, it helped me. It helped me just to do that.

So, if you don't- if you're someone who doesn't get out for lunchtime, bring a couple of plants into your office. Or if you have a window, if you're fortunate enough to have a window, you know, maybe there's some greenery even if it's off in the distance, or bring in a piece of art because science tells us that even looking at art about nature calms us down, lowers the stress hormones in the body, the cortisol levels, eases our breathing, steadies our heart rate, does everything that actually being out in the- in the real, natural forest or the beach does, except for a couple of things. There are benefits of being in the forest, where you're breathing in the essential oils of the trees, the phytoncides, and that boosts our immune system.

Deb Elbaum: Say more about that. I've never heard about that.

Linda Lombardo: Oh, it's won- Well when, you know, when you walk into a forest, and it just smells like it's a woodsy, and it smells like pine which is one of my favorite scents. That is the tree's immune system. It's giving off its own essential oils, and we take that in; we breathe that in. And science has shown us that by spending two hours or more a week in a natural area like that with pine trees or other deciduous plants and trees, we can boost our immune system anywhere between 7 and 30 days.

Deb Elbaum: Wow. How did you get into all this in the first place? Where did you develop your love for trees and forests and nature?

Linda Lombardo: Well, I grew up at a time where kids spent a lot of time outdoors. It was the thing to do, whether it was after school or it was summer vacation. We were always outside. And I lived in the suburbs where across the street beyond the- that row of houses was a wooded area. And there were a lot of trees, and there was a stream, as I recall. And all the kids in the neighborhood would go there and play. We'd climb the trees, and we'd be barefoot in the stream. We'd be collecting all sorts of treasures or creatures and bringing them home, much to the dismay of our parents, and that was my playground, you know? I didn't- I- We didn't have playdates. We didn't- There were no community playground areas. We were just sent outside to play. And so loving nature and loving animals was really just part of my childhood.

Now, I have to say when I got older, on my 13th birthday to be exact, I'd gone out to dinner with my parents, and my mother took me aside after dinner, and she let me know that now that I was 13, I was a young lady. And now that I was a young lady, there'd be no more climbing trees and that I had to put the adventure side of me away and become more responsible. And I still remember that it's probably one of the worst birthdays I've ever, ever had. And I've had a lot of birthdays, you know? And it was a shock because there had never been any delineation between who I was and my age before.

And so, like many of us, a lot of other things began to take the place of play and playgrounds and forests and trees. And- And it was quite some time before I really came back to the idea that being connected to nature has absolutely no age limit.

Deb Elbaum: Yeah, and it's always- You know, so in my podcast, I like to think about how to help people feel empowered. And what I hear you saying is that coming back to nature, breathing in the essential oils of the trees, being in the present, calming down our nervous system is one way to help us be our best selves so that we can show up in the world, so that we can think, so that we can be in effective relationships, that it's a way to give us the foundation to be our best.

Linda Lombardo: I think grounding ourselves is one of- one of the things that we really forget to do. And- and if I may, I can share a story where I- I had a client who wasn't feeling grounded, was feeling very anxious about everything going on in the world. And so, we took that walk down a trail, and I said, "I just want you to stop anytime you find a tree that really just represents being grounded for you." And we walked- we walked for a little bit, and they stopped and said, "This tree. This tree right here. This represents being grounded." And it was this gorgeous, huge tree that if the two of us had tried to put our arms around it, we couldn't have. And at the bottom, its roots were like a- like this beautiful skirt and covered in green moss. I mean, it was just a beautiful tree; she couldn't have picked a more handsome tree. And she said, "This tree. This tree is grounded." And- and so we were talking about that, and with that tree for a while.

And all of a sudden, intuitively, something said to me, *Tell her to look up* because she wasn't. She wasn't looking up; she- most of us look within our own sight line, right? And that's a metaphor for a lot of things. So, she looks up. And this huge tree that was so still is absolutely dancing in the wind. The upper branches are going back and forth, and there was this moment of astonishment. And- And my client said, "Oh, I could just see myself up there swinging on one of those branches, like without a care in the world." That's an- that is an image I'm gonna hold for myself. And- And so I feel as if I had very little to do with that- that epiphany in that moment, that you can be grounded and rooted, and yet you can still sway in the breeze. And yet, in partnership with that tree, it's exactly what I do all the time.

Deb Elbaum: Yeah, so as you're talking, I'm thinking back to a tree that mattered to me. When my grandparents- My grandparents used to live in New York in Queens, and when I was born, they planted a tree in front of their house. And I always call that my tree. And so, whenever we visited them, I would talk to the tree and say hi to the tree and stand to take my picture with the tree. And just thinking about that now really brings a smile to my face that that was a touchstone for me. My tree. I haven't been back in many, many years. I don't know if it's still there.

Linda Lombardo: We have to find out. I mean, that's a beautiful story. And, you know, I- I have clients who say the same thing, "This is my tree now." And even when I'm in the forest alone, sometimes I've been known to just take a picture and shoot them a text and say, "Your tree says hi," and I don't know if it's annoying or not. Nobody's ever told me to stop. They all seem delighted that there was that connection somehow. But somehow, I- I remember, *This is so and so's tree, and this was where we did that*. And it's as if those- those moments have gotten frozen in time for me. And that doesn't mean somebody can't use the same tree, but what you just described, Deb, is something I do with groups when I'm walking

from one place to another. So that everything is present, everything is meaningful, I might ask them to share a tree story with someone on the walk, and those are the kinds of stories that I hear where there's this just deep connection with a tree. So it's lovely. I love your story.

Deb Elbaum: Yeah, thank you so much. Thanks for the reminder that- that we are nature, and that nature is a gift that we can connect to- to ground ourselves, to see ourselves and our world in a different way. And so thanks; thanks for this really interesting conversation. If people want to find out more about you and what you do, where can they find you?

Linda Lombardo: Well, they can find me at wildheartnatureconnection.com, and I also have a presence on Facebook and Instagram, LinkedIn and Twitter. So I'm- Really searching for wild heart nature connection is- is all they need to do.

Deb Elbaum: Wonderful. Thank you so much, Linda.

Linda Lombardo: Well, Deb, thank you so much for having me. I've enjoyed sharing my stories and hearing yours.