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The First One to Try

Japanese macaque monkeys relaxed yesterday in the hot springs in Jigokudani, Japan, which has been hit by record snowfall. Japanese macaques, also known as snow monkeys, are the most northerly nonhuman primates in the world. It is said that in 1963, a female macaque ventured into the hot springs to retrieve some soybeans. Other macaques copied her, and eventually the entire troop was making regular visits to the springs to escape the cold.

Boston Globe, December 28, 2005

Thanks go to the first one to try—not just to swanky spa-inclined monkeys, but to human beings, too. Someone out there ate that first preposterous artichoke. Some first person braved a trapeze. A top hat was modeled for the first time, and someone debuted the hula. Snorkeling, yodeling, and trusting a strapless bra had to be notable firsts at a given point in time. Someone, before anyone else thought to do it, looked at a clam and exclaimed, “I’ll eat that!”

Although I can imagine a yodeling, snorkeling, straplessly brassiered, hula dancer wearing a top hat while flying on a trapeze, I don’t mean to give credit to only one game soul who eagerly awaited a clam and artichoke snack. Not at all.

I’m just trying to say that I’m glad we have so many little heroes around who instigate the wows and the aahs that we have come to enjoy. So hooray for the hot-tubbing monkeys. Hooray for all those who take the plunge. Hooray for everyone among us who makes our own days glad.

I love how the *Boston Globe* says simply: “the other monkeys copied her. “

Do you want to know the untold story? I have not made the acquaintance of any Japanese monkeys, but I know South Carolina monkeys, and how different could they be? What they don’t tell you is that when she first went into the hot springs they were crossing their fingers for her, hoping she wouldn’t get burned or disappear into the steam forever. When she actually seemed to like it, when she lolled around in the hot water popping

the soybeans into her mouth, they ignored her, as if doing that unexpected a thing were a social gaffe from which she might recover soon, a phase she was going through, like painting your living room lavender or eating only raw food or being a lesbian. (That's what one man in my congregation told me when I came out, that it was often a phase...) When ignoring her didn't get her out of the water and back in the snow where she belonged, they made fun of her. Just for her own good --to get her back to normal. When that didn't work, and she was lounging back relaxed in the steamy water for the third or fourth time, with her mate and children in there with her, looking happier than they had all winter, having a little picnic, maybe some more soybeans and a bottle of monkey merlot, then someone got mad and started muttering about how they couldn't be perfectly sure, but all that moist heat in the winter time was bound to get those babies sick, or make them aggressive, and who knew, they could just all end up in hell for it. After enough monkeys became regulars in the hot springs, all the monkeys allowed as how it was their idea all along, and they'd been thinking of doing it for months before that one monkey got in. In fact, they were just about to go in when she took the plunge.

We sang my song "Chrysalis" together.

There is no denying that the cocoon is a safe place. The song goes: “They said the walls were there for protection.” It’s true. It’s restful in there. Nobody bothers you. You feel like you have it together. Listening to the music in your own head, you can think your own thoughts. Sooner or later, though, the food runs out. Sooner or later you start feeling a little peaked, a little grumbly. There comes a time in life when the effectiveness of what you have been doing so far fades. The way you have gone about things wears out. The creative energy wanes. The music in your head gets repetitive. You need something. Some people describe a restlessness, others, more poetically call it “divine discontent.” (That phrase is attributed to Ralph Waldo Emerson, but he hated quotations, so it feels a tad ironic to quote him. I’m always ambivalent about it). It’s that divine discontent that keeps your soul from starving to death. You have to start tearing up the safe cocoon to get to what you’re hungry for.

I wonder if the butterflies feel afraid, becoming aware of their hunger, their discontent, their longing? Do they think they might lose everything? They will. They have to lose all that caterpillar-ness, all that cocoon -ness, in order to get wings, in order to take to the sky. I imagine there is some panic that is part of the process. How have you felt when you tore it up, when you make a leap, when you took the plunge?

It takes some courage, some confidence, and hunger in your heart to be the first one to leave the fold. Becoming a Unitarian Universalist can be like that. Some among us were born into families of this free religion, but most of us had to endure the grief, the silence, the concern, the mocking or arguing that accompanies making a change.

Hunger drove that monkey into the hot springs after those soybeans. She was brave—she overcame her fear of going into the steam and the bubbling to get the soybeans back. Hunger drives us: hunger for juicy spirituality, hunger for something that makes sense and people we can talk to. The great sage from New Jersey, Bruce Springsteen, said “Everybody has a hungry heart.” Something drove you to reach out to the Church of the Larger Fellowship. It feeds something in you when you get online for a discussion, a covenant group, when the Quest comes in the mail. Maybe being a UU puts you in hot water with your family or your friends. Maybe your ideas are different from the other folks in your town. Someone has to take the plunge, talking about how God’s not going to send anyone to hell. Someone has to take the plunge and stand up for civil rights for GLBT folk, for immigrant families, stand up for peace in Darfur, in South Africa, in the Middle East. My current way to take the plunge is to talk about how

we need to reword our sixth principle to say “peace, liberty and justice for all, beginning in our own homes and congregations.” Are you hungry for the truth? For an authentic faith? Come on in, the water’s fine.