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If you're a dog lover, you've probably had that “ahah!” moment when you looked into a dog's eyes and suddenly saw more than fur, slobber and animals instincts. You turned a corner and saw what was always there in a new light —you realized here is a creature of another species who has feelings, intelligence, a sense of fair play and... is very much self-aware.

You were no longer looking at a shaggy lump. And here was no fanciful talking cartoon character. You were looking into the eyes of The Other.

It may be a gradual realization. It could have come as a shattering, cognitive leap. But, there's no going back after that. You could no longer in good conscience treat a dog with anything less than humane

respect.

For years researchers ignored the domestic dog because dogs are so familiar. What could we learn? After all, dogs are simply dumb-down wolves sitting at our feet waiting for table scraps, right? But when science turned its attention to the dog, one of nature's most successful evolutionary stories began to unfold.

Today we know that the dog is more like us and more attuned to man than any other in the animal kingdom. They've learned to read us like a book. Dogs were experts on humans long before we took a closer look at them.

Trying to convince someone that a dog is more than just a dumb animal? Tell them about the work of Brian Hare, author of "The Genius of Dogs: How Dogs are Smarter than You Think," and one of the lead scientists behind Dognition.com, a website that lets dog owners test the genius in their dog.

Hare says dogs learn human words the same way children do, through the principal of exclusion. They recognize that a number of objects are labelled with a word sound. When a new object is introduced and a new sound is spoken, that must apply to the new object. Bonobo monkey, dolphins and elephants — all recognized as highly intelligent species — cannot do this.

It was thought only children did until dogs were tested. A border collie named Chaser has demonstrated a working vocabulary of more than 1,000 words.

Advances in brain scanning techniques help us see what's actually going on inside a dog's mind. The MR Research Center in Budapest concluded after a series of tests that dogs see us as family.

Dogs were trained to lie still in an MRI machine and their brains were scanned. Specifically, they observed how dogs process odors, since scent is one of a dog's most important senses. Their owners' scent

caused the reward centers of the subjects brains to light up. Happy sounds made by their owners elicited a similar response.

The test dogs reacted to the scent of their owner and the sound of their voice with the same joy they feel seeing a member of their four-footed pack.

That's a sample of what researchers are discovering as they peer into the mind of the dog. We're in a golden age of research. Tests all over the world are quantifying and pinning down bits and pieces of what it is to be a dog. Some of the findings are startling. Some of it only confirmed what anyone who regularly looks into the eyes of their dog already knows — dogs are wondrous companions uniquely shaped by nature to be our best friends.

Let's turn on some more light bulbs....