

Origins, Being Human, and other stories for children



from a religious naturalist perspective

Preface

On Sunday mornings, I read stories with my children. We're not church-goers, so we had our Sunday School at home.

This book is a partial collection of what we've done, with a few stories and some suggestions for discussion.

Like the Bible, this book begins at the beginning. It presents modern views of how our world was formed and how life on Earth evolved. And, as it looks at who we are, things we draw from the past, and things we share with others, it can help children form a view of our place in the world and introduce and nurture a sense of reverence.

Take a look. Then sit down with your kids, read a bit, and talk . . .

Todd Macalister

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The Beginning



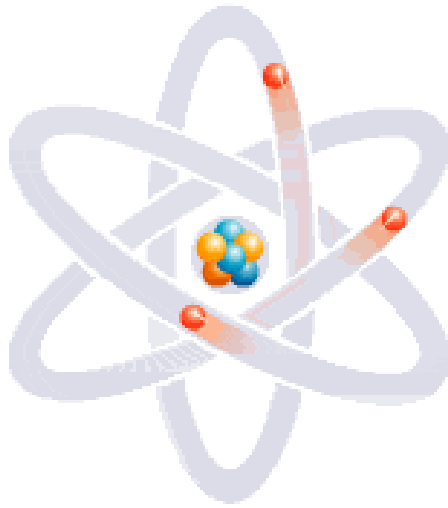
In the beginning,
everything
was all together as one.



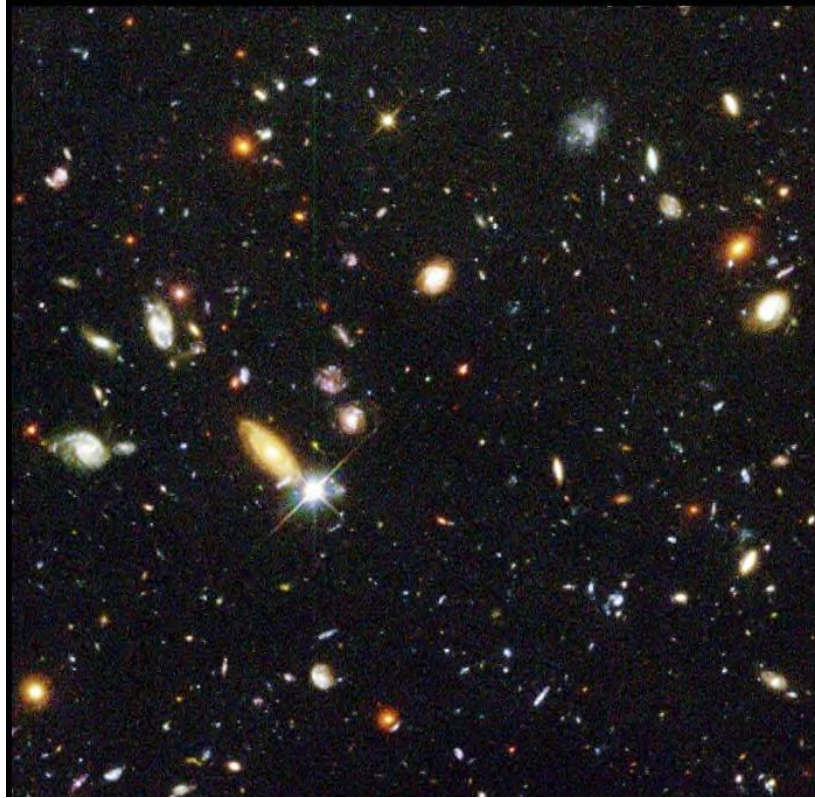
Then, all spread apart,
and continues to expand to this day.



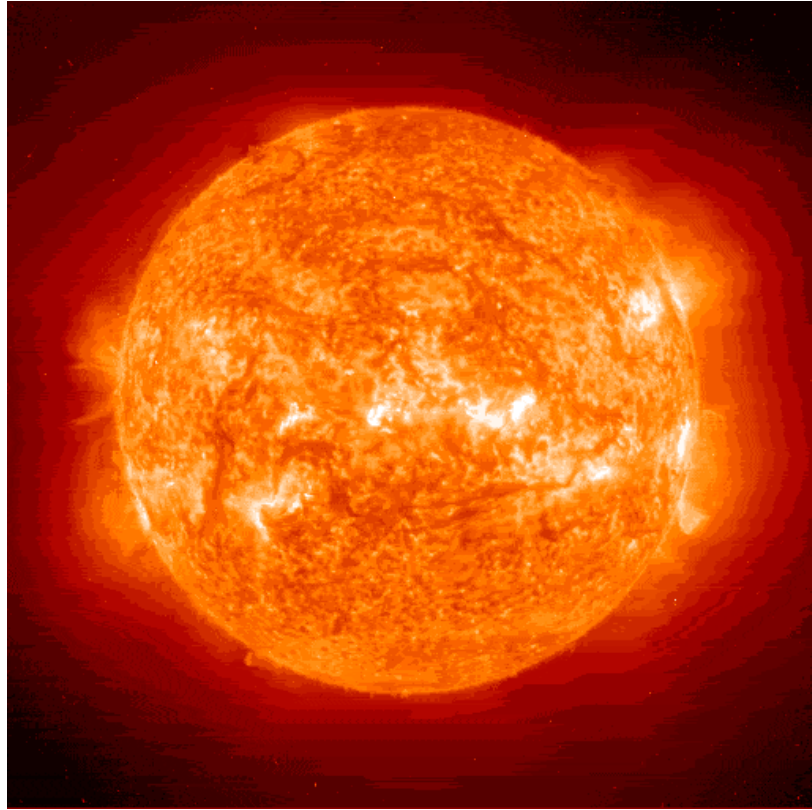
All was a cloud of particles and light.



Particles formed as opposites –
attracting and repelling,
circling, combining, forming clusters . . .



spinning into galaxies,
spinning into stars,
spinning off as planets and their moons.



