



# BECOMING FOREST TOOLKIT

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A close-up photograph of a weathered wooden plank. The plank is positioned horizontally and has the words "THOSE WHO ARE HEALED ARE THE HEALERS" written on it in white, hand-painted capital letters. The plank is set against a background of dark, textured wood. Several bright pink strings are stretched across the scene, some in the foreground and some in the background, creating a web-like pattern. There are also pieces of bright yellow fabric or paper attached to the strings, some appearing as small tags or pieces of material. The lighting is somewhat dim, highlighting the texture of the wood and the vibrant colors of the strings and fabric.

THOSE WHO ARE HEALED  
ARE THE HEALERS

Healing is a circular journey between trauma and recovery without definite ending points. Going through this circle again and again, we build up the strength and the knowledge of healers.



# Mental health as collective responsibility

Breakwater

Youngsook Choi & Taey Iohe

Becoming Forest is a community-oriented healing project focusing on mental health issues accelerated by Covid-19. Drawing upon Franz Fanon's seminal observation on the relationship between colonial oppression/violence and mental illness, Becoming Forest conceptualises collective healing as performing justice. It aims to build a solidarity circle of care, specifically for Southeast and East Asian (SEA) refugees and precarious migrants.

In our approach to articulating collective healing as a migrant justice practice, our participatory process tests out the concept of 'folk healer', which respects and speaks through the participants' cultural common grounds, giving equal weight to both verbal and non-verbal communications. The folk healing approach counters the limitations of western psychotherapy based on individualised pathologisation and patient-healer binary. Becoming Forest sees the collective healing of mental health issues as a slow, empathetic and ecological process, positioning nature and time as key healers. This was composed of a series of seasonal forest walks and creative workshops via digital spaces.

Through the walks and workshops, we experimented with different methods that explore the notion of collective healing. This toolkit comprises of what we did and learnt over the one and a half years of running the pilot programme, examining the full circle of four seasons. We wrote and edited this specifically for the community organisers, creative educators and art practitioners whose works are at the juncture of creativity and activism and who might want to try out a similar approach to mental health issues. We hope this resource catalyses more conversations around the mental health issues caused by structural faults such as racism, misogyny and class trauma.



# Autumn

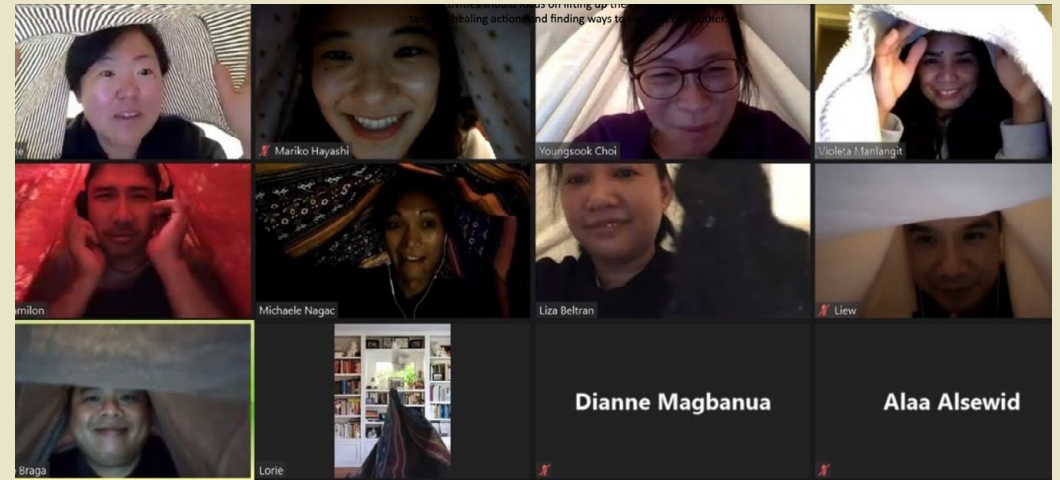




# A time for active healing

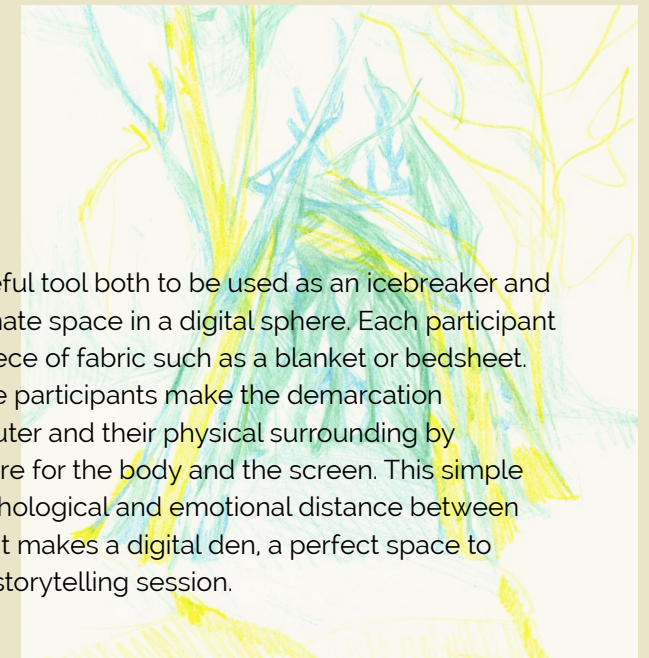
Autumn could probably be the best season to start the journey of collective healing.

As the trees start shedding their leaves and the days get shorter and darker, many people fall into emotional struggles, often with serious homesickness. The autumnal activities should focus on lifting the mood, planning out tangible healing actions and finding ways to look out for each other.



## Web of Den

Web of den is a useful tool both to be used as an icebreaker and for creating an intimate space in a digital sphere. Each participant joins with a large piece of fabric such as a blanket or bedsheet. Using this fabric, the participants make the demarcation between the computer and their physical surrounding by creating an enclosure for the body and the screen. This simple act makes the psychological and emotional distance between participants closer. It makes a digital den, a perfect space to accommodate the storytelling session.



