

The whole tooth

What was your first experiment as a child?

I grew a colony of bacteria. I remember my father's embarrassed expression as he asked fruitlessly for agar-agar in all the pharmacies of the district.

Whose graduate student would you most like to have been?

Albert Dahlberg at the anthropology department of the University of Chicago in the early 1970s.

What scientific paper changed your career path?

Loring Brace's papers on dental size reduction in hominid evolution. Papers such as 'Post-Pleistocene changes in the human dentition' (*Am. J. Phys. Anthropol.* **34**, 191–203; 1971) were a tentative application of the 'probable mutation effect' model published in 1964 in the *American Naturalist*. Coarsely, large teeth means hard food, small teeth means soft food. Just three days before our wedding, my fiancée said that I seemed more interested in these papers than our marriage. She left, and we never saw each other again.

What book has been most influential in your scientific career?

Paleopathology at the Origins of Agriculture by M. N. Cohen and G. J. Armelagos (Academic Press, Orlando, 1984) elegantly showed 20 years ago that even the soundest ideas about recent human history are based on prejudice.

What's your favourite conference destination, and why?

Field work provides the ideal conference destination. Once back at the camp after hours spent looking for fossils and sites, sampling rocks and sediments, and excavating unusual objects, people meet to organize and summarize the results, ask questions, offer critical remarks and suggest more productive search strategies for the next day — and to decide who is in charge of the kitchen.

What book is currently on your bedside table?

Africa by John Reader, a cocktail of history, nature, adventure and politics.

What music heads the playlist in your car or lab?

Almost any opera by Rossini.

The job of captain on the Starship Enterprise in Star Trek has become vacant. Nominate any real person, living or dead, for the post.

Easy — Tim White, a palaeoanthropologist at the University of California, Berkeley.

Assuming the dead can be raised and/or time travel exists, with whom from the world outside science would you most like to have dinner?

One of the members of the early human community fossilized some 300,000–400,000 years ago in a natural pit at Atapuerca, Spain.

Where and when would you most like to have lived or worked?

Tierra del Fuego, in the second half of the nineteenth century.

You are on a plane behind two students obviously going to the same conference, who start to talk about your work. What do you do?

A few months after my arrival in Poitiers, I realized that two students on the same bus were joking about my French pronunciation during lectures. I strategically plunged into an article randomly extracted from my bag.

What one thing would you rescue from your burning laboratory?

Probably the collection of X-ray films of fossil specimens.

What do you most dislike about having research published?

Nothing. I'm convinced that to publish scientific results is simply the expected, proper conduct for professionals.

The Internet is the bane of scientists' lives because...

...you can be much more easily contradicted when you state to administrators that the equipment you have asked for is certainly the best value for money on the market.

What do you do to relax?

Prepare spicy sauces for dinner.

What previously under-recognized sport or pastime should be included in the Olympic Games?

Chess.

What single discovery, invention or innovation would most improve your life?

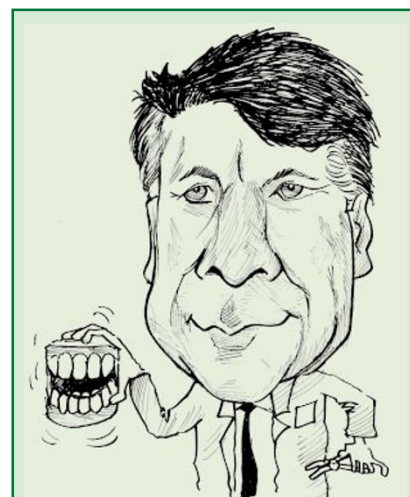
A magic pill, specific for each language, to be taken when travelling, effective for a few days, with no side effects or contra-indications.

Do you have a burning ambition to do or learn something of no practical or immediate value?

To walk across a continental interior — preferably Eurasia moving eastwards — until I reach the sea.

Under what conditions do you have your greatest and most inspired ideas?

I have a notebook labelled 'Memo & To Do'. Each morning I spend a few minutes reading and updating it. This activity represents a major source of frustration. But the unintentional visual juxtaposition of otherwise



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independent listed points sometimes generates unexpected and intriguing results.

What's the one thing about science that you wish the public understood better?

That doubts, additional questions, argument and criticism contribute to the strength, not the weakness, of scientific thought.

Which field in science (apart from your own) deserves more funding, and why?

Research into the deep oceans. It may yet reveal crucial information for the life of us surface residents.

What's the most interesting thing in your fridge?

As I'm in France, capers from Puglia, jealously preserved and consumed, in very limited quantity and only with very close friends.

Which actor would best portray you in a film of your life story?

Dustin Hoffman.

What one thing would you change about Nature?

Nature & Culture might be a more appropriate title for the journal in view of its actual content.

You've just been told (in confidence) that the world will end tomorrow. What do you do next?

I would suggest to my family and friends that we take a full day of vacation together. No school, no job ... but some shopping, a visit to an exhibition, the cinema, a restaurant (probably cous-cous or paella), a drink in a pub, and then back home, with some music before bed. Then, good night... ■