Of Myths and Monkeys: A Critical Look a Critical Mass

By Maureen O'Hara

The 'Hundredth Monkey Phenomenon' was invented by Lyall Watson, a writer on paranormal subjects, in his 1979 book Lifetide, *and was subsequently elaborated upon by New Age author Rupert Sheldrake in* A New Science of Life *(1982), and Ken Keyes, a human-potential movement guru whose 1982 book* The Hundredth Monkey *sold a million copies. By quoting the more marginal of each others' theories as if they were established scientific facts, and by 'puffing' each others' books with glowing back-cover testimonials, these three writers managed to convince an entire generation of New Age readers that telepathy in monkeys had been accepted by science since the 1950s -a staggering assertion. The first published skeptical evaluation of this myth was written by psychologist Maureen O'Hara, who criticized the story in the July 1983* Association of Humanistic Psychology Newsletter *and again in the Winter 1985* Journal of Humanistic Psychology. *The response from many of her colleagues was one of hostility. They regarded her concern for objective truth as petty; their counterreplies paraphrased the New Age Axiom "if it feels good, it must be true".*

Even though the 'Hundredth Monkey Phenomenon' is now little more than a infrequently cited footnote to the history of odd 1980s beliefs, the confusion between speculation and proven fact, prevalent even in scholarly circles, remains, unfortunately, alive and well in the 1990s. This confusion is often deliberately reinforced by writers and public figures whose motivation is to push a particular theory or belief system, and by publishers who have found that representing sensationalistic claims as science sells books and magazines.

The following article originally appeared in Whole Earth Review *52 (1989) and is reprinted, with Dr O'Hara's kind permission, from* The Fringes of Reason *(New York: Harmony, 1989) pp 182-86. The substance of these preliminary remarks has been adapted in large part from the introduction by Ted Shultz, the book's editor.*

The Hundredth Monkey provides us with a case study through which to examine the deterioration in the quality of thought and scholarship among those people who participate in what has become known as the 'New Age' or 'Human Potential' community. I believe that this deterioration may ultimately result (if it has not already) in discrediting humanistic science altogether, leaving us with nothing more than faddism and a rag-bag of pseudoreligious and pseudoscientific superstition. Because I believe that a humanistic view of persons and their communities has never been more necessary in order to counterbalance the galloping alienation in human life, I view this trend toward superstition with real alarm.

Lyall Watson does not tell us the monkey tale in his book *Lifetide* because he is interested in studies of behavior propagation in macaques he is merely using the story to support his conviction about human consciousness, that when a certain 'critical mass' of people believe in something, suddenly the idea becomes true for everyone. There can be no doubt that ideas and attitudes can spread rapidly through a community from time to time. Evidence of this exists everywhere. Perhaps this monkey story and the rapidity with which it passed from pseudoscientific speculation, through dubious editing, word of mouth transmission by superstars in the human potential movement, into popular New Age superstition, makes a far better case study of the very phenomenon than the monkey research putatively demonstrates.

This process is widely known and effectively manipulated by those wishing to influence large numbers of people. Hitler was terrifyingly successful in convincing an entire people (at least a critical mass) of the reasonableness of this 'final solution'. Teenage culture in our own country offers nonstop demonstration of new fads that emerge, spread through the group to become a critical mass, and disappear, all in a matter of weeks. Madison Avenue advertisers pay high salaries to those psychologists who become adept at manipulating the mass psyche to form critical mass, as do the Defense Department and politicians running for office. The means by which critical mass is achieved, however, is not in any way mysterious. It is a matter of telecommunication, not telepathy.

There are major contradictions in the present idealization of critical mass seen not only in the Hundredth Monkey story, but in the ideologies of such organizations as EST, Bhagwan Rajneesh, and the 'Aquarian

conspirators'. In promoting the idea that, although our ideas are shared by only an enlightened few (for the time being), if we really believe them, in some magical way what we hold to be true becomes true for everyone, proponents of the critical mass ideal ignore the principles of both humanism and democratic open society. The basis for openness in our kind of society is the belief that, for good or ill, each of us holds his or her own beliefs as a responsible participant in a pluralistic culture. Are we really willing to give up on this ideal and promote instead a monolithic ideology in which what is true for a 'critical mass' of people becomes true for *everyone?* The idea gives me the willies.

Pseudoscience, Science, and Ambivalence

How could such a profoundly nonhumanistic idea become so popular among people who consider themselves the harbingers of a 'New Age'? I think the answer lies, at least in part, in the renewed infatuation with science and its shadow, pseudoscience. In the past ten years of so, we have seen the image of nuclear physicist shift from Dr Stangelove-like creators of the most terrifying death devices in history to their present status as darlings of the so-called 'new paradigm' consciousness. When we saw the physicists as on 'their side', we rejected everything they did. Now that they are on 'our side', we quote them at breakfast. Books like Fritjof Capra's *The Tao of Physics* have the New Age community convinced that physics is just some kind of Taoism with numbers.

