
Monkeys, Mission and Us

To be surprised, to wonder, is to begin to understand

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IS IT WORTH YOUR TIME TO READ THIS BOOK? Such a question is legitimate to ask of this and any other book you are about to read. Here are my thoughts on why this book is worth reading—it may make the remainder of the book more meaningful for you.

In my thirty years of teaching at the college/university level, the majority of my students have been in my cross-cultural communication classes. Most seem eager to learn, but sometimes a bold person will ask, “Why should I be here? Why can’t I just go to a country and do my ministry?” To some, all the time, courses and money seemed like a gigantic waste. “People are dying every day while we are just sitting here doing nothing. Can you tell me why I should be here?”

Similar questions arose during my fifteen years of training in the corporate world. Some in business felt that understanding people from other cultures was a waste of time. Those in my workshops had their technical skills and just wanted to get on with the job. Such a view, however, is quite shortsighted and potentially dangerous. The reason? These people see the job as a task to be done with little or no concern for genuine relationships with local people. A strong task orientation without first establishing friendships can lead to disappointing if not disastrous outcomes.

Early in my career these “why bother” statements would cut like a knife. Since I am a cross-cultural trainer, my profession and my whole life seemed under attack. Defensiveness would surface and I would mut-

ter something about requirements by sending organizations and statements like “It will do you good” and “Someday you will understand.” I doubt I convinced any skeptics. As you read this book, you might wonder the same. Why bother? Why not just get on with it? Is all this preparation necessary? I have a better answer to that question now, and it begins with a story.

THE MONKEY AND THE FISH

A typhoon had temporarily stranded a monkey on an island. In a secure, protected place, while waiting for the raging waters to recede, he spotted a fish swimming against the current. It seemed obvious to the monkey that the fish was struggling and in need of assistance. Being of kind heart, the monkey resolved to help the fish.

A tree precariously dangled over the very spot where the fish seemed to be struggling. At considerable risk to himself, the monkey moved far out on a limb, reached down and snatched the fish from the threatening waters. Immediately scurrying back to the safety of his shelter, he carefully laid the fish on dry ground. For a few moments the fish showed excitement, but soon settled into a peaceful rest. Joy and satisfaction swelled inside the monkey. He had successfully helped another creature.¹

About monkeys. Like others who have heard this story, you may wonder about the intelligence of this monkey—a valid first impression. But let’s look deeper by asking questions and discovering some important insights. Take a moment to answer the following questions.

1. What was the monkey’s motivation?
2. What words would you use to describe the monkey as he went out over the raging water on a precarious limb to “help” the fish?

3. Why did the monkey help the fish by taking it out of the water?
4. What did the monkey assume about fish culture?
5. How do you think the fish felt about the help it received?
6. What advice would you give the monkey for future situations where he would like to help?

Lessons. In what ways might you be like the monkey? Write down three to four parallels between the monkey and yourself as you consider entering another culture to help the people. This will help clarify your thinking and help you remember the important lessons from the monkey.

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

Here are my thoughts on the story. First, the monkey was courageous, had good intentions and noble motives. He also had zeal. However, his

motives were misdirected because of his ignorance—he could not see beyond his own frame of reference. He believed what was dangerous for him was dangerous for the fish. Therefore, what would be good for him would also be good for the fish—a crucial assumption. As a result, he acted out of his ignorance or limited frame of reference, and ended up doing damage rather than the good he intended. Unfortunately, the monkey may not even have known the damage he did, because he may have walked away leaving the fish “resting.”

IMPORTANCE OF CROSS-CULTURAL TRAINING

Training in cross-cultural ministry is important so that we don't act like the monkey. We demand competence, skill and expertise from people who serve us. Suppose a person went through a year of medical school and then concluded, “All this learning is a waste of time. People are dying every day. I need to get out there and help them now.” Would you consider going to such a physician? We would find such people foolish and dangerous, and would avoid them. What about nurses, lawyers, electricians, builders, pilots and food manufacturers? Don't we require the highest standards from them? Of course we do. We want the best because lives are at stake.

WHY BOTHER?

We bother because we do not want to be “monkeys.” Because the eternity of people is at stake, we want to be the best possible representatives of Christ. If people refuse to become followers of Jesus, we hope it will not be because we were obnoxious, reckless, sloppy, irresponsible, ill-prepared—or because we were well-meaning but badly informed “monkeys.” We can do better.

WHO ARE THE “MONKEYS”?

While this book is written primarily for North Americans, monkeys can come from anywhere—the monkey problem is universal. Since this

appears to be true (at least my observations suggest it is), this book should have broad application. I was a missionary for seventeen years. I have been on numerous short-term trips, trained businesspeople and missionaries, conducted cross-cultural training seminars in dozens of countries and had considerable exposure to inner-city work in the United States. I've seen more monkey behavior in myself than I ever want to admit. But I have tried to identify it and extract from it principles, which seem to work across ethnic groups in North America, cultural boundaries around the world and generational differences. In a curious way, they even help marriage partners understand each other. Now I pass these insights on with the prayer that you will be able to learn from my experiences and those of others. In doing so I also pray that God will reward your effort and make you effective for his glory.

D I S C U S S I O N Q U E S T I O N S

1. What doubts do you have about your need for cross-cultural training? Why?
2. Have you seen anyone act like the monkey? Have you ever acted like the monkey? What was the result?
3. List the things that you think the people will need in the culture you will enter. How can you discover whether what you listed will really meet their needs?