

## **Woods: wellbeing and wisdom for maturing men**

One of my top tips for men beyond fifty, on how to enjoy life to the full, is to find yourself a wood to spend time in and make friends with.

Surprising? I've seen it work for many other men, as well as me. A wood can give you a sense of deep safety, of being nurtured. It can bring you wisdom, and connect you with the strength of the Green man and the Celtic tradition.

Men like proof of such claims. I have no scientific data, but a lot of experience to refer to. The main wood in my life is Hazel Hill, a 70-acre wood in Wiltshire which I have been caring for – and which has cared for me – since 1997.

At that time I received money from share options in the large company I was working for. Instead of investing it, sensibly (?), in shares, I asked myself, 'What would I enjoy doing with this money?', and out of nowhere came the answer – buy a wood. Since then, I have learned a lot about conservation forestry, and have created simple wooden buildings which are used by a range of retreat groups. The deepest of these that I have experienced have all been men's groups.

I spend a lot of time in this wood, both alone and with men's groups. Far more than other landscapes, I find the trees give you a sense of being held, in friendly company. And campfires, in the wood, under the stars, have a deep magic, a sense of merging with the earth, the sky, and the ancient past, which is unique.

In the worst crises of my maturing years, such as the breakup of my marriage, the wood is the place I turn to. As the landscape and even individual trees become more familiar, I find a deep sense of comfort and healing.

In the mid-1990's, I co-led several vision quests for teenagers at Hazel Hill, and heard all these city kids describe how they were receiving guidance and wisdom from specific trees. There are now many regular visitors to the Wood, including me, who will go and sit with a familiar tree and seek advice.

Mind you, it's not like a human conversation. As you may recall from the talking trees in Tolkien, their pace is much slower than humans. There is a magnificent beech tree at Hazel Hill by the main campfire, which I see as the Guardian Tree of the whole Wood. As soon as I arrive at Hazel Hill, I go and sit with this tree, present myself, and ask my questions. Usually an answer comes to me sometime the next day.

There are plenty of other people who believe that trees are very close to people (eg see [www.squidoo.com](http://www.squidoo.com)). Native Americans called trees plant people. The Tree of Life, Yggdrasil, is a central feature of Norse and Anglo-Saxon belief. There is an excellent book, Tree

Wisdom, by Jacqueline Paterson, which covers all this in good detail, including how to make contact with trees, and the different gifts, such as healing or foresight, which different trees offer.

If you'd like to try this out, come to the Maturing Men weekend group at Hazel Hill, November 11 – 13, or one of the Celtic seasonal celebrations. You'll find more information at [www.hazelhill.org.uk](http://www.hazelhill.org.uk)