## Fallen-leaves art



Trees are shedding their leaves in the autumn, getting ready to switch off and hibernate in the winter. The fallen leaves are full of seasonal beauty with vibrant colours. A fallen leaf art activity pays attention to specifically broken fallen leaves - the ones with holes, the ones partly damaged. The participants collect broken leaves before the workshop and use them to create imaginative beings. This simple act of giving something damaged and wounded a second life is inspired by the Japanese Kintsugi philosophy that **celebrates imperfection and brokenness and its power to strengthen us**. It is also a way to talk about how we recognise our inner scars as well as resilience.



## Self-care mobile

Fallen leaves can also be used for creating a self-care mobile. Various shapes and colours of leaves would be the ideal collection for this activity. **Have a moment together to think about what would be tangible and necessary care acts now**. Ask the participants to write down their self-care disciplines based on different acts of care on the leaves, so that the mobile can act as a reminder (i.e. water, 30 mins walk a day). Also, you can decide the period of each discipline as some acts of care require longer periods (i.e. one week-one month-three months approach).





# Autumn walk

## Walking Stick

Once reaching the entrance of the forest, start the walk with this instruction:

Pay attention to the ground and find a walking stick. As you will form the companionship with this stick for the whole journey, please give it a name. Also think about the transformative power of your act that turns a dead fallen branch into a useful companion and how the value often lies and is created in the eyes of the beholder.



## Solidarity Postcard

Each walk ends with a picnic and food sharing. After this, make some quiet time to think of those who are going through difficult times and are not with us here. Write a message for them, draw something inspired by the forest on the front, and post in on the way back.

# Dear fellow migrant community organisers and activists

Mariko Hayashi  
Director, SEEAC

## How are you feeling today?

Our collective journey of Becoming Forest began in the Autumn, a bittersweet season. While embracing the beauty of leaves changing colour, one feels rather anxious about the long, dark and cold winter to come.

This was especially so in the autumn of 2020, when our Becoming Forest group first met. Isolation, fear, uncertainty, loneliness, confusion, difficulties with adopting new lifestyles, or little control over our own lives... This has been felt by many people during the pandemic, but these have always been feelings that accompanied our journeys and lives as migrants.

Life became even more precarious for many of our fellow migrants.

Situations have deteriorated more for some because of their different identities and experiences as migrants who are seeking asylum, migrants who are undocumented or stateless, migrants with a temporary status and no recourse to public funds, women migrants, LGBTQ+ migrants, migrants with disabilities, or migrants living under other circumstances. Being ESEA migrants also contributed to our increased vulnerabilities during the coronavirus outbreak and the pandemic as we have experienced.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, our communities increasingly suffered from not only the disease itself, but also from violence, discrimination, exploitation, destitution, homelessness, mental distress and

even deaths while being unable to access necessary support. We know many of these problems were caused by the systemic oppression of racial others, resulting from xenophobic anti-immigration policies, as well as securitised border controls, which have systemically taken away safety, dignity, hopes, family and even lives from a large number of migrants for a long time.

Being inspired by many fellow human rights activists and influenced by my own migration journeys after growing up in a former mining community in Japan, I have committed myself to advocate for the rights of migrants over a decade. Throughout this time, I knew that migrants, particularly those who are with temporary, insecure or limited immigration status

and those experiencing multiple forms of marginalisations, would be the most vulnerable groups when society faced a crisis. However, I had not seen that happen on this scale until COVID-19 hit us.

The scale of community grief and devastation often reminded me of natural disasters that took away thousands of lives and livelihoods every year in my home country. At the same time, the experiences during the pandemic made me incredibly angry, because many of the devastating experiences of migrant communities were predictable and avoidable, yet we could not prevent them. Community grief became my own grief. As COVID-19 hit every corner of society, we had to speak even louder than usual to get the





experiences of migrant communities heard. I was extremely exhausted. This was how I was feeling in autumn 2020.

A year-long journey with the Becoming Forest family gave me the space to breath as a human being, and the chance to touch the kind hearts of friends and repay that kindness in an act of care. Drawing pictures and creating hanging mobiles with autumn leaves taught us the beauty of broken and mottled leaves and bent branches.

I was reminded that I do not always need to be strong, and that I can benefit from just accepting myself and surroundings as they are and focus on the beauty within them. During our workshops, in which we

created artwork, shared stories and songs from home and abroad, and ate together through our screens, we created such a loving and caring community regardless of different immigration status the authorities had given us, which, in the outside world, determined who we were, how we were treated and what levels of rights and freedom we were given. As time went on, we welcomed new family members and also some could not continue the journey with us. Yet, our circle of care continued to grow, we as migrants naturally understood precarious situations of many and needs for flexibility and acceptance. We stayed in touch wherever possible and welcomed new and returning members with open hands.

I feel this is a strength many of us have been equipped with through our migration journeys. We celebrated a new life born and grieved a death together as one family in this foreign land. Looking back, I think that this community-led approach of Becoming Forest is a very natural solution to the challenges faced by migrant communities, because while living in a foreign land a community becomes our family to keep us warm together.

The pictures we painted in the forest and maps of our own forest walks we drew during our final workshop in Autumn 2021, were so colourful and full of creative ideas. Like autumn leaves, they were all so unique and beautiful in their own ways.





After completing a year-long journey with my Becoming Forest family, I felt that I was more ready for the long dark winter to come, as I had this caring and loving family. Although this specific journey may have finished, this family continues to care for each other. As I write this, in fact, winter seems not as dark as I thought it was a year ago – I am able to enjoy the beauty of frost, trees without leaves and the moon that can be seen on a clear cold morning.

I have always believed that migrant communities are strong, resilient, and able to make changes, as we have always done so in our own personal lives through migration, but now I also believe that our community-led care and support

systems are also vital to our own resilience. Our circle of care is made up of kindness and respect that we bring for each other and makes us live a life with dignity.

Dear fellow migrant community organisers and activists, you work so hard to bring changes to migrant communities of your own and beyond so that every human being, regardless of their race, ethnicity, nationality or immigration status and any other identities or beliefs, will be treated equally with dignity. Our struggles will continue and they may be more challenging in the coming years with the impact of this pandemic. We need people like you. I need comrades like you. So, please take a moment, when you feel exhausted, and get together

with your own Becoming Forest family, or come and join us. Self-care is a form of resistance to heal our soul and body, in order to bounce back in the fight against inequality and injustice when we are ready again.

