

What Apes Can Teach Us

BY JEFF FARR

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It happened quite recently, in evolutionary terms, that human and ape diverged. Proof of this is found in the DNA we carry — human and chimpanzee are, in fact, 99 percent DNA-similar. Adrienne Zihlman, an anthropologist at the University of California at Santa Cruz, has for 30 years been studying this human-to-ape relationship and questioning our stereotypes about male/female roles in the primate world.

That male apes were bigger and did all the hunting and that females were smaller and stayed home raising babies is all a myth, Zihlman argues. For Zihlman, all the evidence points to female apes standing on equal footing with males, physically and otherwise.

Zihlman's ideas have met with much controversy in the academic world, sending some of her colleagues into heated arguments over whether primate bone samples, like the famous "Lucy" ones, are from males or females. But controversy doesn't faze Zihlman — "I'm willing to stand up and say I don't agree with people," she told the *Los Angeles Times* recently.

What's at stake here for Zihlman and her peers? Besides their careers and reputations, how the human race defines itself is at stake. Zihlman has noted in her popular *Human Evolution Coloring Book* (now under revision) that we are as close to apes as horses are to zebras, as grizzly bears to polar bears. Whatever we find out about apes profoundly affects the way we see ourselves.

It will be interesting in the coming years to see what Zihlman and other anthropologists can learn about humanity through the characteristics we share with apes. Our not-so-long-ago evolutionary brothers and sisters have a lot to teach us.

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