This new infatuation with science is a shallow one, easily swayed by tricks of the pseudoscience trade such as theorizing wildly in scientific-sounding language, sprinkling speculative discussion with isolated fragments of real data regardless of relevance, confusing analogy with homology, breaking conventional rules of evidence at will, and extrapolating from one level of reality into others wherein different principles operate.

I do not wish to imply that pseudoscience necessarily stems from a conscious effort to deceive. More often than not, crossing the line from science to pseudoscience comes from ignorance and inexperience, and the popularity of pseudoscience is with an audience equally ignorant and inexperienced. Because this audience is not equipped to evaluate claims of scientific validity, they instead accept them on faith.

One standard trick of the pseudoscience trade, for example, is to emphasize whatever affiliations to established science the writers have or had. It is to great advantage if the writer can be referred to as a scientist associated with a prestigious university with a wide reputation for scientific excellence. It matters not tot the purveyors of pseudoscience whether or not the 'scientists' referred to have been in a lab for years, or if, when they were, it was in a field even remotely relevant to the subject at hand.

An August 1981 *Brain/Mind Bulletin* account of the Hundredth Monkey story refers to Lyall Watson as a biologist: the monkey story follows. The bibliography of Watson's book contains not one reference to any scientific research, biological or otherwise, that he has published, yet his other books, on the occult, are listed. It is not difficult to imagine a rather different response from the reader if *Brain/Mind Bulletin* had introduced the monkey story by referring to Watson as a writer on the occult.

Another example of 'authority transfer' can be found in Tom Cooper's review of the film, *The Hundredth Monkey,* which appeared in the May 1983 issue of the *Association for Humanistic Psychology Newsletter*. In asserting that the Hundredth Monkey thesis is "substantiated" he says, "Rupert Sheldrake, the Cambridge scientist, reports that when one group of rats was taught " The implication here is clear and misleading. The statement conveys the impression that Sheldrake (a) is currently on the faculty at Cambridge; (b) does scientific research there; (c) knows a lot about rats; (d) is 'reporting' on his own research.

If we look at Sheldrake's own book, *A New Science of Life,* we find that he was once a scholar at a Cambridge College, and is described as currently a consultant at an international research institute in India. His research is on the physiology of tropical plants. Again, the impact would be very different if Cooper had written, "Rupert Sheldrake, tropical plant physiologist in an Indian crop research center, says that when one group of rats " This kind of 'credentialeering' is obviously intended to give credibility to scientific-sounding propositions. Such authority-borrowing works because institutions such as Cambridge University and disciplines such as biology have, despite occasional, widely publicized aberrations, lived up to their reputations for reliability.

Another characteristic of pseudoscience is its profound ambivalence toward the scientific establishment. Despite his identification as a biologist, Watson's work carries within it clear evidence of his ambivalence. On one hand, he uses research findings to try to support his conviction about critical mass theory in human events. One the other hand, he suggests that the scientific community is less than honest when he tells us that these same researchers were reluctant to publish what they suspected was the truth. He panders to the popular distrust of science by suggesting that this reluctance was due to fear of ridicule by, one assumes, the scientific community.

Those who engage in pseudoscience want it both ways. They want the authority of science but are unwilling to abide by the rules by which the scientific community earned its authority in the first place. Pseudoscientists and their publishers may actually use criticism of their ideas by the scientific community as evidence that they are important because they are controversial. They seem to reason that because Einstein was controversial, anyone who is controversial must be an Einstein. On the jacket of the US Paperback edition of Sheldrakes's *A New Science of Life* is the prod claim that the British scientific journal *Nature* had suggested that the book was "the best candidate for burning there has been for many years". As the designers of trade-book jackets are well aware, such outbursts by the scientific establishment only enhance a work's attractiveness to a generation of lay people fed up with the excesses of 'more orthodox than thou' attitudes of the scientific establishment.

This ambivalence toward establishment science strikes an immediate and comforting chord in the minds of a public that is not only ambivalent about science, but largely ignorant. It is difficult for the uninitiated to distinguish between good science, bad science, and pseudoscience. Appraisal becomes especially difficult when isolated pieces of scientific knowledge are abstracted from their contexts within the broad, interwoven fabric of scientific thought. It is context that make knowledge out of data. This is true not only for sciences, but for all areas of advanced knowledge such as art, Zen, medicine, psychotherapy and so on. This makes a book like Capra's Tao of Physics almost impossible to evaluate adequately. Those adept at physics don't understand orientalism; those well versed in Taoist philosophy can say little about the physics. The people so swallow Capra's speculations usually can critique neither. If they like what they read, they accept it as fact.

