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Synopsis & Pitch for Non-Technical Reporters

Major breaking news in Science:

Did Apes Evolve from Humans? Did Darwin have it backwards?

Hi, I'm Dr. Aaron Filler. I'm a spinal neurosurgeon at Cedars Sinai in LA and I'm also a Harvard trained evolutionary biologist. I've been interviewed previously on Peter Jennings ABC News and CNN and have recently become a frequent expert commentator on various issues for CNN Radio. In two books earlier this year and in a major scientific article published this month, I've reported a solution one of the great mysteries in human evolution. The result is the amazing finding that the human body form – with its upright bipedal walking - goes back 15 million years earlier than most experts have thought. Lucy (*Australopithecus afarensis*) is just 3.5 million years old and her species now pales into relative insignificance. One remarkable implication is that many of the apes are actually descended from human or human-like ancestors who walked on two feet – appearing to meet our current criteria for being called humans rather than apes.

Startling and controversial as this may sound, the paper is being well received among academics and has been covered in hundreds of media and blogs in the past two weeks. National Geographic is about to report on the new study for their readership later this week. It has not yet been reported in broadcast media.

We all have a stake in human origins. This is non-Darwinian evolution and it is important to us because the science of human origins reflects an inner fascination we all share in how we came to be here and what will happen to our species in the future. Every textbook – scientific or creationist is now totally obsolete.

The idea of Evolution stirs passion. How can one thing change into another? How can the human soul and its place in our religious moral frameworks emerge gradually from animals who don't seem to play a role in our relationships with god? Even more unsettling, how can animals emerge from humans?

The latest scientific discovery in biochemistry or physics just don't reach so deeply into our psyche. This is all about who we are, who our ancestors are and how important we are in universe both as individuals and as a species.

In an important sense, the evolutionary scientist has been bound by the same mind set as the creationist. It made great sense to have quadrupedal apes scratching around on all fours until – sometime after the chimp/human split – we suddenly stood upright, used our hands, and began to think and talk as a gloriously advanced super-species.

However, now it's time to accept the evidence and muddy those waters. What if that moment of standing up took place long ago many times further into the past than has been widely accepted. What if bipedalism was just OK to survive, but not overwhelmingly great. Other types of descendants evolved – knuckle walkers, arm swingers, “four-armed” tree climbers and the primitive original type of hominiform hominoid trudged along in old-fashioned style without further evolution as upright bipedal walker – that happens to be exactly what all the fossil evidence and the genetic evidence now seems to show.

The evidence has accumulated steadily, but it has been so hard for scientists to accept that they may have been so wrong for an entire career of teaching and writing that the clear meaning of the data has been ignored and suppressed.

Now in a major paper published this month, all the evidence is assembled and the old view is being overturned. There will certainly be tremendous controversy, attacks, angry questions, insults, etc. However – as with any good science – the data speak for themselves.

The one fossil that started this revolution was discovered more than 45 years ago. When it amounted to a single piece of evidence against the entire belief system of the scientific anthropology community, it was easy to ignore. David Pilbeam – newly appointed Dean of Harvard College – handed a cast of that fossil to me 25 years ago and asked me to use my special interests and skills to figure out what it really meant.

I've now provided the answer. Bolstered by several other similar finds and other new critical data in spinal function and genetics. It can only mean one thing – the modern apes evolved from human or human-like ancestors, and a sudden “non-Darwinian” event launched it all.

There was an original family. A group of “dental apes” (their molar teeth resembled those of humans and apes), but they walked on all fours like monkeys – no knuckle walking, no arm swinging. Then suddenly, a malformed ape child was born with an abnormal spine that rendered it unable to walk comfortably on all fours. From a very young age it spent its life standing on two feet, while its brothers and sisters no doubt ran circles around it and laughed and teased.

However, that deformed ape was the first human. The first in a long lineage – a series of species – reflected even now in our primitive body form that mirrors that first founding ape-human child. A line that one day saw another genetic shift toward progressively larger brain size. Finally, after 21 million years, the time came – a mere instant into the geologic past – just 35,000 years ago, when language, art and technology began to blossom and explode at the frantic pace that ultimately produced our modern world.