



## Emerald Green Moss

An Excerpt from *Bring Me the Ocean*, by Rebecca A. Reynolds

Since the day of her admission to the nursing psychiatric ward, fifteen years before, Esther had not spoken.

On this initial visit to the ward, Suzanne and Sarah brought a spring forest program. They, along with members of the site staff, went around the circle of people, offering pine boughs, moss, bunches of pine needles, and various animals to be observed, smelled, and touched.

Esther sat silent, as usual, withdrawn and inexpressive. She was unmoved by the great horned owl, and she didn't even glance at the mice or the two dogs. Then Sarah came around with her palms full of thick green moss.

Reaching Esther, Sarah smelled the moss herself, saying, "Esther, would you like to smell the moss? It's still wet with last night's rainfall." To everyone's surprise, Esther responded. Reaching out with both hands, she took the moss and buried her face in the pungent, moist clump. Then looking up, she exclaimed in a strong voice, "Emerald green moss!" She stared for an intense moment into Sarah's eyes, before dropping back into her deep silence. Around Esther, her daily caretakers became silent too.

For fifteen years no one had found a way to break Esther's silence or had heard her speak or had seen her look directly at another person. It was a moment of awakening for all of us. This moment supported and renewed the staff's interest in Esther as a person, showing that there was indeed an avenue to reach her, even in her place of extreme isolation. Esther was not interested in the animals, but somehow the moss touched her senses.

This experience with Esther in our first year was a pivotal event. People often say, "Oh, it's so wonderful that you bring animals in!" Equally important is bringing in the environment, interweaving layerings of materials and animals and stories, for these materials are the

foundation for all the rest of life. Trying to explain why we lug rocks and water miles away to an institution is often difficult, but whenever we have a particularly strenuous day of gathering all the diverse materials and planning how to work them together into a comprehensive whole, we think of Esther, and know that it is worth the effort.