The Sun ignites,
sending warmth and light.



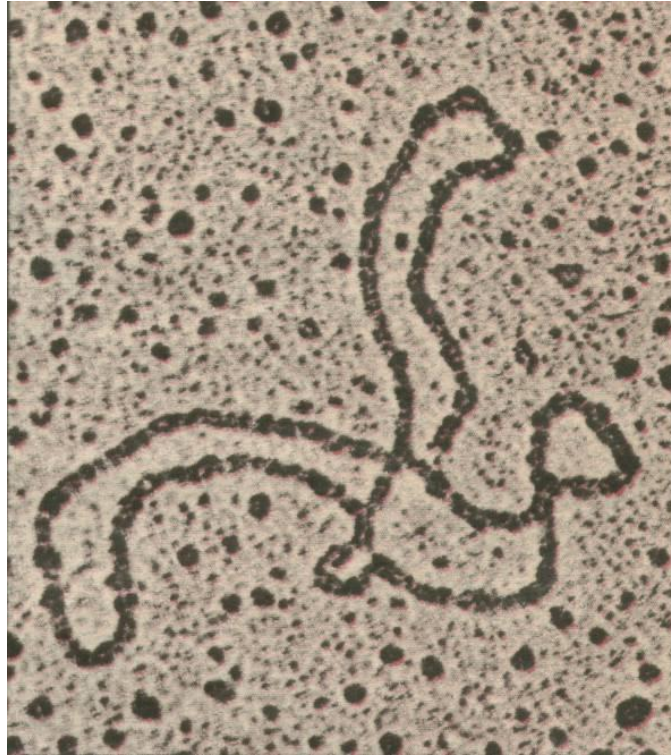
Earth forms as water, sky, and land.



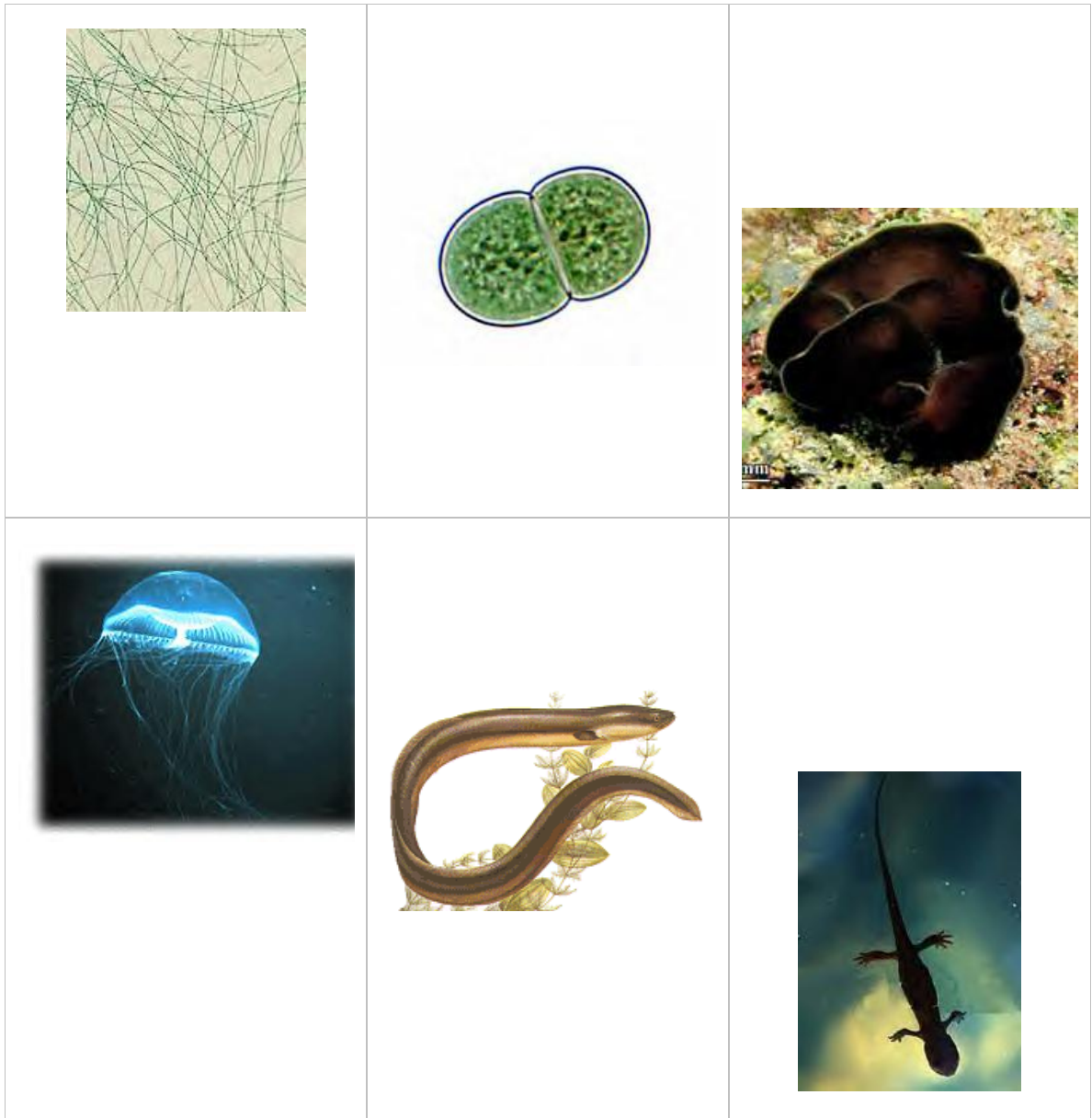
Volcanos erupt.

Mountains push up.

Continents and oceans take form.



Chemicals combine,
and some form in ways that
stay separate, copy themselves, and grow.



From this basic stuff,
life forms in the sea,
then evolves, and sets out onto land.

