THERAPY DOGS

A Breed Apart

BY ELLEN FOLKE

ThornCreeks Mr. Bennett, "Benno," (BG# 86405) surveying his world. Photo credit Ellen Folke.

Many activities – Conformation, Obedience, Agility, Herding, etc. (a long list!) – that you enjoy with your dog help build a strong bond between the two of you. Let me suggest another valuable way to connect deeply with your dog and to become a truly unified working team: animal-assisted therapy. My big boy Benno –ThornCreeks Mr. Bennett (BG# 86405) – and I gained admission to this magical world in 2015. Animal therapy changed our lives.

Benefits of Animal Companionship

Thousands of articles extol the beneficial physical and emotional effects of time spent with a dog. In January, 2015, Harvard Medical School published a special health report titled, "Get Healthy, Get A Dog."[1] Before and since then, study after study has affirmed the profound benefits.

It is well accepted in the medical community that animal companionship can lower blood pressure, decrease heart

rate, slow breathing and increase relaxation. In a hospital setting, the presence of animals absolutely accomplishes these benefits. Furthermore, animals promote patient compliance, a crucial aspect of healing. Patients are more willing to participate in vital therapies, especially uncomfortable or painful ones, with a dog nearby. Multiple studies show the benefits of dogs for patients needing to re-learn to walk following a stroke. Improvement was demonstrated in gait performance primarily, but also for motivation. [2]

Benno and I met a young man in an inpatient rehabilitation setting. He was in a wheelchair, attended by a physical therapist whose usual cheerful demeanor was absent. I asked the patient if he wanted to pet Benno. He said nothing and did not look at me, but he began to pet Benno. I could tell by the way he moved his hands that he was familiar with dogs. I asked if he had a dog; he did, a Brittany spaniel. I asked if his dog would retrieve a frisbee. No response. I told him if I threw a frisbee for Benno, he just looked askance at me, as if to ask why I threw it if I wanted it back. The patient grunted. Another physical therapist arrived. Together they asked the patient to walk. He didn't react to them at all. When I asked if he wanted to take Benno for a walk, he straightened and tried to stand. As he haltingly walked the corridor holding Benno's leash, behind his back the therapists gave me thumbs up. At the end of the corridor, the patient turned around and started walking back. The therapists asked him to sit for a moment and rest. They smiled and gave him high fives. The patient, after resting for just a few moments, stood up and walked back to the starting point. Again, the therapists congratulated him. We all said goodbye. The therapists returned the patient to his room. Afterwards, the therapists told me this young man, who had had a stroke, was furious about his subsequent weakness. Two therapists accompanied him because earlier in the day this patient had become violent, necessitating two calls to security. Clearly the presence of a dog provided something intangible that helped this patient overcome his despair.

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Another pivotal study was done in the intensive care unit at UCLA Medical Center in Los Angeles. After just 12 minutes with a dog, heart failure patients demonstrated lowered blood pressure, decreased anxiety and slowed release of harmful hormones compared to two control groups: patients who were visited by a person and patients with no visits from people or animals. Kathie M. Cole, RN, MN, CCRN, lead author of the study, said "The therapeutic use of dogs to soothe people's minds and improve health has been considered more of a 'nicety' than credible science." She advocates the use of dogs as therapy, saying, "They make people feel happier, calmer and more loved. That is huge when you are scared and not feeling well." [3] Other studies have shown that patients can comfortably go longer between doses of pain medication if they have had some time with a dog.

Sometimes a dog helps a patient break through an unidentified block toward healing. A toddler in the University of Utah Burn Unit severely burned the bottom of her feet when she stepped into a campfire. She had healed to the point where she should have begun walking again but, despite all kinds of creative encouragement, she was afraid to try. Her care team sat with her on the floor at one end of a hallway while a Golden Retriever waited patiently at the other end. That little spitfire stood right up and walked all the way down the hall to cuddle the dog.

Human Animal Bond Research Institute (HABRI), based in Washington, D.C., is a non-profit research and education organization founded in 2010. Its mission is to "advance, through science, education and advocacy, the vital role of the human-animal bond in the health and well-being of people, pets, cultures and communities." HABRI has collected an impressive amount of research, now available online at https://habri.org, a resource managed by Purdue University's Dr. Alan Beck, a well-known scholar in human-animal bond studies. This database houses more than 29,000 entries of peer-reviewed journal articles, books, white papers, videos and data sets.

