Aug, 19, 2017

I may have mentioned that I sometimes post pictures on Facebook of my dog wearing costumes. That's right. I've become that guy, the crazy old dog person. But it's part of the Facebook culture and, technically, I Photoshop costumes onto my wolfhound. Oona never sees the image of her "wearing" pirate costumes or posing as Darth Vader. She'd chase me around the room if she did.

If she ever spots the Little Bo Peep suit, I'm a goner.

Most dog lovers are fluent in their shaggy friends' body

language and easily read expressions. They know what science is just now proving: dogs have a deep emotional life that rivals ours. So it's only natural to think of dogs as little people.

People in my Irish wolfhound groups on Facebook regularly have fun with our dogs "talking" in wolfhoundease. It tickles our sense of the absurd. We're all in on the joke. It's another way we share the thrill and pleasure of living with Irish wolfhounds and all their idiosyncrasies.

Anthropomorphism and the people who avoid it

The science crowd frowns on all this. They're a dour bunch. They call it anthropomorphism, assigning human motives and feelings to inanimate object or animals.

Scientists run from anthropomorphism like a dog flees a bath. A scientists who publicly suggests that dogs have feelings just like us is likely to be savaged in professional journals by a pack of peers, eager to take chunks out of his professional reputation. So scientists doggedly stick to the facts nailed down bit by bit in arcane tests in the lab and field.

And slowly science has moved away from the notion that a dog is no more than a biological machine drive by brute instinct.

Dog trainers discourage anthropomorphism, too. Giving a dog human motives to explain why it does what it does can lead you astray. For instance, a dog doesn't look "guilty"

because you came home and discovered he's eaten your shoes. He's cringing because he's been studying.... you. He knows the crazy human will likely go bonkers.

He ate your shoe because it smelled good and, hey, nobody else was using it. He's a dog. He knows your ways are not his ways. He's trying to appease you. Before you do something undogly.

Enter The Sorcerer

Seeing human traits in animals is hardly new. The oldest-known human figurine, a 32,000-year-old ivory sculpture found in Germany, has the head of a lioness. A mysterious figure called The Sorcerer was painted around 13,000 B.C. in the Trois-Freres Cave in Ariege, France. It may be a horned god, the master of all animals.

Or, it may be the image of prehistoric shaman in a horned headpiece working sympathetic magic to affect the herds stalked by his tribe.

The images come from a time when anthropologists think the architecture of the human brain changed to allow man to empathize with animals. There was a Big Bang in the evolution of man about 40,000 years ago. Man had the same body and brain he had had for thousands of years, but it was as if a stray spark touched the mind of man and set it ablaze. Arts, language, symbolic thinking — and empathy — suddenly showed up in the archaeological record in a big way.

Modern man stepped from the shadows.

Perhaps coincidentally, this was about the time the dog appeared, a new creature that evolved from an extinct species of wolf. Unlike the wolf, the dog had the capacity to partner with man. And man now had the capacity to get inside the head of the animals. It helped man track herds of large game by understanding their movements.

At a time when man's instinct was to eat or kill every animal he met, empathy and its cousin, anthropomorphism, opened his eyes to the dog, a creature with a lot in common with man. Man let dog sit by the campfire. And man and dog bonded in a world long ago.

Talking ducks and zany dogs

Flash forward to now. You can't turn on the TV, click on the Internet or go to the movies without seeing talking animals acting like people. It's fun. It sells. But, raised on a diet of Daffy Duck and Garfield, a kid has to be let down when he meets Oona. She's not sarcastic. She doesn't act zany. She doesn't speak human. She's...something else. And that's the problem with anthropomorphism. We see too much of ourselves and not enough of the dog.

Scientists in recent years have nailed down how like us our dogs are: They have the intelligence of at least a 2-year-old child. They're social, have ethics, display problem solving skills and they have empathy, too.

But that misses the boat. Because when you label something,

you limit it. Still, we're looking at ourselves and not the dog, members of another species lolling on our divans. What science is proving, dog lovers already knew: There's so much more to a dog.

Dogs are not a mirror. They're a window to a time when we ran across the tundra together in the cold dawn, chasing the herd. A time when we gazed at stars, when every stone and leaf was alive. When we were humbler and awestruck. When we were partners.

So I celebrate my dog Oona with my Facebook friends and post photos of her in pirate suits. It's a silly human thing. Lucky for me she doesn't know. Lucky for me she's ferociously self-possessed. She doesn't suffer silly ideas. She compels me to see she's...something else. A full-blown personality who is not human.

She looks boldly into my eyes. And I see an undiscovered country.