Algae, plants,
invertebrates, fish, . . .



amphibians, reptiles,
birds, mammals, . . .



Man.

We've taken a place.

Now we have our day in the sun.

Things to consider

The universe is very large.

If you could travel at the speed of light,
you could circle the Earth six times in less than a second.

At this speed, it would take:

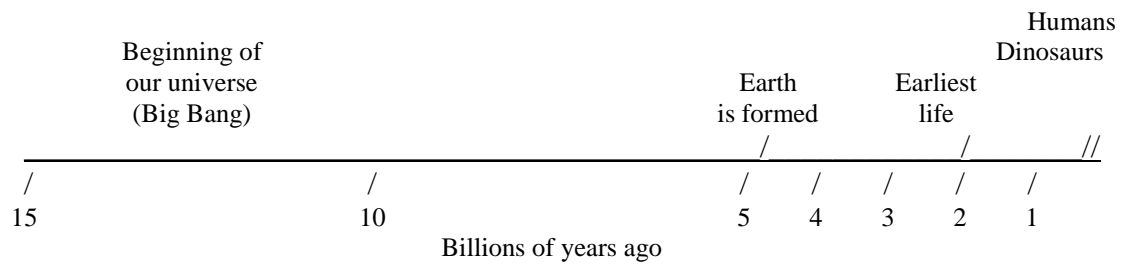
8 minutes	to reach	the Sun,
3 hours	to reach	the edge of our solar system,
4 years	to reach	the nearest star,
2 million years	to reach	the nearest galaxy,
20 billion years	to cross	the whole universe.

The basic units of life are very small.

Everything in our world is made of atoms.

If an atom was the size of this period [·],
a person would be 1,000 miles tall.

The universe is very old.



Human life is very new.

If the age of the universe is viewed as 7 days . . .

It took until Day 5 before the Earth was formed.

The earliest life forms appeared late on Day 6.

On Day 7 . . .

Dinosaurs did not appear until after 9 PM.

Humans appeared less than a minute before midnight.

Our entire recorded history is less than 1 second.

Things to discuss

We understand a lot about how our world came to be.
But, there are many things no one understands.

What thoughts or questions do you have?

How do you think the stars, the Earth, human beings, and other life
came to take the exact forms they have today?

Do you think there is life on other planets?

Why do you think we are here?

Things to do

Look at the night sky.

Identify planets, the Milky Way, and stars.

Lie out in the sun.

Feel its warmth.

Watch a sunset,

or waves on the shore,

or wind in the trees, or clouds,

and explain that these things happen

just as they have for millions of years.

Becoming Human



Who are we?

How did we become the way we are?



Ancient myths have described humans
as created from dust or clay,
or the sweat of God's brow,
or from many other things.

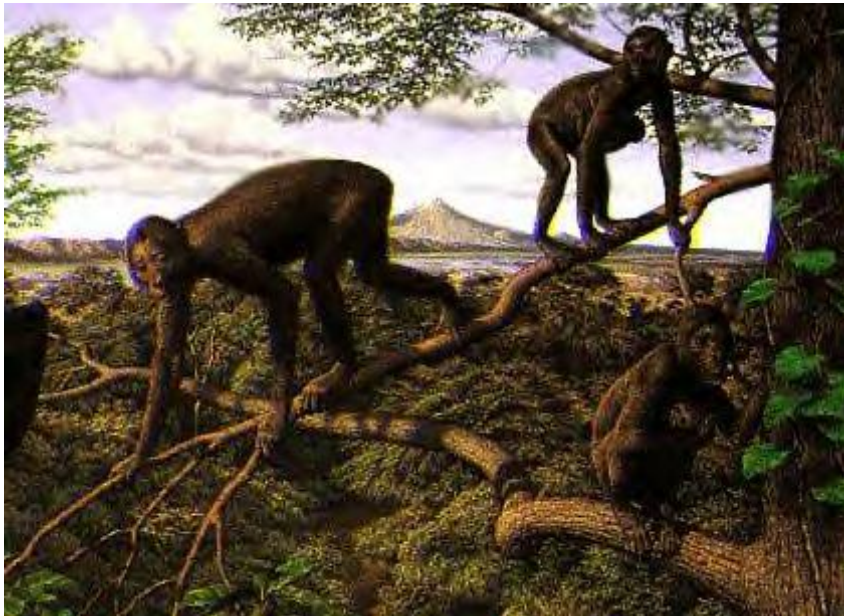
The modern view is just as wondrous.



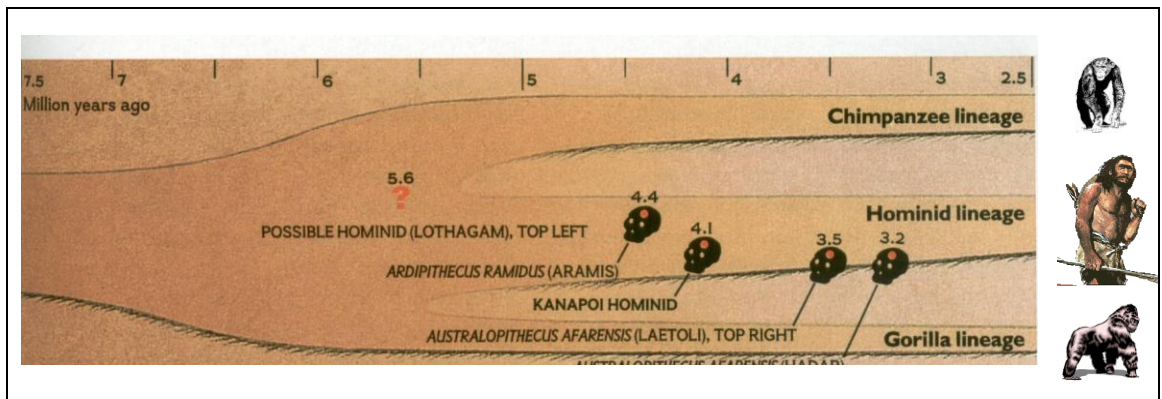
Some 30 million years ago, our ancestors lived in trees.

