

### Temple Grandin speaks from experience



I love Temple Grandin.

I “discovered” her in 2010, during an interview on BookTV. She’s the author of several best-selling books and 300 scientific papers, and a professor of animal science at Colorado State University.

Grandin received a Ph.D. in animal science from the University of Illinois, and has designed half of all the livestock handling and slaughter facilities in the United States and Canada. She has also invented humane restraint systems and gives more than 35 lectures a year on animal management, plus 25 lectures a year on autism.

Grandin is autistic. If her story sounds familiar, it’s because she’s been the subject of numerous television and print stories for her work with autism and with animals, including the 2010 HBO film *Temple Grandin*.

“A great deal of my success in working with animals comes from the simple fact that I see all kinds of connections between their behavior and certain autistic behaviors,” writes Grandin in her 1995 book *Thinking in Pictures*. She says her condition gives her special insight into how animals feel and why they do what they do.

## Animals and Autism

Written by Janet Goodman, BT Contributor  
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“Autistic people can think the ways animals think,” she writes in *Animals in Translation*, published in 2005. “Autism is a kind of way station on the road from animals to humans, which puts autistic people like me in a perfect position to translate ‘animal talk’ into English.”

After the book interview, I was so enthralled by her perspective on animal behavior that in 2013 I rushed to buy tickets when I learned she’d be a guest speaker at UM. The university’s BankUnited Center was packed for her lecture on “Different Kinds of Minds,” in which she explained the three types of thinkers: verbal, visual, and pattern thinkers.

“Having autism made animals easy,” she says, since both she and animals are visual thinkers. “Animals are controlled by what they see. During my thinking process, I have no words in my head at all, just pictures. Visual thinkers of any species are detail-oriented.”

During her teenage years, she tended to horses at her boarding school. Summers at her aunt’s Arizona ranch opened an opportunity to observe cattle. Being around these animals gave her a sense of responsibility and a desire to make relationships with them.

She noticed how cows and autistic people become anxious and fearful of ordinary things that are out of place, like a hat on the ground or a puddle glistening in the sun. But when nervous cows were put in squeeze chutes to hold them still for shots and air compressors closed up the metal bars to hold the animals firmly in place, they calmed.

To relax, she herself would wrap up in a blanket or lie beneath seat cushions. She even tried the cattle squeeze chute during a panic attack. “It was the first time I ever felt really comfortable in my own skin,” she admits. “I have been seeing the world from their point of view ever since.”

The experience inspired her invention of a human squeeze machine, which was manufactured by the Therafin Corporation and used in facilities to treat people with autism. To alleviate stress, she used her own squeeze machine daily for decades until it broke in 2010; by then, she no longer felt the need to repair it.

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“When cattle get excited,” she writes in *Thinking in Pictures*, “they go into antipredator mode, pushing themselves into a ball with their heads toward the center of the group.” They won’t budge. Bunched together tightly, the pressure is calming, as they feel safe.

Throughout her career she worked on systems to improve the treatment of livestock. In her designs, she used animal behavior patterns to encourage them to move willingly through the system, rather than by force. Her center-track restraining systems, in which animals straddle conveyor belts, gave them more room for their feet, making them comfortable and less fearful.

“It works better because it respects the animal’s behavior,” she notes.

Grandin designed painless upright restraints for kosher slaughterhouses that used to shackle and hoist a conscious animal by a chain wrapped around a back leg. (When the Humane Slaughter Act was passed in 1958, kosher slaughterhouses were exempt.) She educated against the use of electric prods and slick metal floors on 45-degree angles that would make cows slip and fall and grow more terrified. After visiting such a facility years ago, she wrote in her diary: “This should not be happening in a civilized society. If hell exists, I am in it.”

Dog owners can tap into Grandin’s means of stress reduction. Kennel crates are calming dens where pets can relax. Dogs will also “den” under beds and tables, or in backyard holes. Snug-fitting ThunderShirts are designed to apply pressure to relieve stress.

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