

Future lies in bones of the past

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I pick up a small blackened rock and inspect it.

Louise stands next to me, takes one look, and says: "No, nothing interesting. It's just a 3 1/2-million-year-old alligator tooth. They're a dime a dozen here." My search continues.

It's a typical day of fossil hunting on the landscape around Lake Turkana in northern Kenya – ground zero for archeologists and paleontologists. The land here is scattered with bones that date back millions of year.

My guide is Louise Leakey, who comes from a long line of archeologists, and is world-renowned for the discoveries she has made.

Walking under the stifling hot sun, Louise explains to me how finding tiny, million-year-old fossils not only sheds light on our ancestors, but also teaches us about modern life.

I am about to learn two important lessons from these ancient bones.

As soon as I arrive, it becomes obvious that archeological work consists mostly of walking around vast areas, eyes to the ground, hoping to come across an important fossil or bone. The trick is to identify which ones are important. Luckily, I'm with the best of the best.



Louise, who is only 34, is the granddaughter of archeologists Drs. Louis and Mary Leakey – renowned as pioneers in their field and largely responsible for mapping out our origins. Famous for advancing the study of primates, Louis Leakey launched the careers of Jane Goodall, Dian Fossey and Biruté Galdikas, who observed chimps, gorillas and orangutans respectively.

The Leakeys' son Richard and his wife Meave took over from them, and now Louise is continuing the family tradition.

After a long day of collecting fossilized oyster shells and pottery pieces, we head back to the camp. Louise lays out casts of 25 famous skull discoveries for me, and explains the current best guess – and hotly debated – line of human evolution.

From the Kenyanthropus platyops, a 3.5-million-year-old skull Louise discovered in 1999, to Homo sapiens – modern-day humans who emerged in Africa 200,000 years ago – Louise explains the tiny differences between various types of bones and fossils that continue to confuse archeologists. Even with all our modern technology, it is still difficult to pick out differences among our ancestors from millions of years ago.

I carefully pick up the skulls, feeling the surface of each one with my fingers. What strikes me is just how similar each one is – the cheekbones, the jaws and the foreheads are so similar, despite millions of years of evolution.

As I feel history in my hands, I begin to wonder why, with so many similarities in our common origin, we focus on what makes us different from one another. Today we fight over superficial ethnic divisions, such as skin colour, ignoring the fact that we have so much more in common.

What Louise shows me – and the world – is that we all come from the same origin, from the same family. We are all Homo sapiens. Suddenly all the conflict and hatred in the world seems that much more absurd.

Later that night, sitting in the camp, our conversation turns to the other thing that attracts Louise and her team: dinosaur bones. The area around Lake Turkana is covered with them – like a huge graveyard. Louise explains the theory that a giant meteor crashed into Earth and killed the dinosaurs is somewhat true, but isn't the full story.

When a meteor crashed into Earth, it caused massive volcanic eruptions, which formed thick clouds in the air. Sunlight couldn't get in and gases couldn't get out. Air and water temperatures changed rapidly, and many of the animals died.

In other words, climate change killed the dinosaurs.

It all sounds eerily familiar. Global warming is once again causing Earth's temperature to rise. Carbon dioxide is polluting the air, plants and animals are being forced from their habitat, and severe storms, as well as droughts, are wreaking havoc in parts of the world. Her explanation of the past seems so relevant to us today.

That's when I begin to understand once again what Louise meant about ancient bones providing lessons for today's world. We often think of ourselves as masters of our planet, but in reality modern humans have been around for only a heartbeat when compared to the dinosaurs, or even our early ancestors. Learning about how they came and went is a reminder that life is too fragile to be taken for granted.

Those bones scattered across the floor of our tent are humbling proof of just how important it is to take care of our Earth – and each other.

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