In solidarity,  
Mariko Hayashi

In London, January 2022

# Winter



# Visioning the new year; making an annual mood board

Winter can be an isolating and lonesome season for our migrant communities. Especially for Southeast Asians, who don't experience severe cold at home, the UK winter can be quite challenging.

Winter can also be a good season to recognise processes, build care networks to share a bowl of soup together with, and engage in small rituals and everyday routines mindfully.

We prepare winter sessions for creating visions together; making an annual mood board, practicing mindful eating, sharing knowledge about food as medicine and making a daily or weekly reflection with visual journaling.

Together, we imagined our annual vision board including our hopes, plans, reflections, self-images using different colours, textures, words and images.

Moodboard made by Lorie (top-left), Diwata (top-right) and Violeta (bottom)





# Mindful cooking & eating

We preserve our physical and emotional energy in the winter. We practiced how we can be mindful regarding our eating and how this can be a meditative practice. Together, we cooked our daily healing food, talked about our recipes and enjoyed the comfort of dinner time. We practiced to be present, accepting our feelings, thoughts, and sensations through preparing, cooking, plating, smelling, chewing and digesting.

Mindful cooking starts with the careful observation and preparation of core ingredients - How they smell, what sounds they make when being washed and cut, what colours, textures and structures they have, and how they all play together in your cooking?



## Youngsook's winter savoury rice.

Steam the jasmine rice with succulent shiitake mushrooms, seasonal greens, peeled prawns and sunflower seeds and serve it with cucumber slices and a drizzle of sesame oil.

## Dianne's Kare-kare

A popular Filipino dish served on special occasions. It is a stew with a thick savory peanut sauce. This traditional recipe uses meat such as oxtail along with veggies like aubergine, green beans and pakchoi. It is usually eaten with a shrimp paste for a more flavourful taste.



**Begin with your list of ingredient.** Have a dish in mind, but be spontaneous about changing and be playful with ingredients. We love our spices, sauces, herbs and little tangs in our Asian home-cooked meals. Also consider the health value of the items.

**Appreciate your food.** Have a brief moment of thanks for your food. Think about the journey of ingredients and express your gratitude either silently or say short words for the food you are eating.

**Open all your senses.** Notice the colour, texture, smell and sound around food. Take it slowly to experience fully and chew thoroughly.



# Food as medicine



Mariko's plantain drying for sore throat



June's ginger and diakon soup with spring onion



Tae's soy marinated wild garlic leaves and gimbab making.

Liew says,  
"When preparing this meal, I feel blessed, moving away from the rat-race, loneliness, stress, a depressive state of mind; when consuming this meal, I take each bite with gratitude and take in the flavour slowly."



**Food is medicine.** We share our thoughts about how our food is deeply related to our daily lives and how impactful it can be for our health. Everyone's body takes different food in different ways - realising what kind of food is suitable and beneficial to us, is an important learning curve for our healing journey.





# Winter walk





# Acknowledgements & resilience

## Violeta Manlangit Becoming Forest companion

[Content notes - child death, labour exploitation]

Each one of the Becoming Forest members has great potential to encourage the community members by displaying their ability and capability to help others embrace the important area of their life - the mental health, which is essential for achieving and leading a happy life. It is greatly affecting our emotions and mindset and plays a part in our self-esteem. Let's not neglect it!

When the pandemic started in the UK, I was thinking of my family back home, hoping that no one will contract the virus. I almost lost my job, my boss gave me choices, stay with them or no job until the virus is gone. I chose to stay in my employer's flat close to their house, but it was so exhausting, relentless long working hours, using my time even on my day off, dumping the kids in my flat for me to look after so they can overwork. Even when they were all at home, I needed to sit with the kids one by one in their online classes to make sure they were on camera and listening, helping them to do their homework plus the household chores. And my rent was deducted from my monthly salary.

I said to myself it's ok, better than nothing and I can still help my family back home. I ended up having gastro problems as I did not have enough time to rest and eat,



### Violeta's Palitaw

"About how we are hit in the situation that we have been in the trials that make us weak and overwhelmed, storms after storms of life. Like this Palitaw, once you throw it in boiling water it stays at the bottom for a few minutes but eventually it rises up or comes up to the top once cooked and ready. Same as our lives. We often stumble and fall, we are hit by the storm of lives, but because of God's help, family, friends and community, we come up well and overcome the storm. We will never always be at the bottom, there is a lot of chances to be at the top and be victorious."

receiving 3 months of medication. But I had no choice.

The online workshops brought by Becoming Forest, Kanlungan, and Voice of Hope church helped me a lot during my day off when I had time to join them! I received vouchers from all the workshops that I had attended. I used them for my weekly groceries. And Sunday morning I went out to have a walk alone. After 6 months, I survived and was healed! Thank you, Lord.

Then, I was completely broken by another unforgettable experience I had within 3 years and 3 months of my stay here in the UK. My husband whom I trusted and loved turned away from me and rejected me. He found a new apple in his eyes. It hurt me so much that I felt like a candle melting thoroughly. I was angry and full of hatred at him to dump me for another woman.

One day I found myself with a forgiving heart, understanding the circumstances of having a long-distance relationship and it's not just a couple of years we were not seeing each other in person! I learned to be strong, focusing on my everyday duty. Life doesn't guarantee happiness all the time. It's ok to cry out loud to release the

emotion inside that heart!

On April 16 2021, it's been one year now. My daughter-in-law fought and endured giving birth to a baby girl. Sadly, my beautiful granddaughter, Khalestine passed away only after 8 days. She had lots of health problems. She couldn't breathe in oxygen with heart and lung failure while other internal organs were infected too. An unbearable condition, we tried our best to provide her medications, showing our love and joy of having her but she survived only 8 days! The whole day and night my heart was aching, my bones were weak with no strength. I was like a low battery cell phone, powerless! No one to cry next to me, I couldn't even hug my son to comfort him and see the baby in person. I felt sick.

After a month, as I came down the lobby of the flat where I was staying, my feet dragged me to the mailbox. What a surprise. I was astonished, who are these cards from? They were all for me! With joy and gladness, my tears were running as I went through the messages of sympathy and love that Becoming Forest members extended in my sorrowful heart. It was so touching, knowing that I have a family here, a community who carried my burdens too and with me in my darkest moment! Becoming Forest you are great! I'm telling you that being connected to one another is like the trees that hold their roots firmly to find their stand and balance!

