

Pamphlet 4

THE MYTH OF THE HUNDREDTH MONKEY

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The hundredth monkey is the name of a new myth. It's a story that has arisen, been repeated, and written about only in the last two decades. It is of very recent origin and yet, like Greek myths that tell of the Trojan war, it's not clear where fact ends and metaphor begins. The story was based on scientific observations of monkey colonies in Japan.

Off the shores of Japan, scientists had been studying monkey colonies on many separate islands for over thirty years. In order to keep track of the monkeys, they would drop sweet potatoes on the beach for them to eat. The monkeys would come out of the trees to get the sweet potatoes, and would be in plain sight to be observed. One day an 18-month-old female monkey named Imo started to wash her sweet potato in the sea before eating it. We can imagine that it tasted better without the grit and sand; maybe it even was slightly salty. Imo showed her playmates and her mother how to do it, and her friends showed their mothers, and gradually more and more monkeys began to wash their sweet potatoes instead of eating them grit and all. At first, only the adults who imitated their children learned, and gradually others did also. One day, the observers saw that all the monkeys on that particular island were washing their sweet potatoes.

Although this was significant, what was even more fascinating to note was that when this shift happened, the behavior of monkeys on all the other islands changed as well; they now all washed their sweet potatoes-despite the fact that monkey colonies on the different islands had no direct contact with each other.

The "hundredth monkey" was the hypothesized anonymous monkey that tipped the scales for the culture the one whose change in behavior signaled the critical number of changed monkeys, after which all the monkeys on all the islands washed their sweet potatoes.

The hundredth monkey is an allegory that gives hope to people who have been working on changing themselves and saving the planet, and wondering if their individual efforts will make any difference at all. As a myth, the hundredth monkey is a statement that affirms a commitment to work on something, like ridding Earth of nuclear weapons—even if the effect is invisible for a long time. If there is to be a hundredth monkey there has to be a human equivalent of Imo and her friends; someone has to be the twenty-seventh and the eighty-first and the ninety-ninth monkey, before a new archetype can come into being.

British biologist Rupert Sheldrake believes that “morphogenic fields” shape the form, development, and behavior of organisms—even if there are no conventional forms of contact between them. Fields are built up over time by the repetitive actions of animals or people of the same species. When a certain number of the members of the species learn the behavior, it is automatically acquired by the other members of the species. Sheldrake has proven the action of morphogenic fields experimentally with both animals and such elementary phenomena as the growth of crystals. This theory is consistent with field theory and nonlocal causation in Quantum physics. We can think of shared vision, values, and purpose as an invisible ordering (field) in organizations.

In organizations, disappointing change efforts, mediocre leadership, the loss of trust and credibility, and the inner turmoil are so great that life may, at times, seem hopeless. We think not. While the destructiveness of an incomplete worldview is apparent all around us, the new growth that is emerging is not always so obvious.

I will not forget the barren, ash covered landscape surrounding Mount St. Helens a year or two after the volcano erupted spewing ash and destruction for hundreds of miles. I felt stunned and said to my wife, “This must be what the aftermath of an atomic war would be like” as I scanned the area. The destruction was overwhelming; it was easy to overlook the grass beginning to grow through the ash. Cleansed by destruction, nature began again.

Like Mount St. Helens, new creation is taking place in our organizational lives. We meet people weekly who are seeking new forms for their lives, for leadership, and for organizations. We see a critical mass of people growing who want to be part of the potential of the transformation the world is experiencing. They are the courageous artists and pioneers who

are discovering, creating, and beginning to live from a new, organic worldview.

Recommended reading *The Fourth Turning* by William Strauss & Neil Howe