One concrete consequence of this ubiquitous ambivalence toward science can be seen in the rejection of training in science and logical thinking by some would-be humanistic psychologists and other aspiring agents of change. Without such training these people, regardless of their heart-felt commitment to transformation, have practically no basis on which to evaluate claims made in the name of science. Anyone crackpot, charlatan, genius, or sage must be dealt with in the same way (believed or disbelieved) solely on the basis of personal opinion. Personal opinion then becomes equated with knowledge and can be asserted without embarrassment.

The result is that the human potential movement has come dangerously close to creating the conditions for the establishment of yet another orthodoxy resting on unproved articles of faith and taken-for-granted definitions, axioms and concepts. Humanistic science loses ground each time it hands over authority to pseudoscientists and speculative myth builders.

Good Myths and Bad Myths

On two occasions (both gatherings of humanistic psychologists) when the monkey story was told, I tried to raise some of the issues raised here. When I suggested that the Hundredth Monkey story lay in the realm of mythic thought, not scientific, the response was the same; the speakers were unimpressed. "myths are as true as science", was the response. "It's a metaphor" as another. P.B. Walsh's comment in the November 1983 Association for Humanist Psychology Newsletter was characteristic: "Science or myth, the Hundredth Monkey is a metaphor that exactly fits " and later , "As metaphor it speaks to our empowerment."

As to the assertion that myths are as true as science, I take the point. But there is more that has to be said, for although they might both be 'true', they are not true in the same way. These respondents either do not know this or do not think it matters much. But, of course, it matters a great deal and I believe that it is urgent that we learn to recognize the difference. Casually interchanging myth, science, and metaphor robs each of these realms of its unique power to deepen our understanding of the word, to orient out science, and to inform our actions. Women and ethnic minorities well know the consequences of wrapping a myth

together with science. It is especially pernicious, as any Nazi holocaust survivor can confirm, when a bad myth is wrapped up with bad science.

My objection to the Hundredth Monkey Phenomenon, then is not that it is myth, but that it is bad myth, and that it draws its force not from the collective imagination, but by masquerading as science. It leads us, (as I have tried to show) in the direction of propaganda, manipulation, totalitarianism, and a worldview dominated by the powerful and persuasive in other words, business as usual.

When I was first drawn into humanistic science, I was well aware that I was attracted to its myth. I know of very little actual 'data' that could support a belief in the possibility of a humane global collective, composed of free, responsible, rational people capable of purposeful action, critical thought, creativity, and individual conscience. Of course I knew this to be an idealized myth standing in sharp contrast to the indignities that are the actual daily experience of all but a privileged few. Even so, I think it is a good myth and has the psychological power to mobilize us and to orient our search for knowledge about ourselves.

Over the past 15 years , this myth has guided my studies and those of my colleagues (and at times has required acts of faith as great as any religion would demand) as we have tried to discover, as all science does, if this mythic possible world could, in fact, be an actual world; and if not, why not? So far we have discovered little that, in my judgment, gives much grounds for the current New Age optimism that the transformation is just around the corner, It is a testimony to the sustaining power of the humanistic myth that we did not give up our research long ago and open a restaurant.

In contrast, I most emphatically cannot agree that the 'Hundredth Monkey myth empowers". In fact, I believe it to be a betrayal of the whole idea of human empowerment. In this myth the individual as a responsible agent disappears; what empowers is no longer the moral force of one's beliefs, not their empirical status, rather, it is the number of people who share them. Once the magic number is reached curiosity, science, art, criticism, doubt and all other such activities subversive of the common consensus become unnecessary or even worse. Individuals no longer have any obligation to develop their own worldview within such a collective it will come to them ready-made from those around. Nor are we called on to develop our arguments and articulate them for, by magic, those around us will catch them anyway. This is not a transformational myth impelling us toward the fullest development of our capacities, but one that reduces us instead to quite literally nothing more than a mindless herd at the mercy of the 'Great Communicators'. The myth of the Hundredth Monkey Phenomenon is more chillingly Orwellian than Aquarian.

Inspired in the 1960s by the works of Abraham Maslow, Carl Rogers, Gregory Bateson, and others, Maureen O'Hara cut short a career in biology and became a humanistic psychologist in order to participate in "the creation of a precise humanistic science" with the goal of "a humane global collective, composed of free, responsible, rational people capable of purposeful action, critical thought, creativity, and individual conscience." Today she is alarmed by the way her profession, intertwined as it is with the human potential and New Age communities, has embraced the trappings of pseudoscience and become prone to accept and amplify 'bad myths', of which the Hundredth Monkey story is only one example. As a specialist in mass psychology and cross-cultural phenomena, she is particularly qualified to comment on the 'critical mass' concept idealized in the Hundredth Monkey myth, and to provide us with an insider's view of the reasons behind the rise of superstition in humanistic science. Dr O'Hara is currently the acting president of Saybrook Graduate School and Research Center in San Francisco.