

The One Hundredth Monkey

Commissioner Peter H. Chang

By Commissioner Peter H. Chang –

The Japanese monkey, *Macaca fuscata*, was being observed in the world for a period of over 30 years. In 1952, on the island of Koshima, scientists were providing monkeys with sweet potatoes dropped in the sand. The monkeys liked the taste of the raw sweet potatoes but they found the accompanying dirt unpleasant.

An 18-month-old female, Imo, solved the problem by washing the potatoes in a nearby stream. She taught this trick to her mother. Her playmates also learned this new way and they taught their mothers, too.

This cultural innovation was gradually picked up by various monkeys right before the eyes of the scientists. Between 1952 and 1958, all the young monkeys learned to wash the sandy sweet potatoes to make them more palatable. Only the adults who imitated their children learned this social improvement. Other adults kept eating the dirty sweet potatoes.

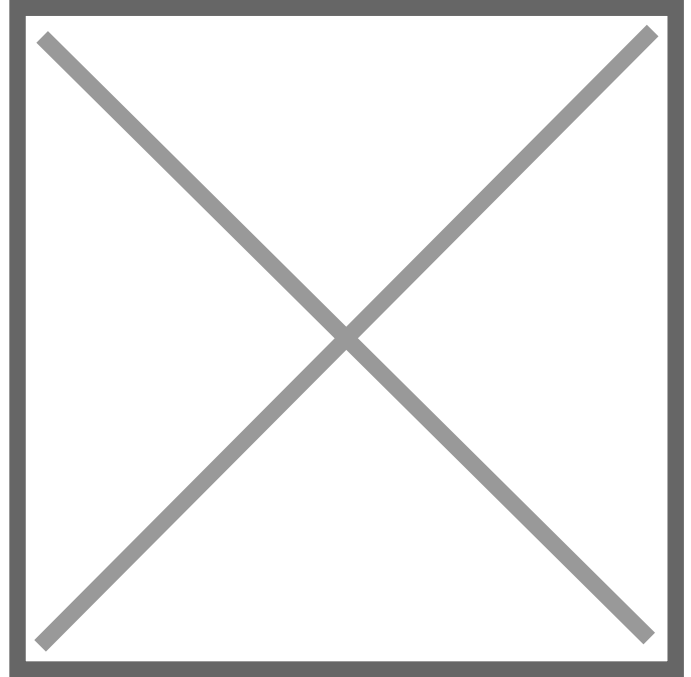
Then something startling took place. In the autumn of 1958, a certain number of Koshima monkeys were washing sweet potatoes. I don't know the exact number: Let us suppose there were 99 monkeys one morning. Later that morning, the one hundredth monkey learned to wash potatoes. Well, then it happened!

By evening, almost every monkey in the tribe was washing sweet potatoes before eating them. The added energy of this one hundredth monkey somehow created an ideological breakthrough!

But that's not all. The most surprising thing observed by these scientists was that the habit of washing sweet potatoes then spontaneously jumped over the sea— colonies of monkeys on other islands and the mainland troop of monkeys at Takasakiyama began washing their sweet potatoes too! How exciting: a spontaneous breakthrough!

It is the high calling of every Christian to be, if not the first, then at least that one hundredth monkey—the one who provides the breakthrough; who shows things can change for the better;

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demonstrating that if enough of us become aware of something, all of us will eventually become aware.

What in our world today is the equivalent of the unwashed sweet potatoes? I suggest that it could be—separatism. We habitually perceive and act toward one another out of a deep feeling of separateness, illustrated by Cain's question to God, "Am I my brother's keeper?" with its implied answer, "No, I am not my brother's keeper—let alone a brother to some stranger."

Separatism is "me-ism" in its individual, corporate and national forms. Separatism is a gladiatorial view of the world, for the line from separateness to violence is short and direct. As the story of Cain and Abel illustrates, all violence stems from seeing others as alien, from counting the interests of others inconsequential compared with the importance of our own. Are we still eating dirty sweet potatoes?

The clean sweet potatoes can be likened to St. Paul's very different model of human relationships. Far from denying kinship, St. Paul affirms it in a glorious metaphor: "The eye cannot say to the hand, 'I have no need of you' nor again the head to the feet, 'I have no need of you'." Paul's model is a holistic way of seeing things. It's not me against you, but me and you against whatever evil seeks to divide us. If we are indeed a team, then it's you and me against the intruder, estrangement. According to the holistic view, we appear separate but in fact are one.

Einstein described this unity: "A human being is a part of the whole called by us the 'universe.' He experiences himself, his thoughts and feelings, as something separated from the rest—a kind of optical delusion of his consciousness. This delusion is a kind of prison for us, restricting us to our personal desires and to affection for a few persons nearest to us. Our task must be to free ourselves from this prison by widening our circle of compassion to embrace all living creatures."

That one hundredth monkey showed that things can change for the better. Said Einstein: "Our task must be to free ourselves from this prison by widening our circle of compassion." "Are we our brother's keeper?" "No, we are our brother's brother."

Let us then set forth in our task, wholeheartedly, caring for our brothers and sisters as God would have us care. The breakthrough will come...and will be spontaneous.