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Dogs Don't Lie

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In a world where truth can be situational and trust used to calculated advantage, I'm reminded every day why I like my dogs.

Their names are Stuart and Polly. They are Yellow Labs. And they're real. Their needs are simple and their affection is constant.

They love me whether they're at home or on the road, squeezed into the back seat of the car. My daughter might be behind closed doors buried in Facebook and my husband working the keys of his Blackberry like Mozart. But they greet me with the same wiggling abandon whether I've been gone five minutes or five hours. They don't care what I look like, what kind of mood I'm in. They are what they are - day after day.

Polly is a three year old puppy with big soulful eyes that allow her to get away with more than she should. She has plenty of what the hunting dog people call drive. She sees what she wants and goes for it - even food on the street, which I often end up prying out of her determined jaws. Hide something from her, and she's still looking for it hours later.

Stuart lets the world come to him. His repertoire of tricks peaked at sit. But only when there is food involved. Call Stuart, and he gives you that level stare that says "Make me an offer." He's a slacker, but it works for him.

I know the argument. These critters that I have anthropomorphized into furry personalities are just doing what eons of evolution have equipped them to do so well - be exactly what I want them to be. There is truth to that. Do the math. There are 10,000 wolves left in the United States, and 60 million dogs. Dogs have learned to play the game.

But you have to own - and love - a dog to understand the insignificance of scientific explanation. Dogs are what they are. Why means nothing.

I will even argue that if more of us realized that, we might see some improvement in the fact that a third of Americans report regular and extreme levels of stress.

I'm surprised it's that low.

The recent Harris Interactive study that quantified stressed-out Americans focused on immediate and personal causes - like jobs, household budgets and dwindling personal time. And those pressures are all very real.

But those issues are spikes in an ever-elevating baseline of stress that comes from issues that are beyond our control, but impact our lives. Our stress hormones are telling us to fight or flee or both. But it's hard to choose when there is a crackling disconnect between what we hear and what we see.

We now know that our government deceived us into a horrific war. We endured serial hypocrisies -- from Pastor Ted and his gay hooker to Jack Abramhoff and his law and order bag-men Ralph Reed and Tom DeLay to Larry Craig's protestations of the innocence of a wide stance.

Life's smaller arenas are a daily struggle for simple honesty.

Credit cards quietly change due dates and then charge a late fee to those who don't catch the switch. Magazines urge subscription renewal when there are five months left on the old. Mortgages bury financial hand grenades in the small print. Oil companies crouch behind "complex market forces beyond our control" but smash profit records every time oil prices spike.

Big lies and small ones accrue to an abiding watchfulness, a fear that trust is not a bond, but a device; a belief that the world runs on a simple rule: you can fool some of the people all of the time and all of the people some of the time - and that's good enough to start a war or make some money.

But when Polly and Stuart sit there in all their simple purity, giving me what our family calls "the look", I know what they are. I know how they feel about me. I bask in an artifice that extends only to snagging a piece of bread left too close to the edge of the counter.

Every day they remind me who I am. And dogs don't lie.