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Writing a newspaper column recently on the Japanese practice of Shinrin-yoku — or forest bathing — a light bulb switched on. I'd been grasping to explain why so many of us are keenly attracted to our dogs these days.

Shinrin-yoku is the idea that some of the best preventative medicine

you can find is in the forest.

Take a leisurely stroll, let your troubles go, focus on the moment. Feel the texture of the tree bark, notice the pattern of light filtering down, touch a wildflower petal, ground yourself in the moment.

Do this simple thing for 15 minutes a day and remarkable results roll in. Your blood pressure drops, your immune system gets stronger, you recover faster from sickness or surgery and you have more energy.

The Japanese government began encouraging its citizens to practice Shinrin-yoku in the 1980s and in recent years, the idea has caught on in the U.S. It's nothing new, really. John Muir wrote in the 1800s, "Thousands of tired, nerve-shaken, over-civilized people are beginning to find out that going to the mountains is going home. Wilderness is a necessity."

Indeed. "You didn't come into this world. You came out of it, like a wave from the ocean. You are not a stranger here," said writer and philosopher Alan Watts.

For hundreds of thousands of years, man has been intimately immersed in nature. Daylight faded, night spilled in, winter became summer. We got up at dawn and bedded down at dusk. Our internal clocks, our circadian rhythms, make sure our bodies fire best on all cylinders when we stick to nature's cycles.

Electricity changed all that. Less than 100 years ago, we started staying up later listening to the radio, the television and, lately, surfing the net. We can hop in our cars and go farther for a loaf of bread at night than medieval people ever traveled in their entire lives. We pack more into our days at night. And we've become increasingly stressed, alienated and detached from the natural world and its ebb and flow.

We call this progress.

“Biophilia” is a term used in psychiatry to describe a healthy attachment to nature and living things. In theory, we’re hard-wired to love nature and animals. It’s been in use since the 1980s but the idea is as old as Aristotle.

In the Greek philosopher’s view, we’re friends with all natural things... as they are with us. It’s mutually beneficial for us to care for and nurture plants and animals.

Take our dogs, for example. You’ve probably read the long list of health benefits that come from living with dogs, everything from stronger hearts to less depression.

But did you know that MRI tests show that our brains light up when we look at color photos of nature — waterfalls and forests, reindeer and wolves, even snakes and sharks — our brains stir. Something inside us is drawn to the natural world.

Look at a photo of a dog, though, and our brains, especially the emotion centers, really flip the dial on MRI’s.

And our dogs’ brains do the same thing when they see color photos of human faces, MRI tests show. Canines are naturally attracted to people.

Committed dog people don’t have to be told by researchers that opening your life up to a furry friend is a deeply rewarding experience despite the frustrations of midnight bathroom outings and the extra chores that come from taking care of someone....you love.

Scores of new studies are now fleshing out and confirming our hunches. Out of all the species on the planet, two are uniquely hardwired so that they’re drawn to one another, the homo sapien and Canis familiaris, man and dog. Just gazing into each other’s eyes boosts both ours level of oxytocin, often called the feel-good, or the

intimacy hormone.

In short, nature means for us to be together.

We may have left the forests and the countryside, man-made structures may block our view of the skies, some of us now may rarely see a tree or walk barefooted across the grass, but we're still scratching our natural itch for nature. We've answered the call of the wild by inviting the wild into our homes and onto our couches.

Dogs are domesticated, yes, but they're still another species, The Other, close enough like us so we can easily understand one another, but still just a step away from their old wild ways.

It's no wonder we're so dog-crazy these days, even if we don't fully understand why.