It's good to have these positive effects documented. But anecdotally we all know they're true. Liana Urichuk, author of "Improving Mental Health Through Animal-Assisted

[1]Harvard Medical School, "Get Healthy, Get a Dog: The Health Benefits of Canine Companionship," Harvard Medical School Specialty Health Report, January 2015. See: https://www.health.harvard.edu/promotions/harvard-health-publications/get-healthy-get-a-dog-the-health-benefits-of-canine-companionship

[2]An, Ho-Jung, and Shin-Jun Park. 2021. "Effects of Animal-Assisted Therapy on Gait Performance, Respiratory Function, and Psychological Variables in Patients Post-Stroke" International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health 18, no. 11: 5818. https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph18115818

[3]Cole, Kathie M. et al. "Animal-Assisted Therapy in the Intensive Care Unit." Nursing Clinics Volume 30, Issue 3 (September 1995): page 529-537. Cole, Kathie M. et al. Nursing Clinics, Volume 30, Issue 3, 529 - 537

◂ Ellen and Benno ThornCreeks Mr. Bennett, "Benno," (BG# 86405). Photo by Robin Pendergrast.

Therapy," discusses the pros and cons of research on this issue. She writes, "It is also important to determine whether the data provides useful information or is valid for determining program efficacy. Dr. Dean Ornish from the University of San Francisco Medical Center warns that we need to be careful not to become so obsessed with the scientific method that we forget what is important. He says, 'We think if we can't measure it, it does not exist. But who can measure love?'"[4] Who indeed?

Therapy Dogs Defined

There is nothing like being part of the dramatic difference a dog can make in the life of a person facing a devastating injury or diagnosis. Our dogs bring with them attention, affection and intuition. They are catalysts and motivators, bestowing fun and inspiration. They do all this with no judgmental drawbacks whatsoever. Joining people and animals for healing is among the most powerful and joyful work we can do.

When Benno and I first visited the University of Utah Hospital, it took us 30 minutes to get from the front door to the volunteer office 100 yards away. Among those who stopped to pet Benno were a woman and her teenage daughter. The mother asked if her daughter could pet Benno. Benno was thrilled. Without hesitation, her daughter began to pet him and talk softly to him. When she held her bandaged arm up, I saw it had been amputated just below the elbow. Her mother stepped away and said to me quietly, "Please keep doing what you're doing. You probably hear that all the time, but you may not know how much you impact people. The visits from the dogs saved my daughter's life. I don't say that in a casual way. These dogs truly saved my daughter's life."

Let's define terms. There are generally three types of support dogs—service/assistance dogs, emotional support dogs, therapy dogs—with subtle

[4]Liana J. Urichuk, Improving Mental Health Through Animal-Assisted Therapy. (Edmonton, Alberta: angelfire.com, 2003), page 154.

differences in the skills required. A service/assistance dog is trained to help a specific person for a specific health need. An emotional support dog is not specifically trained; his/her primary job is to comfort and soothe just one person. In both cases, the dog focuses entirely on his/her owner. A service dog, although entirely aware of his/her surroundings, should not interact with other people or other animals. It is inappropriate to approach a working service dog.

A therapy dog, by contrast, wants to connect with people. This outgoing, accepting nature sets therapy dogs apart from other types of support dogs. Of course, all our dogs provide emotional support and companionship for us as owners, but rare is the dog who wants to engage with just about anybody he/she meets.

Therapy Dogs Are Born, not Made

Therapy dogs are friendly, happy go lucky, rock-solid animals who genuinely enjoy being touched and hugged by strangers, even if those strangers sound different or move in unfamiliar ways. The dogs who are good at this involvement and enjoy it are rare. These qualities are inherent in the dog. They cannot be acquired through training. There are companies that claim that they can deliver a therapy dog. Although they can help train a dog to accomplish tasks a therapy animal needs, they can't put that special affable attribute into a dog.

▲ Benno (BG# 86405) greets all manner of people who stop for a quick pet on his way to his shift at the University of Utah Nielsen Rehabilitation Hospital. Photo by Robin Pendergrast.

Therapy dogs need to be naturally gregarious. Many dogs love their owners and their owners' friends, but they aren't interested in people they don't know. You can't see this trait in your own dog until you take him/her to see strangers. Our local therapy animal organization evaluated a beautiful Dalmatian who, the owner insisted, was thrilled to play with all the neighborhood children. In our facility, however, as attentive as she was to her owner, she simply was not interested in greeting anyone else. This aloofness is not a bad trait in a dog, of course, but she would not be a happy or successful therapy dog if she were forced to interact regularly with unfamiliar people.

Therapy dogs need to be calm, even in crowds or small spaces. At 110 pounds, Benno didn't love small spaces but, with reassurance from me, he tolerated them. I knew to limit those situations so he wouldn't become stressed. Some dogs who unconditionally love all other creatures are exuberant and bouncy. They might make great therapy dogs when they're older and have calmed down a bit. But knocking into someone is not therapeutic. Some dogs will tirelessly run after a ball thrown by a child who needs to regain use of an injured arm or hand, but the handler needs to be able to restrain this energy when the game ends. If you have a wonderfully friendly, welcoming dog who is not yet able to stay calm, wait a few years before introducing him to therapy work.