They were about the size of a cat,
with monkey-like arms and legs,
and fingers that let them grip things well.

They had good balance and good eyes and ate fruit.



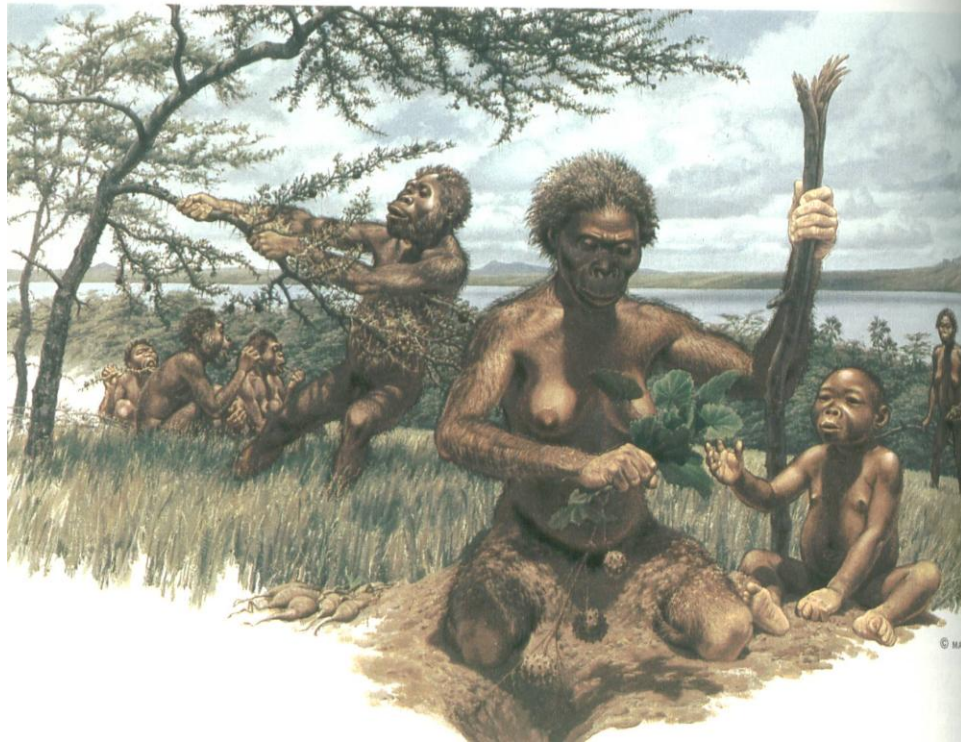
At some point –
probably when food became hard to find –
they came out of the trees
and began to live on the ground.



From these early primates, apes and monkeys evolved.

And early humans evolved - in a different way.

They began to walk on two legs,
which freed up their hands for using tools.







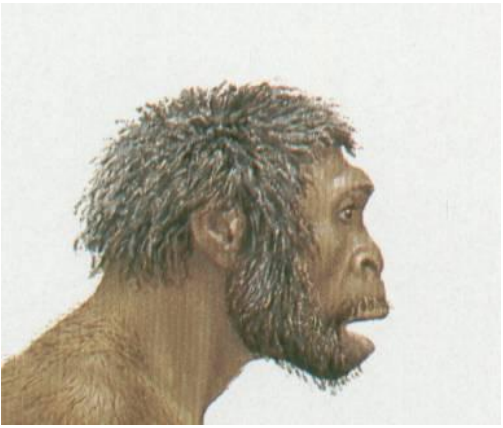

Australopithecus

By 3 million years ago, *Australopithecus* had emerged.

These early ancestors were about 4 feet tall, with a brain about one-third the size of ours.

They ate fruits, nuts, roots, and vegetation.

They may have used simple tools.

		
		
<p><i>Australopithecus</i> 3 million years ago</p>	<p><i>Homo Erectus</i> 1 million years ago</p>	<p><i>Homo Sapiens</i> 100,000 years ago</p>

1 million years ago, we had *Homo erectus*.

These ancestors were taller,
with a brain about three-quarters the modern size.

They used stone tools and fire.

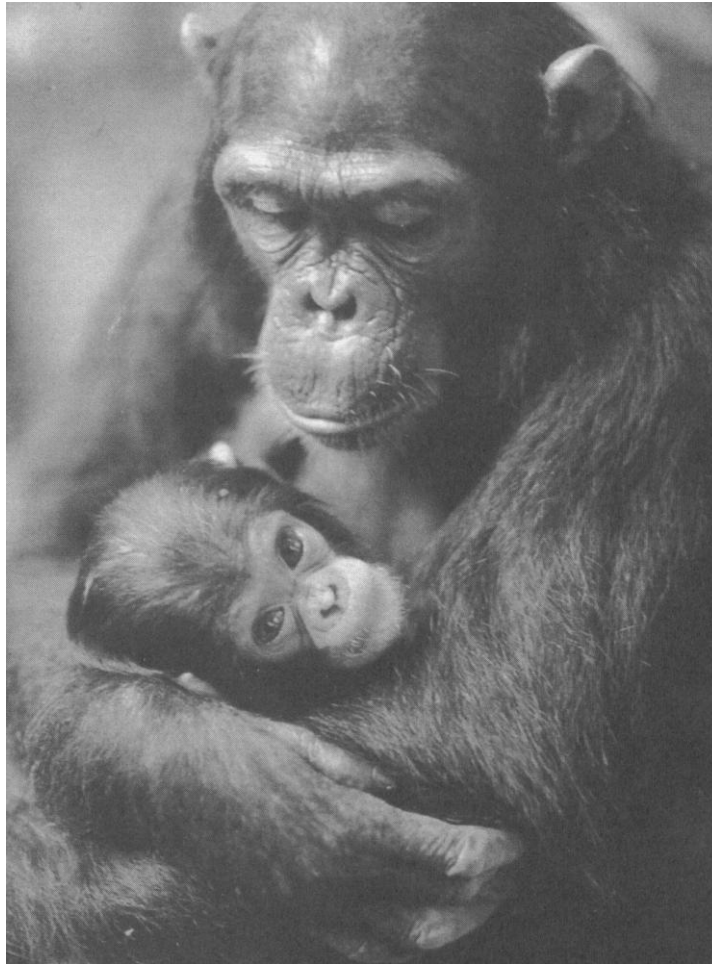
They hunted in groups,
and were the meat-eating primates in Africa.



