

# Up Front/Commentary: Dogs aren't that smart - they just have humans fooled

Kathy Hedberg/Lewiston Tribune

There's been some talk lately about studies proving dogs are a whole lot smarter than we thought they were.

One article I read talked about the smelling ability of dogs, which is phenomenal. A dog's nose, according to this article, is the Black Hawk helicopter of sniffers, used in everything from airport security to cancer detection to terrorist exposure. We used to think dogs' noses could pick out certain smells at parts per hundreds. Now we're finding out it's more like parts per trillions, which is awe-inspiring until you stop to realize that dogs still raid garbage dumps and roll in all kinds of nasty stuff, so what good does it do to have a nose that powerful in the first place?

If this is true, however, it's clear we are wasting a whole lot of tax dollars paying those doofuses at the CIA and FBI whose ability to keep us safe can't hold a whisker to a dog. What does a top operative at the CIA make anyway - \$100,000 or more? And then there's insurance, retirement and other perks that add up. You could keep a whole kennel of dogs satisfied with a lifetime supply of kibbles for that kind of money. And the dog's not going to live much past 10 anyway, so you're saving a lot on retirement and medical benefits.

Anyway, I have some doubts about how smart dogs really are. As I was telling my dog, Christmas Belle, the other day as we were doing the crossword puzzle (she does the horizontal words and I fill in with the vertical words) if dogs are so smart how come you never see a dog running for public office? How come you don't see dogs starting their own businesses or writing novels or flying airplanes? Huh? Can you answer that, Christmas Belle?

She filled in two of my words and said "Checkmate" and then hopped down from the table and went to sit behind the couch. I think the question made her mad.

I think Christmas Belle is smart. She does the crosswords, obviously, and is better at it than I. She can drive, although she doesn't have a license and I have to take her out on country back roads to practice.

But she's selectively smart, as in, if I send her to the store to pick up some groceries I have to send the exact change because she doesn't have opposable thumbs and can't count the coins. She drives the car but she can't fix my washing machine and whenever I look around to see if she would mind mowing the lawn, she's nowhere to be found. And fetch the morning paper? Forget about it. She trained the cat to do that.

I think the reason many people think dogs are smart is because they think dogs understand them and maybe can even read their minds. I've heard many people say that during a time when they

were emotionally upset that it was their dog alone who gave them sympathy - came and licked their tears or slept steadfastly at the foot of their bed until the mood passed.

Of course, even a wildebeest, which is considered one of the dumbest creatures on Earth, might sense something is wrong when his owner is howling and bawling like a stuck pig. Maybe in times like that even a wildebeest might try to nuzzle up and offer a little support, although it's hard to imagine a wildebeest being very snuggly.

But it's not really compassion that motivates animals in situations like those. It is an expression of their own survival instinct, as in: "OK, so my master is freaking out. What does that mean for me and my supertime, which is in 15 minutes?"

Dogs, wildebeests and other creatures, in other words, may seem sympathetic, but they're really only looking out for numero uno. What appears to be understanding is really just self-serving compliance with the upset human's wishes so as to get what the creature really wants, which is food.

And, in that way, dogs, wildebeests and other creatures don't differ a heck of a lot from human beings, which brings me to my original point - how much worse off would we be if we hired animals to take care of the world and the rest of us could all just go on vacation?

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