



# 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 ( $\geq 2$  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*