It's a wonderful feeling I had when I walked with them in Epping Forest. I enjoyed it a lot. Eating together, painting and encouraging everyone, and having coffee together!

I treasure those moments! Memorable events! The feeling that you are not alone, like we are in the same boat, sailing together, enjoying the beautiful forest bedded with tall trees, green leaves, singing birds and ducks in the lake, was a beautiful experience! I'm longing for it to happen again!

May my stories and thoughts be an encouragement to you and bring joy! May God continuously protect us, bless us and be gracious to us! More power to the Becoming Forest!



**Violeta** is one of our active participants in the Becoming Forest community. She is a domestic worker in London. She has four children in the Philippines whom she single handedly has been supporting. She is a dedicated leader in her church community.



# Becoming forest becoming a mother

## Paul Anne Quibael-Forman Becoming Forest companion

Growing up, I saw myself growing old alone with my dogs and pets. Living far away from the city, in my own farm – and now, I am in London, a mom to my beautiful daughter, Tala and a wife to an amazing husband, Jacob. As I transition to accepting all these beautiful blessings in my life, it has taken me a while to get used to it.

In 2019, I moved to the UK with my husband. Walking in the forest has always been therapeutic for both of us, but this journey with Taey and Youngsook has helped me lay my roots down in my new home.

London is different from where I grew up, in different ways. Seeing Southeast Asian strangers has made me feel home – even if we do not talk, even if it is just a smile or just a glance. Who would have thought that a stranger would make me feel safe.

As I go through my pregnancy, my emotions are like big waves. My fears and my worries have been overwhelming but each session has helped me become more in touch with my core, with my roots, with my inner self. The space that each session offered, allowed me to remember my roots back in the Philippines and rediscover, replenish and replant those roots here in my new home.



### Anne's Adobong sitaw

"We had a session about mindful eating. Oh we Filipinos love sharing our food! I prepared adobong sitaw (sautéed string beans in soy sauce) and ensaladang pipino (cucumber salad in vinegar). This session reminded me of that long table in my grandmother's kitchen, and how much she showered us with love by preparing food."

We had a session about mindful eating. Oh we Filipinos love sharing our food! I prepared adobong sitaw (sautéed string beans in soy sauce) and ensaladang pipino (cucumber salad in vinegar). This session reminded me of that long table in my grandmother's kitchen, and how much she showered us with love by preparing food.

We had a session about songs that reminded us of winter (rainy season) and I enjoyed going back to memory lane where all I could think of was my grandmother's lullaby - a lullaby that I now sing to my daughter.

We have a group chat and one of my favourites is the daily 8AM message from Liew. It has become my daily reminder that it's a new day and will be beautiful!

As each session progress, my roots are being nurtured and as my pregnancy comes to an end, I feel more confident that I can do this new journey.

Connecting to my roots has been helpful in this new chapter of my life. It made me feel that even if I am far away from my family, I have a chosen family here in the UK that shares the same longing, feelings, and experiences.

Deciding that I would like to be a mother is a big thing but going through the process was bigger than I thought it would be, and nurturing my inner child helped me prepare to face a new role in my life.

When we began the journey, Taey and Youngsook promised a journey of healing and this journey did not just help me heal, but also helped me give birth to a mother I didn't think I could be. *Winter*

**Anne** is a migrant from the Philippines who joined her husband in the UK so they can start their family. She left the Philippines as a professional counsellor and managed to get her license in the UK to practice counselling. As she starts a new chapter of her life and faces struggles and difficulties of a migrant living in the UK, she found a safe space in Becoming Forest and treasures every moment with the group.





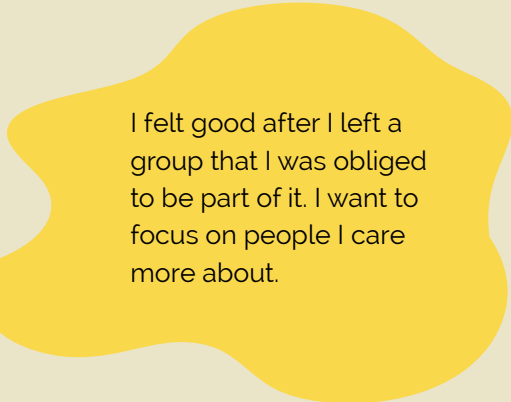


SPRING



# Small acts for change and the moments of self-gratitude

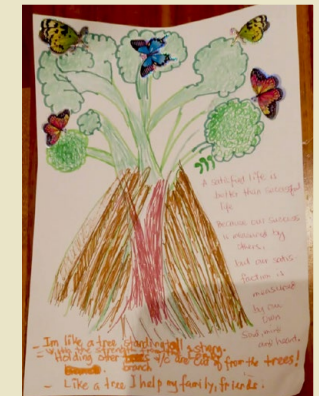
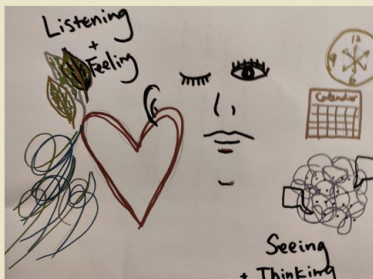
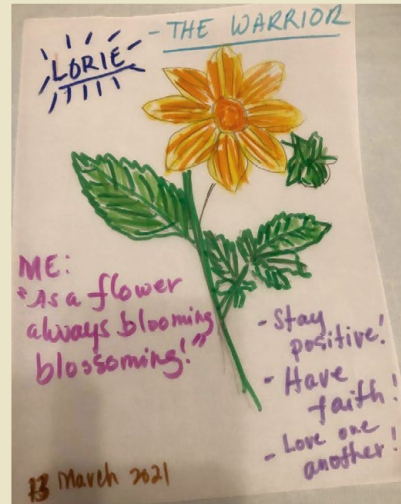
We acknowledge the fatigue and strength required to endure the hardship of wintertime. In the Spring session, we started with a gentle meditation and paired up with our buddy (see buddy system in p.82) to exercise listening carefully to each other, without giving an immediate reaction or advice right away. We exchanged our ideas about what kind of small act could bring joyful moments in life.