By 100,000 years ago, modern humans, *Homo sapiens*, had emerged.

These people had brains and bodies very similar to our own.

They had the intelligence, awareness, and abilities
that make us human.



The chain of life, from early primates to modern humans,
has taken tens of million years.

And, as we evolved to our modern form,
we kept much of what had been with us before.

We share a lot with our animal cousins.

Almost all of our genes
are identical to those of chimpanzees.



Like other creatures . . .

we have hearts and lungs,
we see, hear, touch, taste, and smell,
we feel heat and cold and hunger,
we eat and sleep and move about,
we grow older, get diseases, and die.

Like our closest animal relatives . . .

we smile and play,
we care for and teach our young,
we communicate and live in groups.



But we are also very different from other animals.

The main reason for this is our brain,
which has areas and abilities
that are not present in other beings.



We, alone, have advanced
tools and technologies,
religion and art,
self-awareness, communications, and thoughts.

With these, we now rule
and have become stewards of the world.

Things to consider

We are part of an ancient chain of life.

Our ancestors trace back millions of years.

Much of what we do and want was shaped before humans evolved.

We have a lot in common with other creatures.

We can recognize and respect our kinship with other creatures.

We have both animal and human natures.

Many of our behaviors are instinctive.

For example, when we hit back when we're hurt or defend our turf, our actions are like those of other animals.

Some of our decisions are based on what we think; others are based on habits and feelings.

Sometimes our "gut" or our "heart" tells us one thing, but our rational mind may tell us something different.

We need to understand and learn to use both parts of our brains.

All people in the world have much in common.

We have common genes, which shape who we are and what we want.

We all have laws, education, and medicine.

We all joke and play games, and create art.

We have magic and superstition, and property and status.

We celebrate birth, and marriage, and death.

Although we often see things differently and do things different ways, we all have the same types of challenges and needs.

Things to discuss

Ask children . . .

What do you think about the idea
that our ancient grandparents were monkey-like creatures?

What do you think it would have been like –
living in trees and eating fruit?

What do you think it's like for (*give the name of a pet*) when he/she:
has a drink of water?
has dinner?
goes to sleep?
sees a friend?

In what ways do you think (*pet's name*)'s experience of these types of things
are similar to, and are different from
how you feel when you do these things?

Name something you've seen an animal do
that reminds you of something you do yourself.

People sometimes talk about the difference between
our "thinking mind" and our "animal nature".

Can you think of any things you've done, or seen other kids do,
that seem to show a piece of animal nature?

(Examples – fighting, bullying, possessiveness (mine!), temper/yelling, etc.)

Many creatures have set ways of doing certain things.
Can you think of any examples of where you like to do
the same thing, in exactly the same way, every time?

Things to do

Climb a tree.

Observe animals (pets, and in the wild).

Consider basic aspects of their lives:

What they eat and how they sleep

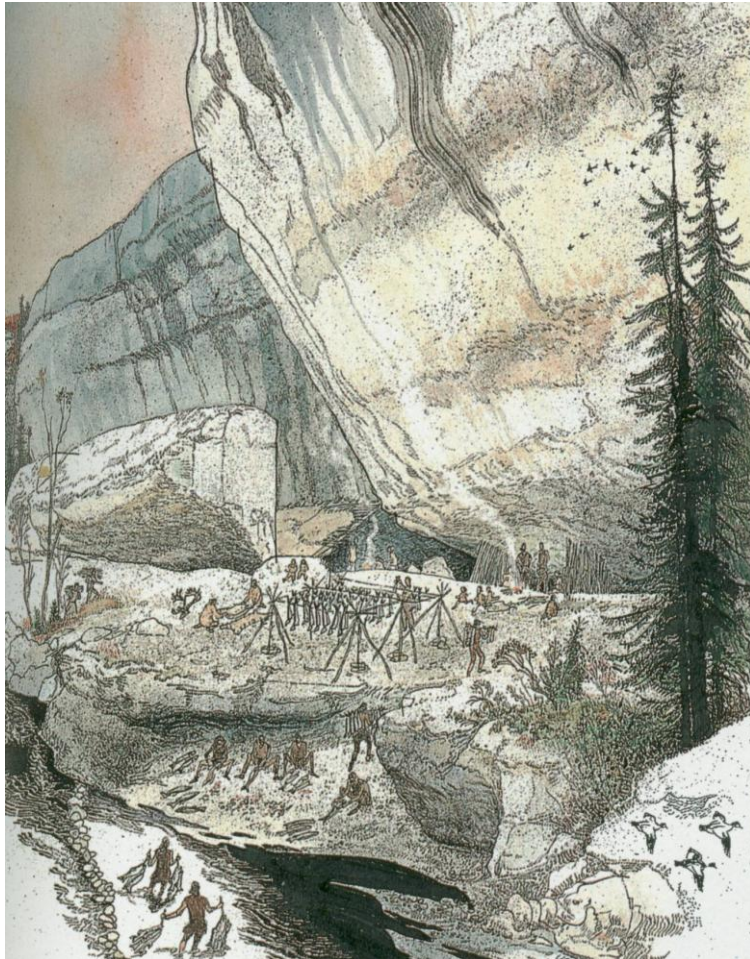
Their relationships with others

Their habits

How they play

Recognize things we share.

