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 Arlington Street Church
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Monkeys in the Spa

The day after a record snowfall in December of 2005, an entire herd of monkeys was hanging out in the spa. Not just near; *in*. *The Boston Globe* reported that, since 1963, when a female snow monkey ventured into the hot springs in Jigokudani to retrieve some soybeans – I have no idea how soybeans got into the spa – other macaques¹ have followed her.²

My friend and colleague Jane Rzepka got ahold of this news and went wild. Here's what she wrote:

“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 [and] yodeling ... 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 ... 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 all 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.... Hooray for the hot-tubbing monkeys. Hooray for all those who take the plunge.”³

Monkeys taking the plunge reminded me of Amy Sutherland's article, *What Shamu Taught Me About a Happy Marriage*. I kid you not; this one ran in *The New York Times*. Amy Sutherland and her husband, Scott, have a good enough marriage, though he sometimes

1 pronounced “McCakes”

2 *The Boston Globe*, 12/28/05

3 Rev. Jane R. Rzepka, *Quest* (the newsletter of *Church of the Larger Fellowship*), March, 2009

drives her crazy. He's [messy,] forgetful, tardy, mercurial, and more than occasionally spouse-deaf. She writes, “These minor annoyances are not the stuff of ... divorce, but, in sum, they began to dull my love for Scott. I wanted – needed – to nudge him a little closer to perfect, to make him into a mate who might annoy me a little less, ... a mate who would be easier to love.”

Help came from an unlikely place: our friends, the animals. Amy Sutherland is the author of *Kicked, Bitten, and Scratched: Life and Lessons at the Premier School for Exotic Animal Trainers*. In the process of her research, she spent her days “watching students [of animal training] do the seemingly impossible: teaching hyenas to pirouette..., cougars to offer their paws for a nail clipping, ... baboons to skateboard ... and elephants to paint.” Not pausing to ask the question on all of our minds – *Why?!⁴* – she writes, “Eventually, it hit me that the same techniques might work on [my] stubborn but loveable ... husband.”

“...I'd be scribbling notes on how to walk an emu or have a wolf accept you as a pack member, but I'd be thinking, 'I can't wait to try this on Scott'.... The central lesson I learned from exotic animal trainers,” she says, “is that I should reward behavior I like, and ignore behavior I don't.... rewarding the small steps toward learning a whole new behavior. You can't expect a [dolphin] to learn to flip on command in one session.... [You] first reward a [turn], then a bigger [turn], then an [almost-flip]....

“I began thanking Scott if he threw a dirty shirt into the hamper. If he threw in two, I'd kiss him. Meanwhile, I would step over any ... clothes on the floor without one sharp word, though I did sometimes kick them under the bed. But as [Scott] basked in my appreciation, the piles became smaller....

“I followed the [animal training] students to SeaWorld San Diego,” Amy Sutherland continues, “where a dolphin trainer introduced me to Least Reinforcing Syndrome. When a dolphin does something wrong, the trainer doesn't respond in any way. [She or] he stands still for a few beats, careful not to look at the dolphin, then returns to work. The idea is that any response, positive or negative, fuels a behavior. If a behavior provokes no response, it typically dies away.

“In the margins of my notes, I wrote, 'Try on Scott!'

“[Now,] it [is] only a matter of time before he [is once] again tearing around the

4 Arlington Street Church member Nije Ribotto reminds us that animals are not meant to do tricks for anyone. Thanks and to Nije for his compassion and devotion!

house searching for his keys.... I [say] nothing, and [keep washing the dishes]. It [takes] a lot of discipline to maintain my [detached] calm.... I hear him banging a ... door shut, rustling through papers ... and thumping upstairs. At the sink, I hold steady. Then, sure enough, all goes quiet. A moment later, he walks into the kitchen, keys in hand, and says, calmly, 'Found them'.... Without turning, I call out, 'Great! See you later' [The] results [are] immediate and stunning.... I [feel] as if I should throw him a mackerel....

“After two years of exotic animal training, my marriage is far smoother, my husband much easier to love. I used to take his faults personally ... a symbol of how he didn't care enough about me. But thinking of my husband as an exotic species gave me the distance I needed to consider our differences more objectively. I adopted the trainers' motto: It's never the animal's fault. When my training attempts failed, I didn't blame Scott. Rather, I brainstormed new strategies....”