# Self Portrait as healing process

Along with our companions, we created our own portraits. The pictures revealed our hidden strengths, desires and pleasures. Making a self-portrait practice is a way in which to explore our own identity in our own terms and redefine who we are. Whilst making this, we process the lightness and heaviness in our pain, loss, loneliness, dreams and uncertainty in daily lives. Instead of the quick snap of a selfie shot, we look inside ourselves, revealing the joyful and true side of ourselves.





## New season

Cường Phạm  
Radio producer

Spring is an old English word that was originally used to describe the source of a well or stream, the place where a flow of water naturally flows from the earth.

A stream has a start point and is usually steady and calm. Radio production is much like a stream, at first it can be steady and calm, slowly trickling by, not letting the current overwhelm us. We can dip our toes in the stream, as we walk with the stream, we can let the gentle waters caress the nooks and crannies of our feet. With a well, the level of water can fluctuate, depending on the groundwater levels versus our needs and usage. If we imagine the well to be our energy levels, in other words the time spent sitting behind a computer. There will be times when we can spend hours and thus we need to step away to replenish our wells of energy.

Later the word spring then started to be used in the context of the first sign or beginning of something, such as the expression the spring of the year.



My journey in radio production started modestly whilst producing a show which I co-hosted on SOAS Radio. At first, I was limited in what I could do, but slowly and steadily with the aid of YouTube, Reddit, other blogs, and friends, I was able to excavate new sources of water.

If you too hope to begin something new such as radio production, the following will act as a sharing resource. Remember spring is the season of new growth; steady, slow, to be admired and enjoyed.

### Guided by Sound

As the child of two Vietnamese first generation migrants to Britain, I grew up in a home where I was limited by the words I could communicate to my parents, extended family, and friends. When I entered the formal education schooling system I too found that it took me a long time to master my adopted tongue. I like to think my ears grew to have a heightened sense of nonverbal sonic awareness. When my understanding of words lacked, I instead looked for meaning in the pace, intonation, tone, and stress of words/ sentences being delivered. I read the cues from the loudness or pitch of a voice to glean what information I could. I learned to understand the hiss, the sighs, the pauses of the speakers to find clues.



As I reacquaint myself with my mother tongue through formal language lessons I still find myself in a cognitive gap between myself and the other person or people I speak to. I think, I am aware that understanding is not always delivered in meaning.

For the Spring episode of Becoming Forest, we, Breakwater (Taey & Youngsook) and I, tried to sonically impart some sense of unspoken joy, empathy, and care into our work. Collectively we will never be able to fully capture the lived experiences of the resilience, resistance, and agency of Southeast and East Asian diasporas. But thinking about the natural sonic environment, non-English oral and musical cultures we hope to build bridges across communities and generations.

### Hardware

Putting together a radio piece can be out of the reach of many individuals due to the high costs associated with production. The hardware that is needed to run high computer processing power can be out of reach for many. If you can afford to buy a premium PC or Mac this makes it easier. Another way to get access to premium hardware is by hiring it, apps such as Fat Llama give you an idea of who is nearby to you and what prices they charge. Some of my friends at SOAS Radio used the computers in the radio station and they were also preloaded with the software



needed. If you cannot get access to a computer with high processing power, but you can a computer that is slow, there are ways to speed up the current machine you have access to.

### Software

For software, I was fortunate to be able to have access to the complete Adobe suite through my university. When I finished my studies, I used the login details of friends who I knew had access to Adobe through their institutions. Adobe lets you use its software across two machines simultaneously, ask around and maybe someone can share it with you. Adobe does offer free trials which you can use for a short period, they also offer heavily reduced discounts when you threaten to cancel, so that can be another avenue to explore. Those who are more tech-savvy can turn to P2P sharing sites/tech which offers an alternative way of downloading expensive software for free. Alternatively, you can use free software such as Audacity instead.

### Capturing sound

If you need to capture field recordings you can use professional handheld sound recorders such as Zoom or Tascam. If you cannot access these recorders, capturing sound on your phone generally does a great job. Myself, I used a mixture of my phone and my Zoom device to capture a variety of sounds used

for the Becoming Forest sound pieces on multiple occasions. Any unwanted sounds generally can be removed in the editing process.

### Sourcing sound

If you cannot go out and capture the sound you want, for whatever reason, there exist some excellent sonic libraries online. YouTube has a great selection of sounds and can be downloaded by using YouTube ripping technology, my personal favourite being 4K Video Downloader, a desktop application. Other sites exist online too, some less restrictive. For sounds that cannot be downloaded because they sit behind sophisticated software, say a big streaming behemoth, you can use Audacity to record a copy of the sound directly to your desktop computer.

### Headphones

For editing, I tend to stay away from Bluetooth headphones because the technology I feel is still not good enough for my liking. I use wired headphones, my personal favourite is the Audio-Technica m20x, it has clear sound, the wear is comfortable, and the price is reasonable. These tend to retail at £40 but if that is something you cannot afford you can buy cheaper wired earphones at a quarter of the price which are also sufficient. You would be surprised at how many professional musicians use cheap earphones to produce music.

### Mentor

Having a mentor, especially one that has more experience than you, is useful, you can ask specific questions and in turn, receive the answer you need. Even though YouTube and Reddit can be useful resources to find specific needs, unfortunately, the jargon and technical terms might be a barrier to entry. Mentors can come in many forms and guises, even a friend offering advice on a process can be a form of mentorship.

### In between seasons

The character Gloucester from Richard III famously said: "Now is the winter of our discontent / Made glorious summer by this sun of York". These two lines show the stark contrast between the discontent of winter, with its long dark and cold days, whereas summers are glorious, hot and a time of long sunny days. Spring sits right in between these two, it is a time of new beginning, when the animals come out from hibernation, when the flowers and fruits start to sprout, and birds chirp at dusk. Spring is a time for growth and there is no better time to take up something new.









# Spring walk

## Best version of myself

Describe yourself and your life the best way you can. This descriptor doesn't have to be necessarily based on what you achieved in the past. It can also be about how you accept your vulnerability. It can be about your acts of kindness or best food recipe you are proud of. Cherish your idiosyncrasy and cultural uniqueness unapologetically.



## Little shrine

Study the structure of the dens around you. Build a mini version to become your shrine. You can build one by yourself or together with other companions. When it's completed, write down your three wishes on the paper strip. Share them with others. Lay your wishes inside the shrine.