The World of Our Ancestors



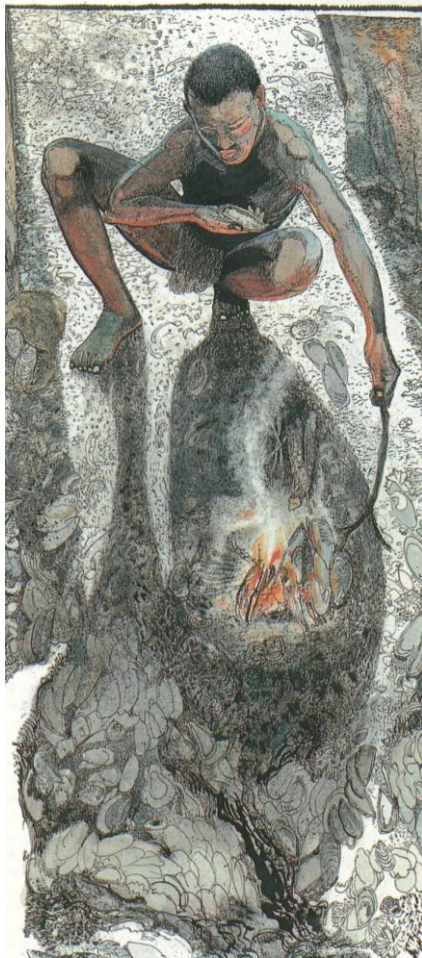
People, like us, have been present on Earth
for 100,000 years.

For most of that time,
our ancestors lived close with nature.

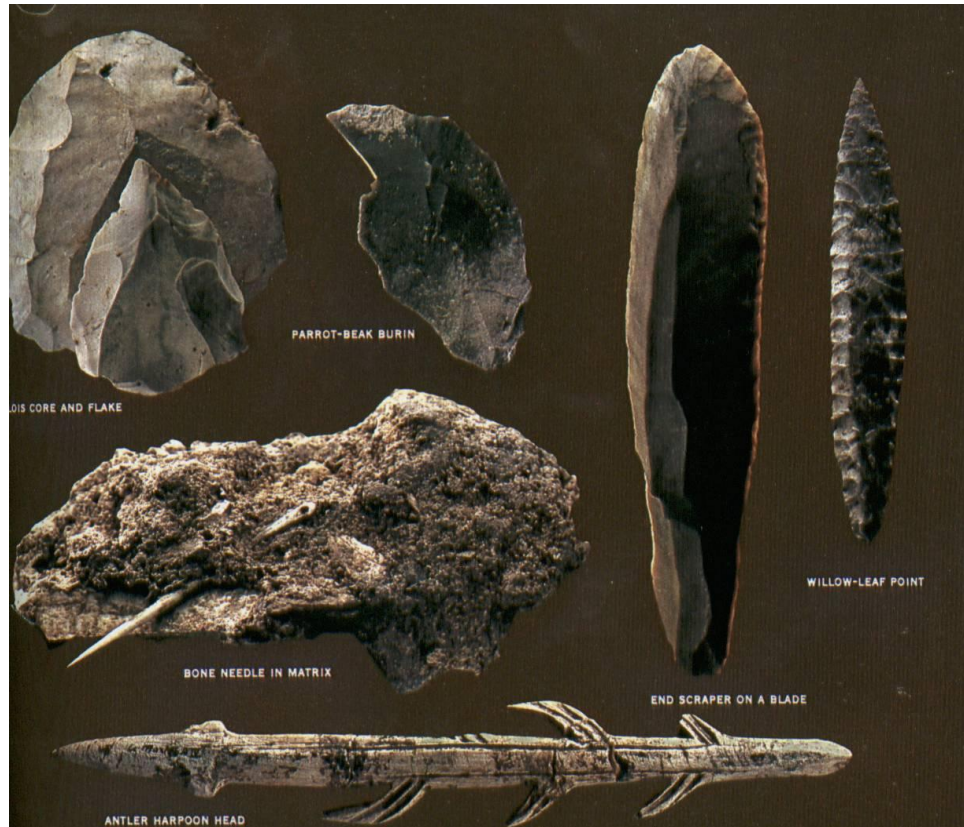


*Site of cave dwellings
Dordogne Valley, France*

They lived by lakes and streams,
to be close to water.



They used fire
for cooking and light and warmth.



They made and worked with tools.



They hunted.



They knew and gathered plants.



They watched the weather.

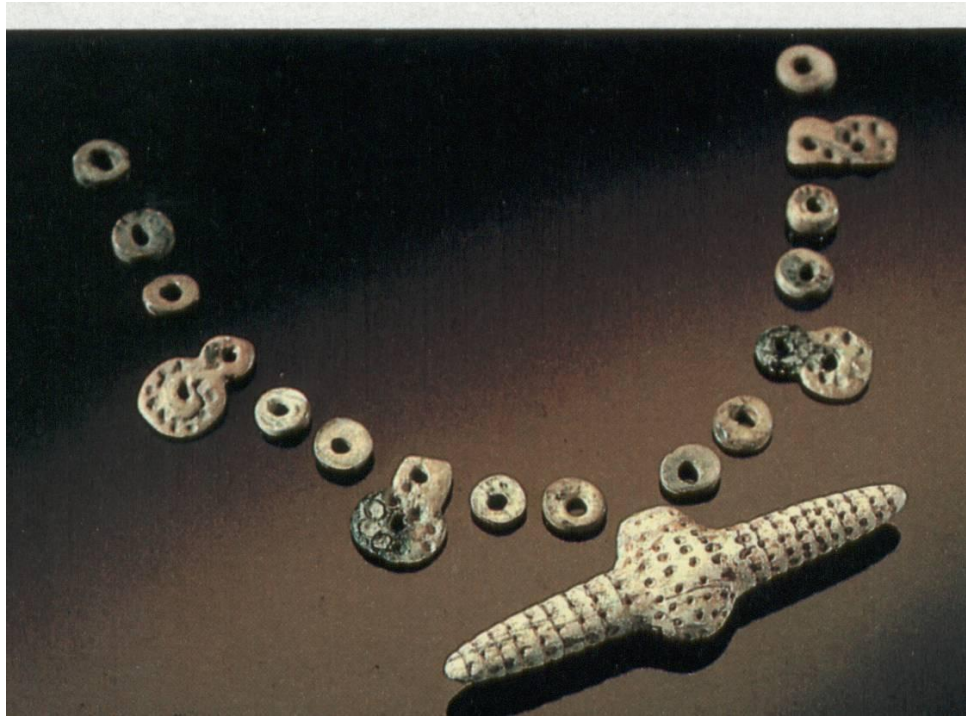
They watched the stars.



