

Maureen Miller O'Hara

THE HUNDREDTH HUMANISTIC PSYCHOLOGIST

In the last month I have been in six gatherings of humanistically oriented psychologists and at **every one** someone has referred to the so-called "Hundredth Monkey Phenomenon". At least two of the people are very well known in humanistic circles. When last week I was given a copy of Ken Keyes' book of that name I finally could take no more. Enough is enough!

I read zoology in England in the 1960s. In a primatology class I had studied the then new Koshima Island macaque research. (3,4,5) Even though my zoology training was twenty years and a life-career change behind me, I experienced a disquieting skepticism on reading the account, in the August 1981 issue of Brain Mid Bulletin (BMB), of Lyall Watson's version of these famous studies. As the incidence of citation of the "hundredth monkey phenomenon" rose I felt disturbed enough to track down those studies and reread them.

I started with Watson's book and the first distortion in the story becomes immediately evident. This is BMB's account. (They mistitle the book, calling it **Lifetide: The Biology of Consciousness**, instead of its correct title, **Lifetide: The Biology of Unconscious**, but I don't consider this too serious in and of itself).

Watson's actual text is italicized.

Watson, a biologist, recounted what happened in a monkey tribe on an island near Japan after introduction of a new food: freshly dug sweet potatoes covered with sand and grit. The monkeys, whose other foods required no washing, were reluctant to eat the dirty potatoes.

Then an 18-month-old female, a sort of monkey genius called Imo, solved the problem by carrying potatoes down to a stream and washing them before feeding. In monkey terms this is a cultural revolution comparable to the invention of the wheel. It involves abstraction, identification of concept, and deliberate manipulation of several parameters in the environment.

Imo taught the new behavior to her mother and to her playmates, who also taught it to their mothers. Eventually all the juvenile monkeys were washing their potatoes, but the only adults to do so were those taught directly by their children. Then, quite suddenly, the behavior tended to become universal.

Let us say, for argument's sake, that the number (of potato washers) was 99 and that at 11 o'clock on a Tuesday morning, one further convert was added to the fold in the usual way. But the addition of the hundredth monkey apparently carried the number across some sort of threshold, pushing it through a kind of critical mass, because by that evening almost everyone in the colony was doing it. Not only that, but the habit seems to have jumped natural barriers and to have appeared spontaneously, like glycerine crystals in sealed jars, in colonies on other islands and on the mainland in a troop at Takasakiyama.

Watson commented:

The relevance of this anecdote is that it suggests that there may be mechanisms in evolution other than those governed by ordinary natural selection. I feel there is such a thing as the Hundredth Monkey Phenomenon and that it may account for the way in which many memes, ideas and fashions spread throughout our culture. It may be that if enough of us hold something to be true, it becomes true for everyone.

What the BMB curiously omitted from Watson's own account is a very clear admission as to the speculative nature of his ideas. In introducing his "Let us say for argument's sake . . ." paragraph Watson wrote:

Then something extraordinary took place. The details up to this point in the study are clear, but one has to gather the rest of the story from personal anecdotes and bits of folklore amongst primate researchers, because most of them are still not quite sure what happened. And those who do suspect the truth are reluctant to publish it for fear of ridicule. So I am forced to improvise the details, but as near as I can tell, this is what seems to have happened.

In the Autumn of that year an unspecified number of monkeys were washing sweet potatoes in the sea, because Imo had made a further discovery that salt water not only cleaned the food but gave it an interesting new flavor. Let us say for argument's sake . . .

So we have already been subjected to a substantial piece of deception by the editors of BMB. What Watson admits is a highly speculative and subjective piecing together of anecdotes and hearsay is presented as "scientific findings". Watson's authority(?) as a biologist is included but not the cautionary disclaimers which Watson himself had been honest enough to include.

But honest disclaimer notwithstanding, Watson's account is in fact worse than speculative, it is inaccurate. He gives reference to three works, two by Kawai and one by Kawamura. I tracked down the papers and, as I had intuitively remembered, they do not say what Watson implies they do.

The papers describe several food-related behaviors, all developed as a consequence of artificial provisioning by humans. The behaviors include Sweet Potato Washing (SPW), Wheat Washing (WW), Bathing Behavior (BB), Give-Me (GM) (begging food from tourists), and Candy Eating (C). According to Kawai the transmission of SPW throughout the colony occurred in two distinct phases. The first phase was slow and, as Watson related, was invented by Imo who then passed it to her playmates, siblings and siblings. This took from 1953 to 1958. By then two out of 11 adults had learned it and 15 out of 18 juveniles between two years old and seven years old had learned it. The second phase seems to be what Watson is referring to, and it is at this time that the so-called "extraordinary thing" happened. The behavior becomes universal (except for the adults born before 1950, who never learn it). What happened was the juvenile females reached menarche and began to have babies, and, whereas friend-to-friend, child-to-parent transmission is slow, mother to infant transmission is one hundred per-cent. The monkeys born after 1958 all learned it, but not by some magical process. They learned it from their mothers. There's nothing new here.

There is one behavior which is reported to have spread through an entire colony in a matter of hours. This though is an entirely different story. This occurred in another troop (Imo was not involved) and the behavior, Wheat Eating, was tried by the dominant male. One feature of macaque social life is that the whole troop will quickly imitate a behavior of a dominant male (4). There's nothing new here either!