# Summer





# Ghosts in a fruit shell



Summer is the season for fun and lightweight activities. People also tend to get high-spirited with longer daylight. Plan the activities to seize this seasonal bright energy. And involving fruits is always a good idea!

Many of the usual participants are from tropical countries, and the Summer fruits are something we could share with excitement. Fruit carving is a fun craft activity that brings specific cultural narratives around colourful edibles - how we consume fruits differently, seasonal fruity memories of homelands. Sharing ghost stories while biting the beautiful works makes the gathering even more joyful.





# Mythologies and folklore

The previous session, where we shared the ghost stories we grew up with, provoked interest in further exploring vernacular mythologies and folklore. It is also intriguing that Amabie, a mythological hybrid of a woman with long hair and fish body, became a popular symbolic talisman during the pandemic in Japan. The mythologies and folklore tales we inherited affect how we relate ourselves to others and nature. Sharing the spiritual power of these mythologies helps understand the roots of one another better.



**Tikbalang** is a humanoid creature with a head and hooves of a horse. It lurks in the mountains and big trees and scares travellers, leading them astray. To tame a tikbalang, you need to obtain one of the sharp spines from its mane.

**Monkey King, Sun Wukong** (孫悟空) in Chinese mythology, is a trickster god who has a superpower to transform into 72 different animals and objects.



**A catfish**, river monster attacks baby animals and causes earthquakes. Any attempt to catch it can bring bad luck!

# Summer walk: forest meditation

## Exploring your senses and paying gratitude

### Seeing

We enter a state of "soft fascination" in the woods where we become more attentive and more receptive to our environment. We think and see more clearly in nature. Take a photo of a spot or natural object that give you a sense of comfort.

### Hearing

There is a rich symphony of life in the forest. You can hear bird songs, flowing water and the branches of the trees in the breeze. Take a pause, close your eyes and try to catch the sounds you didn't notice before.

### Smelling

Think of a forest as a natural spot for aromatherapy. The soil, rich in nutrients, is also good for smelling. Inhaling the smell of dirt has been found to work as an antidepressant. Describe what you smelt in one or two words.

### Touching

Play with the soil, run your hands through leaves and feel the texture of tree's bark. Lay paper on the surface and rub it with a crayon to copy the texture you enjoyed the most.

### Tasting

Forests are full of delicious food, sweet berries, mushrooms and plants. If you spot anything edible, please bring it to the picnic blanket :)

### Lastly, Gratitude

Have a moment of gratitude. How the forest welcomes your body and mind. How the forest heals up your lungs filled with anxiety. How the forest soothes your heart, tired of busy schedules and overloaded emotions. Find a mother tree or old stone and express your gratitude to it.

\*Ref: [animist.eco/forest-meditation](http://animist.eco/forest-meditation)



During our walk, June rests at our halfway treehouse.



# Community healing from the perspective of a herbalist healer

Community Herbalist, Rasheeqa Ahmed

## Stories come out when we walk together.

Of all the many activities I have done in ten years practicing as a herbalist in my community, exploring this way and that way in the relations between land and people and health and myself, the herb walks are always the most relaxed, the most horizontal, relationally, and often the most joy-bringing, in that intangible sense of lift and connection that comes in moments when life seems to meet meaning.

The process that happens when you do a day of walking through a landscape together, has been a familiar experience since my childhood. Uncle Bernard, a Yorkshireman and joyous heart

of a person found by my Mum to childmind us while she worked as a doctor in Leeds, took us for walks in the Yorkshire Dales along with his church group. Often 30 or 40 people strong, with adults, kids, young people, and dogs.

We called him Uncle Bernard because as our family is Indian, all elders have a prefix rather than just their first name. In family relations, in India, this term is very specific to their connection with ones mother and father, but a general non-related elder is auntie or uncle. He was a brilliant elder for me, my sister and brother - probably in his 60's at the time, he was a child himself in his excitement and wonder at life. He would give us riddles to solve that had been in his own 11+ school exam. Once, on



the bus, he give us a quarter of a lemon cut in an unfamiliar way and told us to guess what it was - an early form of intuitive herb tasting, as the unfamiliarity confused one's perceptions of what it was. A big fun stimulating character, always loved and remembered.

He had strong wrinkly red-palmed hands with practical fingers and wore checked tweedy jackets with huge pockets that held chocolate for us on Fridays, and an eternal twinkle

in his eyes. On the Dales walks he showed us the power of love and compassion, bringing along people who were experiencing suffering in their lives and supporting them with togetherness and counsel. I remember his hands pouring steaming tea from a flask and unwrapping ham sandwiches and sprinkling salt on tomatoes.

Our walks would begin with a prayer, all gathered together. Then we would set off from a limestone town

in the West Ridings, cross a canal, walk up into hills, through woods and over sheer wild bleak land that stretched on forever, gloriously. Through spring or autumn rain all wrapped in cagoules, through summer sun where the gorgeousness of wild earth and flowers first spoke to me, talking, sharing, laughing, sometimes escaping death. Like when my little brother somehow got into a situation crossing a tussocky field being chased by a horse - rescued by one of the dads of the walks who jumped in and plucked him out. We all found great camaraderie together and the group always welcomed us, these three young British Indian children, as one of their own.

Look how I started this piece telling you about herb walks and then this story came out. That early experience of walking together - I'm so grateful to Uncle Bernard and my mum for giving us this - meant that it was always instilled in me. This journey that happens when walking, when through the hours of morning,

lunch and afternoon, you change as a person and you move through perspectives and phases that you couldn't experience if you didn't do the whole thing.

Taey and Youngsook offered me another chance to walk in a group through the forest as part of this project. Again, I found that journey where you meet people you don't know, conversing while moving through, moving with and in the living set of the wild world, as multiple players on the stage. Possibilities and outcomes are more undefined. You don't know what will happen. As a so-called healer, I am interested in this shifting of reality, from our quotidian ones, often stuck and repetitive, to others that feel more akin to what life really might be.

A friend, who also leads foraging walks, once spoke of how the didactic nature of 'teaching' a subject, the hierarchising of 'teacher' and 'learners' is transformed and rendered less necessary, on these walks, because people feel freer to

express and share their knowledge than they might in a 'classroom'. We are also in small subgroups where often we are more comfortable to give of ourselves and to hear others. I feel it's really true. And so walking together becomes a chance to understand, to explore and to exchange each other's life experiences, with a level of honesty that maybe doesn't happen all the time. We become confidantes with the forest.