They worked with wood and clay
and reeds and skins.



They made music . . .



. . . and jewelry



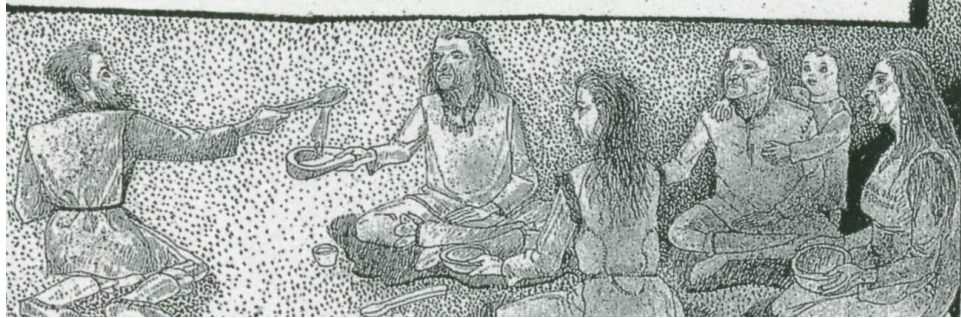
. . . and statues



. . . and paintings.



They showed respect for life
as they buried the dead.



They spent their whole lives
with their family and tribe.



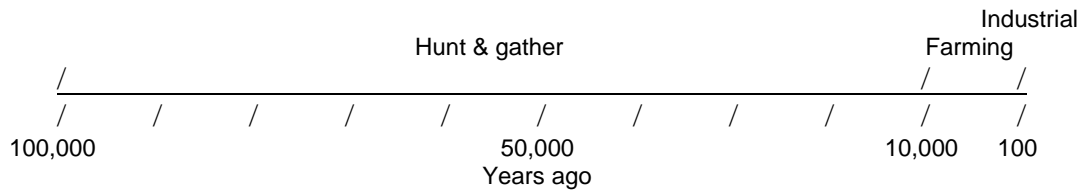
Twelve thousand years ago, the world grew warmer.
Ice sheets melted.
People learned how to farm
and began to live in cities and towns.

Our world, and the ways we live
have changed.

But much in the ways our Stone Age ancestors lived
are things we continue to be drawn to.

Things to consider

The world we live in is not the world to which we evolved.



The activities and pace of our modern world are very new.

Most of what we see and use is man-made.

We stay up after darkness, with electric light.

We travel at high speeds.

Our schedules are shaped by clocks.

We study in school for many years.

We often live apart from family and friends.

We often live among people we do not know.

Food is rich and plentiful.

We sit, rather than move, for much of the day.

What we do, and what we think we need, is rapidly changing.

The modern world offers many improvements over primitive ways.

But it also limits our experience of things our ancestors, and their ancestors took pleasure in for thousands of years.

A goal, now,
is to gain the best of both worlds.

Things to discuss

How do you think you would have liked living in a Stone Age tribe – with simple shelter by a lake or stream, and hunting for and gathering your food?

What things in our ancestors' lives do you think were hardest?

What things seem like they're better than the way things are today?

Things to do

Do ancient activities in nature.

Take a walk in the woods.

Gather flowers or berries or plants.

Make a necklace from an unusual stick or stone.

Sit by firelight after dark.

Learn to tell the time of day without a watch.

Go fishing.

Go hunting.
(with a camera)

Maintain connections with your family/tribe.

Celebrate occasions (such as Thanksgiving) where life-long friends or family come together.

Early Religion

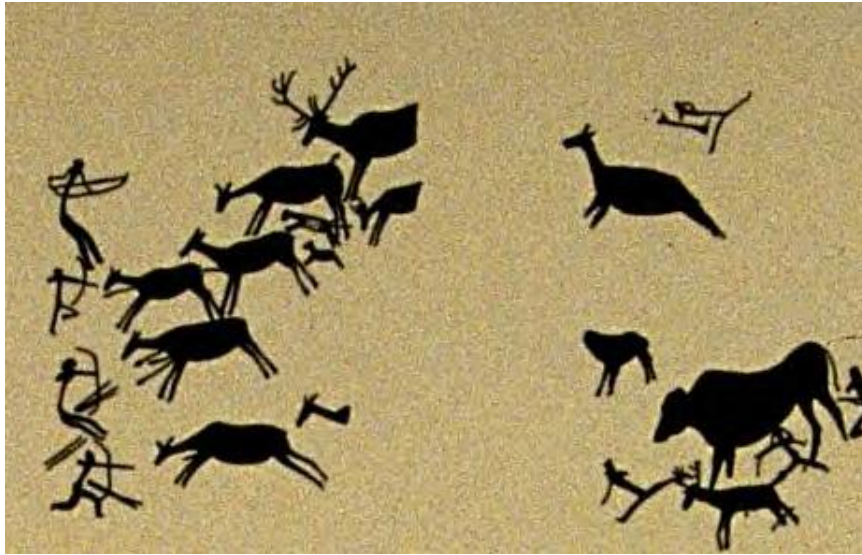


In dark, hidden caves
at the oldest sites where humans lived
are paintings.



No one knows exactly what they mean.

