



DOG BEACH

by Daniel J. Bressler, MD, FACP

THERE IS LITERATURE on pet therapy (now most commonly called animal-assisted therapy) going back decades. The presence of pets in various institutional settings has been found to be physically and psychologically helpful to children with cancer, children and adults undergoing procedures, and elderly with and without memory problems. A recent article comes from Marcus et al from the Department of Anesthesia at the University of Pittsburgh. The authors of “Animal-assisted Therapy at an Outpatient Pain Management Clinic,” published in *Pain Medicine* in 2012, vol. 13, pages 45–57, in their two-month study of 282 patients, concluded that there were significant improvements in pain, mood, and other measurements of distress with meaningful

pain relief (≥ 2 points on an 11-point scale) in 23% of those who had a dog therapy visit but only 4% in the waiting room controls.

There is also medical literature on the beneficial effects of being out in nature. The most developed interest comes from Japan, where there is a cultural tradition called Shinrin Yoku, translated as “taking in the forest” or “forest bathing.” A number of studies have looked at the psychological and physiologic effects of an immersive forest walk and included findings of reduced blood pressure, reduced pulse, and reduced circulating cortisol. See, for example, the review article by Park et al, “The Physiological Effects of Shinrin-yoku (Taking in the Forest Atmosphere or Forest Bathing): Evidence From Field Experiments in 24 Forests Across Japan,”

Dog Beach

*This ocean is my ashram
This river is my church
These seabirds gaunt parishioners
Who come to sing and search*

*The barking dogs are prophets
The silent dogs are saints
The inlet flow meets salty wave
Like a swirling mix of paints*

*I come to breathe my cares away
To feel the sand and laugh
To erase my life's dense sentences
In a timeless paragraph*

*A smell is worth a thousand words
Says one dog to another
They sniff each other's derrières
And voila: my sis' or brother*

*Their squabbles only transient
Dogs can't hold a grudge
They don't demean or stigmatize
Nor do they blame or judge*

*So be prepared to say goodbye
To twisted funks and griefs
These dogs create a buffer from
Our humankind beliefs*

*It's hard to keep a heavy heart
In this canine paradise
Watch your step and bring a bag
Is my only stern advice*