On our Becoming Forest walk, and through preparatory walks and talks with Taey and Youngsook, I learnt about the life situations and support networks of several different members of the UK community who are of South East Asian heritage, living in different parts of this land. I heard and sorrowed about racism and injustices towards, and unheard voices of, these communities. I found out that in the New Malden neighbourhood of South West London there is a mouthwatering hub of excellent Korean cuisine. I practiced saying Vietnamese greetings. I learnt about Korean



seasonal foraging practices, food recipes like dried and prepared springtime ferns eaten in deep winter to bring the vitality of that earlier season, and herb folklore and creation stories with the tiger and the bear and the Mugwort and the garlic. I heard about Balut, the Filipino street food delicacy where the egg is steamed with the tiny chicken inside it, and the range of responses to it. I swung on rope





swings while we all laughed a lot at both. I watched as a local Chingford woman got cross, passing us, when we had gathered around a bridge to look at nettle seeds. Maybe we looked to her like a cluster of 'others' that she didn't like. I heard from some of the group that this hostility was a familiar, soul-destroying experience in this country.

We were together to eat lunch

under great grandparent beeches and oaks with a baby lying serene and sweet on dappled sunlight and earth. We passed a memorial monument to Romany gipsy Rodney Smith who had been born in a tent in Epping Forest. Youngsook spoke of how his life story makes resonant for her the trope of the 'good migrant' who redeems their existence through work that is approved by the dominator culture. He had been a missionary, an evangelist preacher who travelled the world by ship spreading the gospel. Himself a person from a marginalised community, grown in the woods, travelling as a child in his family's horse-drawn wagon and learning crafts.

It reminds me again of Uncle Bernard, who in his other life that we didn't know, which wasn't part of our connection with him, went to many places telling the story of the gospel - even to India, to our family who remember him with great fondness! The complicated connections of our human intertwinings, reflecting somehow

how the plant world of the forest lives in co-habitation with its members, holding multiple realities at once.

All of this to say - walking together I think has a great power, and can open our eyes to things and realisations that we might not see on our own. Walking with our eyes and hands in the plant communities, sharing our reverences and knowledges from our different cultures, re-vitalising seasonal practices that humans have reciprocated with the earth

for a very very long time, these all feel healing, and continue to inform and inspire my practice as a community herbalist. If we can find ways to thread this through our lives, in the city as well, maybe it can transform our relationship with the streets, with each other and with how we act in the world.

Walking in connection with the herbs in the city, on the marshes, along the canal and through the woods, I find ways to develop my perceptions of a living landscape beyond the human-created one,



grounding myself and feeling comforted and more secure with these plant friends all around. Those who take part in such walks report similar delight through meeting particular plants during the year, making friends with them, getting to know special spots that they return to. People whose lives and cultures originated in other places, who may feel unwelcome in this social structure of the UK which despite all its innovation and freedom, is missing to me some crucial human connection holding, may yet be able to connect with the land in a reciprocal way through finding the plants they already know, or meeting new ones. So many times I have met Caribbean, Asian and Eastern European folks walking the marshes, watching them head for specific types of plant in particular seasons, gathering them with a vigour and a knowledge that is part of their upbringing, not from a course that they studied. Working with so many different groups and communities in London to do medicine making sessions, the oral histories we

share have strengthened my own practice as I become ever more aware that this art and craft and love of plant medicine is part of all of our cultures. In fact those communities who have long been marginalised and ill-treated through processes of colonialism and global capitalism - and this includes the land and the plants themselves - are really the ones who hold the power and the skills of this earthlove. My friend Ian Nesbitt, an artist making the pilgrimage project *The Book of Visions*, shares in his introduction some questions that led him to this activity:

"What does a positive future look like right now? Is it possible to be visionary in the face of such uncertainty? Are there practices or ways of being that might be useful in order to live well with insecurity and precarity? Might we in fact need to look towards new educators such as those humans whose lives have always been under the shadows of poverty, ill health, racism, disability and statelessness; or those beings

on different rungs of food chains? Can the walk be re-purposed as a way to seek out these educators and draw them together? *The Book Of Visions* is a framing for the work of collectively addressing these questions - a living publication, an evolving handbook for staying with the trouble of our times, a pilgrim space of fugitivity and sanctuary."

Let's walk together to find out!

### Practical tips / recipes for herbal teas

Taking a walk in the forest we know helps to soothe our souls and calm our nerves, it is talked about as a practice in Japan ('forest bathing') and is now 'scientifically proven' to have health benefits - but we know this because we feel it in our bodies! And humans have always lived connected with our natural environment - we cannot live without it. So the stresses and weight of urban life, and the anxiety and depression of precarious life in a hostile human environment, can

sometimes be met with regular touching of the natural environment, both spiritually and physically.

A nice thing to do when you walk, is to see if any particular plant calls out to you or you notice it. Then to meet it - make friends with it! Notice what your senses tell you about it - how does it look, does it have a smell, what is it like to touch? Meet it as though it is a new person. You could make a drawing of it, and pick a sample to press and later find out if you can identify it.

Wild plants of the forest and field also offer us healing medicine in the form of remedies we can prepare and take into our bodies, shifting with the seasons. In spring, fresh new **Stinging Nettle and Cleavers (Sticky Willy) start to shoot up and bring mineral-rich nourishment** - you can pick them if you are in a clean wild spot away from people and animals, and if there is a plentiful amount of them. At home you can brew them as a tea in a pot. In summertime, **Mugwort, a silvery green tall plant is a beautiful friend to make tea with, to infuse into oil, and to put**



**under your pillow as you sleep.** It is calming when we drink it as a tea, and it is supposed to promote vision and direction in your dreams and your life path. In the air in the forest is a beautiful mix of plant compounds including aromatic oils evaporated from pine and other conifer trees which are cleansing to our lungs and bodies. So breathe deeply as you walk slowly, and take in the elements through all your senses.





# All year around



# Code of care

The space which we are creating in Becoming Forest is one that can heal and support each other's mental well-being. We have discussed how we care for this space: applied to both the physical and virtual spaces.

