

THE HUNDREDTH MONKEY

This is a popular tale by the Japanese storyteller Yukio Funai. It has taken on a life of its own in the decades since its original telling based on the scientific research that inspired it. Ken Keyes Jr. adapted it as a slogan for the nuclear-freeze movement. Combined with the Stone Soup folktale, it reminds us of the power we have to change the world, one person—or monkey—at a time.

As the story goes, a group of curious scientists were observing the eating habits of the Japanese monkey, *Macaca fuscata*, on the island of Koshima. They fed the monkeys by flying over the island and dropping sweet potatoes in the sand. While the monkeys liked the taste of the potatoes, they didn't care for the sand.

Imo, an eighteen-month-old female monkey, figured out that she could wash the potatoes in a nearby stream. She taught this to her mother and to her playmates, who taught their mothers. After a few years, all the young monkeys on the island had learned to wash off the sandy sweet potatoes so they would taste better. But only the adults who imitated the children learned this trick. The other adults kept eating their potatoes with sand.

After a while, more and more monkeys were washing their sweet potatoes—nobody knows for sure how many. For the sake of the story, let's suppose that when the sun rose one morning there were ninety-nine monkeys who had taken to washing their sweet potatoes. Let's further

suppose that later that morning, a hundredth monkey learned to wash his potatoes.

Then something remarkable happened. It seems that the additional energy of this hundredth monkey created a spark—an ideological breakthrough—that advanced the entire species. By that evening, nearly all the monkeys in the tribe washed their sweet potatoes before they ate them.

The scientists soon observed that the new habit of washing sweet potatoes had somehow jumped overseas. Colonies of monkeys on nearby islands, and even the mainland troop of monkeys at Takasakiyama, were all washing their sweet potatoes!

The “hundredth monkey” phenomenon shows what can happen when someone has a good idea. First, a few others recognize its value and put it into practice. One by one, others join in, too, until, at a certain point of “critical mass,” everybody gets it, and the entire species can advance thanks to the ones who dared to do things in a new and better way.

Just think what this can mean for humankind. Each one of us who changes our ways, adopts a more generous habit or a sustainable way of doing things, increases our collective wisdom and benefits the entire planet.

Who knows? The hundredth one, the one who tips the scale, could be you!