What Watson apparently did was to combine two studies yielding a story he apparently likes better than the original. But he does not stop there. He wants us to believe that after a certain point, individual-to-individual transmission by imitation is transformed into a new

order phenomenon. He gives us the extraordinary idea that even on neighboring islands this behavior appeared spontaneously like "glycerine crystals in sealed jars". He cited no reference at all here so I cannot track down what he was using as sources for this. What I can report however, is that the idea of the other islands being as impenetrable as "sealed jars" is just not so.

First of all the researchers who provisioned the monkeys travelled frequently from island to island. Also some of the islands are open to the public as tourist parks. But more tellingly there is a report (3) that Jugo, a young male friend of Imo, who had learned SPW in 1956, successfully swam to the other shore in 1960. He stayed there until 1964 when he swam back. By this time he was a fully mature male. Other monkeys are known to have attempted the swim but up until 1966 only Jugo was known for certain to have made the trip successfully.

I think there is enough here to demonstrate that the so-called evidence in support of Watson's Hundredth Monkey Phenomenon is simply **not there**. Watson is describing his own fancy, not a phenomenon, at least where the monkeys on Koshima Islet are concerned.

Of course the most serious aspect of this story is on the human level. It is tempting to suggest that the rapidity with which this story has passed from pseudo-scientific speculation, through dubious editing and into popular humanistic superstition is itself an example of the "phenomenon" Watson's accounts of the monkey studies putatively demonstrate. But is this really anything new; and further, is it something which we should be happy about?

There is nothing new in the fact that ideas and the like can pass rapidly through the "collective mind"; evidence for this can be seen in Hitler's success in convincing an entire people (at least a "critical mass") the reasonableness of his "final solution". Designer jeans, hula-hoops and revelation also seem to indicate the same kind of dynamic. The phenomenon is widely known and well manipulated. I for one am not at all welcoming of a move on the part of humanists to capture the "collective mind", even for "good" causes (those I agree with) if it is to be done through age-old manipulative, propagandistic techniques.* Between Lyall Watson, BMB and Ken Keyes, as well as some

*I was one of the staff of facilitators of the "community experience" at the AHP Annual Meeting at Princeton and even then I was concerned that we became clear about the difference between a "mindful collective" and a mindless "crowd".

pretty influential members of the AHP community, we can see half-truth, misquotation and speculation wrapped up as science. Myth and wishful thinking is given persuasive status by reference to our "dominant males", our scientists, writers and conference stars.

We should (but I doubt if we will) put this monkey scam to rest. Like all other scams it plays on our own fear and sense of impotence, promising that even though our numbers are small, in some magical way our ideas will become a general consensus. But this simplistic idea ignores the very principles of an open society in which, for good or for ill, each of us holds his or her own beliefs as responsible participants in a pluralistic culture. I am not willing to give that up.

I believe it would be better if instead of peddling dreams our society of humanists engaged in a rigorous collective study of the ways communities and their leaders (elected or otherwise) become conscious and capable of wise collective action. We must learn how to facilitate the evolution of a conscious collective mind which can be influenced by and composed of free, responsible, rational people who are capable of critical thought, and individual conscience as they participate in larger order events. I want to repeat Ken Wilber's urgings:

We are going to have to get very straight, very fast, and evidence the most rigorous of intellectual clarity if we are to avoid theoretical oblivion. (7)

In our efforts to avoid nuclear holocaust or to bring about a "new age" which is more just and humane, we must not let our impatience lead us into the dehumanizing tactics of the propagandists. I say this with a serious suspicion that it may already be too late. In two of the six meetings I mentioned at the beginning of this paper I tried to raise some of the issues I have raised here. The response in both cases were the same - the speakers preferred to believe the myth. "Myths are as true as science" was one response. Yes, they are, but they are not the **same**. Any minority group member who has been relegated to secondary status on the basis of cultural myth knows that. I urge us not to forget everything we have learned about the need for critical engagement with social and personal realities.

Brazilian educator Paulo Freire puts it better than I can when he decries manipulation and indoctrination, whatever the rationalization or however well-meaning.

Propaganda, slogans, myths are instruments employed by the invader to achieve his objectives . . . In that manipulation

encourages "massification" it categorically contradicts the affirmation of human beings as Subjects. Such affirmation can only come when those engaged in transforming action upon reality also make their own choices and decisions . . . True humanism, which serves human beings, cannot accept manipulation under any name whatsoever. (1)

Maureen Miller O'Hara is a gestalt trainer. She works much of the time in Latin America, and is currently at work on a book, with John K. Wood, on the relationship between individual "mind" and group "mind". This year she is a board member at the Center for Studies of the Person in La Jolla. Her article was originally published in the Journal of Humanistic Psychology, USA.

Bibliography

1. Paulo Freire, **Education for Critical Consciousness**; Continuum, 1980.
 2. Masao Kawai, On the Newly Acquired Behavior of the Natural Troop of Japanese Monkeys on Koshima Island. Abstract of paper read at Seventh Annual Meeting of the Society for Primate Researchers. November 22, 1962, Japan Monkey Center, Inuyama. In **Primates**, vol. 5.
 3. Masao Kawai. Newly Acquired Pre-Cultural Behavior of the Natural Troop of Japanese Monkeys on Koshima Islet. **Primates**, vol.6, No.1, 1965.
 4. S. Kawamura, The process of sub-cultural propagation among Japanese monkeys, In Southwick below.
 5. Charles H. Southwick, **Primate Social Behavior**; Van Nostrand, 1963.
 6. Lyall Watson, **Lifetide: The biology of the unconscious**. Simon and Schuster, 1979.
 7. Ken Wilber, The Pre/Trans Fallacy; **Journal of Humanistic Psychology** Vol.22, no.2, 1982.
-