## What is the core value of this space for you?

Our Becoming Forest space encourages openness, promotes healing, brings peace, shows and is given respect, allows for harmony and flow and friendship.

## What makes this space safe and respectful?

We commit to being mindful listeners, giving respect for each other, being in an open and sharing mode with each other, accepting the humorous and being sensitive to our vulnerabilities.

## What makes this space stressful and disrespectful?

When the environment is noisy, argumentative, judgemental or disrespectful, this discourages caring for each other and the space. Speaking over each other, forcing ideas at each other or dominating the space of speech, does not create a compassionate space. Attitudes and mentalities like those of Boris Johnson or Donald Trump are a good example of this. Hate speech and foul language are obviously not conducive to a respectful shared space.

## What does the concept of care mean to you?

Caring is implied by being a listener to and rememberer of a person, keeping that person in mind, and consciously making space for that person. Caring

holds loyalty, sharing, and emotional engagement within it, and values the other's speech.

## What actions of care can be taken in this space?

We should listen carefully and interact openly when someone else speaks, and show our positive and respectful responses (for example 'thumbs up' or other encouraging emoticons).

Everybody should be given the chance to speak up, and to trust and be trusted.

If anybody in the group needs to leave, we should give the group the chance to prepare for the departure.

## What would you like to do if you are not comfortable with certain tasks

## or don't feel well today?

The group members should be honest about their capacities and trust the group to care for them.

It may depend on the individual and whether they are comfortable to speak up openly on the issue; if not, the group member should message Taey, Youngsook, Mariko or Ogie privately.

If a group member is not ready to share something for any reason this should be respected.

\* Code of Care is discussed and written with all of our companions.



# Keep-in-touch

A few weeks of gaps between workshops and walks can cause a downfall to a slow and steady process of creating a space for collective healing. More frequent contacts and reminders are as crucial as planned activities for maintaining the group spirit and healing vibes. Setting up a Whatsapp group chat would be a starter to keep in touch and exchange greetings more often. However, this group communication can be enhanced by introducing remote activities so that everyone keeps in touch on a daily basis with an increasing sense of community building.

## 30 DAYS YOGA CHALLENGE

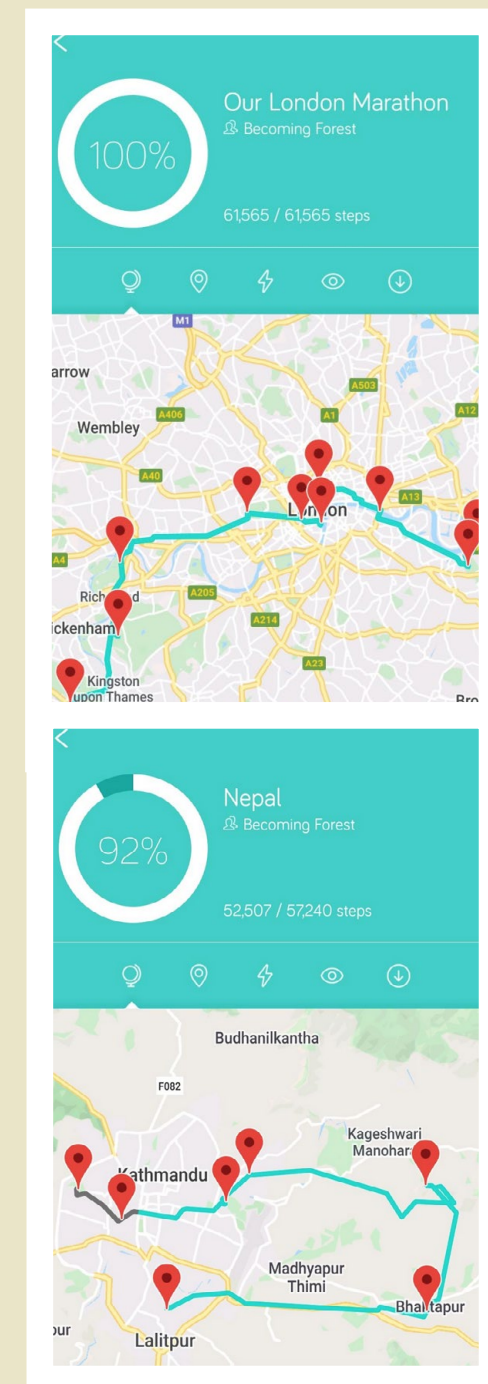
The group take a 5-day a week yoga challenge over six weeks. Regardless of whether people practise yoga every day diligently, this everyday posting of the yoga video link gives one a nudge saying 'have a moment for stretching your body.'

## BUDDY SYSTEM

Each workshop includes a lucky dip to pair up the group members and set the buddy relationship. Until the next workshop, buddies in pairs hold the duty to check in with each other regularly. It is also a great way to distribute care and responsibility amongst the members, not falling heavily on **the facilitators and organisers.**

## VIRTUAL WALKING

When the project started, the Covid-19 regulations did not permit people gathering. It came with the disappointment of not being able to proceed with forest walks. Virtual walking apps can be an alternative to this kind of situation. The group consent to a route to explore (virtually anywhere in the world!). Then the count of steps from individual walks in real life are added to complete the walk as a collective achievement, counting on one another in this virtual journey.













# Credits

**Made in partnership between** Breakwater of Youngsook Choi and Taey Iohe SEEAC (Southeast and East Asian Centre), Kanlungan Filipino Consortium

Special thanks to: Mariko Hayashi, Violeta Manlangit, Paul Anne Quibael-Forman, Rasheeqa Ahmed, Cường Phạm, Rogelio Braga, Nova Fransisca Silitonga, Dianne Magbanua, Liew Teh, Anthony Jones

**Becoming Forest Radio** (created by Breakwater and Cường Phạm)

- Winter episode: Filipino Diaspora Space is made with Mental Health Officer, Michael Nagac at Kanlungan
- Spring episode: Vietnamese Diaspora Space is made with Jack Shieh at Vietnamese Mental Health Services
- Summer episode: Hong Kong Diaspora Space with artists, Bettina Fung, Yin Lo, Yarli Alison, Ghost & John
- Winter episode: Becoming Forest Collective Playlist

**Supported by** a-n, Arts Council England, Arts Catalyst

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**Breakwater  
2022**