

THE HUMAN SPARK

3 x 60



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Three and a half billion years of evolution has produced uncountable billions of living species. But only one—humans—can think in symbols; recombine those symbols into infinite meanings; invent a technology to disseminate the message; worry how others might react to it; ponder the past; speculate about the future; and imagine the unknown.

The Human Spark, hosted by actor, author, and science buff Alan Alda, brings his trademark humor and curiosity to an exploration of the latest scientific research into what differentiates us from all other species.

The first program confronts the puzzle of why the first humans to arrive in Europe from Africa—the Neanderthals—never generated the human spark, sticking to a way of life that changed little for thousands of generations. Meanwhile, among those humans who stayed behind in Africa, some broke free of their past and developed social networking and technological skills that allowed them later to sweep into Europe, driving the Neanderthals into extinction. These new arrivals were the ancestors of all of us.

The second program studies our fellow simians—mainly chimpanzees, our closest living relatives—to discover both what we share with them and what new skills humans evolved since we went our separate ways. By watching—and participating in—experiments comparing chimps with children, he learns that human uniqueness lies in our ability to reason about things we can't observe, especially the content of others' minds, and to employ this skill in the collaborative enterprise we call civilization.

In the third program, viewers literally peer into Alda's head with a variety of high-tech imaging techniques, looking for his human spark. The unique circuitry that provides us with our most prized ability, language, is closely tied to another unique human skill, our ability to make and use complex tools. In his own brain, Alda finds the site of his ability to figure out what others are thinking. He discovers that the essential human spark, our ability to build alternative worlds in our heads—imagination—lies in a brain region closely related to that used when thinking about others' minds—and that fires most fiercely when we are doing nothing at all.

From the cave paintings of Lascaux in southwestern France to the plains of Kenya, this series crosses many different scientific disciplines, including archaeology, primatology, neuroscience, behavioral psychology, and even philosophy, bringing viewers on a scientific journey that is both interesting and exciting.

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CREDITS

Host: Alan Alda

Series Producer/Writer/Producer: Graham Chedd

Director: Larry Engel

Executive Producer: Jared Lipworth

A Co-Production of Chedd-Angier-Lewis Productions and THIRTEEN in association with WNET.ORG

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