But these give clues
about how our ancestors viewed their world,
and what they worshipped and feared.



Life was hard.

They hunted,
but could not always find game.

They farmed,
but if there was no rain,
crops would not grow and they starved.

They knew that much
was beyond their understanding or control.



They recognized the power
of the Sun,
the wind,
and the rain.



They knew the life-force
of a seed in fertile soil.



They saw how chance events
could lead to injury or death,
and the thin line that separated
sickness from health.



They feared and respected
the unseen powers that controlled these things.

They called these forces
“spirits” or “gods”.



Wise men (shamen) sought visions.

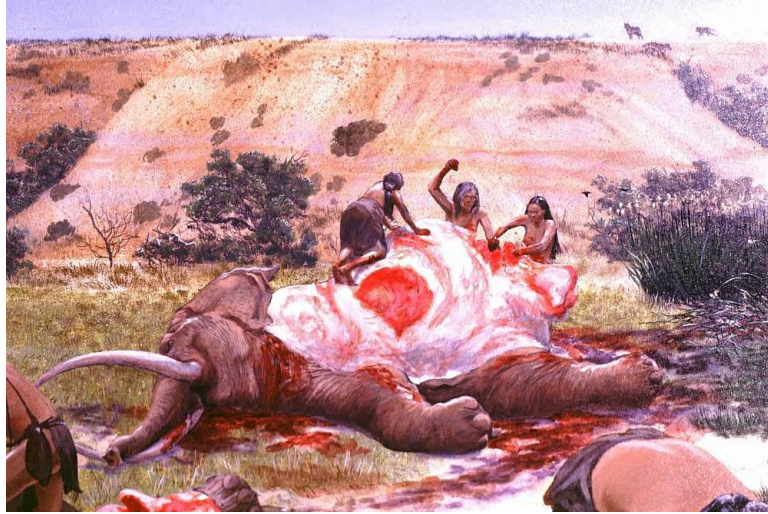
Through chanting, dance,
special potions or plants,
they entered another world
or state of mind.

Here, they received messages
to guide them.



Our ancestors tried to learn
the ways of their world,

and they tried to act in ways
that would bring good things to their people.



As hunters,
they took lives to sustain their own.

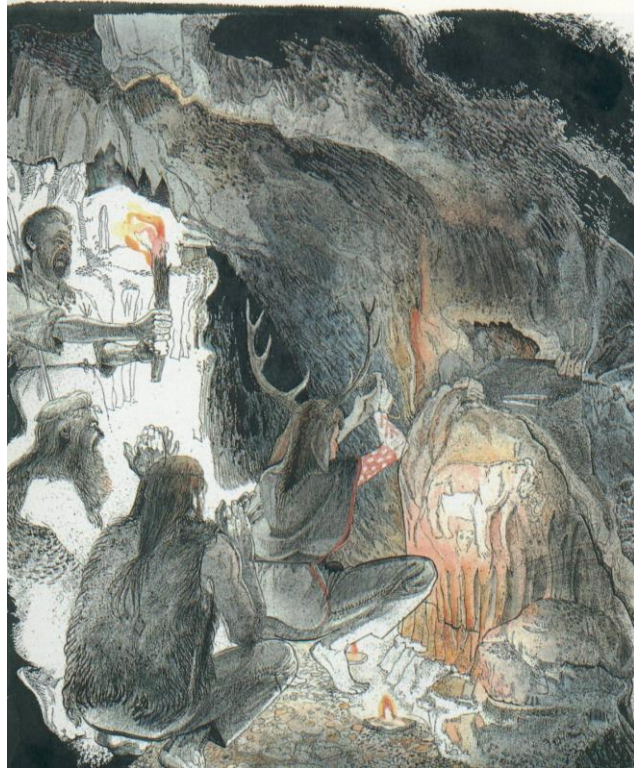
They appreciated the sacrifice
the animals made to help them live.



They tried to understand other creatures.

For, to hunt,
they must know the ways of their prey.

And when they ate the flesh,
they took in the animal's spirit.



To keep the gods happy,
they gave
the best meat from the hunt
and the first fruit from the fields
as offerings.



They watched
the Sun, the moon, and the stars
and marked the cycles of time.



And when they saw
the days grow longer,
the return of Spring,

or a birth,
a marriage,
or a death,

they had ceremonies
to note these events.



They told stories -

of how the Earth was formed,
why seasons change,
and why people act the way they do.

And, just as these myths
explained the world for ancient peoples,
we have our own stories and myths
to explain our world.

Things to consider

Ancient themes are still important.

Some parts of modern religions date back to ancient times.

In the darkest days of the year – each December –
we celebrate with candles and light.

When flowers and leaves return - in Springtime –
we celebrate rebirth.

We give offerings and make sacrifices to show appreciation.

We celebrate births and marriages and other life events.

As with ancient belief systems, modern religions have stories that explain . . .

How the world began

Rules to live by

Ways of dealing with forces we can't control

Things to discuss

Sailors often pray for good weather. Farmers often pray for rain.

Have there ever been times when you wanted something,
and you asked a god or unseen forces for help?

Have you ever made a “deal”? (If this good thing comes, I'll do X?)

Do you have any rituals –
where you do the same thing, the same way every time, for good luck?

If you have, can you describe what you did or said?

Why do you think you asked for help?

How did this make you feel?

When something good or bad has happened, have you ever thought that some force
was helping you, or playing tricks on you,
or causing things to happen the way they did?

Describe what happened, and what you thought.

What do you think causes events in our lives to happen the way they do?

Things to do

Give thanks.

When you sit down to a meal . . .

Recognize the plants and animals that have become your food.

Think about how these were when they were alive.

Give thanks for the food you are about to eat.

Visit an ancient place of worship.

Go to a pine grove, a mountain, a stream, a pool of water, or a rock formation.

Sit in silence, for a while.

Make a gesture to show respect.

Plant a seed.

Give it the care it needs.

Watch it grow.