

# Temple Grandin on animals' sensory-based memories

December 6 2013, by Ryan McNutt

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Temple Grandin speaking in the Alumni Theatre. (Nick Pearce photo)

Temple Grandin shares something in common with some of the animals she works with.

"I am a total visual thinker," she said, speaking to a capacity crowd in the Alumni Theatre on Dal's Agricultural Campus. "When I was young, I thought everyone thought in pictures. As I got older, I learned that others think in patterns, others think in words."

In the case of animals, she explained, their memories are very specific: "It's sensory-based, not word-based... I want you to get away from [thinking about] language: what is it seeing? What is it hearing? What is it smelling? What is it feeling?"

Dr. Grandin, internationally renowned for her groundbreaking work in livestock equipment and [animal behaviour](#), spoke at Dal Tuesday afternoon as part of her visit to Nova Scotia. (On Wednesday, she was the keynote speaker at the Celebrating Abilities conference in Cape Breton.)

Given that Dr. Grandin is also championed for her efforts in autism awareness—she was diagnosed as severely autistic at the age of two—there was widespread interest in her campus visit. Some attendees lined up as early as 9 a.m. for a good seat, and only were the theatre and two overflow rooms both filled to capacity (more than 800 people total), but nearly 200 more watched the lecture online via webcast.

## **Improving conditions**

Wearing a bright red western-style shirt, Dr. Grandin was blunt, direct and captivating in her lecture. Her talk focused on animal behaviour principles that apply to everything from household pets to livestock: what they think and how they feel.

And yes, they do feel.

"It's kind of ridiculous just how old some of these studies are, and that people are arguing about this stuff," she said, describing a litany of research outlining how farm animals experience emotion. The problem, though, is that the research first emerged in the field of neuroscience, and Dr. Grandin has spent much of her career translating this knowledge into agriculture and animal behaviour studies.

She explained how different species show their emotions differently: for example, a wagging tail on a dog is happy, but a horse that's wagging its tail is on the verge of getting very upset. She believes it's incredibly important for farmers and researchers alike to learn the emotional signs of the animals they're working with and to treat them with respect and proper care: "My feeling is that training should all be done positively."

Dr. Grandin's work has led to revolutionary changes in slaughterhouse conditions, and improving those conditions is a cause she's passionately committed to along with industry transparency.

"In Ag, we've got to look at everything we do and ask ourselves, 'Would you be willing to show it to your wedding guests?'"

Dr. Grandin took questions from the crowd following her speech, and also signed copies of her books for attendees.

Watch Dr. Grandin's full lecture below.

Provided by Dalhousie University

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