Once Benno and I joined other therapy teams at a camp for young children with cancer. Cancer is a heavy burden for children to carry, but these campers were cheerful and optimistic. On this day, three 5-year-old boys were lying next to Benno on the floor with their heads on his side. Because they were on Benno's far side, all I could see were little heads and little hands waving in the air. They were chanting, "It's a pillow. It's a pet. It's a Pillow Pet!" Normally TV ad jingles irritate me. This time, though, it was part of giving these little guys a respite from their focus on living with cancer.

Of course, not all interactions are life-altering. We can't know what happens in the hearts and minds of others. But events surprise you. My daughter's friend waited at the hospital for hours while her mother underwent a major procedure. She sent my daughter a picture of herself giving a bear hug to a big, fluffy, welcoming dog who was visiting people in the waiting room. She had no idea when she sent that picture that it was our own Benno she was hugging.

Part of our volunteer service includes giving presentations to groups interested in animal therapy. One of Benno's and my favorite events was a class taught at the local community college for future occupational therapists. The teacher, an OT for patients with traumatic brain injuries, told the class about a patient he had worked with for weeks without success. One day Benno and I arrived at the therapy gym just as this patient came into the gym. As his wheelchair passed by, the patient reached out to touch Benno. This gesture was the first voluntary movement the therapist had seen since the patient was admitted. I remembered that gesture, but I had no idea what a milestone had been reached. I would never have known except that I happened to be in the classroom when the therapist described the interaction.

Another time, as Benno and I walked through a hospital lobby, a woman beckoned us to come to her. She told

us she was finally going home after six months in the hospital following a heart transplant. She told me seeing the therapy dogs as she slowly recovered had been the highlight of her long, long days. Her daughter, who appreciated the solace the dogs brought to her mother, had become inspired to find out whether their own dog had what it took to become a therapy dog.

In addition to the temperament traits mentioned earlier, a confident dog is a successful therapy partner. An owner's primary responsibility is to advocate for his or her dog. The owner volunteers, but the dog is "voluntold." The owner must ensure the dog's safety and comfort. That said, we have no control over the atmosphere—unusual noises, odd smells, unfamiliar activities– in the facilities we enter. Exposure as puppies to a wide variety of stimuli helps build this confidence. Still, some dogs are sensitive to unexpected occurrences. Asking a susceptible dog to endure them would be unkind.

The therapy team, the owner and the dog working together, is the essential provider of service. Developing team skills takes time, experience and practice. The magic comes from the end of the leash with the collar, but there are requirements at the end of the leash held by the human as well. We look for a bonded team that displays a solid relationship. Owners need to understand the value of therapy work, take pride in their dogs, and ensure their dogs' well-being. Both owners and dogs need to be sociable. Owners need to find the optimal balance between talking and listening, all the while ensuring that the patients are the focus of the interaction. They need to be comfortable in all kinds of healthcare settings and other potentially high stress environments. And, if necessary, they need to teach softly, speak softly and guide others in appropriate ways to engage with their dogs.

Programs that welcome therapy teams have varied settings. For example, senior living centers have medical equipment, but they probably don't have the busy hallways that a large hospital has. Residential treatment centers for young adults might prefer animals that like to play a bit. Watching children read to your dog as s/he listens is a lovely interaction. A team that is not a good fit in some settings can absolutely be approved for therapy work in other environments.

I hope this overview gives some food for thought on a rewarding way for you to build a deep, strong relationship with your dog, while providing heartwarming and effective support for people who benefit from this unconventional type of therapy. This activity isn't for everyone, but it is life enhancing for those who feel called to it.

The organization I am affiliated with, Intermountain Therapy Animals (therapyanimals.org), has a list of U.S. affiliates on their website that welcome your requests for further information.

Acknowledgments
I wish to thank my reviewers, Nancy Melone (Thorncreek Bernese) and Kathy Klotz, Executive Director, Intermountain Therapy Animals. This article is better following their comments.

About the Author
Ellen Folke is a graduate of Loyola University of Chicago and Keller Graduate School of Management. She is a former assistant editor of The Alpenhorn. She has been involved with Bernese Mountain Dogs for over 20 years. While she initially focused primarily on Obedience and Draft work with her dogs, a trainer with a savvy eye suggested she pursue therapy work with her boy, Benno, ThornCreeks Mr. Bennett (BG# 86405). Benno and Ellen became a registered therapy team in 2015 through Intermountain Therapy Animals in Salt Lake City, UT (TherapyAnimals.org). He brought joy to so many in his seven years as a therapy dog, retiring shortly before his death at 11 ½ years of age.

▲ ThornCreeks Mr. Bennett, "Benno," (BG# 86405). The notice on Benno's vest ensures people that he is not a working dog and welcomes being touched. Photo credit Robin F. Pendergrast.