The very end of this happy tale is that Amy Sutherland told her husband everything, and he, very wisely, began to use exactly the same methods on her: the exotic species called his wife.⁵

Isn't it amazing when the keys to happiness turn up in the most unlikely place? Why would we do any less than keep our eye out for whatever those hot-tubbing snow monkeys are up to next? And exactly what *are* the elephants painting? Does it make them happy?

And that's where I meant to go with all of this, from snow monkeys in the spa and other exotic animals where you'd least expect to find them, all perfectly happy; I meant to go to happiness. As I include in my daily prayers our recent guests here at Arlington Street, three Burmese monks living in exile from their violence-ravaged homeland, I've been thinking about happiness. Those of us who gathered with U Pyinya Zawta,⁶ U Agga,⁷ and U Gawsita⁸ last month experienced first-hand the radiance of their smiles, their sheer joy as they led us in the lovingkindness meditation and reminded us to include so-called enemies and oppressors in the reach of that meditation ... and these gentle men know more than a lifetime's worth of enmity and oppression. When I touched the jagged scar on U Gawsita's bald head where a military policeman had beaten him, he laughed. *Hard head!*

5 Amy Sutherland, “What Shamu Taught Me About a Happy Marriage,” in *The New York Times*, 6/25/06

6 Pronounced “Ooo-PEEN-yah ZOE-tah” ... sort of!

7 Pronounced “Ooo AH-gah” ... sort of!

8 Pronounced “Ooo Gaw-DEE-tah” ... sort of!

Hard head, happy heart ... warm, open heart, heart open to the world.

For the past thirty-five years, British journalist and author Pico Iyer⁹ has been covering the fourteenth Dalai Lama. This past spring, after a conversation with His Holiness at New York's Town Hall, he wrote something really beautiful, and profound, about one of the Dalai Lama's favorite topics: happiness. “I've found him to be as deeply confident, and therefore sunny, as anyone I've met,” says Pico Iyer. “And I've begun to think that his almost visible glow does not come from any mysterious or unique source. Indeed, mysteries and rumors of his own uniqueness are two of the things that cause him most instantly to erupt into warm laughter. The Dalai Lama I've seen is a realist (which is what makes his optimism the more impressive and persuasive). And he's as practical as [the Buddha].

“...If an arrow is sticking out of your side, [the Buddha] famously said, don't argue about [who shot it or] where it came from...; just pull it out. [We] make [our] way to happiness not by fretting about it..., but simply by finding the cause of [our] suffering, and ... attending to it....

“The first words the Dalai Lama said when he came [out of Tibet] into exile ... were, 'Now we are free.' He had just ... been forced to undergo a harrowing flight for fourteen days across the highest mountains in the world, [losing] his homeland, [and] ... contact with the people he had been chosen to rule.... But his first instinct ... was to look at what he could do better....

“He [saw that he] could bring democratic and modern reforms to the Tibetan people that he might not so easily have done in old Tibet. He and his compatriots could learn from Western science and other religions, and give something back to them. He could create a new, improved Tibet – global and contemporary – outside Tibet. The very condition that most of us would see as ... severance, ... loss ... and confinement, he saw as possibility....”

My friend and Buddhist teacher, Sylvia Boorstein, famously said, “Pain is inevitable. Suffering is optional.” His Holiness says that unhappiness is what we choose, or choose not to choose. In other words, “Happiness is not something ready-made. It comes from (our) own actions.” And “true happiness ... doesn't mean trying to acquire things, so much as letting go....”¹⁰

9 Pronounced “EYE-er”

10 Pico Iyer, *The Doctor is Within*, 7/22/09

“To be happy, says the Dalai Lama, is “the very purpose of life.... From the very core of our being, we desire contentment.... I have found that the more we care for the happiness of others,” he says, “the greater is our own sense of well-being. Cultivating a close, warmhearted feeling for others automatically puts the mind at ease. It helps remove whatever fears or insecurities we may have, and gives us the strength to cope with any obstacles we encounter. It is the principal source of success in life. Since we are not solely material creatures, it is a mistake to place all our hopes for happiness on external development alone. The key is to develop inner peace.”

My spiritual companions, there are monkeys in the spa, and, like so many before them who have taken the plunge, they are warm, and happy. There are hyenas pirouetting, cougars getting manicures, baboons skateboarding, elephants painting, and at least one human couple that has figured out that it's never the animals' fault. May we take our happiness into our own two hands, into the embrace of this beloved spiritual community, and seek to cultivate the peace of surrender that will bring us joy. Now we are free.